The Fire Triangle -- Part One: Fuel

by Merc_Marten

Summary

It’s been two years since Nick Wilde and Judy Hopps broke the Savage Predator conspiracy. Now a brilliant and effective team, they’re only a few steps away from making the detective bureau—and growing closer with every passing day.

But even as their relationship deepens, an immensely powerful and shadowy figure is at work behind the scenes, determined upon a hidden agenda...and equally determined to drive the fox and bunny apart at all costs.

Now, with a gang war threatening to set Zootopia ablaze, Nick and Judy find themselves besieged at every turn...and being driven inexorably towards a heartbreaking choice.

Notes

Revised version of the Fire Triangle
See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1 – With This Ring

Three Years Later—Sahara Square, Second Week of June, Wednesday

Ahmed Ali Rachmann al-Rafaj liked to think of himself as a fair and open-minded jackal, and by the standards of Sahara Square he was. Certainly he was more progressive in his thinking than his brother; Ismael was about as tolerant as the average scorpion.

The senior al-Rafaj brother by contrast was willing to look at both sides of the picture, especially when financial considerations needed to be factored in. (High moral standards were all very nice, but they didn't pay the bills.)

Even he had his limits however, and though Ahmed couldn't possibly know it, they were about to be sorely tested on this fine summer morning.

Like every other resident of Sahara Square, the Rafaj brothers were naturally resistant to change—especially rapid change; they liked to keep things the way they were.

It was an attitude born out of their environment rather than from any cultural mores, and it was best summed up by the famous Six Words of Sahara Square—Always The Desert Sets The Pace

It was an adage known to every animal that inhabited the district, as well anyone who came here on even an irregular basis. The Six Words were everywhere; you saw them on traffic signs, you found them printed on sales receipts; you observed them pasted to the back-bumper of nearly every other car on the street. The Five-Star Palm Hotel even had a 10-foot sculpted bas-relief of the slogan mounted behind the reception desk. Every metro stop in the district had the famous watchwords posted on the directory signs.
"Always The Desert Sets The Pace," The Six were not just a meme, but words to live by—literally. Whether natural or mammal-made, the desert is a formidable environment; it can suck the moisture, (and the life) out of you before you realize what's happening. Every species native to Sahara Square knew this; 'knew it without knowing it' as the saying goes...they could never have survived in such a harsh climate otherwise.

However not every resident of the district—much less every visitor—was wise to the foibles of such a hot and arid ecosystem. It was for these animals that the Six Words were intended.

What they meant was this: You can't defeat the desert, it always wins in the end; if you're going to survive here, then you must adapt yourself to the environment, not the other way around

For example in the heat of the day, (except when absolutely necessary,) never, never push yourself; always move quietly and avoid fast exertion. Otherwise you may find yourself waking up in the ER, dehydrated and suffering from heat exhaustion—IF you're lucky.

That might have seemed an odd bit of advice to a first-time visitor watching as the herds of camels made their daily run across the Beach Promenade, loping full-tilt beneath a blazing sun. What they couldn't understand was that this was madness with a method; an exercise aimed at building up the animals' heat resistance.

Always The Desert Sets The Pace…and the pace was never a rapid one; paws down, Sahara Square had the slowest growth factor of any one of Zootopia's twelve ecosystems. Anyone who thought otherwise needed only to look at an aerial photograph of the city. While Sahara Square contained great swatches of sparsely populated, or even desolate tracts, next-door neighbor Savanna Central was built up all the way up from its border with the desert zone to where it butted up against the Rainforest District. (Even Tundratown, on the other side of the Climate Wall to the north had a denser population.)

Looks could be deceiving, however. Sahara Square might not have been the most heavily settled region in the City of Zootopia, but what it lacked in populace, it more than made up for in per-capita income; The Square it was easily Zootopia's most upscale district; home to more high-end shops and businesses than the rest of the city combined.

Not the least of these was an establishment just across the street from the Cactus Grove Metro Station, though you'd never know it to look at the place.

First of all, Cactus Grove was anything but a tony neighborhood, lower middle-class, if that. For upscale shopping in Sahara Square, Oasis Circle, near the Palm Hotel was the place to go, (for those mammals new to the city or only visiting that is.)

The store's exterior was no eye-catcher either, a white-alabaster front as plain as blank sheet of paper, with arched windows and a trio of keyhole doors in different sizes, (Large Mammal, Small Mammal and Rodent.) Above these, painted in simple, blue, scimitar script was the name of the shop Rafaj Brothers' Fine Jewelers.

But here, as with so many other things in Sahara Square, first impressions could be the wrong impressions. Those in the know knew that Rafaj Brothers' Jewelers was only the most distinctive jewelry store in in the whole of Zootopia, an establishment who's most effective advertisement—indeed whose ONLY form of advertisement was, "Wow, where did you GET that?"

With a reputation such as that, who needed a grand façade?
The answer was, of course, 'you don't', but on the other paw, for such an elite establishment, a grand INTERIOR was de rigeur.

In that regard, Rafaj Brothers Fine Jewelers did not disappoint, the inside of the store was opulent nearly to the point of decadence; walls tiled in intricate patterns of rich, vivacious colors, plush, woven carpets on the floors and brightly polished brass everywhere, from the antique chime above the door, to the blade tips of the slowly turning ceiling fans. There were potted plants in brass urns, brass trim on the display cabinets, and even a charmingly retro solid-brass cash register, (whose innards were actually state-of-the-art digital.)

That was the paradox of Rafaj Brothers Jewelers. The ambience might be charmingly antiquated, but the machinery behind it was all cutting-edge… in particular the security system. (No surprise in such a high-end business.)

Standing behind the counter near the cash register, Ahmed al-Rafaj thumbed in a code on a computer tablet and waited for a second.

The elder of the two Rafaj brothers, Ahmed was a golden jackal by species, a canid very similar in appearance to a coyote. Indeed, he had more than once been mistaken for a 'yote'.

He was of average height for his species, with a slight paunch that he had long ago given up on trying to keep at bay. He was dressed, as always, in what he called his 'wrok ensemble', a starched, white shirt, elegantly cut, a midnight-blue sharkskin jacket and a striped red tie, all of it topped by a dark red fez perched between his ears. Ahmed had never learned to like dressing this way, (although he'd been wearing the ensemble to work for more than twenty years now.) Given his choice, he would have preferred a kaftan or a jellabiya, but nearly all of the store's customers were western in their outlook and this was Sahara Square; here you either adapted to your environment or else you didn't survive.

By nature a fussy and fastidious canid, Ahmed refused to open Rafaj Jewelers for business until everything was just so; all of the plants freshly watered, all of the cabinets clean and spotless, every single one of the mirrors atop the counters tilted at just the right angle.

And last but not least, the security system had better be working properly. Towards that end, Ahmed pressed the 'enter' button on the tablet screen and watched as an LED-light beneath the counter sidestepped from red to green. At once, a message flashed on the tablet, 'DISARMED'. Satisfied, the jackal entered new instructions, and the window on the screen vanished, replaced by a sextet of security camera images.

He turned and called over his shoulder in Arabic.

"Are you seeing the cameras, Ismael?"

"All visible here," the ever-touchy voice of his brother answered from somewhere beyond the beaded curtain that led to the rear of the store.

"Very well," Ahmed responded. "I am preparing test the emergency shutters. Make certain the rear door is clear." (The previous autumn, one of their employees had suffered a serious foot injury after failing to get out of the way in time.) He entered another code on his tablet and reached beneath the counter, feeling for the little, plastic hood. Flipping it upward, he moved his paw atop a bright red 'panic' button nestled underneath, holding it there. At the same time, he focused his attention on the big hippo in grey serge, stationed beside the shop entrance.

"On the count of three, Rashid," he said.
"Yes, sir," The hippopotamus nodded, taking a lazy step backwards.

To the average customer, the jackals' choice of a hippo as their security guard might have seemed an odd one.

Ahmed however knew better. First of all, hippos are not exclusive to the rivers of southern and tropical Africa. In fact, they're most commonly found along the Nile River.

Second, don't be fooled by that jolly, rotund appearance; just forget about it. Hippopotami are actually one of the toughest, most aggressive of all African species. Their thick hide is like built-in body armor and their razor-sharp tusks can beat rhino's horn five sides from Sunday. On top that, they can move at incredible speed for their size and shape.

Hippos are also highly territorial—a definite plus in a security guard—and after five years with the Rafaj brothers, Rashid had long since come to regard their jewelry store as HIS home turf.

Even for his species he was a brute, standing at least half a head taller than the average hippo and considerably larger in circumference; a 'walking wrecking-ball' in the words of one regular customer.

Behind the counter, Ahmed counted off quickly. "One…two…three!" and slapped the panic button with the flat of his pawlm.

At once a row of steel shutters dropped down over the door and windows, slamming into place with the doomsday finality of a guillotine blade.

And the shop was plunged into momentary twilight.

Ahmed gave it a few seconds and then entered another code and hit the button a second time; in response the shutters scrolled upwards again...but much more slowly than they had fallen.

'Very well Rashid," the jackal told him, nodding in approval, "You may open for business now.'

"Yes, sir," The hippo answered, reaching slowly for the jangle of keys clipped to his belt; the two words seemed to be the full extent of his vocabulary.

He had just finished turning the second deadbolt when Ismael called out in Arabic once more.

"When you are done with that Rashid, I need you here for a moment. That filthy beggar of a wolf is prowling round our back door again."

"Yes sir," the hippo repeated a third time and then lumbered past Ahmed and through the beaded curtain, leaving the golden jackal by himself for the moment—actually much longer than that. For the next hour of business, the shop would be all his; the remainder of the sales staff would not begin to arrive until at least 9:30

Like most other shop owners in Sahara Square, the Rafaj brothers liked to keep what were known as Spanish Hours, opening from mid-morning to the early afternoon, closing up in the heat of the day and then opening again from late afternoon until mid-evening. As a rule it was always the second shift where the brothers did the most business; on most mornings, things didn't start to pick up until 10 AM at the earliest. Nonetheless, Ahmed would never dream of opening even a minute later than 8:30. You never knew; the one customer who came in early might also be the one who made your day.

At that precise moment, as if to prove the worth of that homily, he heard the front-door chime.
Ahmed immediately put on his trademark ingratiating smile, big and broad, but with no fangs showing; a smile that said to the world, 'I am only here to serve.'

When he turned towards the entrance, the smile was still on his face…but now it appeared to have been carved from a block of hardwood and applied to his muzzle with super-glue.

Two animals had just entered the jewelry shop, a male fox and a female rabbit.

That by itself wasn't enough to raise the jackal's ire.

What turned that trick was that they were holding paws!

Ahmed al-Rafaj was not opposed in principle to interspecies relationships; (He couldn't have lasted long in this business if he was,) but even he had his boundaries. If the pair of animals entering Rafaj Brothers Fine Jewelers had been, say a fox and an ocelot or a bunny and a marmot, he would have had no difficulty with it.

But a fox and a bunny; a predator and a prey species together?

That was where he drew the line.

Ahmed let none of this show of course; it was hardly the first time that something of this sort had happened inside his shop. In fact, he had a procedure he kept handy for just such instances as this.

I revolved around the fact that there were two types of customers that routinely came into Rafaj Brothers' Fine Jewelry, browsers…and buyers.

If these two were browsers Ahmed would allow them to peruse the merchandise for few minutes, and then politely find an excuse to usher them outside. If they persisted in their browsing, he would IN-sist that they leave, and if all else failed, he would summon Rashid. (So far, that had only once been necessary.)

On the other paw, if they were buyers, it changed everything. In that case, the golden jackal would treat them with the deference shown to all of his paying customers.

It was a long-standing creed between the Rafaj brothers; NEVER show the door to someone ready and willing to pay. As their late father had liked to say, "Money has no smell."

And so he clasped his paws and nodded, ever so slightly towards the couple.

"Ah, good morning sir…ma'am. How may I serve you this fine day?"

"Oh good morning to you," Nick Wilde answered, his voice bright and beaming. He was dressed more elegantly than usual this morning, (not exactly to the nines, more like the sevens,) Docker slacks and a dark blue polo shirt in place of his usual Hawaiian print. Beside him Judy Hopps was clad in designer jeans and a pretty, loose knit blouse.

Ahmed's eyebrow lifted as he took note of this. When mammals dressed nicely to come into the Rafaj Brothers' shop, it was fairly good sign that they were buyers rather than browsers.

Nick pulled Judy closer and she laid her cheek on his arm, looking half excited half afraid. He patted her arm and smiled reassuringly, and then looked at Ahmed again.

"We'd like to buy an engagement ring."

The jackal's smile broadened by two inches…in order to conceal the fact that his teeth were
clamped like a vice; it could have been a tennis bracelet, it could have been a necklace, it could have been a pendant, a brooch, or perhaps a pair of earrings.

But noooo, it was a ring…an engagement ring. These two weren't merely a couple; they intended to become a MARRIED couple. That was bad enough, but could not this idiot of a fox have had the discretion to go looking for a ring himself, instead of bringing his fiancée with him.

And where had this silly, new idea come from anyway—couples shopping for engagement rings together instead of the male surprising his girlfriend with it at just the right moment? The only upside to their trend was that it made for fewer returns than the traditional way. Other than that…he should tell these two to go elsewhere and right now.

Except...the fox said, 'buy', not, 'look at', 'see', or, 'can you show us?' 'buy!' And not only that, the magic word had been practically the first one out of his mouth.

No one said 'buy' right out of the gate unless they had already made up their mind; when this couple walked out of Rafaj Brothers' Fine Jewelers, they intended to depart with a purchase in their paws.

And so the jackal clapped twice and then bowed slightly, "Ah, congratulations my friends…Now, if you will kindly step this way, we have many fine stones in small mammal sizes."

He guided them to a leaded-glass display case, three spaces down from the cash register. It was a bit high for Judy, but the jackal was prepared, rolling out a step stool for her to stand on—an ingenious contraption with wheels that locked as soon as you put weight on them.

And then he nodded at Nick.

"And now if you will allow me just one moment please, sir; in deference to your species I will adjust the light."

Nick and Judy nodded while Ahmed pulled a remote control from his pocket, marked with three buttons:

· Diurnal
· Nocturnal
· Crepuscular

Smiling broadly, the jackal pressed the third button and a row of translucent shades descended halfway down the windows, dimming the light inside the store by about a third. At the same time the ambient lighting shifted ever so lightly, becoming barely tinged with orange.

Foxes and rabbits don't have much in common, but one thing they do share is that they're both crepuscular species, meaning that they're most active in the period between sunset and darkness, and in the interval between first light and sunrise. (What Nick's distant, lupine cousins referred to as the 'Wolflight'.)

"There we are." Ahmed nodded a second time as he put the remote away.

"Very nice." Judy answered, looking over at Nick, who, if anything, was even more impressed

"What she said," the fox nodded
"All part of our service," Ahmed told them smiling, "And now, please permit me to show you a selection of our engagement rings."

He unlocked the display case, removing a tray of diamond rings on black velvet, all of them nestled in neat rows like a new crop of carrots.

"Do you see any that strike your fancy, sir?" Ahmed asked them, looking first at Nick.

The red fox pointed to a ring in the middle row.

"Can we see that one?"

"Certainly, sir." The jackal answered, plucking the ring from the tray with a white-gloved paw. "You may, of course, choose another setting if you wish…or if you would prefer something truly unique, we can design a custom setting, just for you."

"I-I-I think let's pick out a diamond first," answered Judy, down-to-earth practical as always.

"Agreed," Nick, nodded. But when the jackal offered him the ring, instead of taking it, he put on a glove of his own and produced a jeweler's loupe from a side pocket.

That caused Ahmed's muzzle to spread open in an even bigger smile.

"Ahhhh, I like a knowledgeable customer," he said, entirely sincere for the first time since Nick and Judy had entered his shop.

Nick pegged the loupe to his eye and examined the diamond closely.

"Oh, this is exquisite," he said, and then passed the ring and the loupe to Judy, "What do you think, hon?"

Judy studied the stone for a second before looking up with an uncertain expression.

"Ohhh, it's a pretty diamond, Nick." She said, handing the ring back to him with a twitching nose. "But it just doesn't…it doesn't really grab me, if you know what I mean."

"Yes, I do know," Nick nodded solemnly and returned the ring to Ahmed, who returned it to the tray, not at all disappointed. Truth be told, this was par for the course; no one EVER bought the first diamond they looked at…or hardly ever, and if in fact if Judy had said to Nick 'this is it' the jackal would have recommended they look at a few more stones before making up their minds.

(Or that's what he would have done if they hadn't been a predator/prey couple.)

"Why don't you pick the next one?" Nick suggested. Judy nodded and then pointed.

"How about, that one there?"

This time the situation was reversed; Judy adored the diamond, but Nick wasn't particularly taken with it.

"But if it's the one you really want…" he started to say, and she quickly waved a paw.

"No Nick, we agreed…a diamond we BOTH like, remember?"

Nick remembered and returned the ring to Ahmed.
"Perhaps you could recommend something?"

"Certainly sir." The jackal answered, smiling pleasantly.

Three trays later, his smile was once again forced; truly it was all he could do to hide his frustration. THIS was why he didn't like couples shopping for engagement rings together, it was always the same old story; every diamond the fox favored, his fiancée rejected; every stone that she liked, he did not. Well, the jackal supposed, he should have seen it coming—a fox and a rabbit after all—but Bismillah, could these two not agree on anything? He should have bowed them out when he had the chance.

But then he noticed Nick Wilde leaning over the counter and beckoning with a crooked finger. Curious, he moved closer.

"Ahmed…can I call you Ahmed?" the red fox asked him, lowering his voice and looking around as if to ensure that no one else was within earshot. (A ludicrous gesture, the store was empty except for the three of them.)

Satisfied with his survey, Nick leaned in closer and cupped a paw to his muzzle. "Can I ask you something, one maligned species to another?"

Ahmed blinked, and then his eyes narrowed and he too was leaning in close.

Nick Wilde had just struck a chord within him…dead center. For just as conventional wisdom brands all foxes as shifty and untrustworthy, so too it decries all jackals as thieving and cowardly. Oh yes, Ahmed understood. With those two simple words, 'maligned species' the fox had just reminded him that they shared a kindred spirit—rabbit fiancée or no.

"You may ask," the jackal answered, speaking in a low murmur.

Nick looked around again and then moved in even closer.

"You wouldn't happen to have any…lavender diamonds for sale, would you?"

Ahmed blinked his dark eyes again, this time more rapidly…but before he had time to speak, Judy Hopps was raising her voice in protest.

"Nick…NO! You can't afford a lavender diamond. No, please…that's too much money."

Ahmed relaxed but only slightly. He'd been surprised by Nick's inquiry, but not put off by it. And he had been UN-Surprised at Judy's objection—but not completely; her only problem seemed to be with the price of the stone. She apparently had no idea that… Well, what else could you expect from a dumb bunny?

"It's too much money." she pleaded again, spreading her paws at 4 and 6 O'clock.

But her fiancée would not be dissuaded. "Aw c'mon, hon…I just want to see if they HAVE any; it doesn't cost anything to look." He glanced over at Ahmed, arching an eyebrow, "Uh, that is, if…?"

"I-I-I believe we might have one or two lavender stones in the back." the jackal answered, nodding towards the beaded curtain and then adding a caveat, "However, I must caution you sir, the lady is quite right, lavender diamonds are most dear."

"We'd still like to see one." Nick told him, not about to have his mind changed.
Reluctantly, Judy agreed. "Ohhh-kay…I guess."

"I will not be a moment." Ahmed told them, and then turned and called towards the back of the store, "Rashid? Would you come out and watch the front, please?"

As if expecting the call, the giant hippo lumbered instantly through the beaded curtain and past the cash register. Taking up a position near the front door, he folded his arms and focused a baleful gaze on Nick. "Don't even THINK about it, fox." He seemed to be saying.

Ahmed gave him a quick short nod and then disappeared into the back of the store.

There are two big Easter Eggs in this episode; one in the opening sentence that repeats itself throughout the chapter...and another one even earlier than that.
With This Ring (Continued...)

Chapter Summary

Nick and Judy find the engagement ring they're looking for, and also some unexpected friction.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 1 – With This Ring
(Continued…pt.2)

Passing through the curtain, Ahmed paused for a moment, glancing backwards through the beads at the fox and bunny. Scratching at an ear with his hind, he considered how best to approach his brother. This was going to call for a delicate presentation, and depending on Ismael's mood of the moment, even that might not be enough to garner his approval.

He turned and continued on his way.

The rear section of Rafaj Brothers Fine Jewelers, where most of the work was done, had about as much in common with showroom as an adobe hut has with a sultan's palace. Oh the back was fitted with state-of-the-art LED lighting and a top-drawer air cooling and filtration system, but that was where the hi-tech ended; everything else in here was textbook retro-kitsch. The chairs and other furnishings all looked like leftovers from a low-budget remake of Catsablanca—while the employees themselves resembled like extras from the film. Kaftans, thobes and skullcaps abounded and the air seemed tinged at every moment with the smoked-flower aroma of incense. When one of the large-mammal employees got up and moved about, the floorboards invariably creaked in protest.

None of this mattered to Ahmed; his customers never saw this part of the store, only the creations that came out of it. Here was where all the stones were sorted and all the settings fashioned.

On the near side of the room were the worktables reserved for larger mammals while the opposite wall held two tiers of work spaces; a lower level for small-to-midsize species, and above this, a row of tiny tables on a shelf, the denizen of the rodent employees. To avoid any trampling issues, the room was bisected by a low partition.
It was a casual atmosphere to say the least; every employee was allowed to keep his or her worktable any way they saw fit, (provided it did not interfere with their job.) This ranged from a table crammed with enough papers to make a bureaucrat faint, (belonging to a gerbil,) to the almost antiseptically sterile work-space at the far end of the room—the private domain of Ahmed's younger brother, Ismael.

While physically the pair of jackals could almost have been twins, in mode of dress the only clothing item they shared was the deep-red fez perched atop each of their heads. Other than that, while Ahmed's clothes were western, sharp, and neatly pressed, Ismael's kaftan looked regularly slept in and seldom washed. Even worse was his 'lucky' embroidered vest; worn to work every day for the past twenty years, and looking twice its age. Sometimes Ahmed had to wonder; did his brother keep such a spotless work area as a way of compensating for his own, slovenly appearance?

At the moment Ismael was peering intently through a magnifying ring-light, scrutinizing a diamond held beneath it in a pair of tweezers.

Ahmed studied the younger jackal for a moment, considering once more the best way to put it to him. There was another reason why Ismael al-Rafaj was almost never seen out front. Not to put too fine a point on it, he had all the tact of a khamsin. More than once his elder brother had needed to talk one of their employees out of quitting because of him…and he hadn't always been successful.

He cleared his throat and stepped forward, speaking in Arabic

"A private moment if you please, brother?"

Without a word, Ismael pushed the ring light aside and got up. A moment later the brothers were seated crossed-legged on floor-cushions in Ahmed's private office, sipping coffee from Turkish cups

"What is it then, Ahmed?" Ismael inquired, impatiently setting his cup aside. The elder jackal let it pass, his brother was always impatient.

He set down his cup and leaned forward.

"We have a small mammal couple out front who wish to purchase… purchase an engagement ring…a lavender diamond engagement ring." It wasn't quite true of course, but if he was going to get the proposal past Ismael, this was how he'd BETTER phrase it.

"Truly?" The younger jackal also leaned forward, his tawny face alight in a rare display of excitement. He clapped his paws together and lifted them towards the ceiling. "Heaven be praised! Perhaps we shall finally rid ourselves of the last of the…"

He stopped suddenly, peering closely at Ahmed, one eye wider than the other.

"All right brother, I see it in your face…and you would not normally be consulting with me over such a matter. What is it, then?"

Ahmed sighed, and dropped the other shoe.

"They are a fox…and a rabbit."

Ismael's ears turned instantly sideways and his lip curled upward, revealing a fang.

"What…TOGETHER!" he snarled, coming halfway off of his cushion. He held like that for several
seconds—while Ahmed held his breath.

And then finally, he sat back down again, picking his words carefully, as if they were diamonds.

"It is just fortunate…that it IS a lavender diamond they want. Else, I should insist you have this… this fox and bunny sent away at once."

"As I would have," Ahmed assured his brother, nodding gravely to hide his relief. It did not matter whether Ismael accepted the idea grudgingly—as long as he accepted it.

And with that out of the way, there was another matter to discuss. And so Ahmed leaned forward once again.

"We must rid ourselves of this diamond at all costs, Ismael. I say therefore that we should be prepared so offer it for no more than we paid, perhaps even take a small loss as long as it is gone."

This time he got no argument from the other jackal.

"I agree," his brother answered, nodding vigorously. "We made more than enough off the rest of the shipment to be able to afford it."

He left the next words hanging—prompting Ahmed to hang his head in momentary shame. Yes, they had…except for one, singular stone, the one that had been haunting them ever since.

Taking advantage of his brother's momentary contrition, Ismael lifted an ear and an eyebrow. "But you will, of course, not offer that as your FIRST price?"

Mildly offended, Ahmed pinched up his muzzle. He wasn't that ashamed of himself.

"Certainly not brother; you of all jackals should know me better than that." He tapped a finger on the coffee table between them. "Nonetheless, we must free ourselves of this accursed diamond and quickly."

"Yes, immediately," Ismael agreed nodding vigorously this time "before the Red Pig learns of what we have been doing."

At the mention of that name, Ahmed's ears went back and his fur spiked. This time, when his paw hit the tabletop, he didn't just tap it with a finger; he slapped it with his pawl—so hard, the pair of coffee cups fell over and went rolling off the edge and onto the carpet. (Luckily, both were empty.)

"The Red Pig?" he snarled, "He is the LEAST of our worries, brother." He looked down and away, grimacing and pressing his knuckles to the side of his head, "Bismillah, how could I have been such a fool?"

Surprisingly, Ismael attempted to reassure him, offering the elder jackal a pair of upturned pawlms.

"You had no way of knowing who he was, brother."

Ahmed slapped the table again, harder this time.

"I knew he was a SHREW…and that he wanted an engagement ring, I should have added that together!"

A voice called warily from outside the door, "Is everything all right in there, Bey?"
"We are fine, go back to your work." Ismael answered, in a harsh, Arabic growl.

"Yes, Bey." The voice replied gingerly, "But Rashid asks me to inform you that your customers out front are becoming restless."

"Very well, thank you." Ahmed called, jumping in quickly before his brother could say any more. Ismael looked at him for a second, and then rose decisively from his cushion.

"You had best go and soothe them while I fetch the diamond. I will see you out front with it shortly."

Ahmed also got up, but much more cautiously.

"I-I-I think it best if…"

The younger jackal immediately cut him off.

"You should have an extra pair of eyes on that fox, brother."

That sent Ahmed's ears shooting sideways and caused his neck fur to spike again, but his time in outrage rather than penitence.

"Yes, he is a fox…and are we not jackals? Do WE not also suffer the scorn of…"

"I don't care what species he is!" Ismael interrupted testily, "He could be one of our own for all I care. But what if he IS planning to steal the diamond? To whom should we report it, then?"

Ahmed sighed and wiped his forehead with the back of his paw. His brother was right and he knew it, but still…

"Very well," he conceded, "but this time, allow ME to do the talking please? I don't need you causing trouble with our customers again…especially not these two."

He reached over and opened the office door.

"What?" Ismael's muzzle was angled indignantly upwards. "Name one, single instance when I have ever done that!"

Ahmed turned and walked out, ticking off the memories on his fingers.

"There was the wood-rat who threatened to sue us; there was the bison who nearly pitched me through a display case;" He stopped, looking over a shoulder, "And let us not forget the raccoons who came back and sprayed graffiti all over the windows after you called one of them a trash-pan…"

"I said one SINGLE instance!" Ismael snapped.

A moment later, Ahmed was standing with Nick and Judy when Ismael appeared, cupping a tiny blue-velvet box in paws. The elder jackal could tell right away that this was not going to go well; his brother seemed to be barely restraining himself.

"Ah, thank you Ismael," he said, hurriedly taking the box from the younger jackal's paws…and flashing a discreet scowl that spoke volumes; "And pleeeeeease, hold your tongue for once!"

He turned back to his customers.
"I fear we only have one lavender diamond remaining sir," He said, offering the fox and bunny an apologetic expression, "But it is quite lovely. I assure you…and happily, just the perfect size for the lady's species."

He cast a quick, sidelong glance at Ismael, who looked away, mouthing something unpleasant.

Ahmed nodded back sharply and then once more returned his attention to Nick and Judy.

"Here it is, then," he said, and flipped open the box.

Nick was the first to react. His ears fell backwards, his eyes went wide, and then he let out a long, trembling, airy breath while Judy put a paw to her mouth.

There, nestled in dark satin was a cushion-cut diamond of incredible luster—and the delicate hue of a violet sunrise. Nick said nothing but only looked beseechingly at Ahmed, who nodded slightly and whispered 'You may.'

Carefully, delicately Nick took hold of the little ring-box and affixed his jeweler's loupe. At once, his bushy tail commenced to swish back and forth in an S-wave.

"This is it." He announced in a breathless almost choking voice, taking the loupe from his eye.
"This is our diamond."

Judy cried out at once, "No Nick…no! Darn you I just said it's too much money."

But he was already pressing the box into her paws.

"Maybe too much for a birthday present, sweetheart," he told he, speaking in a soft, gentle voice, "Maybe even too much for a Christmas present." He offered her the jewelers loupe "But not for a lifetime…and how can it be any other diamond? Look Judy; look how it goes with your eyes.

Reluctantly, very reluctantly the grey-furred bunny placed the loupe in her eye and examined the ring. When she removed it once again, two things were obvious: The first was that the lavender diamond was a perfect complement for her lovely, violet eyes.

The second was that she was fighting back tears of joy mixed with frustration.

"It's too much money," she repeated, her voice nearly a mouse's squeak

Nick put his paw on her shoulder, looking deep into her eyes.

"I'll manage it, sweetheart."

"Nick…"

"I'll manage it."

Judy sniffed and compressed her lips for second, and then looked up nodding tightly.

"Okay."

"Okay," the fox answered, taking back the diamond with an adoring smile.

And then they embraced in a mile-deep hug…which brought Ismael flying in their direction. He stopped only after Ahmed turned and bared his fangs.
The instant they let go of each other, the red fox was back on ground level.

"Uhhhm, could we possibly discuss some, errr…financing?" he said to Ahmed

"I am sure we can arrange something." The golden jackal answered, before shooting a warning look at his brother; DON'T spoil this now!

A short while later, Ismael emerged from the back once more with a velvet box cupped in his paws, this one in burgundy red. (Ahmed was greatly relieved to see that his brother's righteous indignation had finally given way to practical considerations. Who cared what species these two were, as long as they were finally rid of the last of the lavender diamonds?)

"Here you are sir," the jackal said, presenting the box to Nick with a small bow.

Nick opened it, and both he and Judy gasped. There was the diamond, nestled in an elegant white-gold setting of two intertwined comets. They gazed adoringly for a second, and then Nick said to Judy, "Ready to try it on, Carrots?"

Judy held out her paw with fingers extended…while Ahmed's ears extended upwards and pointed at each other. 'Carrots?' While that was a common enough way to address a rabbit, it was certainly no term of endearment.

And calling a bunny 'Carrots' right before putting an engagement ring on her finger? Just one moment!

Ahmed's dark eyes narrowed as the words of his brother came swiftly and silently back to him, "Supposing he IS here to seal the diamond…"

He looked quickly over at Ismael, whom he saw was wearing the same expression. A subtle nod passed between the two brothers, and then Ismael signaled discreetly to Rashid, who moved quickly and quietly to block the front door. At the same time, Ahmed reached behind the counter, his paw poised over the emergency shutters 'panic' button.

Nick seemed oblivious to everything but Judy; for the moment she was his whole universe. He slipped the ring onto her finger while she blinked back the tears once more.

"Oh Nick," she almost whimpered, rocking her paw slowly from side to side, "Look at it…it's a perfect fit."

"A perfect it for a perfect lady," the fox told her softly, gazing deep into her eyes.

He brushed at Judy's cheek with the back of his fingers—and then he took her in his arms and kissed her. She closed her eyes and kissed him back…lost in the magic of the moment.

…until Ismael's howl of outrage broke the spell.

"Do not do this in our shop, please! Rabbit…FOX!"

He looked towards his brother with smoldering eyes…and for once, the golden jackals were in complete accord. Standing by the door, Rashid seemed equally dismayed.

It took Ahmed all of half a second to come storming out from behind the counter, ears turned sideways and fangs showing, the fox's use of 'Carrots completely forgotten.

"Such an inappropriate display of affection," he raged, "A predator and prey species!"
"Right in front of us!" his brother Ismael growled, (a muted reaction, coming for him.) He looked around for a second, then back at Nick and Judy, aiming an accusing finger. "It is just fortunate there was no one else in our shop to witness your shameless behavior."

"And now you may leave," Ahmed told them, coldly, "You have your diamond, take it and go!" He motioned to Rashid, who stepped quickly aside to let them pass.

Nick ignored him, taking two angry steps moved in the jackals' direction. "Now, just a minute…!"

Judy swiftly grabbed his arm.

"No Nick, no…please, it's not worth it."

Nick stopped, but continued to glare at Ismael.

"It's not worth it." She pleaded again, trying to pull him back, "And it's nothing we haven't seen before. Please?"

Nick ignored her for a second, but then sagged in defeat, letting out long breath of air.

"Yeah…right as always, Judy. Come on, let's just go."

He put his arm around her while she laid her head beneath his shoulder.. Then the two of them strolled towards the shop's front entrance, all dignity.

As Nick pulled the door open, Ismael was unable to resist, firing off one last parting shot.

"Just be sure you make your payments promptly, fox!" he sneered.

"And in FULL!" his brother snarled.

It was Judy who answered them, turning to look at the brothers for a second and speaking in an oddly flat and dismissive tone. "Yeah guys, don't worry. You'll both get whatever's coming to you."

Before either of the jackals could respond to this, she and Nick were out the door.

They held each other tightly as they walked away from the entrance, drawing unhappy glances from several passersby and a derisive giggle from a pair of young goats. The fox and bunny ignored it all, drawing closer with every step.

At the next corner they turned down a side street; finally no more gawkers.

And then the minute they were alone, Judy hurriedly pushed Nick off of her.

"You KISSED me! What did you have to kiss me for?"

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Chapter End Notes

Easter Eggs: At one point, Ahmed makes an oblique reference to Guardians of the Galaxy. Later in the story, Judy borrows one of Ripley's lines from 'Alien'.
With This Ring (Continued...)

Chapter Summary

Nick’s got some 'splainin' to do...and then both he and Judy have a job to do.

Chapter Notes

Okay, here where the revised storyline REALLY begins to diverge from v.1.

(I like to think I got Nick and Judy right this time.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 1 – With This Ring
(Continued…pt. 3)

"You KISSED me! What did you have to kiss me for?"

Judy was staring up at Nick with a mixture of shock and puzzled surprise.

For several seconds, the fox was unable to respond or even look at her; his expression one of uncharacteristic contrition

"Now Carrots," he said, making and short stopping motions with his paws, "let's just calm down and pin this conversation to the wall…"

Hi partner's eyes seemed to grow by two sizes.

"Pin...wall? What in the name of sweet cheese n' crackers are you talking about, Nick?"

Before the fox could answer her, Judy glanced past him. About six paces away a bubbler drinking fountain was gurgling in the sun... Ignoring the fox for the moment, she pushed her was past him and made a mad dash for the water, covering the distance in two leaps and half a bound. The fountain was at least a head too high for a bunny to reach, but Judy Hopps wasn't about to quit now. Jumping up full force, she grabbed the bubbler's rim like a basketball hoop and plunged her
face into the basin, blubbery and gurgling and splashing water over the edge.

A few seconds later she came up for air, spitting water and angry words.

"Ick…Yuck! Carnivore breath! Bluhhhhh!"

When she shoved her face back in again, it looked to Nick as if his partner was almost attempting to drown herself.

The splashing went on like that for almost a full two minutes before Judy finally finished and hopped back down to terra firma. When she hit the ground, the first thing she saw was Nick Wilde offering her a pawkerchief. She snatched it out his grip as if she were taking back a stolen item and began to rapidly dry her face, angrily at first but then at a slower, more measured pace.

And then at last, she looked at her partner again. Although her anger seemed to have mostly cooled, her confusion was running at high revs.

"For crying out loud fox," she said, staring up at him as if he'd suddenly sprouted a third eye, "What the HECK did you have to go and do that for? Everyone and their third cousin must have seen it."

Nick spread his paws wide, in a gesture of mea culpa.

"I…I'm sorry Carrots, really I am, but it was all I could think of right then."

Judy's ears fell back and her nose began to twitch. She had been expecting one of his 'clever-fox' comebacks, but instead he sounded genuinely apologetic.

She decided to tone it down a little.

"All you could…think of? Nick, I don't understand what you mean. Help me out, okay?"

He sighed and began to chew on his lip.

"Uhm, didn't you see what happened back there? Didn't you notice that hippo, moving to block the door?"

Judy thought hard for a second. No, she hadn't seen that; Nick had been in her line of sight. But she had seen the hippo moving away from the door after…hey, wait a second!

She put her paws on her hips, regarding the fox with one eye wider than the other

"Just a minute, Slick. How did you see him? You had your back turned to the door right then."

His answer was both simple and immediate.

"I saw him in one of the mirrors, Carrots. You know; the ones on top of the display counter."

Judy could have kicked herself clear over the rooftops. The mirrors on the counter…DUH! She'd forgotten all about those things; the Rafaj Brothers didn't sell only engagement rings, there were also earrings and necklaces.

Taking advantage of her momentary disquiet, Nick hastened to continue, "Yeah, and it looked like that one jackal was reaching under the counter to hit the shutters. I had to do something, and fast!"

The good news was that the last of Judy's anger melted away at this news; the bad news was that it
was immediately replaced by a rising sense of panic. Her nose began to twitch even more rapidly and she could feel her heart hammering in her chest.

She blinked her eyes shut for a second and drew in a short, hard breath; she would NOT give in to it, period!

"All right Nick," she said, "Give to me straight, do you think they were onto us?"

The fox moved quickly to reassure her.

"Noooo, if that had been the case, Ahmed would have just asked to see the ring again and then cancelled the sale as soon as he had it back; that's what I would have done, anyway. No, they didn't make us, but they knew something wasn't right." He looked away for a second, growling and kicking at the ground with his heel, "and it was all my fault…DUMB fox."

If Judy Hopps's nose had only been twitching a moment ago, now it was practically doing the shimmy; Nick Wilde's vulnerable side was something you saw only about as frequently as a green sun.

"Your fault?" she said, "what do you mean, your fault?"

He sighed again and fessed up.

"I forgot and called you Carrots right before I put the ring on your finger; that's what set them off."

Judy groaned; she couldn't help it. Yes he had—and it had flown right past her. Nick had been calling her Carrots for so long now that she'd not only gotten used to it, but had even come to see it as a term of camaraderie.

But to an outsider, to someone who didn't know any better—and especially to a pair of old-school mammals like the Rafaj brothers—Oh yes, Nick calling 'Carrots' would have raised a red flag for sure..

And now Judy understood something else; Nick hadn't just happened to be looking in that mirror when things began to go south—or at Ahmed al-Rafaj. He had realized his mistake immediately…and just as quickly, been on the alert for any trouble.

She began to rub a pensive finger against her chin.

"Soooo, you thought that if you kissed me, it might make that pair of jackals so mad they'd throw us out of the shop without realizing what they were doing?"

"Uhmmmm, welllll…yeah." Nick was shuffling his feet and looking at the ground again.

Judy eyed him sternly for a second, and then she laughed and punched him playfully on the arm.

"Ow!"

"Then quitting beating yourself up already, CLEVER fox." She waved a paw around them at the street, "It worked; we're here outside the store and we've got the diamond. Your idea worked!" Something in Judy's throat caught up with her just then. Pressing a fist against her mouth, she coughed twice to clear it.

"Only do me a favor, Slick," she said, regarding him with a jaundiced but good-humored eye, "Next time brush your teeth first, okay?"
Instead of heartening the fox, Judy's words had the exact opposite effect; now he looked as if he was fighting off a heart attack.

"N-Next time…? You mean…I… Kiss you again; are you serious, Fluff?"

Judy nearly tripped over backwards. Oh good, sweet… Had she really just said…? Now she was the one making stopping motions with her paws.

"Wha…? No Nick, no…I didn't mean it like that, I…"

Her stuttered explanation ended abruptly when she saw that Nick Wilde's jadestone eyes had turned to sly, narrow slivers and that the corners of his mouth were trying to curl upwards.

"Oh har har…very funny," she half groaned half grumbled, folding her arms. Whoa, it hadn't taken him very long to revert back to his old habits, had it? "You're impossible sometimes, you know that?" she told him.

Nick hunkered down on his knees with that famous big smile on his face.

"And you wouldn't want me any other way."

Judy looked off to the side for a second, tapping thoughtfully at a cheek, playing the old game.

"Would I want that? No I guess I wouldn't." she said, and then offered back the pawkerchief he'd given her. When Nick tried to reach for it, she snapped it out of his grip, "Psyche!"

"I may have deserved that." The fox told with faux solemnity, stuffing the kerchief back in his pocket when she finally gave it to him, but then his expression sharpened and he was looking past her shoulder. "Heads up, Carrots…company."

Judy turned and saw a scruffy, red wolf in torn jeans and a faded tank-top coming towards them, pushing a shopping cart stuffed with various items of no practical use.

"Hey, 'scuse me folks" he said, raising his paw in a gesture of hail-fellow-well-met. His voice was like a cinder block being dragged across rough concrete, while his eyes appeared as nothing more than puffy slits in his head.

Nick slipped on his mirrored sunglasses and Judy's right paw went back to her hip—but neither one made any kind of effort to wave away the approaching street-mammal.

Pulling his cart up beside the fox and bunny, the wolf flexed his fingers on the push-bar for a second, but instead of making the standard plea for spare change, he angled his head in the direction of a produce-truck parked in a nearby alley—and in so doing, revealed a coil of wire plugged into his left ear. (Judy could also see that the items in the shopping cart included a tac-vest, pepper-gas, and a trank-dart gun.)

"If you two are done with your little spat, you're wanted in there right now," the wolf told them, his voice both low and edgy. Without waiting for an answer, he turned and shuffled on his way again.

Judy and Nick regarded each other for a second and then bolted for the alley. The bunny-cop took three steps and made the rest of the way in a couple of bounds. Nick tried to drop down on all fours to keep up with her, but then whoops… Sahara Square, bright sunlight and hot pavement, ouch!

He caught up with his partner just as she was climbing up into the tailgate.
"You okay?" she asked, looking down a worried expression.

"No worries, rabbit," Nick answered her, waving his paws in the air as if to cool them. "I love the smell of crispy paw-pads in the morning. Smells like…dead meat."

Ohhhh boy; Judy could FEEL her eyes rolling upwards and towards the left. "This is going to be another one of those days, isn't it, Slick?"

She reached down to help him up onto the truck. Nick took her paw in a firm grip and she could tell his burns were nothing that a few short minutes wouldn't heal

"Uhm say Carrots," he said, turning serious for a second, "My breath wasn't really…THAT bad was it?"

Judy tilted her head sideways, and her expression skewed at a crooked angle.

"Let me put it this way, Slick," she said, and then rapped twice on the truck door with her knuckles. "Remember back in the jewelry store, when you saw my eyes fill up with tears? I wasn't faking."

She rapped again and threw the door latch, rolling the door a third of the way open and ducking quickly inside.

"Ouch!" Nick yipped, "Okay, that burns."

He slipped in behind her, closing the door afterwards.

There were no veggies in the 'produce truck', no lettuce, tomatoes, and especially no carrots.; it was a regular rolling cop-shop—at least eight ZPD officers inside, probably more.

On the left side wall of the cargo box, a row of tac-vests hung in patient anticipation. Opposite of these, Officer Dan Higgins (a hippo) and Officer Claire Swinton (a pig) were keeping their eyes glued to a bank of flat-panel monitors, all of them displaying surveillance-cam images of the interior of Rafaj Brothers Jewelers.

Claire Swinton was easily the newest cop on the team, but she was far from anyone's rookie. A ten-year veteran of Zootopia Corrections, she had transferred to the ZPD after the city had elected to privatize the prison system. She was tough, savvy, and well-liked by nearly everyone who worked with her. Her specialty was surveillance, a skill she'd honed to razor-keenness while working as a correctional officer. Foolish indeed had been the inmate who'd thought he could mule contraband or stalk another prisoner while she was minding the monitors. (It was a skill made all the more exceptional by the fact that pigs have generally poor eyesight.)

Nearly everyone in the trailer was in uniform—with two notable exceptions; the elephant, Francine Trunkaby, and Chief Bogo, the officer in charge. He was dressed in khakis and a batik shirt, while she wore a brightly colored print-dress.

The other cops' reaction to Nick and Judy's appearance was decidedly sardonic. Most of them snickered, a few grinned irreverently, and one or two of the officers just shook their heads. (Francine Trunkaby looked as if she'd just bitten into an unripe persimmon.)

Judy knew why of course. When Nick had kissed her, they'd been standing almost directly in front of survey-cam number one. And just as she had predicted, almost everyone in the command truck had seen it happen; by tomorrow morning, that kiss would be a running gag in every precinct from here to the Meadowlands.
Her partner knew it as well, and from the corner of his mouth she heard him mutter, "Better get used to it, Carrots."

"I can handle it if you can, fox." Judy whispered back, wanting to believe it. As the ZPD's first bunny-cop, she'd had to endure far worse, at least in the beginning. So why should this bother her so much? She had no idea, but both she and Nick were in for at least two good weeks of razzing; cops are nothing if not inveterate pranksters.

(She could never have imagined just how much worse it was going to get.)

But then Nick Wilde tapped her on the arm, "Look sharp, Carrots; here comes Big Chief Buffalo Nickel."

Judy looked and saw Chief Bogo making his way through the crowd, headed in their direction. Sullen on even the best of mornings, he seemed especially grumpy today.

"You've got it then," he rumbled stepping forward with his arms folded like a sumo wrestler; it was a statement, not a question.

"We got it," Nick answered with his customary wraparound smile. Judy punctuated his words by holding up her ring-finger.

Bogo nodded and turned a 180, beckoning for the fox and bunny to follow him. At the far end of the trailer, barely visible through the packed bodies, Judy could make out a set-up resembling a doll-house version of the Cliffside Med Lab, the place where she and Nick had finally caught up with the missing Emmitt Otterton.

Perched on a stool front of this array was a rust-furred coati in a lab-coat and half-moon glasses, slowly nursing a Snarlbuck's latte.

"So you pulled it off?" she queried, setting down her coffee. If anything, her attitude was even frostier than the Chief's. Without waiting for an answer, she held out a paw in Judy's direction. "Let's have it."

Judy reached to remove her diamond engagement ring. For just a hint of a second, she hesitated, wondering what the heck was going on. Why did she feel a little blue all of a sudden? It was only a stupid ring and it had never really been hers anyway.

She shook off her melancholy and passed it to the tech-mammal.

The coati—professional name, Dr. Irene Hocico—accepted the diamond from Judy and gave it a quick examination under a ring-light magnifier.

"Well?" said the Chief, looking over her shoulder.

"Don't crowd me." The coati groused, waving him back while continuing her scrutiny. (Being indispensable, she was one of the few members of the ZPD who could get away with talking to Bogo like that.)

She returned her attention to the ring. "Well, we're on the right track here, however…"

Pivoting on her stool, she reached over to grab a small, metal, pedestal-stand, and set it on the counter in front of her, attaching the ring to a clip on the end, diamond side up. Next, she turned and opened the door of something that looked like a scaled-down, armored microwave oven.
"Medium rare for me," said Nick, prompting Judy to nudge him in the ribs.

"Oh, hush."

Dr. Hocico slid the diamond inside the 'oven' closing the door firmly and flicking a switch beside it. A thrum and hissing sound followed as the air in the chamber was drawn out.

When the hissing finally ceased, the coati picked up a joystick and pressed another button on her console; at once a green dot appeared on one wall of the chamber. Toggling the stick with a careful paw, she kept her eye squarely on a display screen, carefully aligning a set of animated crosshairs over a CGI rendering of the captive diamond.

That was just too much for a certain fox to resist and he affected an exaggerated, drill-sergeant growl.

"Put it together, soldier. You'll never win the Medal of Heroes THAT way."

Dr. Hocico looked over her shoulder at Judy.

"Is he always like this?"

Judy's eyes lifted upwards and made a sharp right turn.

"You should hear him when he's rolling," (Actually, she was trying not to laugh. No, she wouldn't want him any other way.)

As if to remind everybody as to who was in charge, Chief Bogo cleared his throat.

"Will this take long, Doctor?" he asked.

"Seriously?" the coati looked up at him, arching an eyebrow, and then, "All right, don't anybody look at the door."

She pulled the joystick trigger. A star-bright flash of emerald light followed, and then a tiny wisp of smoke could be seen, curling off the top of the stone.

"Shame to do that to a perfectly good diamond," Nick Wilde observed, and this time he wasn't joking.

"Not so 'perfectly good' when you consider where it came from, Wilde." Chief Bogo rumbled, capping his remark with a derisive snort.

"Wellll, we don't know that for certain," Dr. Hocico cautioned, waving a finger, "It still might be a manufactured stone."

She swung out a keyboard from beneath her work-table and began to type. The crosshairs vanished from the display screen, replaced by a marching display resembling a rainbow-pattern seismograph. The scroll continued for several more seconds and then froze in place with the results superimposed over the graph.

The data on the screen might as well have been hieroglyphics as far as Nick, Judy, and the Chief were concerned. But there was no mistaking the number flashing beneath it.

100%...100%...100%...100%...100%

Dr. Hocico turned and offered Bogo a thumbs-up.
"Congratulations Chief, you have a winner," she said, speaking in the lively tone most mammals reserve for, "Can someone please empty the trash?"

But if Dr. Hocico wasn't particularly excited by the results, it was a different story with everyone else in the truck. In the confines of the cargo box, the coati's announcement had been easily heard, and now, whoops, howls, and high-fives filled the air; Nick and Judy exchanged a fist-bump and even Bogo had a smile on his face.

It was still there when he pulled out his cell-phone a few seconds later and dialed a number.

"Hello, Chief Bogo for Judge Walpole please. Yes, it's important. Would you…? Ah, good morning, Your Honor. Yes sir…yes, we did." His grin widened by nearly an inch, "Even better than we hoped, 100% Positive. You should have the results in your e-mail momentarily. Yes, that's right. Ah yes, thank you Your Honor. You have the number?" He said this while glancing sideways, at the silent specter of a portable fax machine, "Yes sir, that's correct. I appreciate your prompt response. Yes sir, we'll be ready to move as soon as we've got it in hoof. Yes, I'll certainly keep you informed. Thank you again, Your Honor. Good-bye."

He put away the cell and turned to address the group.

"Right, everyone listen up, it's on! We…all right, pipe DOWN!"

The din quieted immediately and the Chief continued with his address.

"We'll have our warrant shortly." He said, nodding towards the fax machine…and prompting another clever aside from Nick.

"Ah, the wonders of modern technology…"

"Quie-ET!" Judy hissed, nudging him again.

But Chief Bogo only nodded. Yes it WAS a great thing to be able to have a warrant delivered right to the scene of stakeout…and in mere moments.

Then he said, "In the meantime, everyone suit up."

The officers immediately begin pulling their tac-gear from the wall. Bogo watched them for a moment and then began barking orders like the captain of a ship.

"Simmers? You and Howell cover the back door. Swinton, notify Howell it's a go."

"Yes, sir," the pig and bear answered together, (Simmers with a notable lack of enthusiasm.) He moved to grab a tac-vest while she hit the radio call button, "Command to Howell, do you copy? Over."

Chief Bogo, meanwhile, was issuing further orders.

"Krumpansky, Delgato, Kobolai, you three cover the perimeter."

"Right Chief," a big Marco Polo Sheep responded…speaking for the lion and rhino as well as for himself.

Chief Bogo barely acknowledged him before moving on.

"Dr. Hocico, I want you to stay with the perimeter team and be ready to move inside that store as soon as the location is secured."
The coati responded with a grunt that could have meant anything. Bogo pretended not to notice, instead delivering another round of instructions.

"Fangmeier, Wolford, Grizzoli and Barrow….you four take up positions by the front door and wait for Officer Trunkaby's signal. Francine and I are going in."

The declaration set off another round of whoops and backpounding…and this time the Cape buffalo didn't interrupt; always good to send the troops in motivated.

But then a small voice piped up from below.

"Chief? What about us?"

Judy and Nick were gazing upwards at Chief Bogo. The fox's expression was soulful while hers was almost pleading.

"You two stay in the command truck," the Cape Buffalo ordered pointing from one to the other.

Judy Hopps recoiled as if Bogo had just backhoofed her. After all the time, and effort she'd put into this sting, he wasn't even going to let her…?

"But Chief…" she tried to protest and was immediately cut off.

"I don't have time for explanations, Hopps...stay here; that's an order." He unbuttoned his shirt to check the tac-vest underneath, and then fixed her in his trademark thousand-yard stare. "I mean it."

"Yes sir," Judy answered, regarding the floor; she looked like a beach-toy with the air-valve popped.

Bogo didn't even glance at her; he had one last order to deliver.

"Swinton you keep watch on the monitors; the rest of you, listen up. I want this take-down to go fast and smooth, in and done in less than five; is everyone clear on that?"

"Yes sir!" the officers shouted in unison—including Nick and Judy, though with considerably less gusto than the others.

Bogo nodded in acclimation and then went to the door and threw it open.

"Right then—everyone, let's go!"

The floor of the command-truck resounded like a thunder-sheet as the officers piled out. From his place beside the door, Chief Bogo waved them on, offering the odd word of encouragement here and there. ("Get going Wolford! Move your tail Delgado! What, d'you think you're in a sack race, Barrow?")

The last ones out were Dr. Hocico followed by the Chief, and then the door was pulled shut from the outside, leaving Nick and Judy alone in the truck-box with Officer Swinton.
Nick Wilde is just the Easter Egg fox on this one: Early on in the story, he borrows a line from Bolt and later on, another one from Captain Jack Sparrow, following further down the chapter with a reference to Wreck-it Ralph. And then, of course, there's his (obvious) nod to Apocalypse Now.

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The Easter Eggs in the first chapter were...

The opening quotes were by Thomas Moore and Lord Byron - as in Rich Moore and Byron Howard, the directors of Zootopia

The Rafaj Brothers' name is 'Jafar' (Aladdin) spelled backwards.
With This Ring (Continued...)

Chapter Summary

The bust goes down--but not without at least one major hitch, a complication that's going to have serious ramifications for Judy Hopps.

...in both the short and the long term

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 1 – With This Ring
(Continued…pt.4)

This time Ahmed al-Rafaj wasn't bothered; the latest pair of animals to enter his store were both prey species. (As if anything would prey on a Cape Buffalo and full-grown elephant!)

And even if the new arrivals had been predator and prey, it wouldn't have mattered; they weren't a couple. The buffalo had arrived a full two minutes after the elephant walked in—and afterwards they had only barely acknowledged one other.

In fact the only thing they seemed to have in common was that both of them were browsers rather than buyers; while the buffalo studied the males' ring display, the pachyderm was looking over the large-mammal necklaces.

Ahmed could live with it; if these two weren't going to buy anything, at least they hadn't been inside the store when that…that FOX had insisted upon kissing his bunny.

(It never would have occurred to the golden jackal that sending Nick and Judy in to purchase the lavender diamond had been a calculated ploy on Chief Bogo's part. With his blood up, Ahmed's natural wariness had been compromised—and now, adrenaline all but spent, he had dropped his guard even further.)

Even better for the Chief's purposes, Ahmed had another customer in the store right then; one who WAS a buyer, a pretty-face wallaby who had just completed the purchase of a diamond tennis bracelet. Thus the jackal remained blissfully unaware of what had just transpired right outside his door. Only a few seconds previously a Bengal leopard had been approaching the shop…and then
turned quickly in a different direction upon seeing the ZPD SWAT Team hunkering beneath the windows.

Meanwhile the wallaby was hopping happily towards the entrance, with Chief Bogo graciously holding the door for her. As she passed him by, he whispered, "Please do not be alarmed, Ma'am. Just keep on your way, police business."

The wallaby gave him a quick look of apprehension, (luckily unnoticed by Ahmed,) but then did as the Cape buffalo suggested.

With her gone, Bogo and Trunkaby moved rapidly. While the Chief made a beeline in Ahmed's direction, Francine quietly put herself between the golden jackal and the front door—not to cut off any avenue of escape, but to block his line of sight. Watching her on the monitors, Claire Swinton passed the word to the others; "It's coming down, get ready to move."

Ahmed al-Rafaj saw none of this of course, only the Cape buffalo coming his way. Ah, so perhaps he was a buyer after all.

The jackal immediately put on his most obsequious manner, bobbing his head and clasping his paws as Bogo came closer, "Yes sir, how may I assist you?"

The response he received was the rare spectacle of The ZPD Chief in distress.

"Yes," Bogo started to say, "I was wondering if you might…"

His words ended in a bellow of pain and then he was doubling over and grimacing.

"Sir, what is wrong?" Ahmed cried out in alarm. 'An ill customer is an ill omen'; that had been another one of his late father's pet aphorisms. In a careless move that he would never have made earlier, the jackal rushed out from behind the counter…away from the shutter controls and the panic button.

"Are you all right?" he asked, laying a paw on the Chief's shoulder.

"I-I'm fine," Bogo answered through clenched jaws, and then suddenly straightened up again, apparently as good as new.

"But you're not!" He snorted, pulling out his badge and holding it up for the jackal to see. "ZPD!"

That was his signal to Francine Trunkaby and she blew a fast note through her trunk and stepped quickly aside from the doorway. Right behind her, the assault team came charging in through the front, sending the door chime flying off its mount to land in a jingling clatter behind a counter.

At that same instant Chief Bogo was looming over Ahmed like a thundercloud.

"Ahmed Rachmann Ali al-Rafaj, you're under arrest…for illegally trafficking in blood diamonds." He looked to his right, nodding curtly "Wolford, cuff him and read him his rights. Barrow, Fangmeier…check the back."

"Right Chief."

"Yes sir,"

Readying their weapons, the tigress and the polar bear went plunging through the beaded curtain and into the rear of the store.
Officer Wolford watched them go and then coldly instructed Ahmed, "All right bub, assume the position."

It all went just as the Chief had specified—like fine, Swiss clockwork. In mere moments, the storefront was secured with yellow tape and less than half a minute later, Dr. Hocito was inside the shop, attaching tags to certain of the display cases.

"Not much out here worth checking," She told the Chief, "But that's not surprising; they probably keep most of their blood diamonds in the vault. In fact, I'd be surprised if they have ANY dirty stones out front. That'd be really brazen."

The Chief snorted. "Given how long they've been at it Doctor, I shouldn't be surprised if they've got a few stolen gemstones in the vault as well."

"Coming out." A voice called from the back, and seconds later a kangaroo rat came hopping through the beaded curtain, followed by a ground-squirrel. Behind these two were a mongoose and Ismael Rafaj, the latter looking as if he was about to suffer a nervous breakdown. Trailing him was goat with a broken horn, and bringing up the rear were a camel and an Arabian oryx, all of them with their arms raised. At the end of the procession was officer Fangmeier, herding the oryx along with a T-handled baton.

Chief Bogo let out a small rumble. "Fangmeier, how many times have I got to say it? Smaller mammals in the rear, so they won't be trampled by the larger ones."

The tigress let it pass without comment; this was just Bogo being Bogo, ever the stickler for protocol. She waved her stick at the troop of suspects, speaking in a purring, Sabra accent.

"We caught them trying to lock themselves in the vault."

THAT got Dr. Hocito's immediate attention.

"Wait, what? The vault's open?"

(Her tone of mild surprise would have ranked as full-blown astonishment in anyone else.)

She moved quickly towards the beaded curtain, but pulled up short when Bogo hastily threw an arm in her way.

"Not yet Doctor, there's still a very dangerous hippo on the loose back there somewhere."

And with that in mind he grabbed his radio.

"Bogo to Barrow, acknowledge, please…over."

The polar bear came back immediately.

"Chief, this is Barrow. Read you five by five, over."

"Barrow, any sign of that hippopotamus? Over."

"Uhhh, that's a negative Chief. No sign of him anywhere…I say again, no sign…over."

The Chief let out a small, pungent, rumbling sound.

"Well, stay sharp back there, Barrow. An animal that size can't conceal himself for very long. Bogo out."
He disconnected and looked around the store.

"Grizzoli, where are you?"

"Right here, chief." The white wolf answered, hurrying forward.

Bogo poked a thumb at the beaded curtain.

"Right, get back there and assist Barrow…see if that lupine sense of smell of yours can pick up our missing perp. If you get whiff of anything that smells even remotely like hippopotamus, call immediately for backup. And if you spot him, tag him with a trank dart and save the questions for later. This is one EXTREMELY aggressive individual we've got to deal with."

"I'm on it, Chief." Grizzoli answered and then hurried into the back of the store.

At the same time, in the alley behind Rafaj Brothers, Officer Sam Simmers was…well, simmering.

"I don't know why HOPPS is complaining, rookie." The brown bear groused to Officer Tad Howell, the red wolf who was earlier posing as a street-bum.

"I know, right?" Howell nodded his head like a bobble-doll, but privately he wished Simmers would just shut the heck up.

"At least she's inside the command truck where it's cool," the bear grumbled on, "while WE have to stand out here in the heat...in full tactical gear! And we're just as far from the action as she is."

It was as if Simmers just uttered the words to a forbidden spell. All at once, the brick wall behind him burst asunder as the hippo Rashid came crashing into the alleyway…colliding head on with the bear and burying Howell under a pile of masonry.

Under normal circumstances it would have been an even match, but Rashid had both the momentum and the element of surprise. Heaving Simmers over his shoulder, he pitched the bear into an open dumpster, throwing the door shut and slamming the lock-bar into place.

And then he was running hell-bent-for-leather down the alley.

At the alleyway exit, the big hippo nearly slid off his feet as he surged into the side street. He stopped…breathless, looking around frantically. Which way to go? To the left? To the right? Bismillah, where were the other police officers? No use trying to run, he'd be spotted in a heartbeat; what he needed was a place to hide, but where...? Wait, over there, in the other alley…a produce truck!

Inside the 'produce truck' Nick Wilde was feeling highly aggravated…not with Chief Bogo, with Judy Hopps.

"Dangit Carrots, will you quit that thumping?"

Normally, he wasn't bothered when she did this, but here, inside a soundproofed trailer, the noise seemed to amplify itself by a factor of five. (And he was already in a bad mood at having been left behind.)

Judy's foot slowed down but didn't stop.

"It's not fair Nick: we've been helping to work this bust from day one, and now Bogo won't let us in for the takedown?"
"I know Carrots, I agree." The fox told her quickly, "Believe me I don't like it any more than you. Only don't take it out on the truck for crying out loud—or my head."

Claire Swinton looked over from her console for a second.

"Patience Hopps, they also serve who only stand and wait."

The Bunny-cop's foot made final, hard slap against the floor.

"Swinton, were you brought in on this sting to bug me?"

The pig-cop pointed to an image of the jewelry store on a flat panel.

"No Hopps, to bug THAT."

Nick sniggered and Judy groaned.

"When I signed on for this op I never thought I'd end up playing straight-bunny to a…"

Without warning the back door of the truck flew open…and then she and the others were looking straight at Rashid while the hippo stared back, everyone too dumbstruck to move.

Then Judy was moving. Grabbing a tranquilizer gun off a tac-vest she dropped to the floor in a prone position, taking aim at the hippopotamus.

"Stop right there!"

But Rashid was on the move as well—slamming the door shut with all his strength.

Judy pulled the trigger and fired, but the dart only embedded itself in the door paneling, and then the whole truck shuddered as the door banged down and the latch was thrown.

Outside in the alley Rashid jammed the door-latch with a piece of rebar and scanned his surroundings. He had to get away from here and fast. Even before he'd pulled the door closed the pig running the console had been calling for backup…and it wouldn't take long for them to get here.

Marbles of sweat rolled down his face as the hippo tried to think. Where could he go now? Wait, look… another alleyway.

He turned and ran for it, full-tilt…unaware that in his blind panic he'd made a potentially disastrous mistake.

Back inside the command truck, Judy struggled furiously with the door-latch but it refused to budge by even a centimeter. She tugged on the handle a second time, a third time…nothing.

And then finally she gave up.

Or…not quite; "Oh no, you don't!"

She hopped over to the center of the cargo box, reaching down to the diamond-plate floor, and pulling a hidden lever.

A metallic groan answered as a section of the floor bucked upwards. Judy grabbed edge and heaved, but the escape-hatch was built for an animal more than twice her size; she only managed to get it halfway open it started to fall back again. Gritting her teeth, she took a breath and pushed
with all her might. This time the hatch arced up to a vertical position; it held there for a smidge of a second, and then finally tilted open. Judy heard it but didn't see it; she was already buckling on her tac-vest.

"You coming?" she said, looking up at Nick.

The fox just raised his paws.

"We were told to stay here the truck, Car…"

But Judy had already dropped through the bolt-hole.

Careening into the alleyway, Rashid had just come face-to-face with his error. He was right back where he'd started, behind Rafaj Brothers Jewelers; without realizing, he had retraced his steps.

Or…had it been such a mistake? The way ahead was all clear; the bear still trapped inside the dumpster. And while the wolf had managed to clear away most of the bricks covering him, his tail was still pinned beneath a section of wall.

Even better, Rashid could also see that not only had the wolf-cop's radio has fallen beyond his reach; it was laying in five easy pieces.

Best of all, the alley beyond was completely deserted, there wasn't another cop in sight: without meaning to, he made the proper move. Doubling back had been the last thing the ZPD had expected of the hippo.

Rashid began to work his way forward, moving carefully and stepping lightly, lest the vibrations alert another one of the other officers nearby. If he could only just make it to the street, then perhaps…

All at once, the hippo stopped in his tracks.

That…wolf.

Rashid's eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared, spewing hot jets of air like a pair of blow dryers.

He hadn't noticed before, but now that he was closer the hippo suddenly recognized the wolf. Disheveled and covered in masonry dust, there could be no doubt; this was the same 'homeless' mammal he'd been chasing away from the back of the shop all week.

A police officer! This filthy maggot had been a cop all along!

Rashid's mouth yawned into a deep chasm and he let out deep, guttural sound from the back of this throat, "Haawwww-waw-waw-waw-wawww," the sound a wild hippo makes, right before it charges.

It was a breathtaking transformation; only scant seconds ago, all that had mattered to Rashid was making it out of the alley and into the street; now he couldn't have cared less. The only thing that mattered was…a COP!

He made the hawing noise a second time and then began to move once more—straight towards Howell.

The red wolf saw him and began fighting frantically to extract his tail from beneath the slab of rubble; it was no good, he was caught like a mosquito on flypaper.
A leering smile panned across Rashid's features as he noted this. Oh, and look—right there beside a refuse barrel, a length of iron pipe. How fortuitous.

He grabbed the pipe, and began lumbering towards the hapless wolf, but this time stepping slowly, taking his time and savoring the moment.

Howell raised his paws and began to make pushing motions.

"Stop, wait! I'm a police officer."

The hippo just kept coming.

"Stop, think for a second!" Howell was almost howling, "If you hurt a cop, they'll throw away the key when they catch you."

Rashid just slapped the pipe into his hoof…and smirked.

Something odd happened then: Tad Howell's eyes screwed shut for half a second, and a hiss of air sucked inward through his teeth. For another couple of seconds he seemed to be talking to himself. "Okay…all right….do it!"

Reaching upwards with a paw he slapped at his shoulder, just below the left collarbone.

And then, in a shaky voice, he began to recite as if from a book.

"Epsilon Override…"

The oncoming hippo was only now ten feet away from using him for a piñata.

"…Alpha, Golf, Sierra…"

Only five feet away…

"…Six, Three, Seven, Bravo…"

Three feet away…

"Initiate!"

Less than one foot…

Howell lowered his head and began to shake it from side to side, his breath turning hot and ragged. Rashid was right on top of him now, raising the pipe in a high arc.

And then it clanged to the pavement behind the hippo…while his eyes flared wide and his mouth dropped open once again. This time, he made no sound and his lower lip trembled like the lid of a boiling pot.

And then he uttered a single dry, rasping word…splitting it in two.

"B-Bis…millaH!"

The sound of deep, hoarse breathing filled the alley, underscored by the noise of masonry falling to the pavement.

…and then crashing against the surrounding walls.
Judy was five feet away from the alley when a brick came whistling out of the entrance with the 
force of a cannon shot, neatly decapitating the bubbler fountain across the street and sending a six-
foot geyser of water arcing into the air. Instinctively the bunny-cop flattened against the pavement, 
ignoring the stinging heat.

"What the heck?" she asked, of no one in particular as she started to get back up again.

Then she heard the wolf howling.

It was like no howl Judy had ever heard before; deep and throaty, it was almost a roar. The next 
thing she heard was the sound of a frenzied battle; a wolf snarling, a hippo bellowing, and one 
violent impact after another…and then a ripping sound followed by a scream of terror and agony.

She pushed herself against the wall, back-first and breathing hard, dart-gun at the ready, ears rigid 
and trembling. Had she really just heard—nooo, *hippos* didn't scream…did they?

Then she heard another scream, and saw Rashid come flying around the corner, headed straight at 
her.

No time to shout a warning; Judy dropped to one knee and took aim with the dart-gun. She had 
better make *this* one count, or…

The hippo threw himself on the ground in front of her in front of her; at first Judy thought he must 
have slipped in the water from the destroyed fountain. But then he began trying to grab at her 
ankles, like a drowning mammal clutching at straws. In another time and place it would have made 
for a humorous spectacle, a huge hippo trying to snatch hold of a tiny little rabbit's legs.

Except…Rashid was sobbing wretchedly and his uniform was nothing but shreds and tatters, the 
body beneath latticed with slash-marks—and he was trembling as if an ice-storm has just blown 
down the street.

"Please…help me!" he begged, looking up at Judy with wet, beseeching eyes, "Don't let him hurt 
me, don't let him GET me!"

Judy felt her own eyes widening and her nose beginning to twitch…but then she heard another 
sound, a deep, metronomic rumbling. Wha…what the heck was THAT?

She looked up.

…and gasped.

A face was peering around the corner…wild, incandescent eyes, neck fur spiking like a hedgehog's 
quills, wet, slavering lips drawn back to expose a phalanx of sharp teeth.

It was a face the bunny-cop had seen before, behind the bulletproof glass in the Cliffside 
Laboratory…and earlier, right before Mr. Manchas had come blasting out of his bungalow, ready 
to turn both her and Nick into mincemeat.

But then the animal's brow performed two quick push-ups.

"You were told to stay in the command truck, Hopps!" he growled, sounding almost…
what, *annoyed*?

And then he disappeared back around the corner.
A paw fell on Judy's shoulder. She nearly jumped straight out of her skin.

"Cheez n' crackers Nick, don't DO that!"

"Sor-ree!" the fox said, backing up with his paws raised.

Judy pointed towards the alleyway

"Did you see that?"

Nick tilted his head sideways.

"See what?"

"That animal…" the bunny-cop started to say, but her partner had just taken notice of Rashid, lying trembling on the ground in a semi-fetal position.

"Holy smoked grasshoppers, what happened to HIM?"

Judy didn't answer him, but only drew her dart gun again. They could talk about the hippo later; right now she had other concerns.

"Cuff him and read him his rights." She said, nodding towards the prostrate Rashid, and without waiting for an answer from Nick, she began padding towards the alleyway entrance. Taking a deep breath, she pulled up hard against the wall and swallowed hard, readying her weapon and preparing to move in.

And that was when Howell came limping around the corner, helped along by Officer Simmers, freed from the dumpster at last. If anything, the red wolf appeared even more trashed-out than he'd been in his street-geek disguise…and NOTHING like the animal Judy had seen peering around the corner a moment ago.

As he hobbled past her, he lifted an ear,

"Didn't Chief Bogo tell you to stay in the truck?"

He told her this as if it was the first time he brought up the subject.

And then Judy's ears went up as she heard more officers approaching. Someone was speaking into a radio, it sounded like Van Horn.

"Dispatch, we have two injured officers…need an ambulance. Over."

For a long, hard moment, Judy stared at the alleyway entrance with her nose twitching—and then finally, she turned away.

Chapter End Notes

Easter Eggs: This episode borrows a bit of dialogue from one of the lesser-remembered Disney movies, The Black Hole
Chapter Summary

The next day, back at Precinct One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 2 – Taking The Bull By The Horns (pt. 1)

Nick Wilde was back in uniform again, leaning casually against the wall beside a door marked, 'ZPD - Females' Lockers'.

While he waited for Judy Hopps to appear, the fox recited a line to himself, each time giving it a slightly different inflection, as if rehearsing for a play.

"I know what I saw, Nick. I know what I saw, Nick. I know what I saw, Nick. I know what I saw, Nick."

His recital ended quickly as Judy Hopps came through the door, also in uniform.

…and turned, smiling sweet venom at the fox.

"I know what I saw, Nick." She told him, in a soft, sultry, satiny purr, "and I heard that and you're not funny."

She wheeled a 180 and walked away, casting a cheerful face in every direction but her partner's, as if to inform the world, "Look everybody, SEE how I'm ignoring him?"

Nick sighed, shook his head, and caught up to her.

"All right Carrots, I had my fun. But you saw…what, an animal gone savage; something that hasn't happened in almost two years now?"

Judy stopped and thumped her foot on the ground.
"I know what I saw!" This time her voice was as firm as solid oak.

Nick pretended not to hear her.

"And then you saw him again, less than a minute later…completely normal?"

That finally got her to look at him again.

"I never said it was Howell. It could have been…"

"No Carrots," Nick interrupted her gently, "There was only ONE wolf in that alleyway and that wolf was Officer Tad Howell." As if anticipating her response, he tapped the side of his muzzle, "The nose knows."

Judy sighed in resignation…but not defeat.

"All right, but you know as well as I do that there's an antidote for Nighthowler now."

Nick was especially ready for THAT one.

"An antidote so secret, even the name is kept under wraps," he reminded her, "and the last of the Nighthowler extract was destroyed right after Mayor Bellwether started her prison term. And she's still behind bars if you recall."

"But Doug isn't." Judy countered him archly…and now it was the fox's turn to look in every direction but his partner's. Like it or not, she was right. While his two chums Jesse and Woolter were later apprehended by the ZPD, Dawn Bellwether's chemist-cum-sniper was never caught. A brick by brick search of the tunnel where he'd last been seen had turned up not even so much as a strand of the rogue sheep's wool.

However Nick Wilde wasn't put off quite that easily.

"Okay, then why would he want to…?" He halted abruptly and changed direction, forming a 'T' with his paws, "Wait, hold it, full stop."

It was time to lay down his trump card.

'Tell you what Carrots, I'll admit you're right if you can explain just one thing to me. How is it that an animal gone savage SPOKE to you and then backed off?"

Judy winced and looked away, sucking air between her teeth as if she'd stuck herself with a cactus thorn. This was the one question she couldn't answer and both of them knew it. Animals darted with Nighthowler couldn't even reason, much less communicate; the only thing they understood was, 'If it moves, attack it!'

But still…

"All right, I don't know." she conceded—and then immediately went back on the offensive, "But can YOU explain what did that to our hippo? Ughhhh, did you get a look at that hot mess?" (She already knew that he had.)

Nick tilted and rolled his muzzle in that annoying manner of his.

"Okay, you know what? Now you're reaching; he crashed through a brick wall, for crying out loud!"
Judy's nose began twitching rapidly.

"That's not what he said to ME...and that's not what I saw when he opened the truck door."

"Well it's what he said in his statement, Carrots." Nick could feel his upper lip starting to vibrate; didn't she EVER let go? "And you saw him in that doorway for what, maybe two seconds before he closed it again."

He regarded the ceiling for a second and drew in a long breath. It was no use; he was going to have to tell her what he knew—but not here, not out in the hallway where they might be overheard. Luckily there just happened to be an office door right beside them, lights off, and apparently empty. Just the same, Nick was taking no chances. He knocked, waited for an answer and then knocked again; still no response. Opening the door by only a sliver, he ducked inside and motioned for Judy to follow. Her ears and eyebrows both shot upwards, but then she hurried in after him and closed the door,

She found Nick leaning his back against the desk, bracing himself up with his paws and facing away from her.

"Carrots," he said, not looking in her direction, "What I'm about to tell you is something us predators don't like to talk about, so I'm asking you please, not one word to anyone else about it, okay?"

Judy felt herself softening; she knew that tone of voice; the first time she'd heard it was when Nick had told her how he'd come by his mantra, 'Never let them see that they get to you.'

She went over and took him by the arm.

"Nick, you know you can count on me," she said, and then, as if to prove it, she put her right paw over her heart while raising the other one, "You have my word Nicholas P. Wilde, whatever you say here stays here, I promise."

The fox couldn't help smiling; that was his Judy, ever the bunny-scout. He pushed himself up off the desk and turned to face her.

"Carrots, you may not know this—heck, I'm SURE you don't know this—but it's possible for a predator to go savage without any help from a Nighthowler dart."

She took a step backwards, looking stunned.

"Not crazy-savage," he added quickly, raising his paws, "Not like Manchas or those animals we saw in the medical lab, and the effect is only temporary, not permanent or until you're given the antidote."

Seriously?" Judy was staring at him with her nose twitching.

Nick drew an invisible 'X' across his heart

"Perfectly, Carrots; it only happens once in a blue moon—but it DOES happen. Sometimes, when a wounded predator finds him or herself cornered, with no way out but to fight their way out, it can set off something called a TSE."

Judy looked at him even more curiously.

"A TSE, what's that?"
"A Triggered Savage Episode," Nick told her, and then looked at the window shades for a second.

"And you thinks that's what I saw?" Judy asked him.

He mulled it over for a second before answering

"Honestly, I don't what you saw Carrots, but the way you described it, it sure as heck SOUNDED like a TSE—and those were almost the perfect conditions for it. Howell was injured, check. He was trapped, check. And there was a hippo coming at him with an iron pipe, double-check." He looked at her earnestly. "Do you understand now?"

"I-I think so, Nick," Judy answered him, pulling thoughtfully at her chin for a second. "But what I still don't get is, why's it such a big secret?"

The fox sighed and leaned against the desk once again.

"Because if a predator has a TSE, everyone starts looking at him differently from then on; they're afraid to get close him and don't want to be around him. I know this is going to sound a little over-dramatic, but if word gets out that Tad Howell had one, it could be the end of his career with the ZPD."

"But the same thing happened during the Nighthowler crisis." Judy raised her paws in protest. "Everyone was shying away from predators back then. But they all got over it afterwards."

"That was different Carrots." Nick was shaking his head, "Everyone knew afterwards that those episodes had been set off deliberately—and by something that could make anyone go savage. But before that, when it looked like it was only predator species and that the episodes were happening spontaneously, how did everyone react to it then?"

Judy could only nod at this. She knew exactly what it had been like; that time on the metro train, when she'd watched a mother rabbit pulling her kits away from a tiger that was just sitting and minding his own business. Was that what it would be like for Officer Howell if it became known that he'd had a Triggered Savage Episode?

Well SHE wasn't going to be the one to make it happen, the bunny cop told herself with stiffening resolve. Tad Howell was a good officer, and what the heck else was he supposed to have done, just lay there and let that hippo work him over?

"Okay Nick, now I get it," she said, laying a paw on his arm again, "And I won't say another word about it, not to anyone." As if to emphasize the point, she extended her other arm straight out from her side, pantomiming the act of letting something fall to the floor. "Subject dropped."

Nick patted her paw and forced a smile, "Not quite Carrots, as Chief Buffalo Nickel would say there's still one more item on the docket—and the answer to your question is no, it never happened to me."

Judy gave him a lopsided smile of her own.

"You know fox, there's only one thing worse than partner who doesn't understand you."

"What's that?" he asked.

"A partner who DOES understand you," she said, and then clasped his arms and looked up at him. "Thanks Nick, I know how hard it was for you to tell me that; thanks for keeping me from acting like a dumb bunny…again."
His expression became suddenly dark and grave.

"Uh Carrots, I don't know if this is a good time to tell you this, but…"

Alarmed, Judy interrupted, "What Nick?"

He winked and his face turned instantly impish.

"You were never a dumb bunny."

Judy groaned, but couldn't keep from smiling.

"Oh, you!"

Someone knocked on the door—and then opened it without waiting for a reply.

"Excuse me Dr. Hocico, but…"

It was Francine Trunkaby.

She pulled up short, catching her breath and then staring at the fox and bunny with small, hard eyes

Nick and Judy hurriedly let go of each other, realizing too late that this only made it look even more like they'd been up to something when the door opened. Judy would later be grateful that at least they'd resisted the temptation to protest, "This isn't what it looks like." That would have REALLY confirmed their guilt.

It didn't seem to matter to Officer Trunkaby; her broad face darkened with contempt—and at the same time, it seemed to light up like a Christmas display. Judy could almost hear her thoughts, 'Oboy, wait'll I tell the gang about THIS!'

She wanted to crawl under the desk and stay there for the next ten years; of all the officers who could have walked in on them, it just had to be the one who thought the Rafaj Brothers were too easygoing in their attitude about predator/prey relationships.

But then Nick Wilde folded his arms and met the elephant's gaze measure for measure.

"If you don't mind, Officer Trunkaby, we were having a private conversation; and why did you just walk right in here instead of waiting for an answer after you knocked?" he narrowed his eyes zeroing in on her oversized ears, "You weren't by any chance listening in on us, were you?"

Trunkaby darted her eyes away for a second, upwards and to the left….and Judy realized with a start that this was exactly what she HAD been doing. At once the bunny's embarrassment vanished and she was reaching inside her pocket, fumbling for her trusty sidekick.

"I couldn't hear what you were saying." The cow elephant tried to protest, and Nick's paws went straight to his hips.

"Oh riight, as if that makes any difference; you know how the Chief feels about eavesdropping on fellow officers."

Judy knew that tone of voice as well, and as far as she knew Chief Bogo had never expressed any sort of opinion on the subject; Nick was bluffing.

But it was a good bluff; Francine hurriedly raised her hooves, "It's your word against…" she started to say, but then stopped abruptly when she saw Judy waving her carrot-pen in the air.
The air around the elephant seemed to darken or a second, and then she quickly turned to leave… but not before determining to get in the last word.

"And you know how the Chief feels about disobeying his direct orders." She countered, pointing with her trunk at the fox and then the bunny, "If either one of you think you're going make detective after THAT little stunt, think again."

She slammed the door and stalked away, causing the floor to tremble with every step she took.

Nick sighed and looked at Judy.

"Did you get any of that?" he asked, nodding at her carrot pen.

"No, didn't have time to switch it on," the bunny cop answered putting it away; one good bluff deserves another.

Then she said, "Listen Nick, if she's right and we're in trouble for leaving the command truck against the Chief's instructions, I want you to know that I'm taking full responsibility."

The fox's reaction nearly blew her through the back wall of the office.

"Like HECK you are Carrots!" He almost snarled, "Nobody put a gun to my head and made me follow you out of that truck. I'll take my own lumps for my own actions, thank you very much."

Judy leaned towards him, face hardening. "Don't give me that Slick, I know you. You only came after me because you weren't going to leave me to face that hippo all by myself."

Nick poked himself in the chest.

"Darn right I did, Carrots. That's what good partners DO—they stick by each other when the going gets roughest. And don't tell me you wouldn't have done the same thing for me if it had been the other way around."

Judy spread her arms in exasperation.

"Nick there's no reason we should BOTH lose our chance at making detective."

"Yes there is, fluff." The fox responded, and then surprisingly he turned away from her once more.

"If I make detective and you don't, then we won't be partners anymore; the Chief will pair me with someone else." His voice had descended to a near mumble.

Judy stopped, blinked, and blinked again; she hadn't thought of that, the fox was right.

He turned to look at her over a shoulder.

"And if I have to choose between making detective with someone else or sticking with you as a regular cop, then there's no contest, Carrots. You got me into this and you're my partner, first, last, and always."

"Oh Nick," Judy reached to lay a paw on his arm, but then stopped herself at the last second. Wouldn't it be just their luck to have someone ELSE walk in through that door right now?"

"Okay," she told him, summoning up as much resolve as she could muster, "Then let's get our tails to roll call and face what we have to face together."
At the entrance to the precinct lobby, Judy stopped for half a second, bracing herself. By now everyone in the building must know about that kiss Nick had given her.

And it would be the command truck all over again; snickers and murmurs and sardonic looks, coming at them from every quarter.

Not this time. Instead when the fox and bunny entered the foyer, everything was business as usual in ZPD Precinct One. Nearly all the other officers were too wrapped up in their own affairs even to pay attention to her and Nick. Of the few glances they did receive only about half were looks of amusement and/or scorn. One or two of the others actually nodded approvingly and Gaby Fangmeier even raised a salute with her coffee-cup. Judy felt herself relaxing; maybe the razzing wouldn't be that bad after all.

Checking in at the reception desk, they found Benjamin Clawhauser keeping company with his favorite morning treat, a box of Zombie Doughnuts. Unusual for him, he was ignoring the fried goodies and concentrating instead on a tablet held in a pair quivering paws, staring at the screen so intently, he seemed to be trying to will whatever was pictured on it into existence.

Nick hailed him first and Judy followed.

"Top of the morning, Clawhauser."

"Morning Benjamin."

He ignored both greetings, instead practically thrusting the tablet into their paws.

"Hey guys, have you seen this? Ooooo!"

The tablet was built for a large-sized mammal size, but in his haste and excitement Clawhauser somehow forgot. As a result, Nick and Judy nearly dropped the pad as soon as they took hold of it. (In their paws, it was nearly big as a picture window.) Working together they managed to heft it back upwards and tilt it vertically. What the heck had been holding that cheetah so enraptured?

It turned out to be Stagslist ad. The opening banner read,

Direct from Zao City - Gazelle Japanese Tour Shirts!

And below this was more text

Oops, Big Mistake

On Gazelle's last tour of Japan, somebody accidentally doubled the order for tour shirts, and now you get the benefits.

Incredible artwork, by Saburo Miyusagi (Furry Tale) voted one of Japan's Top Ten Manga Artists by Tokyo Go! magazine.

Available In Most Species Sizes.

Three Different Colors - Red, Blue and Black.

You'll want to hurry up and get in early, at the Meerkat market last weekend, we were sold out before noon.

Underneath the text were front and back images of one of the shirts, and now Judy was impressed.
If anything, that pitch had been an understatement; the artwork on this shirt was nothing short of amazing.

In the center of the tee was Gazelle, depicted as a winged Ninja princess, while her four tigers were placed one to a corner and done up as post-modern samurai warriors, each one brandishing a different weapon. The colors were vivid, the detail amazing, the work of a true master. Yes, the lettering was all in Japanese characters, but that only seemed add an air of exotica to the shirt—and the calligraphy was every bit as exquisite as the drawings. The back of the tee however was something of an anticlimax, showing nothing but tour dates; (presumably, everything was written in Japanese.) It didn't matter; the front side of the shirt more than made up for the back.

"Wow, no kidding Benjamin." Judy said, nodding to the cheetah, "This is really something."

"I can guess who's going to be the first animal in THAT line," Nick Wilde added with a wink in her direction.

The obese cheetah only sighed and seemed to deflate.

"Awwww, I wish I could," he said, pointing at the bottom of the tablet screen, "But I have the duty and they're selling them all the way down in Bunnyburrows this weekend; the Carrot Days Festival."

At the mention of her hometown, Judy Hopps didn't hesitate.

"Well hey Benjamin, my family lives in Bunnyburrows remember? I'm sure if I asked, they'd be happy to grab one of those shirts for you."

At this Clawhauser practically gushed like a schoolgirl; pushing his paws up into his cheeks and swishing his tail like a willow tree.

"Ooooo, could you?" His voice was a high-pitched squeal.

"Sure no problem," Judy told him.

"But uh, do you think you can take this first?" Nick added with a small grunt, referring to the big cat's tablet which was now beginning to make its weight known. "It's kind of heavy for us smaller mammals."

The cheetah's mouth went wide in a deep, slow gasp.

"Ohhhh, I am so sorr…" 

"Claw-hauser!"

Chapter End Notes

The Easter Eggs in Chapter 1, Part 3 were:

1. When Nick says to Judy, "Now Carrots let's just calm down and pin this conversation to the wall..." From Disney's 'Bolt' - a variation on the line Penny's agent used whenever he wanted to shut down one of her protests.
2. When Nick says to Judy "I may have deserved that." Jack Sparrow—excuse me, Captain Jack Sparrow delivered several variations on that line in the first Pirates of the Caribbean film

3. When Nick tells Dr. Hocico, "Put it together, soldier; you'll never win the Medal of Heroes that way." The Medal of Heroes was the prize in the Heroes Duty game that Wreck-It Ralph won and then later tried to get back from Vanellope.

4. If you couldn't spot the reference to Apocalypse Now for yourself, I really can't help you.
Chapter Summary

Nick and Judy face the music...while someone else faces off with an old friend for the

Prologue

Chapter Notes

In this episode, I attempted to wrap up one the loose ends, left over from the movie.
Nick and Judy's Q-and-A with Duke Weaselton

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 2 – Taking The Bull By The Horns
(Continued…pt. 2)

Inside the bullpen, things were pretty much the same as they’d been in the lobby—with one notable exception. If looks could kill, the one Francine Trunkaby gave to Nick and Judy as they passed her by would have wiped out half the room. The fox just insouciantly flipped down his eyeshades but Judy couldn’t help being bothered.

She had known something was coming of course; nobody gets on the fast track to career advancement without drawing at least a little resentment—and she and Nick had been offered their chance at the detective bureau over the heads of not a few cops with both more experience and higher rank…including a certain cow elephant.

But this was different; this wasn’t just a case of simple jealousy, it was envy mixed with species prejudice. And when you threw in what had gone down in Dr. Hocico’s office only a short while ago, the upshot was an even more noxious brew. Without meaning to—certainly without wanting to—she and Nick had just made their first enemy in the department, and it didn’t help much that Francine Trankaby was hugely popular with her fellow officers.

Judy glanced over at Nick, thinking, “We made a mistake back there, fox; we came down way too hard on that elephant. And one of these days, it’s going to cost us.”
She would have to discuss this with him—later when they could talk privately. Francine’s humiliation had occurred in private, not in public; no one else knew and no one else needed to know about her spying. Perhaps even at this late date, there was still some way the three of them could bury the hatchet.

Judy quickened her pace towards the front of the room, drawing curious a glance from Nick—until he noted the clock above the podium. The delay inside Dr. Hocico’s office had taken longer than he’d realized; The Chief would be arriving any second…and when he did, everyone had better be in their seats.

Some modifications to the bullpen’s furnishings had occurred since Nick and Judy had joined the ZPD; two newer chairs now graced the front table, tall enough for the fox and bunny to see the lectern without having to stand on their seats.

At almost the very instant they pulled up their chairs, the hippo Dan Higgins called, “Attention!” and the side door to the bullpen swung open. As Chief Bogo ducked his way inside the bullpen, he was greeted by the usual round of whoops, hoots, and pounding of fists on tables. And just as typically, he seemed to find the display irritating.

“Right, right,” he rumbled taking his place at the podium, “Quiet down everyone.”

They all hushed up at once. Bogo nodded curtly and then slipped on his half-moon reading glasses, at the same time reaching with a hoof to his right.

“Looks like a slow morning for a change.” Nick Wilde observed under his breath. The clipboard Higgins was passing to the Chief seemed to hold considerably fewer sheets of paper than normal.

“Smile when you say that, fox.” Judy whispered, knocking wood under the table with her left paw. A lot could still happen before the day was over.

“First order of business,” the Chief was saying, flipping to the first page and adjusting his spectacles, “As some of you are no doubt aware, the department pulled off a major undercover sting yesterday morning, and it’s only right that I offer my thanks and congratulations to all the officers involved.” He leaned forward, peering over the tops of his glasses, “But I won’t, because I’ve got better things to do with my time.”

Judy glanced to her right, and was relieved to note that her partner was keeping mum.

Nick had learned to do that after making a ‘clever-fox’ comeback one too many times during a morning brief—and had been slapped with a week’s parking duty for his troubles. And just to make sure he had gotten the point, Bogo had further ordered him to wear a meter-maid’s cap for the duration of his assignment; after that, the fox had learned to curb his enthusiasm.

But even then he’d had to appreciate that Bogo had disciplined him UN-officially…meaning nothing had appeared on his service record. It had seemed like very cold comfort to the fox at the time, but now that he and Judy were up for a spot on the detective bureau, he was profoundly grateful for the Chief’s benevolence.

That, more than anything else, was why he was keeping his mouth shut at the moment.

The Chief meanwhile had flipped to the second page.

“Right then, Snarlov, Swinton, and Grizzoli. We’ve had a call from the Muktuk Cold Storage warehouse in Tundratown; they tell us someone’s been possibly casing their establishment over the past two nights. Get over there and see what you can find out. Swinton, you’ll review their
security camera footage.”

“Yes sir,” the trio responded in unison and came forward to receive their assignment papers. They did not however head for the exit but instead returned to their seats.

That was Bogo’s doing; the previous autumn, he had instituted a procedural change. Now the officers were dismissed together instead of leaving as soon as they had their assignments.

The buffalo flipped to page number three.

“Barrow, Kobolai, and McHorn…looks like The Phantom is up to his old tricks again; Lemming Brothers Bank reports they’ve had another data breach. You’ll see Tufts over in Cybercrimes for your full assignments.

“Yes sir,” they answered—with considerably less alacrity than the first three officers had shown.

Nick and Judy both knew why; although neither had ever met Lieutenant Albert Tufts, head of ZPD Cybercrimes, they’d heard about him. He was the quintessential know-it-all computer geek; the kind who thought anyone with a lesser knowledge of software-tech than himself was a candidate for a Special Ed class. Even Benjamin Clawhauser, who liked everybody, didn’t like him. In spite of all this, Lieutenant Tufts’ brand of cyber-snobbery was tolerated, if not wholly accepted by the Department and for one simple reason. Whatever else you might have to say about him, he was good at his job; even his biggest detractors had to give him that much.

The rest of the assignments were more-or-less routine, and as usual Bogo waited until the end before getting around to Nick and Judy.

“Hopps, Wilde; see me downstairs in twenty minutes, room I-5.”

Nick and Judy looked at each other, each one suppressing a swallow. Bad enough that they’d been summoned for a private talk without any sort of explanation but anytime the Chief wanted to talk you downstairs, instead of in his office…. Not! Good!

It was here that Bogo did something rarely seen in ZPD’s Precinct one; he broke from his standard routine. Instead of calling ‘Dismissed’ as he normally would have, he removed one last item from the clipboard, holding up for everyone to see.

It was a greeting card showing a wolf-cub in a police uniform offering a salute. (It reminded Judy of the costume she’d worn at the Carrot-Days skit more than 15 years ago.) Arcing above the young wolf was a message written in large red letters.

There’s No Speed Limit, Get Better FAST.

“Yesterday, in the midst of that sting I mentioned earlier, two of our officers were injured in the line of duty,” Bogo informed the group solemnly. “One of them, Officer Tad Howell was hurt seriously enough to be taken to hospital.”

He turned the card over and scribbled briefly on the inside, and then passed it to Higgins, saying, “Everyone, please sign this before you go.”

There were numerous nods and several murmurs of approval; if there was one thing about which Chief Bogo was never indifferent, it was the safety of the officers under his command.

When the card got to Judy, she just had to ask, “How’s he doing, Chief?”
For the first time that morning, Bogo smiled. “Glad you asked Hopps. As a matter of fact, his injuries turned out to be much less serious than they appeared. A few sprains and bruises, but nothing broken I’m pleased to say; in fact, the doctors tell me he can come home tomorrow.”

Everyone cheered—except for Wolford and Grizzoli, who chose instead to howl in solidarity with their absent fellow lupine.

It left Judy Hopps doubly grateful that Nick had taken her aside for that talk. She could only hope that Officer Howell wasn’t in too much pain right now.

In fact, Tad Howell was milking it for all he could get.

He lay in his hospital bed with the curtains drawn around him, surrounded by dozens of ‘get-well’ bouquets and a row of greeting cards. (He had saved only the ones from his family—and those from any female admirers who had bothered to attach both a picture and a phone number.)

For the moment, the wolf had the room to himself; visiting hours didn’t start for another hour at least. This afternoon was when the parade would start, he was sure of that much, if nothing else.

Howell had to admit; those guys on the other end knew how to handle things. When they’d wheeled him into Imaging, the armadillo in charge had told him in a Latino accent, “Just relax and do not worry. There is nothing out of the ordinary here.”

He had said that BEFORE the wolf had even been lifted onto the X-Ray table.

Afterwards, he’d been moved into an extra-large private room; that had been courtesy of the ZPD—and Chief Bogo, who always took care of his own—and told anything he needed, just ask. (For that, Howell he knew he could thank someone else.)

Right now he was floating on a cloud of semi-euphoria; that came by way of the 10 mg of Purrcoct he’d been given with the rest of his morning meds. Propped against a pillow he was focused on the room TV—ZSPN, the Large Mammals Female MMA championships and booing loudly at the screen. A female panther had just been disqualified for, ‘use of illegal claw enhancements’.

“You want enhancements, I’ll give you enhancements,” the red wolf growled sardonically, tapping at his shoulder and taking another spoonful of ice cream.

When it came to owning a sweet tooth, Benjamin Clawhauser apparently had nothing on Tad Howell. In addition to the ice cream, (his third bowl), an open box of Three Mustelids bars lay the mattress beside him, most of them gone. Over on his right meanwhile, an empty box marked ‘Sweeties Scots Confectionary Shop’ peeked halfway out of the wastebasket. (Well, they’d warned him the stuff did a number on your glucose level.)

Disgusted with the results of the fight, he reached for the remote to change channels, just as a silhouette appeared on the other side of the bed curtain.

The red wolf’s mouth arced downwards in a puzzled frown. Funny, he hadn’t heard the door open.

The shape moved closer to the bed, the outline becoming much more distinct; it was a mammal approximately the same size as himself…and also very much of the feminine variety.
Howell relaxed and a lascivious grin slid around his muzzle.

“Hey nurse, time for my physical therapy already?” he growled, amused at his own joke.

But then his nostrils flared, along with his eyes, the drug-induced euphoria vanishing, like vapor in a high wind—and then he was pulling himself backwards against the bed-pillow, cringing as though a half-ton spider was crawling towards him.

Someone grabbed the curtain and swiped it violently aside, Tad Howell might have howled, except he had no saliva.

The animal on the other side of the curtain was a female all right, a female wolverine—and the look she was giving him at the moment was anything but friendly.

But it wasn’t thanks to her that the red wolf’s tail was curling up between his legs and he was barely able to keep from whimpering.

That came courtesy of the other wolverine, the one standing off to the side and behind her, the one with the single, white paw.

And HE looked even less congenial than his companion.

“Mind the door Slashburn.” He told her, and the female wolverine made a quick exit, closing it behind her.

Seth Whitepaugh waited until she had gone, and then moved forward, looming over Howell and grinding a white-furred fist into his other pawlm.

“You activated without authorization.” Was all he said; short and to the point

Howell sat up rapidly, still frightened, but also irritated.

“Hey, wait minute, I was told I could do that in an emergency.”

“Emergency…” Whitepaugh spoke in a monotone while regarding the wolf-cop with a steely eye; clearly he was in no mood to mince words.

“Yes, emergency.” Howell was no longer merely annoyed, but thoroughly exasperated, “My tail was caught and my leg was injured and that blankety-blank hippo was getting ready to plant a stinkin’ pipe in my skull. If I hadn’t activated when I did, I’d be down in the ICU on life-support, not up here being kept overnight for observation.” His lip curled upwards, revealing his incisors.

“Don’t tell me you don’t KNOW that!”

In response to this, the wolverine’s mouth spread open, revealing teeth that were like daggers against butter-knives in comparison to the red wolf’s canines.

“Don’t bare your fangs at ME.” He informed Howell coldly, “and in case you’re thinking about activating right now, you’d do well to remember that we can override by remote any time we choose.”

The wolf looked away for a second, but his expression remained sullen. Active now, did they think he was THAT stupid?

Whitepaugh studied him for a second as if he were a specimen under glass; and then surprisingly, he relented.
“As a matter of fact, we are aware; and yes, under the circumstances, your action was justified.”

Howell’s ears began to work back and forth in confusion.

“Then why…?”

His answer came in the form of Seth Whitepaugh grabbing him by the lower jaw and forcing the wolf to meet his gaze. At no point did he raise his voice; in fact it actually dropped a couple of decibels.

“What wasn’t so acceptable,” the wolverine almost whispered, “is that when Rashid al-Azif attempted to flee the scene, you, for some odd reason, elected to give chase.” He let go and took a step backward. “Why was that, Officer Howell? What was the reasoning behind such a reckless act?”

The wolf rubbed gingerly at his muzzle for a second.

“Azif had me made; I had to stop him before he could tell the Rafaj bro…”

The account ended in a choked gurgle as Whitepaugh grabbed him again…this time by the throat. Even in spite of their relative sizes, the wolverine handled him as easily as a rag-toy.

“Howell?” he crooned, in a tone of velvety menace, “Do I look like some B-list street-hustler, peddling pawpsicles to you?”

The red wolf tried to answer but all that came out was a frog’s croak. He had better luck when he tried to shake his head and Whitepaugh dropped him like an oat-sack.

“Then don’t talk to me like one,” the wolverine growled, sounding like a fed-up teacher lecturing a slacker. “You know perfectly well that no one would have taken the word of a felon like that over even a rookie police officer. And as matter of fact, Rashid al-Azif said nothing about you in his statement to the ZPD. Instead, he claimed to have sustained his injuries when he went through that brick wall…a wise decision on the hippo’s part, if I do say so myself.”

He looked up and away for a second, pretending to be lost in thought.

“On the other paw, if one of your fellow police officers were to have reported seeing you in that state…well now, there would be someone with just a little more credibility, wouldn’t you say?”

Still massaging his neck, Tad Howell let out a burbling groan. He knew exactly where this was going and there was no point trying to dodge it.

“Yes, Officer Hopps saw me,” he admitted, “Only for a second, and only my face…but yes, she saw me.”

Whitepaugh turned rapidly to face him, his eyes narrowing into slivers of volcanic glass.

“And did you say anything to her?”

Howell lowered his gaze to the floor.

“I…I told…I reminded her she was supposed to have stayed in the command truck.”

He looked up again, bracing himself, waiting for the blow. Instead, the wolverine actually looked pleased.
“Good,” he answered cryptically, and then, “I appreciate your candor in admitting that, Howell… and you did everything afterwards correctly, including notifying us of the activation even before getting your partner out of that trash dumpster. With that in mind, I think we can write this off as an honest mistake in the heat of a crisis.”

Howell started to relax, but caught himself. If he didn’t know by now that he wasn’t getting off quite so lightly, he’d never figure it out.

And sure enough, in the blink of an eye, Whitepaugh was nose to nose with him again, sniffing deeply as is trying to imprint his scent for later.

“But the next time you violate protocol,” he purred, in that same velveteen voice, “you will NOT live to regret it. Is that understood?”

Without waiting for an answer, the wolverine dropped him and went to the door. Before making his exit he turned and looked back, pointing with two fingers.

“Just remember, Howell…we’re watching.”

And then he was gone.

By the time Nick and Judy got to room I-5 they already knew that things weren’t going to go quite the way they had anticipated.

First of all, usually when the Chief wanted to read you the Riot Act, he’d clear out the Records room for the purpose—and Records was at almost the opposite end of the building from where they were now.

Second, what were all these other officers doing gathered around the door to room I-5? Bogo always delivered his reprimands in private, never in public. (That in fact, was why he called you downstairs for a talk when he was really angry; his booming voice might carry easily enough through the glass-paneled door to his office, but it was no match for the basement’s concrete walls and fire doors.)

This time it was the command truck all over again; at the moment of the fox and bunny’s approach all conversation in the corridor instantly ceased. Most of the officers remained stone faced, but Snarlov and Spottiswoode, polar bear and leopard respectively, looked like a pair of cubs who’d just placed a bucket of water on a door-frame and were waiting for their victim to walk in. (Chief Bogo seemed to be nowhere in sight.)

But then McHorn turned and knocked twice on the door to room I-5. It cracked open immediately, and yep the Chief was in there.

“Is that them, then?” he queried in his familiar basso-profundo.

“Yes Chief.” The rhino answered, glancing quickly at the new arrivals.

“Send them in.”

Nick and Judy exchanged a glance and then moved uneasily past McHorn and through the door.

Once inside, they finally they understood what was happening; Room I-5 was painted in a dingy,
two-tone gray and the overhead lighting consisted of a pair of caged fluorescent bars. On their left side, the wall was taken up almost entirely by a mirror…which Nick and Judy both knew was not a mirror on its other side.

And there, in the center of the room, were Ahmed and Ismael al-Rafaj seated at a table with a nattily-dressed porcupine wedged in between them (not sitting too closely, of course). On the other side of the table were Chief Bogo and a chamois in a suit and tie that Nick and Judy didn’t recognize. The center of the tabletop was occupied by a digital voice recorder, sitting placidly with its light on.

They didn’t know whether to laugh, cry, or kick each other. In their mixed consternation over Francine Trunkaby’s ambush and the Chief’s abrupt order, they hadn’t realized where they were being summoned—until now.

Room I-5…Interrogation room 5. Duh! But there was no time for any further self-recrimination. The Rafaj Brothers took one look at who had just entered the room—in police uniforms—and their eyes appeared to grow three sizes bigger and their jaws fell open like gallows traps.

Chief Bogo meanwhile had assumed his most ingratiating smile. When he spoke, his tone was all warmth and formality.

“Ahmed…Ismael?” He said, gesturing towards the newcomers with a grand sweep of his arm. “If I may, I would like to introduce you to Officer Nicholas Wilde and Officer Judith Hopps of the Zootopia Police Department.”

The two jackals swallowed, look hard at each other, and then at Chief Bogo again. After another few seconds, Achmed coughed and cleared his throat.

“M-Might we have a moment to consult with our attorney in private, please?”

“Certainly.” Bogo answered, all smiles once again, “Take all the time you need…” And then the smile wiped away, leaving only a smoldering scowl, “just as long as I have my answer within the next five minutes!”

He got up and went to the door, beckoning with crooked finger for Nick and Judy to follow. As they got up to join him, the chamois spoke for the first time.

“If you know what’s good for your clients, Counselor,” He said, talking to the porcupine, “You’ll advise them to take the plea bargain…because if I hear anything but a ‘yes’ when I come back in here, The Mammals will withdraw their offer.”

Before their attorney could answer, Ahmed bolted halfway out of his seat, whining like a buzzing fly.

“They are only diamonds bey,” he protested, “just diamonds!”

It was Chief Bogo who answered him turning to stare with a glacial expression.

“Just diamonds purchased with guns.” He snorted, “Just diamonds mined by slave labor.”

He ushered Nick and Judy through the door and then stepped aside for the chamois. And then, making after his own exit, Bogo slammed the door behind him.

No sooner did it close than a remarkable transformation came over the Cape buffalo…and this time it wasn’t a performance. A friendly smile might have been something of an effort for Chief Bogo,
but not so a smile of triumph.

And his was actually one of the milder reactions; McHorn and Snarlov exchanged a hard high five while Rick Spottiswood was almost folded in half with laughter. The only party-pooper seemed to be the chamois; he appeared to be half pleased, half anxious.

“O-M Goodbar!” Spottiswood had finally straightened up and was peering through the one-way mirror, “Did you see the look on that one jackal’s face when the Chief brought Wilde and Hopps into the room? For a minute there, I thought we were going to need the defibrillator.”

“Oh for most certainly,” Snarlov agreed, “They’ll start to sing now, I think, yes?”

“Sing?” McHorn snorted gruffly. “Those two are gonna perform an OPERA.” He nodded over at Nick and Judy; the fox responded by giving him a sour look, as if to say, ‘Hey thanks for finally noticing we’re here.’

“Just you wait,” the rhino continued, either ignoring Nick or not caring, “By tomorrow morning, I bet they give up every single one of their suppliers.”

“I believe you’re possibly right, McHorn.” Bogo nodded cautiously, and then turned a sardonic expression on the chamois, who immediately threw up his hooves in vexed defeat.

“All right Chief, you want me to say it? I’ll say it. You were right and I was wrong; saving Hopps and Wilde for the closer did the trick.”

That was Judy’s cue to cough and clear her throat.

“Ch-Chief?” she said, unconsciously tracing a design on the floor with her big toe, “I just wanted to say that…uhm, I…want to apologize for going after that hippo instead of staying in the command truck.”

To her utter surprise—and relief—Chief Bogo only waved a dismissive hoof.

“Oh, never mind that, Hopps. Given the circumstances, your actions were justified. That hippo had already made you as police officers, and you couldn’t just let him get away.”

But then his trademark scowl returned and he pointed a finger at her and then at Nick. “Just the same, let this be a lesson—to both of you. When I give you an order to stay back you’d do well NOT to assume that it’s only because your species. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Said Judy

“Right Chief.” Said Nick.

“Now that’s out of the way,” Bogo gestured towards the chamois with an open hoof, “Officer Hopps…Officer Wilde, this is Deputy Chief Prosecutor Rudy Gamsbart, of the Zootopia Attorney General’s office. He’ll be handling the case from here on in.”

“Nice to meet you,” the chamois said, offering each of them a hoof and shaking quickly. “That was some excellent undercover police work on your part,” he winked, “even if your methods were a little, mmmmmm, unorthodox.”

There was an undercurrent of condescension in his last remark, but Judy let it pass. A sideways glance at Nick however told her that it wasn’t going to roll off his back quite so easily.
She hurriedly spoke up.

“So I guess we’ll be seeing you on the witness stand,” she said, a left-pawed way of reminding her partner that this chamois was NOT someone you wanted to antagonize.

Gamsbart drily shook his head.

“Actually, I hope that won’t be the case Officer Hopps. As your Chief rightly pointed out, the most common currency for the purchase of blood diamonds is weapons—and that’s who we really want, whichever illegal arms traders were supplying the brothers with those stones.”

“If they give you any of their suppliers,” Nick Wilde was asking, “Is there any chance we might be put on the case?” No longer irritated, he was now a fox on the hunt.

It was Bogo who answered him.

“Possibly…if there any of them turn out to be within our jurisdiction. But I shouldn’t get my hopes up, Wilde; illegal weapons traffickers usually make it a point of not dealing locally—neither in armaments, or in blood diamonds.”

“I’m afraid he’s right,” Gamsbart started to say, but just then his cell-phone chimed a marimba beat.

“Oops, have to take this.” The chamois said, and scooted away towards a corner. He might just as well have stayed where he was; less than three seconds later he cried out alarm, so loudly Benjamin Clawhuase would later claim to have heard it.

“What! You have GOT to be…! Tell me you’re not ser…! Yes, yes, I’ll be right there. No not now, I’ll talk to him when I get there. Yes, good bye.”

He jammed the phone back in his pocket and looked at Bogo with a face that was barely under control.

“Are you ready for this Chief? Vinnie Blacktail just recanted his deposition, says he only made it under duress, and now he’s refusing to co-operate any further. Looks like Mr. Big is going to walk…again.”

Chief Bogo said nothing to this, he didn’t have to; the outraged note he blew through his nostrils left no doubt as to where his sentiments lay.

Nick and Judy’s reaction was somewhat more muted, the fox grimaced and the bunny winced. Crime boss or no, if it hadn’t been for Mr. Big, they would never have caught up with Doug, much less foiled Dawn Bellwether’s scheme.

So far at least, it had never come back to haunt them, but it was always there, hanging over their heads like the sword of Damocles; Duke Weaseltion had only given up Doug after the Big Shrew had threatened to ice him—with Nick and Judy’s blessing. At the time, it had seemed like a good idea, and if the Dukester hadn’t fessed up, well… Shortly after Bellwether’s arrest, a draft proposal had been found on her hard-drive, something called the Tame Collar Initiative. (Nick Wilde still got the shudders when he thought about it.)

Just the same, the fox and bunny had crossed the line, and both of them knew it. They had later sworn ‘never again’, and up until now, they had kept that vow.

All very well and good but also so far, they had never had to make that same choice as they’d had
back then; either go beyond the pale or stand back and watch a cataclysm unfold.

Gamsbart meanwhile was bounding up the stairs, four at a time, forget the elevator. As soon as the chamois was gone, Bogo turned his attention to Nick and Judy again.

“Right then, as for you two, Councilmammal Nizhang’s called a press-conference in front of City Hall, starting in.” He looked at his watch, “Approximately one hour, and I need two more officers to help keep order; as you know she’s something a controversy these days. So get y’selves on over there and then after you’re finished,” His expression became an odd mixture of drollness and solemnity, “It has come to my attention, Officer Hopps, Officer Wilde, that you two have been racking up quite a bit of overtime lately. And I won’t have it, I want my officers bright and alert, not overworked and frazzled, so after you’re done at the presser, I want you to clock out and I’ll see you back at roll call, first thing Monday morning.”

This time the fox and bunny answered both in unison and with fervor.

“Yes, sir!”

“Just a minute, just one minute, I haven’t dismissed you yet,” the Cape buffalo rumbled gruffly. (Nick and Judy actually hadn’t moved a muscle.)

And then, to their astonishment, he held out a hoof. “Congratulations, both of you, on successfully completing your first undercover assignment. If it were up to me, I’d give the both of you your detective shields right now.”

They shook, and then the Chief reverted quickly back to form.

“Right, off you go.” he said, and then walked away without even so much as a backwards glance.

Nick Wilde was not unhappy.

“Press conference? Piece of cake,” He said, offering Judy a thumbs-up.

He could never have imagined how wrong he was.

Chapter End Notes

Easter Egg, Chapter 1 pt. 4

The exchange between Judy and Claire Swinton just before Rashid opens the truck door was lifted from an exchange between Charlie Pizer and and the robot V.I.N.CENT in Disney’s The Black Hole
Taking The Bull By The Horns (Continued...pt.3)

Chapter Summary

Judy makes Nick an offer he can’t refuse, and then then two of them head off to the press conference--which goes nothing at all the way either one expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 2 – Taking The Bull By The Horns
(Continued…pt. 3)

Benjamin Clawhauser was gushing again.

"Oooo, could you really?"

"No problem, Benjamin," Judy Hopps was telling him, "Chief Bogo gave Nick and me three days off until Monday, so I'm heading home to the Burrows for Carrot Days. Give me your size and I'll make sure you get one of those shirts."

They'd had plenty of time to get to the press-conference, and so the bunny had made a small detour on the way, stopping off at the reception desk to give Benjamin the news

"Don't forget the color," Nick Wilde reminded them both. He was leaning against the counter with an eyebrows raised, looking in Judy's direction. She was heading back to Bunnyburrows for the weekend? While that information was hardly a bombshell, it was news to him nonetheless. Sure, that's where her family was, and yes there was that Carrot-top festival, but other than that—why would anyone want to spend three days in a town where a big night was when the pop machine was working?

"Oh yeah, right." Clawhauser answered, fox an appreciative nod. "Red if they have any, otherwise black is fine. And I take a large-mammal tee in size TXL."

Judy's nose began to twitch.

"Size…TXL?"
The cheetah fidgeted with his fingers for a second and looked away.

"Uh…yeah, size Tentmaker, Extra Large."

Nick chewed on his lip to keep from laughing; Judy wouldn't speak to him for the rest of the day if he did. But when she answered the cheetah, it was obvious she was having at least as much trouble holding it in as he was; every second or third word she spoke was punctuated by a little spurt of air.

"Right…gst…in red…fsh…or black if…pss…they don't have red…gsst. Size XLT…kss-ssst."

"Ohhh, thank you SO much." Clawhauser answered, apparently unaware of her struggle, and then he leaned over the counter, lowering his voice.

"Hey, I bet you're wondering why the Chief took fursonal command of that diamond sting."

'We were, kind of," Nick answered him off-pawedly. In fact, just about every cop in the precinct had been offering theories about it all week. While Chief Bogo was known as a hooves-on kind of leader—a mammal who would never assign a task he wasn't willing to take on himself— actually running a street-level sting was a 'first-time-in-a-long-time' for that Cape buffalo.

Clawhauser looked left and right and then lowered his voice even further.

"Well, I can't tell you where I heard this, but his family—his extended family—comes from the same part of Afurica as most of those blood diamonds."

"Seriously?" Nick answered, pretending to look interested. In truth he found the cheetah's revelation to be something to be something of an anti-climax. While it certainly made sense from a logical point of view, it was only a partial explanation at best.

"Well, we better get going if we're going to make that press-conference Benjamin." Judy put in quickly, searching for a graceful exit. When Clawhauser was in 'gossip' mode he could be harder to break away from than one of those face-hugger bugs in the Feral's Duty game.

Fortunately, the obese cheetah hadn't quite yet reached that stage

"See you soon," he said, waving her and Nick on their way.

From Precinct One to City Hall, it was only a short stroll through Savanna Square Park; and so the fox and bunny decided to walk.

"So you're going home to visit your family over the weekend?" Nick Wilde asked, moving deftly out of the way for a skunk who was paying more attention to her cell phone than to where she was going.

"Oh you bet, Nick," Judy sounded almost as enthusiastic as Clawhauser had a moment ago, "I haven't been home for the Carrot Days festival since—oh, not since I started at the Police Academy."

She stopped walking suddenly with her ears raised in a 'V'; Nick knew what that meant, it was the Judy Hopps equivalent of a light-bulb going on over head.

"Uh, what is it Carrots?" he asked, not sure he wanted to know. The last time her ears had done that trick, he'd ended stuck on a zipline for almost three hours after his tail became caught in the pulley. (He'd lost a nice chunk of tail-fur, too.)
Judy turned to him and took hold of his arm.

"Say Nick, why don't you come with me?"

The red fox quietly turned his head aside, but made sure to keep her in his field of vision his wary expression concealed beneath a placid smile.

"Come…with you?" he asked.

"Sure," she said, giving his arm a little squeeze, "you've never been to the Carrot Days Festival, am I right?"

"Mmmmm, no," Nick admitted before adding silently, "No, and I'd rather watch PAINT dry."

"Then come on and come with me," Judy's eagerness had spiked an extra three notches, "It won't be any trouble, and I know we've got plenty of room."

"I-I don't know Carrots," Nick answered, looking this way and that as if a fly were buzzing around him, "I was kind of…"

"Kind of what, fox?" Judy's nose had begun to twitch. "I thought you said you didn't have anything going on this weekend."

"Well nooo," Nick conceded, drawing out the word. No he hadn't, and that was the general idea. After nearly a month of almost nonstop activity, the fox had planned to spend his time off doing three things, nothing, nothing, and sweet, blissful nothing.

He decided to try a different tack.

"Well, I don't know Carrots. Have you cleared this with your folks?"

She just waved a paw.

"On don't worry about that Nick; like I said, we have plenty of room. With 276 of us not counting Mom and Dad, we always make sure to have plenty of extra space. Trust me, it won't be any problem."

Nick bit his lip for a second. 276…in one burrow? Helllllp meeeeee!

He knew what next to say, but not how to say it; only that it was going to have to be phrased very delicately.

"Well yes, but…you know Carrots, me being a fox and all…"

His words were cut off as Judy thumped her foot on the ground.

"Nicholas P. Wilde, you've met my parents lots of times, and you know perfectly well they're in business with a fox." Her eyes blinked and then tilted downwards while her mouth became a small inverted triangle, "If you don't WANT to come, just say so."

What Nick actually wanted to do was let out a world class fox-scream. Agghh, grrrr, there it was, that hurt-little-bunny-girl expression she got sometimes. He had first seen it back in the Rainforest District, that time when Bogo had demanded her badge.

"Dang that rabbit, she KNOWS I can't say 'no' to her when she get like this."
He made hurried, placating gestures with his paws. "No, no Carrots, I do want to come with you, (about as much as I want a root canal!) I just…I'm sorry, I forgot all about Gideon Green…"

"Gideon Grey…!" Judy corrected him, thumping her foot.

"Grey, Green, Purple, whatever." Nick was waving his arms, "What's important is, if it's okay with your family, then heck yes, I want to come with you to the Carrot Days Festival." (He wondered if he was going to Hell for lying like that.) "And I really want to meet Gideon Grey," he added, and THAT much was the truth. Nick had long wanted to make acquaintances with this other fox who, like himself, had managed to turn his life around after getting off to a bad start.

"Great!" Judy answered, waving a paw towards the Zootopia Central Station, conveniently located on their left. "I'll get the tickets when we're done at City Hall and we'll meet back here at 7 for the early train."

"Sounds good." Nick answered, forcing a smile. 7 A.M., the early train; he should just go lay down on the tracks right now and get it over with.

When they reached the front steps of City Hall, Nick wondered for a moment if the conference hadn't been called off. There was a podium set up on the top tier all right, but where were the crowd—and the press? No wait, a few reporters could be seen milling around, a very few, about as many as might be expected to cover a nut-cracking competition.

"Look upon my works, ye mighty and despair," the red fox quoted dolefully to himself. Two years, even one year ago a Claudia Nizhang presser would have attracted a horde of spectators and a throng of reporters.

Not anymore; once considered a shoo-in to be the next mayor of Zootopia, Councilmember Nizhang would now be lucky even to hold on to her seat in the upcoming fall elections.

Nick glanced over at Judy and was unsurprised to see that the bunny's expression was even more depressed than his own. She had always held Claudia in particularly high esteem; most of the ZPD had back in the day, and many of them still did.

Councilmember Nizhang was one of their own, a highly decorated former Zoo York City Police detective, who'd retired from law enforcement after suffering a crippling wound in the infamous Finagles raid.

Claudia had come to the city a little more than two years ago, hoping to pursue a legal career. (She had earned her law degree but had yet to pass the bar.) Upon her arrival, she had settled in Old Growth City, Zootopia's temperate forest district, where she had family. Almost immediately the red panda had caught the attention of Rich Grillo, the district's City Council representative. Impressed by her background and her nimble mind, the Pudu deer had hired her on as his administrative assistant. At first it had been a routine job and Claudia had made no bones about the fact that she intended to move on as soon as she passed the bar exam.

Fate, however, had other plans; less than three months after Claudia took up her new position, the Savage Predator crisis erupted—and everything changed. The watershed day had begun the morning after Mayor Lionheart's arrest. Arriving at the office, the red panda had been stunned to discover that her boss had fled the city sometime during the night, leaving behind a district in turmoil. Prey animals were barricading themselves inside their homes, reams of anti-pred graffiti graced nearly every wall, and no predator dared to walk the streets alone. Already there had been instances of looting and on the south side of the district a black bear had almost been torched inside his den.
Claudia Nizhang had reacted in her customary manner; she had rolled up her sleeves and gotten to work. Her first order of business had been to make a speech, one that had particularly resonated with Judy Hopps. "That's what I should have said at that press conference." The bunny later told Nick.

"No one knows why these predators are going savage, but what we do know is that it's not happening through any fault of their own. No one is making themselves go savage, we mustn't forget that. To the prey species of Old Growth City I say, I know you're afraid, I'm afraid too; red pandas aren't exactly an apex species. But believe me, no one is more afraid right now then the predators of Zootopia. Yes they're afraid, afraid they might hurt someone close to them. That's the other thing to remember folks, these animals that have gone savage all have friends and family who love them and want them back."

It didn't work like a charm, but it was a good first step…and Claudia was just getting started. Next she introduced a savage behavior watch program, insisting that it be run by entirely predators. It was a brilliant tactic. Seeing the preds of Old Growth City willingly policing their own, the prey species began to cut them a little slack. As for the predators themselves, being minded by their own kind quashed any sort of sense that they were being discriminated against.

In the days that followed, Claudia was a dynamo. She had flyers printed up, ("What to do if you see an animal having a savage episode." "What to do if you think you're having a savage episode", etc.) She started a crisis help line, she set up a series of 'panic shelters' where the citizens could take cover in the event of a savagery episode; she also hosted a weekly web-forum where predators and prey alike could safely come together to discuss the crisis. The animals of the district quickly responded, and even more quickly the tensions began to decrease. One thing that helped immensely was the fact of Claudia's species. While red pandas are technically predators, their diet is mostly herbivorous, so much so that they are sometimes mistaken for prey species. As a result, both sides came to trust her.

The turnaround didn't happen overnight, but in the end, Claudia's efforts paid off; while the rest of city slipped further and further into chaos, Old Growth City remained, as ZNN reporter Fabienne Growley put it, "an island of stability in a sea of troubles."

When the crisis finally ended, Claudia Nizhang emerged swiftly as one the city's heroes. Old Growth City had held up better than any of the other districts in the midst of the emergency and it had all been thanks to her. (Dawn Bellwether had certainly thought so; while publicly she had backed Claudia's actions to the hilt, in private she had put the red panda on her hit parade, a fact confirmed by her hench-rams Jesse and Woolter following their arrest.) And in the special election that followed, Claudia was elected to replace her boss by an overwhelming majority. (Richard Grillo had been summarily ejected from his seat on the City Council for abandoning his post; ironically, it had been Bellwether's last official act as Mayor.)

With Bellwether out, the next in line for the Mayor's office had been Zootopia City Manager Chuck Ziegler, a zebra so indecisive—so the joke went—he couldn't order coffee without changing his order at least ten times. That was Claudia Nizhang's opportunity and she took it, within a month of her election, she had become the dominant force on the Zootopia City Council, successfully pushing one measure after another through the assembly. Her crowning achievement had been the rescue of the moribund Zootopia Academy for the Performing Arts, which had finally opened the previous September.

But by then her star had already begun to fade.

It had begun with the arrival of Aker Correctional Corporation, a division of the Aker Group which
had its headquarters in the city. A.C.C., a private correctional firm, was then in charge of both the Zoo York and Zoo Jersey state prison systems, and now they proposed to take over Zootopia Youth Corrections as well. Most of the City Council members had been amenable to the idea, not only would it save a lot of money, no one could deny Aker Correctional's phenomenal success rate. One glaring exception to the rule had been councilmember Claudia Nizhang, who had been foursquare against the proposal. This time however, she had bitten off more than she could chew; Aker had the money, they had the connections, and most of all they had their track record. At every single one of their correctional facilities, the past year had seen a remarkable decrease in the level of violence; there'd been fewer fights, fewer incidents with correctional officers, and practically no escape attempts. Even more impressive, the Aker facilities had also seen a sharp drop in the recidivism rate, the percentage of inmates who return to a life of crime following their release into society. In both Zoo York and Zoo Jersey, A.C.C.'s recidivism numbers had declined so dramatically, it had affected the overall crime statistics.

And so the proposal had passed—by only the slimmest of margins, but still it had passed.

And with its passage, Claudia Nizhang's downfall had begun. From practically the moment Aker took over Zootopia Youth Corrections, things had begun to improve, and even more significantly than they had back east. Claudia had been proven wrong—and now her enemies on the council saw their chance, and went after her hammer and tongs, with much of the media joining in. One particularly vicious foe was a popular local radio and TV talk show host, a hyrax who went by the name of Rock Hardesty. Hardesty soon began referring to Claudia as The Wicked Witch of the East, a none-too-subtle reminder that the red panda was not a native of Zootopia. When Aker floated a proposal to take control of the entire Zootopia Correctional System, it passed with only a single dissenting vote; the most that Claudia had been able to get was keeping the City Jail under ZPD control. That had been what Hardesty later gleefully referred to as "the final nail in the witch's coffin." Once the brightest star in City Hall, she was now written off by most mammals as a crank and a carpetbagger.

And yet even her darkest moments, the red panda refused to throw in the towel—and there were the podium and microphones to prove it. Whatever else her problems, Nick had to give Claudia Nizhang points for determination, if nothing else.

Judy tapped him on the arm.

"Look, there's our other guys."

Nick followed her gaze, and saw standing beside the podium were Officer Sam Simmers and Officer Sandy Franklin, a giant eland. It made sense; Franklin and Simmers were there in case there was trouble with any larger species, if any smaller mammals decided to cause trouble, he and Judy would handle it.

Not that that the Chief was expecting any serious trouble, Sam Simmers presence here was proof of that. When Bogo had tried to give him the day off, the bear had insisted on coming in to work. "It's just few scratches, is all." Eventually the Chief had relented—a rarity for him—but with the condition that Simmers remain on light duty for the remainder of the work-week.

It was Sandy Franklin who spotted them first. "Yo fox, yo rabbit. You got this gig too, huh?"

Her tone of voice was anything but miserable. More than likely, Sandy was proud to be here; heck, she'd probably volunteered for the job. A former correctional officer like Claire Swinton, she didn't like Aker any more than the pig-cop did—or Councilmember Claudia Nizhang.

And speak of the red panda, at that moment, the doors to City Hall swung open and Claudia
Nizhangb burst through into the sunlight.

For a mammal only able to walk with the aid of a cane and a knee brace, she was a remarkably spry red panda; the marmot accompanying her was barely able to keep up, much less offer any assistance.

Moving swiftly to the lectern, Claudia just as swiftly discovered that it was head too tall for her size.

"Someone did that on purpose!" Judy grumbled under her breath, and Nick thought that probably she was right. This was just the kind of petty indignity to which Claudia Nizhang was being constantly subjected these days.

"You think?" the red fox answered muttering scornfully out the side of his mouth, "Honestly Carrots, what the heck is this, City Hall or the Seventh Grade?"

"No kidding," the bunny answered with an angry thump of her foot.

And so the conference was delayed for ten minutes while someone fetched a step stool. In the interim Nick took the opportunity to study Claudia Nizhang, whom he had never seen in the flesh and fur before.

Except for the cane, you would never know that she was a retired police officer; Claudia's build was lean and hard-wired with not an ounce of fat to spare. (She was rumored to hold a Master's rank in not one but two martial arts disciplines.) For all that, she had lost none of her femininity…or the sardonic air that seemed to hover about the red panda like an aura wherever she went. She was dressed as usual in a khaki pants suit with a pair of aviator sun-glasses perched atop her head, a constant reminder to all and sundry of her law enforcement background.

When her aide finally returned with the stool, Claudia climbed aboard, tapped the mikes to check for feedback and then began to speak.

"Ladies and Gentlemammals, and members of the press, thank you for coming out on such short notice today." She paused for a second and then continued.

"I'd be lying if I tried to pretend my credibility hasn't taken a hit." She started to say, and that was as far as she got before the first heckler interrupted her.

"Darn right, carpetbagger!"

"Go back to Zoo York, Fursula!" someone else shouted; a rodent judging by the pitch of their voice.

Claudia ignored them both.

"But last night, at an executive session of the Zootopia City Council something occurred that I feel deserves to be brought to the immediate attention of the mammals of this city."

"You announced your resignation?" someone catcalled, and there was laughter and a ripple of applause.

That was too much for Sandy Franklin. She stepped up beside the red panda and pointed into the knot of onlookers.

"All right, that's enough."
Nobody answered, but Nick caught a glimpse of lynx in a hoodie backing away from the City Hall steps—paws raised in an exaggerated gesture of innocence.

Once again, Claudia waited for the hubbub to die down before resuming, but this time when she tried to speak, a squeal of feedback burst from the PA, causing several of the onlookers to clasp their heads, including both Nick and Judy.

"What happened?" Judy asked she straightened up again.

"Someone messed with the sound, that's what!" Sandy Franklin was almost livid.

Yes, they had, but it was not whom the eland thought. Almost at once a voice rang out from the direction of the City Hall entrance-way.

"Councilmember Nizhang!"

Nick and Judy turned to see several animals coming through the door, a reindeer, a tree kangaroo and a muskrat. The fox recognized them at once; they were Sven Kristoff, Jake Marahute, and Ray Louis, the council members who represented Tundratown, Outback Island, and The Canal District respectively. Kristofferson was clearly the leader, and as he strode in the direction of the lectern he was waving a document back and forth. It reminded Nick of a shaman trying to ward off evil spirits.

"Councilmember Nizhang," the reindeer repeated, raising his voice so that he could be heard by the reporters and spectators as well as the red panda. "By order of the Superior Court of the City of Zootopia, you are hereby directed to cease and desist immediately with this press conference."

Claudia just leaned an elbow on the podium, regarding the reindeer with an air of, 'What took you so long?'

"I presume that's the court order you have in your hoof there." she said, holding out her paw to the reindeer. Kristofferson responded by slapping the paper into her grip as if laying down four aces, an overly dramatic gesture that made Nick Wilde want to shake his head and caused Judy to roll her eyes.

Claudia Nizhang only studied the document with an insouciant expression.

"Hmmm, signed off by the honorable Judge George Schatten I see. Why does that not surprise me?"

Nick Wilde felt his eyebrows lifting. That name, where had he heard it before? He couldn't remember, but wherever he'd heard it, his neck fur was spiking and his ears lying flat.

In the meantime, Claudia was offering the papers back to Sven Kristofferson.

"Sorry, I forgot my reading glasses. Why exactly am I being served with this order?"

Judy sniggered and Kristofferson's nostrils flared; the red panda knew perfectly well what the court-order said but she was going to make him say it.

He did, but now he dropped all pretense of formality.

"All right, fine. Let's cut to the chase, Claudia. That meeting last night was confidential, meaning not for public consumption, meaning YOU don't come out here and start blabbing it to the press."
Nick laid his paw across his eyes, stifling a groan. Making a statement like that in front of a gaggle of reporters was like dumping a quart of honey on the ground in front of a beehive. THIS was the best that Tundratown could do for a council representative? Sure enough, when the red fox looked again, every member of the press in attendance was scribbling rapidly in a notebook; the reindeer had definitely gotten their attention.

Claudia Nizhang either didn't notice or was too hacked off to care.

"The mammals of Zootopia have the right to know what went on at that meeting." She declared in a tone of righteous indignation. "And why was it held in closed session anyway?"

"Get down off the podium, Nizhang, an' right now." It was Jake Marahute.

The red panda wheeled on him moving with surprising speed for a mammal with a damaged leg.

"Since when do YOU give me orders?" she snapped.

"I don't," the tree kangaroo shot back, folding his arms "It's the Superior Court of Zootopia issued that order wan' it?"

"The court has no right to do this." Claudia tapped the podium with an angry finger. "The sunshine laws specifically state…"

"Repealed last year Sheila, try to keep up." Marahute cut her off, sneering,

Claudia's face darkened and her voice became a white hiss

"Yes, in a motion that was rammed through a council session after midnight…with no debate."

"We may discuss that at another time and place," Ray Louis spoke up for the first time, "What matters now is, are you prepared to comply with the order of the court, Ms. Nizhang?" the muskrat demanded in a proper bayou drawl.

"You're making a big mistake, all of you." Claudia was seething, "I know where this will lead us, I was there!" She slapped at her knee brace with her cane, raising her voice, "And I won't see what happened in Finagles happen HERE!"

"That's enough Claudia." Sven Kristofferson said, coming as close to a snarl as was possible for his species. "One more word out of you and I'll have you arrested for contempt of a court order." And to Nick Wilde's horror, the reindeer turned and beckoned him and Judy forward with a crooked finger.

"So much for the cakewalk." The red fox heard himself muttering as the two of them started towards the podium. Glancing sideways, he saw Judy was tight-lipped and forcing herself to move; it was exactly how he felt. Over on the other side of the podium, Sandy Franklin seemed to be barely restraining herself, while Sam Simmers was wearing an expression that spoke volumes. "I could have stayed home today, but nooooooo..."

It was Judy who delivered the message when they reached the lectern, swallowing deeply before speaking. "Councilmember Nizhang, please get down from there. We don't want to have to…"

"That won't be necessary, Officer Hopps, Officer Wilde," the red panda interrupted wearily, surprising Nick and Judy by recognizing them, "I'll comply with order."

She hopped down from the podium, landing lightly on her feet, and turning her face away from the
other council members. As Claudia straightened up again, her ears were wilting and her tail was lying limply on the ground.

…which made the expression on her face all the more puzzling to Nick Wilde; now she looked like the one who had just laid down four aces.

At the edge of the crowd, a young silver fox was sipping through a straw, watching as the mammals gathered in front of Zootopia City Hall began to disperse.

He had come here to grab a blackberry smoothie before heading on home, not to listen to Claudia Nizhang's speech, (or press conference, or whatever. the heck it was.) and at first, he'd paid scant attention to the events on the City Hall steps; like most kids his age he had little interest in politics.

But when she'd mentioned Finagles—and told the others she'd BEEN there, that was when the young fox began to pay full attention. And now he remembered her.

She'd been one of Pennanti's crew, The Full House, the guys who'd gotten Danny and Kieran out of Finagles' Dance Club alive, the only members of The Company to survive the raid

He knew what he had to do, slip a note under her office door, "I was at Finagles, too. I know what happened. You're right. Meet me at…" No, that wouldn't work she'd think it was prank or maybe even a set up.

Unless he included a detail that only someone who had been there could have known about; yeah, that would do it. Tell her about the room where he'd lived, the cops had never been able to figure out what it was used for; (the fire had completely gutted it.) And though its existence had made it into the police report—and later the Circle's database—the information had never been released for public consumption. If he included that detail, she'd believe him.

Except there wouldn't be any details, because there wouldn't be any note.

Because if he was wrong and if he couldn't trust her, he'd be on a plane back to Jersey and Granite Point so fast, he'd never know what hit him.

And that was a risk he was NEVER going to take.

He tossed his cup into a nearby wastebasket, and then turned and headed back to Zootopia Central Station.

High over the city in the downtown district, a dark figure was clutching a cell phone in his paw, gripping it so tightly, little hairline cracks were beginning to streak across the crystal face.

For a short moment he listened, and then he spoke just three words, enunciating each one as if he were stapling it to a bulletin board.

"He…did…WHAT?"

He listened again for a minute, eyes closed, breathing in fire bellows cadence. When he opened them and spoke again, his voice was like a safety valve blowing off excess steam.

"Very well," he said, "now listen carefully. I want you to get Councilmember Kristofferson on the line—I don't care how you do it—and inform him that I expect him inside my office within the hour." He closed his eyes again and took another deep breath, "Or else—and I want him told this
very specifically—his next job with the city of Zootopia will be as CHIEF SEWER INSPECTOR!"

The animal's voice had risen to almost a scream on the last three words, but now it dropped back down to room temperature. "Did you get that? Good. See to it immediately."

He disconnected without waiting for a reply.

Chapter End Notes

This is the first episode from the revised Fire Triangle that is not a rewrite from the first version, but an original work. This is where the story will be going for the foreseeable future; as result it will be a little further between updates than before.

The Easter Eggs include references to The Rescuers Down Under, The Princess and the Frog, and Frozen. There's also one that's a Quadruple Easter Egg, referring to A. Watchmen, B. Breaking Bad, C. Alien Covenant D. A young fox in a webcomic.

Thanks to EO Costello for help with the legalese. The character of Claudia Nizhang was inspired by Walt Reimer's Luck of the Dragon saga.
Chapter Summary

And lo, the 'Shadowy Figure' from the previous chapters is revealed at last

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction**

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**Part One:**

Fuel

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**Chapter 2 – Taking The Bull By The Horns**

(Continued…pt. 4)

Seth Whitepaugh heard him even before the elevator reached the Penthouse level.

He couldn't make out *everything* of course; a wolverine's hearing is not particularly sharp, but every now and then a word would filter through the walls, each of them sharing a common purpose with the others.

"IDIOT!
MORON!
DIMWIT!
IMBECILE!"

My, but his employer was in fine fettle this morning the wolverine reflected to himself. Not that HE was bothered by any of it; if the animal on the carpet right now was who he thought it was, the fool was actually getting off *lightly*.

Whitepaugh had heard about the Nizhang press-conference downstairs at the reception desk and he'd known immediately that there would be an explosion. Heck, he was smoldering himself. What in name of all Perdition had those City Council drones thought they were *doing*?

The elevator opened and he stepped out into a circular hallway.

As befitting of the top floor of a Furtune 50 Company, the corridor was laid with extra plush carpeting and paneled in rich, dark wood, buffed to a high polish. The ceiling was arched, and the lights art nouveau; a first time visitor might be forgiven for thinking he had somehow wandered into the vestibule of a 5-Star Hotel.
Around the next bend, the hallway ended at a set of heavy, Blackwood double doors, the right one fitted with a plaque reading simply, 'Jack La Peigne', the name etched in gold, rather than brass.

There was only one nameplate affixed to the entrance, not the usual two or three, set a different levels for different species. If you didn't know whose office this was by the time you reached this floor, you didn't belong here anyway.

And besides, if all of Jack La Peigne's official titles had been listed on the door to his office, they would have started at the top and gone all the way down to knee-high-for-a-hedgehog. He was CEO of the Aker Group, which included Aker Security Solutions and Aker Correctional Corporation, and also Chief Operational officer and majority stockholder in LPN Pharma, one of the ten biggest drug companies on the planet, (and also one that for all practical purposes, he controlled with an iron fist.)

And those were only the crown jewels in his collection. There was also Waters and Downe Private Equity, the Warren Hutch Group, (hedge funds) and Multiplicity a software development firm; the list went on and on.

So it was that there only a single nameplate on the door…although at the moment it did have a pair of unofficial adornments; crouching around the edge of the frame were a bighorn ram and a female opossum, hunkering as close to the floor as they could get. The tableau reminded Seth Whitepaugh of soldiers taking cover during an artillery barrage, which was actually a pretty fair analogy; at that moment a word came thundering through the partition like an armor-piercing rocket.

"PINHEAD!"

The opossum and sheep cringed even more tightly into themselves. Whitepaugh was tempted to go over and cuff the ram back onto his feet; as head of operations for A.C.C's Youth Corrections division, Ken Dahlberg should have been setting a better example. (The opossum could stay where she was; Polly Walters was Jack La Peigne's fursonal assistant; her job requirements didn't include the rough stuff.)

The wolverine moved closer to the door and cocked an ear, drawing horrified looks from the both Dahlberg and Walters, and with good reason. If either one of them was ever caught eavesdropping on Jack La Peigne, they'd be out the door so fast, they'd barely have time to read their pink slips….IF they were lucky. Not so for Seth Whitepaugh however; rank has its privileges

The first thing he heard was...yes, it was Sven Kristofferson in there all right, and at the moment he was pleading his case.

"B-But I don't understand sir. We stopped Councilmember Nizhang before she could reveal anything that..."

The voice that cut him off was as sharp and unkind as an executioner's axe.

"You NUMBSKULL, that was exactly what she wanted you to do!" Jack La Peigne was all but roaring, and Seth Whitepaugh found himself nodding in agreement.

"You played right into her paws, you stupid idiot!" he heard his boss shouting, "Don't you get it? Nizhang was bluffing; she NEVER intended to reveal what happened at that council meeting."

A moment of awkward silence followed before Kristofferson spoke up again.

"Sh-She didn't? Then what was...?"
"What, were you BORN clueless, or did you have to *work* at it?" La Peigne cut him off at the knees this time, "If you'd called her move, if you'd let her give that press conference, big deal, it would have been second tier news at best, the kind of item you see on ZNN *after* the commercial break. We could have managed a story like that, no problem." His voice went up a couple of notches and took on a demeaning mocking, overtone, "But not anymorrre. Now, thanks to you and those other two stooges, that city council executive session is the meeting the eeeevil city *government* doesn't want YOU to know about. And now the media will be all over it like flies on a massacre. Don't believe me? Grab your cell-phone and check with your office; I'll give you ten to one you've gotten a hundred calls from reporters in the last half hour."

"I-I wouldn't take *that* bet if I were you," Whitepaugh chortled to himself. His employer certainly had a way with the words

"B-But you just said what happened in that meeting wasn't that big a deal." He herd reindeer offer lamely, and now Whitepaugh could almost see the fumes coming out of his boss's ears.

"Let me explain a little something to you, Kristofferson." La Peigne sounded as if he were lecturing an especially slow child, "Now that the media has invested so much time and effort in building up that story—yes they have, I've seen it, and yes they will continue to do so—when they finally get hold of what actually went on at that meeting they are NOT going to present it as a wet firecracker. We could have been discussing *what color to paint the street signs*; doesn't matter, they'll push it as the story of the DECADE! That's the way the press works, *now* do you understand?"

More silence followed, and Whitepaugh knew that his boss had finally gotten through to the reindeer.

"That was NOT a rhetorical question, Kristofferson." The wolverine heard him say, "Did…you…GET…that?"

"Yes…I…" Kristofferson was tripping over his words, "I…I'll take care of it."

A loud banging noise echoed through the door, Jack La Peigne pounding a fist on his desk.

"No, *this* is what you're going to do," he said, "You are going to go back to your Tundratown office and cancel every single one of your public appearances—for the next three weeks; you're also going to stay the heck away from city hall, and you're especially going to stay away from Judge Schatten. If a reporter asks you a question, your ONLY answer to them is, "no comment.' I don't care if you're being asked what *time* it is; 'No comment' is what you say, and that's *all* you say. Do I make myself clear?"

"Y-Yes…yes sir." The reindeer sounded as if he were about to burst into tears.

"Good," La Peigne concluded brusquely. "Now get out of my office and get out of my sight!"

Seth Whitepaugh stepped swiftly away from the door and then even more swiftly looked to his left.

"You there, get up!' he snapped, and Ken Dahlberg all but jumped to his feet; as fearful as he was of his boss's wrath, the bighorn ram was even more fearful of his boss's senior field operative.

A split second later the door burst open like a starting gate and a frazzled Sven Kristofferson went rushing past the wolverine without looking at him. Whitepaugh watched him go and then stepped through the opening. Yes, Dahlberg and Polly Walters had been waiting a lot longer than he had, but once again, R.H.I.P.
The interior of the office could almost have been transplanted wholesale from an exclusive London Mammals' Club. There were wingback chairs, a wall lined with bookshelves, a cathedral-high ceiling; there was even an antique pool table. Fine paintings adorned the paneling, a cozy fireplace nestled in the far wall, and over in the left rear corner, a tall grandfather clock chimed the Westminster melody and then the hour, 11:00. Whitepaugh frowned again; it was hard even for him to believe that it wasn't even noontime yet, not with everything that had happened since he'd started his day.

Evan so, the wolverine didn't bother to double check with his watch; the clock was correct and he knew it. While the ambience in this office might have been charmingly retro, the mechanism that ran it was cutting-edge, high-tech, and precise.

Take the chair in front of the massive Admiralty desk for example; when you sat down in it, the seat automatically adjusted itself to your size and species, (unless La Peigne chose to manually override that function—which he'd obviously done with his previous visitor.)

And then there were the overhead lights. Not only could they be made dimmer or brighter as the need arose, but it was also possible to move them to different locations. And all of it was controlled by either voice or foot command—and only Jack La Peigne's voice or foot could make it work; if anyone else tried it, they'd get no response at all. The same held true for the window shades and the flat-screen LED Panel concealed in the ceiling—and just about everything else in this office, truth be told.

And there he was, the mammal himself, Jack La Peigne, standing in the center of the room, facing away from the door with his paws behind his back. He stood bathed in the sunset-orange glow of a wall-sized holographic display, watching with interest as a parade of stock prices went marching past.

He was nearly the same size as Seth Whitepaugh, perhaps even an inch or two taller, something which in and of itself was not all that unusual. Wolverines are hardly the biggest of all predators. But in the case of this particular animal, his stature wasn't merely surprising; it was blow-you-away stunning!

Jack La Peigne was a rabbit!

No one knew where he got his size, at least two and a half times bigger than the average bunny; (Bonnie Hopps could have stood on her husband's shoulders and she still would have come up only to his collarbone—*with* her ears raised!)

The big bunny's last name however, provided a clue to his enormity. In ancient times there had supposedly been a tribe of rabbits called the Flemish Giants, who—so the story went—had selectively bred themselves into massive brutes in order to resist the Roamin invaders.

Whatever the case, La Peigne himself had always maintained that his size was par for the course for his family; in fact, he'd always insisted, he wasn't even the biggest member of his clan. That may have been true; he *did* look bigger than he actually was. A dedicated fitness buff and martial arts expert, Jack La Peigne's physique had been described by at least one observer as, "a cross between The Rock and Michelambgelo's David."

"I take it you heard that conversation just now, Whitepaugh?" the big rabbit said without turning around. His rich baritone seemed to go perfectly with the furnishings.

"I did." The wolverine answered simply.
La Peigne turned to look over his shoulder, regarding his senior field operative with a cynical gleam in his eye.

"Of course you did, they probably heard me downstairs in the commissary."

He thumped his foot, thumped it again, and the holograph disappeared.

Then he turned the rest of the way around.

Jack La Peigne had fur the color of blue steel that lightened to sunset gray around his throat, and under his chin. (It was also the color of his chest-fur Whitepaugh knew.) His eyes, which appeared to be black at a distance were actually midnight-blue.

He was dressed as always in an impeccably tailored silk suit with a matching striped tie and a diamond stickpin, which ironically had been purchased from Rafaj Brothers Fine Jewelers the year before, (although it was NOT a blood diamond.)

"Idiot reindeer." The rabbit muttered, moving behind his desk. Whitepaugh waited until the rabbit took his seat before taking the chair in front of it. At once it rose up to meet him and adjusted its curvature to fit his frame. Just as the wolverine had suspected, his employer had deliberately set the chair too low when interviewing Sven Kristofferson. It was something he frequently did when delivering a tongue-lashing; it made whoever he'd called on the carpet feel small and inferior.

It also told him that, just as he'd suspected, a great deal of what he'd heard while standing on the other side of the door had been an act rather than acting out. He wasn't surprised; while Jack La Peigne was by no means slow to anger, his fuse wasn't quite THAT short.

And a good thing it was too, the wolverine reminded himself; on those rare occasions when his employer became truly enraged he tended to lash out impulsively or even recklessly. In Whitepaugh's opinion it was the big rabbit's one and only character flaw.

"So I take it we're NOT going to be backing Councilmember Kristofferson in upcoming the mayoral elections?" he asked.

La Peigne poured himself a glass of carrot juice before answering.

"Believe me, I'd like nothing better than to kick that reindeer to the curb right now, but until—and unless—we can find a suitable replacement, he's our guy. I've got Bob Rackham looking into it though; who knows, maybe we'll get lucky." He took a sip of juice and looked straight at the wolverine, "I blame myself for what happened, Whitepaugh. I wrote off Claudia Nizhang much too quickly; should have known she'd have at least one more card tucked up her sleeve." His expression became ironic, "Me…the mammal everyone ELSE is supposed to underrate."

Seth Whitepaugh nodded dryly. Because Jack La Peigne was a bunny, opponents tended to underestimate him…sometimes to their ultimate regret. But then the wolverine frowned for a second. All very nice, but the fact of his employer's species could occasionally become a double-edged sword, encouraging attacks that would never have occurred had he been of a species with a more aggressive reputation. That fat fool, The Mister; there had been the almost perfect example. The sea-mink wouldn't have dared to pull that blackmail scheme of his on say, a tiger or a bull elephant, but a bunny—even a bunny who surrounded himself with wolverines—The Mister had thought he'd be easy pickings. Ehnh, WRONG!

He pulled himself back to the present

"Just say the word Mr. La Peigne, and I'll have Nizhang dealt with."
The big bunny instantly threw up his paws in horror. "And make a martyr out of her? Noooo, thank you!"

"Oh, I didn't mean resorting to extreme measures, sir." The wolverine answered, annoyed with himself for having overstated his case. He leaned forward in his chair. "But that front she put on at the presser, looking all weary and defeated when she got down from the podium? No one would be surprised if say, she were to start having anxiety attacks."

La Peigne let out a soft, rumbling sigh.

"It's a good thought, Whitepaugh…but it won't work. Have you seen her latest blog entry? She's already back to her old, feisty self."

"Dang!" the wolverine snapped his fingers and then looked at the rabbit again, "So how do you want to handle this?"

La Peigne reached for his glass and drained it.

"Well for starters we need to crank up the rumor mill." It was a cryptic statement at best but Whitepaugh knew exactly what the big bunny meant; it was a tactic Aker had used successfully before. First, they'd leak a rumor as to what had been discussed at the City Council executive session, completely untrue and only barely believable. And then as soon as the initial rumor began to spread, they'd start a second rumor and then a third…and then on and on and on until it became a flood. That way, by the time the truth of the matter came out, it would be a letdown, perhaps even dismissed as more fake news if they were lucky. "May I assume you already have it working?" the wolverine asked. If he knew his boss, the mill would already be chugging to life.

"You may," the big rabbit answered. "But you didn't just come up here just to discuss the Nizhang press conference, Whitepaugh. What else do you have for me?"

"Some good news for a change," the wolverine answered, offering a rare smile, "I just came from paying a visit to Pawvidence Memorial Hospital."

Jack La Peigne's face clouded over for a second. "Oh yes, that wolf Howell. He got the message I take it?" It was good news if he had, but hardly a cause for celebration.

"Yes, but that's not what I wanted to tell you." Whitepaugh answered him, "I also talked to the doctors, and they tell me that every single one of Officer Howell's injuries was acquired BEFORE the activation." He tapped his finger on the desk for emphasis.

La Peigne leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. "Really?" he said. "All right now THIS is some positive information, Whitepaugh."

"I know, right?" the wolverine was grinning. "One lone wolf was able to take out a huge hippo—by himself—while he was injured—and he came through it without so much as another scratch. I talked to the boys in the lab right before I came up here and they're just about over the moon. Dr. Honeybadger says this goes beyond even her most optimistic projections."

"Hmmm, make that very good news, Whitepaugh" the big rabbit said, sitting up in his chair and laying his paws on the desk. Just then his cellphone beckoned from its cradle, reciting the opening notes from Modest Moiseyevsky's Night on Bald Mountain.

La Peigne's expression was at first a darkening frown. "Ahhh darn, forgot to put it on 'do not disturb' again...hello?" But when he looked at the screen, his eyebrows lifted and his nose began to twitch. "Hmmmm, now what the heck do you suppose would HE'D be calling me for?" His voice
rose sharply and then settled back down again "Speakerphone! This is La Peigne."

At once a familiar voice became audible, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

"Mr. La Peigne," the speaker's tone was neither timid nor forthright, but only quietly matter-of-fact. "Sorry if I'm interrupting, but I thought you'd want to hear this right away. All the charges against Mr. Big in the Pipeline Connection case were just dismissed; the City's star witness got cold feet, and when the corroborating witness heard, he bailed out, too."

La Peigne glanced at Seth Whitepaugh for a second; the wolverine's face was a mask, his expression unreadable.

He resumed speaking to his caller again

"Yes, that is important; thank you for bringing it to my attention. However, I'm in a meeting at the moment. I'll get back to you this afternoon."

"Very well sir." The caller said, and disconnected at once.

La Peigne looked over at Whitepaugh again.

"You have to give that shrew one thing," the wolverine said, a grudging note of admiration in his voice. "He knows how to plug a leak. I wonder what he had on Vinnie Blacktail?"

"I don't know, and frankly I don't care." His boss answered, tapping his fingers together, "What matters to me is, with the Zootopia Attorney General off his tail, Mr. Big is now fair game."

Seth Whitepaugh sat up abruptly in his chair, his head canted 5 degrees to the right.

"You're thinking of accelerating the timetable?" he asked. This time the note in his voice was one of caution.

La Peigne leaned back in his chair again, pulling at one of his cuffs with a pair of fingers.

"Maybe…I'll admit, I'm as leery of the idea as you seem to be, but it looks as if the stars may be aligning in that direction, whether we like it or not. First that press conference and now this news about Mr. Big…and there's a couple of other tidbits I discovered for myself just now and purely by accident." His voice became stentorian again, "Desktop-display, guest!"

A flat-panel computer screen rose silently out of the desk facing in Whitepaugh's direction.


A page of documents appeared on the screen and then scrolled rapidly downwards.

"I was going over the police report on The Rafaj Bother's Jewelery sting." The big rabbit explained, "When I came across something rather curious. Third paragraph from the bottom, take a look."

The wolverine leaned in close to the screen and then looked up sharply.

"The Red Pig? Is the ZPD sure about this."

"No," La Peigne conceded, "If they were, there's no way this information would have been buried almost in the back of the report. No, it's only a rumor. Just the same thought, it might be worth a
follow-up—because there's something else I saw in that report. Apparently the ZPD got the evidence on the Rafaj Brothers by sending in some undercover officers to purchase a lavender diamond."

"Yes I know." Whitepaugh nodded, wondering where his employer was going with this.

The big bunny was only too happy to explain.

"Well, it reminded me of something, an item about lavender diamonds I'd seen in the Mr. Big files some time ago; took me a while to find it again, but…Research Dossier 5-2795 3A, page 12!"

The screen changed and Whitepaugh leaned in close again.

…and reeled back in slack-jawed surprise, so violently that the two front legs of his chair actually left the ground.

"Burn me in perdition…"the wolverine murmured breathlessly, shaking his head as though fighting off a dizzy spell, "You think it was the jackals who sold it to him?"

"Yes, I think so," La Peigne grinned, enjoying his subordinate's reaction. Putting Seth Whitepaugh off his stride was normally about as easy as shooting a hole-in-one while blindfolded. He lifted a paw and waved it "Who else COULD it have been?"

Whitepaugh stroked at his chin with a thumb and forefinger; to Jack La Peigne, he looked almost professorial.

"I-I see what you mean about the stars coming together." He finally said.

"Yes, but only if that information about The Red Pig and the other diamond turns out to be more than just gossip." Jack La Peigne answered while raising an index finger.

He was not being cautious or playing the Devil's advocate; he was prompting—and Whitepaugh immediately got the hint.

"I'll get our research staff right on it" he said, rising briskly from his chair.

"Good," his boss told him, offering a quick thumbs-up. "If it turns out to be solid, I want to be notified immediately." 

"I'll see to it fursonally," Whitepaugh assured the big rabbit as he reached for the door. But then he stopped and turned, raising an eyebrow. "But…if it does turn out to be accurate; if the Red Pig IS involved and if that WAS the Rafaj brothers, what then?"

La Peigne quickly showed his pawlms.

"Let's not cross that bridge before get to it, Whitepaugh. Even if BOTH those items pan out, there are still a lot of other factors we need to consider." He lifted his gaze, looking over the wolverine's shoulder and towards his office door. "If you don't mind though, who else is out there waiting to see me?"

"Polly Walters and Ken Dahlberg," Whitepaugh scratched at an ear, "Or that's who was waiting when I arrived anyway."

"Right," the big rabbit nodded, "Have Walters come in next if you would. I don't need to see Dahlberg right now, please tell him to come back later this afternoon."
'Yes sir,' the wolverine answered. Though it was somewhat beneath his position to serve as his boss's majordomo, he didn't mind the request...because it was a request, not an order.

The big rabbit watched as his senior operative closed the door, wondering what he'd do if the answer came back in the affirmative. While never a control freak, Jack La Peigne didn't like having his paw forced.

Just then the office door opened again and moment and Polly Walters slipped through, nearly dropping everything as usual.

Like everything else in the office, the door to Jack La Peigne's private sanctum was fitted with state-of-the-art electronics, geared to accommodate whatever species was making use of it; the lower down you pushed on the door the less effort was required to open it, but also the lower down you pushed, the less it opened, period. That was fine if you didn't happen to have your paws full, but Polly Walters nearly always did. (Her nickname in the company was Polly the Juggler.) And right now was no exception; the opossum was bobbling a tablet, thee notepads and a Fursonal Data Assistant. She tried to make it in through the gap before the door closed, but wasn't quite fast enough; it promptly swatted everything out of her grip.

An observer hoping for a replay of Bellwether and Lionheart right then would have been sorely disappointed. Jack La Peigne hopped swiftly over the top of his desk and caught the load mere microseconds before it hit the carpet.

"Walters, when are you going to stop trying to carry the world on your shoulders?" he asked, rearranging the items into a neat stack before returning them to the opossum. His voice was a mixture of sympathy and exasperation. He must have asked her that question only a thousand times—and she always said the same thing.

"I like my job Mr. La Peigne."

The big rabbit sighed, and then said what HE always said, "Fine, but don't go killing yourself on me."

He went back around behind his desk and sat down again, while Walters took the chair in front of it, the seat adjusting to suit her size as it had with Seth Whitepaugh.

"So, what have you brought me this morning?" La Peigne asked, fulfilling yet another part of their daily ritual.

In a neat, quick motion Polly Walters pulled her tablet from the bottom of the pile and slid it across the desk; when she wasn't trying to walk and sort things at the same time, she could be as deft as a stage magician.

"There's only one item on the agenda this morning, Mr. La Peigne. Mr. Shipley from Waters and Downes called; they've completed the acquisition."

"Excellent!" the big rabbit clapped his paws.

"Mr. Shipley said to tell there was no problem, sir." Walters was smiling as she nodded at the tablet. "Burrows Trust was more than happy to unload that mortgage. A slam dunk I think is what Mr. Shipley called it."

Jack La Peigne practically snatched the tablet from the desktop. He knew he looked like a kit who had just received exactly what he wanted for his birthday—and he didn't care. With the morning's business at last completed, he could afford to indulge in a little pleasure.
"If you'll just sign at the bottom sir," his assistant was pointing at the tablet, "Mr. Shipley says he can have the papers served this afternoon."

La Peigne affixed his signature with the pad's stylus, but then he shook his head.

"Nooo, tell Shipley I think I want to handle this fursonally." After all that had happened during the week, he felt he owed himself a treat, "What's my schedule like for Saturday?" (He already knew he was booked solid for tomorrow.)

The opossum consulted her FDA.

"You've got that teleconference with Zoo York and Mammila., starting at 10."

"Dangit," La Peigne slapped his paw on the desk, "'Kay, that's going to take up most the day." (How could it not, with the time zone differences?) "All right, what about Sunday? I REALLY want to get this done before Carrot Days is over."

Walters looked at the device again.

"Nothing you can't clear sir," she answered, looking up," just your usual golf game and that lunch-time meeting with Judge Schatten."

"Cancel them both." the big rabbit declared, pointing like a sovereign rendering judgement on an errant vassal.

"Very good sir," the opossum answered, jotting a note, "And do you want me to reserve the executive helicopter?"

The big rabbit couldn't help smiling. Always anticipating his needs; that was one reason why he valued Polly Walters so much. He thought it over for a second and then shook his head.

"Noooo, I think I'll drive. Call the house and tell them to make sure that the Roamac is charged and ready to go Saturday Evening." He pulled at his chin for a second, "Hmmm, and I'd better not go in alone. Have Hummel and a couple of our other wolverines follow me in one of the tactical vehicles. Oh, and send the executive motorhome on ahead too, make sure it's got the solar panel with the EV hookup attached. There may not be a charging station in the Burrow."

"Very good sir." Walters answered, jotting another note.

La Peigne started to nod, but then stopped, noting for the first time that his fursonal assistant looked just a mite drawn this morning.

"Walters, did you skip breakfast…again?"

"The opossum looked away for a second, "I-I got off to kind of late start, sir."

"I thought so," the big rabbit sighed, "All right, soon as you talk to Shipley, I want you to get yourself down to the commissary and get yourself something to eat, put it on my tab. After that I want you to take the rest of the day off." He leaned over his desk and pointed straight at her with the tablet stylus. "And don't try to argue, that's a direct order."

"Yes sir," Polly answered, sliding out of her seat with a grateful smile. It was good to work for a company that took care of its own.

It should have occurred to her then; 'We take care of our own' was a phrase that could be
interpreted in either one of two different ways.

**Chapter End Notes**

**Author's Note:**

A few words about Jack La Peigne.

Jack was originally created as a character on a Zootopia RPG. (He was known back then as Jack La Pine.) I was inspired to come up with him after seeing this picture on FurAffinity. (Art by Jonas) http://www.furaffinity.net/view/14338897/

The second I introduced Jack, it seemed as if EVERY player in the group wanted to interact with him. That was nice; what wasn't so nice was that they all wanted to kick his butt on the very first encounter. (Come on already, that's like the Joker losing to Batman right out of the gate and NEVER getting the better of him.) Even so, with that kind of enthusiasm, I knew right away that if I ever got around to writing the Zootopia sequel I had buzzing around in my head, Jack La Peigne should be included.

Two things though. No, he's not a reworked version of the Jack Savage character, and no he's not intended as a caricature of any real person.

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**Easter Egg:** A reference to another rabbit saga towards the end of the chapter
Chapter Summary

Judy takes the A-train back to Bunnyburrows for Carrot Days with Nick Wilde at her side—and learns a thing or about the fox she never knew until now.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries

(Pt. 1)

Judy Hopps paced back and forth along the platform in Zootopia's Central Train Station, pausing every now and then either to thump her foot, look at her watch, or gaze towards the entrance in mounting frustration.

"Dangit Nick, where are you?"

She must have asked that question of the absent fox a dozen times by then. Darn him! It wasn't as if their meet point was hard to find; Zootopia Central, Track Two, and by the light-pole closest to the escalator. How hard should that be for a so-called 'clever fox' to figure out?

"Where ARE you, Nick?"

Judy stopped and looked to the right once again, towards the long, silvery form of the Zootopia Zephyr, the newest of the trains plying between the city and its outlying communities. For the moment, it was sitting patiently with its doors open, but another quick glance at her watch told the bunny that it wouldn't be like that for much longer; train service in and out of Zootopia was as regular as an atomic clock.

"Darn you, Nick, hurry UP!"

Just then, as if her last thought had finally gotten through to the fox, Judy caught sight of a bushy-tailed figure, hurrying up the platform with a wheeled travel case slewing in his wake. She started to relax—and only got about a third of the way there before the station PA boomed.

"Attention all passengers, final boarding call for the Zootopia Zephyr, now leaving on track 2 for
Judy let out a groan and bounded full tilt in the direction of the approaching fox. Dispensing with any greetings, she just grabbed the travel case by its other handle and nearly yanked the fox of his feet as she turned and dashed for the train.

"C'mon Nick, hurry!"

As the train came closer she found herself chanting silent mantra at the open doors.

"Please-don't-close, Please-don't-close, Please-don't-close, Pleeeeease…don't close!"

The doors either didn't hear her, or else they had a warped sense of humor. With less than two feet to go, they began to slide shut. Thinking fast, Judy dropped onto her back and kicked out with her feet, catapulting Nick and his travel bag through the gap and onto the train. Pushed backwards by the same motion, the bunny rolled a 180 and came up on her feet. Her move must have impressed somebody up there somewhere, because there was still time for her to make it onto the train…barely

No time to think, Judy hunkered down and sprang for the rapidly closing doors in a Hail Mary leap-for-life.

She made it through with less than a centimeter to spare, so close she felt the door brush the tips of her ears as it shut completely.

But as the old saying goes, 'Flying is easy; it's landing that's hard." And for Judy Hopps, right then was a good example. With no time to gauge her jump she came down hard and on her face. Luckily she had something to break her fall—although Nick Wilde wasn't especially happy to fulfill that role. The bunny's impact turned him into bushy-tailed whoopee-cushion. (Or that was the sound he made.)

For a dazed half-second Judy lay on top of Nick—until the fox made a small, rumbling sound in the back of his throat. "Uhh Carrots, do you mind?"

Judy recovered quickly when she realized that they were almost nose-to-nose, and even more quickly when she looked up and saw a pair of middle aged wombats staring at them with shocked expressions.

She got hurriedly up off of the fox, while just as hurriedly the two marsupials disappeared around the corner. It took even less time for Judy to fold her arms and for her foot to start thumping again.

"Well?" she demanded, regarding the fox with an aggravated eye.

He only shrugged self-consciously and began to brush himself down with his fingertips

"What can I say, Carrots? I'm a sporting predator; I like to give the train a chance to get away." Judy instantly raised an index finger.

"Nick, that's not…gsss." Her words ended in a wince and a hiss of air. She tried again.

"Now you listen to me-myeeenmmn." She looked away clenching her fist and making a sound like fingers rubbing balloon.

One more time…
"I mean it Niiiii-mmmmmm." Judy's face became so taut, she might have been trying to bench-press twice her weight.

Finally she just stared up at Nick with her eyes blazing, and then doubled over, unable to hold it back any longer.

"Ohhhhh, I hate you...heeheeheeheeheehehehahahahahaha-Haw! Haw! Haw!"

(Darn fox, couldn't he ever let her get good and mad at him without spoiling it?)

"Sorry Carrots." He told her, sounding genuinely apologetic, and because of that she was willing to let him off the hook—*this* time!

The train lurched slightly and then began to move; the motion put Judy Hopps firmly back in take charge mode once more.

"Come on, let's go get your bags stowed and grab some coffee from the café car; then we can head on up to the observation deck." (She had wisely loaded her bags on the train prior to Nick's arrival.)

To the bunny's considerable surprise, her partner instantly vetoed the idea—but not in a bad way.

"Noooo, why don't you grab us some seats up there while I go get the coffee?"

"Works for me." Judy said, trying not to get all big-eyed. Awww, he really *did* want to make it up to her.

The train was halfway across Zootopia Sound when she spotted him coming up the stairs, bearing a tray with two coffee cups.

"They were out of nutmeg, Carrots." He said "So I asked for cinnamon; it that okay?"

"It'll do, Nick." She answered, taking the offered cup, and also taking measure of her traveling companion. He had—wisely in her opinion—opted to ditch his usual Hawaiian shirt and tie for something more rural, a pair of faded dungarees and a chambray shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbow. (Judy herself was dressed in the same outfit she'd worn when she'd first arrived in Zootopia; it seemed somehow correct.) She was pleased by what she saw; not only by the way Nick was dressed but by his overall manner in general; now that the fox was on board the train, he also seemed to be a lot more 'on board' with the idea of spending the weekend with her at the Carrot Days festival. (His initial resistance had not gone unnoticed.) She took a sip of her coffee and then posed a question, offering her companion a semi-playful grin.

"Soooo, is this your first time out of the city, Nick?"

Once again his answer surprised her.

"Nope," he said, raising his cup in mock toast, "would you believe, back in the day, Finnick and I were on a road trip for almost three years?"

Judy's ears went up and she felt her nose beginning to twitch. All right, THIS was some unexpected news; she'd always assumed Nick was an urban fox who'd never been further away from his home than the Meadowlands, if that.

"Really, when was this?" she asked.

He tapped at his chin and tilted his face upwards, as if trying to recall.
"Hmmmm, must have been almost...nine, ten years...ago."

His voice faltered and Judy saw him turn to look out the window for a moment. She immediately felt the flags go up; this was something else she'd seen before; Nick was gazing into the past—and what he was seeing there was a painful memory. Something had happened on that road-trip—or just before, she didn't know which. What she did know was that the best thing for her now was just to stand back give him some space.

"I've never taken the train though." He added quickly, turning towards her once again—and poking a thumb out the window, "And I have to admit, this is some pretty country, Carrots."

Yes it was; which was exactly why she'd wanted to ride in the observation deck; summer had arrived and the Wilhamsterette Valley was in full, emerald splendor, lush meadows and high hills, festooned with a mixture of evergreen and hardwood trees, all of them eager to show off their foliage.

The floor of the car began to shake and the fox and bunny instinctively grabbed their seats, bracing themselves; a member of one of the larger species was coming up the stairs, more than one by the feel of things. And yep, less than a second later, a pair of big water buffaloes came lumbering into view. Luckily for Nick and Judy, the large-mammal seats were at the opposite end of the observation deck and as soon as the buffs sat down, they were able to pick up their conversation again.

"There's something I've been wondering about, Judy," Nick asked her, taking another sip of his coffee. "Why's the Carrot Days festival held at the beginning of summer? Wouldn't fall be better? You know, harvest time and all?"

She just smiled.

"Tell me something Nick, do you know how the tradition of letting kids out of school for summer vacation started? No? Well originally it wasn't a vacation; it was so they could go help out on the farm. That's why Carrot Days is always held third week of June."

"Okay, I get it now." The fox said, lifting his coffee cup in another faux salute, "So it's kinds of kids thing?"

Judy thought that one over for a second.

"More of a family thing, I'd say, it was started by my great, great, great, GREAT grandfather on my mother's side, Henry Haredigg." Even she couldn't resist a little puffing once in a while. But perhaps she should have said the 'f word.' Nick's ears stood up at one and pointed at each other

"Wow, I didn't know your family went that far back in the Burrows. How many brothers and sisters did you say that you have again?"

"276...last time I counted." Judy answered while suppressing a groan. She knew what was coming next, a whole, big batch of 'sly fox' comments about waiting in line for the bathroom, keeping track of everyone's birthday and whatever. (Har-de-har, as if she hadn't heard that routine only a hundred times before.)

But for the third time today, she had misread the fox. He just sipped his coffee again and asked, "Are they all still in Bunnyburrows, or have some of them gone out into the world the same as you did?"

"Most of us are still at home, Nick." Judy answered him. (Even having lived away from the
Burrows for more than two years now, she could never think of her family as 'them'.

"But….hmmm, let me think. My brother Art is studying mechanical engineering at the University of Harezona, my sister Violet just got her teaching certificate, my brothers Darrel and Dean went partners on a tractor repair company in Hoof River Boaregon, my sister June got married and moved to Colorato with her husband, he's snowshoe hare and they run a ski shop together. Annnd,,," she looked out the window for a second, chewing, "That's all I can remember off the top of my…oh wait, riiight, I knew there was someone else. My kid sister Erin is hoping to start next fall at the Zootopia Academy of the Performing Arts."

Nick hurriedly took his cup from his mouth and let out a low whistle.

"Whoa, color me impressed Carrots; that's a pretty tough school to get into, from what I hear."

Judy nodded, but she was thinking, "Pretty tough to get into the way it's pretty tough for an elephant to get into a gopher hole." Even to be considered for admission to ZAPA you needed to have maintained at least a 3.75 GPA for the last two years, and then you had to pass an entrance exam that made the SAT's look like a first-grade pop quiz. And then, if you made it that far, you still had to pass an audition before panel of judges that included no less a fursonage than Gazelle. (She was one of the Academy's biggest patrons.) Small wonder then that ZAPA's motto was, Multi Autem Sunt Vocati, Pauci Vero Electi, ("Many are called, but few are chosen.")

"How close is she to getting in?" the fox asked, interested.

"Well she got the grades of course," Judy answered him, "And she passed the entrance exam, did really well from what I heard, but she's still got to get through the audition, and that's going to be the tough part, Erin's never performed for an audience other than the family." She smiled, "If anyone can pull it off though, it's her, Nick. She's only the most determined bunny in the family, present company included."

"Really?" Nick was looking at her with his head titled slightly to the left, the way foxes do when something piques their curiosity.

"Really times two." The bunny responded. A quiet smile spread across her face as she recounted her sister's story for the fox, "For her eleventh birthday, Erin asked mom and dad to buy her an electric guitar. Well, dad didn't know one guitar from another but he went out looking anyway and found a used one in really good shape; it was just her size too. But when Erin opened up the package, it turned out to be a BASS guitar. She had never played bass in her life back then, only an unplugged six-string, but you know what she did? She sat herself down and made herself learn how to play bass guitar, and now it's HER instrument. See what I mean about how determined she is?"

"I-I-I think I'm getting the idea," the fox answered with a small snicker, "Yep…that sounds like your sister, Carrots. Does she sing, too?"

"Oh you bet she does, Nick." Judy was nodding eagerly, "Erin's got a fantastic singing voice; you'll hear it for yourself, I'm sure."

"I'm looking forward to it, Carrots?" Nick answered with a smile, but now it began to fade into a wistful expression and his eyes began to flicker towards the scenery.

"What is it, Nick?" Judy asked, nose twitching and more than a little bewildered. NOW what had she said?

He only sighed and looked at her again.
"Oh, it's nothing Carrots, it's just that…I never had any brothers and sisters. It would have been nice."

Judy instantly felt her senses sharpening. One thing Nick Wilde almost never talked about was his family; even now, more than two years into their partnership, she knew precious little of his background.

She knew that he had lost his father at a fairly young age and that he'd been raised by his mother (who had never remarried.) She knew that there hadn't been much money in the house when he'd been growing up, and of course she knew about the Junior Ranger Scouts incident, but that was pretty much all of it. Other than that, Nick Wilde was a closed book. Judy was aware however was that on those rare occasions when the fox lifted the cover, her best course of action was just to sit quietly and listen.

And that was what she did now.

"Mom and dad tried to have another cub," he was saying, "Both before and after I came along, but they were never able to. It hit my mother pretty hard, especially after my father passed away."

He drifted into another melancholy silence, looking out the window again. Judy knew that was all she was going to get from him this morning…especially when he turned to look at her again. sporting that famous, foxy smile.

"Oh well, at least I didn't have to take a number and get in line to use the bathroom every morning."

Judy groaned under her breath. "Uh-huh, there it is—finally."

She finished her coffee and got up quickly, before Nick could get on a roll. "Ready for a refill?" she asked.

It was on her way back from the café car, that an epiphany hit the bunny like tidal wave, so overwhelming that she actually had to stop for a second.

Judy had known about it since right after Nick had stopped her from surrendering her badge to Chief Bogo. When the fox had been a boy, "All I wanted to do was to join the Junior Ranger Scouts." Judy knew that tale well enough, but what she had never been able to figure out was why it had meant so much to him.

Until now…

"I never had any brothers and sisters. It would have been nice," the fox had told her only a few minutes ago. *That* was why he'd wanted to become a Junior Ranger Scout so badly; he'd been trying to find the brotherhood he didn't have at home.

And instead he'd been rebuffed in the most cruel and heartless manner imaginable.

Judy looked towards the stairs and felt her eyes getting misty. More than anything, she wanted to go back in time, find that little fox-boy and hug him tight. "Don't worry, I'm here for you."

Well there was nothing she could do for that *kid* now, Judy told herself with stiffening resolve, but she could still be there for the fox he'd grown into. Maybe, just maybe when they got to the Burrows, she could help him find a little of what he'd been looking for back then.

She braced up and moved on.
When she sat down at the table again, Judy was surprised to see that they were only 83 miles from the Burrows and with only a little more than an hour to go. (Each car—and the observation deck—had been fitted with an LED readout showing how long and how far it was to the next station.)

She realized then that Nick was looking at her curiously.

"Sorry," she said, passing the fox his blueberry latte, "It's just—this new train is so fast; I hope someone's going to be there at station when we get to the Burrows."

"You can always call ahead." The fox suggested, and Judy nodded quickly.

"I'll do better than that, I'll send a text," she said, and pulled out her cell phone.

Nick took a small sip of his latte and asked her, "So what do you think our next assignment will be?"

Judy's foot thumped the floor before she could stop it.

"Seriously Nick? We finally get some time off and all you want to talk about is work?" Her expression tilted sideways. "And besides, I do the gung-ho cop routines around here."

"My sincerest apologies for cribbing your style, Ms. Hopps." the fox responded, bowing deeply over the table with feigned, exaggerated grace.

"Apology accepted," the bunny answered with a snicker, "But since you asked, I'd really like to get the assignment of trying to take down one of the Rafaj Brother's illegal diamond suppliers." She sighed, "But honestly, I don't think that's going to happen. The Chief's right, they're probably out of our jurisdiction."

"Maybe we'll get lucky and they won't be," the red fox offered hopefully, and Judy felt her expression turning lopsided again.

"Be careful what you wish for, Slick. Remember what else Chief Bogo said? A lot of those blood diamonds come from gunrunners, and those are some of the most dangerous animals out there." She took a short pull from her own cup, "That's how Claudia Nizhang ended up with her bad leg you know; she got hurt in the shootout at Finagles Nightclub, with that gang of arms dealers, The Company." She let out a short, quick breath, "Whoa, there were some BAD guys, only two of them made it out of there alive, Kieran McCrodon and Danny 'The Danaconda' Tipperary."

"Tipper-IN," the fox corrected, causing Judy's ears to rise up and her nose to start twitching. She was only aware of the name from having seen it online the night before—she'd become curious about councilmember Nizhang's history with ZYPD—but Nick seemed to know it off the top of his head.

Her change of expression did not go unnoticed by him.

"Yes, Carrots I know who he is." he told her, shaking his head and sighing, "or who he was. I guess I should say. Danny Tipperin used to operate back in Zootopia before he moved on to Zoo York; I knew him by reputation, but that's all; I always stayed as far away that swift fox as possible." A dash of bitters entered his voice, "It's animals like him that give my species a bad name."

"Right, right." Judy nodded quickly, slightly embarrassed. If Tipperin had gotten his start in Zootopia, of COURSE Nick would know about him.

They spent the rest of the journey talking safe subjects, food, TV, the weather, anything that
wouldn't strike a spark. And with every passing mile the numbers on that darned overhead display seemed to ever more slowly; it was like the wall clock on your last day of the school year, with the dismissal hour approaching.

But then finally the PA pinged and a velvety voice intoned.

"Bunnyburrows Station, Bunnyburows Station, next stop. Doors open to my left."

"Well, I sent the text, I hope there's someone there to meet us," Judy said as she got up. (She hadn't received a reply, maybe she should have called.)

But then she noticed her traveling companion was staring out the window, wide eyed and open mouthed.

"Wha…what Nick?" she asked.

The fox just raised an arm and pointed.

Judy turned and looked, and felt her throat thickening and her eyes becoming misty all over again. "Awww, guys!"

The tune I envisioned as the soundtrack for Nick And Judy's journey back to Bunnyburrows., "Homeward Bound' by Patrick O'Hearn ( The sound quality could be better and I could do without the intro, but for all that I like it more than the studio version.)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Br7OZantm9c

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 7 Easter Eggs: The three City Council members.

Sven Kristofferson -- Sven and Kristoff, the Reindeer and his faithful human stooge, Frozen

Ray Louis, Ray and Louis -- The alligator and the Cajun firefly from The Princess and the Frog.

Jake Marahute -- Jake and Marahute, the 'other' mouse and the eagle from The Rescuers Down Under
Chapter Summary

Meet the parents, and the grandparent, and the brothers and sisters, and MORE brothers and sisters, and the sister with the...

Oh, never mind....

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries

(Continued...Pt. 2)

Judy sniffed and flicked a tear away, ears falling backwards in a sign of complete emotion.

The Bunnyburrows Station platform was literally swarming with rabbits, they seemed to be everywhere. It was hard to spot an individual face in a crowd like that, but the few Judy was able to pick out, she recognized immediately; and right there in the center of the throng were her parents, waving almost frantically in her direction. And as the Zootopia Zephyr pulled to a halt, the crowd raised a huge banner, strung between two poles. 'WELCOME HOME, JUDY!' It was decorated with hearts and a drawing of a police badge

"You didn't ALL need to come." Judy sniffed again. It wasn't her entire family out there, but is sure as heck felt like it, "And what's the sign for?"

When the doors opened, Judy's parents were there, the first ones waiting to greet her. She leaped off the train in a single bound and threw her arms around them, hugging them tight.

"You didn't have to do all THIS." She said, and then gave them each a kiss on the cheek.

"No Judy, but we wanted to," her mother countered and the three of them hugged even tighter. When they let go, Stu took hold of her paws beaming with pride as only a happy father can. "Welcome home Detective Hopps."

Judy stepped back and raised a cautionary paw.
"Easy Dad, I haven't made the detective squad yet."

"No, but we're getting closer." A voice from behind her said, "We worked our first undercover sting, the day before yesterday, helped our Chief make a big, important bust" 

Judy frowned as she heard Nick speaking. Wasn't it just like him to exaggerate everything?

She turned to offer the fox a rebuke—and felt her face drop down to the floor. Nick was lugging their bags, hers and his, all by himself. D'ohhhh, she should have stayed and helped him instead of jumping off the train like that. Luckily, a couple of her siblings took note of the fox's plight and immediately pitched in to assist him.

"Hello Bonnie, Hi Stu." the red fox waved, freed from the extra burden. (They had known each other long enough by now to be on a first-name basis.)

"Hello Nick," the bunny farmer answered, thrusting out a paw, "Welcome to Bunnyburrows."

Watching him, Judy had to smile. They first time they'd met, her dad had barely been able to bring himself to touch Nick's paw. It hadn't so much the fact that he was fox as it was that he was a CITY fox—or that was how her father had explained it at the time. Whatever the reason, he had no such problem now by the look of things.

"Thanks Stu, it's good to be here." Nick answered, sounding as if he genuinely meant it before accepting a hug from Bonnie. "Quite the turnout," he observed, making what was for him a rare understatement.

"Well," Stu answered, hooking his thumbs in the straps of his bib overalls, "It's the first time in ages that our Jude-the-Dude's been back for Carrot Days."

A wince and a grimace hit Judy's face like a snowball. "Don't call me that in front of him!" she wanted to scream.

Instead, she said. "Uh Dad, what don't you introduce Nick to some of the others family members." She was speaking with a haste that the fox couldn't fail to notice, (although he gave no sign of it right then.)

"Yes, good idea," Bonnie Hopps chimed in even more hurriedly than her daughter. She turned and beckoned with a crooked finger, "Pop-Pop, come on over here and say hello to Judy's partner."

A crotchety voice answered from somewhere in the middle of the crowd. "Trudy where is she?' the wizened bunny inquired—while looking straight at Judy.

"I'm right here, Pop-Pop," she said, feeling a small flood of warmth. In spite of everything else, it
was wonderful to see him again. Just the same, she decided she had better move fast, before her
grandfather could misspeak again. She turned swiftly, waving her companion forward.

"And this is the fox you heard me talk about, my partner on the police force Nick Wilde." She
spoke slowly as if reciting for a third grade spelling test. To her immense relief, the old rabbit
nodded and regarded Nick amiably. "Mind hunkerin' down a bit, boy? I ain't so good fer stretching
upwards these days."

"Sure, no problem," the fox answered, dropping down to his haunches with his wrists on his knees.

The old rabbit let out a whooping noise, "Ha, Got you!" and immediately began running his paw
over the top of Nick's head in a fevered circular motion. Nick reeled back so suddenly, he nearly
tripped over his own tail, and when he straightened up again, the wizened bunny was pointing
balefully up at him with his cane.

"Where's your devil horns, boy? How'd you hide 'em?"

"Dad!" Bonnie Hopps cried, getting quickly between them. "I'm so sorry," she said to Nick and
then took her father by the shoulder and began to walk him away. "Now darn it, Pop-Pop, I thought
we discussed this."

For what seemed like hours, an awkward silence reigned over the platform. No one seemed to
know what to say; Judy Hopps wanted to jump into the nearest trash container and pull the lid
closed after her. "Why don't you come with me Nick? Me and my briiiiight ideas!"

Finally, her father cleared his throat.

"For what it's worth Nick, the same thing happened the first time he met Gideon Grey."

From somewhere out of sight, a pair of high voices rang out again.

"The Devil I say, the DEVIL!"

"Daaad!"

If there had been a pole handy, Judy would have been banging her head against it, but when she
looked over at Nick, she was vastly relieved to see that the fox looked more amused than offended.

But then she saw him drop to his haunches again. "Hello, who's this?"

Judy felt her nose moving. What the…? What the heck was Nick…? No wait, a little paw was
wrapped around her father's knee and a pair of small, green eyes peered out from between his legs.

"It's all right Cotton, come on out." she said, and a little girl bunny came cautiously out from
behind her father. She was gray-furred like Judy, but lighter in color, dressed in a pink skirt and
pastel blue blouse. She moved with slow shuffling steps and had her paws clasped in front of her—
as if she'd just been summoned to the front of her class by the teacher; "What have I said about
passing notes during lessons, young lady?"

For a moment, she just stared up at the fox with big winsome eyes.

"Say hello Cotton," her father prompted.

"H'lo" the little bunny said. She looked like she was going to start sucking her thumb.

"Hello Cotton, I'm Nick." The fox said hunkering down even further.
"Are you my sister Judy's partner?" She asked, so softly that Judy had to cock an ear to hear her.

Nick nodded and Cotton put her paws on her hips, no longer guarded, but curious.

"How come a fox is partners with a bunny?" she demanded, this time loud enough for everyone on the platform to hear—including Judy, who wished another train would come along so she could throw herself in front of it. First her grandfather and now her little sister; two for two on this fine morning.

But Nick just smiled.

"Well because before I met your sister Cotton, I was a street hustler, just getting by from day to day; I thought that if the world was never going to see a fox as anything but shifty and sneaky, there was no point in trying to be anything else." He glanced over at Judy for a second, then back at the little bunny-girl. "I was wrong Cotton, and it was a bunny—your sister—who taught me I was wrong. She made me believe that even a fox could make it as a police officer and she never stopped believing IN me. The whole time I was going through the Police Academy she was always there to prop me up, even if she wasn't there with me. Whenever I used to feel like quitting, all I had to do was remind myself, 'Judy didn't quit, and look how hard she had it'. I wouldn't be a police officer if it hadn't been for her. THAT'S why she's my partner. Do you understand now?"

Cotton's mouth compressed to a near pucker, and then moved from side to side while she considered the fox's words. Then she looked up again with those big earnest eyes and pronounced her verdict.

"I like you, you're nice."

…and gave him a big hug.

Almost everyone, 'Awwwed' and Judy made a promise to herself; when they got to the Carrot Days festival she was going to buy her little sis the biggest, bestest slice of her favorite carrot cake ever! (With extra whipped topping just the way Cotton liked it.)

With the ice finally broken, the rest of the introductions went smoothly. (Her father didn't introduce Nick to everyone of course; they'd have been here until after midnight if he did.)

"And that's about it," he finally said, preparing to wrap things up.

"Uh just a second, Stu." The fox held up a paw. "Is Erin Hopps here? Judy told me on the train about her trying to get into ZAPA; I'd really like to meet her."

"Erin? Yes, she's here." The bunny-farmer responded cheerfully. He turned and called over a shoulder. "Erin? Come on out, Nick wants to say hello to you."

The voice that answered from somewhere in the crowd was high, angst-filled, and stretched taut as a bowstring, "Da-a-a-aaaad!"

"Young lady, you get out here this instant." Bonnie was back, and she was taking no guff from her daughter.

"All right, all right." The younger voice answered, and the crowd began move aside to let her pass. After a few second of this, a bunny girl of perhaps 13 years stepped forward through the gathering.

Judy almost gasped.
"Errrr-in, oh my you've gotten so big and so pretty!"

What she DIDN’T say was, "and you've gotten such an attitude, too. How the heck did you talk mom into letting you dress like THAT?"

Erin Hopps was probably the closest thing in the family to a white rabbit, and she would have been except for the black fur around her feet, paws, and the tips of her ears; she was tall for her age; her eyes a deep azure blue. She had gotten her fur color, according to family lore, by way of a nearly forgotten great-grandmother. (Judy's black tipped ears had supposedly come from the same source.)

She had grown at least a good three inches since Judy had last seen her. And as she had observed only a moment ago, Erin was maturing into a lovely young rabbit, lithe and supple with none of the awkwardness that usually comes standard with a growth spurt.

So what the heck was she doing in THAT outfit?

Erin Hopps' ensemble could best be likened to a chip on her shoulder the size of a railroad-tine; she wore urban-camo denim parachute pants, a denim jacket with the sleeves torn off to make a vest, and t-shirt bearing the logo, 'I Slap Bass So I Don't Slap YOU." A braided collar encircled her neck, decorated with Welsh Cross in rose gold. She had backcombed her facial fur to make it stand out.

It was her eyes, though that really got Judy's attention, Erin had dabbed the lids and sockets with black eyeshadow to make them match her muzzle. It gave the younger bunny a haunting almost spooky appearance. Looking at her, Judy had to wonder again, how the heck had her sister ever gotten away with something like this. If mom wasn't careful, one of these days, she was going to come home sporting a nose piercing.

Ignoring Nick as if the fox were invisible Erin made a beeline straight in her older sister's direction

"Hey big sis," She said, and then gave Judy a hug that had all the warmth of a pat-down for weapons. Turning her attention to Nick—finally—she offered a peremptory paw and shook his quickly, "Hello." She might have been greeting a mannequin for all the emotion in her voice.

Judy Hopps was flabbergasted. Was this the same sweet girl she remembered from her last visit home?

"So can I go practice now?" Erin asked her folks, now completely ignoring both Judy and the fox.

Bonnie Hopps looked for a second as if the boom was coming down, but then she sighed.

"Yes, I think we all need to get going."

"Good," the young bunny declared, and melted back into the group again.

The second she was gone, Judy buttonholed her mother.

"Mom? What the heck is going on with her?"

Bonnie sighed and said with infinite patience, "She's growing up Judy, she's...at that age."

"Yep," said Stu, coming over to join his wife, "Going through her moody phase, just like you did, Jude-The-Dude."
Judy’s ears shot upwards, and then shot backwards.

"What? Dad, I never had THAT much attitude!"

"Oh, no?" It was her mother talking, "How about that time when you wrote us from summer camp? Six pages long—telling us how much you hated that place and everybody there and especially us for sending you."

"And then when camp was over, you didn't want to leave." Her father reminded her.

"Uh, I thought it was only five pages long." Judy fidgeted with her fingers for second, before remembering with horror, "Ohhhh, no. NICK!"

She turned and looked feverishly at the fox, who was gazing at the roof of the station, pretending to find the weathervane interesting. Oh, peachy! She was going to be hearing about this again, and the worst part was, Nick would wait until just the right moment to spring it on her and then, SNAP!

From the other side of the station they heard Erin's voice again.

"Hey, are we GOING?"

Everyone turned en masse and headed for the station exit. Judy had just wrapped her paws around her travel bags, when she heard Nick Wilde's voice close to her ear.

"Jude the Dude?"

Judy's teeth clenched and her lips compressed. Ohhh-kay, to paraphrase another famous law enforcement officer, it was time to nip this in the bud.

She set down her bags again and turned to address the fox, wearing the sweetest smile ever and speaking in an even sweeter voice.

"Nick, sweetheart…I don't mind if my folks call me Jude the Dude—but if YOU ever do it, I'll bite your face off, mmm'kayyyyy?"

She grabbed her bags and continued on her way, still wearing that beamy smile.

Exiting the Bunnyburrows train station, Nick and Judy discovered a long line of vehicles, pulled up on the roadside and waiting. It was a motley caravan, to say the least; everything from a mini-van to a stake-side flat-bed trailer, filled with straw and, drawn by a farm tractor.

The minute Judy spotted it, a river of memories went coursing through her—those wonderful moonlight hayrides from back when she'd been on as a little girl. Okay, so maybe it wasn't nighttime yet; the hay-wagon and tractor were still there and two out of three ain't bad. With that in mind, she Nick's arm she all but dragged him towards the trailer. (Wisely, he did not attempt to raise a protest.

On the ride home, little Cotton Hopps insisted upon sitting on the fox's laps, something Nick seemed to find genuinely touching.

Maybe inviting him along hadn't been such a bad idea after all, Judy swiftly decided.

In the meantime her mother—who was riding with them in the wagon—decided to take advantage of the interlude to bring her and Nick up to speed on the day's schedule.

"We're going to go back to the warren first so you two can unpack and get freshened up before we
head on out to the festival. It shouldn't be especially busy there today; things don't really start to pop until Saturday. One thing though: if you're planning to do any shopping for crafts or souvenirs, you'll probably want to get that done today. A lot of the booths sell out quickly when the weekend crowds get here."

Judy's ears snapped upright and then she also snapped her fingers.

"Ohhhh Mom, you just reminded me. Do you know anything about a vendor selling Gazelle Japanese tour shirts? I promised to pick one up for a friend of ours back at the police precinct.

Bonnie thought for a second, and then shook her head, answering slowly.

"Mmmm, noooo, sorry hon...I haven't heard about anything like that. If they're here though, they'll most likely be down on Dealer's Row. I can show you where that is when we get to the festival."

She stroked at her chin with a finger. "And let's see, there's the carrot-cake eating contest later today, oh and the Farmer's Benevolent Association is raffling off a car again, so be sure to get your tickets before they're gone."

"I will," Judy answered, and then she nodded wistfully; even with Zootopia's first-rate public transportation system, it would be nice to be able to get around on her own every now and then. (A sideways glance at Nick told her he was of the same mind.)

"And be sure your don't miss the talent show tonight Judy," Her mother was saying, her voice swelling slightly with a note of maternal pride, "Erin's going to perform."

"Yay!" Judy clapped her paws and then patted Nick Wilde on the arm.

"Oh great Nick, you'll get to hear her." Emo-bunny or not, Erin Hopps was a fantastic singer and bass player. But then Judy felt her brow furrowing, "But why tonight Mom? Won't there be more mammals at tomorrow's show?" (The talent show had run on two consecutive nights since back when she was in middle school.)

"I know," Bonnie answered with a sigh, "That's the idea. Erin's never played in front of an audience before and she felt it would be easier to break the ice with a smaller group."

"Right, I get it." Judy answered, nodding. It made good sense, but still....

Judy Hopps' favorite way of meeting challenge had always been to take it head on; she was the kind of bunny who always jumped right into the swimming hole. (Easing in gradually was for wimps and wussies.) It didn't bother her that Erin seemed to be taking a different point of view—except, for one thing. That kind of cautious attitude went completely against her kid sister's new, 'tough-grrrl' fursona. Was Erin acting out a role that wasn't really her? Judy hoped not, when she'd been that age, the girls at her school had had a word for kids like that—Poser, and it had not a label anyone wanted.

Well she could talk that over with Erin later; right now her mother was still speaking

"And then tomorrow night we've got the traditional Hopps family Carrot Days dinner and the bonfire afterwards," Bonnie had decided to skip ahead a little, "and of course, there's the Big Barn Dance on Sunday night."

"I wouldn't miss either of those for the world," Judy said from the heart, and looked over at Nick again.

He was pretending to find interest in a nearby windmill, but the bunny wasn't fooled. Her mother
had just uttered another 'forbidden fox-word'—dance. Well Nick could try, but he couldn't put her off forever; sooner or later, by hook or by crook, she was GOING to get him out on the dance floor, period, end of story.

"Resistance is futile, Nicholas." She silently reminded him.

Then her father called from the tractor up front. "Hopps family homestead, coming up on your right!"

Judy's made her face turn poker-table neutral, no mean trick considering the look she hoped to see on Nick's face any second now.

She was not to be disappointed. When they came around the bend, Nick's eyes went wide, and his sharp, foxy ears turning backwards in astonishment.

Judy leaned in close, lowering her voice to puckish murmur.

"Well, what did you expect fox, a ranch house with a wraparound porch? Nope, sorry; we're bunnies, remember? And they don't call this town Bunny-BURROWS for nothing."

The Hopps family home was built into the side of a hill, no surprise there. But other than that, Judy could just imagine what was going through her traveling companion's head right now.

The front of the house looked like…well the closest you could come to it was an alpine chalet, with gingerbread trim in pastel-pink; except no chalet was egg-shaped with a pair of rabbit-ears sticking out of the top. "That's actually our wireless receiver." Judy explained, pointing. "TV, phone and internet reception can get kind of dicey out here in the sticks. And don't be fooled if the outside looks too small for a family this size. Trust me, there's a lot more underground."

"Will that be problem for you Nick?" he mother asked, suddenly concerned.

He just waved an airy paw, "Not at all Bonnie; us foxes like to den underground too. As matter of fact, back in Zootopia I live in a basement flat."

Someone called from one of the upper windows, "Hey all, they're back," and a skein of more bunnies came streaming out of the front door to welcome the caravan.

Stu pulled the tractor to a halt about ten feet away from the house, and set the brake, declaring lustily as he shut off the engine "Home again, home again, jiggity-jig!"

Judy couldn't help smiling; that was what her father always said, and it fit the moment like an old, favorite wind-breaker.

It was good to be home again!

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:

Bunnyburrows, as it was shown in the film, always reminded me of some of the rural/agricultural areas I know here the Pacific Northwest. The Willamette Valley, the Yakima Valley and the Rogue River Valley to name just three. Accordingly I used a
few of these communities as the template for The Burrows as it's depicted here.
Days of Carrots and Blueberries (Cont'd Pt. 3)

Chapter Summary

Welcome to the Carrot Days Festival; new surprises and old friends.

But meanwhile, back in Zootopia....

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries
(Continued…Pt. 3)

"Sweet cheeze n' crackers!"

Judy Hopps leaned her elbows on the dashboard, peering in disbelief through the windshield of the old family farm truck.

She had traded in her traveling clothes for something a little more 'country girl', blue jeans, a checked shirt in sky blue and her famous big, floppy hat, (currently nestled in the lap of the fox seated next to her.) Nick, being Nick, hadn't bothered to change; if Judy knew him, he'd probably wear the same outfit for the whole time he was here, (more of a 'guy thing' than a 'fox thing').

"I can't believe this, dad." She said, turning in the opposite direction to speak to the rabbit seated behind the steering wheel.

"I know, Jude." Stu answered, smiling broadly as he swerved to avoid a pothole, "Pretty impressive, huh?"

"Impressive?" Judy thought, gazing forward through the glass again, this time with her nose twitching, "Impressive doesn't even begin to cover it."

She had known the Carrot Days Festival would be bigger than the last time she'd attended—it had be growing in both size and attendance every year since she was a kid—but now it seemed to have taken off like the proverbial bat out of hell.

"You could fit six Meerkat Markets in there." She told herself with growing wonder, "And still have room for the Palm Hotel."

Well maybe this year's celebration wasn't quite that ginormous, but it was still a far cry from the
festivals she'd attended as a little girl. Back then, Carrot Days had begun and ended with two rows of vendors' stalls, a hay maze, perhaps an inflatable slide and a barn converted to a makeshift auditorium.

Not any more! Now there were more rows of stalls than Judy could count—and also carnival rides, an outdoor stage, (complete with bleachers,) and a parking area that seemed to stretch from here to Podunk and back.

"How'd it all happen?" Judy turned to her father again, more amazed than ever.

"We picked up a corporate sponsor this year," Stu told her, chest swelling a little as if the sponsor were himself, "Soon as that happened, the festival just took off, whooooooosh!" To emphasize this, he made 'shooming' motion with his paw…causing the truck to lurch sideways a little.

"Both paws on the wheel, Dad," Judy quickly admonished him, ever the family bunny-scout.

"Sorry." Her father answered sheepishly, gripping the wheel and 10 and 2 with a tight, firm paw.

"Who's the sponsor?" Nick Wilde asked, suddenly, from out of nowhere. He seemed to be trying to head off an argument between Judy and her dad.

It was a heartfelt but completely unnecessary gesture; Judy Hopps had never in her life gotten into a shouting match with her father, (or with her mother, either.)

Her kid sister Erin, on the other paw was beginning to look like another story. When they'd all come out to pile into the truck, they'd found Erin waiting in the cargo-bed with her arms wrapped around a guitar case. (To Judy she'd looked like an unevolved predator, protecting the last remnants of a kill.)

"Come ON already," had been her greeting to everyone else, and then she'd absolutely refused to take the time to show her new bass guitar to Nick. Judy had let it slide that time, but she was sliding on a slippery slope and she knew it; before the Carrot Days Festival was over she and Erin were going have words; it seemed as inevitable as the next day's sunrise.

She brought herself back to the present just in time to hear her father's answer to Nick.

"LPN Pharmaceuticals," he was saying

Judy felt her ears go up. Well, one ear anyway. Her feelings on the subject were of a decidedly mixed nature.

She knew of the firm LPN Pharma of course, everyone in Zootopia did; it was the company that had developed the Nighthowler antidote, yet another heroic name to emerge from the Savage Predator crisis.

But still…a drug company, sponsoring the Carrot Days Festival? Good guys or no, it just didn't feel quite right to her.

Well at least LPN Pharma hadn't insisted on putting their name on the event, standard procedure for most corporate sponsorships these days. Judy had to give them that much, if nothing else. 'The LPN Pharmaceuticals Carrot Days Festival'; when she thought about it, she didn't know whether to laugh or cringe.

"Whoa, look at that." Nick Wilde yipped from the next seat over. Judy looked, and let out a low whistle.
A sculpted metal archway had been erected over the parking lot entrance; a pair of art-deco carrots with their greenery intertwining to form the top of the arc. On this, printed in big booming, letters was the greeting, 'Welcome to Carrot Days!' The structure had to be a good five stories tall.

"Is that new this year, Dad?" Judy asked her father; it was certainly new to her.

"Yep," Stu Hopps answered, keeping his eyes on the road, "all courtesy of LPN Pharma."

"Nice piece of work," Nick said, and Judy had to agree, feeling her outlook regarding the LPN sponsorship kicking up a notch. Also unlike so many other corporate sponsors, they weren't following the standard meme of 'put in some money and run with it.' No, LPN Pharmaceuticals seemed to be making a genuine effort to promote the Carrot Days Festival while keeping their faces in the background. Whatever had been their reason for sponsoring this year's Carrot Days Festival, it had NOT been an exercise self-promotion.

When they got to the entrance arch, however, Stu Hopps surprised Nick by turning right instead of driving under it.

"We have the use of the exhibitor's parking lot," the bunny farmer explained noting the fox's expression, "Much better than the one up by the main entrance. Ten steps and you're slap in the middle of the midway."

As they pulled into a space near the Exhibitors Entrance, Judy noted that most of the other nearby vehicles had placards in the windows, reading either 'Vendor' or 'Exhibitor'. Stu Hopps didn't bother with one, and now it was his daughter Judy who felt a small swell of pride. No, her father didn't put up a placard; he never did and he'd never needed one. Everyone in the Burrows knew the Hopps family and also which vehicles they drove; there would be no citations or tow warnings on the truck when her father returned.

The moment her feet hit the turf, Judy became aware that at least one member of their party was conspicuous by her absence.

"Where's Erin?" she asked looking around for her younger sister.

It was her other sister Jessie who answered.

"She grabbed her stuff and took off already." she said, her braces adding a slight lisp o her voice.

"Did she now?" her father asked, coming around the other side of the truck. Now he was beginning to sound peeved with Erin, and Judy felt the same way; even in her worst moments when she'd been 'that age', she'd never been this insensitive.

Well, she'd deal with Little Miss Attitude when she saw her again; right now there were other kids to help out of the truck.

Not all of them needed help; Ethan and Ellen were old enough to get out by themselves, as was Jessie. Mikey and Cotton did require some assistance however, and as before, Cotton immediately chose to hook herself up with Nick. As he set the little bunny-girl down again, Judy caught him looking in her direction, grinning sardonically and raising an eyebrow. She sighed inwardly at the fox's unspoken message.

In the city of Zootopia, it was illegal to carry passengers in the bed of a pick-up truck, a misdemeanor good for a $100.00 fine. Not only that, Judy could recall at least two occasions when she'd written up a motorist for just that infraction—in Nick Wilde's presence. 'Well…?' his expression seemed to be saying to her
She lowered her voice to a soft murmur.

"Number one, this isn't Zootopia, Nick. Number two even I'M not that much of bunny scout." And now it was her turn to smile wickedly. "And number three, if that's what you think, how come you didn't speak up earlier—OFFICER Wilde?"

Nick groaned and pointed with a pair of fingers, "What is it you bunnies say? Tou-che? You see I'm a poet, and you didn't know it."

"What's THAT from?" Judy asked responding with a groan of her own. (She could always tell when Nick was quoting.)

"The Scarlet Pimpernel." He answered immediately.

"The Scarlet Pimple?" Cotton Hopps was looking up at Nick with big winsome eyes.

"The Scarlet Pimpernel, princess." Her father corrected, looking over from where he was closing up the tailgate, "It's a story, kind of like a cross between Robin Hood and The Three Mustelids. Pretty sure we got in our library at home."

"Yes, that's right, Stu." Nick agreed with him quickly—a mite too quickly, which told Judy he'd been quoting from a movie, not the book.

Someone whistled from over on the right, and then a wee voice called. "Hey there, Stu Hopps."

They all turned to see a gaggle of rodents skittering towards them, bushy tails and charcoal fur. The squirrel in the lead was dressed in bib overalls, the same as her father.

"Hey there Levon Chatterton," the bunny called back cheerfully.

Judy smiled warmly. The Chattertons were their neighbors from up the road and Levon was one of her father's best friends. He grew hazelnuts, filberts, and blackberries, along with other assorted items. Like her father he was a mammal who needed no placard on his vehicle to identify him as an exhibitor and/or vendor.

"Look who came home for Carrot Days this year." Stu was saying, laying a proud paw on Judy's shoulder. "You remember her, I'm sure."

"Sure do," the squirrel answered, sitting back down on his haunches, "How's life in the big city treating you, Judy Hopps?"

Before she could answer, her father jumped in again.

"Working on getting her detective's badge," he said, beaming.

"That's right," Judy nodded in agreement. What the heck; let her father puff a little. He was entitled to it, and besides, it wasn't as if he was exaggerating her accomplishments. But then she remembered the fox standing next to her. Oops.

"And this is my partner from the ZPD, Nicholas Wilde." She said, shepherding the fox forward.

"Ah, the famous Nick Wilde. Yep, we heard all about you." Levon answered in a noncommittal tone. For all Judy knew he could have been heaping either praise or scorn on the fox. When he offered a paw to Nick, she decided at least it was probably the former.

"Oooh, you missed all the excitement here earlier Stuart." Another of the squirrels piped up. Judy
recognized him as Levon's younger brother Les, "The Guilford boys tried to put an appearance about an hour ago; wouldn't take, 'You're Not Welcome Here' for an answer." He puffed out his cheeks and let loose a squirrely whistle. "Boy, howdy, fer a minute there I thought it was gonna be just like last year all over again."

"Oh now don't go blowin' things up again Lester Chatterton." It was Levon's wife, Clara. "Pete just called for couple of extra security guards an' when the Guilford boys saw 'em, why they just turned round and left without any extra fuss."

"Well maybe, but it's lucky we got that extra security this year." Levon retorted

Judy looked at her father and saw that his eyes had turned upward. She felt like doing the same. As much as she liked the Chattertons, they were Douglas squirrels, a species that never shut up once they got going.

Then Nick Wilde cleared his throat.

"Um, Excuse but I'm kind of new in town. Who are these Guilfords, and what's the problem with them?"

Levon Chatterton was only too happy to fill him in.

"They're a family of coyotes, came to the Burrows about eight years back, maybe nine, it don't matter. They live out on Star Route 33, the old La Peigne place. Jerry and his two brothers Joe and Dean run the Sky-ote Crop Dusting Service—but they don't get a whole lot of business these days, not since most of the Burrows went organic." He said this while looking at Stu. Judy knew why, it was her father who had started that movement.

"So pretty much all they got for income these days is what they can make tryin' to grow sugar beets." Levon's whiskers stiffened and his tail began to flap like a towel in a strong breeze, "that... and whatever they can steal."

He went on to explain that the trouble with the Guilford clan had started long before their crop-dusting business had taken a turn for the worse. No sooner had they taken up residence in the Burrows than their neighbors had begun to notice various and sundry items disappearing from their yards overnight, and it had only gotten worse from there. All three of the brothers had done stretches in jail, and the family had at least one lawsuit pending.

"Then right before last year's Carrot Days, Jerry Guilford found out that his contract with the County to spray for illegal Catnip farms had been cancelled. Him and his brothers came to the Festival looking for Chip Fielding—oh sorry, Chip was County Commissioner back then—and they almost caused a riot when they caught up with him. Jerry got sixty days in County and all three of them were banned from Carrot Days for good."

Judy let out a low airy whistle of her own.

"Whoa, in that case, I agree, it's a good thing you had the extra security laid on."

"You can thank our sponsors for that." It was Les. "It wasn't exactly a big surprise when the Guilford brothers showed up this morning. Everyone in the Burrows knows those boys are ones for holding grudges. And I guess the folks from LPN must of heard about it too, coz they sent us down some extra paws from Aker Security just in case."

"Well hopefully we won't have to put up with the Guilford family's antics much longer." Stu Hopps expression was a mixture of relief and grim purpose. "I heard last week that Burrows Trust is about
to foreclose on their property."

Levon flapped his tail again and shook his head.

"I wish, but no such luck Stu. Becky Harrison says they managed to scrape together enough cash to wangle themselves another extension…and she should know, her boss is their loan officer."

"Darn!" Stu snapped his fingers, looking disgusted.

"All right you two, enough of this gloomy talk." Clara Chatteron spoke with her paws on her hips. "It's Carrot Days and the sun is shining. So what are we all standing around out here for?"

It turned out to be the best suggestion Judy had heard all morning. When she and the others stepped out of the service aisle and onto the midway, it was like entering another world. The Carrot Days Festival had been an enchanting place for her ever since she was a little girl, but now it was almost magical. There were jugglers, there were clowns, there were balloon vendors and face-painting; over the tops of the vendors' booths, she could see the slowly turning arc of a Ferris wheel. And then there was that outdoor stage; now they were inside the festival, Judy could see that—sweet cheeze n' crackers, it was bigger than the one at the Lionheart Park Amphitheater, (and also with more seating from the look of things.) When her sister Erin took the stage later tonight, she might well find herself performing in front a big crowd after all. Where the heck had she disappeared to, anyway?

As they strolled down the Midway, little Cotton took the lead, prancing ahead of the group like drum majorette, with others all tagging along behind.

"All right Carrots, it's your show." Nick reminded her. "As big Chief Buffalo Nickel might say, what's the first item on the docket?"

Judy answered him at once; she had made up her mind even before they'd piled into the truck to come here.

"First thing we need to do is head on down to Dealers Row find that stall with the Gazelle Japanese Tour shirts. You saw what the ad said; they sold out last week before noon. I'd hate to get here and then be too late."

"I agree," the fox responded, offering a sober nod, "Clawhauser's size is going to be hard enough to find as it is."

"Right." Said Judy, and felt a tug on her sleeve; it was her sister Ellen, pointing up ahead

"What, you see it? Where is it sis?" she asked.

"No," the younger bunny kept on pointing, "But there's an information booth right over there; I bet they could tell us where to go."

"Good idea." Judy nodded.

Yes…and no. Yes, the portly bunny lady behind the counter knew where to find the t-shirt seller, but…

"No, they're not open for business yet; they just got here. Probably about 1 this afternoon is what they told me."
Judy sighed, thanked her and the group went on their way, pausing briefly to consider their next move.

"Okay. So what's plan 'B'?" Nick asked, leaning casually against a light pole with his legs crossed in a figure 4.

Judy Hopps didn't answer, she just grinned at the fox.

"Huh, what?" he asked, ears falling backwards in confusion

Judy's grin only widened, and then so did Nick's eyes when all of the bunny-children started to giggle.

"All right, what…?" he started to say, but then sniffed and looked to his left.

From seemingly out of nowhere a mime-rabbit had attached himself to the red fox, white face, and black leotards, a black-and-white striped shirt, his head topped by a bowler hat with a red carnation. He was leaning against an invisible pole in an exact copy of Nick's own stance.

The fox turned peevishly in the mime's direction, only to have his movement copied perfectly. While the silent performer was a bunny and not a fox, he was tall and lanky for his species; by standing on the balls of his feel he could almost match Nick Wilde's height.

Nick raised a finger, the mime raised his, so perfectly matching the fox's movement that their fingertips almost touched.

Nick sniffed; the mime pretended to sniff.

Nick reached into his pocket; the mime pretended to reach into his.

The fox bought out an object, cupped in his paw. The made up bunny brought out an invisible object, held in his.

Nick opened his paw to show what he had, his off-duty police badge.

The mime opened his...and hesitated.

And that was the opening the fox was waiting for.

"All right you, I've had enough of this," he said, and pointed to the right of the mime, tracing an invisible, vertical line with his finger. "You see that rope? Start climbing!"

The mime clasped his paws to his chest, looking horrified, then slowly turned towards where the fox was indicating, with bulging, petrified eyes.

He stared for a second and pointed with a shaky finger, looking piteously at Nick.

"Yes, you heard me…climb!" the red fox snarled, pretending to bare his fangs.

The mime took hold of the invisible rope and began to shinny his way upwards. It was a marvelous performance, and soon more mammals had gathered to watch. Every now and then the bunny-mime would stop and look downwards with a feigned expression of terror. Twice, he pretended to lose his grip and slip downwards, catching hold of the rope at the last second and swinging like Quasimodo on a church-bell. After a couple of minutes of this, the Hopps children were all in stitches and Judy didn't know how much longer she could keep from rolling on the ground, laughing herself sick.
Then Nick reached behind his back and brought out a pair of invisible garden shears; the mime saw what he was doing and began to his head wildly.

The fox responded by grinning wickedly, and then reached his paws above them mime's head and cut the rope.

It was the pièce de résistance. You could almost see the rope slipping through the bunny's fingers as he flailed desperately for something, anything to grab onto. When he began to flap his arms as if attempting to fly, even Nick had to double over laughing.

Down and down and down the chalk-painted rabbit seemed to go, until he appeared to hit the ground hard, tumbling backwards, head over heels.

…and coming up on his feet with his arms raised in a, "Ta-daaa' V. Everyone cheered, and when the mime took off his bowler hat and began to pass it around, Nick Wilde was the first to make a contribution, with everyone else quickly following suit, even little Cotton.

"Nice work," the fox said, offering paw. The mime shook with him, winked and bowed, and then went off in search of another audience.

'That was really cool Nick." Judy said when the mime had gone. This was something she was seeing more and more of these days; the red fox's big-hearted side.

He just shrugged it off. "Oh, I've always had a soft spot for street performers, Carrots. I must have met hundreds of them back in the day when…"

"Judy? Judy Hopps!"

Someone was hailing her from the other side of the circle of onlookers. Judy turned and saw two cougars, a female just starting to show the first signs of pregnancy and a male, dressed in tan slacks and a polo shirt…hey, wait a minute!

"Bobby Catmull!" she cried out, clapping her paws. "Oh, come here!"

Without waiting for the big cat to respond, she bounded over and leaped upwards, giving him a hug around the neck.

"Oh, it's great to see you Bobby. How long has it been now?"

"Five years at least," he answered with a grin, and then turned to the lady cougar standing beside him. "Judy, I'd like you to meet my wife, Belinda. Lin, this is the rabbit I told you about, Judy Hopps."

"Zootopia's first bunny cop," Belinda Catmull answered, getting down on one knee to make eye contact. Her voice was tinged with a soft, southern inflection, "Oh yes, Bobby told me all about you. Speaking as a predator Miss Hopps, I'd say that was a fine thing y'all did, exposing that Nighthowler plot."

Judy nodded, "Well I thank you for that Belinda…"

"Call me Lin, hon."

'Okay Lin it is," she said, "but I didn't do it alone." It was a perfect opening and Judy wasn't about to pass it up; she turned and beckoned with a pair of fingers. "Without my partner Nick, I could never have—excuse me, WE could never have cracked the case."
"Oh so this is Nick Wilde." Bobby said, also getting down to eye level. "It's great to meet you."

"Likewise." The fox said.

The shook warmly, and then the cougar spoke to Judy Hopps again.

"Well Judy, you did it; you're a police officer, you realized your dream."

"Maybe, but I'm not the only one Bobby." The bunny reminded him, and then went on to explain for Nick's benefit.

At the skit where Judy had announced her intention to become a police officer, Bobby Catmull had provided all the musical effects, using a variety of gadgets and instruments. It had turned out to be the genesis of a lifelong fascination with acoustical effects for the big cat, and now he worked as a sound engineer with the prestigious FX firm of Industrial Mice and Magic.

"That's where Lin and I first met." Bobby was beaming, "She works in the CGI animation department. One day we ended up sharing a table in the commissary…and the rest is history."

"And this is where it all began." Belinda said, spreading her arms as if to take in the entire festival. Judy's ears went up in a V.

"…Where it all began." She repeated in a whisper, almost to herself. And then she grabbed Nick Wilde by the arm.

"'C'mon Nick, c'mon kids. There's something I want to show you guys. You too, Bobby, Belinda."

Without waiting for an answer, she began to lead the fox up the midway, with Cotton and the other young bunnies following along behind

"Judy, wha…?" Bobby started to say, but then his eyebrows raised and his tail began to click back and forth. "Ohhhh yes! Come on Lin, I really want you to see this."

The two of them hurried to catch up.

A little more than 200 miles away, Jack La Peigne was entering his office with Polly Walters in tow; as always, the opossum was juggling six different tasks at once.

"Mark that memo to Zoo York as regular delivery," the big bunny was saying. "And send the one to our office in Dysney Urgent Priority. I want to be informed immediately of any new developments." His tone was even but at the same time as taut as a bridge cable, a sure sign he was in a foul mood.

As well he should have been; earlier that morning, much earlier, at like 3 AM, La Peigne had received an emergency phone call from Aker Correctional Corporation's office in Dysney Australia. What he'd heard would have sent even a rabbit of a more genial nature into a fury; a general revolt had broken out in the facilities managed by Aker Correctional's Australian branch—not amongst the inmates but amongst the correctional officers; in essence they were threatening a wildcat strike.

The big rabbit had been practically beside himself when he'd been informed. A prison is not like an auto plant, you can't just close up shop for the day if none of the workers decided to show up. The correctional officers knew that and had figured it would give them some bargaining power. In fact their proposed walkout was perfectly illegal; Australian law specifically forbade strikes by public
Fine, except some nitwit guard had gotten the idea that since Aker Correctional Corporation was a privately-held company, (it wasn't) their employees were privately employed and therefore not subject to that 'no-strikes' law. It was pure idiocy of course, but it was idiocy that had spread like a wildfire. As a result, Jack La Peigne had been obliged to stay up most of the night trying to resolve the crisis; his first instinct had been to immediately fire every single one of the would-be strikers, but even in his most hot tempered moments, he could never be that impulsive. Eventually the correctional officers had agreed to return to their posts, but the big rabbit was anything but satisfied. In the due course of time, he promised himself, those ingrates who had threatened the walkout were going to pay and pay dearly for their arrogance. If there was one thing guaranteed to send Jack La Peigne's blood into a high-rolling boil, it was presenting him with an ultimatum. Nobody held this bunny's feet to the fire—nobody!

He was just about to issue another order to his assistant when he stopped, brought up short by the fact that in his absence, a stack of DVDs and a thick Manila folder had been left on his desktop.

'Hold that thought, Walters" he said and went over to have a look. The file was stenciled with the letters 'ZPD' and labeled Police Report 20578-210. The big rabbit recognized the numbers at once. It was the final report on the Rafaj Brothers blood diamond sting. (The DVDs must contain the surveillance camera footage, the big rabbit swiftly realized.)

For a second he hesitated; neither he, nor anyone else outside of the ZPD or the Attorney General's Office was supposedly allowed access to this file. Claudia Nizhang would have a field day if she discovered he had a copy in his possession.

Well, that troublemaking red-panda wasn't going to find out, La Peigne assured himself, features darkening as he recalled once more her performance at the press conference.

As if his labor troubles Down Under weren't enough of a headache, the vultures of the fourth estate had suddenly widened the scope of their inquiry to include the Aker Group. The first calls from reporters had started coming in at about six o'clock that morning and had never let up since then. Did Aker know anything about what had transpired at the City Council session Councilmember Nizhang had been referring to? Was it true that two of their representatives had been seen entering City Hall just before it convened? The answer to every single one of these inquiries had been a polite 'No comment." followed by a quick disconnection. When La Peigne had been informed of the calls, he'd had to go to his private gym and spend ten minutes beating a practice bag to death before he felt better.

"Dangit, he'd known the media circus was coming to town, but THIS soon? And not now!

"Interfering, band-tailed witch!" he flared, inwardly at Claudia Nizhang, "And if that IDIOT Kristofferson thinks he's going to be the next mayor of…all right, calm down."

He closed his eyes and took four deep breaths. When he spoke again, his voice was as even as a plumb-line.

"Walters, see that I'm not disturbed for the next half-hour," he said indicating the folder with a wave of his paw. "I need to concentrate on studying this without any distractions."

"Yes of course Mr. La Peigne." she answered, and then quickly (and gratefully) bowed herself out. The big rabbit watched her go and then sat himself down behind the desk, flipping open the folder and frowning over the pages with a twitching nose.
Should they move up the agenda? La Peigne didn't know and he wouldn't be able to make the decision anyway until he heard back from Seth Whitepaugh, (and he sure as heck wasn't going to make the call while he was in THIS state of mind.)

But in the meantime, he needed to study every relevant piece of information he could get his paws on, including the report on the Rafaj brothers bust; just how much of what had happened in the alley behind the store had Judy Hopps seen? More importantly, how much of what she'd seen had made it into the official documents? Jack La Peigne knew better than most mammals that something appearing innocuous at first glance could take on a wholly different aspect when coupled with subsequent evidence.

He checked the table of contents, and flipped to the section regarding the confrontation between the hippo Rashid and Officer Tad Howell. After only a quick perusal, he closed it again, enjoying a small sense of satisfaction, his first since arriving at the office that morning; not enough to dampen his anger but nothing to stoke it either

Hopps had said ZERO about Howell appearing to have gone savage when he'd looked at her around the corner; heck, she hadn't even hinted at it. That was good, very good. If the news from Whitepaugh turned out to be in the affirmative…no, let's not get ahead of ourselves.

La Peigne closed the folder and was about to set it aside when his eye fell on the stack of DVDs. Was there anything on the surveillance cam footage that might be relevant? He should at least take a quick look.

There was at least fifteen hours of video on the disks, but narrowing it down would be cakewalk easy. The only relevant footage was the last twenty minutes or so, from the time of the diamond purchase to the hippo's final takedown.

He inserted the number five disc into his desktop tray and thumped his foot twice.

"Play DVD, the last…forty minutes." he said, changing his mind at the last second. Better to start it early rather than late; he could always fast forward if he liked.

He settled back in his office chair, with his elbow on the armrest and his cheek propped moodily against his fist.

An image appeared on the screen. It showed Wilde and Hopps with the Rafaj brothers in the background. The fox was saying something to her, "Ready to try it on Carrots?"

Jack La Peigne didn't catch the Rafaj brothers' reaction to this; he was too busy dealing with his own response. In a flash he was sitting bolt upright. The fox had called her that…and she'd let him?"

"Where's your pride in your species, Hopps?" he demanded softly of the bunny on the display screen. Any fox daring to call him 'Carrots' would be eating dirt the hard way.

He looked at the screen again…and let out a cry of alarm. The computer mistook it for a voice command and froze the image.

Jack La Peigne froze too. And then he gripped the arms of his chair and rose slowly to his feet, staring at the monitor and quivering as if a hundred volts were passing through him.

On the display-screen in front of the big bunny, Nick Wilde was holding Judy Hopps in his arms; the playback had stopped at the exact moment their lips met.
Seth Whitepaugh would later conclude that had his employer not been bone-tired and already in a towering rage when he saw the image, his reaction, more than likely, would have been far less severe.

…and his subsequent actions might not have been nearly so rash or so imprudent.
Days of Carrots and Blueberries (Continued…Pt. 4)

Chapter Summary

Judy takes Nick back to square one, but the fox makes an even longer journey into the past.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries (Continued…Pt. 4)

Finding the place was easy; except for a faded paint-job and a slightly bowed-in roof, the old barn looked just the same as Judy Hopps remembered it.

Getting inside though was another matter; the double front doors were held shut by a grapefruit sized padlock and a chain as thick as a python.

Never-say-die Judy however was never that easily discouraged; she remembered a side door close to the back. It would hard to find, almost a secret entrance, but she was willing to bet her left ear that it had been left unlocked and for just that reason.

It all worked exactly as she'd hoped; well, not quite exactly. At the door's threshold, Nick Wilde balked.

"Are you sure this is all right, Carrots?"

It was Bobby Catmull who answered him, (though not directly.)

"I didn't see any 'Keep Out' signs, did you Judy?"

"Nope," She said, and moved quickly through the entrance with the Hopps children following close behind. Bobby and Belinda Catmull went next, and Nick Wilde brought up the rear.

Inside the barn, it was dark, dusty, and musty, the air suffused with the pungent aromas of old alfalfa, diesel, and creosote. The only things visible were the overhead rafters, and the hulking outlines of what were probably farm vehicles.
"Think you can find the light switch, Bobby?" Judy asked

"Yeah, but give me a moment," the cougar's words seemed blunted by the dead air, as if he were speaking in a soundproof chamber, "My eyes take longer to adjust than yours." (Like everything else in nature, superior night vision comes with a trade-off.)

"Hmmm, not having any luck over here," the big cat finally said after a minute, "anybody got a match?"

"No, don't!" Nick Wilde cried out in horror. "There's fireworks in here!" He had smelled the powder the instant the door opened.

"Just kidding!" Bobby called back, flashing a Cheshire-Cougar grin through the dimness. Judy and the kids all sniggered—while Nick let out a growling lament.

"Is everyone from the Burrows this warped?" he moaned, speaking to no one in particular.

Judy answered him anyway, "Pretty much," she said, and just then Bobby Catmull found the light switch.

The lights were low at first, giving off only a dull amber glow, but it was enough. Yep, the old barn had reverted to its original function as a storage unit over the past few years; Judy could make out three tractors, a forklift, several rolls of bunting, a few folded tents, and over on the far side a pair of fireproof blankets marked with hazmat diamonds, labeled 'Explosives1.1', the fireworks Nick had sniffed out a moment ago.

One area of the barn remained uncluttered however, a raised platform at the far end of the enclosure.

"Just like I remember it," Judy breathed; her tone was hushed almost reverential, "C'mon guys."

She waited until everyone had joined her on the old wooden stage before making the announcement.

"This is it, guys." She said, spreading her arms and turning in a slow circle, "THIS is where it all began."

Nick Wilde's head titled sideways, as if he were doing a crossword puzzle and had come to a clue that stumped him.

Before he could say anything, Bobby Catmull beat him to it.

"Hey, would you look at that?" The cougar was pointing towards the wings, "The old piano, it's still there. Hrrrm, I wonder if…" He looked for around and found two pieces of wood, then walked over, studied the exposed strings for a second and pounded out a trio of minor funeral notes—the same three notes he'd played in this very spot 17 years ago when Judy had told the audience, "Back then, the world was divided in two, vicious predators…or meek prey." And now she repeated the line for posterity

That was what finally stirred Nick Wilde to realization.

"Wait a minute," he said, pointing downwards at the floor, "This is the place; this is where you performed that skit you told me about?" By the tone of his voice, he seemed to have been expecting a somewhat grander setting.
"Yep, this is it," Judy answered, turning another circle.

"You mean that thing where you told mom and dad you were going to be a police officer someday?" It was Jessie.

"That's right," her sister answered, looking out towards the spot where Bonnie and Stu Hopps been sitting on that long-ago afternoon. Then, for no apparent reason she suddenly groaned and slapped a paw over her eyes, making a noise that was half a giggle, half a groan.

"Wha….What is it, Carrots?" Nick Wilde asked, thoroughly baffled.

Judy was barely able to meet his eyes. Even now, after all these years, she could hardly believe that she'd...

"Ohhh, Nick…my poor parents, they were SO embarrassed." She shook her head, still wearing that look of rueful mirth, "If you thought I was milking it that time in the Natural History museum with Bellwether, you should have seen me here. I had this great, big bottle of ketchup with me and I squirted it all over myself during the death scene."

To emphasize the memory, Judy held out her paws as if she were wringing someone's neck, making squeezing motions and retching sounds. "Bluccch….Gyyyyuccch….Gahhh!"

Nick started to laugh and the kids were giggling too. So were Bobby and Belinda.

"Don't forget the ribbon, bunny-girl." The cougar reminded her, almost hooting.

"Oh yes," Judy's voice was nearly a squeal, "I had this big, long red ribbon, too." She pantomimed pulling a rope from her chest screaming like a little girl, "Ayiiiiiiieeee! Blood! Blood! Blood!"

"You did THAT in front of your folks?" Belinda Catmull was still laughing, but now her laughs were one part horrified. In the skit, Judy had 'died' after being 'attacked' by another big cat.

"Yep, 'fraid I did," she admitted, gazing at the floor, but still sniggering.

Belinda shook her head and looked at Nick.

"Whoa, Ah think y'all nailed it, fox. They're ALL warped in this town." She glanced at her husband, who grinned with feline mischief.

"Hey, I wasn't you'd never have married me." He said, taking her by the paw.

"Well, somebody has to keep you under control, boy." Belinda answered, and then the two of them nuzzled, purring.

Judy smiled, but then her expression turned thoughtful and she looked out at where her folks had been sitting once again.

"You know…Mom and Dad were never all that happy with my plan to become a police officer. I don't think they're entirely comfortable with it, even now."

She turned to the others again.

"But even with all that, they never stopped supporting me. When I was going to the Police Academy, Mom used to send me a care package every week." She let her gaze fall on Nick, adding. "And when I gave it up and came home after that horrible press conference, they never once said to me, 'We told you so.'" She reached out to tousle Cotton's ears; she didn't know why, it just felt
right. "Strange, isn't it? They never liked the idea of me becoming a cop, and yet I never would have made it without them."

Her statement was greeted by a chorus of slow solemn nods. Bobby Catmull started to say something, but just then his cell-phone buzzed—with the same tune the cougar had played right before Judy had informed the world, "I'm going to be ... a POLICE Officer!" (She could not have been more delighted.)

"Hi dad," the big cat said, putting the cell to his ear. "Yep, we're here." His eyes flickered over at Judy and then at Nick, "Just hanging out with Judy Hopps and her partner, Nick Wilde. You remember Judy. Wilde...yeah, the fox that's right." He pulled the phone away for a second, "Dad says to tell you and Nick hello, Judy." He put it back again, "We're in the old barn, Dad. You know; the one where we performed the skit. Yeah, you got that right; it DOES bring back a lot of memories. Listen, where are you and mom? Okay...Okay, I know where that is. We'll be there in just a minute." He glanced over at his wife's bulging tummy, adding, "Got a little surprise for you and mom. No, I'm NOT telling you over the phone."

"It's twins," Belinda explained under her breath to Judy and the others. Meanwhile her husband had just disconnected.

"Gotta run, Judy...Nick. I'll never hear the end of it if I keep mom waiting now. See you around later maybe?" He finished on a hopeful opening, and Judy was only happy to take advantage of it.

"Oh you bet Bobby. If you can make it later on, my kid sister Erin is playing in the talent show tonight."

"Erin's in the talent show?" Bobby was genuinely interested. "Whoa, I think the last time I saw her, she wasn't much older than Cotton there. What does she do?"

"She sings and plays bass guitar." The bunny explained, "Getting warmed up for her ZAPA audition. She'll be on about 7:30"

Bobby's ears went up and his whiskers stiffened.

"Whoa, she's up for acceptance into to the Performing Arts Academy? Okay now I really want to see her." He turned to his wife, "You'll like Erin, hon. She's about the sweetest little bunny-girl I ever met."

The cougar said this while looking at Belinda—which was fortunate for Judy Hopps, otherwise he might have seen her rolling her eyes and biting her lip. Ellen and Ethan were doing the same, while Jessie was pressing a finger to her lips—a gesture for the benefit of Mikey and Cotton—and Nick was...

Nick Wilde was standing at the edge of the stage, gazing into the middle distance; his ears were lolling backwards and his tail was lying on the boards like a wet dishrag. What the heck?

Bobby and Belinda didn't see him. Offering a quick, final farewell, they began to thread their way in the direction of the exit.

Judy waited until they had gone and then turned to her brothers and sister.

"Okay guys, Nick and I need a couple of minutes alone here, okay?" (The fox didn't seem to hear her.) "Jessie, can you mind your brothers and sisters for me?"

"Sure sis." The younger bunny lisped, knowing an order disguised as a request when she heard one.
When they had left, Nick was still at the edge of stage, still staring at…what?

Judy went over and took him by the arm. The fox started to pull away from her, but then stopped himself.

"Nick…what's wrong?" she asked.

She saw him glance at her over a shoulder, and then his chest rose and fell, very slowly.

"Ohhhh, I'm okay Carrots, it's just that…" his gaze shifted upwards for a second. "I wish MY father could have been here to see how I ended up; Officer Nick Wilde, ZPD… maybe even Detective Nick Wilde, cross your fingers."

Judy let go of the fox and took a step backwards. Nick was lifting the curtain on his past again—and once again, the best thing for her to do was give him some space.

He turned to her.

"Fatherhood is a huge thing with us foxes, Carrots, did you know that? Yeah, it's true. Even way back before we evolved, the Daddy fox would always play a big part in helping to raise his cubs." He sniffed. "My father was like that too. Before he passed, he was always there for me."

He looked at the floor again. Judy just waited; let him speak when he's ready.

"This may be hard for you to believe Carrots," he said when he looked up again, "But my dad never ran a hustle in his life, he was a completely honest fox. His dream was to start his own tailor shop. I still remember the name he had picked out, Suitopia." He said this while tracing the name in the air with a thumb and forefinger. "It was going to be the first tailor shop in the city aimed at serving both predator and prey species—I know that kind of business is a pretty common thing these days, but back then it was really rare."

"What…happened, Nick?" Judy asked. Rule of silence or no, his revelation was all but blowing her out the window.

Nick's shoulders slumped and he looked away again.

"He couldn't swing a bank loan, Judy." He said, and then quickly raised a paw. "I know…I know; it's against the law for a bank to discriminate on the basis of species. Yes, it is now, but it wasn't back then; when I was a kit, if you were a fox, no lender would even come near you. You could have good credit from here to Vulpitania and they still wouldn't lend you a nickel." He shook his head, sighing, "And like I said my father's business idea was fairly radical for the time anyway. He never had a chance—but he never gave up; right up until the day I lost him, my dad was out there trying to get that loan. The banks laughed him out, they threw him out; at least one time he even got arrested." He stopped for a second, rubbing his eyes. Judy thought that he was done, but then his gaze found hers again.

"But no matter how many banks turned him down Judy, my father wouldn't even think of borrowing that money from the mob. It was out of the question, period. The one time that my mother even hinted at it, my dad quit speaking to her for a week. He was always an honest fox, Carrots, and I know he wanted the same for me." He sniffed, and then his shoulders hunched and began to shake, a hundred hairline cracks threading through his voice.

"I wish Dad could have lived to see me become a police officer, Judy. It would have meant so much to him."
"Ohhh, Nick!' Judy leaped up and gave him a hug, but then he felt him stiffen and straighten up again; the moment had passed.

Or...had it? Nick set her back down, laying his paws on her shoulders.

"Well Dad's not here Carrots, but Mom is," he said, taking her by the arms and setting her down again. "And when we get back to Zootopia, I'm going to do it Judy; I'm going to keep my promise and go visit her."

"Yay!" Judy whooped and threw an arm in the air—but at the same time, she was wary.

Why was it that Nick had never been to visit his mother? In light of what he'd just told her, it made some sense; perhaps she hadn't approved of his hustling lifestyle any more than his father would have. All very nice and neat, except Nick had left that life behind more than two years ago; so why hadn't he been to see his mom in all that time?

Oh he'd seen her around, (he said; Judy had never met her) and he'd talked to her on the phone. (THAT much was true.) But he'd never actually gone to see her. Why was that? Judy didn't have a clue; the most she'd been able to get out of her partner on the subject was, "It gets awkward," and. "We have an issue." Even so, she had eventually managed to extract a promise from the fox to go and visit his mother, (after he lost a bet to her.) So far, he had repaid that debt with excuses rather than action, but this time—Judy was certain of it—this time he was going to follow through on his pledge.

And at the end of the day, wasn't that all she really needed to know?

"Good for you Nick." She said taking his paw, and raising a finger, "Only fair warning fox, I'm going to hold you to your promise this time."

"I hope so, rabbit" he told her with a lopsided smile, "Because if someone doesn't twist my arm a little, I'm not sure I can go through with it."

He did not elaborate, only gave her paws a small squeeze. "Thanks Carrots, thanks for putting up with me getting all silly and sentimental.'

She immediately squeezed him back.

"Nick, you're not silly." This time her eyes were locked into his.

For a long moment, they just gazed at each other.

…and then Nick abruptly pulled away from her; he seemed to be coming out of a trance.

"Come on Carrots, we better go find the kids before they trash the festival."

Judy's paws went straight to her hips.

"Nicholas Wilde, my brothers and sisters are good kids and would never...!"

Her words were cut off by the sound of a scream.

Judy braced herself for a sly-fox retort, but Nick was already halfway to the exit. She immediately went after him, hopping over the top of a tractor to catch up.

They burst through the door to find Ellen and the other kids waiting for them, Little Cotton was shivering slightly as if the outside temperature had dropped good twenty degrees. They'd heard the
The scream came again, louder this time.

"Did anyone hear where that came from?" Nick asked, looking from face to face. His voice was both crisp and commanding.

Jessie and Ethan pointed quickly to a space between two vendor's stalls. "Through there." the boy-bunny said.

"Thanks," The red fox nodded, and then, "Okay, you kids stay here."

He took off without another word.

"Jessie, mind your brothers and sisters," Judy pointed a warning finger and then hurried after him at full tilt. Her ears—which should have been standing straight up—were whipped back against her neck. Her nose could still twitch though, and now it was practically doing a St. Vitus dance. NOW what the heck? She had hardly seen Nick this agitated since their escape from the Cliffside Laboratory.

Not only that, now she realized where they were going; that gap been the tents led straight back into the courtyard where she'd confronted Gideon Grey all those years ago.

"Come on Carrots, hurry." Nick called back to her over a shoulder, "That was a fox scream, and not a scared one; someone's mad, REALLY mad!"

As if to confirm this, the scream came again; it was high pitched and earsplitting, a lawn rake dragged on a blackboard—and incredibly, Nick Wilde slowed down for half a second.

"Wha…that sounded like…oh, no!" He sniffed the air, and then Judy saw his ears lay back and his hackles rise, "Hang on buddy, I'm coming!"

He pulled out his badge and put it between his teeth, and then dropped to all fours and lit out as if his tail were on fire.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: a few words on Nick Wilde's family history:

In putting together Nick's backstory, I tried to remain as faithful as possible to the Disney Studio's vision of Zootopia; it was a task not unlike assembling a LEGO construction from the remnants of several different sets, all with a few missing pieces.

My first source of information was the Zootopia movie. In the midst of the ranger-scout flashback scene, Nick tells Judy, "And so my mother scraped together the money to buy me a brand new uniform."

Two things caught my attention here; number one, Nick says 'My mother' rather than 'My parents'; number two is that his mom had to 'scrape together the money' to buy him a uniform.

Since a scout uniform isn't exactly a big ticket item, I saw that as a pretty fair
indication that there wasn't much money in the house when Nick was growing up. That combined with 'my mother scraped together enough money…' told me Nick Wilde's father was no longer present in the household at the time.

This led me to source number two, the discarded scenes from the 'Shock Collar' version of Zootopia. In one of these sequences, it's revealed that Nick's father did indeed pass away when he was a cub, although the exact details are somewhat sketchy; it's only mentioned in the narration, and the exact nature of how it happened is never revealed. One thing that was shown, and in several storyboards, was that Nick's father had been trying to open a tailor shop in the city to be called Suitopia but hadn't been able to swing a loan. Though it was never stated outright in any of the scenes I saw, I got a very strong vibe that Nick's father, John Wilde was the upstanding fox I described here.

Nick's relationship with his father was based partially on what I saw in the discarded scenes I just described, and partially on a webpage I happened upon while browsing through Facebook—The 10 Best Animal Dads, (or something like that, I forget the exact title.) Much to my surprise, the number one slot was occupied by the red fox; a daddy fox often takes the lead in teaching his cubs to hunt and will stay behind to watch the kids while mom is out foraging for food.

And that brings me around to Nick's relationship with his mother. I based this on some things I read on the Twitter pages of Rich Moore and Byron Howard (Zootopia's two directors.) Yes, Nick was an only child, and yes, he has an 'issue' with his mother. (How it was that he came to be an only child was pure speculation on my part.)

I plan to get into more of Nick's back-story in future chapters. There's a lot more material on his background out there than just what I've referenced so far.
Chapter Summary

Old Fox, New Fox, Red Fox....Uh. silver fox?

(Sometimes old friends ain't all that friendly.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries

"Whoops, come and get it shrimp! Whoops! Too slow, Shorty. Hee!"

"Give that back!"

"Okay dude, you win…psyche! Wah-hahahahaaaaa!"

There were two of them, a zebra and a serval-cat; high school kids…and also gangsta wannabees judging by the hoodies, backwards-turned baseball caps, and pants worn at half-mast; definitely not from the Burrows. Each of them was holding a flat, rectangular cardboard box which every few seconds they would use to taunt the animal confronting them, holding out a carton and then pulling it away at the last second.

"Give that back punk!" the other animal snarled, grabbing for the box the serval had just yanked out of reach.

The pair of homies nearly fell over laughing. It wasn't their opponent's size that they found so amusing, it was his voice; a deep-dish, gravel-strewn basso-profundo that would have been more appropriate to a musk ox than a fennec fox.

"Give 'em back!" Finnick snarled again, brandishing his trademark baseball bat.

"Ho, what are you gonna do with that thing, squirt?" the serval sneered, "Make a pawsickle?"

"I'll show you what I can do with this." the desert fox raged. He started to raise the weapon but
then hesitated. A crowd had begun to gather around him and the homeboys and if he used his bat in front of a dozen witnesses, especially with him being a *fox* species…

Reluctantly, he lowered it again.

"Hey guys, give him back his property." a voice called from the rear of the crowd. "Come on, you had your fun."

"No way, these are OURS!" the zebra brayed.

"Heck they ain't, you stole 'em off my table." Finnick's voice was almost a roar.

"PROVE it…*fox*!" the serval taunted him, spitting out the last word like spoiled fruit. "These puppies belong to us and you're just trying for a sympathy hustle."

"Yeah *fox*, like anyone would be stupid enough." His partner agreed.

"You stole 'em off me!" Finnick insisted, "I HEARD you take 'em."

The two homeboys started laughing again, and this time a few of the onlookers joined in.

"*Heard* us take them!" the zebra kid let out short, derisive bray and looked at his partner, "Can you believe this shrimp, dude?"

"Yeah, like you can believe anything a fox says," The serval agreed, reaching out to give his bud a fist bump.

"Yeah, for sure." The voice from the crowd had become suddenly agreeable, "Everybody knows that *all* foxes lie like rugs."

"What he said," the zebra nodded, poking a thumb over his shoulder at the speaker, "I never met a fox in my life that wasn't a dishonest dirt-bag."

"You got that right," the voice to the rear agreed.

"No kidding," the serval mewled, "Species don't come any lower than foxes."

"Absolutely;" the animal behind him concurred, a bit more easily heard this time; he had moved to the front of the crowd. "Every single one of is a shifty, dishonest crook."

"Yeah!" the zebra almost whooped.

"Right on!" the serval meowed…right before his face crash-dived into the ground. "Every single one…of…*us*…?"

Slack-jawed and trembling the pair of would-be gangers turned slowly around to find themselves face to face with another fox—this one wearing mirrored shades, a police badge clipped to his belt…and a grin that could stretch across a freeway. Standing beside him was a gray-furred bunny, also showing a badge—and also thumping her foot.

"Welllll now, is there anything ELSE you boys would like to put in your mouths while they're open?" Nick Wilde asked them cheerily. (Behind the pair, Finnick was rolling on the ground, laughing himself sick.)

For a second or two, they seemed to deflate, but Nick knew that it wouldn't last; give it minute and one or the other of these jerks would double down; it was the way these poser kids always rolled.
Even if he hadn't caught them picking on his former partner, Nick would still have retained a healthy measure of contempt for the two punks. He must have seen their kind literally hundreds of times in his day—both before and after he'd joined the ZPD. First of all, these slackers weren't real ghetto blasters any more than Finnick was a real elephant; their outfits were a dead giveaway. The serval was sporting a chromed studded wrist band and a gold neck-chain, while the zebra had a Species of Anarchy t-shirt on underneath his hoodie. Real homeboys never mixed hip-hop and gangsta duds…and they never mixed metal-head chrome with homie gold either; it was all or nothing in the ghetto.

Nooo, these two were just another couple of upper-middle class kids who thought if they dressed up as gang-bangers, (and tried to act the part,) they could pass for the real deal. If that was their game, Nick had some news for these two. More than once he and Judy had been required to come to the rescue of a fake homie who'd been dumb enough to pull that act on some real gangers. Nothing made the neighborhood thugZ madder than having some middle-class tweaker show up in the hood, 'acting cool'.

Nick not only knew the type, he also knew the script. At first these two would try to tough it out; they would act defiant, they would make veiled threats; they'd seize on any perceived holes in the fox's case like an osprey on a salmon. And when they were finally down to their last card, they'd remind him that their fathers were important mammals, and he'd better not make THEM mad. When what didn't work, that was when they'd finally give it up—and it would be a catastrophic failure, not a slow collapse.

And so the fox just folded his arms and waited.

He didn't have to wait for very long. All at once the zebra's ears laid back and his finger shot out like a bolt from a crossbow.

"Heyyy, wait a minute dude, that's a ZPD badge!"

In the blink of an eye, his partner was born again.

"Ha! Guess what, sly-boy; you're out of your jurisdiction!" The serval-cat's voice was a triumphant yowl.

Nick said nothing, only nodded over at Judy; legal niceties had always been her specialty.

She responded in her usual fashion, sweet, demure, and moistened with venom.

"Actually…no, if whatever is in those boxes is worth more than 300 smackers." She said this while looking at Finnick, who nodded vigorously, and then she turned back to the serval and zebra, laying a paw on her hip in her classic bunny-cop pose. "In that case, it's a felony and anyone can bust you; it's called a citizen's arrest sweetheart."

(Ahhh, but Nick loved to watch her work this game; sheer poetry it was.)

The zebra started to say something, but then seemed to think better of it—and then everyone's attention was diverted by a stirring at the back of the onlookers.

"Make way please, coming through," a soft voice murmured, and then the crowd parted to let a white-tailed deer and bobcat pass through. Each of them was dressed in green khakis, with a Sam Browne belt and wide-brimmed trooper's hat on his head. Judy recognized the deer immediately, Deputy Sergeant Peter Buckley of the Burrows County Sheriff's Department.

"Hey Pete," she waved.
"Hey Judy," he answered, pushing back the rim of his hat with a finger. "What's going on here?"

By rights that should have cut the pair of would-be 'boyz from da 'hood' off at the knees; instead it seemed to embolden them. Before Judy could say another word, the serval was stabbing an accusing finger at Finnick.

"This dirt-bag fox is trying to rip us off." he said.

That brought another fox-scream from Finnick and Nick got quickly in front of him before he could raise the bat again.

"Take it easy, Mini-Me." he said, muttering out the side of his mouth, "That's exactly what he wants you to do," The Fennec fox glared at him for a second and then lowered the bat and let it fall quietly to the ground.

Judy meanwhile had taken over with the deputies, careful as always to explain things as simply as possible.

"The fennec there says these two kids stole those boxes off his table…"

"That's a lie, lady!" the serval yowled. Finnick tried to say something back, but Nick silenced him with a 'shushing' motion. "Sssss, let them rant Finnick; they'll only end up digging themselves in deeper."

Once again, the desert fox backed off, but he was clearly reaching the end of his tether. Nick would need to wrap this quickly if he wanted to avoid an explosion.

That was when the zebra played right into his paws.

"We never even saw this guy until just now!' he protested, and a long, foxy grin sliced its way around Nick Wilde's muzzle. Like any good police officer, he thoroughly enjoyed watching a suspect trip himself up.

He said, "You never saw him before? Then he never saw those boxes before, am I right?"

The serval took the bait so fast, he almost swallowed it

"Darn straight, dude!"

"Okay-y-y," Nick Wilde was almost jolly, he was enjoying this so much, "In that case, neither one of those boxes would have his scent on them would they?" By way of explanation, he tapped at his nose, and was instantly gratified to see the serval's face fall like a ton of bricks—while the zebra glared at him with an expression that fairly screamed, "Well this is ANOTHER fine mess!"

Nick held out his arms and waved his fingers at the box under the feline's arm.

"Pass that here and let's find out, okay?"

"No way!" the serval held the box away from Nick as if the fox's paws had turned to magma.

"Give him the box, kid...NOW!" The bobcat deputy's ears had turned sideways and his claws were also unsheathed; after listening in silence for a couple of minutes, he'd finally decided that enough was enough.

"When I tell my dad about this…" the serval muttered, and then gave the box to Nick without looking at him.
One whiff was all Nick needed; if he didn't know Finnick's scent by now, he never would. But there were onlookers to convince and so he made show of thoroughly sniffing over the box and then getting a good scent from his former partner before delivering his verdict.

"They're Finnick's" he declared, passing the box back to his old partner…and instantly regretting his mistake. ("Hey how'd you know that fennec's name?") Maybe he'd get lucky and the pair of gangta-posers wouldn't catch it.

"Yeah, and maybe I'll get lucky and find the winning car-raffle ticket in a trash can."

"Finnick?" the zebra seized on the red fox's error like lighting on a steeple. "Hey wait a sec, you dudes KNOW each other!" He turned to the deputies. "There's no scent on those boxes, this fox is just trying to help his bud."

That was what finally pulled the pin; Finnick's claws unsheathed and his lips pulled back exposing his fangs. Nick held his breath but before the little desert-fox could make a move, a new voice entered the fray, low and gravelly with a southbound accent.

"Well I never saw that fennec in my life, but I know his scent is on that there box ...and it's a lot stronger on it than either you or your friend's is, boy."

Nick looked, and saw that another fox had just arrived on the scene, thickset and stocky, with his hair parted in the middle, and a striped apron wrapped around his midsection. He didn't have to guess who it was.

And the deputies didn't need to hear any more. "All right you, give that back to the fennec fox and let's go." Pete Buckley was thrusting a finger at the zebra; incredibly, the kid still wasn't ready to give it up.

"Are you kidding dude, he's another fox!"

Sorry kid, not this time; the air around the deer buck seemed to darken by three shades.

"Yes, and he's also a respected member of this community," He reached down to unclip one his belt holsters. "Now give that box back, son; I'm not asking you again."

The zebra passed the box back to Finnick, mumbling something unpleasant under his breath.

"Okay you two, let's go," said the bobcat.

"You know who my dad is?" the serval demanded.

"Yeah, he's the father of a jerk!" Finnick catcalled through his paws, and Nick Wilde laughed and gave his old partner a thumbs-up; it was good to see the little guy hadn't lost his touch.

"Good one, boy!" the burly fox also laughed as the thieves were frog-marched away. Nick turned and offered him a paw.

"Gideon Grey, I presume?"

"Yeah, that's me." The other fox said, taking the paw and shaking it warmly. "And you must be Nicholas Wilde."

"In the flesh and fur," Nick answered, grinning. "Thanks for helping out."

"Aw, weren't no big deal." Gideon answered with an 'Aw shucks' shrug, nodding over at Finnick,
"Them city boys was wrong and I knowed it soon as I got here. So did Pete and Mac; they weren't fooled nohow by those kids and they'd have busted 'em anyways, sooner or later. All I did was hurry things up a little."

"Well it's a good thing you showed up anyway," Judy said, coming over and patting his arm, "How's business?"

"Doin' really fine Judy." The big fox smiled. He had long since shed any reserve with her over his past 'exploits'. But then his left ear cocked and he looked at his watch, "Listen, I hate to take a rain check," he said, looking up at her again, "but I got to get back to my stall; the bakery truck should be pulling in any second with a whole bunch more pies to unload. Come by though when you're done here; I'll save you each a slice of my Carrots Days Special." He poked a thumb over a shoulder. "I'm over in Row C, space 5. Y'all know what my place looks like."

"I do," Judy promised, "And we'll be there, Gideon."

"Wouldn't miss it," Nick Wilde nodded in agreement.

"See you around, now." The baker fox said, offering final wave, before heading for the exit. All around Nick and Judy, the rest of the crowd was also beginning to break up.

While this was going on, Finnick was trying as best he could to deal with his recovered property—and not having a whole lot of luck. The boxes, which resembled oversized pizza cartons, clearly contained large-mammal items of some kind; easy enough for a serval and a zebra to handle, if you split them one apiece. A fennec trying to handle both at once was another matter; it was almost like a slapstick routine. Every time Finnick tried to pick up the second carton, he'd lose his grip on the first one, (and that was without trying to retrieve his baseball bat.)

"Can we help you with those?" Judy asked, throwing Nick a jaundiced look that the red fox knew he deserved. She was right of course; he should have been the one to make the offer, not her.

"Yeah, thanks." The little desert fox answered, gratefully passing box to Judy…and nearly pitching the other one at Nick. The red fox caught it with little difficulty, but then bobbed the carton and nearly dropped it.

"What the heck?"

"What the heck is right, Nick." Judy Hopps was staring bewildered. Nick Wilde may have had his faults but clumsiness wasn't one of them.

The red fox said nothing, only turned the box over to show her the label.

It featured a Manga image of Gazelle, with lettering underneath—in Japanese characters.

Now Judy nearly dropped her carton, (much to Nick Wilde's barely concealed satisfaction.)

"Finnick?" she said, "You're the one selling those Gazelle Japanese Tour Shirts?"

"Yeah," the fennec responded brightly, "You want one?"

"Yes, but not for ourselves," Nick told him, "We promised to pick one up for a friend of ours back in the city. Do you have any in…Mmmm, what was that size again? Oh yeah, do you have any in size TXL?"

Finnick thought it over for a second before answering.
"Hm, dunno Nick, but we should have something close. Have to check when we get back to the van." His tone was as tepid as tap-water, a fact that did not escape the red fox's notice, (or Judy's, judging by the look on her face.)

The little desert fox clearly had an issue with him—and Nick thought he knew what it was. But then something else occurred to him; Finnick had said 'we should have', rather than 'I should have'. Somewhere along the line, he'd picked up a new partner.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised," Nick told himself, annoyed at the twinge of jealousy pricking his pride, "Finnick never was one for operating solo. I wonder who the new guy is."

Judy's voice quickly yanked him from his reverie.

"Hello-o-o-oo, ground control to Major Nick, are you coming or not?" She and Finnick had started on their way

"Oops, sorry Carrots." He answered and hurried to catch up.

At first it was hard to tell where they were going, Finnick was taking them back to his van by way of footpath that skirted the rear of the vendors' stalls. He clearly wanted to get there as quickly as possible and taking the midway would mean stopping to answer questions. ("Are you the one selling those shirts?" "Where are you located?" "When are you opening?" Etc.)

Of course, taking this route meant having to dodge rocks and power cables.

It was just around the third bend that they spotted Finnick's van. The first thing Nick noticed was, "Hey you got the driver's door repainted."

Finnick had lost the original door after being sideswiped by a hit-and-run in the Acorn Heights neighborhood of Savanna Central. He'd found a replacement at Pig-n-Pull easily enough, but hadn't possessed the capital to have the artwork restored. And so things had remained, right up until the moment he and Nick had gone their separate ways. From what the red-fox could see now, whoever had repainted the door had done a superlative job; they'd even managed to 'age' it so the door matched the rest of the van almost perfectly.

"Yeah," was all that Finnick said, not looking back at the red fox; no doubts now; he was visibly out of sorts with his former partner.

That was when Nick became aware of something else; on the other side of the van, someone was playing a guitar, a twelve string by the sound of it.

Whoever it was, they were good; playing with deft, sure paw. No sooner did this thought stray across Nick's mind than Finnick's new partner. (He assumed that's who it was,) hit a wrong note. Barely missing a beat, he pulled back and started over again, this time getting it right.

Then a scent caught Nick by the nostrils and he drew up short for a second.

Whoops, here came another surprise he should have been expecting; Finnick's new sidekick, whoever he was, was another red fox.

When they came round the front of the van however, Nick saw that he'd been only halfway correct in his assessment—right species, wrong color phase. Finnick's new partner was a fox all right, but a silver, not a red.

He was also only a kid, a young fox of 13, perhaps 14 years of age. He was dressed in cargo-pants,
held up with suspenders rather than a belt, a checked shirt with rolled-up sleeves and a denim vest, topped off with an oversized apple-cap; the neo-mewsies look that was becoming popular with so many of the kids back in Zootopia. The only thing missing was the obligatory red bandanna encircling his neck.

What really caught Nick's attention, however were the subtler cues. Whereas the Zebra and Serval who'd attempted to rob Finnick had been FAKE home-boys, this kid had 'street' practically written all over him with a marking pen. At the instant of his approach, one ear had swiveled backwards, and his nose had elevated slightly to sniff the air, a discreet move that only another fox could have detected.

"He knows there's someone here, but he's not letting on." Nick thought to himself.

Any further musings on his part were cut off by Finnick's growl of exasperation.

"Hey kid, you 'psed to be keepin' an EYE on things."

"Oops, sorry DF." The youngster responded awkwardly—much to Nick Wilde's surprise; he would have expected something smooth and snarky from a kid like this one.

"DF?" Judy asked, lifting an ear.

"Desert Fox." Finnick explained as the young fox set his guitar aside and turned around.

And now Nick saw where the bandanna had gone; the kid had been wearing it wrapped around his face like a blindfold. In a quick, neat move, he whipped it away and replaced it with a pair of red-mirrored Gargrowls sunglasses.

"He doesn't want me to see his eyes." Nick realized at once. He wasn't surprised, all foxes are wary in the presence of a police officer. He had done the same thing many a time, back in his street-hustling days.

"Only, how did the kid know I was a cop? Aaggggh, grrr… riiight."

He had forgotten to put his badge away, it was still there, clipped to his belt.

"Hey, you got 'em back!" the young fox said, pointing at the boxes Nick and Judy were holding. He didn't seem to have expected a successful outcome, (and why should he? Nick Wilde wouldn't have, when he was that age.)

"Yeah, can you just leave 'em on the table there?" Finnick said, speaking to Nick and Judy and then turning to speak to the kid. "Conor, this is my old buddy I told you 'bout, Nick Wilde…and the bunny there is his partner, Judy Hopps. Nick…Judy? This here's my new partner, Conor Lewis."

Nick immediately felt his ears go up. Given the standoffish response he'd gotten so far, Finnick was being surprisingly warm with his introductions.

But not nearly as convivial—or as unexpected—as the youngster's response; Conor's face seemed to light up like a storefront Christmas display.

"Whoa, you're the fox DF is always talking about? Cool!"

He leaped off his stool and bounded over0

"Gimme four, big guy!" he said, holding up a paw for high one. Nick returned the gesture but
privately, he didn't know what to make of all this. To hear the kid talk, you'd have thought Finnick had been singing his praises to the heavens. Why the heck would he have done that, and then given his old partner the cold shoulder just now?

There was another thing as well; this Conor kid had some serious calluses on his paws. When Nick returned the four, it had felt like he was laying some skin on a belt sander. And while there were no scars present that the red fox could see, he couldn't shake the feeling that this boy had been in some serious fights in his day; he was street all right, no question and no doubt about it.

Every fox has secrets, it comes with the species; no one knew that better than Nicholas Piberius Wilde. But this kid seemed to have more than the usual measure; that was one other thing the red fox's instincts were telling him.

And he wasn't so sure he wanted to know what those secrets were.

Conor meanwhile had moved on to Judy. From what Nick could see, she seemed quite taken with the boy, offering a fist bump which he immediately returned.

"So you're a musician?" she asked, nodding at the guitar stacked next to the stool where he'd been sitting.

"Ahhh, I'm working on it." The young fox answered, fanning a pawlm. His accent was Zoo Yorkish with maybe a portion of something further to the northeast thrown in.

Judy smiled; so did Nick. The kid's modesty was an honest assessment of himself, not false humility, unusual for a kid his age.

Then Finnick spoke up again, reminding the fox and bunny why they were here.

"Say Conor, these two are looking for a shirt …ahh what was that size again, Judy?"

Once again, the fennec-fox was shutting Nick out. The two of them were going to have to talk but not with Judy and the kid still here.

"Size TXL," she said.

Conor Lewis frowned, a long fox-grimace that seemed to stretch all the way to his ears, and then his head moved slowly from side to side.

"Ahhhh, I'm gonna to look that up. I'm not down on size TXL; 'scuse me a sec."

He dropped to all fours and scooted inside the van.

"All the shirt sizes are in Japanese." Finnick explained, "We got most of the equivalent sizes nailed, but not all of 'em."

"Oh right," Judy nodded, and Nick Wilde understood. No, they wouldn't have, and Benjamin Clawhauser's size was an odd one to say the least.

Just then, Conor returned, toting a laptop underneath his arm.

Nick felt his ears go up again, and this time his head was also tilting to one side. The laptop computer the kid was carrying was no wafer thin student or business model. It was as thick as a concrete slab and was built out of…what the heck, was that carbon fiber?

"A mil-spec laptop; where the heck did he get THAT thing?" the red fox had to wonder. He was
about to pose the question to Finnick, when the kid set the computer down on a table and opened it.

On the back of the screen was a sticker with the logo of a hedgehog-type animal with a sunburst for quills, and beside it the words 'Consolidated Echidna.' Beneath this sticker was a smaller one in neon green, reading simply 'Lot 457'.

Okay, now everything made sense; utility companies also used bombproof laptops. Nick had seen that for himself once; an ibex had crashed his car into a power pole in the Rainforest District, and he and Judy had been summoned to direct traffic. And power companies were constantly upgrading their computer systems and selling off the older stuff.

"Stop being so dang suspicious Wilde." The fox growled silently, giving himself a mental kick, "For crying out loud, he's your own kind!"

Just then, the young silver fox let out a yip. "Okay, got it. What color do you want?"

"Do you have any in red?" Judy asked.

"Yep, hold on." Conor said and disappeared inside the van again.

"Hustling little guy." Judy observed, and then immediately looked as if she wanted to face-pawlm herself. "Oops, I didn't mean hustling like…that is, I wasn't…"

"We know what you mean," Nick and Finnick both grinned. Just then Conor returned with the t-shirt, carrying it in a bundle over his head. (To a fox his size it was as big as a mainsail.)

"How much?" Judy asked, taking the shirt and wisely setting it on the table for the moment; it was king-size for a rabbit as well.

Finnick smiled and flipped a palm back and forth. "Ahhh, no charge this time." He said, and Nick had the distinct impression that if it had been he who'd asked the question, the charge would have been full price and then some.

"How about you guys, you want one too?" It was Conor asking, and Nick and Judy abruptly looked at each other. They'd been concentrating so hard on getting one of the shirts for Benjamin Clawhauser, they'd never stopped to think about picking one up for themselves.

In Judy Hopps' case, it was a no brainer.

"Oh yes, have you got one in blue, small-mammal small?"

"Plenty," said Conor and then looked at Nick, who couldn't help smiling; NOW the kid was hustling-hustling; if he didn't buy a shirt for himself after all that, he'd look like the world's biggest party pooper. (Not that it mattered; he wanted one anyway.)

"Black for me," he said, "Small mammal, medium."

"Coming right up."

When the young fox returned with the shirts—sorry, no freebies this time—Judy had another question for him.

"Conor, I just have to ask," she said, "When we got here you were playing the guitar blindfolded; how come?"

"Ah, that's just a trick Eric taught me." He answered, as if it were no big deal. "Eric Roy, I mean.
He runs the Peace Rock Guitar Co-Operative, back in Zootopia. I work there on a part-time apprenticeship. Anyway, Eric thought playing strictly by feel and ear would help me get down on the twelve string; I gotta admit, it's helping, a lot.” He nodded at the guitar, adding, "And I really want to get dialed in on the twelve; I love the sound."

"I see," Judy said, and then she asked, "Do you also play electric guitar?"

Nick couldn't help smiling; he knew where she was going with this.

"Sure do," the silver fox answered, pointing with two fingers at a guitar case, stashed halfway under one of the tables, (and secured to one of the legs with a cable-lock, Nick Wilde couldn't help noticing.)

Judy craned her neck and then nodded approvingly, "You know my sister Erin sings and plays bass guitar. Maybe the two of you could play together sometime."

Nick Wilde felt his ears go up and point at each other again. Ohhh-kay, so she wasn't taking quite the tack he'd anticipated.

"Careful Carrots," He told her silently. I've got a feeling Erin wouldn't like that idea." As a matter of fact—and he would never say this to Judy—when he'd first met his partner's younger sister, he'd gotten a very strong vibe that she didn't like foxes, period.

"So are you playing in the talent show, Conor?" his partner was asking, finally taking the conversation in the direction Nick had expected it to go. And now it was the younger fox's ears that turned into skewed steeples.

"Talent show?" he asked.

"Yes," Judy told him, "there's a talent show going on down at the main stage, tonight and tomorrow night."

The young silver fox seemed to come alive once again.

"Wow, coolness. Are the sign-ups still open, do you know?"

The bunny sucked at a corner of her mouth.

"Mmmm, prrrr-obably—but you better hurry up if you want to get in on it." She waved in the direction of the stage. "If there are any slots still open, they won't last long."

Conor said nothing to this, only looked at Finnick with a beseeching expression. The desert fox sighed and rolled a paw in the air, as if to say, 'all right, go ahead.'

"I'll be right back…promise." The young fox told him, holding up three fingers like a ranger scout.

And then he scooted under the table and sprinted off down the aisle-way.

Chapter End Notes

Yep, HE'S back....but this time I think I got him right.
"Okay, yeah that's good. Come on down Nick."

Judy watched as Nick Wilde slid down from the awning, ignoring the ladder Finnick had provided and spiraling his way earthward around an aluminum support pole, swinging by a single paw.

"Showoff," Judy muttered under her breath, smiling nonetheless. That was Nick for you; go in style, or go home.

"That all of it, Finnick?" the red fox asked after he hit the ground, casually flicking a spot of dust from his shoulder.

"That all of it, Finnick?" the red fox asked after he hit the ground, casually flicking a spot of dust from his shoulder.

"Yeah, that's everything." his former partner replied, glancing over at Judy for a second; she was the one who'd gotten them into this after all.

No sooner had Conor Lewis departed, than the bunny had suggested Finnick allow her and Nick to help him finish with the set-up.

"It's kind of my fault the kid left." She'd said, and the desert fox hadn't tried to argue.

Actually there hadn't been all that much left to do. Bring out some signs and a sandwich board, help deploy the awning, attach the banner, (the job Nick had just completed) and they were done. The whole thing had taken less than ten minutes.

Judy had to admit, this thing was a marvel of efficiency. Flip up the signs, open the sandwich board, pull two strings to unfurl the banner, and Voila! From a plain vanilla dealer's table, purpose unknown, to THE place to get your Gazelle Japanese tour shirt—and it could all be done in less time than it takes to grab a soda from the fridge.

"It was really nice of you to let Conor go, so he could register for the talent show." She said to
Finnick after they got the ladder stowed.

The big-eared fox just waved a pawlm.

"Had to do it, Judy; if Conor gets a spot, he's gonna crush it."

"He's that good, huh?" Nick Wilde asked, not exactly skeptical, only curious.

"Oh yeah," Finnick was nodding and looking oddly abashed, "and I aughta know, it's kind of how we met."

It had happened while Nick was attending the Police Academy. Strapped for cash and at a loss for any new moneymaking ideas, Finnick had decided to try running the Pawpsickle hustle on his own.

"I managed to get hold of a Jumbo Pawp okay, but after that…"

After that, when Finnick had set up shop at their usual spot in front of the Lemming National Bank, everything seemed to be going hunky-dory…at first. But when the clock in the plaza chimed 5 o'clock and the bank employees came trundling out the door, they had walked right by the pawpsicle stand without even so much as a sideways glance.

"It was like I'd become the invisible fennec, Nick." Finnick was shaking his head, "no one would even look at me."

In desperation the little desert fox had launched into their old pitch, "Pawpsicles! Get your pawpsicles."

"Didn't work," he sighed, "Shoulda known that it wouldn't, with a voice like I got. The lemmings not only didn't stop and buy anything, a few of 'em even shied away from me. I didn't know what I was gonna do Nick; it was hot out that day, and any second the pawps were gonna start melting on me. But then…"

But then a young silver fox had come along, toting an acoustic six-string and parked himself on the bench next to where Finnick was working.

The desert fox had immediately bristled.

"Hey, buzz off kid. I'm workin' this side of the square."

Paying the fennec no more mind than the lemmings had done, Conor had twisted a tuning peg on his guitar and settled down to play a smoking take on the old Van Howlin' cover, Ice Cream Mammal.

And something amazing had happened.

"The lemmings not only came back Nick." Finnick grinned as he recalled it, "They came flocking back—and a whole bunch of other folks, besides. Before I knew it, I was all sold out. Whoa, I couldn't believe it."

And that was when Conor had looked at him and grinned. "Hey, whaddaya know, it WORKED!"

"He almost sounded embarrassed that he'd pulled it off." Finnick waved a paw over at Conor's twelve-string. "I was grateful, but I couldn't help feelin' a little suspicious, y'know? Kid just showin' up outta nowhere like that. So I asked him, "You want a cut boy, is that it?"
Conor had immediately shaken his head. "Nope, that's your score …but can I call you sometime? I run across some good stuff on the net every once in a while."

"So I gave the kid my number," Finnick went on, "more to get rid of him than anything else. I figured what the heck? If he starts being a pest I can always block his calls later on."

In fact, by the time the call from Conor finally came, Finnick had nearly forgotten about him.

"There's an estate sale going on down in the Palm District this weekend.\] The kid had said, "I dunno, but it might be a decent score; the owners are running it themselves and I don't think they know what they got, at least not all of it. You wanna go check it out?"

"I almost told him to get lost." Finnick rumbled with amusement as he remembered the call, "Cept I didn't have nothin' else goin' on an' I was low on cash again. So I said okay and who'da thunk it? The kid was right; it turned out to be a pretty good score—not a great one, but a good one—and we been working together ever since.\] He nodded towards his van, "and as you seen on the other side over there, it's been a pretty decent partnership. I even got myself an apartment now. Nothing tony, but it sure beats living out of my ride."

"Yeah." Said Nick, "About your van; who DID that repaint job? Looks like they nailed it to me."

"Bouda and Sons Paint and Body Shop." The little desert fox answered, "They're a new outfit, run by a family of hyenas out of South Savanna Central. I got a really good deal, coz they'd just opened their doors, and wanted to get some word of mouth goin'."

Judy Hopps nodded slowly and solemnly. Like foxes, hyenas were a species with a less than savory reputation—to put it mildly. At least one Afurican legend had it that a kit born while a hyena is crying will likely grow up to become a thief, that's how bad it was.

And needless to say a species with that kind of baggage could advertise until they were blue in the ears and not attract any customers. No, if a hyena wanted to kickstart his business the only way to do it was to SHOW the quality of his work, and to as many folks as possible.

"So how'd you find out about that shop, mini-me?" It was Nick asking.

"Don't call me that," the fennec answered laying back his ears for a second, "Actually Conor found it; he's good at spotting stuff online. He's the one who found the T-shirts, too."

Judy watched Nick's ears standing up again, and felt her own do the same.

"You mean this whole thing was HIS idea?" the red fox asked, waving an incredulous paw around at the tables.

Finnick looked at him for second as he'd just crawled out from under a rock.

"He found out about those shirts Nicky, but seeing if we could pry some loose to sell over here was my idea." He spoke with the taut patience of someone long accustomed to not getting credit when credit was due.

Finnick had put the proposition to Gazelle's manager thusly; let us have a block of those unsold shirts to try and sell over here in Zootopia. If we get the buyers, then you'll know they're an item that'll move and you can bring the rest of them over to sell yourselves—or else sell them through.

"And if they don't move, move, then it's our loss not yours," the fennec fox had said, by way of conclusion. It had seemed like the classic offer you couldn't refuse…but Gazelle's manager had
refused it anyway, politely but with no explanation given.

That was where Conor Lewis had come in, suggesting that Finnick let him try to go over the manager's head and make an appeal directly to Gazelle.

"I thought the kid was nuts." Finnick was saying, "How the heck was HE supposed to get in touch with someone like Gazelle? And even if he could, her manager had already nixed the idea, so why would she go for it? But we had nothing to lose by trying, so I told him 'okay, go ahead.' Two weeks later we got a letter from Gazelle—I mean from the lady herself, not from anyone on her staff, giving us the green light."

Yes they had, but then the real work had begun. Getting permission to acquire the shirts and actually getting their paws on them had been two very different things. They'd needed to arrange packing, arrange shipping, get the shirts through customs, etc. And while Gazelle had given Finnick and Conor the go ahead for to acquire the shirts that was the only thing she'd given them. Like any successful entertainer, she could be a hard-nosed business mammal when the situation called for it. She'd let the shirts go, but NOT on consignment; it was cash up front or forget it. Luckily, the two of them had had enough left over from a previous score to cover the costs…but only just.

"It was almost every penny we had." The desert fox's ears shivered as he remembered, "I don't mind telling you, I was scared. If these shirts didn't sell, I'd be back on the street again."

"But they are selling?" Judy asked. Even to her it sounded like a 'dumb bunny' question, but given what was at stake…well, how could she NOT ask it?

Finnick just laughed, that deep, kettledrum chortle she remembered from their second encounter.

"Can't keep 'em in the boxes, bunny." He said. "Last week at the Meerkat Market, Conor had to bust up a fight between two kids who wanted the last shirt in small-mammal large. By then we'd already made our money back and then some." Without warning his eyes locked on Nick. "And yeah, we filled out the all tax forms…and all the other paperwork, too."

It was meant as a jab; Finnick's face was that of a wicked imp. But instead of rolling his eyes or growling, Nick let out a long breath of air and a yoke seemed to lift itself up off his shoulders.

Judy Hopps felt her nose begin to twitch again, and then it was twitching even faster when Finnick's expression softened, and his face became almost…sympathetic?

And then he turned to her.

"Say Judy, I got something I need to talk over in private with Nick. Can you give us a few minutes?"

It was phrased nicely enough, but Judy would have really HAD to be a dumb bunny not to get the desert fox's underlying message; 'no' would not be an acceptable answer.

"Sure Finnick, no problem." she said, and then offered Nick a parting shot dipped in lye-cured honey. "I need to go find the kids anyway…before they wreck the place, remember?"

(THAT would teach Mr. Slick not to pique her curiosity right before Finnick sent her away. But in fact, although Judy couldn't know it, at least one of her siblings WAS about to do some damage.)

When she had passed through space between the stalls, Nick opened his mouth to speak, but Finnick immediately held up a paw for silence while pointing with the other to one of his oversized
ears.

The red fox quickly got the point; if the fennec-fox could still hear Judy, she could also hear HIM; the two of them were about equal in that regard. While they waited for the bunny to pass out of earshot Finnick took a seat in one of the chairs behind the table, and invited Nick to do the same. Almost at the moment they sat down, he seemed to decide the coast was clear and began talking.

"Much as I appreciated your help back there with those punks—and thanks, by the way—I think you noticed I didn't look all that happy to see you again, Nick."

"I noticed," was all the red fox said, grateful that he was wearing a shirt with an open collar. (Otherwise, Finnick might have seen him tugging at it with a finger.)

The little fox leveled a finger of his own.

"That's right, and you know why?" he asked—and then answered his own question. "You avoid me like rabies for almost two years, won't return my phone calls, never answer my texts, ignore my e-mails, and then you show up here tryin' to act like nothing's different." He lifted his up his muzzle by an inch-and-a-half, "An' Mini-Me? Well at least you came up with something different for a change."

Nick fidgeted in his chair for second and looked away; when he looked back again, Finnick's expression had softened once more.

"Only now I think I understand, Nick," he said, "but I gots to hear it from you; tell me the truth. Is the reason you been avoiding me coz you didn't want to take a chance on maybe having to haul me in?"

Nick felt the air rushing slowly out of him; it seemed like enough to fill a blimp. His former partner hadn't exactly nailed it but as the saying goes, it was close enough for government work,

"Yes…and no. That's part of it Finnick, but that part's even worse than you think. About a month after I reported for duty at Precinct One, I heard through the grapevine that Big Chief Buffalo Nickel was thinking about having me bring you on board as a Confidential Informant."

"No!" the little fennec gasped.

Nick immediately raised his paws.

"Easy Finnick, you know I'd never expose you to that kind of risk." He tried to speak reassuringly, leaving unsaid what both of them knew. Sahara Square, the desert fox's home turf was also the bailiwick of one Rocco Peccari, aka The Red Pig, a hot-tempered crime boss who harbored a particular loathing for snitches.

"Okay Nick, now I really understand." Finnick said, but then cocked his head and gave him a one-eyed look. "Only you said 'part of it' just now; what's the other reason you been keeping your distance?"

Instead of answering right away, Nick got up from his chair, standing at the edge of the table and looking into the middle distance with his paws clasped behind his back. Had Judy not departed she would have recognized this stance, it was the same one he'd assumed while reminiscing about his father.

"Because, I wanted to make a clean break from street hustling, Finnick." He finally said "The last time tried it, I didn't..." the words ended in a choked grimace and a rush of memory.
"How could you, Nick?"

"Nick," the fennec-fox told him gently, "Nick, you didn't have no choice..."

The red fox spun around as if on a dime.

"Yes, I did Finnick. I could have chosen to tell Robyn the truth...and I didn't." He looked away for a second, sniffed, and then straightened up again. "And now I'm going to have to deal with that choice for the rest of my life."

Finnick slid off his chair and came over.

"Nick, that was a long time ago; an' even if you had told Robyn the truth you'd have only been postponing it for what, three years tops?" He reached up, laying a paw on his old partner's arm. "Now that you finally made good on your promise, ain't it time you quit beatin' yourself up over her an' moved on?"

The red-fox looked at him over a shoulder and sighed.

"You're not saying anything I haven't said to myself at least a thousand times, Finnick. But it just doesn't work that way; it seems like every time I think I'm finally over her, something happens to pull me back in." He felt his shoulders sag as if in defeat. "More than anything, I wish I could let her go, but honestly I don't know how anymore."

"Okay, Nick." The desert fox told him quietly. "I said my piece and I won't say no more."

The red fox nodded and held out a paw.

"Still friends?"

"Was we ever anything else?" the desert fox asked, taking it in a firm grasp. But then his paw pulled away and morphed into a pointing finger. "But you call me 'mini-me' again, an' the deal's off."

Nick immediately raised a paw while putting the other one over his heart.

"Never again Finnick, I promise." He said, and then crinkled his eyes mischievously. "Is little toot-toot still okay?"

The desert fox winced as if his former partner had just dropped a particularly bad pun.

"Agggggh, grrrrr. You ain't never gonna change are you? No, an' especially don't ever call me that in front of Conor."

"I won't, I won't," Nick told him, getting serious again. He had the distinct impression that Finnick's attitude went well beyond simply not wanting to be embarrassed in front of a kid.

And speaking of that kid...

"Shouldn't Conor be back by now?" he asked.

Finnick airily waved a paw. "He'll make it back in time Nicky; he always does. That boy ain't never been afraid to take on his share of the load."

He said this while looking straight at Nick, but it was meant as compliment, not an admonition; back in the day when they'd been partners the red fox had always been more than willing to
shoulder his part of the burden too. That time in Jerry Jumbeaux's, when they'd first met Judy Hopps was a good example. The second they'd disappeared around the corner and out of the bunny cop's sight, Nick had insisted on helping to carry the Jumbo Pop and refused to take, 'I got this' for an answer.

"That's good to hear Finnick." Nick nodded approvingly, "Conor seems like a pretty sharp kid."

"Sharper'n a diamond blade, Nicky," Finnick was grinning from ear to ear. "When I took off after those punks who tried to rob me, I didn't need to tell him to stay put. He knew it for himself."

Nick's ears and eyebrows both shot upwards.

"Okay, that's impressive."

One of the favorite tactics of street hoods was make a grab off a vendor's table and while he's off chasing you, your partners come in and make the real score. Nick knew that scam of course, every good street hustler did. That Conor Lewis also knew it was no big deal. What was a big deal was that the young fox hadn't forgotten it in the heat of the moment and taken off after the thieves along with Finnick. Instead he'd stayed behind to guard the van—and all on his own initiative.

Yeah, it was impressive all right; kids his age weren't supposed to possess that kind of self-discipline.

And come to think of it, neither did this one, not entirely.

"Of course, then he decided to stand guard on your van while practicing his guitar and wearing a blindfold," Nick reminded the fennec dryly.

Finnick winced again, but his time he laughed.

"Okay, maybe not a diamond blade, only a scalpel. Still, he's a good kid and he thinks the world of you."

"Yeah, I kind of noticed that," the red fox answered, a little uneasily, "How come? I never met him before in my life. What's so special about me?"

Finnick's eyes widened, first in shock, then in outrage.

"All right you, who are you an' what'd you do with the REAL Nick Wilde?"

Nick reeled back in confusion.

"What the…?"

"The real Nick Wilde ain't never been that modest in his life." The desert fox was glaring up at him with a fang showing and his paws on his hips. "Out with it; where is he?"

Now it was Nick's turn to look pained.

"Oh har-har; don't quit your day job, Finnick. Okay seriously, what is it with Conor and me? Is it because of the Nighthowler business again?" He wondered why he hadn't thought of that in the first place.

But Finnick only smiled.

"No, it's coz of that thing you was talkin' 'bout just now, walking away from the street life an'
becoming not just an honest fox but a police officer." Growing serious for a second, he shook his head. "You got no idea how much the kid admires you for that Nick; calls you a role model for all foxes, says if you can play it straight the rest of us can too."

Nick looked away from Finnick for a second, confused by the odd sensation of heat rising up through his cheeks and into his ears, "A role model...ME? I'm nobody's role model; I'm just a regular fox, doing the best I can."

But them something else occurred to him; 'the rest of US' the boy had said—as if he too were attempting to turn over new leaf.

He looked at Finnick again…and it must have been a penetrating look, because the desert fox came straight off the blocks with what he said next.

"That's pretty much all I know about him, Nick," He told the red fox quickly—a little too quickly. "We only work together off and on and we got a deal, him and me; when we ain't working together, he stays out of my business and I stay out of his."

Nick's ears fell downwards by half an inch and he sighed inwardly, a little disappointed. Having anticipated his former partner's next question, Finnick had just moved to pre-empt it—and it had been a completely unnecessary move; he should have known the red fox better than that. Nick Wilde had never been one to pry, and in any case he wasn't about to ask about Conor's parents. If the answer turned out to be that the kid didn't have any, then he might be required to take action as an officer of the law.

And that was the mother of all non-starters as far as Nick Wilde was concerned; though he had never 'been there-done that' himself, he knew perfectly well what happens when a young fox is put into foster-care. It was a fate he'd never wish on another member of his own species, certainly not the boy who had just become Finnick's new partner. It would be the betrayal of not one but TWO other foxes.

Time to make a graceful exit, he decided. And fortunately, an opening was just about to present itself.

"Uhhhm excuse us?" a voice queried from off to the side of where he and Finnick were talking.

They turned and saw a pair of high-school bunnies standing at the table.

"It this where they're selling those Gazelle T-shirts?" the boy bunny asked; he had dun-colored fur and a narrow face.

"We be open in about another 15 minutes." Finnick told him, and then to Nick he said, "I hate to brush you off Nicky, but..."

"No problem Finnick I understand," the raid fox answered. "Judy's going to be wondering what's taking me so long anyway. If you get a chance though, come by later this evening about 7:30 and catch her sister Erin in the talent show."

"I'll be there if we done sellin' Nick." The fennec-fox promised, and then he grinned, "But now you got to promise ME to come see Conor if he gets a spot. Deal?"

"Deal," said the red fox, offering a paw.
Chapter Summary

The irresistible force meets the immovable object--only we're not quite sure which is which

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction**

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**Part One:**

**Fuel**

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**Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries**

(Continued…Pt. 7)

"Eeeyyeahh, gotcha bay-bay!"

Conor Lewis was whooping and throwing a fist in the air as he headed away from the sign-up table. He hadn't merely lucked out, he'd *made* out—like a bandit! Not two minutes before his arrival, another one of the talent show participants had cancelled, leaving open a precious Saturday evening space.

It could not have been more perfect if it had been a boon from heaven. Not only had the young fox sewn up a prime-time slot, but if he and Finnick hadn't sold all the t-shirts by then, it was never going to happen.

It was sheer luck too that Conor had brought along not only his electric six, (which he'd almost opted to leave behind,) but also his pedalboard and all his karaoke disks; the choice of tunes to play was wide open.

Strolling along the midway in the direction of Finnick's van, the young silver fox began whistling the melody from one of his favorite guitar piece; it seemed to fit the moment perfectly.

"When I feel I'm over-reacting, and I'm trying too hard,
If I feel I might need to…get out in the country…my friend."

Conor had always loved the song, 'Racing in A', but only now was he learning to truly appreciate it. This was his first time out in the country, (unless you counted Granite Point, and he didn't count that for fill dirt,) and it was just like the lyrics said; here was a place to drop your troubles, unwind, and clean out your head. Ohhhh, but the Burrows was so different from everywhere else he'd been,
easygoing and laid-back, with none of the hard, electric energy he knew from back in Zootopia, and especially Zoo York City.

Hmmm maybe he should perform Racing in A at the show tomorrow night. No, no 'maybe' about it, that was the song, done and done. He wondered for minute if he could talk Finnick into staying over through Sunday. If the t-shirt sales went as expected, that might be doable.

He stopped and felt his ears stand up at a sound wafting through the air.

Well, speak of the devil-horns; someone, somewhere was getting seriously down on a bass guitar, and it was a bassline the young silver fox recognized, 'Fursonal Cheeses' by Depeche Mole.

Conor stopped and cocked his head. Whoever was playing that bass, they were kicking it… really kicking it. Only where was the music coming from? Wait a sec, that old red barn over there? Yeah that was the place.

For a second the young fox hesitated. He had promised Finnick he'd be right back, but… ahh, how long could a quick look-see take? Yeah, one quick look and then back to the van.

No sense trying the front door; he could see that one was a non-starter from fifty yards away, held shut a chain and padlock worthy of a city gate. No worries, there had to be some other way inside; that bass wasn't jamming on itself.

If the unseen bass player had bothered to close the door after entering the barn, Coor might never have found it—and the Carrot Days Festival might have ended very differently for both him and the phantom bassist.

But when the young silver fox scooted around the side of the barn, he found the door not merely open but hanging open. Quickly and quietly, he slipped inside.

There were lights on inside the barn, but it was still pretty dim compared to the exterior. He'd need to give his eyes time to adjust before moving on.

While Conor waited for his vision to come up to speed, the bass player shifted gears and changed songs. It was another tune he recognized; Mystery Achievement by the Purrtenders, another one with a strong bass line.

And this time there were vocals to go with the instrumentals.

"Mystery acheeeeeeeeeiveemennnnt….
Don't breathe down my neck, yeah."

Conor felt his ears prickle up a second time. It was a girl playing the bass—close to his age by the sound of her voice—and day-ang, this kid had some PIPES, Annie Lynninix, Anne Wildeson, and whoever had sung the vocals on Pig Floyd's The Great Gig in the Sky, all rolled into one.

He decided that Finnick could live without him for just another minute or two, and began to thread his way between the tractors and towards the source of the music at far end of the barn.

When he finally made his way through to the front, the young fox found himself in a dark corner, over on the left side of the enclosure. Leaning back against a support column, he settled down on his haunches to watch the action.

Yep, the bass player was a girl all tight and she was his age too; she was also a rabbit and a very pretty one. (Even to himself, Conor knew better than to call a bunny cute.)
"Dangit why couldn't you be vixen?" the young fox asked her silently, immediately wondering where the heck THAT question had come from. That was when the young rabbit turned slightly on her heel and he got a good look at her eyes.

When he saw her, Conor didn't know whether to laugh or groan; why the heck would anyone want to do that to her face? It was like trying to improve a Van Gopher painting with a marking pen. What the heck, was she was trying for the emo-look? Well if she was, then she was way overdoing it the young fox swiftly decided; she should have only accented her eyes with black, not turned them into empty skull sockets.

Meanwhile the bunny had finished up on Mystery Achievement and was tuning up for another number. Conor felt the urge to get going again but managed to hold it in check.

He saw her count off a beat by snapping her fingers, 1…2…3… and then she launched into a tune that the young fox not only knew, but knew how to play, Red Barchetta by Brush.

As he listened to her performance Conor began to move his fingers over the strings and frets of an invisible guitar, unaware of what he was doing. He didn't know what was more surprising, an emo-girl playing a classic-rock tune or an emo girl playing a song that was more or less upbeat. (Of course Red Barchetta was also a tune about sticking it to the system, so it had that much going for it at least.) Well, whatever the bunny's reasons for picking that song, she was killing it on the vocals again. And now he saw that she was playing a five string bass, a fairly new one by the look of it. Conor was impressed; you didn't see many Rickenbarkers in that configuration, and you didn't see practically any kids that girl's age who knew how to play a five.

Dang, but he wished he had his Strat with him. Was she also in the talent show, he wondered?

When she finished Conor wanted to applaud, but somehow managed to restrain himself. (Why he felt the need to restrain himself, the young silver fox had no idea.)

Just then he heard the sound of a hunting horn and felt a buzzing at his hip. He shut his eyes and grimaced; that horn meant he had an incoming text—from Finnick no doubt. "Hey Kid, Where ARE You?"

He pulled out the phone and looked at the screen. The message header read. "Stop Premature Shedding For Good With This 100% Natural Product.'

He growled silently and deleted the message.

When he looked up again, the emo bunny was right in his face.

"Hey you bushy-tailed creep, where do you think you get off, spying on me like that?"

Conor reeled backwards, nearly tripping over his own tail. Where the heck had SHE come from?

But then he quickly recovered. "Hey it's your own fault for crushing it like that." He said, trying his best to be diplomatic. "Conor Lewis." He added, offering her a paw.

Erin looked at the paw as if it were holding a mushy black banana, and then put her paws on her hips. "Don't give me that, Shifty. I saw you; you were practically slobbering all over the floor."

Conor blinked, and then stared, and then like a tent peg coming loose in a high wind, he felt his self-control beginning to give way. He hadn't been looking at her like that; no, of course he hadn't; she was a bunny, for cripes sake. No way, Renee!
He folded his arms and hardened his gaze.

"Got clue, kid?" He pointed to her, than to himself. "You bunny, me fox…Not. Possible."

"Duh, you're a fox," Erin Hopps wasn't backing down. Though she was a good two inches shorter than Conor, she seemed to be looming over him.

"What were you doing, hiding in the dark back there?" she demanded. "Were you stalking me?" Her face turned wickedly scornful. "Or maybe you were thinking about eating me."

Chunk! Whoops, there went another tent-peg. Conor felt his mouth stretch backwards into a long, foxy grin. "And always remember Mopsie, you asked for it."

"Nah," he said, flipping a pawlm, "No worries there, Babe. I hate, Hate, HATE the taste of spoiled rabbit."

"I'm not your babe, creep-o!" she almost screamed, and Conor almost face-pawmed himself.

"I could have headed straight back to the van after getting signed up for the talent show, but nooooooo...!"

"Cool your jets, willya bunny?" he said, "I'm from Zoo York City, you follow what I'm bringing out? Mammals call each other babe back there all the time." He shrugged. "Heck, back in Zoo York, GUYS call each other babe sometimes."

"Yeah, surre they do." Erin sniffed derisively, lifting an ear and an eyebrow and having none of it, "Let me guess, Shifty. Back in Zoo York City, it's ALSO okay for a fox to call a bunny cute, am I right?"

Conor felt that grin slide over his face again.

"No," he said, speaking with silken, exaggerated formality, "I think I can safely say that if there's one bunny I'd NEVER call cute, it's you."

Erin blinked, and Conor saw her eye makeup begin to shed flecks of black around the edge. He hurriedly backtracked.

"Look," he said, raising a paw, and placing the other one over the center of his chest, "Ranger Scout's honor. I really did come in here coz I heard you playing bass, and I really do think you're that good. No kidding, and you've got an awesome voice, too. I'd love to jam with you sometime."

He immediately wondered where that last line had come from. "Seriously, I sing and play guitar myself." He added quickly.

The good news was Erin wasn't going to cry (and hadn't been anyway.) The bad news was that her face became a mask of contempt.

"No! WAY! I am not jamming with a three-chord creepazoid loser like YOU!" She spoke in the lofty voice of a queen dismissing a beggar.

Pop! Okay, that was it; there went the last tent-peg. Now Conor's face also became a mask—a portrait etched in innocence.
"Uh, then I guess a kiss is completely out of the question?"

Erin stared at him for moment…

"Aaaaagh, grrrr!

Nick Wilde could have kicked himself right out of the Carrot-Days Festival. Before Judy had left, he should have arranged for a place where they could meet after he was done talking to Finnick. But he hadn't and now he had no idea where to find her—and forget about calling her cell; he'd already tried it—twice, and had gotten her voice-mail both times. Agghh, grrrr…dumb, Dumb, DUMB fox. Of course the first place to look would be Gideon Grey's but where was that again? He'd forgotten already.

The problem, and Nick knew it, was that he wasn't used to being on such unfamiliar turf. Back in Zootopia there'd been no need to jot down instructions or memorize landmarks; he knew every street by heart. But here in Bunnyburrows at the Carrot Days festival, he might as well be in the Maze of Minos without a shred of string to his name.

But hrm, wait a second, there was that old red barn again. And wasn't there an information booth somewhere close by? Yes, there it was.

No, there it wasn't; it was a fruit stand, not an information booth, something called Luckyfoot Farm and Vineyards, and Gideon Greys's was that way. No it wasn't, it was this way. Like heck it was; it was that way. This way! That way! You shut up! No, YOU shut up!

At least it wasn't a total loss, Luckyfoot had some lovely red grapes for sale, and Nick happily bought a basket to go.

"A fox lives not by blueberries alone." he reminded himself as he popped the first one into his mouth. Mmmm, these were good, almost as good as….

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a door slamming on the other side of the barn, so hard it actually shook a layer of dust from the eaves. Curious, Nick went over, arriving just in time to see Erin Hopps come storming away from the back entrance, toting a guitar case and several pieces of gear—and muttering aloud to no one in particular.

"…little creep…thinks he's so….talk to ME that way…show him…smartmouth…!"

Nick stopped, staring. What the heck had gotten into HER?

Erin swung out onto the midway, gathering steam like an advancing freight train. She seemed to be heading right towards Nick, but no, the young bunny was looking right past him as if he wasn't there

He wondered if he should say anything, but then Erin beat him to the punch. Just as she was about to pass him by, she wheeled and let loose a furious rant.

"As if I'd ever kiss a FOX…"

And then she realized which species she was speaking to, "Ewww!"

Thoroughly revolted, she turned and stalked on her way.

For a moment, Nick could only stare after her, too dumfounded to move. Was she…was she
talking about what had happened between him and Judy in Rafaj Brothers' jewelers?

"No don't be ridiculous," he admonished himself at once. Who the heck would have told her…

Carrots? No way, and no way could Erin have seen that surveillance tape either. It was police

property and evidence in a pending case; any member of the ZPD who showed that thing around
could clean out his or her locker right NOW.

So, what the heck…?

Nick's thoughts came skidding to a halt as a familiar scent teased his nostrils. There was another

fox nearby and he knew who it was…and it explained a lot.

Judy could wait a few more minutes, he decided.

Nick reached the side door of the barn just in time to watch it swing open again and see a young

silver fox emerging into the sunlight, rubbing the side of his face with his pawlm.

"Conor, what happened?" he asked.

The young fox looked away for a second, embarrassed. "Open mouth A, insert foot B." was all he

said.

It was a cryptic explanation at best, but it filled in the gaps nicely. Nick was easily able to guess

the rest…or enough of it anyway.

"I'd say it wasn't your foot that got inserted kid, and it was upside your head, not into your mouth." He spoke wryly to the young fox, and then in a more concerned voice, he said, "Are you okay?"

Conor waved off Nick's worries like a pesky fly.

"Ahhh, I've taken way worse hits than that." he said, and the older fox believed him. Now that they

were alone he was able to study Conor Lewis a bit more closely. And what he saw was a mass of

contradictions.

First of all, Conor was street, but he wasn't living on the street; he was too well dressed, too well

groomed, and most importantly, much too clean for that. Street kids, the ones living out of boxes or

under bridges only washed when the opportunity presented itself—which wasn't often—and they

rarely, if ever used soap.

Then there was the fact that the kid was obviously too well fed for the role of a homeless fox-kit, and also too well built; his physique was lean, wiry, and taut as a bridge cable, a budding street-fighter not a street urchin. (That brought up another contradiction but Nick would get to it in a minute.)

No, Conor Lewis had a place to call home, Nick was sure of it, but where? He wasn't living with

Finnick; the desert fox had pre-empted that notion when he'd said that he didn't know anything

about Conor's background.

"Who the heck was that crazy rabbit anyway?" the kid asked suddenly and without warning. It was clearly meant as a rhetorical question, but Nick just happened to have the answer with him.

"Her name's Erin, Erin Hopps, she's Judy Hopp's younger sister."

"More like Sergeant Cowhorn's kid sister." The silver fox responded sourly, referring to the

character in the Feral's Duty game. He rubbed his eye again and then looked at Nick. "Your partner
Judy's sister, huh? Do me a favor, don't tell her what happened, 'kay?'

Suppressing a grin Nick started to nod. Of course the kid wouldn't want it known that he'd been clobbered by a girl, especially a bunny.

Only…Conor had said, 'Don't tell Judy' not, 'Don't tell anyone', he wasn't afraid of being ridiculed if word of the incident got out, he just didn't want to get Erin in trouble.

And that brought up the other contradiction; for all her 'tough grrl' façade, Erin Hopps was still a country bunny with no experience in hard knocks, while Conor Lewis was just the opposite, a whipcord-tough, street-smart fox who knew his way around a fight; Nick was almost certain of it by now.

So, how the heck had Erin even connected with him? By rights, the young silver fox should have been able to dodge or parry her rabbit-kick as easily as a slow-pitch beach ball.

"All right, but what the heck DID happen?" Nick asked, knowing full well that Conor would have no choice but to tell him if he wanted the secret kept.

The kid seemed to know it too, repeating the story without any hesitation. Nick listened with mild interest at first—until Conor came to the (literal) punch line. Then he was unable to restrain himself any longer.

"You said that to her?" he burst out laughing. Making that kind of suggestion to a bunny like Erin Hopps was like letting off a skyrocket into hydrogen balloon; there will be an explosion.

"Listen kid," he said, assuming the role of the wise, older fox., "you might get away with a remark like that back in Zootopia, but in case you didn't notice, attitudes are little different in the Burrows."

"Hey, I'm vulpine, I got limits." The young fox protested, bracing up in a pose of youthful defiance. "and I wasn't looking at her like THAT, okay?"

"Okay," Nick nodded, conceding the point with a raised paw. At least the kid understood that he'd overdone it and besides, Erin hadn't exactly been blameless herself. He began to wish that he hadn't made that promise not to bring up the incident with Judy.

But he had made the promise, and so he wouldn't say a word. It was an ironclad rule of his species; a fox never betrays the trust of another fox—period!

He decided it was once again time for a graceful exit.

"Listen, I need to go find Judy. Do you know where Gideon Grey's pie stand is?"

Conor settled down for a second and scratched at an ear with his leg.

"Ahh, it be easier to show you than tell you big guy; I gotta head in that direction anyway; Finnick's gonna be looking for me."

He turned and beckoned for Nick to fall into step besides him. Okay, if that was the case, they might as well talk some more.

Nick popped another grape in his mouth and then asked, "So I'm guessing you're from Zoo York, is that right?" He figured it was a safe enough inquiry.
“Heyyy, how’d youse guess?” the kid answered smartly in an exaggerated Barklyn Irish accent. “Yeah that's right. From the Island to be exact.” He was referring to Long Island.

“Not the Humptons, I'm guessing?” Nick ventured, with a small, sly grin of his own.

Conor laughed. "Yeah, like I'd really be peddling T-shirts if I came from that neighborhood."

Nick laughed along with him and scarfed another couple of grapes.

But then he found himself at a loss over what to say next. He had plenty of questions for the kid, but none that would get any answers that weren't either evasive or outright dishonest.

"You know if Erin is playing in the talent show?" the young fox asked, abruptly and without looking at him.

Nick's ears began to work in confusion and he almost stopped in his tracks. Conor's question had been phrased casually…very casually, but still it had come like bolt from the blue.

"Uhm yeah, she's on tonight about 7:30." He said, and then remembered something. "Oh you know, I never asked, did you get a slot to perform?"

"Yeah!" the young fox answered eagerly, "Got a great one too; tomorrow night at 8. Someone else canceled."

"Good for you." Nick offered Conor a fist bump which the silver fox heartily returned. He was still curious about the kid's question though. Was he planning to go and watch Erin Hopps's performance? After the encounter he'd just had with her, that made about as much sense as air conditioning in Tundratown. Still, the red fox couldn't purge the notion from his head.

He decided to test the waters a little.

"You really think Erin's that good?" he asked, "Honestly I haven't heard her yet."

"Kicks tail," the young fox told him, and Nick was surprised to hear that it wasn't grudging concession. "She plays a killer bass and what a voice. Blow-u-way, fawx."

Okay, he was planning to go and watch her, Nick decided—and as if reading his mind, Conor confirmed it…sort of.

"I might go check her out I guess, if we're done with the T-shirts by then." he said, shrugging, and then surprised Nick yet again. "I guess I should go and apologize, but she'd prolly only smack me again." He added, mournfully.

Nick Wilde felt his ears falling backwards and face pinching up in bewilderment. What the heck was going on with this…? Wait no, it couldn't be that…could it?"

And that was when a door opened in the red-fox's psyche and a memory walked in, Tundratown, The Thaw, the dance floor, that first time; it should have a painful recollection, and yet it made him smile.

"Don't let it bother you too much, kid." He said, "I remember this one time at a club when I met a girl fox I liked, and…"

"Hold it, hold it. Time out. Full! Complete! Stop!"

Conor had halted in his tracks and was forming a 'T' with his paws. His ears had turned sideways,
and his neck fur appeared to be spiking.

Then he turned and his burning-amber eyes were boring straight into Nick's

"First of all, Erin's a bunny, not a vixen 'kay? Let's get that outta the way right now. Number two, even if she was a fox, she's still a stuck-up, snotty little hormone monster. Seriously, I wouldn't take her to a cockroach fight if she was the top-ranked contender!"

"Okay, okay." Nick took a step backwards, stung by the younger fox's unexpected fury. At a loss for any other response, he settled on a peace offering.

"Want some grapes?" he said holding out the basket with his other paw.

Conor craned his neck and then shook his head.

"Uhhh, no thanks; those things look way sour."

The next thing he said was, "Okay, what?"

"Mmmm, nothing." Nick answered, looking away quickly so the kid couldn't see him trying not to laugh.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note, Erin Hopps.

Erin Hopps has been through a lot of changes since her introduction in an earlier series of stories. Originally she was a corsac fox named Erin Marsh, and much more insecure than she is in her current incarnation; originally she was a nice girl who hung out with the popular girls as at school. Very much against her nature, she often went along with some of the popular girls nastier escapades in order to win their acceptance. The leader of the popular girls, a lynx named Amanda Kaine sometimes made Erin her tool.

I was never entirely comfortable with Erin's personality in that incarnation. She was too much like the damsel who only needs the right guy in her life to put things right. When I decided to introduce her into the Fire Triangle Story line she became a much more independent character, an arctic vixen who is much closer in character to who she is now. Once again, I wasn't satisfied; she was too much of a walk-on character who wasn't really all that important to the story. Changing her to a bunny and making her Judy's younger sister would, I felt, allow her to become a much more integral part of the plot.

Erin's current persona takes a lot of inspiration from the 'Hormone Monstress' episodes of the Netflix series Big Mouth. (And in fact there's an Easter-egg reference in one of Conor's lines.) If you haven't seen Big Mouth, check it out; it's screechingly funny—but be warned, a lot of what's in this series is NSFW, use of the F-word, to cite one example.

One thing that's always remained constant about Erin is her singing voice; she's always been able to belt it out, and will continue to do so in the future.
Days of Carrots and Blueberries (Continued…Pt. 8)

Chapter Summary

A tragic illness descends upon the Hopps clan as two of the family members are struck down by a case by a case of Foot-In-Mouth Disease

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries (Continued…Pt. 8)

"Nick, Nick…over here!"

Judy was waving to him from a picnic table, along, with several of the Hopps kids…and the red fox was happily relieved; she was greeting him with a raised paw, not her paws on her hips. He also noticed that a few more young bunnies had joined the entourage since last he'd seen her, not including—he was glad to note—Erin Hopps. (One encounter with little Miss Attitude had been enough for today, thank you very much.) Also seated at the table were Gideon Grey and another fox, a plumpish vixen with rust-colored fur, dressed in a barista's outfit.

As Nick approached, they also waved.

"So, did you have a nice talk with Finnick? Judy asked, sliding over to make room for him. It was a question with an edge, a serrated one.

Nick knew he'd have to give her something; it was that or he'd have her barely speaking to him for the rest of the day. Fortunately, he could tell her at least part of the story; that he'd been deliberately avoiding the fennec-fox since joining the ZPD—and also why he'd been staying away from his former partner.

"Oh Nick, you should never have dumped him like that." Judy said when he had finished, and the red fox quickly raised a paw.

"I know, Carrots. It was a big mistake, and I should have at least…"

"No, I meant you didn't NEED to." She interrupted, mildly exasperated. "Chief Bogo wasn't
planning to bring Finnick on board as a CI; no one was. That was only a rumor."

"What's a CI?" Little Cotton asked from the next table over

"It means Confidential Informant, honey." Judy told her.

Cotton's ears went up and her brow furrowed.

"What's a confi…deshul in-form-ant?"

"He means a snitch, dunny," one of her brothers piped up.

Cotton clenched her fists and thumped her foot.

"Don't call me dummy, dummy."

"All right, that's enough." Judy said, and the two little rabbits went back to their pieces of pie.

"All right, maybe it was just a rumor, Carrots" Nick conceded, trying to put the conversation back on the rails. "But what if I'd had to BUST Finnick, what then?" He raised his paws in an effort to head off any protest. "Judy I'd never do this to a friend, but even I have to admit that Finnick would make a great CI; he knows the streets of Zootopia almost as well as I do—heck, he knows Sahara Square better than me—and he's been working them for a long time."

"Okay Nick, I see your point." Judy admitted, nodding, "And anyway, the important thing is that you patched things up." She narrowed an eye and raised an ear. "Have you pathed things up?"

"We have," Nick answered offering another ranger-scout salute, and then grinning, "Finnick never could stay mad at me for long, and honestly Carrots, I really have missed the little guy; I'm glad we're back to being friends and… Whoa, what's this?"

Gideon Grey had just slid a wedge of pie in front of his fellow fox, a layer of blueberries atop a layer of fluffy white.

"The specialty of the festival." The burly fox said, a note of pride in his voice, "My new blueberry vanilla pie. I got cherry and blackberry vanilla too, but Judy tells me you're partial to the blues."

'She's absolutely right about that." Nick said, and took a bite of his pie. All at once, his eyes rolled, his mouth pinched, and his tail began to swish in an S-curve.

"Ooooo," he said, pointing to the plate with his fork, "I want to LIVE here!"

"Does that mean you like it?" the vixen two seats over teased.

"Where'd you ever get that idea?" Nick teased right back, eagerly taking another forkful.

Gideon laughed and put an arm around the female fox's shoulder.

"Nick, this is my fiancée, Bette Renaard; she owns the stand next door to mine. Nick looked and saw parked next to Gideon Grey's, a van bearing the logo, Dutch Girls' Coffee.

"It's not mine, Gideon," Bette protested, nudging him with an elbow, and then turning to Nick. "It's a family operation, me and my two sisters."

"That have anything to do with how you and Gideon met?" Nick asked, nodding at the other fox.
"Well, what's pie without coffee?" Gideon winked, and then turned to nuzzle his intended.

Nick was seriously glad to have finally made his acquaintance.

Then Judy spoke up. "Okay Gideon, come on, don't keep me in suspense; what the OTHER big piece of news?"

The husky fox hooked his thumbs in his apron.

"Gonna open up a franchise in Zootopia, Judy…next March if everything goes right."

"Yay!" Judy cheered and threw her arms in the air, drawing curious looks from her younger siblings.

"Which district?" Nick Wilde asked, genuinely interested.

"Old Growth City." The other fox answered, and Nick nodded approvingly.

"Good call,"

"Not downtown or Savanna Central?" Judy asked. She sounded a little disappointed. That was nowhere near where she lived, much less close to Precinct One.

"Nope, not with the real-estate prices in THOSE districts," Bette responded, illustrating the point by pretending to lop off an arm and a leg with the flat of her paw. It made Nick wonder if perhaps she was the brains of the operation.

Just then a boy bunny from the other table came over and tapped Judy on the arm.

"Heads up Jude," he murmured pointing up the concourse with a pair of fingers.

Judy looked, and Nick saw her seem to collapse inward. Gideon Grey's reaction was even more startling; his mouth became a hard, flat line, and his neck fur began to stand up.

"'Scuse us, please folks." He muttered tersely, and then he and Bette got up quickly from the table.

At first Nick was unable to see what the hubbub was all about, but then he noticed that Judy was fixing her gaze on one particular rabbit in the crowd.

The newcomer was perhaps half a head taller than Judy, but of a breadth more akin to Benjamin Clawhauser. He had tan fur with a brown muzzle and arms, a color scheme the fox had noted several times among members of the Hopps family…but UN-like them his fur was slightly unkempt He wore a beat-up red work shirt and a pair of stained painter's overalls. The top of his head was crowned by a faded blue cap bearing the logo "Let's Make Zootopia ROAR", the campaign slogan of the now disgraced Ex-Mayor Lionheart.

He was also headed in their direction…and pretending he hadn't noticed Judy or any of the other Hopps bunnies—a deception so obvious that Nick almost felt pity for him.

The fat rabbit was about ten feet away when he halted in his tracks and his ears fell backwards in a badly feigned display of surprise.

"Judy, is that you?" he said, throwing up a paw in greeting.

When Judy waved back, it was with a notable lack of enthusiasm.
"Hello, Uncle Terry." She said, sounding as if she were reciting a lesson by rote.

Nick turned so that face was invisible to the approaching rabbit and lowered his voice to a near whisper.

"Uncle Terry?" he queried, cocking an ear halfway, "Your same Uncle Terry who accidentally ate some Nighthowler once?

"Yes." Judy's voice was a hiss out the side of her mouth, and she was grimacing as if preparing to receive a tetanus shot. This bunny was obviously NOT one of her favorite relatives.

It didn't take long for Nick to discover why.

"How's my favorite niece?" the thickset bunny boomed, a well-used line that Nick suspected Judy's uncle Terry Haredigg used to greet all his nieces.

"Just fine, Unk." Judy answered somehow managing to bend her grimace into the reasonable facsimile of a smile.

"That's great," Terry responded apparently unaware of her disdain for him, a fact that became painfully obvious when he spread his arms and said, "Come here and give your uncle a hug."

Judy got up and let Terry hug her, but refused to return the embrace. (To Nick Wilde, she looked as if a cactus had just its arms wrapped around her.)

"It's great to see you again, Judy." The other rabbit said, "How long has it been?" His accent was a lot like Gideon's but more Midwestern twang than Southern drawl.

"Not long enough," Judy's face seemed to say, and before she could say anything aloud, the older bunny was coming in Nick's direction with an outstretched paw.

"And you must be Nick Wiley," he said, "I heard a lot of good stories about you; been hopin' to meet you someday."

"Actually, it's Nick Wilde," the fox corrected, keeping his voice pleasant. Privately, it was all he could do to keep his fangs hidden; now he was really beginning to understand why Judy didn't care for this rabbit. Heck, now he was beginning to develop a healthy dislike for Terry Haredigg himself; every word he'd spoken had sounded forced and insincere.

"This poor fool wouldn't last five minutes, hustling on the streets of Zootopia." The red fox swiftly decided, but then accepted the paw nonetheless. When they shook, it felt like his paw had become enveloped in a wad of bread dough.

"Nice to meet you too," Nick answered noncommittally, but the bunny wasn't paying attention.

"Say," he said, looking down at the wedge of pie on Nick's plate, "that looks mighty good, son. You mind if I have just a little taste?"

"Well..." the red fox started to say, caught off guard for once; (it was a completely unexpected request.)

If he hadn't blinked in the next half-second, Nick might have seen what happened. As it was when he looked at his plate again, it was almost empty and Terry's cheeks were nearly full; he looked like a chipmunk with a mouthful of sunflower seeds.
"Mmmm diff is deffificious." The chunky rabbit was groaning and blissfully rolling his eyes.

(Behind the counter of his pie stand, Gideon Grey was rolling up his sleeves—and Bette was getting quickly in front of him.)

Terry meanwhile was finally getting down to business, turning to speak to Judy once again.

"Listen Jude, I hate to ask, but…" he said, and now it was his niece's turn to roll her eyes, only in her case it was with an expression of, 'Here it comes.'

"I got myself pulled over on Route 99 t'other day." Terry was telling her, "Now I wasn't… y'know really speeding, but that new deputy Mac Cannon, the bobcat? Well he's a real hardcase that one, wrote me up just like that, and said I was driving reckless too."

Okay, now it was unanimous, Nick Wilde was rolling his eyes too; Judy's uncle sounded just like a teenager, trying to explain why he was coming in at 2 in the morning.

"So you think maybe you could help your old uncle out and take care of this of me?" Terry asked her, by way of conclusion.

There...there it was. THAT'S what Judy's uncle was doing here, and now Nick thoroughly understood her contempt for him; not just a moocher, but a clueless one at that. Did this dumb bunny—yes he'd say that about Terry Haredigg—did this moron have any idea how badly he'd just insulted her? No member of the ZPD prided themselves more on their integrity than Officer Judy Hopps. If the red fox hadn't been aware of how capable she was at handling her own problems, he would have been halfway out of his seat by now.

"I'm sorry uncle," she told him. She appeared to be perfectly calm, but Nick could see that she was standing on her foot with the other one to keep it from thumping. "But I'm ZPD, not Burrows County Sheriff's Department; The Burrows is out of my jurisdiction." She shrugged, "I have no authority here for anything like that."

Judy was playing her ace immediately, Nick could see. Good for her; a bunny like her Uncle Terry wasn't going to accept any arguments against helping him, based on moral principles alone.

And he wasn't accepting this one either.

"Yeah, but you could go and have a talk with Mac, couldn't you, one cop to another?" He was practically whimpering.

Judy shook her head.

"Wouldn't help, it's out his paws too. Now it's up to the traffic court."

That wasn't entirely true and Nick knew it. The bobcat deputy could at least make a recommendation to the court, although the fox seriously doubted he would, even if Judy asked him. It didn't take much imagination on the red fox's part to conjure up a picture of the song-and-dance Uncle Terry must have given the sheriff's deputy after he'd been pulled over. (Since joining the ZPD, Nick Wilde had many times born witness to a similar spectacle.)

"Then you won't help me?" Terry was spreading his arms, and looking like a hurt little bunny.

"Not 'won't', 'can't'," Judy corrected him. Her voice was firm, but not unsympathetic. Nonetheless Terry looked at her as if she'd just wished him dead and burning in Hell.
"And I thought we were family. " He sniffed, and then slunk away with his ears drooping, several times glancing over his shoulder as if expecting her to come after him. It didn't happen; Judy remained rooted to the spot, regarding her uncle with a fixed gaze.

Nick got up and went to join her, catching up with his partner just in time to see her cross her arms and mutter, "That trick might work with Mom buster, but it won't work with me."

"What now?" the fox asked, unable to stifle the question before it came out.

Judy sighed and turned to him, "Mom can't say no to him Nick; whenever he plays the guilt card on her, she always folds.,"

Nick's ears went up like bottle rockets.

"Wait, what? Hang on Carrots. He ate some Nighthowler and attacked her—and now she's the one who feels guilty?"

Judy raised a sardonic eyebrow. "Yes, well you know WHY he ate that Nighthowler Nick? It was because Mom dared him to; happened back when they were kids, and he's never let her forget it."

"Say no more, Carrots, I get it now." The red fox swiftly raised a paw. Being poisoned with Nighthowler was every bit as traumatic an experience as being attacked by an animal exposed to the toxin. When the victims recovered, they had no memory of their actions after being darted, but suffered vivid nightmares for weeks, sometimes months thereafter. At least two of the mammals darted by Doug had needed to be kept under 24-hour Crisis Watch, lest they harm themselves. One of them had been Mr. Big's limo driver Mr. Manchas, (who had suffered the double-whammy of being attacked by a predator darted with Nighthowler, and then being darted himself.) "Do you think your uncle might put the touch on your mother about that ticket, try to get her to pressure you into fixing it?"

Judy bit her lip and shook her head. "Nooo, maybe I shouldn't have said that mom never…" She looked over at Gideon Grey. "Gideon, is it okay if I tell him?"

The thickset fox just nodded, "Yeah, go ahead."

It had happened right after the Bellwether bust, while Judy had been in the hospital recovering from the injury she'd sustained during the museum chase. Judy's uncle had blown into the Burrows, arriving at the family produce stand just as Gideon Grey was pulling out. The amount he'd wanted to borrow had been larger than usual and her parents had reluctantly turned him down.

"We just put a lot of money into new business partnership." Judy's mother had said, waving at the departing pie-van.

"That's when Uncle Terry put his foot in it," Judy was shaking her head again. "He told Mom, 'How can you neglect your own family in favor of a dirty FOX?''"

That had too much even for Bonnie Hopps, and she'd curtly informed her brother that he needed to be on his way and right away.

Nick heard a growl and saw Gideon Grey's neck fur standing rigid; he felt his own fur trying to do the same. Bro-THER, that hadn't been just putting your foot in your mouth; try stuffing it in with a broom-handle. No wonder Uncle Terry had felt the need to raid Nick's plate; after a remark like that, he sure as heck wasn't getting any pie from Gideon.

"Mom forgave him later on, of course." Judy was saying, "But it goes to show that she does have
her limits, and my uncle knows it; he won't push that ticket business any further."

Nick was just about to respond to this when Gideon slid a fresh piece of pie in front of him.

"Sorry about that," he said.

"No problem." Nick answered, offering his fellow fox a fist bump.

Just then, little Cotton piped up. "I'm done, can we go on the rides now? I wanna go on the roller coaster." She was talking quickly, and Nick guessed it was a reaction to the pie she'd just consumed. Gideon's fruit-and-vanilla pies were heavenly, but sugar-free treats they weren't.

Judy looked at Nick before answering her.

"Uhhh, maybe in a little while Cotton, but not right now."

"Why?" the little bunny girl asked, looking up at her.

"Uhhh because riding a coaster isn't something you want to do on a full tummy." Judy answered, trying to be as tactful as she could.

"Why?" Cotton asked again. Her blue eyes had grown big and winsome.

"Because you'll puke all over yourself, dummy." It was that same brother again.

"I will NOT, Timmy!" Cotton thumped her foot and turned indignantly on the other rabbit, a medium gray bunny maybe a year or two older than her.

"Will too." He said.

There followed one of those childhood debates that make up for in passion what they lack in eloquence.

"Will not!"

"Will too!"

"Will not!"

"Will too!"

"Will NOT!"

"Will TOO! Ow! Judy, Cotton kicked me!"

"He called me Dummy first!"

"All right both of you; that's enough, or you're going home right now." Judy was standing with her arms folded, as if to say, 'Don't test me.'

Cotton and Timmy looked at each other and then at her.

"Not fairrrrrrrrrrr!"

Nick snickered and then sighed. For all that he'd just seen, it would have been good to have some brothers or sisters of his own.
He quickly went back to work on his pie. The others were already done with theirs, and the sooner he finished his, the sooner they could all move on.

Meanwhile at another picnic table, one aisle away….

"Ewwww!

"I know, right? What a jerk!"

Erin Hopps was holding court with her best girlfriends, and had just regaled them with the tale of her encounter with Conor Lewis. (With the proper embellishments of course; she was, after all, 13.)

Erin's clique was not, as one might have expected, an all rabbit posse. In fact, two of her buds were predators. Terri Blackburn was a ferret, and Sue Cannon was the daughter of Mac Cannon, the bobcat Sheriff's deputy. Cara Combs was a sheep, and rounding out the group were Tawny Lloyd and Jill Pepper, both of whom were also rabbits. It might have seemed an odd group of associates, given Erin's confrontation with predator just a short while ago, but she had known these girls since kindergarten. Besides that, they all shared a firm and singular conviction. Each and every one of them couldn't wait to get the heck out of Bunnyboring and the sooner the better—and now with Erin's pending acceptance to the Zootopia Academy of the Performing Arts, it looked as if she might be the first of them to actually accomplish that task. As such, she was the group's de facto leader, at least for the moment.

"Are you sure he was a fox?" Jill Pepper was asking, "I never heard of fox that color before."

"I don't know," Erin shrugged coolly, "But he sure as heck looked like one to me."

"Did he have black and gray fur?" a wee voice piped up from below, "and was his name Condor or something?"

They all looked and saw that another member of their posse had arrived on the scene, a Douglas squirrel wearing a brightly adorned t-shirt.

"Hey, Lisa, where you been?" Erin asked her. The little squirrel was a member of the Chatterton clan and one of closest friends. She lowered a paw laying it flat on the ground, pawlm up.

"Getting one of those Gazelle Japanese t-shirts," Lisa answered, pointing to the one she was wearing as she climbed on board Erin paw.

"Ooo, cool." Terri chirred, as Erin lifted Lisa up and set her down on the table top. (If the table had been wood the squirrel-girl could have easily scrambled up one of the legs; but it wasn't wood, it was aluminum, and so she'd needed a helping paw.)

"Wow, I have got to get me one of those." Jill Pepper declared, peering closely at the shirt. Though most of the girls at the table deplored pop music, Gazelle was a large and very prominent exception to that rule.

"Well, you better hurry if you want one." Lisa cautioned, seating herself on an overturned cup that Erin had just provided, "That place is already a plinkin' madhouse. They'll probably be sold out by this evening."

A collective groan went up from the table.

"Baaaaah, I did NOT come here to wait in line all diddly-dang day," Cara Combs lamented, folding
her arms and pouting.

That was another thing Erin and her friends had in common—every single one them came with a healthy dose of youthful angst. (It showed in the way they dressed. Terri’s lower forearms were encircled by a pair of studded, camo wristbands and Tawny was wearing a tank top under her jacket, decorated with a bright-red anarchist’s, ‘A’.)

Erin swiftly decided it was time for her to take charge.

"There's only one way to do this, if we all want one of those shirts guys. We know each other's sizes, right?" The others all nodded and Erin nodded back. "Kay, so we put our money together and then we draw straws; short straw takes the money and gets in line for the shirts, and then gets one for each of us. That work for you?"

With varying degrees of enthusiasm the other agreed, except for Lisa Chatterton.

"Ummm…"

"Oh not you Lisa." Erin said, moving quickly to assure her friend, "You've already been in line once, and anyway, you couldn't carry the shirts for all the rest of us, not by yourself.

"It's not that, Erin." Lisa's incisors were clicking against one other. "That fox I heard you talking about? I-I think he works at that table."

"Are you sure it was the same guy?" Erin asked.

"Are you sure that he's a fox?" It was Cara.

Lisa answered the sheep's question first.

"Yeah, I heard someone else ask him; he said that he's a silver fox."

"A silver fox? I never heard of that species." Jill Pepper was lifting an ear.

"It's not a species; it's a color phase of the red fox." Lisa explained, "I heard that too while I was waiting."

She looked at Erin. "He has black fur with gray on top, except around his face and arms; they're all black. And he has a black tail with a white tip, too. Oh, and he's dressed like one of the kids from Mewsies. Is that your guy?"

"What do his eyes look like?" Erin asked. She was almost certain this was the same fox she'd encountered inside the barn—but only almost.

"Kind of scary," the squirrel answered, with her tail shivering slightly, "Like burning charcoal, or that's what I thought.

Erin groaned and let out a hiss of air from between her teeth.

"Yeah, that's him." She said.

"Great," said Tawny, slapping her knees, with her pawlms, "Then you can't draw either, Erin."

"Yes, I should, it was my idea." The white-furred bunny countered, thumping her foot. Erin Hopps might have tended to act thoughtlessly now and again, but in no way did that attitude extend to her circle of friends
"Erin, no." Terri Blackburn protested. "When he sees it's you, he might refuse to sell you anything."

Lisa and Sue rolled their eyes, and Tawny and Erin gave each other a look. The girl ferret had always been the group's resident worry-wart.

"Look," Erin finally said, "let's just draw the straws and we'll worry about what happens next, if I get the short one, okay?"

As things turned out, there was no need to worry. When they drew the straws the short one went to Jill Pepper.

She responded by lifting her feet up onto the bench and giving them a dirty look.

"LUCKY rabbit's feet...yeah, riiiiight," she grumbled, accepting her fate with a lopsided grin.

When she had gone, Lisa turned to Erin.

"So what happened with you and that fox? I only heard the last part just now."

So Erin told the story once again, and when she got to the punch line, the Douglas squirrel's reaction was the same as the others. "Ewwwww! Whoo, it's a good thing you didn't get the short straw, Erin."

"Tell me about it," the bunny said, able at last to give vent to her relief. She waved a paw in the direction of the old red barn's cupola, just visible in the distance. "Said he sings and play guitar himself. Yeah...as IF!"

"Actually, I-I think he does." Lisa was clicking her incisors again, "Or at least he plays; I saw a couple of guitar cases stashed under the table while I was waiting in line...two of them, a plugged and an unplugged. He had 'em chained to the table with a bicycle lock."

"So he has a guitar, that doesn't mean he can PLAY it." Tawny Lloyd pointed out batting her paw in the air.

"Yeah, really." Erin nodded, but privately she wasn't so sure. Not one but two guitars, an acoustic AND an electric; that spoke of a musician a little more serious than an upgraded air guitarist.

"I just hope that creep doesn't show up backstage when I'm playing tonight." She said. Actually she didn't really think he would, but it was as good a way as any to change the subject of their conversation to the talent show.

In the case of Terri and Sue, it didn't work; the two just looked at each other and then the girl bobcat winked at the ferret, her yellow eyes aglow with feline mischief.

"Want me to get Craig to go beat him up?" she asked. Craig Roberts, a lynx two years older than Sue was her sometime boyfriend...and also a star player on the local small-mammal La Crosse team.

It was meant as a tease, but Erin simply waved dismissively.

"Naw no need, I already kicked that fox-jerk's butt."

This revelation was greeted by a quintet of shocked expressions. Erin hadn't told them this part; she'd taken it a fox? Was she crazy? It was all the encouragement the girl-bunny needed.
"Oh come on girls, you don't think I'd let any guy, even a dirtbag fox, talk to ME that way, do you?" She gleefully pounded her fist into a pawlm. "Got him—BOOM, put my foot right upside his face! Teach him to show me…a little…re…spect…"

Erin's voice ground slowly to halt. Why were her girlfriends still looking at her like…? And why was Terri making slicing motions across the tabletop with her paw?

Oh, snap!

Erin's eyes screwed shut and she pinched the bridge of her nose.

"My mom is standing behind me, isn't she?"

She turned around and looked.

No, it wasn't her mother; it was her older sister, Judy…arms crossed and right foot thumping.

Standing beside her was another fox, her partner, Nick Something-Or-Other.

Ohhhh, double snap!

And surrounding them both was a gaggle of Erin's younger siblings, all of whom were regarding her with looks of gleeful anticipation.

TRIPLE Snap!

Chapter End Notes

Judy's Uncle Terry is another character who's gone through a few changes since I first thought of adding him to the story. Originally he was just an eccentric uncle, who had never quite recovered from the effects of his Nighthowler poisoning. Later on I decided to make him the family mooch, something I though works much better with the story-line. (It's going to figure very prominently in an upcoming chapter.)
Days of Carrots and Blueberries (Continued…Pt. 9)

Chapter Summary

An elegant solution to an inelegant problem.

But then the best laid plans of little bunnies 'gang aft aglay.'

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries
(Continued…Pt. 9)

Erin Hopps was out of her league, way out of her league…and Judy Hopps knew it.

In her time with the ZPD, Judy had questioned street-thugs, gangers, smugglers, car-thieves, fences, burglars, and counterfeiters. After all of that, a 13-year-old sister with a 'tude was not a particular challenge.

And so she stood, leaning against a light pole with her arms folded and one leg crossed over the other in a figure-four, listening to Erin's explanation with a placid expression and no comment.

(Yet!)

Mercifullly, for Erin's sake, Judy was at least making this a private Q-and-A; she had taken her younger sister out behind the dealer's stalls, leaving Cotton and her other siblings with Nick, (much to the younger bunnies' disappointment,) and hopefully out of earshot.

As for Erin's GFs, they'd responded to Judy's appearance as any girls that age would have.

"Oops, gotta go."

"Later, Erin."

"C ya girlfriend."

"T-T-Y-L."
When Erin finally wrapped up her presentation, Judy had only one question for her.

"He tried to kiss you?"

"Yes!" Erin replied, spreading her paws at 4 and 6, fingers extended in a clawlike manner as if to emphasize the word. "So yeah, I hit him. I mean, how would you feel if a fox tried to kiss YOU?"

Judy coughed into fist, remembering al-Rafaj Jewelers. Without even trying, her younger sister had just scored a bullseye—but of course, she didn't know that.

And the older bunny wasn't about to tell her. Instead she furrowed her brow, and began pensively massaging her chin, looking very serious.

"All right, that's serious Erin—felony misconduct. Come on, we need to go find one of the Sheriff's deputies."

She pushed herself up off the pole and turned as if to go. Almost immediately, she heard Erin's voice coming from behind her. "Wait!"

Judy waited, but did not turn around, not right away. When she finally did, she saw her younger sister trying hard not to look shaken.

"What is it Erin?" Judy asked, (as if she didn't know.) "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine, Judy." The younger bunny insisted, "Really, and I don't need to go talk to any Sheriff's dep. I smacked up that creep up good."

For a hint of a second, Judy fought the urge to smile. Erin talking like a 'girl from da hood' sounded about as natural as Chief Bogo singing, 'Oops, I Did It Again'.

"Yes, and good for you that you did, sis," Judy nodded approvingly, and then her face turned utterly grim. "But what about the next girl he tries it with? No, we need to go report this and right now."

She turned away again, this time beckoning with a finger.

Erin did not follow her, instead assuming her favorite tough grrl stance.

"He won't," She said, "not after that mark I left upside his face." It was as close to a growl as was possible for a bunny…and sounded even more artificial than her attempt at 'homie-speak'.

Judy shook her head. "Yes, he will Erin, he'll just pick a weaker target next time." She tapped at her chest, the spot where she normally wore her badge. "Trust me, I know these things. Now, let's go."

"WAIT!" Erin called again, but this time there was a plaintive edge to her voice. She seemed to wilt for a second, and then looked down into the grass, unable to meet her sister's eyes.

"Okayyyy , he didn't really try to kiss me…"

"What happened, Erin?" Judy had assumed her earlier pose, once again waiting patiently.

That was how it went for the next twenty minutes. Erin would tell the story, and when she was done, Judy would simply ask, "What happened?" And with each retelling, another layer of varnish would come off, until the tale was finally pared down to the truth.
…including at least one little tidbit that Erin hadn't mentioned even to her girlfriends.

"….so then I heard a sound like a horn or something, and when I looked, all I saw were these two eyes like furnace vents. It scared the sweet be-cheezes out of me Judy, I swear, I almost wet myself."

She shuddered slightly at the memory, and Judy could see that this time her sister wasn't acting. Okay, now they could move on.

She put a paw on the younger bunny's shoulder.

"Look Erin, that boy was out of line with what he said, but that still doesn't justify you hitting him," she raised an ear and an eyebrow, "OR bragging about it to your friends. I have to say it little sis, that was really being a dumb bunny. Do you WANT mom to find out about this?"

Erin drew back in horror as if Judy had suddenly burst into flame. Why hadn't she thought of that herself?

"You won't tell her, will you?" Her voice was a high whimper.

Judy sighed and shook her head.

"No Erin, I won't tell on you, but I heard what you said back there; you thought I was mom for a second. And you were right to do that, because she's going to find out."

The younger bunny said nothing to this, only looked at her pitifully. Judy nonetheless caught the unspoken question, and sighed again; only this time it was more of a grumble.

"Yes Erin, she'll find out. She's MOM; she always find out."

"She won't…make me pull out of the talent show, will she?" Erin looked even more pathetic.

It was a question Judy hadn't anticipated and she had to think it over for a second. No, their mother wouldn't forbid Erin to participate in the talent show, not even for a worse offense than using her feet to settle an argument; there was much too much riding on the young girl-bunny's performance for that to happen. It was the dress rehearsal for her Performing Arts Academy audition after all. Their mother would never dream of…

"Judy, this is my LIFE!" Erin cried out suddenly, having mistaken her older sister's hesitation for something else.

The unexpected outburst sent Judy's train of thought skidding off the tracks for a second, and in the awkward silence that followed, another voice spoke up.

"Um, excuse me?"

Judy looked…and gasped, and then all at once her face became a granite mask with a twitching nose and laid-back ears.

"Nick! What the heck do you think you're doing?" She began thumping her foot so hard it punched a divot into the ground. "Darn you, this is a private conversation, and…"

…and he was supposed to be watching the other kids, and now they were probably hiding nearby and listening in, too. Before Judy could say this however, the red fox hurriedly raised his paws.

"I know, Carrots, but there's something YOU don't know, something very important that I need to
tell you both."

Judy stopped her tirade, but her foot continued to thump. And now Erin's foot joined in on backup.

"Go on." She said

Nick took a short breath and then turned to speak to Erin.

"I bumped into Conor right after he left the barn. He knows he was out of line with what he said, and he feels bad about it now.

Judy started to raise a finger, but then her partner quickly adjusted his sights.

"He made me promise not to talk about it, Carrots; that's why I didn't say anything before." He shrugged, adding, "But since you already know anyway, I figure now there's no harm in telling."

"Okay," Judy nodded, her ire rapidly cooling. Yes, they did need to know this, and if that was the case, Nick had been absolutely right to keep what he knew to himself.

She watched him turn to speak to her sister again.

"But there's one thing, Erin. Conor didn't realize was scaring you, he was looking at his cell-phone when you spotted him. I bet that if he'd seen you, he'd never have made that crack about a kiss."

Judy looked at Erin and then back towards Nick. No, and Erin sure as heck wouldn't have let on to Conor that he'd frightened her. Look at the way she'd kept it from her girlfriends. (It was the code of the tough grrls, you never showed fear—eh-VER!)

Heck, she'd had to PRY it out of her younger sister.

"I think if you told him about it, he'd apologize." Nick was saying, "He's halfway ready to say he's sorry already."

"Well there you go, little sis." Judy said, giving Nick a quick, appreciative nod and then laying a paw on Erin's shoulder again, "If mom finds out what happened but you've already buried the hatchet with Conor….well, then she won't be mad about it."

Erin spread her arms in exasperation; she still had a little 'tude left.

"How am I supposed to do that, Judy? He's working the table where they're selling those Japanese Gazelle shirts. You know how long it'll take me to get to the front of the line?"

"Sorry sis, but that's the way the carrot cake crumbles." Judy answered with a shrug. She suspected that having to wait in line wasn't the real reason Erin was balking at Nick's suggestion; she'd rather do anything than admit to Conor Lewis's face that he had frightened her.

"Almost anything." Judy coolly reminded herself, glancing away over the tops of the vendors' stalls and towards the gantry of the outdoor stage.

It didn't matter anyway because Nick Wilde had a ready solution to her sister's (alleged) dilemma.

"Allow me," he said, pulling out his cell-phone and holding it aloft in the manner of a stage magician presenting 'an ordinary object.'

Then he scrolled and punched in a number on his speed dial.
"Hello, Finnick? Listen, I know you're busy but can you put Conor on for just a second? Yeah, thanks." He waited and then, "Hi kid. Listen, I won't keep you, but I'm here with Erin and Judy Hopps and... No! No Conor, I didn't tell her, but Judy knows anyway; she overheard Erin talking about it to her friends. Yes, that's right. But listen, there's something you don't know, kid. Well it's something I think you need to hear from Erin, and not from me."

He held out the phone in Erin Hopps' direction, but Judy immediately waved him off, swiftly turning her gaze on Erin before the younger bunny could object.

"No sis, not over the phone; face to face."

Nick nodded and put the phone to his ear again.

"Did you hear that, Conor? Yeah. Yeah, okay, I'll tell her."

He put his paw over the phone again.

"He says he'll meet you in back of Finnick's van in half an hour. Is that good for you?"

"That works." Erin answered quickly, (more in response to the look Judy was giving her than the red fox's words.)

Nick nodded and spoke into the phone again. "She says okay. Right, bye now."

He put the cell away and Judy nodded.

"Okay Erin, I think we're done here. You can go."

Erin nodded and turned to leave, but then was quickly yanked back by a caveat from her older sister.

"Just so you know sis, I'm going to call and make sure you went through with it."

Erin thumped her foot again, but the protest that followed wasn't quite what Judy expected.

"Well DUH you're going to check up on me; give me some credit, huh Jude? I get enough of that 'dumb-bunny' garbage from other species, 'kay?"

And then she was gone.

"She's your sister, all right." Nick chuckled in the background.

"Can we go on the rides now?"

They turned and saw Cotton and Timmy, looking upwards with pouty expression.

"Well at least they're not arguing again." Judy thought with a wry smile.

There was no question of which ride to go on first; if they picked anything else, the Ferris wheel, the Orange Stringer, The Astro-Jets, The Flying Saucers, the Tea Party, The Carousel, etc. the kids would invariably demand, "Why can't we go on the roller-coaster?"

And so the roller coaster it was, an attraction that went by the simple name of Bald Mountain.

Actually Judy was as eager as any of her brothers and sisters to get on the coaster, though for a slightly different reason.
Here was her chance to get a picture of Nick Wilde, the fox who never let things get to him, (yeah, right!) screaming like a little girl—perhaps even catch him on video. The thought was enough to make her ears want to curl up like cinnamon rolls. Ooooo, eeeeyes!

Someone nudged her from behind.

"Judy, the line's moving."

"Oops, sorry Jessie."

She hurriedly stashed her cell phone. Yes, it was set for the camera function, yes the lens was clean, yes she had enough data storage, so stop your fidgeting Judy Hopps.

The coaster was a newer one, with rails set on a brightly painted triangular frame. Judy counted three loops, two corkscrews and a spiral. If one of those things didn't get the fox going, another one surely would.

And speaking of Nick, when she turned and looked back for a second, Judy saw something that made her ears stand up and her nose start twitching.

The red fox was gazing out over the amusement concession, his face a kaleidoscope of different emotions. First he was smiling, and then his expression turned wistful, then deep-blue sad, and then his hackles rose in momentary fury.

And then they lay back down again, and a sad smile crossed his face.

"What the heck is going on with him?" Judy wondered. It was heard to tell; Nick had donned his mirrored sunglasses and she couldn't see his eyes.

What she did see was the fox take out his cell-phone and scroll through if for second, staring down at something on the screen with an expression of…of…

Judy felt her ears rise up again. "Wha…? Nick almost looks like he's going to start crying."

Then the line moved forward once again, snapping both of them out of it.

The coaster cars turned out to be arranged in standard order; a single car up front for the rodents, then two cars for the smaller mammals, and three more behind for the larger species, the seats getting progressively bigger the further back you went. When the Hopps party boarded the ride, Judy found herself in the second car, with Timmy seated beside her, and Nick Wilde sitting directly behind.

She had planned it this way; when the time came, all she'd have to do was take out her cell, aim it over her shoulder and…

"Please Carrots, DON'T show that thing around the precinct, ppleaseeese?"

"Wellll, I don't know, Nick..."

YES!

As before, little Cotton insisted upon attaching herself to the fox, sitting beside him and holding his paw. (She would have been seated in his lap again if the attendant hadn't vetoed the idea.)

Settling a little deeper into her seat, Judy pulled down the safety bar and waited. A second later, the coaster pulled away from the entrance platform and began to churn its way up the ramp.
'Bald Mountain' was an apt name for the attraction. Like all mobile coasters it came with no frills and no scenery, depending entirely on twists, turns, drops, and loops for its thrills.

And speaking of drops, they had reached the top of the lift-hill, and down we go!

The initial drop was almost vertical, and Judy nearly forgot to grab her camera phone. All around her the kids were screaming. Was Nick losing it too? She couldn't tell; there were too many other shrieking voices for her to pick his out of the chaos.

From the first drop, the coaster went over a series of rolling hillocks. It was fairly tame stuff, and she didn't even try to get a picture of the fox. But now came the first loop, and Judy had to hold her cell-phone in practically a death grip to keep from it from slipping away as the car went up, over, and upside-down. Behind her there were more screams—and also the sound of one of the larger mammals saying 'adios' to his lunch. From there the coaster went into another drop, shorter than the first and then into the first corkscrew. (She barely got her phone out in time for that one.) Another drop followed and then another, and then the cars went into a second loop, smaller than the first. Judy didn't bother with the camera-phone here; she wanted to save it for what she knew was coming up.

Because here came the second lift-hill.

This time the drop took them straight into a corkscrew. Luckily for Judy Hopps, she saw it coming in plenty of time and was able to get the phone-cam ready. From there, the coaster went into another series of rolling hills and then up and around the big loop. Now Nick was screaming; Judy was sure that she heard him, and she switched the phone to video cam, recording for a full ten seconds as the coaster went flying around the arc.

But the Bald Mountain Coaster still had one more card to play, the rattlesnake, a circular vortex in which the cars spun around an ever-tightening series of coiled tracks.

When the coaster eased back into the station, Judy couldn't wait to pull up the safety bar, though not for the same reason as some of her fellow riders. ("I wanna get off! I wanna get off!" a young feline voice was chanting a somewhere behind her.)

No, in the case of Judy Hopps it was because she couldn't wait to see what treasures her cell-phone camera must have captured; she was like a lotto ticket holder who just KNOWS that hers is the winning number.

But first she had to get some privacy. No problem; she simply excused herself to go use the little girl bunny's room and off she went.

She had to wait nearly a full minute for an empty stall; it seemed like six hours. But then finally it was her turn and she bounded inside the waiting cubicle, shutting the door behind her and scrolling eagerly through her cell-phone's picture library.

Almost immediately, her face fell into the linoleum. "What the…?"

The first pic was from the initial drop; and not only was Nick not screaming, he wasn't even raising his arms—or holding on to the safety bar. Instead, his arms were lying folded across his midsection, and his face looked like…like…

"Sweet cheese n' crackers, he almost looks bored!" Judy gaped, barely able to register what she was seeing.

She scrolled on to the next picture. This was the one from the first loop and it was even more
bewildering that the first image. Once again, Nick looked as cool as one of the Pawpsicles he used to sell.

"And how the HECK did you manage to keep your sunglasses from falling off?" Judy's voice was almost screaming in her head.

The bunny's mood did not improve in the next few minutes; every one—every single one of the pictures that followed showed Nick wearing that same insouciant, 'yeah, whatever' look on his face. Through the corkscrews, the loops, the drops, even the vortex his expression never wavered. The video footage was even worse; it was as if he'd substituted a wax dummy of himself right before the coaster pulled out.

And the worst part was—Judy was certain of it—the red fox hadn't had a clue that she was filming him.

Jamming the phone back in its holster Judy banged the stall door open, so hard the wall shook and several other females stared. The Bunny ignored them all, stomping out of the powder room and back into the sunlight.

"Spoil MY fun, will you Nick?" she silently demanded of the fox…and speaking of that double-crosser, where the heck was he anyway?

Using her paw as makeshift visor, Judy turned in a slow circle, raising her ears like antennae. No Nick, but somewhere nearby a kid was performing the famous 'broken record' skit, "CAN'T we go again?" CAN'T we go again?" (It was the same young leopard cub who'd been begging to be taken off the coaster only moments ago.)

Judy finally spotted him waiting in line for the Furris Wheel with her younger siblings, giving little Cotton a ride on his shoulders.

And something inside of the bunny seemed to grab her and pull her back.

"What the heck is your problem, Jude? You should be showing Nick some admiration, not acting like he just dropped your birthday cake. And why did you even want that picture anyway?"

She took two long breaths and went over to him. Though her irritation had evaporated, she was still curious; just how had Nick managed to stay so calm throughout the ride…and how had he kept his shades from falling off for that matter?

The answer to the second question came almost immediately. Approaching the fox from the rear, Judy saw that his sunglasses were secured to his face by way of a neoprene strap encircling the back of his neck. D'ohhh, right; surfers used those things, too. Clever guy, that Nick Wilde.

But that still left her other question unanswered. Sidling up next to her partner Judy asked him, as casually as she could, "So, how did you like the roller coaster, Nick?"

The red-fox cleared his throat.

"Oh it was okay, Carrots," he answered, offering a small shrug, "but honestly, it could have been better and it could have been a LOT more scary."

"Really? How?" Judy felt her nose beginning to twitch.

"Well...take that first drop out of the lift-hill." Nick answered—and did he sound just a little uncomfortable? She couldn't quite tell.
"I mean, you come off the hill and down you go, whoosh." The fox was saying, illustrating the point with the flat of his paw. "A better way to do it is to have the drop start off gradually and then suddenly turn steep when the riders aren't expecting it. Same thing with the loops; you want at least one of them where the coaster slows down when it gets to the top of the curve, make it feel for a second as if you're about to get stuck in the air, hanging upside-down. Then when the car starts to go down again, make it sudden so that the passengers aren't ready for it. That's what makes for a great roller coaster ride, Carrots; it should always have a few surprises up its sleeve—and this one didn't"

"Ah, I see," Judy answered, trying hard to conceal her bewilderment. She had brought Nick on board the Bald Mountain coaster hoping to see him freak; instead she was getting a critique, and it only led to the biggest riddle of all.

Where the heck had he learned all this stuff?

Unable to gather her thoughts, Judy looked at her watch for a second.

Erin should just now be making her rendezvous with Conor Lewis. She hoped it would go well, because at least one of the things she'd said to her younger sister was a truism as old as the hills.

Mom always does find out.

"Wait a minute, hold it. You didn't KNOW I was a fox?"

Conor Lewis was T-boning with his paws again, staring dumfounded at Erin Hopps.

They were out behind Finnick's van on dealer's row, while on the other side, the sale continued at full tilt. Luckily the fennec-fox had been able to buttonhole one of the sheriff's deputies, a bobcat, into helping them maintain order. It was the only reason he'd been able to spare Conor, even for a couple of minutes.

Erin held up a paw, pawlm outward.

"Swear to heck, I've never seen a fox with fur that color before. I didn't even know there was such a thing as a silver fox until my girlfriend Lisa told me about it."

Conor shoved his paws in his pockets and looked away for a second.

"Yeahhh, we are getting kind of rare," he admitted in a melancholy half mumble.

It was an opening, and Erin quickly took advantage of it.

"Look, I'm sorry for going off on you like that, really." She said, "You scared the heck out of me fox." She went on, repeating in a rush what she'd said to her older sister. When she finished, she braced herself up, waiting for the inevitable rejoinder. 'Then why the heck didn't you say so in the first place?'

There was no comeback; Conor Lewis might never have heard his fellow fox's credo, 'Never let them see that they get to you,' but he understood the principle well enough. No, Erin wouldn't have wanted him to know she was afraid of him, not under those conditions. (HE wouldn't have either, had the situation been reversed.)

"Right, yeah I can see that now." he said, and then solemnly raised a paw, Ranger-Scout style, "And what you just told me, isn't going any further than right here, right now. You follow what I'm
Erin nodded, but then she felt her ears standing up.

"Yeah, thanks but…"

"But what…?"

The bunny scratched at her nose, it was starting to twitch.

"Well that thing you just said, 'follow what I'm bringing out'? I never heard that expression before, is that something else from Zoo York?"

Conor's mouth pulled sideways for a second.

"Ehhh, sort of," he said, flipping a pawlm, "It's something another fox I knew back there used to say all the time. I guess I sorta picked it up from him."

"Kay," Erin nodded, and the young silver fox took a slow, deep breath.

"And I'm sorry for that…that thing I said about you kissing me. That was out of line." He squeezed his eyes shut for a second, and even through the black fur of his ears, the young bunny could have sworn she saw a hint of rising blush.

Then he looked at her again, and Erin felt a wave of disquiet. Even in contrition, there was something unsettling in those molten amber eyes of his.

"And…I hope you understand that I never would of actually tried to kiss you."

"Better not have, boy." Erin thought, (with more self-assurance than she felt) and then she said, "Yes, I know." And then it was her turn to feel a rising heat in her face. "And…I-I'm sorry for hitting you, Conor, really."

The young fox only shrugged and flipped his pawlm again, "Ahhh forget about it, Erin. I had it coming, know what I mean?"

Erin blinked as the realization came over her. She'd suspected it all along, but only on a subconscious plane. But now the thought was front and center—and now she was all but certain of it.

Conor had LET her plant that foot in his face…and now that the girl-bunny thought about it, he hadn't even flinched when she'd connected with him. It was as if he hadn't felt a thing.

Erin forced herself not to shudder. Without meaning to, the silver fox was scaring her again—but she wasn't about to own up to it, not again.

As things turned out, she didn't need to. The young fox seemed to sense her discomfort and quickly changed the subject.

"So, what time you playing again? 7:30, that right?"

"Yes, that's right," the girl bunny answered, the urge to get the heck out of here fading just enough to keep her in place for the moment.

"Cool," the silver fox offered her a thumbs-up. "What song you got in mind?"
Erin couldn't help grinning. "Adam's song by Mink 182."

The reaction she got was wholly unanticipated; she had expected either wicked delight or white-eared shock. Instead, this stupid fox was...frowning?

"What?" she demanded, feeling the ire starting to seep in through the cracks once more; "that song a little too edgy for you fox-boy?"

"No, too depressing." Conor answered, shaking his head. "If it were part of a set, yeah, but if you're only playing one song, you probably wanna stay away from a downer tune like that."

Erin internal temperature went up by fifteen degrees. Where the heck did this...this FOX get off lecturing her? She felt her paws go straight to her hips.

"Oh, and I suppose you think I should play something nice like 'Girlfriend' or 'You belong With Me?'"

"No," Conor answered her, refusing to take the bait, "I think you should play something edgy yeah, but also upbeat, "Get This Party Started." You'd crush that song, or 'Would I Lie To You?' by the Ewerhythmics, that one would give you a chance to strut your stuff on vocals AND on bass."

For just a hint of a second, Erin hesitated. The fox was right; either one of those tunes WOULD be great for her to perform.

But there was no way she was admitting it to this jerk. She pointed to the base of her neck and leaned forward.

"Listen bushytail, when I want your advice, I'll ask to be talked out of it."

"Whatever." Conor shrugged and turned to go, but then stopped and looked over a shoulder.

'By the way Erin, I'm signed up to perform myself, tomorrow night at 8," he winked, "just in case you're interested."

"I'm NOT!" she snapped, thinking, "Dang fox-creep, always trying to get in the last word!"

With that, the young bunny turned and stepped into her huff, and then departed in it.

Chapter End Notes

There is an Easter Egg in this chapter, (actually several of them,) referring to a certain series of theme parks we all know and love.
Days of Carrots and Blueberries (Continued…Pt. 10)

Chapter Summary

Home again home gain…and few home truths.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries (Continued…Pt. 10)

"Wha..? Ohhhhhhhhhhh, I am naked!"

Judy yanked her paw away as if the door to her hutch was booby-trapped. Sweet cheez n' crackers, she'd come THAT close to walking out into the hallway in a state of nature. (And with her luck, Nick Wilde would have been right outside the door.)

The truly disconcerting part was that this was the first time one of Judy Hopps' 'city habits' had followed her home to the Burrows. In her apartment back in Zootopia she could get from the bed to the bathroom without need for a robe. No such luck here in the Hopps family warren; the bathroom was three doors down the hall from her hutch, and the chances of making it that far without bumping into someone rested somewhere between being hit by lighting on a sunny day and flagging down a bullet-train.

She went to the closet and started to get dressed, a little nicer outfit than the one she worn earlier, embroidered shirt and khaki vest, together with a flowered skirt. She wanted to look good for Erin's talent show debut.

By now—Judy was certain of it—her mother had to be aware of the encounter between her sister Erin and the silver fox Conor Lewis. Just as she'd promised, Judy had checked to make sure her sis had kept her part of the bargain—and had learned that the end result had been an armed truce, if not a full reconciliation.

Hopefully, that would be enough for their mom.

In point of fact, Judy had bumped into her mother, together with her dad, just as she, Nick Wilde, and the kids were exiting the ride concession…and the timing couldn't have been better. The
youngsters had all been clamoring to go on the coaster again, and they might never have lain off
had their mother not flatly declared, "You have two more days left; that's plenty of time to go
again," and that had been that. (Bonnie Hopps might have been incapable of putting her foot down
where her brother Terry was concerned, but her children were another matter.)

Just the same, Judy could understand her younger siblings' not wanting to leave the ride
concession. They'd all had grand time, her and Nick included. On the carousel ride, the fox and her
sister Cotton had formed a tag team to grab the brass ring, a feat that had earned the little bunny a
huge stuffed dragon, whom she'd promptly name Elliot and promised to love 'forever and ever and
ever and ever'.

Even now, checking herself in the mirror, Judy had to wonder how the fox had pulled off that
coup; he'd seemed to know exactly when to make the move, and instead of stretching out sideways
as most animals would have, he had leaned over backwards with Cotton sitting on his chest and she
had grabbed the ring on the upswing of the wooden unicorn they'd been riding.

It was yet another piece of unexplained inside knowledge on Nick Wilde's part. How had he known
to use that trick?

Meeting up with Judy's folks had been a fortuitous occurrence for her and the fox. They'd been able
to leave the kids with her mom and dad—except for Cotton, who had refused to be parted from
Nick—and finally go get some shopping done.

In addition to the Farmer's Market, there were three other shopping areas at the Carrot Days
Festival. Of these, the best was the Craft Market followed by Dealers' Row and with the Flea
Market trailing at a distant third. ("Not even close to the one at the Meerkat Market," Nick had said
and Judy had agreed wholeheartedly.)

They had come away from the excursion with plenty of swag; Nick found himself a snappy new
summer fedora and a tie-dye Hawaiian shirt, while Judy bought herself a bookcase for her
apartment, (making arrangements to have it picked up later, though she had no idea how she was
going to get it back to the city.) From a craft-booth selling paw-made kites, they had bought one
kite for Cotton and another to take back to Zootopia.

Finally, arms full and unable to carry any more, they had headed for the Hopps Family Farm booth,
hoping to catch a ride home with somebody. On the way back, they had passed by Finnick's van—
and found it gone. In its place was a sign reading simply, 'Sorry, Sold Out'.

"Wow those shirts really were a hot ticket." Judy had said…and received only something like a
grunt for an answer from Nick. What the heck was up with him?

Glancing over, Judy had seen a look of envy on the red fox's face, and also a look of longing. She'd
had to smile; even now, two years after joining the ZPD and nearly ready to make detective, there
was still some little part of Nick Wilde that missed getting into the action.

"Too bad you missed them," she'd added, unable to think of anything else to say, "You never got a
chance to say good-bye."

"Oh they're still around, Carrots," Nick had said, his cheery mood rapidly returning, "Conor told
me he's playing in the talent show tomorrow night."

Judy's ears had shot straight upwards. A Saturday slot; how had the kid managed that one?

"One of the others canceled." Her companion had shrugged. (Anticipating some questions was a
cakewalk for the fox.)

When they got to the Hopps Family Farm booth, Nick and Judy had lucked out yet again. One of her older brothers was just about to head for the homestead and yes he had plenty of room in the back.

It had made their day a runaway success—at least up to that point.

The instant Judy stepped through the front door of the Hopps' Warren, she had felt like she was walking into a wall of fatigue; the day's nonstop activity was finally catching up with her. Saying good-bye for now to Nick, (who himself had been yawning on practically every other breath,) she had all but stumbled into her hutch to take a nap, remembering nothing after closing the door behind her.

Now, after giving herself a final inspection in the bedroom mirror, Judy smoothed down her face with her fingertips and turned for the door.

She did not step out into the hallway immediately, instead waiting for an opening in the traffic. (In a warren with more than 250 family members there was always traffic in the halls.)

Her first stop was the hutch next to hers where she rapped tentatively on the door.

"Nick, you awake in there?"

"He got up about half an hour ago, Jude," said a voice from behind, whom she recognized as belonging to her elder brother, Stuart Hopps Jr. "He's down in the living room, I think."

"Oh, thanks Stu."

Well, since the fox was already up, that gave Judy some time to freshen up; she returned to her room to grab a towel and then headed for the doe's bathroom. A few minutes later, freshly cleaned and smelling faintly of strawberries and lavender, she exited back into the hallway, ready to face the rest of the day.

Or…was it still day-time? With a start, Judy realized that she didn't know; she hadn't checked yet. A look at her watch however quickly reassured her; quarter to five, she hadn't slept for as long as she'd thought. (Nick had barely slept at all if he'd been up for half an hour.)

She could only hope the fox had been wise enough have someone guide him to the living room. For a first-time visitor, the Hopps Family Warren was about as easy to navigate as an M.C. Fisher lithograph. None of the hallways went in a straight line, cul-de-sacs often appeared out of nowhere, and a stairway that went downwards might take you to a ramp that led up to an even higher level than where you'd started. The entire layout seemed to have been thrown together in a fit of madness, but Judy knew it was madness with a method, specifically insulation and air circulation. The Hopps' warren might have made the Labyrinth of Minos look simple, but it was cool in the summer and snug in the winter, and a more than fair trade-off as far as Judy was concerned.

And of course, she knew her way around the place.

At the end of the hallway, Judy turned right, passing by the door to the laundry room, an affair as big as any of the commercial services back in Zootopia, complete with chutes. From there, she went by the spiraling ramp that wound past the younger bunnies' hutches, feeling a wave of nostalgia wash over her. (It was here she had spent the first few years of her life.) From there, she descended a short flight of steps, coming to a five-point junction, and taking the second passage on the right. This led her through the family library and into another meandering tunnel and then to
another crossroads. Here was also the top of a spiral slide, leading down one level.

She got in line and waited her turn

At the bottom of the slide, Judy found herself facing an archway topped by a pair of rabbit ears, (again for sake of ventilation rather than simple aesthetics.)

She stepped through and out onto the middle balcony, overlooking the family dining room.

The big dining area was a cheerful place, dressed up in the Hopps family colors of pink and yellow, with tables in the shape of five-petal flowers, most of which were occupied. In the center of the room, Judy could see a ring of young bunnies, holding paws and turning in a circle.

It was also vast enclosure, as big a blimp hangar, with three rows of balconies, all front by 'eared' archways like the one behind her. One level below, she could see a caravan of toddler bunnies in a 'rolling saucer train', being pulled by a boy on a tricycle.

And there, at the far end of the room, behind another trio of archways was the Hopps family kitchen. And there was her mother, standing at the stove under an air-hopper the size of an army tent, supervising the preparation of the evening meal along with several of her siblings and two of
They were actually not that busy, only doing prep work for later. The family would eat just a light meal before leaving to watch Erin in the talent show, and then a larger meal would be served upon their return.

Erin...yes, their mom must have heard by now

Judy turned and went back through the archway and took the stairs to the ground floor. Entering the kitchen, she greeted her mother with a peck on the cheek. "Hi mom, can I help with anything?"

"Sure can, Judy." Her mom answered, "Can you cover up those pans with some paper toweling and put them in the refrigerator for later?" She pointed to a row of baking sheets on a side table, stacked with folded half-moons of dough resembling oversized turnover pies. These Judy knew were the famous Hopps vegetable pasties. A good choice she thought; when the family returned from the talent show, all they'd need to do was pop them in the oven for thirty minutes and dinner would be would be on the table.

She had gotten about three of the pans transferred, when her mother asked, very casually, "So I suppose you heard about Erin's trouble with that fox?"

"Yep, I heard," Judy answered, trying to keep her tone light. So her mother did know about Erin and Conor; well, anyone could have predicted that much. The question was, how much did she know? More importantly, how much of what she'd been told was accurate?

There was only one way to be certain, the bunny swiftly decided, and that was to tell her mother everything she knew.

"I got it straight from the rabbit's mouth, as a matter of fact." she said and then went on to relate for her mother the conversation she'd overheard, and the 'interview' that had followed, being sure to include Nick Wilde's side of the story.

"And did Erin follow thought on her promise?" Bonnie queried over her shoulder.

"She did, mom." Judy nodded quickly, "I called to make sure; she did."

"Good," her mother answered, nodding as she went back to her work, "Then I don't think I need to say anything else to Erin about it."

Judy started to nod back, but then her mother surprised her by turning around and pointing with the carrot she'd been peeling.

"Just the same that boy—Conner did you say his name was?—that fox had better keep away from her from now on."

"Mom?" Judy's ears were standing up and seemed to have lengthened by six inches. This sharp tone of voice was almost completely unlike her mother.

"Talking that way to my daughter—a kiss!" Bonnie grumbled, and then her voice tightened even further, "And a FOX saying things like that!"

"Sis, shhhhh!" another voice hissed, "Judy's partner is a fox, remember?"

It was one of her aunts, speaking in a low murmur. Nice try but with her ears still standing at full salute, Judy had caught it anyway.
Meanwhile her mother remained unmoved.

"Yes, he is—and Stu and I are business partners with a fox." Bonnie answered her sister smoothly, and then her features darkened two shades, "But that's different Tess; you'd never hear Nick saying something like that to Judy."

She glanced in her daughter's direction as if to validate the point. She had more to say on the subject, but Judy didn't hear it. In the back of her mind the scene inside Rafaj Brothers' Jewelers was unspooling once again.

"Thank goodness that video is sealed evidence." Judy reminded herself for the twentieth time. Just the same, she remained uneasy. So there WAS a limit to her mother's tolerance of foxes. And that was just her mom; heaven only knew what her father would say—or especially her grandfather.

(Erin would probably try to blackmail her!)

She covered the last tray with a paper towel and slipped into the fridge, trying not to think.

"All right, that's everything." her mother said, wiping flour from her paws and looking pleased. "Judy, can you go out to the south lawn and tell everyone to come in for first supper?"

"On my way," Judy answered, turning to go, (and secretly eager to go.)

The south lawn was only a stone's throw away from the dining room…horizontally. Vertically it was a good four stories higher. The warren had an elevator, but since joining the ZPD, Judy never missed a chance to keep active and opted for the stairs instead, racing up them two at a time.

But when she exited onto the back porch, she was surprised to find it almost deserted.

That is, until she looked out onto the lawn, "Aw, Nick."

The fox was seated cross legged on the ground, with a heap of young bunnies all around him, and an open book in his lap. Several of the youngsters were leaning in close and little Cotton was perched on his shoulders looking down over the top of his head while he read aloud to the congregation.
He was upwind from where Judy was standing, and she could easily make out the words.

"Sink me! Your tailors have betrayed you! T'would serve you better to send THEM to Madam Guillotine."

Nick was speaking in a foppish English accent…and Judy was wryly shaking her head.

'The Scarlet Pimpernel'—of course.

"Ohhhh Nick, I was so right to bring you here," she thought, and then sighed inwardly, reminding herself that the only way to deal with an unpleasant task is to just get it over with.

She strolled out onto the grass and clapped her paws.

"Okay everyone, supper's almost ready; time to close up."
The reaction to this was wholly predictable.

"Awwww, just one more chapter, pleeeeeease?"

Judy folded her arms and thumped her foot.

"No Nick, it's time to get inside. And no arguments from you guys either, kids."

Chapter End Notes

Author’s note: the description of the Hopp’s Family Warren is based on some of Matthias Lechner’s concept drawings for the original version of Zootopia. If you haven’t seen them, you need to; they’re amazing.

http://www.matthiaslechnner.com/zootopia.html

Nick reading to the Hopps kids was taken from one of my favorite pieces of Zootopia fan art.
https://www.deviantart.com/art/Bunn.....ting-596465601

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The Easter eggs in the previous chapter were, "...if they picked anything else, the Ferris wheel, # the Orange Stringer, The Astro-Jets, The Flying Saucers, the Tea Party, # The Carousel, etc."

All the rides listed between the hashtags are, or were, attractions at one of the Disney theme parks.

Also, the name of the roller coaster. If you've ever been to Disneyland, Walt Disney World, etc, you've noted that many if not all the coasters have names including the word 'Mountain' - Space Mountain, Splash Mountain, Big Thunder Mountain, etc. And of course Bald Mountain comes from the piece playing during the Apocalypse sequence in the Fantasia.
Days of Carrots and Blueberries (Continued…Pt. 11)

Chapter Summary

To quote Luke Skywalker, this is not going to end the way you think.

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries
(Continued…Pt. 11)

They came in three vehicles. Once again Judy was riding with Nick, sitting up front in the Hopps Family Farm truck. Next in line was a venerable Jeep Furrokee with her mother at the wheel and Erin seated beside her. Bringing up the rear was the standby ride for smaller Hopps outings, a stretched passenger van that had once belonged to the county.

Not everyone in the clan had joined Erin Hopps-talent show caravan. (Good thing; even if they'd snagged every vehicle in the warren, there wouldn't have have been space for everyone.) Just the same, when Erin stepped into the spotlight later on this evening, she'd have a decent sized cheering-section in the audience.

Judy turned and glanced through the truck's rear window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the younger bunny. Yep, there was Erin, wearing an expression that would have made stone sphinx proud—frozen and immobile, showing no emotion whatsoever.

She wasn't fooling anyone, especially her older sister. Judy knew from her own experience that Erin's stoic façade was just that-a façade. It was the same look she'd had on HER face while waiting in the foyer of the Zootopia Police Academy, preparing to make the pitch for why she should be the first animal admitted into the ZPD under then-Mayor Lionheart's mammal-inclusion initiative.

To the outside world, Erin Hopps might appear to be all placid and serene, but on the inside—Judy was certain of it—she was pins, needles, and butterflies. It couldn't have been more obvious if someone had spray painted it across the Furrokee's windshield in day-glo orange paint.

"And this is only Carrot Days talent show." Judy reminded herself. "She still has to get through the big one, her ZAPA audition." Hopefully whatever happened here tonight would give her sister a boost for that upcoming endeavor.
At the theater's rear entrance, Erin and her family were forced to separate; the backstage area being strictly reserved for stagehands, security, and performers waiting to go on. (There had been incidents in the past involving anxious parents.)

"Well this is it." Erin offered a wan smile as she hefted her guitar and pedalboard case, too excited and/or terrified to display any attitude now.

It reflected in the ensemble she'd chosen for her performance, a pair of black yoga pants, topped by a pair of torn denim shorts, and a black lace tank top over a wine-red t-shirt. The only item remaining from earlier in the day was the collar she'd been wearing at the train station.

Best of all, as far as Judy was concerned, Erin had ditched the heavy eye makeup in favor of something a bit more subtle. Now her deep blue eyes were only lined in black and the lids had been left untouched. It gave the younger bunny a sultry air that somehow seemed to fit the occasion perfectly.

"Wish me luck." She said, flashing that skittish grin once more. (NOW she looked like the girl Judy remembered from her previous visits.)

"Good lu…" Judy started to shout, along with Nick, her dad, and several of the other bunnies. But then Bonnie Hopps quickly shushed them all.

"No, no, no, not 'good luck,' you'll jinx her."

Everyone immediately stifled themselves while Bonnie turned to her daughter with a beaming smile. "Break a leg, Erin."

"Break a leg!" A chorus of voices echoed.

"Break both your legs!" A youngster's voice piped up from somewhere near the back of the throng, and another young voice quickly jumped in on it.

"Break both your legs and your neck and also your…"

"Timmy!"

"Sorr-reeee…"

Erin laughed so hard she nearly dropped her gear.

And then she set it down and went rushing to her parents, throwing her arms around their necks and hugging them tight.

"Love you mom, love you dad." She said, and then added with a sniffle, "And I'm sorry for being such a jerk these last few days."

"It's okay Erin." Bonnie reassured her, hugging her back. "You just go out there and make us proud."

"I will," Erin promised, and then grabbed her things and disappeared through the gate.

Almost immediately, it was her father's turn to sniffle. "Ohhhhh, darn waterworks!" he blubbered, prompting a weary groan from his wife.

"Oh Stu, for heaven's sake; what are you going to do when she leaves for school?"
Before dropping Erin off at the stage entrance, Bonnie had wisely sent some of the other Hopps bunnies to put dibs on seats for the rest of the family.

And now that precaution was paying off; no sooner had Judy and the others passed through the gate than they saw Art, Violet, and Stuart Hopps Junior beckoning from the fourth row, just right of center stage. Not the best seats in the house, but still good ones and they had managed to corral an entire row of chairs for the group.

"Good work," Judy thought, but then another, unsettling idea crept in and settled on top of it. Had it really been such a good idea to bring so many family members for Erin's first performance? Her little sister was under enough pressure already without adding that to the mix.

True, even with the Hopps family contingent present and accounted for, the Carrot Days Amphitheater was only filled to half capacity, but Erin would still be facing a much bigger crowd, (by a factor of three at least,) than the one that witnessed Judy's performance those many moons ago.

"Please let her do well," she silently prayed, clasping her paws as she took her seat.

Settling into her chair, Judy became aware of a cluster of young, giggly voices, emanating from somewhere towards the front of the audience. She swiveled her ears in that direction and at once, the voices switched from familiar to easily recognizable; Erin's girlfriends, sitting front and center by the sound of things.

Judy wondered for a second if that was a good or a bad thing—and then finally decided 'good thing.' These girls had been her sister's friends with since forever; having them up front would be a tonic, not a burden.

She frowned for a second as another thought occurred to her, and then turned to the fox in the adjoining chair.

"Think Conor's here tonight, Nick?" With the Gazelle tour-shirts all sold out, it was a strong probability, but who really knew for certain?

Nick Wilde didn't know, as things turned out. Raising his nose and sniffing the air, he pursed his lips and quickly lowered it again.

"Sorry Carrots, no idea. I'm not catching his scent, but that doesn't mean he's not around. Look how breezy it is out here tonight." He raised a paw, gesturing towards one of the pennants, fluttering atop the stage. "Honestly, he could be three feet away from me and I wouldn't be able to smell him, not if he was staying downwind."

"Right, right, yeah.. " Judy sighed. After two years as Nick Wilde's partner she had come to understand that even his sense of smell wasn't infallible.

Then a voice from behind her spoke up:

"Hey there Judy, we made it."

Judy turned and saw Bobby and Belinda Catmull seated in the next row, together with a pair of older cougars whom she recognized at once.

"Hey Bobby, Hey Lin," She said, and then turned quickly to her parents, nudging her father in the elbow, "Mom, Dad? Look who's here."
The instant Bonnie and Stu turned around their faces broke into a pair of broad smiles.

"Well hello Gordon!" Her father quickly thrust a paw in the elder cougar's direction.

"H'lo yerself Stuart Hopps," the big cat answered, taking it.

Gordon Catmull was one of the most respected mammals in the Bunnyburrows community. The owner and manager of Catmull Farm and Ranch Supply, he was always willing to extend some extra credit to a local farmer having a bad year. More than once, the Hopps family had benefitted from the cougar's generosity, and Judy's parents had never forgotten it. Gordon's wife Betsy Catmull was a fine one as well; deeply involved in charity work. (She was head of the local Red Cross Chapter.)

"So it's your daughter Erin performing tonight is that right?" Betsy was asking, indicating the stage with a wave of her paw.

"That's my girl." Stu answered unable to suppress a grin. Judy couldn't help noting that her parents hadn't shown this kind of enthusiasm for her talent show performance, but that was okay. Back then there'd been no such thing as a bunny-cop 'Bunnies don't do that,' her father had said.

A rabbit singer/musician on the other paw was anything but an unknown quantity—and hadn't been for a long time now. Erin's first musical hero, the animal who had inspired her to pursue a career in music herself was also a rabbit, the great Bunny Raitt. And even though Judy's younger sister had since moved on to what she called the harder stuff, she had never lost her affection for Bunny's music; she could still be heard singing it around the warren.

In fact, although Judy couldn't know it, her younger sister was humming one of Bunny's tunes to herself at that very moment, 'I Will Not Be Broken', her go-to song whenever her confidence needed a shot in the arm.

How, she wondered, had she ever managed to come this far without ever once having performed in front of a live audience?

Okay, all right, that wasn't quite true; Erin had played and sung for her friends, (and her family of course,) but never for a gathering of strangers, much less a crowd as big as the one here tonight.

Anyone seeing the young rabbit, humming nervously to herself while she paced back and forth in the wings might have justifiably assumed that Erin Hopps was suffering from a bad case stage fright.

And they would have been mistaken. Erin's bugaboo wasn't anxiety, it was perfectionism; everything had to be just right for her performance or else it wasn't good enough. (She was hardly alone in this; there were many other rockers with the same quirk. The legendary guitarist Jeff Buck was known to cancel entire tours if everything wasn't going his way.)

What was really driving Judy's sister to distraction was great fear of all entertainers, the possibility of having to go on stage in the wake of someone better than her. Even at the age of thirteen, Erin knew that for any performer, this was the death sentence—and also something over which she had no control, (the worst part!)

So far, it had been so good. The first animal she'd seen onstage had been a high-school bunny with a juggling act...who'd kept losing his props every few minutes, (and then come off the stage acting like he'd owned it, much to the amusement of everyone in the wings, Erin included.)
The animal out there now was someone she knew, Bobby Flowers a skunk and also an amateur stage magician. She rated him no more than 50/50, a virtuoso with his tricks and illusions but possessing all the stage charisma of an unvarnished footstool; every word he said to the audience was delivered in a flat monotone. The applause that greeted the finale of his performance was only a notch or two better than polite.

But the next animal up, ahhhh, here was the one that might offer the possibility of bettering Erin at her own game.

Maya Curry was a black sheep, three years older than her and the niece of Sharla Curry, one of her older sister Judy's best friends. Though she didn't play an instrument, Maya had a great singing voice; her specialty was the blues and on a good day, she could kill it. While it was never in Erin Hopp's nature to wish ill on anyone else, at least a part of her couldn't help but hope that this would not be one of Maya's better nights.

The bad news (for Erin) was that Maya Curry was in excellent voice this evening. The good news was, for some inexplicable reason she had chosen to perform the song 'Rehab' by Amy Whitemouse, a tune not calculated to go down well with an audience of staid farmers.

And it didn't; by the end of the first verse, the crowd was a sea of scowls and folded arms. (Erin saw at least one set of parents take their children and leave.) It was a reception Maya clearly hadn't counted on; midway through the tune her tone began to falter and the rest of her performance could only be described as a game effort.

Watching her practically stumble off the stage, Erin was immensely grateful that she had changed her mind about performing Adam's Song tonight. (And no, her decision had nothing to do with that smartmouth silver-fox, Conor Lewis. Absolutely not, are you kidding me?)

No, instead she had decided on a different song, a bass driven tune with some soaring vocals on the chorus.

"I'm just glad that fox isn't going on ahead of me."

Erin started and almost gasped. The thought had come into her head straight out of left field. And why should she care whether HE was performing ahead of her? She was better than him, right?

RIGHT?

The next act onstage was a troupe of young bunnies, performing a skit entitled The History of the Carrot, recalling how The Festival's namesake had originated in ancient Persia and then been picked up by the Romans, selectively bred for generations to produce the modern version of today. It was a sumptuous production, complete with costumes and period music, (pre-recorded.)

By rights, Erin should have been reassured; yeah, the kids were doing a great job, (in the fourth row her sister Judy and Bobby Catmull were grinning and sharing a fist-bump,) but an act like this was no threat to her performance; apples and oranges.

Except…it was her turn to go on next. And now the butterflies in her tummy were turning into squids—slimy squids that wanted nothing more than to fly up her throat and ralf themselves all over the floor.

She forced them back down again and began humming to herself once more. Out on the stage the young rabbits were just getting ready wrap things up. (About time, they had seemed to have taken three whole hours with their skit.)
And then finally, they were taking their bows (to a standing ovation.) A moment after that they were hopping off stage and gabbing animatedly amongst themselves.

"Okay Miss, you're next." One of the stagehands, a raccoon said to her. Erin felt hot breath hissing inward between her teeth. What was this 'coon's name again? She thought she knew his name…

"Shut up and get out there!"

Erin nodded and followed the raccoon out onto the stage. Almost immediately she heard her name being spoken over the loudspeakers.

"Please welcome our next performer, Miss Erin Hopps."

At once a burst of applause came from the first and fourth rows of the audience. While Erin's family made a good showing, they couldn't touch the young rabbit's posse; they weren't just cheering, they were standing on their chairs and whooping.

Once again, there was an inverse effect; instead becoming more anxious, Erin felt her backbone stiffening.

"I'm going to DO this!" she told herself, and then waited while the stagehand plugged in her bass and adjusted the microphone.

She tapped it once and cleared her throat.

"Hi everyone." She said, and had to wait for more applause to die down. She took a short breath and then spoke once more.

"Ohhh-kayyy this is a tune by Concrete Sloth; it's called 'Joey'."

More applause followed, just a sprinkling this time. Erin played a couple of exploratory notes on her bass and then nodded into the wings. The bunny in charge of the soundboard nodded back and then the music began to play.

The tune opened with a quick drum flourish, and then Erin joined in on bass.

The first riff went great, but when she tried to get into the next one, what she heard instead was a scream like an electronic chainsaw that made her want to slap her paws over her ears. It was followed by a noise like a giant paper bag popping.

And then, nothing; when Erin tried to resume playing, no sound came from the amps, not even a hiss or a hum. She waved frantically into the wings, making slashing motions across her throat. The music cut out at once.

"Come on Erin, keep it together." She clenched and unclenched her fists and then took the mike once more.

"Sorry folk, technical difficulties." She said offering the crowd a wan smile. And then there was nothing to do but wait while the raccoon plugged her bass into a different amp.

Erin took another breath and played another note.

Again, there was nothing.

She tried again.
"I'm sorry Miss." The stagehand raccoon was sympathetic, but also beginning to sound impatient, "It's not the amps, it's your guitar. You'll have to either go on without it, or step aside for the next performer.

Erin didn't seem to hear him. She played another note, and again there was nothing from the amps.

"No," she breathed, her voice barely audible, even to her. This couldn't be happening, not here, not now.

Not now..."Not now, you stinking traitor!"

A gasp erupted from the audience. Without meaning to Erin had screamed the words aloud.

She didn't care.

"NOT NOWWWW!" she screamed again, and then with the cry like a dying rabbit, she yanked the amp-cord out of her guitar, and then turned and fled from the stage in tears.
Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries
(Continued…Pt. 12)

A thousand things were happening, everywhere at once.

In the fourth row of the amphitheater, each and every animal was halfway out of their seat.

Judy wanted the others to stay put. "Let Nick and me take care of this, guys."

Her mother was having none of it. "She's my daughter Judy!" And there was no arguing with her on that score—much less with the order she gave her husband to remain where the heck he was.

"No Stu; you'll just start blubbering again and that's the last thing Erin needs right now."

"'Kay," he nodded meekly and sat down again.

All right, that much was settled, but the Hopps party had all been seated stage right—and the performer's entrance was on the far left side of the house. Erin might be long gone by the time they got there, unless…

Nick Wilde was the first to size up the situation.

"Okay Carrots; you take the high road and I'll take the low road," (their private code for 'you go over and I'll go under'.)

Instead of responding, Judy looked at her mother for a second.

Bonnie instantly made a shooing motion.

"No, go…go! I'll catch up later." Every second was critical.

Judy nodded and sprang up out of her seat, leaping and bounding over chairs and spectators while
Nick Wilde dropped to all fours and went scurrying underfoot.

"Excuse me…sorry…coming though…police business …"

"Sorry…'scuse me…family emergency…pardon…"

Three rows in front of them, Erin's girlfriends had also cleared their seats and were also racing for the stage gate. It was no contest as to who would get there first; the girl posse was not only closer but also had fewer 'obstacles' in the way.

When they reached the entrance however, everything became equal; the bighorn sheep on guard duty refused to them through the gate.

"Sorry, no one gets in without a pass."

"Please, that's our friend in there," Terri Blackburn pleaded,

"Erin needs us; she's hurting baa-aa-aad." Cara Combs added swiftly, hoping a little bleating might draw some sympathy from her fellow sheep.

She might just as well have growled like a tiger. The bighorn ram only eyed her coldly for a second.

"No one gets in without a pass." He sounded like one of those animatronic dummies in a theme park ride

"Dangit my father's a Sheriff's deputy!' Sue Cannon was almost screaming.

The sheep folded his arms and flexed his muscles.

"No one gets in without a pass."

Ten yards away, deep in the stage wings and out of their sight, Erin Hopps was crouching and holding the neck of her bass.

She might almost have been a shipwreck survivor clutching a spar, except this castaway didn't WANT to be rescued; she wanted to be left alone. Anyone who so much as glanced in Erin's direction received a wild-eyed glare in return.

No sound came from the young, creme-furred bunny as she huddled, shuddering with her guitar, weeping silently to everyone and to no one in particular.

It wasn't FAIR!

Why'd it have to happen here, why'd it have to happen NOW? Why…WHY couldn't her stupid bass have waited until she finished to die on her? Dangit, couldn't it at least have quit while she was practicing? If that had happened, if it had blown out this morning, she'd at least have had time to cancel her performance, but no…noooooo, the stinking little traitor had waited until she was standing onstage with a zillion mammals watching her!

As these and other hot thoughts went careening through Erin's mind, her mood made a fast shift sideways; in the space of a heartbeat the tears coursing down her cheeks were marks of rage rather than sorrow.

She felt her fingers constricting around the neck of her instrument, gripping it tighter and tighter as if she were trying to strangle it.
"You no-good traitor." she hissed, pulling the headstock close to her face. "You stinkin' piece of trash."

The bass did not reply and the silence sent a white-hot stab of fury straight through the young bunny's heart.

Her paws reversed themselves on the guitar's neck; they seemed to belong to someone else.

Slowly, almost like a wind up doll, Erin stood up, raising the instrument high over her head, preparing to bring it down and turn it into so much electric junk. No wait, she was standing on grass, but wasn't there a rock just to her right, a nice big rock? Oh yes, this was meant to happen; do it!

"Good…BYE!" she bawled, and spun a hard right, ready to…

"Wait, DON'T!"

Erin nearly lost her grip on her guitar. What the…? Where the heck had he come from?

Conor Lewis was standing right in front of her, arms raised like Pentecostal preacher.

"Don't!" he repeated.

Erin wanted to kick him right into the ER. If there was ONE animal she didn't want to see right now…!

"Get out of the way, creep!"

The silver fox refused to budge.

"Erin no, you don't want to do this!"

"Yes, I DO!" her voice had risen to nearly a scream. She feinted left, trying to dodge around the fox, but he moved with her easily, blocking her path.

"Don't, please."

Erin raised the bass even higher

"I'm gonna wreck it!" Now she was screaming.

What happened next sent a chill up the young bunny's spine. Conor moved his foot backwards taking up a defensive stance, and then his ears turned backwards and his eyes narrowed into glowing embers.

"Not gonna let you." he told her simply.

Erin lowered the guitar but not all the way; now she was holding it like a baseball bat. Scare HER again, would he?

"You move or I'll break your face with it!" she hissed.

Conor stayed right where he was.

"Then that's what's gonna happen."
"Fine!" Erin's voice was a factory whistle and her thoughts were racing out of control. "Okay creep, you ASKED for it."

With a cry of frustration, she swung for the fences, aiming at the young fox's head.

She never connected. Instantly Conor ducked into a three point stance, nearly flattening himself against the ground as the guitar whipped harmlessly overhead. The move caught Erin completely unprepared and she spun around in full 360, coming to an abrupt halt when the fox's black-furred paws took hold of her instrument by its other end.

Erin screamed again, "Let go, you jerk!" and pulled frantically on the guitar. The silver fox didn't let go, but he didn't resist either. Instead he pressed forward, forcing the bunny into reverse. Instinctively she pushed back…and felt him easily snatching the bass out of her grip.

"Give me that!" she cried, grabbing for it

Conor pulled it up and away, out of her reach.

"No."

"I'll call security," Erin warned, baring her incisors at the fox. It was no bluff; there wasn't anyone onstage at the moment and they'd be able to hear her now.

But that was how Conor treated the threat, only smiling at her wickedly.

"Go ahead; in fact, I'll save you the trouble." He said, and turned and called through a cupped paw. "Security! Hey, need security down here!"

At once they heard hooves approaching, and then another bighorn ram appeared.

"Yes, what's the problem here?" he demanded, hooves on hips as he looked from one young mammal to the other.

Conor glanced sideways at Erin, saying nothing…but the expression on his face spoke volumes.

"Okay rabbit, it's your ball, you gonna run with it or what?"

Erin didn't run with it; she punted.

"No, no problem." She said, "We were just having a little argument, that's all." Somehow, she managed to give Conor a look of, 'You called security for THAT?' (And he actually seemed to admire her for it.)

"All right," the ram said, "but either keep it down or take it somewhere else. If I have to come back here again, you'll both be out of the Festival."

With that, he turned on his heel and strode away.

Even in her disconsolate state, Erin couldn't help but wonder; how could that sheep NOT know that she'd already been onstage? Never mind, it didn't matter. What did matter was how the heck had Conor gotten back here? He wasn't supposed to perform until tomorrow night, right?

She turned to look at him, and at once her confusion gave way to horror.

Conor's ears had shifted sideways and his neck and tail-fur had turned into a forest of needles. Both of his fangs—and all of his claws—were fully unsheathed as he stared at the trio of yellow letters
on the back of the ram's shirt.

"He looks like he wants to eat that sheep." Erin thought to herself, never mind that the ram was nearly twice Conor Lewis's size. If he hadn't still had her guitar in his paws, she would have turned and run away.

Then he heard him growling under his breath; it sounded almost like a tractor engine getting ready to blow a gasket.

"A.S.M. dirtbag!" he snarled, and then all at once he seemed to shake it off, looking around bewildered as if he had no idea where he was or how he'd gotten here.

Erin saw the opportunity and lunged for her guitar…too late; Conor whipped it out her grasp a second time.

"Give me that!" she cried.

The fox only lifted high it over his head, holding on to it with both paws as if he were wading across a stream.

"Why do you even want this back, if all you're gonna do is trash it?" he asked.

Erin's mind slammed to a halt as if it had been fitted with air brakes. Yeah, why DID she want that treacherous piece of junk anyway?

Her thoughts must have shown on her face, because Conor held the bass closer, (but still out of reach.) "Do you REALLY wanna get rid of this?"

She answered him in a rush of tears. "I don't ever want to see that...thing again!"

The young fox seemed to deflate slightly, almost as if she'd won the day.

"Then don't destroy it, I'll buy it off you," he said.

Erin blinked, and then gaped.

"Say what?"

"I'll BUY it off you." He said again.

The young bunny felt her ears pull backwards and her face beginning to harden.

"Just where would you get the money to...?"

"From the T-shirt sale, duh!" Conor cut her off; he sounded tired and exasperated. "Come on Erin, get something out of this."

For the second time that day, she only stared…

"Erin! Erin, are you back there?"

"Come on Erin, talk to us!"

Terri Blackburn and Cara Combs were calling desperately through the fence. It was no use; another act had just taken the stage, a trio of wolves performing (badly) a high volume version of
the Beastly Boys tune 'Sabotage'. No way could the ferret and sheep's young voices get through that wall of noise.

And the ram minding the stage entrance wasn't making things any easier.

"All right ladies, let's move away from there."

"But that's our…"

"You heard me…"

Meanwhile six feet away, Tawny, Jill, and Lisa were watching from the sidelines as Sue Cannon tried desperately to get through to her dad on her cell-phone. Judging by the look on the young bobcat's face, she wasn't having a whole lot of luck.

Then Lisa tapped Jill on the neck. (She'd been sitting on the young bunny's shoulder.)

"Hey look."

Jill and Tawny turned Just in time to see Nick Wilde and Judy Hopps approaching.

The two young rabbits hopped hurriedly over, with Tawny Lloyd in the lead; (Jill Pepper still had Lisa with her and she didn't want to risk dropping the young squirrel.)

"Oh Judy, thank goodness." Tawny's ears were going in six different directions at once.

"Where's Erin?" The older bunny asked her, in no mood to waste words and/or time.

"Back there somewhere." Lisa Chatterton said, pointing towards the stage wings with her bushy tail flapping like a towel on a clothesline.

"But that jerk won't let us through!" Jill Pepper almost wailed, stabbing a finger in the security ram's direction as if the whole thing was his fault. (She sounded almost as distraught as Judy's sister had, just before she'd run off stage.)

"It's all right, we've got this." Judy assured her, and then beckoned to Nick with a sweep of her arm.

"Come on fox."

"Right behind you, Carrots."

When they got to the gate, the bighorn ram tried to throw them a variation of the shtick he'd given Erin's girlfriends.

"Sorry, no unauthorized fursonell are allowed backstage."

Judy instantly whipped out her badge, "Authorized!"

Not quite. The sheep gave it only a cursory glance and then slowly shook his head again

"Sorry, this isn't Zootopia and you're not...

Judy would later remember this moment as the closest she'd come to a meltdown of her own that evening; and so it might have happened, had Nick Wilde not pushed past her right then.

"Sir," he said, also showing his badge, "We have reason to believe that there's an escapee from
ZPD custody hiding back there somewhere."

He flicked his eyes at Judy for a second and she smoothly took her cue, regarding the sheep with hauteur in her eyes and a paw on her hip.

"Technically, you're right; this isn't our beat, and we're not on duty anyway." She shrugged indifferently, "so it's no fur off my back if our perp gets away, but…" She looked directly into the ram's eyes, letting the sentence complete itself.

It worked; the sheep stepped quickly aside and opened the gate. Erin's posse tried to follow her and Nick through the entrance, but that was where the security guard drew the line.

"Only them," he said, moving quickly to block the entrance again as soon as the fox and bunny had passed.

"We'll handle this." Judy called over a shoulder, and then she and her partner were hurrying up the ramp in the direction of the stage.

It didn't take them long to find her; (though it might have, had it not been for Nick Wilde's ultra-keen sense of smell.) They caught up with Erin right around the first bend.

She was huddled in a gap between the lighting gantry's truss supports, invisible to any passersby, crouching in a fetal position, with her arms wrapped around her legs and face buried in the gap between her legs. No sound at all came from the young bunny; only the bobbing of her head gave any sign that she was weeping. Scattered all around her in a rough semicircle was a swatch of what looked like…

"Sweet cheez n' crackers, is that money?" Judy stared with a sensed of expanding dread, then pushed it aside and pointed, "Take care of that, Nick."

"Right." The fox answered, and quickly began to scoop up the cash. Judy watched him for a second and then took the younger bunny gently by the shoulders.

"Erin? Sis? It's me Ju…"

That was as far as she got; Erin instantly threw her arms around her older sister, sobbing hysterically.

"Ssss, it's okay Erin," Judy cooed, rocking her tenderly, "That's it, little sis; that's the way. Don't hold it back; it'll only hurt you more if you try to keep it in. Just let yourself cry, let it go."

She waited until Erin's sobbing began to diminish and then took her by the arms again, this time more firmly.

"Erin?"

The younger bunny only stared into the ground. Judy hooked a finger under her chin and lifted it so that their eyes met.

"Erin, where's your guitar?"

Her sister only started crying harder than ever. They'd get nothing out of Erin Hopps for a while; that much was obvious. Finally, after what seemed like hours, she recovered enough of her senses to let Judy and Nick to take her from the hiding place and walk her towards the gate.
Well, enough of her senses to allow her sister to help; she refused point-blank to let Nick Wilde near her. "Get away from me, fox!" The outburst only served to heighten Judy's sense of foreboding.

She turned and looked over her shoulder.

"How much, Nick?"

"How much wha…?" the fox started to say before catching himself. "Oh, right; there's two hundred dollars here, Carrots."

For some reason this news made brought Erin to the brink of more hysterics—and sent Judy's apprehension level spiking through the roof. Only THAT much? Oh no, Erin couldn't have…!

When they came through the gate, Erin's posse rushed quickly to greet her—only to find that now she didn't want anybody close to her.

"Just keep away from me, 'kay?"

They all did…except for her mother, (who had finally caught up with Nick and Judy, along with several other family members and also Bobby Catmull.)

Marching straight up to her daughter, Bonnie stood with her paws on her hips and a no-nonsense look on her face.

"Erin, look at me. No, not at the ground, you look at me."

The younger bunny reluctantly lifted her gaze.

"Erin where's your bass guitar?"

Judy wanted to shake her head. Her mother had seen nothing of the cash they'd found with Erin and yet she'd already guessed what must have happened.

"It's true, isn't it? Mom DOES always know!"

Meanwhile her sister was trying to look away again; Bonnie angrily thumped her foot.

"ERIN!"

"I…sold it." The younger bunny blubbered in a barely audible voice.

"Did what?" Bonnie's voice had also dropped to an only-just-perceptible level.

Erin spread her arms and screamed as if confessing to a crime against nature.

"I SOLD IT, OKAY?!"

Everyone gasped, Judy too. (Even if you see it coming from a mile away, a runaway freight train still has carries a hellacious impact.)

"Who, Erin?" Their mother was looking straight into the young bunny's eyes again. "Who did you sell it to? Who was it?"

This time the answer came back immediately.
"It was Conor," her daughter answered, stifling another sob, "That silver fox kid, Conor Lewis."

An ever louder gasp erupted from the gathering, but this time their shock morphed quickly into outrage. Bonnie's foot began to thump like a kettledrum, and so did a dozen of the other rabbits' feet—including Judy's. Over on the left, her sister's girlfriends looked ready to get a rope and find a tree.

But NOBODY was angrier than Nick Wilde. Had Judy not known any better, she could have sworn he'd accidently eaten some Nighthowler. His ears were laid backwards, his tail and neck fur had turned to spikes, and his quivering lips had pulled back completely, revealing not just his fangs, but ALL his teeth; his eyes were blazing with emerald fire and his paws had turned to talons. (Had Erin chosen to look in his direction just then, she would have beheld an even more frightful countenance than when Conor had spotted the ASM logo on the security guard's shirt.)

"Where is he Erin?" Her mother was asking, lips pursed, voice crisp, "Where'd he go?"

The younger bunny just shrugged and shook her head. "I…I don't know."

Judy turned to the security guard.

"Did you see a young silver fox come through here earlier?"

"No, no one like that," the bighorn sheep answered barely looking in her direction.

"Is there another gate anywhere back there?" her sister Violet wanted to know.

"Yes, the loading dock." The ram wouldn't look at her either.

"Could that…Connor boy still be hiding backstage somewhere?" Someone else asked.

"No, Nick would have smelled him." Judy answered, glancing warily at the fox for confirmation. At first he seemed not to hear her, but then he nodded tightly.

"No, but I know where that little jerk went." He snarled, and then pulled out his cell-phone and punched the speed-dial.

"Finnick? This is Nick. Listen, where's your van, where'd you move it to?" His ears lay back even further for a second. "Never mind why, just tell me… The camping area…which space? Okay, thanks."

He disconnected and slapped the phone back in his pocket.

"Okay everyone else stay here; let me take care of this."

The first to raise a protest was Judy.

"No Nick, I'm coming with you," she said, but for once the red fox wouldn't budge.

"Not this time Carrots. Erin may be your sister," he shifted his gaze to Bonnie, "and your daughter, but Conor Lewis is MY species!" He said this while poking himself in the chest. It seemed to take the wind out of his sails, and when he spoke again, he sounded almost resigned. "I need to do this Judy, let me deal with him, please."

“Okay,” she answered quietly, while her mother only nodded. Nick nodded back for a second, and then his expression turned strangely abashed.
"Uhhhhh, anyone know how to get to the campgrounds from here?"
Days of Carrots and Blueberries (Continued…Pt. 13)

Chapter Summary

Fox vs. Fox….vs. Fox

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries
(Continued…Pt. 13)

By the time Nick reached the Midway he was high up in his dudgeon; every rabbit he encountered moved quickly out of the way and one mother bunny even put her paws over her little girl's eyes.

The fox didn't care; he couldn't remember the last time he'd been this angry.

Nick Wilde was no saint and had never claimed to be one; he'd been a hustler for most of his life and there were things in his past that made him wince when he thought of them now.

But there were limits; even on his worst day, back when he'd been working the street, there'd been places he wouldn't go. (If he hadn't spotted a canister of Fox Repellant clipped to Judy Hopp's belt for instance, he would have insisted on paying for that Jumbo Pop himself.) There were boundaries, there were lines you didn't cross—and that blankety-blank little silver-fox jerk hadn't just crossed them; he'd zig-zagged all over them with a marking pen.

"When I get my paws on that punk…!"

All foxes, even the ones who happily embraced the shifty-and-dishonest stereotype, had rules to live by. Whatever else Nick might have done back in the day, he could still hold his head up knowing he'd never broken them.

Rule number one, you never, NEVER took advantage of another mammal's misfortune; the guy you hustled was the one leaving the card game with a wad big enough to buy a new car, not the poor sap down to just enough cash to make the rent. You never turned someone else's bad luck into a disaster.

That led straight to rule number two; a good hustle always appealed to someone's greed, not their
grief. "Your Mark should be someone with dollar-signs in their eyes, never tears." Nick couldn't remember where he'd heard that, but it was true. Scamming someone who wanted a quick payoff for practically nothing; you could pull that off and actually feel good about it. But cheating a poor soul who was hurting and not thinking straight? That was something YOU didn't even think about.

Conor Lewis had done a lot more than just think about it. Oooo, when he found that kid…!

Nick stopped for a second, peering ahead while shading his eye with a paw. Yep, there was the sign, right where Bonnie had said he'd find it; 'Camping Area,' with an arrow pointing right, towards a space between two stalls. Nick followed it, and found himself on a footpath running parallel to a gravel road. In the middle distance he could see a dim glow and the outlines of various humpbacked shapes; motorhomes and travel trailers, he assumed. Somewhere in that mix was Finnick's van, and somewhere inside that van was that sneaking, low-down…!

It was no use, Nick couldn't help himself; if there was one thing guaranteed to get his dander up, it was when another fox gave their species an even worse name than they already had. That was bad enough, but to do it by taking advantage of Judy Hopps's sister…

He stopped again and cracked his knuckles.

"I hope you think it was worth it, kid."

And set off at again at a brisk march

He found the campground entrance around the next bend in the road, perhaps a hundred yards further on, a kidney-shaped expanse ringed by low wooden fence. It was almost full, but most of the trailers were dark; they wouldn't come alight until later on this evening, when the Carrot Days Festival closed for the night,

Nick was halfway across the road when he heard the bull-blast of a truck horn. He turned just in time to be pinned in the glare of blinding halogens the size of rocket silos.

Thinking fast, he averted his eyes. (Foxes aren't quite as susceptible to headlights as deer but it does have an effect on them.)

The driver hit the horn again; he wasn't slowing down for the likes of Nick, The fox knew instantly that he couldn't make the other side and turned back the way he'd come, leaping out of the way he landed in a pyramid stance, just as the vehicle went rumbling by.

At that moment, he saw the driver lean out of the window. "Watch where you're going, fox!"

And then the vehicle was past him, adding injury to insult by showering Nick with gravel from its massive rear tires.

He stood up again, brushing himself off and growling. Dangit, he hadn't gotten the license plate; it had happened all too quickly. But then he saw the big-rig slow and turn off the road up ahead. Hmmmm, hadn't Bonnie mentioned something about a…? Oh yes.

"You want the big campground, the first one; not the smaller one, that's the VIP camping area."

Nick was tempted to go and give that driver a piece of his mind—and a look at his badge. Nearly running down a peace officer, even an off-duty cop outside of his jurisdiction was an offense that the courts never took lightly.

It was just a lucky thing for the jerk that Nick had more important business to attend to right now.
The rig, though. It hadn't been a tractor-trailer, it had been a *motor-home*; the biggest one Nick Wilde had ever seen.

"That thing makes Gazelle's tour bus look like a micro bus." The red fox thought to himself. (He had seen it the previous year while working the Skunk Pride Parade; the pop-star had been Grand Marshal.)

Normally that might not have meant very much; the RV could have belonged to say, a hippo or an elephant. But Nick had gotten a look at the driver, and more importantly, caught a glimpse of the motorhome's back door; this baby was built for small-to-medium species, on a par with the wolverine behind the wheel. For an animal that size, it was practically a rolling a mansion.

Who the heck did it belong to? The fox had no idea, except…there'd been some artwork on the side, a vehicle wrap, too dark for him to see clearly, and yet still it had felt familiar.

"Stay focused on the job, Nick." He reminded himself with a mental slap, and then turned and darted across the road and into the campground.

As soon as he passed through the entrance, he spotted a sign tacked to a vertical beam. A map of the compound he hoped. Yep, now where was that space, annnd…what was the number again? Oh right, space A-113, left side, about the middle of the camping area.

Moving through the campground, Nick instinctively avoided the road and stuck to the grass fringe. (Grass doesn't make crunching noises under your feet.)

It felt eerie to the fox, almost like walking through a ghost town. The quietude wouldn't last long though, he reminded himself, ever savvy to the foibles of mammalian nature.

"It may be quiet now, but by 10 tonight this place is going to be Party Central. Whoof, I'm just glad I'm with ZPD and not the Burrows County Sheriff's Department. They're going to end up getting more noise complaints and have to break up maybe a hundred…wait, there it is."

Finnick's van was nestled in a space flanked by a gooseneck trailer and a motorhome; each one of the large-mammal variety, it gave the desert fox's ride the appearance of a pawpsicle sandwiched in between two jumbo-pops.

Nick barely noticed; of much more interest to him was the fact that the lights in the van were on and the side door was open…and there he was, the little miscreant, sitting and typing on a laptop computer without a care in the world. Nick was unable to see Conor's face from this distance, but he didn't need to. This time HE was the one on the downwind side—and he'd have known that kid's scent anywhere by now.

"Got you, you little snot!" he muttered under his breath

He ducked quickly behind a snowberry bush, sprouting in the shadows of power pole —and nearly jumped when a paw fell on his shoulder.

"What you DOIN' Nick?"

Nick whirled around in a 180. Finnick…he should have known.

"Get back behind here before he sees you." The red fox hissed.
Finnick eyed him curiously for a second but then did as his former partner instructed.

"What the heck is goin' on here?" he demanded, looking up at Nick with his paws on his hips. Nick's neck fur bristled and his voice became a guttural snarl.

"Your little friend in the van there went over the line, that's what happened."

Finnick's ears began moving like semaphores, "What do you mean he 'went over the line'?"

"This is what I mean," the red fox said and then told him the story of what had happened at the talent show. When he finished, the little fox was shaking his head like a metronome.

"No way Nick, not him, not Conor, he ain't that kind of kid. He'd never do a thing like that."

"Oh yeah?" Nick snarled, jabbing finger in the direction of the stage, "Tell that to the heartbroken little bunny I left behind just a few minutes ago; two hundred bucks for a guitar that has to be worth at least five times that much!" (He had no idea how much Erin's bass was actually worth, but that figure sounded about right.)

Finnick folded his arms.

"Nicky, there's gotta be more to the story than that. I've seen that boy in action a hundred times; he always does the right thing."

The red fox refused to be swayed.

"Not this time."

The little fennec shook his head again, making a noise that might either have been a growl of frustration or a sigh of resignation; (most likely all of the above.)

"All right, I give up; nobody can talk to you when you get like this." He tilted his head to the side, giving his former partner a piercing, one-eyed glare. "Only what you gonna DO about it, Nick? He's a kid; cop or no cop you can't lay a finger on him."

Nick polished his knuckles with his other paw, as if he was planning to do just that.

"That kid wants to hustle? I'll show him a hustle!"

The desert fox said nothing to this, only let out a sharp bark of laughter.

"WHAT?" he demanded. What, did Finnick think this was funny? He looked almost the same as when Judy had pulled off that tax-evasion hustle.

Finnick pointed in the direction of his van.

"You just gonna waltz down there an' take that guitar back, easy-peasy, without payin' even a nickel for it. Is that what you think, Slick?" He held up his paw, and showed two fingers, displaying them one at a time: "Two words, 'Not'... 'Happening'."

"Get out of here Finnick," the red fox scoffed, "You think I can't handle a thirteen year old kid?"

"Fourteen," the fennec corrected him.
Nick waved his paw in the air.

"Fourteen, thirteen…whatever; I eat punks like that for breakfast."

Finnick narrowed his eyes and smirked.

"That's why you gonna crash and burn if you try to take him on. Conor Lewis ain't nobody's punk."

He flipped his paw upwards in a throwaway gesture. "Oh, you could take him like candy from a cub on a good day, Nick. When you on a roll, I ain't never seen a hustler, good as you."

He jumped up, grabbing Nick by the shirt and getting right in his face. His mood was almost jolly.

"Only you ain't havin' a good day, Slick and you ain't on a roll. You always had two weak spots boy, when you get mad and when you get cocky; remember how Judy Hopps hustled you on those taxes?…and you mad and cocky both right now." He let go of the red-fox's shirt, and dropped back down to the ground, brushing at his arms.

Then he looked up with that penetrating gaze once more.

"You think Conor Lewis is just another smart-mouthed street kid, gonna fold up like a house of cards if you lean on him? Well he's not. He's tough an' smart, that one…really smart for a kid his age; someone taught him good along the way…and you ain't hustling him in the mood you in. Like I said, it ain't happening."

"That's it, I've heard enough of this." the red fox said, turning to go.

"Fine," Finnick was smirking again, the look on his face felt like claws on a blackboard to Nick, "Then how 'bout you put your money where your mouth is, big fox." He held up a bill between two fingers. "I got a twenty right here says that boy makes a chump out of you."

"You're on." Nick Wilde sneered. No kid was going to play him for a sucker.

He turned and stalked away, flattening himself against the side of the gooseneck trailer and pausing to consider his options. The first order of business was to lift his nose and take an air sample. Good, he was still downwind from the little jerk and he was still there, inside the van.

All right, how should he do this, just stroll in and openly confront the kid? No, that wasn't an option, not if Conor was as tough as Finnick said he was (and as Nick suspected he was, never mind what he'd just said to his former partner.)

Nope, this situation called for a stealthy approach, he needed to catch Conor by surprise and then start laying the hustle on him before he had time to recover. Yes, that was the way, only how to…?

Hmmm, wait a second, there was the answer, literally right at his back.

Like all foxes, Nick Wilde had the ability to secrete himself in a space that by rights should have been much too narrow to accommodate an animal of his size. One time, to the utter amazement of his partner Judy Hopps, he'd pursued a fleeing muskrat right through a storm-drain entrance, a space that had looked no bigger than a shoebox to the bunny.

He dropped down and slipped silently beneath the gooseneck trailer. He could manage that okay, but he knew from experience that the space beneath Finnick's van was too constricted even for him; (blankety-blank rear axle and drive shaft!) No, he'd have to make this a perimeter approach once he was clear of the trailer.

At the rear end of the gooseneck, Nick turned sideways, lay on his back, and rolled, coming to rest
face down, less that a centimeter from the edge of the van's front bumper; a near-perfect move.

"Maybe that Police Academy training was good for something after all." He mused, listening and sniffing the air.

Conor's scent was still there, and now he could hear the clatter of laptop keys.

He began to slither around the edge of the van, making no noise. A glow appeared in the corner of his eye. The side door was still open. All right…closer…closer…just a little bit closerrrrrr, annnnnnnd…NOW!

Nick sprang upwards to his full height, grinning for ear to ear. "Hello, bayyyyyyy-BEH!"

Conor Lewis was not surprised by this.

Conor Lewis wasn't there.

And neither was the bass guitar; both of them were gone, along with the laptop. Dangit, how the heck had the kid known…?

A young voice spoke to him from behind.

"Mama don't 'llow no prowlers round here!"

Nick spun around and found himself less than two feet away from Conor Lewis. He knew instantly what had happened; somehow the kid had sensed his presence and made an end run, bolting out through the driver's side window, and then sneaking back up on him from under the van. (Nick could have kicked himself for forgetting; that space might have been too narrow for an adult fox, but not for a younger one.)

"Should have known he wouldn't run," the red fox thought. What he said was, "All right, give it up, punk!"

Nick could feel his fur beginning to fluff out and his voice beginning to gekker, becoming a high pitched, rippling duck's quack.

He ignored it all; so did Conor, whose fur was also fluffing and whose voice was beginning to sound as if he'd just taken a hit of helium.

"You mean that bass guitar, right?" he said,

"No, I mean the Infinity Stones." Nick's mouth was open wide now and ALL his fur was standing, out, the classic stance of an angry fox confronting another member of his species. "Yeah, that's what I mean, give it up!"

Conor's jaw snapped open and then HIS fur was looking as if he'd just stuck his finger in a light-socket.

"Two words and a number, Wilde-thing: 4! Get! and It!" (It would have been good comeback if it hadn't been delivered in a squeaky falsetto.)

Too angry to think, Nick took a step forward. The heck with hustling and the heck with rules; he wanted to wring this juvenile delinquent's neck until his head popped off.

Conor saw him and as if from thin air something appeared in the young fox's paw, springing out to a length of three feet; a telescoping baton.
Nick tensed and unsheathed his claws; there was nothing that said he couldn't take on a kid if the kid went after him first.

But then the younger fox said, "I'll only give that bass guitar to Erin Hopps, no one else. She can have it back for 200 bucks."

Nick blinked and felt his fur beginning to flatten again.

"Two…hundred? But that's all you paid for it." His voice had dropped noticeably in pitch.

"And that's all I want for it," Conor answered him, lowering both the baton and his fur. His speech had also begun returning to normal.

"Awwww you guys!" A deep voice groaned out of the dark, "just when things was gettin' GOOD!"

Nick and Conor both turned with their ears laid back.

"Finnick!"

"All right, all riiight." The desert fox growled and retreated back into the night.

Nick turned to Conor again, no longer angry but thoroughly perplexed.

"I keep forgetting about those ears of his… Okay, help me out here. Why would you buy Erin's guitar if you were just going to sell it back to her at the same price?

The younger fox threw up his arms.

"What can I say? It was all I could think of to keep her from trashing it."

Nick's ears went up and pointed at each other.

"Wait, what? She was going to break that guitar?"

Conor's ears pricked up as well.

"Dang straight she was, you didn't know? Yeah, she was gonna smash it against a rock; I had to do something."

Nick took a step backwards; it felt like he was stepping back from the edge of a cliff. Sweet cheez n' crackers, as Judy would say, what he'd almost done! But now the younger fox's actions made sense, now everything made sense.

And he had badly misjudged this boy; Finnick had been right about him.

"Nobody told us she did that," he said and laid a paw on the young silver fox's shoulder. "I'm sorry Conor, really."

The kid looked at the paw for a second as if it were some strange artifact.

"Sorry, for what? You didn't do anything."

Nick couldn't help laughing. No he hadn't, when you thought about it.

"There is one thing though big guy" the young fox said compressing the baton back down to its normal size. "I won't sell that bass back to Erin for 200 or a million bucks—not until I'm sure she
won't try to destroy it again."

"She won't." Nick assured him, "Judy and I will make sure of that…don't worry, she won't." He did not add that when Bonnie found out what had really happened, the chances of Erin breaking her guitar would be roughly the same as that of her breaking the sound barrier on rusty roller-skates.

"That's all I wanted to hear," Conor answered looking greatly relieved. "If you can go and get her, she can have her guitar back."

"Will do," the red fox answered, fully understanding the wisdom of Conor wanting Erin to come to him instead of vice versa. He knew the full story but the others didn't—and they needed to hear it before they caught sight of the young silver fox; otherwise he might end up as a throw rug before he could get a word in edgewise.

Nick turned to go, but then something else occurred to him.

"Mmmm, before I take off kid, there's a problem we need to deal with—Finnick."

Conor's head tilted sideways and his ears went up again.

"Finnick?" he started to say, "What's the problem with…." But then his head righted itself and he nodded knowingly, "Oh yeeeeaahhh, that's something he would do."

"Right," the red fox nodded, "Good friend, but he never could resist a prank."

"Tell me about it." Conor rolled his amber eyes,

Nick sat down for a second and scratched at an ear with his foot. Nice place the Burrows but there were a lot more bugs out here than in the city. Then he stood up again and looked at Conor.

"Finnick's a lot closer to your size than mine, kid. If I distract him, you think you can you grab it?"

The young fox smiled puckishly and fanned a palm. "No problemo, Jefe."

They found the little desert fox sitting on upturned bucket, grooving to the beat of his iPaw. As soon as he saw Nick and Conor coming, he plucked the ear buds and got up again with a bi-i-ig smile on his face. Nick Wilde's ears were like wilted lilies and his tail was dragging limply along the ground. As he trudged along, he could be heard grumbling oaths under his breath, a noise easily picked up by the fennec fox's ginormous ears. "Call me a planewreck…nrrrrgghh… grrrgh…smartmouth… grrrrml… punk…"

The 'smartmouth punk' by contrast was almost skipping along beside him, and looking like he'd just won the car raffle. It didn't take a rocket scientist to know which one of them had come out on top in the exchange that must have followed the fennec fox's departure.

Finnick said nothing, only held out his paw and winked, grinning almost as broadly as Conor was right now. Nick saw him and jammed a paw in his pocket, extracting his wallet and pulling out a twenty.

"All right wiseguy, all right." the red fox growled, holding out the cash in his old partner's direction.

The desert fox reached out to take it, and in that instant, two things happened simultaneously; Conor Lewis brushed against him from behind and Nick snatched the money out his reach.
"Hey!"

Finnick slapped at his belt, and wheeled rapidly to see Conor holding his cell phone.

"What the…? Give that back, you little…"

Conor didn't answer him; he let the cell speak for itself, turning it around to show a display of Nick and himself on the screen. He pressed a button and the image began to move, accompanied by a pair of voices reduced to near squeaks by the combination of a tiny speaker and the fact that the two of them had been gekkering.

"You mean that bass guitar, right?"

"No, I mean the Infinity Stones."

Conor shut the phone off and shook his head in an exaggerated theatrical manner, mournful as a mortician on a sunny day with not a whiff of death in the air.

"Finnick…for shame! Hitting the 'record' button on your buds like that. Who'd have ever thunk you could do such a thing?" He looked off to the side for a second, biting his lip, "besides anyone who's ever known you, I mean."

The little fox's oversize ears shot backwards…whether from guilt, embarrassment, or anger Nick Wilde couldn't tell.

"Now, now Conor," he said, making placating gestures with his paws, "I've known Little Too…I-I mean Finnick longer than you and I'm sure he'd never do a thing like that. Noooo, someone must have stolen his phone, shot that video of us arguing, and then slipped it back in his pocket with him even knowing it." He turned and winked at the desert fox, "That's what happened, isn't it, pal?"

He got no answer to this; his former partner just stood there, looking like a pop bottle that's been shaken fifty times.

"And being the good friend he is." Nick went on, warming to his subject, "I know Finnick would have wanted that video deleted as soon as he found it. Conor, would you do the honors?"

"Why certainly," the young silver fox said, scrolling pressing and pressing again. He tossed the phone back to the fennec fox. "There you go DF, and don't say I never did anything nice for ya."

Finnick almost dropped the phone, bobbling it in his paws for a second then slamming it back in the holster so hard he almost cracked the screen.

"Har har, real funny, both of you." He jabbed a finger at Nick. "I'm gonna remember this, Nicky," and then at Conor, "And you. You wanna walk home boy, keep it up!"

He turned and stalked away, growling at nobody.

"You're not gonna ask for your twenty?" Conor queried when he was gone. (Nick had told him about the bet.)

"Nahhh," the red fox folded his arms and shook his head, "I'm calling it a draw—and don't worry, Finnick won't stay mad for long."

The younger fox just fanned his pawlm again.

"Ahhh, I know that, he never does. Heck, he'll prolly end up saying he's sorry for shooting that vid
"He was right about one thing though Conor," Nick told him, laying another paw on the silver fox's shoulder, "You ARE a good kid."

Conor looked away embarrassed for a second.

"I-I try to be, big guy. I got some stuff to make up for…from back in Zoo York City. You follow what I'm bringing out?"

Nick felt his ears go up again. 'Follow what I'm bringing out?' There'd been another fox he'd known once who always used that expression. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask Conor where he'd gotten it, but then he decided it wasn't important.

It was a decision Nick Wilde would later come to regret.

"Okay," he said, "Hang on while I go get Erin."

"Right, you know where to find me." Conor answered, and with that they partied company.

To find out what gekkering sounds like, go here. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKHZ201aLX0 (But don't say you weren't warned.)

Chapter End Notes

This particular chapter contains one of the most famous of all Disney Easter Eggs. (Actually a Disney-Pixar Easter Egg, there's your clue.)
When Nick Wilde returned to the amphitheater he found only Judy there waiting for him.

"Everyone else went back to the farm-stand, Nick." She said, referring to the Hopps Family Farm produce booth. "What happened with Conor?"

She asked the question in an ambiguous tone, but Nick could see that she was trying very hard not to thump her foot—and also that her gaze was focused on his paw, which was clearly not holding Erin's long, lost, bass guitar.

"I'll tell you on the way," he said, "But listen Carrots, there's something we didn't know…"

When Judy heard it, she gasped so loudly it sounded almost like an asthma attack.

"Oh my Gaw, Erin did that?"

"Yes, Erin did that," Nick started to say—and then quickly corrected his course, "All right, honestly, I don't know what she did, Carrots," he added. Now was not the time for speculation; 'just the facts ma'am', as another police officer once said.

"But that's what Conor says happened," he went on, "and I believe him. He made the offer to sell Erin's guitar back all on his own; I didn't have to ask." (Only technically true, but true enough.)

Judy nodded and resumed walking, looking thoughtful.

"Nick, I-I-I don't think Erin kept it from us on purpose; she's smart enough to know we'd find out
sooner or later anyway. No, I think she was just so upset about everything, she didn't quite know what she was saying."

"Hmmm yeah, I think you're right, Judy." The red fox answered after a second or two of reflection. "Honestly, I can't really blame her. Of all the times for that guitar to kick the bucket, it had to happen right then." He turned and looked at her. "How's she doing by the way?"

Judy sucked on her lower lip for second.

"A lot better, last time I saw her, when she left with mom and the others…but right now, who knows?" She seemed just a bit little insecure to the fox, a rare occurrence for Judy Hopps. "Erin's at 'that age' for girls, Nick. Just when you think you've got it together, nature turns on the hormones and …boom!"

"Right, right," Nick answered, nodding quickly. Like every other guy, he preferred to remain blissfully ignorant of such feminine matters.

They walked in silence for another minute, with Judy twitching her nose meditatively. After a moment or two she looked at him sideways.

"Nick, I think before anything else, we need to have a private talk with Erin."

"Agreed," the fox answered, nodding. *(This was a subject he could talk about.)* "It'd be better if the others get the story from her, rather than us."

"Exactly what I was thinking," Judy said

They found Erin and the rest of the group out behind the Hopps' Family Farm stall. She was perched on an empty carrot-crate with the others all seated around her in a rough semicircle, and her mother on a crate right beside her. The scene reminded Nick of a painting he'd once seen; a tribal council. Right away he noted that none of the original party had left the group. As a matter of fact, the gathering seemed to have expanded since he'd left; Erin's father was also there, (keeping well off to the sidelines, no doubt at her mother's insistence,) and so were Bobby and Belinda Camull, along with several other Hops family members. The instant they saw the fox approaching, everyone turned and regarded him with a jaundiced eye. Where was Erin's bass guitar and WHERE was that lowlife silver-fox kid?

*That* told Judy she'd better move and move quickly.

"Mom, Nick and I need to speak to Erin privately for a minute, okay?"

It was phrased as a request, but Bonnie instantly caught the inflection in her daughter's voice and agreed at once.

"Of course, Judy." She said, ushering Erin in her sister's direction before turning to the others, "All right now everyone, let's just step back and give them some room," *(mom-speak for, 'Don't any of you even think about eavesdropping!')*

Just to be on the safe side, they brought Erin out to the parking lot and spoke to her inside of the passenger van. Judy asked it as soon as the door closed.

"Erin, did you really try to break your bass guitar?"

Her sister burst into another flood of tears.
"I'm sorry!" she sobbed.

"Okay, come here." Judy said, taking the younger bunny in her arms. So her sister really had tried to smash her guitar. More importantly, she hadn't kept it to herself on purpose—thank goodness for that. Just as Judy had suspected, she'd simply been too distraught and/or too ashamed to bring it up. All right, now they could move on...as soon as Erin got hold of herself, however long that would take.

It didn't take long; after all her earlier crying jags, the younger bunny didn't have a lot of steam left in the boiler.

Judy gave it another minute just to be sure and then lowered herself in her seat so that the two of them were at eye-level.

"Listen Erin, no one else knows that Conor only bought your guitar to keep you from breaking it; they all think he took advantage of you."

"That's right," Nick Wilde said from the driver's seat, reaching over and laying a paw on her shoulder, "And it would be..."

Erin instantly batted him away.

"Don't touch me, okay fox?"

Judy felt her face and ears hardening, but then she saw Nick make a pushing gesture and bit back on the words in her mouth.

"All right, I won't." Nick said, showing his paws to prove it, "But your mom and the others all need to hear that part of the story. Listen, I know you don't like Conor Lewis..."

"Or foxes in general," Judy was thinking.

"... but he doesn't deserve to be punished for trying to help you—and I think it would be better if everyone heard about it from you."

"O-Okay," Erin agreed weakly. Her immediate acquiescence was of no surprise to Judy; implicit in the fox's words had been a caveat, 'It will go a lot better for YOU if you tell what you almost did; otherwise, if you don't, we will.'

Knowing she had little choice, the young bunny wisely chose to volunteer the information as soon as they returned. Still, it was a painful admission for her, and she delivered it in a near stammer.

"I'm...I'm sorry now that I tried to break m-my bass...and...and that I didn't...tell you guys. I-I swear I didn't mean not to...you know...say anything about it. I just... I don't know why I didn't tell, but...I...I-I don't know what got into me ...please forgive me."

She bowed her head and would have cried again, except now she was all out of tears.

"Erin, it's all right," her mother said, putting an arm around her daughter's shoulder, "The important thing is you didn't break your guitar."

"Only because Conor stopped me," Erin pointed out with a dry half-sob. Okay, now it was official, she hadn't held back the info on purpose.

Nick Wilde took that as an opening and dropped down on his haunches...
"Speaking of Conor, there's something else he told me Erin. He's willing to let you have your guitar back for the same $200.00 you paid for it."

A small cheer went up from the gathering—but only a small one, more than a few in the group were too busy putting on shamefaced expressions. (Erin's girlfriends were huddling and looking as if they had just been caught shoplifting.) This was the kid they'd been ready to shave, tar and feather up until less than a minute ago.

The bubble broke when Erin's tongue turned unexpectedly sharp again. She may have run out of tears, but she had plenty of attitude left.

"I don't WANT it back; that fox can keep it!"

*That* put a damper on things; the near-festive mood turned promptly to one of shock.

"Erin…you don't mean that." Judy finally said.

"Yes, I do!" Her sister snapped.

Judy nearly shied away from the younger bunny; cheez n' crackers was this the same girl who'd been begging forgiveness just a minute ago?

"Erin…" Bonnie came quickly to the forefront, but this time her daughter refused to back down.

"Why would I want it back mother? It's *already* broken, it won't play anyway!"

Judy winced and swallowed hard. That wasn't the real reason Erin didn't want her bass back, and both of them knew it. Unfortunately, the excuse she'd just made was also an unanswerable argument.

*Almost* unanswerable; right then Nick Wilde jumped into the fray.

"Yes, but that doesn't mean it can't be repaired." He said.

Erin turned a freezing look on him.

"And just how would YOU know that, fox?"

Nick started to answer, but Erin's mother got there first.

"All right that's enough young lady." She said, wagging a finger in the white-furred bunny's direction, "If I hear you call Nick Wilde 'fox' in that tone of voice *one more time*, you'll spend the rest of the weekend pulling weeds, do you understand me?"

Judy tensed and crossed her fingers. "*And when mom talks to you in THAT tone of voice little sister, you had better believe she means it.*"

But Erin only lowered her head, "Yes, Mam."

Judy let out a long, slow sigh of relief; over Erin's right shoulder she could see her posse doing more or less the same.

Then Nick spoke up again; he seemed not to have heard any of it.

Well okay, *I don't* know that, Erin," he admitted, "But Conor Lewis seems to know his way around guitars…and he's a pretty sharp kid from what I've seen." He looked straight into her eyes. "You
tell me; would he have made you an offer on that guitar, if HE thought it was a lost cause?"

Erin looked away for a second; she wasn't beating Nick in a stare-down, not today, 'tude or no 'tude.

"No." she finally said.

"Uhm, excuse me?"

Nick, Judy, and everyone else turned and saw Bobby Catmull with his paw raised like a kit in class.

"I know thing or two about guitar craft myself actually." The cougar said, lowering it and speaking to Erin "If your bass is really beyond repair I might be able to tell you." He shifted his gaze to Nick, "You think Conor would be willing to let me take a look at it?"

"I don't see why not?" the red fox answered, and then he looked at Erin again, "There is one thing though. He's says he'll only sell it back to you—not anyone else."

Judy let out a hiss of air through her teeth.

"Too SOON, Nick!" He should have waited until after Erin agreed to buy back the bass before telling her that.

Sure enough, the young bunny's back went up like shield and the charcoal fur of her ear-points, nose, paws, and feet seemed to darken to pitch black.

"What? No way! I'm not having anything more to do with that f…that creep!"

"Yes you will Erin, and let me tell you why."

Everyone turned to look again; Stuart Hopps was making his way through the crowd in the direction of his daughter.

"You'll do this Erin." He said, getting down on one knee in front of her. "not because your mother, or me, or anyone else told you to; heck, we couldn't make you do it anyway. No, you'll go and get your guitar back because that's the kind of bunny you are." He pointed over at Judy. "I remember when your sister resigned from the ZPD after that horrible press conference she gave; Judy thought she'd ruined everything for the predators of Zootopia, that she'd up and done something that could never be fixed."

He nodded at his older daughter and looked back at Erin again.

"I thought she'd given up on herself, little girl...for good. Heck maybe she had for all I know. But then when Judy saw her chance to make things right, she didn't hesitate. She went right back to the city, and got back on the case." He gave her arm a small squeeze, "because she knew it was the right thing to do. And she got it done Erin, she broke the savage predator plot."

He shifted his gaze again, this time to the red fox standing next to his older daughter.

"But your sister Judy couldn't have done it by herself, Erin; she needed someone to help her, and the only one who could was that same fox she'd hurt so badly with what she said at the press conference. And the only way that was going happen was if she swallowed her pride, owned up to her mistake, admitted to him that she'd been wrong."
He gave Judy and Nick a quick nod and turned back to his younger daughter.

"That was the bravest thing your sister ever did, Erin. Not going to the Police Academy, not graduating at the top of her class, not even bringing down Mayor Weathervane, (or whatever her name was.) No, Judy Hopps's finest hour was when she told Nick Wilde, 'I really am a dumb bunny.' That took more courage than I could ever have."

He took Erin's paw and looked at her earnestly. "But it's not more courage than YOU have, Erin-on-a-tear. Remember that? I didn't give you that name because it sounded good. You have that same strength your sister Judy does; I know it, I've seen it. It's in your blood little girl. That's why you're going to go and buy back your guitar; because this is your chance to make things right…and you won't walk away from it, because that's who you are."

Erin looked at him for second, and then she blinked wet eyes and nodded tightly.

"Yes, Daddy." She said, in a little choked voice, and threw her arms around him.

"You're not finished yet, Erin-on-a-tear." He told her, hugging her back, "Not by a long shot."

On the other side of her father and sister, Judy could see that her mother's eyes were also moist and glistening. Well, why not? So were hers and just about everyone else's here; hadn't that been just like her Dad? When you least expected it…

Once Erin made up her mind, she began to show some resolve to go with it. Everybody wanted to come with her to Finnick's van but she insisted that they all hang back at the campground entrance.

"You'll scare the heck out of that fox if he sees an ARMY coning." She said. (She seemed to relish the thought, but understood that it wouldn't be a good idea.) In the end she did allow Judy to accompany her, "But please, let me do the talking 'kay? I'm the one who sold my bass; I'm the one who should buy it back."

"You don't want Bobby Catmull to look at it first?" Judy asked her, raising an ear.

Erin immediately shook her head.

"No…win, lose, or whatever, I'm taking my bass guitar back."

Judy could not have been more proud of her.

They found Conor seated at a table in front of the van, working at his laptop again, this time with a headset wrapped around his ears. More animals were returning to the camping area now, but the Carrots Days Festival hadn't quite begun to wind down, not just yet; the campers on either side of the young silver fox were still unlit and occupied.

Judy and her sister were about ten yards away, when the young fox turned and looked in their direction.

Erin's ears shot upwards like antenna.

"What? How'd he know we were…?"

"We're upwind of him, sis." Judy said.

"Oh…right."

Erin squared her shoulders and moved forward. Before she had taken three steps, Conor darted
inside the van and returned with her bass guitar, laying it on the table next to the computer. Judy followed her sister to the perimeter of the campsite but then held there waiting. As Erin had told her earlier, this was her show.

"Hi," she said simply when she reached the table. Erin sounded as if she was completely unruffled but Judy could see her feet shifting awkwardly.

"Hi," the young fox replied, appearing equally uncomfortable.

"They look almost like a pair of kids at their first dance." Judy thought to herself with a perplexed smile. She'd expected it from Erin but not from Conor.

"Well, there it is." The young silver fox waved a paw at the bass guitar as he settled into his camp chair again, "If you have the money, it's all yours."

"You said two hundred, right?" the white-furred bunny asked him.

"She still doesn't trust him, even now." Judy could feel her nose twitching and her foot trying to thump, but Conor seemed to take it all in stride.

"Yep, that's the deal." He said. Erin counted out the money on the tabletop and he quickly counted it again before stashing it in his pocket. He might trust her sister more than she trusted him, Judy decided, but he was still going to cut the cards.

Then he waved a paw at Erin's guitar.

"Before you go, ba...kiddo, I plugged it into one of my amps and tried to see if I could figure out what happened. I-I-I think the only wrong with it's a busted amplifier jack; that's a real easy fix."

His words were well intentioned, but Judy saw her sister's ears wilting and her shoulders starting to tremble. Now she knew she'd come that close to ruining a perfectly salvageable instrument.

But then Judy felt her ears kick up and form into a 'light-bulb' V. Hold phone here…

"Conor, could you fix it?" she said, hurrying forward; never mind her promise to stay in the background.

The young fox's eyes went wide for a second and then his head reeled back, as if he'd been hit in the face by a blast of cold air.

"Wha-me? I don't…"

Judy cut him off at the pass.

"Didn't you tell Nick and me you worked at a guitar co-operative?" She said this while giving Erin quick sideways glance. There was no irritation on her sister's face, only a look of surprise.

"Whoa-ho-ho, wait a minute." Conor lifted up his arms and made stopping motions with his paws, "I said I had an apprenticeship at Peace Rock; way big difference. I helped out on some fixes yeah, but I never did one solo."

"But you just said this was an easy repair." Judy countered, refusing to be deterred.

"For someone with experience, but not for me," the young fox shrugged helplessly, "and anyway, I don't have any tools with me."
It was a good point, but if Conor Lewis thought *that* argument was going to dissuade *this* bunny, he really didn't know her all that well.

"If we got you some tools and someone to help you, *then* could you try to fix it?" she asked.

Conor looked at Judy as if she'd just sprouted antelope horns.

"Well yeah, maybe but…"

…but she already had her cell phone out.

"Nick…can you send Bobby Catmull down here? I'll tell you later…okay thanks. Bye"

When she disconnected, Judy became aware of a drumbeat sound coming from beside her.

It was Erin, thumping her foot.

"Excuse me Judy, but whose bass is that on the table there, yours…or mine?"

Taken aback, Judy could only answer weakly, "Yours, Erin." Oh brother, she was *really* playing the dumb bunny now—and an insensitive one—leaving her sister out of the equation like that.

"Right!' the younger rabbit gave her foot a final thump, and then pointed towards herself with two fingers. "So I'll decide who fixes my guitar and when, thank you very much."

Judy felt her heart begin to sink, but then her sister turned and spoke to Conor Lewis.

"One question. If I let you try to repair my bass, is there any chance you could end up breaking it for good?"

His expression became even more bewildered.

"Mmmm, nooo…" he finally said, "THAT wouldn't happen but…"

"Fine, then go ahead," Erin told him.

Conor shot up out of his seat.

"Go ahead? What are you, a couple of *March Hares*; didn't you hear what I said just now? Aghhhhh, grrrrrr, I should of *let* you break that thing when I had the…!"

"Hey everyone what's going on?"

They all looked and saw Bobby Catmull approaching; it was Judy who answered the cougar's query.

"Conor says he might be able to fix Erin's guitar…"

"Hey, I *never*…!"

"…but he doesn't have any of his tools with him and he can't do it alone. Could you help?"

"Mmmm, maybe," Bobby answered guardedly, "I've got a few of my tools with me. But what's wrong with Erin's bass, any idea?"

He said this while looking at Conor, who in turned looked the same way Nick Wilde had when he'd heard his voice playing back on Judy's Carrot pen. *I make 200 dollars a DAY, fluff.*
"I think it's the stereo jack," the young silver fox finally said, "but I…"

"Oh yeah that's a Morty-Mouse repair job." The big cat told him, nodding cheerily…and then held out his paws towards the instrument lying on the table. "May I…?"

Conor's ears began moving in twenty different directions at once.

"I just…Look, I….It's not…aw, here already."

He picked up Erin's bass and passed it to the cougar. Judy thought he looked like Leep, surrendering his sword to Grunt at Hippomattox. (For the life of her, she couldn't understand what the fox-kid's problem was.)

Bobby took the bass guitar and examined it minutely.

"Did you try plugging it into an amplifier?' he asked.

"Yeah," the young fox said, "When I turned up the gain I got a low hum, but nothing else. I tried holding it near a mike too; see if I got any feedback."

"Did you?' the cougar asked him.

"Yeah, sure did," the young fox answered twisting a finger in his ear to demonstrate. His reticence seemed to be rapidly fading.

"So the pickups are still good." Bobby gave the instrument back to him, "I think you're right, it's a bad stereo jack." He raised a cautionary finger, and then pointed at the guitar, "The bad news is, I'm pretty sure that one's toast. It's going to need replacing, not fixing. And I don't have a spare, I'm afraid."

"Me either," said Conor, perhaps a little quickly. (He seemed to find the information heartening.)

"We'll get you one." Judy told him confidently. That was good for an odd look from both the young fox and Bobby Catmull; even Erin was regarding her dubiously.

"Okay," he said, raising his paws, "No promises, but if Bobby here can help me, and if you can find a replacement jack—one that'll fit this bass—then I'll try to see what I can do, okay?"

Conor didn't sound particularly sure of himself, but he finally understood one thing if nothing else, (a fact well known to his fellow fox, Nick Wilde.) When Judith L. Hopps got a notion into her head, you couldn't dislodge it with dynamite.

"Okay Conor, that's all we can ask." Judy told him, offering a paw. (Erin only nodded; she didn't want this fox touching her either.)

Conor took Judy's paw and they shook on it, but then showed he hadn't played all of his cards either.

"I can't do anything tonight," he said, reaching over and powering down the laptop, "I gotta get back to the stage; they're gonna be wondering what happened to me. Heck, I'll be lucky if I haven't been fired."

Judy felt her ears go up and saw Erin's do the same. Bobby Catmull's tail was flicking in curiosity.

"Back…to the stage?" she queried at last.
By way of response, the young fox slipped two fingers under a lanyard encircling his neck and then lifted them up to display a laminated, plastic card.

"I volunteered to help out at the talent show." He explained, "Figured I might learn a thing or two, you follow what I'm bringing out?"

He closed up the laptop and scampered back inside the van with it, leaving the bunnies and cougar to stare after him in confusion.

Chapter End Notes

There are two Easter Eggs here. an indirect reference to the most famous all Disney icons and a ref to a character in another Disney animated feature.

The previous chapter's Easter Egg was the number of Finnick and Conor's campsite, A-113.
"So they sold out all the T-Shirts, the kid has money to burn in his pocket and the rest of the Carrot Days Festival to do whatever he wants….and instead of going on the rides or anything, he volunteers to help out at the talent show. Pretty weird if you ask me, Nick."

"Uh-huh." The red fox answered laconically.

There were strolling through the flea market. It was late and the place was almost deserted; most of the stalls were dark and empty. Aside from the few still open, the only other activity they'd seen in the last ten minutes had been a clean-up crew, emptying trash receptacles.

"I mean." Judy waved her paw in the direction of the campground, "he practically begs Finnick to stay on through the end of the Festival, and then when he gets his wish all he want do is WORK."

"Uh-huh." Nick said.

She nodded towards amphitheater, (now also dark and deserted.)

"Well, at least we know how Conor got backstage without being stopped by Security."

"Uh-huh."

From a nearby light-pole a P.A. speaker crackled. "Attention…attention everyone: The Carrot Days Festival will be closing in fifteen minutes. Please begin making your way to the exits and thank you for attending. We hope to see you again tomorrow."

"Uh-huh." Nick Wilde said.
Judy looked at him with a twitching nose and a raised eyebrow.

"Did you hear about that big fight over by the Ferris Wheel, Nick?"

"Uh-huh."

"I think it's terrible that they're banning foxes from next year's Carrot Days, don't you?"

"Uh-huh."

She clasped her paws to her cheeks and pretended to gasp.

"Oh no, look, they've got Finnick in pawcuffs!"

"Uh-huh."

She pointed to a nearby dealer's booth.

"Will you buy me that necklace?"

"No, it's too much money...and nice try." (Now he was the one with a raised eyebrow.)

Judy stopped, harrumphed, and thumped her foot.

"All right Nick what's bothering you?"

He turned around with his paw on his hip.

"What's BOTHERING me, Carrots? What the heck are we still doing here? We should have left for home half an hour ago."

The bunny folded her arms.

"You can read to the kids anytime. Nick. And anyway, I made a promise and I'm going to keep it."

"Okay, fine." He was becoming exasperated, "But do we have to go looking for that floor-jack...?"

"Amplifier jack..."

"Whatever kind of jack; do we have to go looking for it tonight? And here...at the Carrot Days Festival FLEA-MARKET? Give me a break, rabbit." He lifted an arm and pointed. "What do you think is going to happen, that we're just going to turn around and...see one...right in front...of us?"

Judy felt her nose starting to twitch again. Nick's mouth had become a slackened clothesline, while his eyes were a pair of glass marbles and his ears looked ready to drop like autumn leaves. Now what the...?

"What Nick?" she asked.

The fox just tapped her on the shoulder and pointed over it and behind her.

Judy turned, and saw almost directly opposite, across the aisle, a dealer's stall with a pair of guitars propped against the front table. And propped against them was a sign reading, "$50.00 - Does Not Play!"

She turned to look at Nick again; her gaze seemed to snap him out of it, and he raised a fast finger.
"Before you say anything Carrots, remember—I'm the one who spotted it!"

That was good for a laugh, but only a quickie, and then Judy was bolting for the dealer's booth with the red fox right behind her.

"Is this day ever going to run out of surprises?" She asked herself.

Technically, it already had… but the wee hours of the morning would bring another unexpected occurrence, one that neither she, nor her partner would be aware of until after their return to Zootopia—and even then it wouldn't seem like any kind of bombshell.

But only in the short-term; in the long run, it would turn out to be perhaps the most significant event of that weekend.

Muktuk Cold Storage Warehouse—Tundratown District, Zootopia - Saturday, 01:27 AM.

He wriggled easily through the drainage conduit, a space no bigger than an old fashioned stove-pipe. (Foxes had nothing on his species when it came to maneuvering in tight quarters.)

Three feet ahead of him a set of iron bars had been sunk into the ground at the fence-line, supposedly blocking the way. Ahhh, but some wiseguy who was either cheap, stupid, or all of the above had decided to employ rebar for the purpose, either forgetting or unaware that Muktuk Cold-Storage used rock salt (illegally) to keep their truck yard drivable on icy days. And when that saltwater-ice melted in the high days of summer, it flowed straight through this drainpipe…and salt had a rather interesting effect on iron. When he'd shown up to case the joint three nights ago, bang! The rebar had been as rotten as tree branches in the wake of a bark-beetle infestation, practically disintegrating at his touch. (He had replaced them with fakes made out of painted bungee cord, an almost childishly easy task.)

That had been two nights ago. He would have made his move right then and there, but he'd needed to wait for the swag to arrive first.

A whole truckload of Spot Prawns, a fantastic score for anyone who could grab a piece of it; seafood was always easy to move. (He knew of at least a half dozen joints in the Canal District that'd take anything he brought them, no questions asked.) And for Spot Prawns he could practically name his own price; the season on these babies was maddeningly short.

The info had cost him two C-notes, but it had been worth it. Mason's intel was always reliable, (he worked dispatch for a local air-freight company,) and this time the hog-nosed skunk had steered him right into what was almost a dream set-up. The Muktuk yard had a huge a blind spot along the fence-line and the security at the construction site on the other side was worse than a joke.

All he'd needed was for the shipment to arrive, and it had rolled in through the gate at 9:30 on the dot that morning. (He'd been watching.) And now here he was, ready to make his move, with everything was in place. He had a flatbed truck—rented under a phony name—parked and ready beside the fence, and a construction-site crane hot-wired and all set to go; he had an access card, lifted from an employee's wallet at the lunch-wagon that afternoon, and the security codes from Mason. In fact, there was only one thing missing from his checklist

Backup—he was running this heist completely on his own.

Oh he'd tried to bring some other guys on board…and in every case the response had been the same…excitement, enthusiasm, and eagerness. But then when he'd mentioned that the score was
going down in Tundratown…

"Forget it pal, I ain't playin on that turf."

"Tundratown? Count me out."

"What, you gotta death wish or sump'n?"

"Sorry homes, I gots better things to do than end up on ice."

Bunch of losers, he'd finally concluded. If Mr. Big had owned Muktuk Cold Storage—even had a piece of it—then heck yeah, he wouldn't have touched it with a 53-foot truck-trailer either.

But the arctic shrew didn't have his paws in the joint; heck Muktuk Cold Storage wasn't even paying him protection money; (that had been a ginormous surprise, he'd had to double check, just to make sure.) In fact, the word on the street was that Mr. Big was actually moving away from the rackets and putting more and more of his resources into legitimate enterprises...and doing it legally. Whatever, the important thing was that the Tundratown crime boss had exactly zero investment with Muktuk Cold Storage.

But none of that had been enough to persuade any of the guys he knew to come in with him. In fact, he'd come that close to giving it a pass himself. (Better than most mammals, he knew what happened to anyone who ran afoul of Don Antonino Grandi, aka Mr. Big.)

And he would have let it slide if it hadn't been for Roscoe; when he'd laid the proposition on his sometime accomplice, the badger had not only rejected the idea, he'd nearly fallen over, laughing his tail off.

"Tundratown...you made out your will yet? Bahahahahaaaaa. May as well go with it, you got terminal stupidity anyway. Bwahhahhahawwww!"

"Okay, fine…!" he'd hissed and stomped out the door.

All right, if no one else wanted in, he'd go it alone. The take would be smaller but he wouldn't have to share it.....and then they'd ALL be sorry they'd shined him on, especially that wise-mouth badger.

"See how funny ya think it is when I start wavin' a wad of cash under yer nose!" he sneered at the absent Roscoe, brushing away snow as he emerged from the culvert.

Before proceeding any further, he rolled up the sleeve of his snow-suit and checked his arm. Yep, he was still good to go. As an added precaution he had temporarily dyed his fur white before setting out on the score. The purpose here was twofold. Not only would it serve to camouflage his appearance, anyone getting a look at him would assume he was a resident of the district—his was a species that changed color in the winter, the perpetual season here; and as with everywhere else in the world, the residents of Tundratown were far less suspicious of locals than outsiders.

Moving along the fence-line, he scurried to the edge of the loading bay, skittered up the access ramp and onto the freight dock, keeping flat against the wall as he edged his way towards the employee entrance. Okay, now here came the tricky part. There was a security camera aimed directly at the door and no way to avoid it. He could unlock the entrance from outside of the camera's POV, but he couldn't pass through it without being seen; he'd be visible for only a hint of second, but he'd still be visible. The only good news was that if he was spotted, he'd know right away; the warehouse would instantly lock down, trapping him inside. (The thought made a brick rise into his throat.)
He swallowed it and got down in a runner's crouch.

"Okay, 4…3…2…1…Go! Get to the door, keep low, swipe the card, open the door. Urgh, this thing's too heavy for my species! C'mon, HEAVE. There, good. Now get yer tail inside that warehouse. Awrite there's the alarm control-panel; hit 'function', hit 'alarm', hit 'turn off', punch in the code, hit 'enter' anddd…"

He winced and looked away for a second trembling inside his snow-suit, his breath forming gray puffs in the frigid air of the warehouse. It was cold in here but not that much more than it was outside. (Not that it mattered, he would have been shivering right now if this was the middle of Sahara Square.) All right, $64 G question; had he made it through the door without being spotted? There was only one way to find out. He looked at the display panel again, 'Alarm Off'. Awrite that was good, but…

He pushed on the door-handle, felt it give way.

YES!

All right now where was the stuff he was looking for? He pulled out the map that Mason had drawn and looked it over quickly. Row C, third one from the left, spaces 19 through 48 levels one and two. It was only the ground-floor level that interested him, and the spots near the back of the warehouse.

First thing, however, was first.

On his left was the dispatchers office, and on the other side of that should be…yep, there they were, a long row of electric pallet jacks. Most of them were set up for larger mammals, but the two on the end were geared for smaller species, and just like Mason had said, the second one was just his size. Before doing anything else though, he opened the door to the dispatch office and left it that way. When the critical moment came, every second would count.

Sprinting back to the pallet jack, he unhooked the umbilicus from the charging station, climbed aboard, and set off.

He had to take it slow at first; he'd never driven one of these things before. It was galling, but better than flipping out, going around a corner.

Avoiding Row C for moment, he rode the pallet-jack down the first aisle-way, keeping close to the wall and out of sight of the security cams. Around the back of the enclosure at the far end of row C he found what he was looking for, a long line of sky-blue plastic bins, each of them four foot square by 40 inches high, with slots in the bottom for pallet-jack and forklift blades and lids held on by rubber bungee cords; they reminded him of giant Leggo pieces. He was tempted to snap the cords on the first one and check out the product, but knew he didn't have time.

He slid the pallet jack under the first one, raised it, and pulled out backwards, returning the way he'd come. It took him longer than he'd have liked, but his time improved considerably on the next two loads. He would have loved to grab more, but working alone, three bins were the most he could handle, (and the most the flat-bed truck could carry anyway.)

He parked them in front of a roll-up door, jumped off the pallet jack, and scurried inside the dispatch office, grabbing the keys to the cargo-doors off of a wall peg as he went.

Bellying up to the security console, he surveyed the images on the monitor screens. Nuh-uh, there was no way he could pull this off without showing up on at least two of them, UNLESS…
Like most businesses these days, Muktuk Cold Storage used a DVR-based security camera system. Much more efficient than the old VHS-tape model, they could store a week's worth of footage at a time.

There was one disadvantage to this system however, one tiny Achilles' heel, a power outage, even half a second's worth, would cause the system to reboot, a process taking anywhere from five to ten minutes. And during that time, the last image on the security cameras would freeze in place. It was a flaw that had been corrected in all of the newer models, but this one was anything but state of the art. (He had learned that by scoping out the model number on the gate-side camera through a pair of binoculars.)

Kneeling down under the security desk, he began looking for the proper plug…and was delighted to find something even better, a surge protector with a reset switch. Could this score possibly get any easier? Now when he cut the power, they'd never know it wasn't just a glitch…not until they noticed the trio of missing bins, and by the time that happened, he'd have unloaded them for a cool payoff.

"You coulda been IN on this with me Roscoe, but nooooooo…!"

He took a breath and pressed the reset button. The lights in the office went out for a second and then came back on again.

Getting up quickly, he fished a small rubber ball out of his pocket, and rolled it out the exit and across the concrete, all the while keeping his eyes on the monitor screens.

Nothing, no sign of the ball on any of them; all right, now was the time to move.

He dashed to the roll-up door, grabbing the ball on the way. Slipping the key into the lock he turned it to the right and then reached up and pressed the 'open' button. A hum and a clatter followed as the door began to rise. Before it was even halfway up, he was already back on the pallet jack and picking up the first of the plastic bins.

Ducking down as he went under the door, he swung right and backwards, rolling down the access ramp and towards the fence-line. At the correct spot, he toggled down on the raise/lower switch, dropping his load neatly beside the fence, and then swinging back around and up the ramp again.

The second and third bins took longer than the first; he couldn't drop them on the fly, but had to turn around and push them up against the other(s). Nonetheless, in short order, he had all three containers lined up next to the fence. Okay, then…up the ramp, back inside the warehouse, and close the door…

The door dropped only an inch and then it stopped.

And close the door…

He pushed the button a second time.

Once more the door fell only a short distance before quitting.

And close the door…

And so he pushed the button again.

Close! The! Door!
And again…

CLOSE THE DOOR!

And again…

"Will you CLOSE awready, ya stupid, blankety-blank…? D'agghhh, RIGHT!"

He'd finally realized; he had to hold down the 'close' button to make door shut all the way. It made him want to throw something; these were precious seconds that he couldn't afford to lose.

Well, he could rant about it later; right now, he had to get moving again

Okay, door's closed; get the pallet jack back on the charger, door-keys back on the peg, close up the office, reset the alarm, and get back outside before it activates. Wait…the ball, had remembered the…? Yes, there it was in his pocket. Okay, back to the fence and through the drain-pipe again, be sure to put the 'bars' back and then into the construction yard.

On this side of the fence, about five yards away from the drain-pipe was the crane he'd gotten set up before going through into the warehouse. Normally it was used for lifting loads of masonry to the upper floors of the unfinished project, but here it would serve a different purpose.

He slipped inside the cab. It was built for larger species than him, but by setting a couple of books on the seat and strapping a pair of homemade stilts to his legs, he found he could manage the controls decently if not perfectly.

Cranking up the engine, he raised the boom and swung it out over the Muktuk yard. Letting it come to rest directly over the first bin, he lowered the cable until it just barely brushed against the lid. And then he killed the motor and scurried back through the culvert.

Very conveniently, the bins all had tie-down points at each corner….and the crane cable just happened to splay out into four smaller cables at its end, each one fitted with a small cargo hook; wasn't that convenient? He attached them quickly, checking to make certain each one was secure, and then hurried back through the drain pipe and into the cab of the crane again.

Here was where the process really became achingly slow. It was one thing to operate a crane carrying no cargo, but with a load attached to the cable, it was whole 'nother ball game—a game for sloths, not a fast-moving species like his.

Okay, haul back on the cable until the load is higher than the fence. Agghhh, he'd need to raise the boom up higher; okay, do it. Higher…higher than that; okay, good. Now swing it over the fence, take your time. Get it over the flat-bed truck. No…that's too far, go back a little. There, now wait'll the load stops swinging. Stop swinging, dangit! Awright, lower it down to the truck…little more…little morrrrrr…annnnnd perfect!

As before, the second and third times went more easily. In short order, he had the flatbed stacked and ready to go…almost

Lowering the boom back into the position where he'd found it, he shut down the engine, and jumped out of the cab, dashing to the truck and quickly getting the load tied down. (NOW he was able to move at a speed more to his liking.)

He was just about to climb up into the truck, when he remembered something; the hot-wire…he needed to pull the hot wire. No sweat, that wouldn't take more than a few seconds.
Scurrying back in the crane cab, he reached under the steering wheel, and…

And at that moment a beam of light stabbed out of the darkness, pinning him like a butterfly in its harsh, ammonia glare.

Before he had time to react or even to think, a second beam hit him from the opposite direction, catching him in the crossfire.

No time to run, no place to go. He could only hope it would end here instead of in the ice-pit.

But then more lights came on, not white, but red, blue…and flashing. And then a siren whooped amplified voice called out from somewhere beyond the illumination.

"You…inside the crane! Stay where you are and get your paws up where we can see them, this is the ZPD!"

He relaxed slightly; cops…it was the only the cops.

He lifted his arms as instructed.

"Don't move; keep those paws up!" the voice commanded, and now he could see figures running towards him through the construction yard.

It was only the cops not the Big Shrew's enforcers. He might still get out of this.

But not until after they booked him; he couldn't play his ace until then.

He heard the thump of footfalls coming from all around him, and then the door was yanked open and four big paws hauled him roughly out of the cab and into the glare of the spotlights.

Chapter End Notes

The previous chapter's Easter Egg's were...

Conor asking Erin, "What are you a couple of March Hares?"

Bobby Catmull's reference to a 'Morty-Mouse' repair job. (Mortimer Mouse was Mickey's original name.)
Days of Carrots and Blueberries (Continued…Pt. 16)

Chapter Summary

The Carrot Days Festival -- Day 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries (Continued…Pt. 16)

They arrived early at the Festival grounds well before the main gates opened to the public. As they had on Friday, Judy and her family were taking advantage of their status as vendors, slipping in through the side entrance ahead of the crowds.

Perhaps 'taking advantage' wasn't quite a fair term; no one in the Hopps caravan was playing the vendor card simply to get the jump on the regular patrons. Far from it; there was work to be done and plenty of it. They needed to get the Hopps Family Farm's stall cleaned up, set up, and ready to do business; sweep out the back, lay out the produce, get rid of the empty fruit and vegetable crates, post the prices on the chalkboard, and make sure they had plenty of extra stock on hand. Much to Judy Hopps' surprise, it was a task which Nick Wilde seemed to thoroughly enjoy, pitching in eagerly to help out.

With Saturday's arrival, the Carrot Days Festival was about to shift into high gear, and it was 'gonna be a buster' in the words of Judy's father. With at least an hour to go before opening time, the lines were already five deep at the turnstiles. And why not, there was fine weather on tap for the weekend; clear skies, light breezes and a forecast calling for highs in the low 80's. You couldn't have asked for a more perfect couple of days.

For all the changes the Carrot Days Festival had gone through over years, one tradition remained; Saturdays were reserved for the competitions; to name just three, the prize for the biggest carrot, the prize for the tastiest carrot, and the carrot-cake eating contest, (this year sponsored by Gideon Grey's Bakery.).

Of these, the Hopps Family Farm was entered in the first and third competitions but not in the second; the panel of judges for the tastiest carrot contest changed annually on a rotating basis and
this year it was Stu Hopps' turn to serve. (Judy's Uncle Terry was representing the family in the Carrot Cake eating contest, something about which she had decidedly mixed feelings.) There were tractor pulls, there was a plowing contest; this year they'd added wood-sculpting competition—using chainsaws.

And then of course there were the athletic competitions, the tug-of-war, the wrist-wrestling challenge, and the ever-popular running contests; including the 2K Bun Run, and the big race of the day, the 10K Rabbithon. Among the entrants to this event was a bunny named Judy Hopps, representing not only her family but also the Zootopia Police Department.

After sliding the last flat of blueberries into place—"Ow... Carrots!" "WHAT did I tell you about sampling, fox? Paws! Off!"—Judy and Nick bade a temporary farewell to the others and grabbed the guitar they'd purchased, heading for the camping area.

"This thing BETTER work, Carrots." The fox had grumbled when they'd climbed into her dad's pick-up to head home the night before. "I'm not paying fifty bucks for a dead end." (He had actually shelled out only half the purchase price.)

Judy had assured him that it would, but privately she couldn't be sure. Wouldn't it be just their luck if their new acquisition didn't play for the same reason Erin's bass had given up the ghost?

The 'two guitars' they'd seen at the flea market had actually turned out to be only a single instrument; a guitar with two necks. Judy had found that extremely odd, but who cared if the jack could be swapped out with the one in Erin's bass? (IF it was functional of course.)

A phone call from Nick to Finnick, ("Dangit, I'm trying to eat breakfast!") had confirmed that Conor was at the van, and another from Judy to Bobby Catmull had verified that the cougar was on his way to the Festival. "Be there in half an hour."

They were halfway to the campground, when the fox abruptly turned to her.

"Mind explaining something to me, Carrots? What the heck is the point in trying to repair your sister's bass guitar right NOW? What difference will it make? It's a little later for her to start over again." (The quiver in the fox's tail told Judy he'd been harboring this particular question all night.)

"Have faith, Nick," was all she said; it was a weak answer at best and she knew it, but the truth of the matter was, she was following a hunch, (and try telling that to her companion!) It was an intuition so abstract, she couldn't put it into words, but at the same time so strong, it couldn't be ignored. And THIS rabbit had learned a long time ago that when her instincts kicked into overdrive, you had better follow along if you knew what was good for you.

They found Conor Lewis standing beneath a tree, halfway in between the van and the motorhome. He was clad in a plain white t-shirt, jogging-shorts, and fingerless gloves, hard at work on a makeshift punching bag he'd fashioned from some rope and what looked like a stuffed military surplus duffle.

As they watched, the young fox fired off a side kick with his right foot and segued into a spinning rear with his left, driving the bag backwards against the tree trunk. As it swung forward again, he caught it with his pawlm and slammed his other elbow into the canvas like a nutcracker. Back-fisting the bag as he moved away, he charged in with a flurry of punches a microsecond later.

Beside her Judy saw Nick Wilde staring openmouthed; she knew what he was thinking; how the heck had her sister ever landed a kick on this kid?
It wasn't what SHE was thinking however; Judy Hopps' eyes weren't open wide, they were tight and almost wincing. The young fox's attack on the bag was vicious, brutal-not quite savage, but definitely feral, fueled by a deep anger. Yet at the same time he seemed to be completely in control, able to calculate his tactics.

"He didn't learn moves like THAT on his own," Judy swiftly concluded, "Someone taught him, someone I'm not sure I'd want to face on the street. Whoa, I'm just glad Erin can't see this; she'd REALLY be spooked."

It wasn't the young fox's fighting skill that would have disturbed her younger sister, it was the channeled fury behind it—and that was all on Conor, no one can teach you to have a rage pool; it's either there or it isn't. Nick Wilde had been absolutely right about this kid, he was street, all the way.

They saw him leap up into a fox-pounce, and come down aiming for the bag with a head-butt. This time he miscalculated however, coming in at too steep an angle. Instead of striking the bag full force, he glanced off the canvas and went sliding down the front, turning tail-over-teakettle when he hit the ground and landing on his back.

He shook it off, rolled over quickly, and whirled to his feet again.

That was when he noticed Nick and Judy watching him.

"I-I meant to do that." He told them, offering a lame grin.

Judy and Nick both laughed, and just like that, the tension was broken; there was something rather endearing about the young silver fox's pluck. He'd gotten up immediately rather than let his faux pas deter him.

But then he got a look at what Nick Wilde was holding in his paws and both his ears and eyebrows shot upwards as if they were spring-loaded.

"Hey, hey, heyyy, what's that you got there, big guy?" he held out his paws, waggling his fingers inwards, "Lemme see?"

Nick passed the guitar to the younger fox; he let out a low whistle.

"Whoa, a Denelectro 6/12 double-neck; niiice…where'd you get this?"

"At the flea market," the red fox told him.

"It doesn't play." Judy added hastily. She found Conor's enthusiasm slightly annoying. They had bought this guitar for the parts, not as a collector's item.

"Oh I can see that," the young fox answered, turning it over in his paws. "The necks are cracked and the bridges are toast." He looked down the length of the instrument with a single eye as if sighting down the barrel of a gun. "The rest of the hardware looks okay though, same for the amplifier jack; that's why you bought it, right?"

"That's it Conor," Judy felt a small, awkward flush rising in her cheeks; Nick had told Finnick on the phone earlier that they'd found a possible replacement jack, but he hadn't mentioned where they'd found it.

"Thought so," the young silver-fox lowered the guitar again. "I can't tell for sure if it's any good though, not without plugging it into an amp."
"Can you do that now?" Judy asked him. She needed to know; had they made the right move, buying that guitar?

Conor reluctantly shook his head.

"Believe me, I'd like to, but if I do that and get majorly feedback, the neighbors aren't gonna be any too thrilled about it." He said this while indicating the spaces on either side of Finnick's van, then pointed to the road leading through the campground, now strewn with a hundred varieties of refuse, "This place was a stinkin' rave last night; music blasting, fireworks going off, dirt-bikes and three wheelers racing around all over the place, guys getting into fights, that kind of stuff. I counted like six times the Sheriff's deps showed up, before they called 'enough!'. They got everyone together over by the picnic tables and read out the Riot Act, told 'em 'One more noise complaint and somebody's going to jail!'" He said this as if expecting Nick and Judy to understand automatically; peace officers themselves and all that.

He was right, they did, Nick especially; he had seen that circus coming to town the first time he'd been here.

"The good news," Conor told them, pointing to the butt end of the guitar, "Is that the jack on this bad boy looks like it should fit Erin's bass guitar, no problem."

"Yay!" Judy whooped and offered him a fist bump. Now the kid was getting down to business.

Conor returned the gesture but with an added note of caution.

"Like I said, I can't be sure of any of this until Bobby C. gets here with the tools."

"He's on the way; I talked to him a few minutes ago," Judy told him. She appreciated the young fox's air of restraint; it was perfectly reasonable not to get their hopes up.

Then Nick Wilde pointed at the guitar with a raised ear.

"Mind if I ask you something Conor? What the heck is the point of guitar with two necks? You can't play both at the same time."

"Yeah, I know." The young fox said, holding the instrument as if he were playing it. "The idea here is that you can switch from a six to a twelve string and back again without having to change guitars; you don't have time for that on stage. Jimmy Cage f'rinstance could never of pulled off playing Stairway to Heaven live without using a double-neck; that tune's got a real fast guitar-change in the middle."

"Ahhh, I get it." Judy said. Actually, she wasn't quite sure she did, but what the kid was saying sure as heck sounded logical. Then she told him, "Listen Conor, there's one thing we never discussed; if you can help us out, what do we owe you?"

If she was expecting him to wave her off with an 'Ah, fuggedaboutit,' Judy Hopps was in for a rude awakening. Conor held up the guitar.

"Can I have this? I'd love to own a double-neck."

Judy blinked, and then her ears went up and then she was staring. (Beside her, Nick Wilde looked quietly amused.)

"What? But it doesn't play anyway and you're going to take the jack out…"
"Ahhh you don't know the animals down at Peace Rock Guitar Co-Op," the young fox was grinning and offering her a thumbs up. "I've seen those guys bring axes back to life in much worse shape than this one." He lifted an eyebrow, "Do we have a deal?"

"Do I have a choice?" Judy asked herself, wondering how she'd gotten into this. A minute ago the kid had been all friendly and congenial; now he was driving a bargain. She held out a paw, "Deal!"

She almost pulled it away again when Conor spit into his pawlm before taking it; yep, he was street all right.

(While all this was going on Nick Wilde was biting his lip and looking away, making noises like a leaky steam radiator.)

"But if you can't fix Erin's bass, the deal's off," she said, pulling a tissue from her pocket and wiping her paw with it, trying to salvage a little face.

No such luck; Conor shook his head and grinned slyly, holding up the double-neck again "Nuh-uh rabbit, you shoulda said that before we shook on it; this thing's mine now, free and clear." He suddenly seemed to remember something and pointed towards a concrete structure about 30 yards away, fast Finnick's van, "Listen I need to go put this away and grab a shower before Bobby C. shows. Talk to ya later, okay?"

He turned and hurried away without waiting for an answer.

Nick managed to hold it in until they reached the campground entrance, and then he was practically rolling on the ground, laughing.

And once again, Judy's foot was thumping.

"All right Slick, mind letting me in on the joke?"

(As if she didn't know. "I swear, if he EVEN says, 'It's called a hustle Sweetheart,' he's walking home tonight!")

It took another moment or two for Nick to recover, and then he was shaking his head and offering her a wry, foxy smile.

"Carrots…Carrots…Carrots…how many times to I have to tell you? Never ask a fox if you owe him one. We may not be shifty and dishonest as a species, but that doesn't mean we give away freebies."

Judy looked at him with a narrowed eye and both paws on her hips.

"Oh reeeeeally? Then how do you explain Conor offering to give back my sister's bass guitar for the exact same price he paid for it?"

Nick had a ready answer for that one.

"That was different, rabbit. Conor made the decision to rescue Erin's bass guitar all on his own. But he never offered to try and fix it; you and your sister roped him into that job."

If he thought he was going to silence Judith Laverne Hopps that easily, the fox had another thing coming. She knew exactly what to tell him in response

"Uhhh, let's get back to the farmstall."
When they returned to the Carrot Days Festival, they found the gates had opened and the crowds had come surging in.

They also found someone minding the gate that led to the campgrounds, an off-white ram with curling horns; fortunately he'd was a local sheep, not another one of those bighorn rams brought in from who knows where. Even better, Judy knew him; he was Tommy Combs, her old friend Sharla's big brother. (He had been there to witness her encounter with Gideon Grey, in the wake of her 'Zootopia' skit.)

"I really wish Sharla could have made it Judy." He said, "I'd love to see the look on her face when she finds out how Gideon ended up."

'So would I," the bunny answered with a laugh.

When they got inside the gate, Nick and Judy saw that not only were there a lot more visitors, a whole slew of new vendor's stalls had popped up overnight; Conor and Finnick's space had been taken over by a Mouflon goat selling metal garden sculptures.

"I feel for that poor soul." Nick Wilde said, corking a thumb, "You watch Carrots, half the animals showing up at that booth today are going to want a Gazelle tour-shirt...and when they find out he doesn't have any, they're going to take it out on him."

"No bet, fox." Judy answered with a painful sigh. He was right of course but still, the poor goat had no idea what he was letting himself in for.

Or maybe he did; as they passed the stall, she saw a sign being raised over the top of the canopy, "No T-Shirts Here." She turned to nudge Nick in the ribs, but the fox had already seen it.

By far the majority of the newcomers were food cart vendors...and by far the majority of these were selling something Judy and Nick both loathed, deep-fried food. (It was one of the first things they'd discovered they had in common.)

Here was booth selling deep-fried pickles, there was another selling deep-fried green tomatoes, and of course there were several offering deep-fried carrots-on-a-stick, plus deep fried insect sellers purveying a myriad of different species.

When they turned onto the Midway, Nick Wilde threw up his paws in frustration and disgust. "Okay, that's it, that's ALL!"

Judy craned her neck and looked past the fox, and then she was groaning too. "Ohhhh, sweet cheez n' CRACKERS!"

It was as much an observation as an exclamation; directly in front of them was a food stall hawking 'Deep Fried Sweet Cheese and Crackers'.

They tried not to look at it as they passed.

"Oh that's nothing," Judy's father told them, when they arrived back at the Hopps Family Farm sales booth, "Last year we had a cart selling deep-fried margarine, if you can believe that."

Nick and Judy believed it, but that didn't mean they didn't want go out and slap someone.

Then another voice spoke from behind the stall, "Judy, is that you?"

It was her sister Erin.
"Yeah Sis," Judy told her, "Good news, Conor thinks the jack on that guitar we found will work with your bass." She was about to add a caveat, when the younger bunny came out from behind the booth.

She was dressed a lot more plainly that the day before, just jeans and a navy-blue plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up and her ears in a scarf, looking every bit the farmer's daughter. Judy wasn't quite sure what to make of her sister's quick-change act; it could be something either very good or very bad, depending on the younger bunny's motivation.

"I wished you'd waited until I got here before you talked to Conor, Jude," she said.

Judy wasn't bothered by this; her sister spoke without a trace of angst in her voice, her brows did not furrow and her foot did not thump; it was a simple statement of fact, nothing more.

"I appreciate the help and all," Erin went on, "But I really should have been there; the whole thing's kind of my responsibility."

"Sorry Sis, you're right." Judy admitted, trying not to grimace. "I wanted to get that guitar to Conor as soon as possible, and I guess I didn't think."

(Shedid not tell Erin that it was most likely a good thing they'd gone ahead without her. She could just imagine her sister's reaction if Conor Lewis had offered HER his paw after spitting into it first.)

"She'd probably have tried to deck him all over again...only this time I don't think he'd have let her. Or maybe she wouldn't have; not if she'd seen his dance with that punching bag."

Just then, a young voice squealed from behind the booth, and Cotton Hopps came running out, throwing her arms tightly around Nick Wilde's waist.

"Where've you BEEN?" she demanded, looking up at the red fox with a pouty expression, "We've still got lots more Carrot Days stuff to do." She grabbed his paw and turned around, making a game attempt to drag him towards the Midway.

The red fox winked and looked slyly at Judy and Erin.

"Ahhh, you Hopps sisters...like peas in a pod."

The two bunnies each put a paw on her hip, assuming a sultry pose.

"Darn right we are Nick." said Judy.

"And proud of it too," said Erin, reaching up to give her sister a high-five.

"Yeah!" said Cotton, striking a reasonable facsimile of her elder siblings' stance.

"Well first things first, Judy has to go check in for the Rabbithon." Bonnie Hopps had just come around the stall with a fresh flat of carrots.

Judy eyed her cautiously, "Mom? The race doesn't start till eleven; I've still got plenty of time."

"Not if you want a good starting position hon," her mother told her, setting the flat into place, "it's strictly first come, first serve. If you wait until later, you'll end up near the back of the pack."

"Whoa, I did not know that." Judy puffed her cheeks and let out a breath of air. Then she looked at the fox standing next to her. "Nick, I hate to ask, but..."
"Don't worry Carrots, I've got this." he assured her…and that was good enough for Judy Hopps; there was no bravura in his manner, not of that cocky self-assuredness he affected sometimes; as a matter of fact, Nick sounded a little UN-sure of himself, not 100% certain he could handle the kids on his own, but determined to give it his best.

And that was all she could ask of him.

"Okay fox," she said, "I'll see you at the starting line; don't be late."

"I won't," he promised, raising a paw in a ranger scout salute, and then he cupped his paws muzzle, calling out in a carnival barker's pitch. "Hurry, hurry, hurry; step right up for Nick Wilde's Magical Carrot Days tour; who else is coming with Cotton and me?"

He immediately found himself surrounded by a gaggle of young bunnies including, much to Judy's surprise, Erin.

"There's nothing I can do to help Bobby Catmull and that Conor kid right now," she said, "except to leave them alone."

"Good thought," her mother nodded, but Judy suspected it was more a case of the younger bunny wanting something to take her mind off her bass guitar—at least for a while.

Nick wasn't quite ready to go just yet, however.

"Before we take off," he said to Bonnie, "It there anything the kids aren't allowed to have?"

"Yes, none of that deep-fried junk," Judy's mother answered crisply, before giving the kids her patented 'And-I-mean-it' look, "and especially NO deep-fried cotton candy."

The reaction to this was a chorus of young, "Awwwws!" while Nick and Judy just looked at each other slack jawed.

Deep-fried cotton candy…

"It's a good thing he asked mom that question before he takes off with the kids," Judy decided, "maybe he HAS got this."

"Right, Mrs. Hopps," the fox said to her, reverting to a formal address, the better to emphasize the rule she had just laid down. And then to the bunnies gathered around him, "Come on everybody, let's go."

Judy watched until they disappeared around a corner, and was just about to turn away when she heard that chorale of young voices again, "Awwww, no FAIR!"

She sighed, shook her head, pinched the bridge of her nose, and then headed for the exit with fingers crossed.

Behind her, she heard Cotton's voice.

"Niiiick, Timmy keeps LOOKING at me!"

She picked up the pace, hurrying to get out of earshot as quickly as possible.

Chapter End Notes
Author’s note:

Yes Virginia, there IS deep-fried cotton candy; I saw it for sale at a State Fair some years ago. And there is also deep fried cheesecake, deep fried Twinkies, and deep fried Snickers bars, plus the ultimate triple-bypass special, deep-fried BUTTER. (I substituted margarine here; even I have my limits.)
"Stop thief!"

Nick and the kids were at a face painting booth, watching Cotton getting her cheeks daubed with flowers and a sunburst when he heard the anguished cry.

He wheeled instantly in the direction of the sound, tense and ready for action. You could take the fox off of his police beat, but…

It would have greatly relieved Judy to see how quickly he'd gotten a grip on things. After only one or two more outbursts, the Hopps children had settled down quickly to enjoy their day at the Festival. (They'd initially been testing him; the red fox was certain of it.)

Now he saw a figure dashing flat out down the concourse in their direction. At first Nick thought it was a weasel, but the animal coming his way wasn't slender enough and his legs were much too long.

Then his nose caught the interloper's scent.

"A mongoose," he realized, and now he saw the purse clasped in the animal's fingers…and since he was obviously a male, it was pretty safe bet that it didn't belong to him.

"Everybody, get behind me," Nick ordered, waving the children back. A mongoose and a red fox were about an even match, but this one was bigger than most, (and also bigger than Nick.)

He ducked partway into the booth and sat down on his haunches.

"Huh? What the heck are you doing, fox?" Erin demanded, staring in confusion.

"I said get behind me." He told her again, this time in a no-nonsense voice. What he was doing was
getting ready to pounce, but he didn't have time to explain that to her because here was the purse snatcher, running at full tilt. All right….3...2…1…GO!

Nick launched himself upwards into a jackknife, aiming with an open paw for the mongoose's weak spot, the back of his neck.

He never made contact, because at that second, something big, black, and bulky crashed headlong into the purse snatcher, bowling him backwards a good fifteen feet and leaving him in a confused sprawl. The suddenness of the attack caught Nick Wilde completely off-guard and he nearly came down on his chin, avoiding that epic fail only at the last second by tucking himself into a liquid roll, and tumbling over onto his feet.

When he got up again, Nick was able to get a closer look that the animal who'd knocked the mongoose into the middle of next Tuesday; the first thing he noticed was that the crime-buster wasn't actually black in color; he was dressed in black, the same black paramilitary fatigues the bighorn sheep minding the stage entrance had worn...and with the same three letters on the back, ASM.

This animal was no kind of ram however, although he was of a species Nick had encountered only recently.

He was a wolverine, a big one, and mean looking too. Behind him, the red fox heard Cotton starting to whimper. "Can we go please?"

Nick would have liked nothing better, but for the moment he was transfixed, watching mesmerized as the wolverine grabbed the mongoose's arm, twisting it behind his back as easily as a dishrag, while the would-be purse snatcher shrieked in agony.

"Nick, let's GO." It was Erin this time.

Her words didn't register with the fox. "What the HECK?"

Now having cuffed the mongoose (and none too gently) the wolverine picked him up by the scruff of the neck, hoisting him like a laundry sack. In the process he stepped all over the stolen purse, most likely destroying half the contents.

He didn't seem to care one bit; in fact, he appeared to be thoroughly enjoying himself.

"NICK!" Erin was almost screaming now.

Two figures in green ran past him, Pete Buckley and a deputy Nick hadn't seen before, a pronghorn antelope.

That finally broke the spell.

"Yeah, kids, I'm sorry. C'mon, let's get out of here."

He did a quick head count and then shepherded them away from the crime scene…but for the next few moments his mind remained there.

A wolverine, they'd brought in wolverines to work security? Okay fine, if the Guilford brothers showed up again; Nick could see that, no problem. But using a wolverine to take down a purse snatcher, and a mongoose at that, was like using a flamethrower to remove a wasp's nest from your garage.
In plain language, it definitely counted as overkill.

"You're overthinking this Wilde," he told himself, attempting to rationalize the scene he'd just witnessed. "He was probably right there anyway, the same as you."

That argument might have flown with the fox a couple of years ago but not now that he was police officer. When the wolverine had tackled the mongoose, he'd nearly lost his radio; the loop on the holster had been unclipped.

…meaning he'd put the two-way back in a hurry. Had he been talking to someone on the radio when he'd spotted the mongoose…or had someone called him to the crime-scene? Try as he might, the red fox couldn't shake off the notion that the latter instance was the correct one.

"Nick, look out!" Erin Hopps was shouting again. He came back down to earth just in time to avoid being run over by an elephant.

"Sorry," he said after ducking out of the way, "Guess that wolverine shook me up a little more than I thought."

He braced himself for snarky comeback, but the young bunny only nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, even Judy gets nervous around that species."

Nick felt his ears prick up; while he didn't disagree with the sentiment, it was hard to imagine any animal that could frighten Judy Hopps.

" Seriously? " he asked.

"Yeah." the young white bunny pulled at the base of an ear, "Something happened while she was going to the Police Academy." She looked away for a second, sucking air between her teeth, "Ahhh, but if she never talked to you about it, I guess I shouldn't either."

"No worries," Nick told her, hiding his annoyance. Wasn't it just like this girl to pique his curiosity and then shut the door?

Someone tugged at the leg of his pants, a little dun rabbit in shorts and a blue tee-shirt.

"Nick…?"

"No, you can't have deep-fried Orleos." He said.

"Awww!"

The bunny thumped his foot and stalked away.

Erin laughed. "You really are getting the hang of this, fox" she said.

"Hey ev'rybody, look…LOOK!"

Little Cotton was pointing skyward with a quivering finger.

Nick turned and looked upwards; so did everyone else.

High overhead, a twin engine airplane was circling lazily over the Festival.

"What the heck is such a big deal about that?" the red fox wondered. Even way out here in the
Burrows, airplanes weren't exactly a rare phenomenon.

He found out less than second later when a dark speck tumbled from the side door of the aircraft, followed by another…and then another and another. And now Nick saw that several others that had dropped out ahead of them.

Right then a billowing red rectangle bloomed open over one of the dots, followed by others of differing hues, each one attached to a flecks.

"Parachutes, I wonder what that's all about?" he asked of no one in particular. Was it some kind of demonstration, maybe a show?

It was Erin who answered him, pointing to nearby booth. The sign over the canopy read:

"Hoppy Landings Skydiving Adventures"

And beneath that, another one:

"Are you ready for an EXPERIENCE? Sign up here."

Nick Wilde let out a long, airy breath. Whoaf, it was a good thing Judy wasn't here; otherwise, she'd be hauling him in the direction of that booth, ready to sign the both of them up for…. 

"Awwww!" Little Timmy was pouting and thumping his foot. "It's just dumb ol' skydiving; I thought we were gonna get to see a planewreck!"

Nick's paw went over his eyes. Kids…

A serenade at his belt pulled him out of his reverie; a heavy guitar riff, followed by a pair of breathy lyrics.

"Foxy…
Foxy…"

Erin sniggered from beside him, "Jimi Hendrox…well at least you have good taste in music, fox."

Nick ignored her and picked up the call.

"This is Wilde."

"Nick, this is Conor," said the voice on the other end, "Good news, we got Erin's bass all fixed."

The red fox looked at his watch; they had dropped off the guitar only a couple of hours ago.

"Whoa that was some fast work, kid." He said, and saw Erin's ears spike upwards and her fingers crossing over one another. She had guessed who was calling and why.

"I know, right?" the young silver fox was saying, "Piece of cake once we got started. Can you let Erin know we got it done?"

"You can tell her yourself, she's right here." Nick answered, proffering the phone in the young rabbit's direction.

She snatched it out of his paw like a starving bunny, grabbing for a carrot.

"Conor?" she said, "Please tell me…"
Nick saw her eyes screw shut for a second and then she was pumping a fist and mouthing the word, 'Yes!'

She listened again for a moment and let out a sound that was almost a squeal.

"Oooo, thank you, thank you THANK you!"

Nick Wilde didn't know whether to laugh or slap himself. Yesterday Erin had been halfway ready to take Conor's head off. Now here she was, gushing like Benjamin Clawhauser when Judy had offered to get him one of those Gazelle Japanese tour-shirts.

"So, you're at the van?" she asked, crossing her fingers again, "Are you going to be there for a while, or…? Ooo, YES!" She looked at Nick with an anxious expression.

He nodded quickly, adding a mental note, not for public consumption.

"**Heck yes, Erin. Do you think I want your foot planted upside MY face?**"

"Okay be there in a few." She said, and then disconnected, turned and sprinted for the campground exit.

She managed to get about five yards before Nick Wilde's voice caught up with her.

"Erin—my phone?"

The young bunny skidded to a halt and turned a 180 with a vexed expression on her face, "I would have been right back." She protested.

"**Well at least she didn't pretend not to hear me,**" Nick told himself, holstering his cell after she returned it.

A thought occurred to him then.

"If you don't mind Erin, I think we'll come along."

Actually, Erin **did** mind, (and she wasn't the only one,) but she was too elated over the news with her guitar to give full vent to her objection.

"Uhh, thanks Nick, but I can get there okay on my own."

"It's not getting there that concerns me, Erin." The red fox told her, hunkering partway down on his knees in order to make eye contact, "It's getting back again. From what Conor told me, that campground's kind of a lawless place. I'd for hate you to have your bass stolen right after it's working again."

It was a hustle her sister Judy would have seen through in a heartbeat; the **real** reason Nick wanted to tag along was in order to keep the peace. He had been exposed to enough of Erin Hopps' mood shifts by now to know that she could change from Miss Congeniality to Princess Harpy at the drop of an off-color comment.

Luckily, Erin **didn't** have her older sister's savvy, at least not yet.

"Right, right…yeah, thanks Nick," she answered, nodding vigorously

He got exactly two seconds worth of satisfaction before...
"Awwww, do we hafta go NOW?" Little Timmy had his arms crossed and an even more cross expression on his face.

The other kids quickly rallied to his banner, but before they could raise anything more than a half-hearted protest, Erin snuffed it out like a birthday candle.

"Yes! We! DO!" she declared; paws planted firmly on her hips.

That was the end of that; none of Erin Hopps' siblings were willing to tangle with HER.

When they got to the exit, they found a bighorn sheep had taken over on guard duty. Happily this one was much friendlier than the one from the talent show the night before…and he had also come equipped with a pad and rubber stamp. As the fox and the bunnies passed him by, he marked each of their paws for re-entry.

Inside the campground, a clean-up crew was hard at work, picking up the trash from the previous night. While they constituted a variety of species, all of them had one thing in common; a bright-orange jumpsuit with 'Burrows County Corrections' printed on the back in glowing, electric blue. They were presided over by a pair of mammals in mist gray uniforms, a bison and a bobcat.

Nick approved of this arrangement; the buffalo to mind the larger inmates, and the cat to keep an eye on the smaller ones.

"Hi Mark." Erin waved to the feline, receiving a casual nod in return.

"H'lo Erin." He said, not taking his eye off his charges.

"That's my girlfriend Sue's uncle," the bunny explained to Nick Wilde after they'd passed

"Right." the fox nodded. (He'd already guessed it was something like that.)

When they arrived at Finnick's van, Conor and Bobby Catmull were seated at a camp table out front, kicking back and sharing drinks from a nearby cooler. Propped up on a stand behind them was Erin's bass, already hooked to an amplifier.

"Hey guys," Nick called, and the pair immediately got to their feet.

The exchange of greetings that followed was brief and perfunctory; Erin wanted to get her bass back, Bobby Catmull wanted to get back to his wife, and the kids all wanted to get back to The Carrot Days Festival. The only one who didn't seem in any kind of hurry was Conor. Nick found that kind of surprising; the young silver fox had been more or less hijacked into assisting with this enterprise.

"I went ahead and got it plugged into an amp for you," he said to Erin, waving a paw in the direction of her bass.

"Thanks." The young bunny answered, speaking in a near rasp; her voice seemed to be drying up in her throat. She went over to her bass and picked it up with a nervous paw and a guilty look on her face; this instrument was her treasure, her most cherished possession—and she'd come within an ace of destroying it.

Nick watched as Conor switched on the amplifier and saw Erin close her eyes and mouth something under her breath.

And then she braced herself, steeled herself, and slapped her fingers against the strings.
A riff burst from the amplifier, deep and rich and rumbling. Nick and Bobby exchanged a high five and two of the kids cheered. (The rest were rolling their eyes, as if to say, 'NOW can we get out of here?')

Erin looked over at Conor with tears of joy flecking her cheeks.

"Thank you," she told him again, this time in a little, choked voice.

"Ah don't worry about it," the young fox answered, waving a paw at the cougar on the other side of the table, "Bobby there did almost all the work."

"I did NOT!" the big cat protested, tail stiffening as if he'd just been accused of breaking a window, "Don't listen to him Erin, he carried more than his share of the load."

"Okay, I'm not gonna argue." Conor threw his paws upwards and outwards in gesture of frustration—and now Nick was the one rolling his eyes; the kid sounded as if Bobby was claiming he hadn't done his part.

The next thing Nick saw was the young silver fox propping his laptop on the table and opening it, and then typing in a quick set of instructions.

"Hang on a sec."

Nick tilted his head in curiosity, "What the…?" But then he noticed that the computer was also connected to the amplifier

There was brief pause, and then music began to play, pizzicato guitar notes over a chorus of synthesized strings.

Conor nodded to Erin

"Go for it."

She giggled, (Giggled!) and began to play along with the recording, a melodic bass solo. That lasted for about fifteen seconds and then a guitar came crashing in on the track and the tune took off at full gallop, with the young bunny's bass leading the charge.

But it wasn't until Erin began to sing that Nick finally recognized the song.

"My uncle has a country place
That no one know about…"

It was Red Bearchatta by Brush.

Erin's performance didn't quite measure up to her rendition inside the barn on the previous day—but that was through no fault of either her or her bass; she didn't have her pedalboard with her and there was no mike set up. Nonetheless, by the time the she was into the first refrain, the other Hopps kids were no longer in a hurry to get back to the Festival grounds, gazing raptly at their sister instead.

So was Bobby, so was Conor—and so was Nick. DAY-ang, the younger fox had been right about Erin; she really was that good.

Just the same, the police officer in him couldn't quite reconcile with something; this tune was basically an ode to an unlawful act.
"Tires spitting gravel,  
I commit my weekly crime."

When the final verse came up, Nick became aware that the number of onlookers had nearly doubled in size; animals were coming in from all over the campground to listen. When Erin hit the finish, they gave her a rousing ovation.

All she could do was grin and take a bow.

It was while she was unplugging her bass that Ethan asked her the question…a query Nick Wilde might have made if he hadn't already known the answer.

"So are you going to play the talent show again?"

Erin sagged like a leaky grain sack, she also knew the answer, but that didn't make it any easier for her.

"I-I…can't Ethan." She told him sadly. "I wish I could, but all the slots are full, so unless somebody cancels, no."

"Then I'll cancel; take my spot."

Everyone turned to see Conor Lewis standing with a shocked expression on his face. "I…said… WHAT?" He seemed to be asking himself. "Conor," Erin started to say, "You don't have to…"

"No, I don't." He was recovering rapidly, "I don't have to do anything except stay outta trouble and go to school—and since it's summer right now, you can bag on school." He looked straight at her. "This is what I want to do Erin," he said, and then he folded his arms and raised an eyebrow, "but I got one condition."

"And what's that?" the young bunny asked, crossing her arms right back and eyeing him suspiciously. Unlike her older sister, she knew better than to expect Quid sans Quo from a fox.

"I get to join you onstage," he said, pointing to a guitar case tucked underneath the table "You can have my slot but I'm on lead guitar and backing vocals; I'm not gonna give it up completely." His eyebrow cocked up an extra two notches, "Do we have a deal?"

Nick gasped silently and then grimaced. The last time Conor had said that…. Ohhh boy, Erin was going to…he had to stop this before…

But it was already too late. "Deal!" she said…and before Nick could make a move or even speak, the young fox had spit into his paw again and was offering it to Erin.

She only stared in disgust for a second.

And then she spit into her paw and raised it at an upwards angle, "Not underpawed, OVER pawed, don't you know anything, fox?"

"Hey Snowdrop you got your way, I got mine, okay?" he growled, reaching out nonetheless…and then pulling away at the last second, "but first get your other paw out from behind your back."

Erin's ears laid back and her foot began to thump again. "I wasn't…! Ohhhh, YOU!"

She brought out her left paw where the fox could see it, "And DON'T call me Snowdrrop," she
said, and then finally they shook on it, first high, then low, and then finishing up with fist bump.

The pact was sealed.

"Okay." The young fox said, in that throwaway manner of his, "Go get your pedalboard and let's start rehearsing."

Nick braced himself for a flashover from Erin, "Heyyy, you don't tell me what to do, creep!" he could imagine her saying.

But she only shrugged quietly.

"Can't right now, I have to go watch my sister Judy in the Rabitthon."

Conor's answer to this was an even bigger surprise.

"Whooa yeah, gotta stick by your family Erin. Okay, we can meet at the red barn after the race, or..." He looked thoughtful for a second. "You know what, I think I'll come and watch too."

"Great, the more the merrier," Nick Wilde said, (quickly, before Erin could respond...and getting an angry glare from the bunny for his troubles.)

"Okay, lemme get my gear stowed in the van," Conor closed the laptop and unhooked it from the amp.

"May as well leave my bass here too," Erin told him, resigning herself to the inevitable—apparently.

"Hmmmm," Nick Wilde thought, stroking his chin with a finger, "Is it just me or does anyone else think Erin doesn't really mind him joining us...at least not as much as she's pretending?"

The thought brought a smile to the red fox's face—until the voice of another rabbit began to echo in his head, drowning out everything else. Oh Lord....JUDY. He could just imagine her reaction, when she heard about Conor's offer.

"See Nick? Wasn't I right, wanting to get Erin's guitar fixed ASAP?"

A painful grimace swept across Nick's muzzle. Oh GAW, he'd be hearing about it until the end of the festival...or even longer. Three weeks from now, there'd be a phone call in the middle of the night.

"Hi Nick, remember back at the Carrot Days Festival when I wanted to get Erin's bass repaired right away? Okay fine, go back to sleep."

"Hmmmm, maybe she'll be too tried after running in the Rabbithon to give me hard time." The red fox suggested hopefully to himself.

"Yeah and maybe Chief Bogo will quit the ZPD to become a ballerina." He told himself right back. "Awww, grrrrr, I could have insisted on paying for that Jumbo Pop myself, but nooooooo." 

"Nick, what's wrong?" It was little Cotton asking.

"Nothing," he said, hurriedly smoothing down the front of his shirt. "Come on let's get back to the festival, we still have time to get more Carrot Days stuff done before the race."
"Yay!"
The best laid plans of little, grey rabbits gang aft aglay, too

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries
(Continued…Pt. 18)

Judy Hopps should have been feeling honored.

Instead she felt unsettled.

It seemed like half the Hopps family had turned out for her run in the Rabbithon…or that was how it seemed anyway; there were at least as many bunnies here as there'd been for Erin's talent show performance the night before.

That was good; what wasn't so fantastic was that everyone seemed to think she had the race in the bag. The only exceptions were Nick, and to lesser degree Conor Lewis. The others were all behaving as if she only had to phone it in to collect the winner's trophy.

While Judy was grateful for any and all support from her family, overconfidence on their part was something she didn't need. For one thing, it reflected badly on her own attitude; for another, she knew that the Rabbithon was anything but a done deal. Yes she was a bunny-cop, not only the first to join the ZPD but the first one anywhere, (as far as she knew.) And yes, she had the skills and conditioning to go with that job—but that still didn't mean the race was a lock. There were least three other rabbits in the competition that could be first over the finish line, (and those were the ones she knew about.)

First up, Neela N'kula. Neela was a riverine, or bush rabbit, an Afurican species long noted for its stamina and endurance. She was also dedicated runner in her own right; the Rabbithon would be her fourth competition this year. Neela was homegirl as well; a second generation Burrows bunny, she had moved away three years ago to take a job with a relief agency based in Seattle. Like Judy she had never forgotten where she came from.
David MacLeap was a smiling Scottish Mountain Hare who worked as a ranger in Canada's Bunff National Park, a job that required him to make long treks over sometimes difficult terrain. His wife, Anne was a Bunnyburrows girl whom he'd met in college.

And then there was Tess Hazelton.

Tess was Judy's distant cousin and the girl's phys ed. instructor at Bunnyburrows High. She wholeheartedly practiced what she taught, working out religiously before and after classes. She also had the advantage of having been able to train over the local terrain in the run-up to the race.

Technically the Rabbithon was open to all comers larger than rodents and smaller than a red-fox, (which left Nick out.) But only rarely did species other than rabbits and/or hares sign up for the event.

The reason for this was simple; the Rabbithon was run over a course geared specifically to bunnies. This was no mere road race; it was combination steeplechase and trail run. There were walls and fences, there were hairpin turns and hill-climbs, and there were culverts and tunnels to negotiate. (At least there wouldn't be any sandstorms or ice walls Judy wryly reminded herself.)

One thing she did have in her favor was a piece of wisdom she'd picked up at the ZPD Academy, if you can't run faster, run smarter...and that her plan for today.

The first order of business however was to get dressed for the occasion, and so she ducked into one of the portable changing rooms to switch clothes. As fate would have it, Judy had purchased a new running outfit the week before, a two-piece ensemble that could have been a minimalist variation on her everyday police outfit. It started with a pair of knee length running shorts in sky blue with the letters 'ZPD' on the left hip and finished with a matching sports bra with the letters imprinted where her badge normally went. The last item on the agenda was to pin her ears back with a runner's barrette, the better to cut down on drag. (Judy refused to follow the latest trend among competitive runners, covering her head completely with a spandex hood in order to pre-empt all wind resistance; she couldn't hear a thing with one of those face-huggers wrapped around her ears.)

She gave herself as best an inspection as was possible in the room's tiny mirror, and then gathered her clothes and went back outside…and walked straight into a rousing cheer from the members of the Hopps clan.

"Guys, come on," she protested, pretending to be appalled, "Give me a break, the race hasn't even started yet."

Perhaps it was just as well; distracted as she was by her family, Judy was unaware of the way Nick Wilde was looking at her—or of the way her sister Erin was looking at Nick, (or of the way Conor Lewis was looking at Erin.)

Nick only wanted to slap himself; he would have done just that if it weren't for all these bunnies milling around.

"What the HECK?" he told himself, "Get a grip, Wilde; this isn't anything you haven't seen before; it's just a two piece version of her old workout clothes."

Yes, it was, so why couldn't he stop staring at her? Judy had never looked lovelier. With her strong, supple frame and glossy fur, she was the picture of perfect…“Get it together, fox!"

Whatever recriminations Nick might have been laying on himself, they couldn't begin to touch the
thoughts of the young rabbit standing on his right.

"Foxes!" Erin could have spit out the word like bile, "You're all alike, first Conor and now YOU!"

Conor's thoughts, as he looked back and forth from Nick to Erin were shorter and to the point.

"I was NOT looking at you like that!"

The curse finally lifted when they heard Stu Hopps speak up.

"All right everybody, gather 'round, it's time to grab your bottles and take your stations." He said this while pointing to an oversized ice-chest parked at his feet.

Nick wondered what the heck Stu was talking about, until he popped the cooler's lid. It was stacked with a variety of runner's bottles, the clear ones showing a liquid in light, burnt yellow.

"What's that stuff," the fox asked, pointing at the ice chest, "Vitamin water? Gatorade?"

"Nope, it's switchel." Erin said from beside him.

Nick felt his ears rise up. "Switchel? I never heard of that brand, who makes it?"

The young bunny laughed and shook her head mockingly.

"WE make it, city boy; it's a home brew, you can't buy it in the stores."

"Best thing in the world for a hot summer day in the fields," Said a familiar voice, and they all turned to see Judy coming their way. Nick braced himself but whatever had come over him when he'd seen her in that running outfit had already moved on.

"All right, so what IS switchel?" he asked.

"It's kind of like lemonade," Judy told him, "except you use honey instead of sugar and add ginger and cider vinegar."

"Sounds a little heavy for a sports drink," Conor Lewis observed from over on Nick's left.

"Not if you dilute it really well," Judy answered, pointing at the cooler. "That's the nice thing about switchel, you can make it as strong or as weak as you like."

"Hey c'mon you three; grab your bottles and take your places." Stu was beckoning to Nick, Conor, and Erin from beside the cooler.

Nick led them over but his outlook was somewhat less than enthusiastic.

"I kind of wanted to be there when Judy crosses the finish line," He said.

It was Judy herself who provided the solution

"We can put them at the Change Lake station Dad. There's an easy shortcut back to the finish line from there."

"Good idea." Stu said handing Nick and the others each one of the bottles.

"So why three of us?" the red fox asked a short while later as Erin led them along the trail that led to their hydration stop. "Judy can't take more than one of these at a time."
"Redundant systems, I'm guessing," Conor Lewis offered from two paces up ahead.

Nick felt his ears go up, "What now?"

"He means like a back-up system." Erin told him, "and he's right. If Judy misses grabbing the first bottle, she'll still have two more chances to get one."

She went on to explain how the rules worked. The racers could rehydrate either with water supplied by the race organizers or they could bring their own sports drink…but they could get it only at one of the designated hydration stations. The way it worked was as the runner approached the station, he or she would hold out their paw to indicate that they needed fluid.

"If we see Judy with her paw out, we run alongside the trail so she can grab some switchel on the fly." Erin explained

"Doesn't seem fair to me," Nick Wilde observed, "What about the racers who don't have a support team?"

Erin looked over her shoulder.

"No worries Nick, each runner will get the same chance as Judy, we always have tons of volunteers to help out at the Rabbithon." She grinned and then winked, "This is Bunnyburrows."

"Oh, I see." Nick answered with a nod. He actually didn't care one way or the other about Judy having an unfair advantage, but no one had said anything about HIM having to do any running. Heck this trail they were on was no picnic either, steep and twisting with lots of nice rocks to trip over.

"At least it'll be all downhill when we head back to the finish line," he reminded himself.

"Attention." A distant, amplified voice echoed up the hillside, "Attention please. All runners to your staring position, all runners, take your starting positions."

"Uh oh, better get a move on." Conor said, trying to pick up the pace. Erin just waved him back.

"No, no hurry. Where we're going is like more than halfway through the race, and we're almost there anyway." She led them into a thicket of mixed pine and alder-wood trees, so dense that Nick couldn't see more than two feet on either side. He didn't mind; finally the trail was starting to level out and he could hear the hubbub of voices up ahead.

When they exited the trees, Nick found himself on a gravel road set along the shoreline of a blue-water lake. Over on the right, he could see a turnout where a pair of tables had been set up, a large cluster of bunnies gathered around each of them. Both were crammed with hydration bottles from one end to the other.

"Welcome to Change Lake." Erin waved her paw like a tour-guide

"Change Lake," Conor Lewis wanted to know, "why's it called that?"

"It's actually an irrigation reservoir," the young bunny told him, pointing towards the opposite shoreline, "See? Right now the lake's full, but by Fall, it'll be down at least ten feet. So…Change Lake."
"Oh, so that's it." Nick answered with a poker face, "I thought for a minute there, maybe there was larger lake upstream called Dollar Lake."

Conor sniggered and Erin rolled her eyes.

"Har Har."

And then every bunny's ear went up at the sound of a sharp report.

"Annnd they're off!" someone crowed.

Down below at the starting line, Judy Hopps had just observed that you could always tell the rookies from veterans in a race like this. The neophytes were the ones who got down into runner's crouch when the starter called, "On your marks!"

The experienced racers knew that was what you did in a sprint, but not in a long distance competition.

And this would be a long distance run; 10 K for a rabbit was like 26.2 miles for a larger species. This was one of these races where anyone who made it to the finish line could call themselves a winner.

"Get set!"

Judy tensed and prepared herself; she was as ready as she was going to be. She was stretched and limbered up, her hydration team was in place, and she had secured a good starting position, a quarter of the way back from the front of the pack, "Thanks, mom."

"Annnd…"

The starter raised his pistol and fired and they were off, spurred on by a cacophony of whoops, cheers, and the thumping of a thousand rabbits' feet.

The first two kilometers were relatively easy, flat terrain with no curves. But everyone, even the first timers, were aware that this was only a warm-up; the twists and obstacles would come soon enough…and when they did, they'd get progressively harder with every passing kilometer. No one knew this better than Judy Hopps and so she paced herself accordingly, conserving her energy, not pushing herself. The idea was to keep within shouting distance of the lead but not to go for it until she hit the last two kilometers.

Of course, she wasn't the only bunny following this strategy. Neela N'kula was keeping right there with her and Tess Hazelton had even dropped back behind them little. (There was no sign of David MacLeap, but he had to be somewhere close by.)

At 1.5 K they came to the first hydration station. This was another thing that separated the newbies from the veterans. The rookie runners wouldn't grab for a drink until they thought they needed it, while the seasoned competitors made a point of hydrating themselves early and often; it would be a telling point in the final third of the Rabbithon.

And so as she approached the stand, Judy stretched out her paw. Instantly a trio of young rabbits moved out along the side of the road, bottles at ready. None of them offered any cheers or encouragement; that would come later.

She came closer; they began to sprint along the roadside keeping pace with her, each young bunny holding out a bottle like a relay-race baton. Okay, who should it be, Ethan? No. Jenna was closer.
Judy slowed down a tiny bit to keep pace with her younger sister; Jenna stretched out with her paw and Judy plucked the bottle from her grasp.

And now the cheering erupted.

"Yay, Judy!"

"Whoo hoo!"

"Go sis, go!"

Judy did not respond, that was something else that would come later. Instead she popped the top on the water-bottle, taking in the switchel in short measured squirts. The action forced her to slow the pace a little and at least two other bunnies passed her by. That was okay, it would pay off in the long term.

She didn't finish the whole bottle, drinking only a comfortable amount before dropping it by the roadside. (Her crew would retrieve it.)

No sooner had Judy let the bottle go, than up ahead, she saw the first obstacle, a wall constructed of straw-bales. She accelerated and leaped, clearing the wall easily without even having to use her paw to boost herself over.

But this, she knew, was literally only the first hurdle, and the ones to follow wouldn't be any easier.

As if to confirm this, the course went around a bend and she found herself facing three more barriers of straw bales, lower than the first, but strategically placed so that the runners had to take them in succession; she'd have to hit the ground jumping between each one.

Only one way to do it, speed up but not too much, time it just right…jussst riight and…

Over the first, jump the second, clear the third and go…yes! Judy took the triple perfectly, gaining back every inch of ground she'd given up to re-hydrate herself.

But now the course began to tilt uphill, slowly at first but then gradually becoming steeper. At the top of the rise, the road assumed a meandering course, zig-zagging through a stand of trees.

This was where things truly began to get devilish; there were hurdles placed around some of the bends, set up so that the runners wouldn't see until they were practically right on top of them.

Luckily for Judy, she was a cop…and no one knew better than a police officer to that you had better be ready for something unexpected around the next corner. Here came a left- paw curve around a tree. Something was there, she could feel it. Yep two logs across the roadway, up and over she went. A minute later Judy came to a turn around a boulder; she took that one flat out, nothing on the other side. But now here came a double switchback. There'd be something in between THERE, all right. Yep, more hay bales; jump 'em, Judy!

When she exited the woods, she saw another hydration stand up ahead. This time a lot more runners were stretching out their paws, including her.

And now was when she saw the first bunnies beginning to drop out of the race—because looming up ahead was a sheer-faced ridge with the road snaking up the side in series of sharp hairpin turns. It was enough to make HER have second thoughts about continuing on.

But thoughts were as far as she got; there was no question of her acting on them, not this rabbit!
Judy pushed her doubts aside and pushed on.

The ascent to the ridgetop turned out to be over a narrow, rocky track, rough, pitted, and only one lane wide. That made for a difficulty she hadn't anticipated, there was no room for passing and the cluster of rabbits up ahead of her had slowed to nearly a walking pace...while the pack at the head of the throng was drawing further and further away. Dangit, she could catch up with them if she could only get around this rabbit roadblock...but how?

The answer came on the approach to the first switchback. Up ahead she saw a bunny break from the pack, leap up, and go caroming off the road-bank and around the bunny bottleneck. Judy recognized her immediately; it was Tess Hazelton. She must have practicing for just this sort of possibility.

Never too proud to borrow some else's tactic, Judy let herself fall back a little and then gave it the gun as she approached the turn. At head of the curve, she spotted a small boulder and jumped on top of it, leaping up again, and then springing out from the bank with everything her legs could give her

She hit the ground running less that afoot ahead of the traffic jam—but that one foot was all she needed and she put the hammer down, determined to make up the ground she had lost.

Judy made it but there was a price to pay, when she hit the top of the ridgeline, her throat felt like dried parchment, never mind her two pit stops earlier in the race; there was practically no moisture in the air today. Her only consolation was the knowledge that she couldn't be the only one feeling the effect.

And it was a long way to the next hydration station...but at least for now she could cruise; the path along the top of the ridge was a simple straightaway.

But only for a short while; up ahead perhaps twenty yards away was a familiar sight, the elevated embankment of the BunnyBurrows Railway.

The underpass beneath it had been blocked off so that the only way through was by way of five PVC pipes of varying sizes laid inside the cut. Up ahead she saw David MacLeap drop down and dive head-first into one of the larger ones.

Judy knew a better way, a trick that dated back to her second day on the job with the ZPD. Putting on a little extra speed, she leaped out into a 'baseball slide' the same thing she'd done when Duke Weaselton had tried to evade her by taking shortcut through Little Rodentia.

The tunnel here was longer than the gateway to Zootopia's Rodent District, but it was also much slicker; she sailed through it like a kit down a waterslide, shooting out the exit and coming up on her feet two full yards ahead of David.

There was no time to savor her coup however, because twenty yards in front of her another obstacle was waiting, a wooden 'ladder-wall', too high to clear in a single jump. She would have to take it in stages.

No problem, after the frigid ice wall at the Police Academy this thing should be cake walk. Judy jumped up hard, making it half way to the top on the first leap, and then all the way to the summit on the second. Now all she had to do was grab the top, pull herself over, and...

A thrill of pain shot into her paw as the yellowjacket plunged the stinger deep, emptying its poison sac into her pawlm. Instinctively, she cried out and yanked away.
...And lost her balance, pitching head-first down the reverse slope of the hurdle.

Thinking fast, Judy stretched out and grabbed with her paws, catching hold of one of the lower rungs. The pain in her paw rose instantly to a banshee scream; she bit down on her lip and pushed off with all she had, at the same kicking out with her legs, tumbling over in mid-air and into an upright position...she hoped; there had been no time to gauge her move. She didn't....

She came down on her feet, not a perfect landing but close enough for government work; she was still standing and still able to continue. A split-second later David MacLeap landed beside her.

"Wha'happen?" he asked breathlessly as they sprinted off again. (He must have seen her near epic fall.) His query was a waste of time and oxygen but David, like Judy, had a job that involved helping other animals...a tough habit to shake off, as she herself knew only too well.

"Wasp." She managed to gasp, allowing herself a few seconds of well-deserved pique. Of all the places for that blankety-blank little so-and-so to have settled down for a rest, it had HAD to pick right there.

David nodded briefly and they continued on, the throbbing in Judy's paw become stronger and more noticeable with every step she took.

And she still had more than half the race ahead of her, but now oh sweet crackers n' cheez, here came another hydration station. If she couldn't relieve the searing in her paw, she could at least wet down the convection oven in her throat.

She moved to the side of the road and stretched out with her paw. At once she saw Junior and two more Hopps family bunnies detach themselves from the group around the table, bottles at the ready.

They began to run, keeping pace with her. Joanie Hopps was the first to come abreast of her sister. Judy grabbed the water bottle...and felt that searing pain in her pawlm again and lost it. Her brother Ben tried next; this time Judy tried to grab for the bottle using only her fingers, but was unable to grip it tightly enough to hold on. Once again the bottle went tumbling to the ground.

"Dang yellowjacket!" she seethed, unaware that she had spoken the words out loud.

Now only Stu Hopps Junior remained. If HE missed …

He was determined not to. Junior was big and strong and if he wasn't much good for a long distance run, a short sprint was easy-peasy. When he came alongside Judy, he pressed the bottle into her paw, not letting go until he was certain she had a firm hold on it.

Judy wanted to scream; the pain was excruciating, but she didn't let go of the bottle. As Stu Jr. drifted back in her wake, she pulled the cap and tilted it upwards, preparing to drink.

The bottle was gone, nothing was there...and there was no such thing as going back for it, (assuming she could even find it.)

Only now did Judy Hopps understand the bitter truth, her right paw was useless, the yellowjacket's venom had temporarily disabled it; she was desperately thirsty and the next hydration stop wasn't until Change Lake.

That was more than a K and a half ahead...and on the other side of who knew how many more obstacles? (And even if she could make it, what then?)
She gritted her teeth and pressed on, regardless

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was inspired at least in part by the Stephen King's novella, *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*

'Change Lake' is a corruption of the word, 'Lagomorph.'
Chapter Summary

Wise Mammal say, "It takes a village to run a marathon...but only one to out you."

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**The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction**

**Part One:**

**Fuel**

**Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries**
(Continued…Pt. 19)

"Dad, can you hear me? Judy got stung by a wasp...I said a WASP!"

Stuart Hopps Jr. was holding his cell-phone tightly against his right ear while keeping his left ear plastered to the side of his head with his paw. "Can you hear me?" he said again, his voice becoming high with frustration. "Judy got stung by a yellowjacket, she can't use her right paw. No, I don't want to talk to mom, hello? HELLO?"

A pair of curt 'boops' informed the bunny that his call had just been dropped. He could have thrown that blankety-blank phone into the woods...except that he needed it; whoa, did he need it right now. Somehow he had to get word of what happened to the next hydration station; Judy couldn't miss getting fluid again; he had seen how dried out she already was.

Of course, the obvious thing to do would be to call ahead directly to the next pit stop...except that he didn't know who was stationed there, or even which station was next. Neither did Ben or Joanie; dangit, why hadn't he checked before they'd left to come up here?

Junior looked at his cell again; a single bar was stuttering on and off.

He turned and beckoned with a paw.

"Ben? Joanie? Come here, quick!"

The two young bunnies hopped hurriedly over.

"I can't through to dad," he told them, holding up the cell-phone, "there's barely any reception up here. We need to split up and find a place where we can get ahold of him. Joanie, you go up the road to right, Ben, you go left and I'll head back down the trail we used to get up here. Soon as you see more than two bars on your screen, stop and make the call; tell Dad what happened to Judy and have him warn the other watering holes. And hurry, your sister needs to get some fluid in her,
ASAP."

"How about sending him a text message?" Ben Hopps offered, trying to be helpful. "Text works sometimes, even when you can't make a call."

The suggestion earned him an odd look from Joanie.

"A text message…DAD?"

Ben shook his head as if awakening from a deep slumber.

"Right, right right…never mind, let's go!"

A kilometer up the road, Judy was approaching another obstacle, a rail fence…easily cleared, except this one was placed at the edge of a mud-bog; anyone trying to leap it in a single bound would end up with a face-full of goo. The only way to pull it off would be to jump upwards, balance yourself on the top rail of the fence, crouch down, and then perform a broad jump from there; tough but not impossible.

For the average bunny maybe, but not for Judy Hopps; with her right paw out of commission she'd only be able to get half a grip on the top rail. THAT made things a wee bit more difficult; she'd have to time her jump perfectly, otherwise—here's mud in yer eye, Cutie!

Judy was running strictly on adrenaline now; it seemed be the only liquid left inside of her…and that kind of thing doesn't do much for helping you keep it on an even keel.

Picking up a little speed, she sprinted for the fence, hopped once, hopped again, and then jumped. She landed with the arches of her feet on the top rail, felt herself beginning to wobble; pulled in fast and leaped out hard. She could see at once that she had enough distance to clear the mud, but that was the easy part. The natural instinct when you're about to perform a face-plant is to throw your arms out in front of you to break the fall.

Not possible with a pawlm full of wasp-venom; the only alternative for Judy was to tuck her head in and try to perform a shoulder roll…and hope she didn't wrench her neck into a pretzel twist in the process.

She hit the other side hard, but not hard enough to do any damage. Now, pull yourself into a ball, roll forward, up onto your feet, and…

And Judy had made it; the only remnants of her move were a fading ache in her shoulder and a cold sensation in her left foot.

Cold…foot?

She looked down quickly. Eww, she hadn't quite cleared the mud-bog after all; one foot was smothered in…wait-a-second—COLD!

Judy spun around, hopped back to the bog and plunger her injured paw into the mud. The coolness didn't stop the pain but it helped…a lot! Instantly, the pulsing shriek dulled to low whimper. Hmmm, maybe her luck was finally starting to…

"LOOK OUT!"

Judy jerked her head up just in time to see another bunny leaping off the top rail of the fence—
coming right at her.

She leaped sideways—she could still make that move—and got out of the way in the nick of time, the other rabbit passing so close, she could feel the changes in the air density as he went by.

"Sorry." She tried to say, but all that came out was a noise like a frog's gargle. The other bunny gave her an unpleasant look, and then accelerated on his way.

Judy would later tell her family that this was the moment was when she came closest to giving up and dropping out of the race.

Instead she got up again and started moving again.

"It can't be that much further to the next hydration stop," she told herself, "it CAN'T."

"What's that Stu?"

As Junior Hopps had earlier, Nick Wilde was pressing his cellphone to his ear, while clamping the other one shut with his paw. This was not in order to compensate for any bad reception—Judy's dad sounded clear as an IMINX movie. No, it was to block out the whoops and cheers coming from all around him; the first racers had come trickling past only moments before the call came in and the volunteers were reacting accordingly.

"I said Judy got stung by a yellowjacket." He heard her father saying. "Nasty little things, always turning up where you least…"

"Stu, never mind about that!" Bonnie Hopps cried out in the background.

"Sorry, Sorry," Stu's voice faded for a second and then came back again. "She can't use her right paw Nick. At the last station she dropped every single water bottle before she could take a drink. You've got to get over to the other side of the road so she can try and grab some fluid with her other paw.

"We're on it," the red fox answered, casting a wary eye to his left. By now the dribble of passing racers had become virtual river, a nonstop-bunny parade with no gaps in between. It would be impossible to cross to the other side until the flow thinned out a little. Then maybe they could….

"I see her, there she is!" Erin Hopps cried from somewhere further up the road.

Nick let out a silent groan.

"Oops, she's coming, gotta go." he said, ending the call quickly. Turning to his left he called through cupped paws, "Erin! When Judy gets close enough, tell her to move over to the other side of the road…the LEFT side of the road."

"Wha-Why…?" the young bunny called back.

"Just tell her!" Nick shouted, raising his voice and hoping Erin would do as he said; he didn't have time for an explanation.

"What's going on?" Conor Lewis asked from beside him.

"Judy's paw is hurt." Nick told him, "She can't…"

"Right, I gotcha." The young silver fox answered, nodding quickly, (THIS kid at least would listen
to him.) "Only how the heck are we supposed to get through that plinkin' horde over there?" He was nodding at the non-stop procession of bunnies passing by. With so many competitors slowing to rehydrate themselves, a choke-point had formed.

Nick looked around quickly, felt his ears stand up.

"Under there, that's how," He said.

Conor looked, and then looked at him with an ear and an eyebrow raised

"What are you, crazy like a fox?"

Nick was pointing up ahead, towards a bridge spanning a small stream that emptied into the lake.

The stream in question was at least thirty feet below the roadway, at the bottom of a ravine with nearly vertical walls.

"We don't have time to argue kid, grab your bottle and let's go." Nick told him; he spun around and sprinted for the bridge, not waiting for an answer.

Conor answered anyway. "What do you mean 'we' red fox?" he growled, but then snatched up his own sports-bottle and hurried after him.

There was a shelf beneath the bridge, barely wide enough for a woodchuck, and if you fell, there was nothing between you and the creek-bottom but thin air.

Without even thinking, Nick stuffed the precious bottle into his mouth, dropped down on all fours, and scampered out onto the ledge. He did not look back; the kid would either follow him or he wouldn't.

It was slow going, too slow. He couldn't miss Judy, no way. He tried to put on some extra speed… and felt his right foot starting to skitter over the edge with the other one ready to follow. He scrubbed desperately, felt a foot claw catch in a chink in the concrete, pulled himself up and continued on. Nothing to do now but continue on slowly; the other side of the bridge seemed to deliberately stretch away from the fox, as if mocking him. Nick pushed on, feet don't fail me again. Come on other side, where are you? It wasn't going to work, when he exited, Judy would be long past him.

He pulled himself out from under the bridge and up the opposite bank. It was futile exercise and he knew it, but still….Wait, there she was—and on his side of the road, YES! Nick hurried over and began to run with her.

Judy only stared at him with a blank, almost hopeless expression. He wondered why; never fear, the cavalry's here. Ohhh but she looked bad though, like an extra from the Migrating Dead. Well he knew how to fix that. He took the sports bottle from his mouth and….

Empty…the lid had popped! It must have happened when he nearly went over the precipice. He failed her after all; he had…

"NICK!"

Conor Lewis had just emerged from beneath the bridge, sports bottle waving high in his paw. Nick saw him rear back and fling it as hard as he could, saw the bottle arcing towards him, end over end. He reached up to catch it, trying hard to estimate the distance. Dangit, football had never been his game. Not yet…not yet…NOW!
He closed his paws around the bottle, felt it slipping; grabbed it again. Yes, this time he had it. Moving it to his right paw, he held it out to Judy. But then his foot hit a rock and he tripped, feeling himself starting to pitch forward.

And at that instant Judy snatched the bottle from his grip, seizing it with both paws and clutching it to her chest like an icon.

Nick fell forward on the roadside, scoring both of his pawpads on the rough gravel.

He didn't care; it had all been worth it, on the other side of the road he could hear Erin Hopps cheering up a storm.

"Go Judy, go Juuuudiiiiieee! Wooh-hoooooo!"

A shadow fell over Nick and he looked up to see Conor offering him a paw…and a puckish grin.

"You really are crazy like a fox."

Nick took the paw and let the boy help him to his feet.

"What can I say, kid? It runs in our species."

Conor frowned thoughtfully for a second and then nodded and cocked a finger.

"Point."

50 yards ahead of them, Judy Hopps was tossing the empty bottle to the side of the road.

The effect of the switchel had been not unlike the effect of a can of spinach on Pupseye; she felt almost completely rejuvenated. Even the throbbing where the yellowjacket had tagged her seemed to have lessened a little more.

Nick….that silly, wonderful, DUMB fox; only he could have come up with Hail Mary stunt like that one. Judy could only hope he would think to notify the bunnies at the stops up ahead that they needed to wait for her on the left, not the right-paw side of the road.

Oops, never mind that for now; more straw bales, dead ahead.

There were five barriers altogether, set up in a pattern called a 'dealer's choice'. The runners could either hurdle them or go around…the latter option taking them on out-of-the way detours of varying lengths and degrees.

This was where Judy's plan to 'run smarter' came in; most racers, when confronted with a dealers choice set-up reacted in either black or white, meaning they either jumped every hurdle or avoided them all.

Ahhh, but a canny competitor would have seen that declining the difficult jumps took you only a little bit out of your way, while the loops around the easy ones sent you on a journey from here to Timbucktoo.

And so Judy took the simple jumps and detoured around the tougher ones…and in so doing made a gain of another ten yards.

Maybe she still had a shot at this after all.
From there the course took her through a series of low, rolling hills and then a jump over another watercourse. Several other racers were stopping to grab a quick drink, and Judy was sorely tempted to join them—that one bottle of switchel was already beginning to wear off. She might have, except for a voice inside her head, one that sounded eerily similar to that of Nick Wilde.

"It's called a hustle, sweetheart."

Thus did she tell the stream 'get thee behind me' and vault it without stopping, immediately wondering if she'd made the right call.

The answer came around the next bend in the road, directly ahead of her was another hydration stop. While Judy was immensely grateful for it, at the same time she couldn't help wanting to know who the heck had designed this race-course, the Spanish Inquisition? (She was tempted to survey the underbrush for any red-clad figures skulking about.) When the racers who HAD stopped to drink saw those tables crammed with sports bottles—'Sucker!'

But Judy still didn't know if she'd made the correct decision, and there was only one way to find out.

She put out her paw, her left paw, and immediately three bunnies stood up along the left side of the road with sports bottles at the ready. Yes, yes, bless that fox, he HAD gotten the word out.

Snatching an offered bottle with both paws, Judy pulled it in tight and pushed onward, buoyed by the chorus of cheers and whoops resounding in her wake.

"I'm going to take this." she vowed to herself.

Down below at the finish, Nick, Erin, and Conor were just then straggling in; the return trip might have been a downhill course, but it had been anything but an easy one. More than once the red fox had nearly come tumbling down the hillside in the manner of Jack and Jill.

He heard a voice, "Nick? Erin? Over here."

A short distance away Bonnie Hopps was waving them over.

"Where's Dad?" Erin asked when they caught up with her mom. Nick Wilde was also looking around. Yeah, where was Stu? There appeared to be no sign of him.

"Your father had to leave to go help judge the Tastiest Carrot contest," Bonnie explained with a sigh. The younger bunny looked a little disappointed, but Nick couldn't help but be impressed by Stu Hopps' devotion to duty. He wondered for second if that was where his daughter Judy had gotten it from, and then decided, 'probably, yes.'

That reminded him of something; "Any word on how Judy's doing?" he asked her.

"A lot better the last I heard," Bonnie answered, pointing a finger up the road, "Mary says she might even have chance at finishing in the top ten."

"Yep, she should be hitting the final stretch any second now."

Another voice called from over on their left. Nick turned and saw Stuart Hopps Jr. coming his way.

"Did you really almost fall into a ravine trying to get Judy some switchel?" he said, staring at Nick with his nose twitching as he came closer.
The red fox felt his ears rise up. How the heck had he...?

And then he noticed Erin Hopps, standing off to the side and making a very conspicuous effort to look every single direction but his. Uh-huh...right.

He looked at Junior again and tried to wave off the question "Noooo," he said, but then Conor Lewis rolled right over the top of him.

"Yes you did, I was right there behind you."

Nick sighed, shrugged, and spread his arms, glaring at Conor for half a second. "Et tu, silver kid?"

"What can I say?" he finally told Junior, "Crazy like a fox."

The bunny laughed and thrust out his paw. "Best day's work my little sister ever did when she took you on as a partner." he said.

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What Judy was working on right then was the final obstacle before the sprint to the finish, (if you could call a K-and-a half run a 'sprint."

She had done well after the last pit stop, gaining ground slowly but steadily.

It wasn't that she'd been going any faster; it was that she'd been able to maintain a steady pace while the bunnies up ahead of her had been slowing down or sometimes dropping out, unable to go on any further. (Right after that last hydration station, Judy had passed by Neela N'Kula, pulled up lame on the side of the road, while a pair of volunteer medics attended to her.)

Now she found herself coming up on another series of switchbacks and hairpin turns, only this time with 'vive la differance.'

It was another dealer's choice; the runners could either take the road or bypass it, vaulting straightaway down the hillside. In theory taking the shortcut sounded like the way to go. In practice the majority of the runners were sticking to the road, and with good reason; the few bunnies that had opted for the direct route were find it slow going to say the least. You could either take it a snail's pace or risk landing on your face every time you made a jump, the short way down was just that steep and treacherous.

…except for one rabbit, that is; away down the hillside Judy could see David Macleap, the Scottish Mountain Hare working his way downwards at a steady if not a brisk pace. Well, what did she expect? If any bunny could that move quickly down a hillside, it was him.

Not Judy however; she had already decided to stick to the road when she felt her ears stand up in a 'V'.

What if there was a third option? What if she bypassed the road but instead of going straight down the hillside, she took it at an angle, a diagonal course? The way down wouldn't be nearly so steep then.

If you can't run faster, run smarter—only was this a smart move or a dumb bunny move?

Once again, there was only one way to find out. At the first hairpin turn, Judy plunged off the road and went leaping down the hillside on an angular course. She couldn't move at full speed, she had to gauge every leap and landing, (this was sloping terrain after all,) but she was moving way faster than the bunnies taking the direct way down, and her course was much, much shorter than if she
had stuck to the road.

This could work—but she was going to have to make it work.

Judy leaped, landed on top of boulder, leaped again, found a patch of grass. Another jump, this time onto ...whoa-ooaah, loose gravel, loose gravel! She could feel the ground giving way under her feet. Quick, hurry, jump again. She leaped, managing only a short hop, but she made it before she lost her footing and landed on solid ground. She jumped again, landed on grass. So where to…? Wait, how about that tree over there? She leaped again, compressed her feet, ricocheted of the trunk and down again. She landed on packed earth, leaped again, another rock but smaller than the first. Oh, ohhh, balance, balance, baaaalance…jump again, quick before you fall. Hit the ground crouch again and jump. A tree stump, jump again, take it at a flying leap, there's the road, almost there. No don't jump that way, more loose gravel. Land in front of it then jump over it, YES!

She came to earth aimed down the road in the direction of the finish line. David was in front of her but she had momentum behind her.

However that wasn't all Judy had behind her. A second later she heard something hit the ground about ten feet to the rear. She risked a glance, it was Tess Hazelton. All's fair in love and Rabbithons; on the first switchbacks, Judy had borrowed one of Tess's tricks and now the other bunny was returning the favor.

And here she came, coming on strong, determined to overtake Judy and catch up with David.

Judy almost put it into overdrive, but then held back at the last second, the lightbulb going on above her head once more.

She held herself in check and let Tess go by her, but she wasn't conceding anything, not by a long shot. Instead she watched carefully as the bunny teacher caught up with David. He immediately put on an extra measure of speed. And then the two of them begin to move towards the head of the pack with all deliberate speed.

That was when Judy finally began to pick up her feet, keeping pace with, but not trying to overtake the other two bunnies, always staying within striking distance. Clusters of spectators were beginning to appear at the roadside now, clapping and cheering as the racers went by. They reserved their biggest cheer for when David and Tess fought their way into the lead positions. The instant they broke from the pack, the pair began to duel it out in earnest. Tess pulled out ahead of David, David caught up with Tess and passed her; Tess put some speed on and overtook him again—almost; he pulled away at the last second. But then he faltered for an instant and she took the lead back again, while all along the road side the spectators whooped and cheered up a storm. (There's nothing like a close-fought race to get a crowd fired up.)

What almost none of them noticed, was the other bunny, the one in the ZPD running togs, hanging back and waiting for just the right moment.

Not yet, Judy told herself, not until the last half kilometer—or unless either Tess or David fell back or quit. For now, let them knock themselves out trying to beat each other.

"Go Judy!" she heard from the side of the road, and saw three of her siblings waving.

They were getting closer to the finish now, she needed to be ready. Here there were no more turns or obstacles—which was good; the downside was that with nothing else to distract her, Judy Hopps
was aware of every sensation in her body. Her arms were leaden, her joints were aching, and now her whole body felt like a wasp sting; the air in her lungs had turned to thick, hot syrup, and time seemed to be flowing like molasses as well.

But then all at once, she was alert again; there was the marker, ½ k to the finish. Now, go for it, make your move!

Judy hunkered down and gave it all she had.

She didn't have nearly as much left as she'd hoped, she managed to break free from the pack, but then she was closing on David and Tess by only inches at a time. Dangit they should have been spent by now; what were they, cyborgs?

She gritted her teeth and kept pushing…saw them getting closer, closer. And then Tess dropped back, nothing left in the tank; Judy caught up with her and passed her, but then David turned to look—and for the first time saw the other rabbit closing in on him. He put on a last ditch effort while Judy pulled up her last reserves and went after him. Ahead she could see a swarm of bunnies, whooping cheering and thumping their feet. But where did the road go from there? Wait, there was no more road, they were coming up on the finish line.

David was still ahead of her, but she was slowly gaining ground. Closer…closer, the spectators were screaming in her ears, she couldn't hear the words.

Then she and David were abreast of each other, she passed him for a second, but then he passed her again, sprinting for the finish with his last ounce of energy…and then he too began to fall back. Judy pushed forward, they were neck and neck, but that was all the Scottish Mountain Hare was willing to give her, he refused to surrender another inch of ground.

Judy's vision was filling with dancing black spots, her lungs were stuttering like a car with a bad cylinder. She couldn't make it, she couldn't…wait why was everyone cheering like that? Huh, she was across the finish line? When had she crossed the finish line?

She collapsed into a crouch, paws on her knees, mouth open, chest heaving. Someone was patting her on the back; she hardly felt it.

When she looked up, David was there, down on his knees and wheezing like an antiquated bellows pump.

"Who…won?" he asked her, staring with almost vacant eyes.

"Dunno." Judy managed to gasp, "Thought…you …knew."

David staggered to his feet and pointed. "You…better…have that paw…looked at."

Judy just nodded, and then they heard the PA crackling.

"Attention…your attention please, we have the results from the finish line camera; in first place, Mr. David MacLeap, in second place, Ms. Judy Hopps.

A ginormous cheer went up all around them.

Judy somehow managed a crooked smile.

"That's officer Judy Hopps….of the ZPD," she gasped,
"...And...Sergeant David MacLeap, National Park Ranger Service, if you please," the other bunny added breathlessly with a lopsided grin. He reached out and offered her a paw, (wisely, his left paw). "Good race."

Judy got up and took a step forward to accept it…and at that instant they both collapsed, breaking their fall at the last second by throwing their arms around each other.

Watching from the sidelines, Nick Wilde felt a shaft land home.

Dangit, what the HECK? This wasn't what it looked like; he knew that. They'd fallen into each other's arms out of heavy fatigue, that's all.

So why did he want to rush over and grab Judy away from that other rabbit? He couldn't have if he'd wanted to; the only animals allowed in the finish area were competitors and support fursonell, everyone else had to stay behind the barriers, including him. Heck the place was getting crowded enough as it was with all the other racers coming across the finish line. (Tess Hazelton had managed to squeak in for third place.)

Dangit, he had to move away from here; put some distance between him and Judy; that might cool his jets. He could only hope that none of her family had seen him just now, especially Erin.

He turned and slipped away through the crowd, trying not to be noticed, parking himself a good twenty feet further away.

The first thing he saw was David and Judy hugging each other, and this time, it wasn't to keep from falling. He bit his lip and forced himself to think. "Take it easy Wilde, that's just a friendly embrace between toe competitors—and anyway, he's already married, and even if he wasn't, Judy's only..."

"Haw, Haw, Haw, Hawwww."

The deep, rumbling laugh from behind and to his left brought Nick Wilde's teeth gnashing together and made his eyes clamp shut as if HE had just been stung by a yellowjacket.

"Agggggghhh, grrrrr, where the heck did HE come from?"

"I don't believe it, you jealous Nick!" Finnick slapped his paws together with hearty bonhomie, loving every second of it, "You jealous on that bunny."

Nick turned and looked down at the fennec-fox with as cool an expression as he could muster.

"That's right Finnick, a bunny." He informed the fennec fox calmly, "And I'm a fox. Judy's my partner and my friend, nothing more."

"Oh yeah?" Finnick's eyebrow went up like signal flag and then he guffawed again, and pointed to Nick's rear. "Tell that to HIM, boy!"

Nick turned and saw that his tail was frizzing out as if he'd just stuck his toe in a light socket. Errrgh, stinking, bushy traitor!

"You got it bad, Nick." Finnick was warming to his subject now. "You got a crush on that rabbit." He slapped the red fox on the knee. "You gonna have to learn to like carrots now. Bwa-ha-ha-hawwww!"
That finally did it, Nick Wilde's cool façade melted away like a snowball in a ceramics kiln.

"This is your revenge for that business with your cell-phone camera isn't it Mini-Me?" he snarled, regarding his former partner with a pair of unsheathed fangs.

"Dang straight, Nick." The desert fox answered, offering him a beaming smirk and a big thumbs-up, "and I'll get the kid back too."

He turned and toddled off, just jollier than old Saint Nick.

Nick Wilde meanwhile was sorely tempted to chase after the fennec-fox and boot him for a field goal. (He'd do no such thing of course; if he'd given into that urge every time Finnick had yanked his chain, he'd have kicked the little guy to death ten years ago.)

Then out of the corner of his eye he saw Judy making her way to race course exit where her family was waiting for her. Whoo, he'd better not be absent without leave when she got there; he dropped down quickly onto all fours and scooted in that direction. It was a wise move, because when he stood up again, the first thing he heard was, "Nick? Where's Nick?"

Judy was sitting on a camp chair, surrounded by the members of her family. Junior and another bunny were massaging her shoulders while Erin held her uninjured paw. The others just stood off regarding her with adoring eyes.

Nick felt a warm lump rise into his throat. All those Hopps bunnies, and he was the one she was asking for. What was it he'd been upset about after she'd crossed the finish line again? He couldn't remember for the life of him.

"Right here Carrots!" he called waving vigorously.

"Oh there you are,' she said, and started to get up. Nick immediately waved her back; no, he would go to her. And so he began to push his way through the crowd, with the Hopps bunnies making way to let him pass. In mere seconds he was with her, gazing raptly down at the bunny.

Judy folded her arms and thumped her foot, gazing up with a stern eye

"You dumb fox, I didn't ask you to try and kill yourself for me!"

Poof! Just like that, the spell was broken. Well what do you know? No good deed does go unpunished.

"What can I say, you're welcome." he answered with a growl.

"Ohhhhh Nick," Judy was shaking her head as if over an errant child, "Don't you understand? Even I'd won, it wouldn't have been worth it if YOU got hurt."

That wasn't enough to completely re-kindle the fire…but it helped.

And besides that, she was right.

"I'm sorry Carrots." Nick told her, trying not to shuffle his foot. "Really… I just didn't have time to think of anything else."

This hurt-little-fox act, (it wasn't an act,) turned the trick. Judy's manner softened like a stick of butter.

"It's okay Nick," she said, taking his a paw and patting it, "And thanks."
Nick immediately pulled away, not because he felt embarrassed or uncomfortable but because he had seen her wince just now.

"You sure that paw's all right?" he asked.

"I'll be fine Nick." She said, waving her other one, but then another voice spoke up from behind her.

"Uh-UH Judy, you need to go and have that looked at." Nick craned his neck and saw that David MacLeap had just arrived on the scene. This time however, the red fox felt no pang. Possibly that might have had something to do with the fact that David's wife was there, assisting him with an arm around his shoulder—and with a very possessive look on her face.

"I'm all right David." Judy insisted.

The Scottish Mountain Hare was having none of that.

"You may be all right for now, eh?" he said, "but those wasp stings can get infected if you're not careful, I've seen it happen. You need to get over to the first aid station and have them check you out."

"Look, I…" Judy started to say, but then the thump of another rabbit's foot interrupted her.

"No Judy, he's right. Go on over and let the medics take a look at that paw."

Judy turned in her chair.

"Mom I don't need to…"

Bonnie's paws went straight to her hips and her voice became heavily starched.

"Judith Laverne Hopps, you get yourself over to that First Aid station this instant."

Judy's voice became mixture of exhaustion and exasperation

"Mommmmm, not…"

Bonnie's finger shot out to the right like a lightning bolt.

"You heard me…march!"

Judy groaned, sighed, got to her feet and then shuffled off in the direction of the white tent with the Red Cross emblem on the canopy.

By rights Nick should have found the spectacle amusing. Instead he was practically squirming; Bonnie Hopps had sounded uncomfortably similar to someone else he knew just now.

He shook it off and went sprinting after his partner.
Days of Carrots and Blueberries (Continued…Pt. 20)

Chapter Summary

Conor and Erin begin their rehearsal, getting off to little bit of a rocky start. (Which is kind of like saying things got little bit warm on board The Hindenburg.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries
(Continued…Pt. 20)

This time Erin had some help available.

On their way back to Finnick's van, she and Conor had bumped into her posse. A few quick introductions had followed, and then the girls had all but insisted upon helping to carry their gear to the chosen rehearsal spot, the barn where the two of them had first met.

Unbelievably, (or that was what the fox thought,) Erin had attempted to decline the offer, leaving him no alternative but to grab the reins away from her.

"Oh that'd be great, thanks," he'd said, earning himself a look from the bunny that could wither crabgrass…a look that Erin continued to give him all the way to the barn.

It had had exactly Zero effect on him.

"Fine, you wanna break your back Snowdrop, go ahead," the young fox had snarled silently.

There had been a lot to haul, two amplifiers, a karaoke set-up, a pair of mikes (with stands,) a sound board, Conor's laptop and, of course, their instruments and pedal-boards. Erin also had a backpack with her.

Last but not least was a rolling cooler containing the unused bottles of switchel from the Rabbithon; (waste not, want not.)

Following the awards ceremony, Judy had repaired back to the Hopps Family Warren for some Zebuprofen and a good, long soak in a hot tub Nick, Bonnie, and about half the other Hopps
bunnies had gone with her, but they'd promised to be back well in time for Erin's talent show performance. That had been good enough for her, and she'd seen her mother and sister off with a hug and peck on the cheek. After that, things had been amiable enough between her and Conor—until they'd encountered her girlfriends and he'd countermanded her refusal of their offer to help.

What was really bugging Erin—or it seemed to Conor—was that as soon as her GFs heard that he had offered his talent show slot to her, they'd started treating him like the fox in shining armor. Seriously, they didn't want to let him carry any of his stuff. (He'd insisted on toting his guitar case and laptop. "Thanks, but nobody touches those things except for me.")

Now, inside the barn with their gear mostly set up, Conor was tapping a mike with a finger claw and making a 'puck-puck' sound. He adjusted the height, tapped it again, and pronounced himself satisfied with the results.

And then his ears pricked up. Had he really just heard…?

"What was that about the Zootopia Performing Arts Academy?" he said, turning to speak to Erin's girlfriends.

It was Lisa Chatterton who answered him.

"Erin got into ZAPA…well almost, she still has to pass her audition, but she's almost there, she aced all her classes at middle school and killed the entrance exam. Anyway that's why she wanted to get into the talent show, coz she's never played in front of a big audience and…"

"Li-SA!"

"Oops, sorry Erin."

Conor coughed into a fist…to hide his amusement.

"That's what you get for hooking up with a Douglas squirrel Snowdrop. Once they get wound up, they NEVER stop talking."

Erin must have caught his reaction anyway, because she hurriedly opened her guitar case and motioned for him to do the same. "Well?"

The young silver fox's face was the mask of a sphinx as he flipped the hasps on his guitar case and casually tossed it open.

Erin's eyes nearly fell out onto the floor.

"Wha-tha….? Are you stinking KIDDING me, fox?"

She stared downwards for a second and then stared daggers at Conor.

The guitar inside the case looked like it had been left out in the yard for a year and then gone through a car wreck. The top, which had once been a cheerful robin's egg blue, had faded to the color of a smoggy sky…where any paint remained, that is; about a third of the guitar body was bare wood.

And rest of it wasn't looking a whole lot better; the neck was dingy, the frets were tarnished, and the bridge appeared to have been fashioned from old lawnmower blades. Even the pickups were sporting a thin film of gray. The only things that looked new were the knobs and the pickguard, big whoop! The rest of it was a six-string horror.
"You have GOT to be kidding me!" Erin said again, ears back, face pinched, and right foot thumping. Her girlfriends, meanwhile, were looking uneasily around the barn as if searching for bolt hole. Danger…danger, containment breach imminent, thirty seconds to meltdown!

Erin was so angry, she looked as if her skin was about to split open and eject a fire-breathing she-demon, "Why didn't you tell me all you had was a junk guitar?" she demanded, waving a pair of clenched fists. "Oooo, I should of known from the way you blackmailed me into letting you…hey, don't you turn your back on me, boy!"

Sorry, but Conor needed to turn around in order plug his guitar into an amp. He switched it on and checked the settings…while Erin's rant kicked into high gear.

"I swear to Gaw fox-creep, I'll get you for this…and I am NOT appearing onstage with you, deal or no deal. No way, I'll get security to…"

That was as far as she got before Conor turned and brought the guitar close to his mike, setting off a quicksilver squeal that had Erin and all her posse hurriedly clapping their ears shut.

"Thank you." The young fox bowed as if he'd just received a standing ovation, and then reached over and punched a key on his laptop. At once a piece of music began to play. At first no one seemed to know the tune…until he joined in on it.

The number was Cliffs of Dover by Eric Tawnyson, a bright, lively guitar piece…and also one that was noted for being not all that easy to play (to put it mildly.)

Conor didn't perform the entire song, only about a minute's worth; he figured that would be enough to establish his guitar cred.

He figured correctly; on the final riff, Erin's eyes and mouth were both wide open. He had played the piece brilliantly and like the Millennium Falcon, the young fox's guitar might not have been much to look at, but she had it where it counted. (And besides that, in this case, looks had been deceiving.)

"Anything else you wanna put in yer mouth besides your foot, bunnykins?"
Conor almost said it, but then stopped himself at the last second; he hadn't come in here for a fight.

"Sorry, had to do it." He shrugged, and then, "So where do you want to start? This is your show," he reminded her, "you should make the call."

For once, he'd gotten it right. Erin nodded and even managed to smile a little.

"Well first, we need to find something we both know how to play." She said.

"Right," Conor nodded appreciatively; that was good place to start." Got your playlist handy?" he asked.

Erin reached into her backpack and pulled out a tablet. "Got it right here, fox."

"Great." He said, "Can you send it to me as an email attachment?" By way of explanation, he pointed to the notebook computer, sitting atop an old cider-barrel.

"Yeah, no problem" Erin answered and began thumbing the screen. "Okay…sent."

Conor nodded and went over to the laptop, parking himself on an upturned paint bucket. After a few seconds of typing and scrolling he looked up again. "Okay, got it," and then went back to work.

"What are you doing?" Erin asked, coming over with her nose twitching. Didn't he say he had it?

"I'm converting your playlist to a PDF file so we can post it side by side with mine." The young fox explained, continuing to type. "There we go, take a look."

Erin moved in closer, standing up on tiptoes in order to see over his shoulder.

She frowned and her nose began to twitch again. "Whoa, long list….you've got a lot of songs by…" she seemed to roll the name in her mouth for second, "Richard Tomcat?"

Conor wasn't surprised, much less disappointed that she didn't know the name; he got that a lot, actually. "Yeah, most animals never heard of him but he's one seriously awesome guitar player; way cool songwriter, too."

To his considerable surprise, Erin slapped her paws together. "Songwriter, now I remember where I heard…. Isn't he the guy who wrote 'Dimming of the Day'?"

"Yeah that's right." The young silver fox answered, feeling his ears stand up and point at one another. He wondered how the heck she could have known that…until he happened to glance at the laptop and saw her playlist again. "Ohhh, Bunny Raitt fan, huh?"

"Yeah," Erin looked slightly embarrassed, "Bunny was kind of my first musical crush; Dimming of the Day was the first song I ever learned how to play. Her nose began to twitch again, but this time uncomfortably. "I-I-I don't want to do anything by her for the talent show, though. I need to rock out tonight."

"Gotcha." Conor nodded his understanding; Bunny was great artist, but she was nobody's hard rocker. (Besides, except for 'Dimming' he didn't know how to play any of her tunes.) "So…any ideas?" He asked.

Erin scratched behind her ear, thinking. Then she said, "How about if we just jam on a couple of
songs together and see if anything clicks?" she said.

"Works for me," Conor answered, picking up his guitar and strapping it on again, "where should we begin?"

Erin looked at the laptop screen, running her finger down the lists.

"Kayyyyy, let's start wiiiith…Middle of the Road by the Purrtenders."

"Good choice." The young fox answered, readying his guitar again

Erin insisted that they play along with her karaoke disk; fortunately it worked with his app as well as hers. After filtering out the lead guitar he looked at her.

"Okay, Ready?

"Let her rip." Erin told him.

"Okay," There was one more item to take care of first, "Do you want me to sing with you on the opening, or do it solo?"

The white-furred bunny brushed back an ear with a finger tip

"Ummm, what say you come in on the opening and join me on the chorus? Other than that let me handle the vocals, 'kay?"

"Can do." The young fox answered.

He reached over and punched another key on the laptop. A quick drum bash followed, and then they were off.

The tune opened with a twangy guitar riff, followed by some scat vocals.

"Wooooooo-oooooo-oo! 
Wooooooo-oooooo-oo!"

Lisa Chatterton would later tell her mom, "It was amazing, like they'd been working together their whole lives. They not only played great together they sang great together, too."

On their next selection, Welcome to Paradise by Green Drey the young Douglas squirrel was forced to revise that opinion. Conor and Erin missed each other's cues several times, and on the second verse the young bunny made a slashing motion across her throat. Conor reached over and punched a computer key and the music abruptly ceased.

"Okay, what should we try next?" the young bunny asked him.

He shrugged, "It's your call, Erin"

"That's right," she reminded him, loftily, "So I'm calling on you to suggest the next tune."

"All right, All right, "the young fox answered, waving his paws, but secretly he was pleased. As one his teachers had pointedly explained, "You don't really know whether you're working good together until the song isn't working. If you can mess up on a tune without no argument gettin' started, that's when you know you got the tempo."

And that was how it had been on Welcome to Paradise. No voices had been raised, no fingers had
been pointed; Erin had simply cut the number short and moved on. Even more than that, the girl bunny had shown that she was not only willing to take suggestions from another mammal, she was even willing ask for one. (Demand actually, but let's not split hares.) Conor decided then and there Erin Hopps' potential went way beyond the ability to sing and play; she was a natural for the Academy of Performing Arts.

*IF she can curb her Prima Donna,*" the young fox cautioned himself

He became aware that Erin's foot was thumping and came quickly down from his reverie.

"Sorry," he said, studying the lap top screen, "What about…The Authority Song, by John Cougar Melloncat?" He figured this little bunny would go for anything rebellious.

She would; "Let's do it!"

They played well on The Authority Song, and even better on the next number; Would I Lie to You by the Ewerhythmics, (her choice.) But on the one after that 'You Wreck Me," by Tom Catty, they "totally crushed it," in the words of Erin's bunny-girlfriend Tawny Lloyd. Conor agreed with her and was ready to look no further, but Erin insisted that they try one more song, Awake and Alive by Skillynx. The young silver fox went along immediately, even though he wasn't quite dialed in on the tune. It would be so fantastic if they could play this one; Awake and Alive absolutely reflected his outlook on life. Erin seemed to feel the same way but she hadn't quite learned it either. Reluctantly, they agreed to set it aside.

And so it would be the Tom Catty tune after all. Or maybe not; without warning Erin Hopp's ears stood up in a V.

"Wait, wait…didn't I see…?"

She went over and studied the laptop screen for a second and then slapped her paws together again. Now her ears weren't just standing stiff, they were shivering like a divining rod.

"Ooooo, I knew I saw...let's try this one next."

Conor went behind her and studied the laptop screen over her shoulder. And then his mouth was crinkling in a sly, foxy smirk. Ohhh yes, this would be almost the perfect tune for the talent show, it was rocker, it was rebellious, it was a party-hardy number, and—cherry on top—you could even dance to it.

There was only one small problem.

"What about the first verse?" the young fox asked, tilting his head slightly "It's kind of a guy-tune-thing, isn't it?"

"Not the way I sing it," Erin answered him; she was becoming more and more excited with every word she spoke; "I change the lyrics around, 'my party gown' 'my ears let down', and 'my little schoolboy.'"

"Mmm, grrrr, I like," Conor growled. Ohhh yeah, that would make this tune downright edgy. "Let's go for it." He said.

From the opening bars, they both knew this was the song. Erin's girlfriends knew it too, responding not just with cheers and clapping, but whistles and shrieks when they finished.

Afterwards, the white-furred bunny suggested that they wet down their throats a little before
continuing. That was fine with Conor; he didn't want to over-rehearse. Too much practice could lead to an overly stiff performance. 'You always want to leave room for some improv,' as another of his teachers had said.

He was surprised at how much he liked switchel; a little weak for his tastes but still very good.

"So how long have you been playing guitar?" Cara Combs asked him.

Conor took a long, slow sip of his drink before answering her. This was going to require a little finesse.

"Mmmm, since I was nine, I'm not sure," he said; (actually, it was ten and he was sure.) "I used to hang out with these guys in a computer club, (The Company's hacker squad,) and one of them always used to bring a guitar along," (true,) "so one day I asked if I could try it, (not true…he'd simply grabbed the guitar when it had been left unattended and started playing it—better than the owner. If it hadn't been for Kieran's timely intervention, he would have ended up with a knot on the head for his troubles.) "And the rest is history," he concluded, and that much was true, depending on your interpretation of history.

"What about you Erin?" he asked, and it wasn't just to deflect the subject away from his own history; he genuinely wanted to know.

"Ahhh, I guess I started about the same age you did." She said, "I used to love to sing along with Bunny Raitt on the radio. So one day I asked Mrs. Bunderson, the music teacher at my school if she could teach me to play guitar."

"And she didn't even HAVE a guitar." Jill Pepper hooted, unable to contain her glee.

"Yes, but I got one soon enough." Erin reminded the other bunny with a toss of her ears and a look of flippant insouciance.

And then there had been the rest of it, how she'd asked her folks for an electric guitar and they'd bought her a bass instead.

"That one used to be my back-up bass," she said, taking a short pull on her bottle, "but it died too, like three weeks ago…for good."

"Ohhh, I see." Conor said, taking a swig of his own. Okay, that made her meltdown last night a little bit more understandable—if not entirely acceptable; she'd lost not one but two basses in the space of less than a month…sheesh! "What made you decide to try out for The Academy?" he asked.

The young bunny kind of looked away for a second, "Ahhh that was mostly coz of my sister Judy. I figured if she could be the first bunny to become a police officer, then I could get into ZAPA." She looked at him adding quickly, "But don't get me wrong, that's not the only reason I want to go there."

Conor swiftly decided not to push the issue of the Academy. Instead he said, "Judy's kind of a hero to you isn't she?"

The nod that followed was both solemn and sincere.

"Not just me, to all of us Hopps kids." Erin told him, "When she quit the force and came home after that press conference she gave, we were seriously bummed, I can tell you."
"But then your sister went back and fixed it." Lisa Chatterton reminded her hastily.

"That's right," Erin nodded again, her face becoming firm with resolve, "She didn't let her mistake stop her." She turned and nodded in the direction of her bass. "And that's why I've got to get back on that stage again tonight."

Chapter End Notes

Note: This chapter and the one to follow contain references to the characters and events depicted in the Prologue to The Fire Triangle

It can be found here:

https://archiveofourown.org/works/12187398/chapters/27669060:
Days of Carrots and Blueberries (Continued…Pt. 21)

Chapter Summary

An unexpected (and unwelcome) visitor brings out a very different side of Conor

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries
(Continued…Pt. 21)

What happened next might almost have been the work of an imp with a warped sense of humor. Just then, Erin's Tablet declared, in Bunny Raitt's voice. "Let's give 'em something to talk abouuuut."

"What the heck is that?" Conor wondered to himself and it was Sue Cannon who answered his unspoken question, although not directly.

"Wha…? Who's sending you a chat request now?" She was looking at Erin.

By way of an answer, the young bunny picked up her tablet…and nearly dropped it.

"Oh cripes, it's Amanda!" She reached for the screen with an index finger, but the girl on the other end had already gotten the drop on her.

Don't even think about it, Snowbunny." A high, sing-song feminine voice came over the tablet's speakers, Conor felt his ears go back and his teeth setting on edge. He didn't like that tone, not one little bit. And besides, whoever this Amanda was, she sounded like…

He went around behind Erin and now his neck fur was standing up in quills. Just as he'd suspected, the girl sending the chat invitation was a member of his own species.

She was a red-phase fox but with fur much lighter than Nick Wilde's, almost the color of orange juice. Conor judged her to be a few years senior to Erin; not old enough for a driver's license, but definitely within range of a learner's permit. She had several piercing in her ears and another one through her left nostril. Standing behind only her partly visible was another canid, too big for a fox but much too small for a wolf. "Probably a coyote," the young silver-fox concluded.
"Heyyyy, little miss loser," Amanda continued in that same smarmy voice, "Look what IIIII got."

Her face vanished and was replaced by a VXN Media Player screen. Conor heard a wrenching sound from Erin and a cry of dismay from behind him. (the girl bunny's posse was also crowding around.) For his part Conor felt his rage meter spiking into the red zone. Our Feature For Today was a playback of Erin's onstage meltdown the night before.

There was no need to ask where Amanda had gotten it; half the mammals in the audience last night had brought camcorders with them.

But that lead to another question, one that wasn't so easy to answer.

"How the heck didn't we *spot* her?" Sue Cannon was almost yowling. The footage they were watching had obviously been shot at close range...and she and the others had been right up front as well.

Conor though he knew; Amanda, being another fox, had known to keep downwind of Erin's girlfriends—and with that breeze coming in off the stage last night, even a row or two back would have been far enough to keep Terri and/or Sue from picking up her scent.

Aggggh grrrrr, he wanted to reach through the tablet screen and wring that snotty little vixen's neck. Like Nick Wilde, he didn't *like* it when another of one his species played into the fox stereotype, shifty, sneaky, and in this case, downright cruel.

And that was the *lesser* of the two strikes against Amanda Whatever-Her-Last-Name-Was. If there was one thing guaranteed to get Conor Lewis's hackles up, it was a cyberbully.

While the average school bully tended to be an underachiever from the wrong side of the tracks, cyberbullies occupied almost the opposite end of the spectrum; often as not, they were high-end students from good families. As a result, whenever they got caught, (which wasn't very often,) their parents would frequently rally to their defense—"Not MY son, he's a *good* kid!" (Sometimes they would even go so far as to file a defamation suit against their little darlings' victim.)

It never failed to make Conor want to bite somebody; for all their privileges, for all the advantages these kids had in life, they still felt the need to pick on their inferiors. (Or those they thought of as their inferiors, he reminded himself; Erin Hopps hadn't earned the right to audition for ZAPA by lacking smarts or slacking off...and if her family wasn't exactly living large, they weren't just scraping by either.)

What bothered him most of all was, as he saw it, cyberbullying was an act of cowardice. The punk who stuffed you into a locker at school was at least willing to confront you face to face. Cyberbullies, on the other paw, usually worked anonymously, hiding behind avatars and screen names; most of the time you had no idea who they were.

Conor was none too happy with the myths that surrounded cyberbullying either. Most mammals assumed that the average cyberbully was a member of a smaller species getting back at a larger mammal, and that usually it was prey species going after preds...animals they didn't dare take on IRL, (In Real Life.)

Nothing could have been further from the truth and what was happening, right here, right now was all the proof you needed, a bunny being cyberbullied by a fox Aggggh, grrrrr, no wonder Erin didn't like his species, it all made sense now.

But Amanda, whoever she was, was no cyberwarrior; she had made not one but two amateurish and
potentially fatal mistakes just now. First, she had revealed her identity to her victim; a smart cyberbully never did that. If Kieran McCrodon had been here right now, he'd have been sneering his tail off. "Oi, an' welcome to amateur night, missy!"

Amanda's second and even larger blunder had been to make her move when a certain other young fox was in the house...one who was NO cyber-newbie and who had access to resources she didn't even want to think about. Conor Lewis may not have been another Mr. Roblox but he was way above her pay-grade, and whatever skills he lacked himself, he knew some guys who could fill in the blanks... and whoa, did he have the tools.

On Erin's tablet screen, the video had wound up and Amanda's face was back again.

"What do you think would happen if the guys at ZAPA saw this, little snowbunny?" she asked, leering into the web-cam with her fangs showing, "Or maybe I'll just post it on Ewwwe-Tube."

She turned to the animal standing behind her, "What do you think Craig? ZAPA or ewe-tube?"

"Ewe tube, definitely," a guy's voice answered in the background. He sounded bored with the whole thing.

He shouldn't have been; Amanda had just outing him, too; Erin, Jill, and especially Sue all seemed to recognize that name, and they had a voice to go with it.

Conor fished in his pocket, found a pen and a scrap of paper, scribbled a hasty note, and showed it to Erin.

He had written just three words, 'KEEP HER TALKING.' The girl bunny gave him a curious look but then said to Amanda, "Sorry Vixy...Not happening. All my girlfriends are here and they just heard everything you said."

"Ooo," the young fox-girl replied, "I'm soooo scared..."

There was more but Conor didn't hear it; he was already moving; hurrying over to grab his gear bag, he unzipped it quickly, rummaged for second, and extracted two items, a six foot USB cord and a fox-sized head-set. Putting the head-gear aside for the moment, he plugged the cable into his laptop, then scampered back and hooked it up to Erin's tablet. Now Amanda's BF—he assumed it was her BF—was speaking up.

"You even THINK about telling Amanda's parents about this snowflake, and me and my brothers might have to... 'do something'...know what I mean?"

It made the young silver fox want to roll his eyes up into the ceiling. NOT the smartest suit on the rack; Craig had just let everyone see his face, too...and yep, coyote. And would you listen to this punk, trying to sound like one of the Sopurrnos? (Conor, who had once run with a real life crime cartel known as The Company could have given him a few pointers in how actual mobsters walked and talked.)

Still...the girls all seemed to be taking his threat very seriously. Even Sue, whose dad was a sheriff's deputy, looked halfway petrified.

"Careful Conor," he reminded himself, "don't underestimate this guy."

"And anyway, who do you think my parents are going to believe, me or you?" Amanda had returned to the screen with a taunting smirk on her face.
Conor didn't care. The important thing was that Amanda was talking instead of uploading. He hurried back to the laptop, slipped on the headset, adjusted the eyepiece and started typing.

211 miles to the north, a beast awoke inside its cage, red and green quill-points and a cold blue eye, a cave-dweller of immense capacity and nearly unstoppable power. Seconds later, in response to the commands of its master, it began to zero in on its target, punching through firewalls and security protocols like a diamond blade through crepe paper.

He typed again, Erin's ears stood up as a message appeared on her tablet.

**Shut your mike off**

Conor.

*(Amanda can't see this, don't worry.)*

Erin reached for the tablet, and then looked at him.

"Kay, it's off. Now what?"

Conor laced his fingers and flexed them and then he smiled—a wicked foxy grin.

"Now...we dance."

Cara Combs turned suddenly in his direction from the tablet.

"Whatever you're going to do, do it fast, fox. She's getting ready to upload that video to Ewe-tube."

"Oh no, she's not," Conor muttered under his breath. He moved the cursor, clicked, and hit 'enter' twice.

Erin looked up sharply with her nose twitching.

"Wha...what'd you do?" she asked. On the tablet screen Amanda had become suddenly flustered.

"I just logged her out of her Ewetube account." The young fox answered, keeping his eye on the laptop screen.

"That won't stop her for long." Jill Blackburn pointed out. "She'll just log back in again."

"Yes, but then she'll have to start the upload again from scratch." Conor informed her, "And that's all the time I need. Okay, don't talk to me for a few." With that, he mentally shut her and the others out. Okay what was the name of that file again? Oh yeah..."Erin_Meltinng Q#907". (Really cute there, Amanda.)

Okay, search...right click, click on 'open file location', right-click, click on 'sort by size.' And the closest match isssss...Flaming Vengeance_01xv, almost exactly the same size. Right, open Microsoft Word on my laptop, click on Erin Melting. Copy the filename, paste on Word, click on Flaming Vengeance, copy the filename go to Melting, right-click, click rename, and paste. Back to Word, click on filename, Erin Melting, click to select, right click, click copy, back to Flaming Vengeance, right-click, click 'rename', paste, and...bingo.

Now reset the folder to 'sort by name' again...and that's all folks, (for now.)

"She's logging back onto Ewetube again." Sue Cannon called, looking at him.

"She's uploading." It was Tawny Lloyd.
Conor looked up from the laptop screen and grinned.

"Yeah, but not what she thinks." He said.

Erin's ears went up even higher.

"Huh, what do you mean?"

"Bring your tablet over here and I'll show you," Conor answered beckoning with a pair of fingers. "But make sure you keep the camera turned away so she can't see me."

"Like, DUH!" Erin snapped. She still had a little fire in the belly, but she brought the tablet over just the same, with the girls in her posse tagging closely behind.

"I switched filenames with another vid." the young fox said, pointing to the lap top screen and Amanda's video file folder, "She's uploading the wrong one…but she won't know it until the load completes and she tries to play it."

Most of the girls whooped and clapped their paws…most of them; Erin was anything but wholly satisfied, and Terri Blackburn remained uneasy.

"What video did you switch it with?" the white furred bunny asked.

"How do you know how to do all this?" The ferret girl inquired.

Conor answered the second question first.

"Let's just say, I got friends in low places." He said, and then turned to Erin. "Honestly, I don't know what I switched it with. I didn't have time to check,"

He was about to find out however; they all were. Without warning a scream erupted from Erin's tablet; not Amanda but her boyfriend.

"You dumb, stupid fox, what'd you do? Get it off, GET IT OFF!"

On the tablet screen Amanda was moving frantically, but Conor was quicker. With three fast clicks, he logged her off of Ewetube again and also closed the page, at the same time speaking into the headset. "Delete all bookmarks. Yes." And then in practically the same motion he copied the Mpeg she'd just uploaded to his own computer, went back into the folder and reversed the filenames again. In the background he could hear Amanda's fox-scream. "I'M TRYING!"

(She had forgotten to turn off her mike.)

Ignoring her for the moment, Conor called up an app from the beast labeled 'Malefaker', (one of Kieran's creations) and then went back into Amanda's video folder and clicked on the Erin Melting and Flaming Vengeance files while holding down the 'control' key. Then he spoke into the headset again. "Apply both." The icons flashed for half a second and then returned to normal.

"What'd you do this time?" Erin asked, no longer worried but merely curious.

"A head-fake," the young fox told her. "If Amanda tries to open either of those files again, she'll get message saying, 'Sorry, no can do, malware detected;' same thing if she tries to upload either one of 'em."

"You planted malware on her computer?" Cara Combs was aghast, and Sue Cannon looked tense and angry.
"Noooo," Conor waved a hasty paw. "Those files aren't REALLY infected, it only looks that way."

"Why didn't you just delete that vid of Erin?" Jill Pepper queried with her nose twitching. "It would have been way simpler."

"Oh I know why, Jill." It was Erin herself answering. "If he did that, Amanda could just plug in her video camera and replace it. Now she can't be sure if the original file is safe either."

"Exactly." The young fox nodded, impressed by her savvy. "and even she does figure out it's not infected, she still won't be able to open it…or upload it to Ewe-tube. And now if you'll excuse me for a sec…” He got back on the laptop and made a fast exit out of Amanda's database, making sure to delete all traces of his presence.

And then he turned to the others and smiled. "And now I suppose you're all wondering what the heck was so bad with that video, it made Amanda's guy almost go postal. Shall we find out?"

The verdict was a unanimous, "Heck, yes!"

At first, no one could understand why the thing had triggered an explosion. The opening scene showed Craig, just sitting huddled in the back of a pickup truck, with a hoodie pulled over his head. Barely visible over his shoulder was another Coyote in the driver's seat.

The truck slowed and began to swerve to the right. At the same time Craig stood up, bracing with a paw on the cab of the vehicle.

"What's he doing now?" Jill Pepper asked. Good question; Craig had taken his paw from the cab and now it looked like he was snapping his fingers. But then a tiny flame bloomed in his paw, becoming a blazing torch when the young coyote touched it to a wad of rags stuffed into the neck of a bottle.

"Molotv cocktail, wow!' Cara combs bleated.

As they all watched, Craig raised the flaming bottle high in the air, a bad pantomime of the Statue of Liberty.

Conor barely suppressed a groan. Good GAW, was this guy an idiot or what? He was actually starting to feel pity for this stupid excuse for a coyote.

"You moron, what are trying to do, set yourself on fire? NEVER throw a Molotov cocktail that way; always hold it back and off to the side."

Now they heard Amanda's voice, "Do it!" and saw Craig hurl the fire bomb, casting it down like a judgement from heaven. It burst again the front of a wooden structure, setting it quickly ablaze.

All the girls gasped, and then every single one of them was talking at once.

"Sweet cheese n' crackers, that's the Luckyfoot's produce stand."

"So it WAS the Guilfords."

"Yeah, but I never thought it was Craig."

"Who's that driving, is that his dad?"

"No way, if he saw Amanda with a video camera, she'd be out on her tail soooo fast…"
The image lurched and slewed as the truck burned rubber back onto the road, and then the view spun around into a bouncing selfie, Amanda and Craig grinning toothily into the lens and giving the viewer a thumbs-up.

The video ended with the two of them sharing a kiss.

For a long moment, no one said anything. It was Conor who finally broke the silence.

"You gonna show that to you dad?" he asked. He was looking at Sue Cannon.

The young bobcat blinked, sniffed and then shook her head tightly, not looking at him.

"I…can't. If Craig gets busted coz of that video now, he's going to think it came from Erin. And then it won't just be him, she'll have his whole darn family all over her back."

"Not just her back," Lisa Chatterton amended, "They'll go after Erin's mom and dad too; maybe even her brothers and sisters." She shuddered slightly and flipped her tail, "You know what those Guilfords are like, Sue."

"Well, I don't know what they're like." Conor said, looking from one face to the other. "Somebody care to enlighten me?"

They took turns filling him in; everything that had happened since the Guilford family had come to town, the thefts, the vandalism; the tit-for-tat revenge, sometimes for no more than an imagined slight.

"They're crazy, those coyotes," Erin Hopps told him by way of conclusion, "If you get them mad at you, they'll take it out on your whole family, sometimes even your whole species—and they won't care what happens next."

"Sounds a lot like a family of sea-mink I used to know," the young silver fox thought but did not say, "only way more nutso and way LESS smart." Still, he could understand the girls' reluctance to antagonize the Guilford clan, especially if they didn't care whether they got caught. He knew that mindset all too well; 'Then that's what's gonna happen.' Who was it, always said that again?

"You baaaa-etter hope Craig never finds out it was you inside of Amanda's computer." Cara Combs was pointing with a shaky finger.

"Don't worry, he won't." The young fox answered confidently; he had routed the hack through a server in Coronia and had covered his tracks well. (Or rather The Beast had done it for him; don't get cocky, kid.)

"You know," Sue Cannon spoke in a low murr, leveling her eyes at Conor, "I-I'm not sure I'm cool with you hacking into Amanda's computer like that; you just committed a crime, fox."

Conor didn't respond immediately; he knew he didn't have to. One of the others would take care of it for him.

Sure enough, Jill Pepper came sailing out of her chair.

"And what were we supposed to do, Suze, just sit there and LET her upload that video to ewetube?"

"And didn't we see evidence of an even bigger crime just now?" Terri Blackburn said.
"Evidence that's useless," the young bobcat pointed out, with the stub of her tail shivering, "And how do we know that's the only video Amanda has of Erin from last night? For cripes sake, we don't even know if she shot it herself; she could be uploading another one right NOW."

"Let her, it doesn't matter," another voice said, and they all turned to see Erin standing with her bass guitar and her jaw jutting defiantly, "Amanda can go ahead and post a copy of that video on ten different Ewetube channels for all I care." She picked up her bass guitar, holding it aloft like Arthur hoisting Excalibur, "Because after tonight, no one's going to care about it anyway!"

And in that moment there could be no doubt that she was Judy Hopps' sister.

Chapter End Notes

Note:

This chapter and the previous one contain references to characters and events depicted in the Prologue to The Fire Triangle.
"What do you mean I can't go on?" Erin Hopps stared wide-eyed at the animal on the other side of the table, thumping her foot to no avail.

She was waiting at the talent show check-in station, a tented booth set just to the right of the amphitheater entrance; here was where you came to pick-up your access-pass for the backstage gate…except it looked like she wasn't getting through the gate tonight. Gah, after all she'd gone through to obtain a second chance, to be turned away now; so close and yet so far.

The worst part, from Erin's point of view, was that she was dealing with a member of her own species, a plump, matronly bunny on the wrong side of middle-age that looked just like everyone's least favorite grade school teacher.

Acted like her, too.

"Young lady, the rules are very specific." The older bunny picked up a sheet of paper and adjusted her half-moon glasses, "Three: 'No one participating in the Carrot Days Talent Show may sign up to perform more than once.'"
"But I never got to perform," Erin tried to protest, (Dangit, this Stonewall Jackrabbit would have to recognize her from yesterday!) 

As if that would make a difference to this rabbit; she refused to budge 

"Sorry, but rules are rules," she said, and then peered over the rim of her spectacles, "Frankly my dear, I don't understand how it was that you were permitted to sign up again in the first place."

"Wait a minute, she didn't sign up, I did." Conor Lewis tried to intervene, speaking up from behind her. Aggggh, grrrr, he could have kicked himself all the way back to Zootopia. Why hadn't he just kept it as his slot until they got onstage? It wouldn't have made any real difference, and they'd already have their passes.

Ms. Stonewall gave him the same look she'd given Erin.

"You can't just give away your slot to whomever you want, young fox; that's also not allowed, therefore, I'm afraid I must inform you…"

"Wait hold it, Conor didn't give her his slot!" A new voice interrupted, and then he and Erin turned to see Nick Wilde standing there.

"It's still his performance, he just invited Erin to join him on a duet," the red fox continued hastily, and then gave Conor a sideways glance. "Didn't you kid?"

"Uh yeah," the younger fox answered snatching up the lifetime, "I wasn't sure if she was going to be available, so I signed up to perform solo. That way I'd still have my spot in case she couldn't make it. I only gave her top billing coz she's on lead vocals."

"Yes, that's right." Erin jumped in quickly, pointing to her guitar case "My bass quit on me and I wasn't sure if I could get it fixed again in time." (That was good for an admiring glance from both foxes. Way to hustle, rabbit.)

Stonewall Bunny folded her arms in her lap, looking from one young mammal to the other and then back again, her nose twitching in a fast, staccato rhythm.

"Well you might have said so in the first place." She told them tartly, and then scribbled hastily on a pair of lime-green cards. "Here are your stage passes; now move along, there are other mammals waiting in line."

As they walked away from the sign-up table, Erin Hopps looked like she wanted to strangle a certain plump rabbit with her own ears…and Conor looked like he would have happily disposed of the remains by having them for a snack.

"Easy kids," the red fox told them, "You got your slot, that's what counts."

It was Conor who cooled down first, regarding the ground for second and then rubbing his nose with a finger.

"Yeah, right. Thanks Nick."

"Yeah, thanks." Erin added, a little more contrite for having been less prompt.

When they arrived at the stage entrance, the young bunny's family and most of her friends were there, waiting for her, (except for the ones delegated to go save the seats.) Erin was breathless with excitement but coping. Conor Lewis by contrast looked charged up but relaxed. No surprise there,
Judy thought; he didn't have nearly as much riding on this gig as her sister.

Once again there was an exchange of hugs and good wishes, (although this time brother Timmy wisely kept his thoughts to himself.)

Finally Conor said, "C'mon Erin, it's time." And the two of them hefted their gear and headed over to the gate. Watching them pass through, Judy felt a small pang of conscience. Her family had been all over Erin with words of support and encouragement; same as above from her sister's girlfriends.

But nobody had said a thing to Conor, (including Judy herself, guilty as charged,) and that wasn't right; Erin wouldn't even be here if it hadn't been for him.

Well, there wasn't anything she could do about it right now; the two of them were already on the other side of the gate and out of reach.

And it was time for everyone else to take their seats.

Anyone not knowing that Judy Hopps had completed in the Rabbithon today would have been surprised to see her now. Normally, she moved with the confident stride of someone who knows exactly where she's going; now she walked with the halting, pendulum steps of a rabbit on chemotherapy. Her joints were aching with every little move she made and her legs felt as if they'd been encased in a pair of concrete hip-boots. Her paw was starting to hurt again, too.

She accepted it all without complaint; if this was the price she had to pay for having done well in the race, then so be it.

This time, the Hopps family and the Erin posse were all sitting together, front row seats, and enough for everybody. Settling heavily into her chair, just left of center stage, Judy raised her arms and stretched, lifting them high over her head. Almost immediately, she heard Nick Wilde's voice from beside her.

"Don't even think about putting your arm around me, Carrots" he told her primly, "I'm not that kind of a fox."

Judy rolled her eyes and elbowed him in the ribs. Oh happy day, he was in another one of those moods again.

Three chairs down, Stu Junior stood up with his paws on his hips. "Okay, I'm gonna mosey on over the concession stand. Anybody else want anything?"

He should have known better, the effect was like pulling the keystone out of a dam; at once the burly bunny was deluged by a torrent of requests. Junior finally sorted it out after a minute or two, deputizing some of the younger family members to come and help him. (Judy asked for a soda—she'd need to take another Zebuprofen in few minutes; Nick opted for the same and also a bag of blueberry kettle-corn.)

No sooner had Junior departed than a small, diminutive figure came trundling in their direction. At once, Nick Wilde's ears went nearly vertical.

"Finnick, what are you doing here?"

"What you THINK I'm doing, Nick?" the desert fox rumbled in that grumpy manner of his, "Conor's my partner; I wouldn't miss him tonight."

"No, you wouldn't want to miss, him." The red fox rejoined sourly, remembering the fennec's
promise to even the score with Conor for that cell-phone hustle. "Got your rotten tomatoes ready, little toot-toot?"

"Har—har!" The fennec-fox sniffed derisively, and then turned and called in that booming voice of his. "Hey, is there a Cara Combs around here anywhere?"

"I'm Cara." A young sheep leaned forward out of her chair. "Are you Finnick?"

"Yeah, that's me."

"We got your seat saved right here!" she said, patting the one beside her

"Great thanks," he told her, and then turned to Nick and Judy. "Conor asked 'em to save me a spot," he said and then continued on his way.

Judy Hopps barely noticed; what she wanted to know was, what the HECK was Nick so irked at him for, all of a sudden?

Meanwhile backstage, Erin Hopps was talking to the pig behind the audio control console.

"So remember, don't start the music until after you hear Conor start in on his guitar."

"Right, right….I got it." The pig answered, more bored than annoyed. He had obviously seen his share of anxious performers today. (Fortunately he HADN'T seen what had happened with her the previous evening; a different animal had been on duty then.)

The opening intro had been Conor's idea and Erin had latched onto it almost at once; it would catch the audience straight out of left field. Of course her girlfriends knew the plan, but she had sworn them to secrecy and knew that none of them, not even Lisa Chatterton would ever tell; Lisa might have been a Douglas squirrel but she was first and foremost always a loyal friend.

With the instructions given, there was nothing to do but wait her…hold that thought, wait their turn; that and pace around backstage…and wonder how the heck that frinkety-blank silver fox could stay so dang-all calm at a time like this.

It would have reassured Erin to know that Conor Lewis wasn't the walking cucumber he appeared to be; (or maybe it wouldn't have.)

Judy had been wrong in her supposition that he didn't have a scorpion in this fight. He did; he wanted Erin to succeed tonight every bit as such as she did herself. And as someone much wiser than he had once said, "Every performance is important…even the ones where the audience is throwing garbage."

No, the truth of the matter was that Conor was feeling plenty antsy himself right now; the difference was that he was better at handling it than Erin. He understood too that it was good to be just a little bit wired before you took the stage.

And there were two other things he understood. One…no, it wasn't good to follow a killer act onstage but two… no, there wasn't anything either he or Erin could do about it. Whoever went on ahead of them, would be going on ahead of them; que sera, whatever.

The five bunnies coming off stage right now were a group that he and Erin were lucky hadn't gone on right ahead of them; they had just turned in a smoking rendition of Steve Ermine's Copperhead Road. As they passed by Erin, one of them nodded politely to her, while two of the others stared at Conor's guitar as if it had just crawled out from under a rock.
The animals out there right now were four of the Burrow's older inhabitants, three rabbits and a weasel, performing barbershop quartet version of the old Rolling Stoats tune, "You Can't Always Get What You Want." They were good, really good, and the song converted nicely to the new format. Erin seemed to know it too; she was wringing her paws like a penitent seeking absolution, (which in a very real sense she was.)

Conor badly to go over and reassure her, but knew that it would be an exercise in futility. His best course of action—the only course really—would be to just stand back and give her some space.

That…and hurry up and wait.

Meanwhile out on the lawn, Nick Wilde was slurping his soda and scarfing his popcorn, more to occupy his mind than his mouth. Whatever emotions he'd been feeling after Judy had crossed the finish line had long since ebbed….and that joke about her stretching her arms as an excuse to put one around him had NOT been because that was what he had wanted to do…certainly not!

The real problem was the fennec fox, seated about twelve chairs away. Swami Finnick had seen all, he knew all…but would he TELL all? While the little guy would never intentionally blow the whistle on what he'd seen at the Rabbithon, Nick Wilde was all too aware that his former partner was anything but the soul of discretion. (That was why back in the day, he had always insisted Finnick keep that pacifier in his mouth even after they had sold all the pawpsicles.)

He looked at his watch for the twentieth time

Waiting in the wings, Erin Hopps' pacing had subsided to mere fidgeting, and not all of it had to so with her upcoming performance, (although that was certainly the wellspring of her anxiety.)

No, at least a little bit of it had to do with the young fox, sitting three feet away from her, performing a final inspection of his guitar.

While Erin was certainly grateful to him for pre-empting Amanda Sylvester's coup, there was something about the way he'd done it that had left her a little bit shaken.

It wasn't the ease with which Conor had carried out the hack, it the cavalier, almost high-pawed ruthlessness he'd shown to his victim; when he'd broken into Amanda's computer and corrupted those files, he had acted with no more afterthought than Erin would have wasted on a flea.

It made the young bunny wonder just what else Conor Lewis was capable of—and she wasn't sure that she wanted to know

For tonight's performance the young fox had donned another apple-cap, this one with a checkerboard pattern of differing colors, and also a wine-colored, faux-silk vest and a matching Moroccan scarf, plus a green and white rugby shirt, decorated with a Welsh Dragon. The only item remaining from their first encounter was the parachute pants—and those had shifted from beige to black. She had to admit he looked sharp…sharp and slightly sinister. (Well he was a silver-fox after all.)

For her part Erin was wearing a pair of 'strategically torn' jeans in midnight blue, a denim jacket with the sleeves removed, a dark blue bandanna tied around her neck and her favorite Rickenbarker Bass 'Bring the Thunder' T-shirt, the one in bubblegum pink, (just to let everyone know that girls rock too.)

Someone tapped her on the arm, she almost jumped.

It was Conor.
"Don't do that, fox!" she snapped, batting his paw away.

"Sorry," he told her unapologetically, "But they're coming offstage, we need to get ready."

By 'they' he meant the troupe of young bunnies who made up the last act before theirs. What had they done again, some kind of acrobatic thing, was that it? Erin was surprised that she didn't know. In fact, right now she could remember any of animals that had gone on ahead of them.

Well it didn't matter at this point; she moved aside to let the other rabbits to pass and took a deep breath.

"But I know where I'm not goin'," she sang to herself, "I will not be broken." (Don't fail me now, Bunny Raitt!)

"Okay kids, you're up." A familiar voice said. It was the raccoon from the night before. Luckily he seemed not to recognize Erin; (that or he was just pretending.)

"Right," she said, and led the way out onto the stage without looking back. (She knew without checking that Conor would there.)

Then the announcer spoke.

"All right everyone, please welcome to the stage, Ms. Erin Hopps and Mr. Conor Lewis."

The cheers and applause that greeted the announcement were of a decidedly mixed bag, enthusiastic in the case of Erin's friends and family, but mostly polite everywhere else. And at least a few audience members were looking warily at one another. These were the animals that must have seen her lose it the night before. "Easy girl, you expected this," the young bunny reminded herself.

She could feel her knees quivering as she stepped up to the microphone—while Conor took his place at the mike to the right and just behind her. Out in the audience she saw Judy pointing towards the young fox with a horrified look on her face. What the heck…? Oh right, that guitar of his. Erin would have smiled if she hadn't felt so nervous. Dangit, she hadn't been this panicky yesterday…but then yesterday she hadn't been coming off a crash and burn. Dangit!

What the young bunny couldn't know was that this was actually a good thing; uneasy as she was there was no chance of her ending up 'bedeviled by the details' as had happened so many times before when she'd come to play.

She held up for a second, looking out over the audience; it was bigger than the crowd last night; much bigger. Ooohh-kay…

Someone tapped her on the arm again, the raccoon this time. For a second she thought he was going to tell her to get a move on, but instead he slipped a note into her paw.

When she opened it Erin recognized at once her father's writing.

It's better to burn out than to fade away.

Dad

Erin closed her eyes for a second, sucking air between her teeth and clutching the note to her chest like a talisman.
"Thank you, Daddy."

And then she put it away and took the mike.

"Hi everyone, I'm Erin Hopps...yes, the same Erin Hopps from last night." This show of bravado got was it deserved; a ripple of laughter and a sprinkle of applause.

She nodded in acknowledgement and then began to play, a simple up and down progression of notes; she could almost have been practicing scales.

And then she began to sing.

"But ma-maaa...I feel so low. Ma-maaa...where do I go?"

Out beyond the stage, her sister Judy's nose was twitching in confusion. What the heck was going on here? Erin was singing well enough, but there was no back-up music; it was just her and her bass guitar. And Conor...why was he just standing there, when did he come in? And what was he supposed to do if he did? Judy knew this song and it had practically no guitar in it.

And why had her sister gone directly to the refrain instead of starting from the beginning?

"They always said that you knew best..."

Had she bothered to glance to the right just then, Judy would have caught the crafty, knowing looks of the faces of all her sister's girlfriends; they knew what was coming.

"...little bird's fallin' out of that nest..."

Five seats over Bonnie Hopps turned to her husband.

"Well this is a pleasant surprise." She said, wondering why Stu looked almost disappointed. (She wouldn't have if she'd seen his note to Erin)

Up on the stage, the young bunny was singing.

"...so I've just got to put these wings to tessssts."

On the final word, Conor let loose on his guitar, a blazing riff that tore through the moment like a chainsaw in a flower-garden.

He slammed out a power-chord...and another and another.

And then he launched into a raucous rolling, rollicking melody that brought half the kids in the audience out of their chairs. Ohhhh yeah, they knew THIS tune.

At that instant, the background music cut in, and Erin hammered out a pair of thunderclap licks on her bass.

And tilting her face to the microphone, she gave it everything she had.

"Oh, yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah-yeah-yeeea-ea-eah! Come on!

"Got my party gown! Got my ears let down! Got my heart beatin' bay-bayyy!"
All around Judy, bunnies were bolting from their chairs as if the seats morphed into catapults, bouncing on their feet and clapping with their paws held high.

When the refrain came up, Conor joined in with Erin on the vocals.

"Tie your mother down!
Tie your mother down!
(Get your daddy out the door, I don't need him nosin' around!)

On the last line, Erin's posse and whole bunch of other kids joined in.

Give me all! Your! Love! To-niiiiight!"

Front row center, Lisa Chatterton was perched on Cara Combs' shoulder singing along with the others, but she was sniffling and her eyes felt wet too. She had known Erin Hopps longer than any of the other girls, and her friend had never sounded this good before—never; her voice was soaring like a falcon given its freedom.

"But you know, I don't give a light
I'm gonna make out alright…"

Conor saw it first; kids rushing from their seats towards the front of the stage. For a second or two, he wondered if a mosh was about to get going, but instead they began to dance. Okay, fine…he was down with that.

Oops, here came the refrain; time to join the chorus again.

"Tie your mother down!
Tie your mother down!

Or you ain't! No! Friend! Of! Miiiiiiine!"

Down below in the audience, Judy Hopps could barely see the stage, even by standing on her chair. The space between her and Erin was wall-to-wall dancers. What made it doubly frustrating was that her little sister was singing her heart out. Judy had always known Erin had a great voice but DAY-ang, she had never her sing like this before. Wow!

Well, she decided, surveying the sea of dancing kids in front of her, there was only one thing left to do.

"If you can't beat 'em, join 'em," She told herself, and then hopped down off her seat and grabbed Nick Wilde by the wrist.

"Come on fox, let's dance."

Nick's head reeled back and his tail stiffened.

"Wha…Dance? Carrots, are you serious? You just ran the Rabbithon a few…!"

But she was already hauling him into the crowd.

Ten yards away and five feet above them, Erin Hopps was watching as Conor ripped into the first guitar solo, noticing for the first time that he used a hybrid picking technique; he used mostly his thumb-claw, with assistance from the rest of his fingers. He was absolutely killing it on the solo, working the strings at a breakneck pace, twisting, bending and stretching the notes like strands of
salt-water taffy. She responded with her best machine-gun riff, a bass-guitar blitz that brought a resounding cheer from the audience.

Conor answered with a few fast licks of his own—but only a few; this was Erin's gig not his, and so he kept it short and sweet, returning quickly to his mike when he was done.

Taking the cue, Erin came back strong on vocals.

"Oh, your Mommy and your Daddy
Gonna plague me till I hurl..."

Midway through the crowd, Judy suddenly could see her sister again; the animals in front of her were no longer bigger than she.

"I'm such a peace lovin' girl."

In any case, she couldn't hold it back any longer; she began bouncing from foot to root, pumping her arms in time to the music. In the rush of excitement her fatigue had simply vanished, and aching joints? Not THIS bunny, bub.

But then she happened to glance over at Nick Wilde. The fox was bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet and rolling his paws in the air, smiling pleasantly; ohhhh, it was the Gazelle concert all over again.

"Oh no, you don't Slick, not THIS time!" she told her partner silently.

She whipped around and grabbed his paw, trying to get him to dance with her.

He did, but his movements were jerky, almost robotic; he was like a marionette being handled by a novice puppeteer.

And he had his face turned away from her, looking towards the stage, almost as if she wasn't even there. If it had been anybody but her sister playing onstage, Judy would have turned on her heel and stalked off in huff.

"What the heck is WRONG with you, fox?"

What was wrong was something she could never have imagined—and something Nick Wilde could never have anticipated.

Separately—by themselves—neither Erin, nor Conor could have triggered it, but put the two of them together, couple the sight of him with the sound of her...and suddenly this wasn't the Carrot Days talent show any more; it was another stage, another place, another time, many years ago.

And that wasn't a bunny and a silver fox he was looking at, it was a cross-fox vixen, and she wasn't playing bass or lead guitar, she was playing keyboards.

And the song wasn't 'Tie Your Mother Down by Quoll, it was 'And We Danced' by the Hoofers. It shouldn't have happened, not with so many differences...but it had, Nick was back there in The Thaw as helpless as a moth circling a candle-flame.

And then the vixen turned to look at him.

"You didn't need to lie to me, Nick!"

"Nick? NICK!"
All at once he was back in the present, with Judy staring up at him.

"What the heck is your problem tonight?" she demanded, thumping her foot.

Nick knew what he should do; he should take her aside after the show and tell her everything, about Wild Times, about Robyn, about all of it. He should come clean with Judy Hopps…the way he should have done the first time, before it was too late.

He told her, "I-I'm sorry Carrots, I guess I'm just never been one for dancing."

Even to him, it sounded lame, but before Judy could react, Erin and Conor hit the refrain at full throttle.

"Tie your mother down
Tie your mother down
Give me All! Your! Love! Toniiiight!

All your love, tonight!"

On the final solo Conor unleashed his secret weapon, a technique he'd learned from watching another one of his guitar heroes, the late Michael Hedgehog. Loosening up his fingers, he snapped them against the strings, cracking them like a whip and bending the strings with his other paw just as the note struck, and at the same time punching the tremolo pedal.

The effect was mind-blowing; the licks seemed to ricochet through the air, like a golf ball hit full swing in a tiled bathroom. It earned the young silver fox a roaring ovation, and that was what told him it was time to back off and let Erin take the helm again. He finished up the solo with a quick wave and nod.

When he looked her way again, he saw Erin beckoning him to join her at the center-stage mike…and then the two of them were there, riffing off each other while their voices joined together on final reprise

"All your love, tonight!
All your love, tonight!
All your love, tonight!
Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah…!
All your love, tonight!
All your love, tonight!"

The last line belong to Erin and Erin alone.

"Give me all…your…love… tooooooooo…"

She paused for three seconds and then,

"...NIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIGHT!"

Erin slapped on her bass, releasing a torrent of riffs: Conor immediately picked up where she left off using the whip-finger technique again, but this time at a near blinding speed. He held the last note in a long bend.

And then he and Erin jumped up in the air and came down together on a final, slashing power chord.
As the old saw goes, the crowd went wild; frantic applause, frenzied cheering and so many bunny-feet thumping, it sounded like an avalanche. At the front of the melee, Erin's girlfriends had begun to chant, "Eh-RIN! Eh-RIN! Eh-RIN! Eh-RIN! Eh-RIN! Eh-RIN!"

It spread quickly through the ranks of the other kids.

"Eh-RIN! Eh-RIN! Eh-RIN! Eh-RIN! Eh-RIN! Eh-RIN! Eh-RIN!"

Erin sniffled and looked away for a second.

"Dangit, I am NOT going to cry again!" she swore to herself.

She swallowed hard and grabbed her mike.

"Thank, you, thank you so much," she said. It wasn't much but it was the best she could manage without her voice cracking up on her. She swallowed again and waved with her paw, indicating the young silver fox on her right.

"On guitar and backing vocals, Conor Lewis."

The ovation swelled as the young fox took a short bow and raised his guitar in acknowledgement.

"Thanks again," Erin said. It felt completely inadequate, but it was all she could think of right now.

Someone tapped her on the elbow, Conor again. When she looked, she saw him nodding over a shoulder, towards the right-side wing, where the raccoon who'd assisted them earlier was beckoning with a paw. Nice job kids, but it's time to make room for someone else.

Erin nodded back and reached to unplug her bass, while Conor did the same with his guitar. And then the two of them helped the stagehand disconnect their pedalboards and, with a final wave to the audience, they headed back into the wings once more.

It was like a journey into a dream. Half the animals they encountered applauded as they approached, and from way everyone moved aside to let them by, they might almost have been passing royalty.

When they came out through the gate, Erin's family and her girlfriends were there and greeted her with a whoop and a thunderous ovation.

"Woo-hoo, Erin!"

"You rock, sis!"

"Kick tail, bunny!"

"You GO, girl!"

"Next stop, ZAPA!"

It was all very nice, Erin thought, but where ....? Wait, there he was.

She let her gear fall to the grass and went rushing to embrace him.

"Daddy!"

She had not forgotten his note.
Stu swept her up in his arms and held her tight, rocking her back and forth.

"Oh Erin." He sniffed, fighting back the tears, "I am SO proud of you."

Erin went to hug her mother next, and then of course it was Judy's turn. But when she got to the girls in her posse the white furred bunny found herself swiftly being hoisted off her feet.

"Hey guys, come ON!"

It was no use; she was already up on their shoulders and they were bouncing her up and down while chanting that meme again.

"Eh-RIN! Eh-RIN! Eh-RIN! Eh-RIN!"

Judy flicked a finger at the corner of her eye. It was good to see her sister so happy after the debacle of the night before.

The night…before? Hold on a second…

She looked towards the gate and saw Conor Lewis all by himself, hefting his gear and preparing to move on; even Finnick seemed not to have noticed him.

That wasn't right…and she wasn't going to let it happen a second time.

But before Judy could take even a single step, she heard Erin's voice from behind her.

"Guys, guys…put me down. Come on I mean it, lemme down."

And then the younger bunny was pushing past her.

"Sorry, sis…Conor? Conor, wait up!"

The young fox stopped and set his gear down.

"Conor," Erin told him gesturing towards the stage with a sweeping paw, "Conor, you're the one who made this happen. You stopped me from destroying my bass, you got it fixed, and then you gave me your talent show slot."

She took him by the paws and then her voice softened to almost a whisper and began to crack.

"Thank you…thank you for everything."

Judy raised her paws and began to clap. Almost immediately another bunny joined her, and another; and then Nick joined in, and then Erin's girlfriends…and then everyone was clapping and all of the bunnies were thumping their feet.

Conor nodded deferentially, but he never looked away; that was the one thing Judy would always remember about this moment; there was no false modesty in this kid.

When the ovation began to die down, Erin looked down at her paws and her eyes went wide as if to say 'What am I doing?'

She hurriedly pulled away, perhaps a bit too hurriedly because that was when the young fox finally spoke up.

"You don't need to thank me Erin, believe me it was worth it. And I'd be honored to share another gig with you, anytime you want."
Erin just smiled, and then she said. "Listen, we always have a big family dinner and a bonfire on the second night of Carrot Days. Would you like to come and join us? I'm sure it'd be no trouble.

Actually, she wasn't sure, but a quick glance in her parents' direction assured the young bunny that she'd made the right call; both of them were nodding enthusiastically.

"Oh yeah, I'd love..." the young fox started to say, but then checked himself, seeming to remember something. "Uhm, is it okay if Finnick comes too?" He asked.

This time, Erin looked at her parents before saying anything, but once again they were nodding.

Off to the side, Nick Wilde couldn't help but feel a little humbled. Even after the way Finnick had snubbed him, Conor still refused to abandon his partner. (The little desert fox seemed to have realized it as well, Nick could see him looking at the ground, shamefaced.) It harkened back to something a swift fox of both their acquaintance had told him many years ago, "Us foxes gotta stick up for each other Nicky, no matter what …coz we're the only species we got, you follow what I'm bringing out?"

Stu Hopps meanwhile, had his thumbs hooked in the straps of his overalls, "Listen, how about you boys staying over with us in the warren tonight? We've got plenty of room, and I'm sure it beats sleeping out in that van of yours."

Conor accepted that offer with NO hesitation.

Chapter End Notes

On a final note, I must have considered a hundred different songs for Erin and Conor to perform before I settled on Tie Your Mother Down. These included 'When the Levee Breaks' by Led Zep, ' Heroes,' by David Bowie, and "We're Not Gonna Take it" by Twisted Sister. plus all of the tunes they tried out during the barn rehearsal. Hopefully, this one was a good choice.

And here it is in the original version:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGDGwDnJvps
Days of Carrots and Blueberries (Concluded…Pt. 23)

Chapter Summary

Family gathering...and a gathering storm.

Chapter Notes

The opinions of Nick Wilde regarding farmers and farming ARE necessarily those of the author

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 3 – Day of Carrots and Blueberries
(Conclusion…Pt. 23)

Dinner had been a complete success; the family had welcomed Conor and Finnick into the Hopps' warren as if they were a pair of long, lost cousins. Gideon Grey had come as well, bringing with him the dessert, (Blueberry carrot cake) and also Bette Renaard, his fiancée. The presence of so many foxes at the dinner table had prompted Grandpa Pop-Pop to spend most of the meal muttering under his breath. ("This dang-fool place, it's possessed…possessed. Need t'find an exorcist.")

Now the family was gathered around a towering pyramid of scrap-wood and old timber, watching as Junior supervised some of the younger family members through the ritual of the lighting-of-the-bonfire. On his word, each young rabbit would hop forward and toss a firebrand into the mix.

The wood caught almost immediately; the same dry air that had plagued Judy through the Rabbithon had now become an ally; in mere moments the pile of wood was cheerfully ablaze.

It was the perfect night for a bonfire; the sky was clear, the stars were out, and air was just cool enough to make the heat from the fire comforting.

As always, Stu had brought up some jugs of 'family friendly' cider from the cellar, and Bonnie had with her a big bag of marshmallows and a stack of chocolate bars.
Conor Lewis had his twelve-string acoustic with him, and Erin had brought her unplugged six. Together they led the gathering in such campfire classics as Red River Valley, This Land is Your Land, In the Evening By the Moonlight, She Moved Through the Faire and Oo-De-Lolly-Day, plus a few more contemporary numbers, Blackbird by the Beatles, Moonshadow by Cat Stevens, and Bob Dylion's immortal Blowing in the Wind.

In between the songs, everyone kept up a lively round of banter while the younger members of the gathering, (and not a few of the older ones,) toasted marshmallows over the fire to make s'mores. (Gideon Grey had supplied the graham crackers, baked fresh in his own ovens.)

It proved to be a task nearly beyond the capabilities of the young fox Conor Lewis, who not once but twice managed to set fire to the marshmallow he was roasting.

Erin Hopps was not about to let such a juicy opportunity pass without comment.

"That's a marshmallow fox, not a witch." She giggled, pointing.

"Hey, gimme a break, I'm new at this stuff." the young fox growled, affixing a third 'mallow to the end of his toasting stick. "You build a fire like this in Zoo York City and you'll get busted by the arson squad."

Everybody laughed, but Judy Hopps caught the wistful note in the young fox's voice, as if by not learning the proper way to make s'mores, he'd missed out on something important. Erin seemed to sense it too and went quickly over to help him.

Much to the surprise of everyone in the group (except for Conor and Nick,) the life of the party was turning out to be, of all animals, Finnick. Grumpy or not, the little guy knew a thing or two about how to tell a joke.

"So one day Officer Nick Wilde is walking the beat in the canal district an' he comes across this little skunk boy, playing with a pile of rotten fish guts. Well, being a naturally curious fox, Nick ambles on over to see what's goin' on."

"'Hey kid, what you doing?'' he asks. And the skunk-kid looks up and says, "I'm making a bunny-cop.'"

Finnick paused then for just a second, grinning from ear to ear, seeming to love the uncomfortable expressions on the faces all around him.

Then he went on.

"'You're WHAT?'' Nick says, and he gets so upset he goes running to the precinct to grab Officer Judy Hopps. He brings her back and says to the skunk, "'All right kid, tell her what you told me; what're you doing with all those stinking fish guts?' And the kid says it again, 'I'm making a bunny-cop.'"

Here, the desert fox paused once more, looking around as if in confusion.

Then he said, "So now Judy's all stressed, and she says to the skunk kid, 'What do mean you're making a bunny cop? That's not nice; why would you even do thing like that?'"

Finnick paused yet again, this time with a poker-face and for only the skip of heartbeat.

And then he threw the sucker punch.
"An' the skunk-kid just kind of looks at her an' says, 'Well, coz I don't have enough fish guts to make a FOX cop!'"

Instantly the Hopps Family bonfire became a roaring fire...roaring with laughter. Several of the kids dropped their marshmallows into the blaze, and Gideon Grey went tumbling over backwards off the log where he'd been sitting. ("I'm all right!") Erin Hopps nearly broke a guitar string.

"You should have tried out for the talent show Finnick." Her sister Judy suggested when the laughter finally began to ebb.

The fennec-fox flipped a paw back and forth.

"Naw, then it'd be too much like work."

"Hey, I'm dry here." Nick Wilde called from beside her, raising an empty cup. (They were sitting together on a pair of adjoining cushions.) "Can I get some more of that cider, please?"

"Coming your way," a voice replied, and jug began to move along the circle.

It pleased Judy to no end that Nick seemed so perfectly at ease amongst her family members. She began to think that perhaps she'd succeeded; that she had brought him to the fellowship he had lost so many years ago in the basement of a Happytown rec center.

What she could not know was that there was another fox here tonight whose yearning for the comforts of a family eclipsed even that of her partner.

Twenty yards away, on almost the opposite side of the bonfire, Conor Lewis was twisting a tuning peg, and studying her younger sister.

Though he had refused to let it show—never let them see that they get to you—when he and Erin had come through the stage gate after their performance, Conor had been deeply saddened to see all the attention being lavished on the white-furred bunny, while he'd been left to his own devices.

But it was not for the reason Judy might have surmised; the young fox hadn't felt slighted, what he'd felt instead was envy. He was feeling some of it right now as he gazed across the circle at Erin; there she was, chatting with her parents, surrounded by her brothers and sisters.

"She knows," the young fox mused silently, "She may have a 'tude but she knows how lucky she is."

He would have given almost anything to know how that felt; to belong; to really and truly belong somewhere.

Maybe someday...but in the meantime, his opinion of Erin Hopps had just gone up few notches. In the course of his life, Conor had met more than a few kids who didn't appreciate their families; not the way Erin did. (On the other paw, he had also come across one or two families that were worth not appreciating; that pack of coyotes, the Guilfords? Perfect example; they probably fit the category like a favorite sweater.)

Then he saw the young bunny raise her guitar and nod at him; it was time to boot up the jukebox again.

The next number of choice was the old Celtic folk song, Raggle-Taggle Gypsies, with everyone taking sides, the guys playing the part of the jilted lord, and the gals taking on the role of his runaway, lady. Led by Erin, the females won that one, but it promptly became a Pyrrhic victory when her brother Ethan urged, "Now you sing something, sis."
The young bunny tried to protest, but was quickly overruled when the rest of the gathering closed ranks behind her younger brother's suggestion.

She raised her paws in acquiescence, strummed a couple of notes her guitar and began to sing.

"I am on old bunny, named after my mother…"

Everyone fell into a hush as Erin sang and played the Bunny Raitt cover of the old John Pride tune, *Angel From Montgomery* …swept away by the slow bittersweet melody of the song.

"Make me an angel that flies from Montgomery
Make me a poster in an old ro-de-ohhhh."

Watching her, Judy felt her eyes welling, and a lump rising into her throat. The way Erin sang, you could almost feel the longing in the lyrics.

"How the heck can a bunny go to work in the mornin'
Come on home in the evening, and have nothing to sayyyy?"

Watching from the other side, Conor Lewis was equally enthralled. Ever since he'd learned that Bunny Raitt had been Erin's first music heroine he had wondered what she sounded like unplugged.

Well now he had his answer; she was awesome.

On the last refrain, she invited everyone to join in with her.

Which they did

"Just give me one thing that I can hold on to
To believe in this livin', is a hard way to goooo."

She ended the song on a fading chord.

The ovation that followed was not a tsunami, it was more like a slow-rising tide, but what it lacked in thunder, it more than made up for in warmth and enthusiasm.

As the last smattering of applause faded away, Erin looked across the way at Conor.

"All right fox, you're up."

Now *everyone* was looking at him; but the young silver fox remained unfazed, (Except for the slight spiking of his tail; both Finnick *and* Nick spotted that one.)

"Okay," he said, holding his guitar aloft. "But can we trade instruments, first? This piece I got in mind is hard enough on a six string, I'd mess it up for sure if I tried to play it on a twelve."

Erin nodded and they both got up.

The met each other at the halfway point and swapped guitars, and then Conor returned to his place and settled onto the beanbag chair where he'd been sitting, tweaking the tuning pegs with a look of studious concentration on his face.

When he'd called the tune 'hard enough' to play, it had been an understatement of almost Classic English intensity. Many a more experienced player than him had broken their teeth on it. Sometimes whenever he performed it, Conor became so wrapped up in the music that he crossed
up the lyrics—and you had *better* believe he didn't want that to happen NOW.

Finally he looked up.

"Okay, this is called 1952 Vixen Black Lightning."

He settled down and began to play, a lively Celtic 'picking tune', with a bright, intricate melody and fast, nimble fingering.

Then he lifted his muzzle and began to sing, mentally crossing his fingers that he wouldn't flub the opening. (He didn't.)

"Says James, to Red Molly, that's a fine motorbiiike…
A girl could feel special on any such like."

Twenty yards away, Judy Hopps felt her ears standing up. Dang, this boy could PLAY …and if his voice was *quite* amazing as her sister's, it was still pretty darn impressive, a cross between a young Joe Jackal and a youthful Scott Wildland.

And one other thing was clear; Conor loved this tune.

"….my hat's off to you.
She's a Vixen Black Lighting, 1952."

It was the classic story of the girl who falls hard for a motorcycle outlaw…

"….I robbed many a mammal to get my Vixen machine."

…only to lose him.

"Come down Red Molly, to his dying bedside."

The song ended with James leaving his bike to Molly before taking his leave of this world.

"And he gave her one last kiss and diiiii-iiiiied
And he gave her his Vixen…to riiiiiide."

Conor finished with repeat of the opening chords and six fast riffs. Once again the ovation built slowly to a rousing crescendo, punctuated here and there with whoops, whistles, and the thumping of feet.

"Who was that by?" Erin asked him as they traded guitars gain.

"Richard Tomcat." He answered, and when he did, a soft gleam came alight in the young bunny's deep-blue eyes.

"Richard Tomcat, huh? Well I guess you know what we have to play next, right?"

"What else *could* we play?" Conor answered, favoring her with a sly, fox-grin. And then he became serious. "You should take the lead though; with all apologies to RT, Bunny Raitt's version is the best one out there."

"Of course, it is." Erin answered with a wink, and then the two of them returned to their seats.

After a quick tune up on each of their guitars, Erin began to play with Conor joining in on the second bar. Almost immediately a quick round of applause swelled and faded within the circle. If
there was one song on Erin's playlist that her family would recognize, it was *Dimming of the Day*.

She began to sing:

"This old house is fallin' down around my ears
I'm drowning in the river of my tears..."

On the refrain, Conor joined in with her.

"You pull me like the moon pulls on the tide.  
You know just where I keep my better si-hi-hi hiieee.

As Erin and Conor continued to sing and play everything around them appeared to soften, faces softened, the glow from the firelight softened; the very air felt like it was becoming softer.

"Now all the bonny birds have wheeled away  
Oh I need you at the dimming of the day."

Judy was enthralled; it was as if they'd been performing this song as duo for years. (She was actually closer to the truth than she realized. Though Conor and Erin had never played together on Dimming of the Day, it was a tune with which the both of them were intimately familiar.)

"Come the night, you're only what I want,  
Come the night you could be my confidant."

On the last line of the song, they gradually slowed the tempo.

"Oh, I need you... at... the dimming... of... the ... dayyyyyyy."

As the music faded, Judy's eyes widened. What the...? She and Nick were holding paws? When had their paws found each other? She had no idea, and a quick look at Nick's face revealed that he didn't have a clue either.

They hurriedly let go of each other, looking away embarrassed, and then looking around furtively to see any of the others had noticed.

No, thank goodness; they'd lucked out this time. Everyone else was too busy cheering for Erin and Conor; even Finnick had missed it.

Then Stu Hopps stood up with his thumbs hooked into his overalls. That was what finally broke the spell.

"Ahhh, here comes his speech," Judy murmured to Nick, out of the corner of her mouth.

From the sound of her voice, the fox guessed that this was something of a yearly ritual, (and not an especially popular one, given the looks on all the nearby faces.)

"Well, another yeas has come and gone, and it's Carrot Days again," Judy's father said without preamble.

Judy looked at Nick and whispered, "That's what he always says." She was smiling and her tone of voice was affectionate, never scornful.

"I have to tell you," her father went on, "I'm one very happy rabbit tonight. looking around at our family. There's Judy, Zootopia's first bunny-cop, there's Loren, just back from his first semester at Stanfurred, There's Darell and Dean, they're going to expand their tractor business next year, there's
Art, made the Dean's list at the University of Harezona, there's Violet, ready to start her teaching career next fall." He smiled and then nodded, "And there's my daughter Erin, on her way to the Zootopia Academy for the Performing Arts. A bunny-dad couldn't be prouder."

His expression turned slightly rueful.

"But I also have to say, I'm feeling humbled, and maybe a little bit puzzled right now; all these Hopps Bunnies going out into the world to make their mark. And here's me, just a plain old carrot farmer, a rabbit who always preached the beauty of complacency; 'If you don't try anything new, you'll never fail,' I always said."

He paused, shook his head, and then put his paws on his hips, sweeping a quiet gaze over the gathering.

"Honestly, I don't think I ever took a chance in my life; I don't know where you all got your inspiration, but right now I think I must have the two luckiest rabbit's feet in Bunnyburrow."

"Uhm, excuse me…Stu?"

Everyone turned to see Nick Wilde raising his paw like a kit in class…while many of the Hopps bunnies stared at him with expressions of pale-faced shock, none more than Judy. Interrupting her father's Carrot Day's speech was something simply not done; an act falling somewhere between heresy and sacrilege.

"Look, I'm just a city fox here," Nick told the group, rising to his feet, "But even I know that no one takes more chances than a farmer." He began ticking off a list on his fingers, "You have weather, bugs, interest rates, crop prices, and probably a hundred other things I don't know about. And not only that, I read somewhere not long ago that as dangerous jobs go, a police officer has nothing on a farmer." He looked directly at Stu Hopps, "You may think you've never run any risks, Stu but from where I sit, you never had a year when you weren't taking any chances."

Stu shifted on his feet for a second.

"Well that's a nice enough sentiment Nick, but I really don't think…"

"No Dad, he's right." Junior Hopps was also on his feet. "How about when you took the Hopps Family Farm organic, the first rabbit in the Burrow to try it? A lot of folks said you were putting us on the fast track to the auction block when you made that move. Instead, half the farms in Bunnyburrow have gone organic now, and there's more converting every year."

"Or how about when you bought that land out on Star Route 47?" Violet Hopps had also gotten up, "200 acres of hillside that no one else had ever gotten to produce, but you planted blueberries instead of carrots, and now it's our second biggest crop."

"And what about ME, Stuart Hopps?" It was Gideon Grey, "A fox with a record, an animal that the banks wouldn't touch with a hunnert foot pole…but you partnered up with me just the same, and now I'm about to open me a franchise in Zootopia."

Fifteen feet away, Conor Lewis' ears had pricked up and he was regarding Stu with an almost gaze. (He knew a few things about banks and foxes that no else here did.)

"That's right, Dad." Judy Hopps was standing up as well, "If you want to know where we got our inspiration, it was from you. You may have preached complacency, but you always practiced courage…and like the old saying goes, action speaks louder than words."
A chorus of acclimation from the others quickly followed.
"A-MEN!"
"Hear, hear!"
"Well said, Jude."
"Darn right!"
Then little Cotton's voice piped up.
"Three cheers for Daddy! Hip, hip…!"
"Hooray!" Every bunny in the circle joined in with her and all of the foxes, too.
"Hip, hip…"
"Hooray!"
"Hip, hip!"
"HOORAY!"

Stu Hopps seemed to hunch over for a second, and then he turned towards Nick with his mouth and eyes quivering.
"Ohhh, now look what you did, you dumb fox; here come the waterworks again!"

He began to blubber uncontrollably. At once, Bonnie Hopps was up and standing with him.

Only this time, she wasn't embarrassed and she wasn't urging him to 'pull it together'.
"Oh Stu," she sniffed, "I love you so much, you big lug—and I'm so very proud of you." She threw her arms around her husband and then the two of them were holding each other tight. A split second later, Violet joined them…and then Dale and Dean Hopps, then Erin, and then it was Judy's turn.

"I love you Dad," she murmured, holding him close, and then from the corner of her eye, she became aware of Nick Wilde, watching from the sidelines.

And she thought, "When you say the right thing fox, you REALLY say the right thing!

**I-51 Expressway - 110 Miles North of Bunnyburrow:**

It came out of the night like a phantom, a silent, silver-grey spearhead, locked on course for the Burrow.

Seated inside the cockpit of his Roamic Concept One (He could never think of it as the driver's compartment,) Jack La Peigne was fuming like a jalopy with a blown head-gasket; an ironic analogy if ever there was one because the vehicle he was driving produced no emissions; it was entirely electric…electric and also hideously fast, (and even more hideously expensive.)

If it hadn't been so expensive he would have been pounding the steering wheel with his fist right now. DANGIT!
It would have been so much easier just to have had the executive helicopter fly him to the Burrow instead of driving...especially with him getting off to such a late start. Ironically, because of that delay, the big rabbit had felt the need to let off some steam, and a hard, fast drive usually did the trick.

No such luck tonight; Jack La Peigne was letting off steam all right, but it was turning the inside of his car into a mental pressure cooker.

Today had not been a good day for him. No soon had Aker Correctional put that wildcat strike in Pawstralia behind them, (at a staggering cost, thanks for nothing,) than the Philippine President had announced during their teleconference that the price he'd been quoted was too high, and he wished to renegotiate the terms of La Peigne's proposal. There could have been only one possible reason for the switch, and Seth Whitepaugh had quickly confirmed it; Aker's rival security concern Zorya (PAO) had stuck their collective noses into the deal.

Jack had been both flabbergasted and furious; there'd been nothing he could do but accede to the president's wishes. In the end, Aker had won the contract, but only after hours of mind-numbing discussion—and for a fraction of the profits they'd expected. Ohhh, that smirking snow-fox, Dimitri Oloshenko was going to be sorry for this. Zorya's meddling had cost La Peigne not only money but also valuable time; he should have been on the road to Bunnyburrow hours ago.

"Think you're sooo smart, don't you Dimitri?" La Peigne hissed under his breath, not caring that he was talking to himself. "If you didn't have your government backing you up as a silent partner, I could crush you like the bug you are. Just wait...just wait you little snot; when Aker Security implements the Fire Triangle, we'll see who has the last laugh."

That reminded Jack of something, he still hadn't heard back from Seth Whitepaugh. Was it possible, could the information he'd unearthed truly be valid? Jack hoped like heck that it was; right now we would have given his left ear to wipe the smarmy smile off that arctic fox's face—once and for all.

A fox...a stinking fox; how the heck had a member of THAT species ever been raised to such a positon of power? Jack knew the answer of course, Dimtri hailed from a society where trust was a joke and treachery was an old, established rule; in other words, the perfect environment for a fox to grow and flourish.

He allowed himself the cold comfort of knowing that it was both a two edged sword, and a sword of Damocles. Any day now, Dimitri Oloshenko might wake up to find himself undone by ether an ambitious subordinate or a double-crossing bureaucrat. That was one problem Jack La Peigne would never have to face; in his domain, he ruled supreme.

He'd feel better when he got to Bunnyburrow and took care of business with that pack of mangy canids. Mess on HIS memories, would they?

"I don't think so," the big bunny sneered.

Putting the thought aside for the moment, he wondered if he should put in an appearance at the Carrot Days Festival afterwards. He really should; after all, one of his companies was sponsoring the event, and he did feel at least a small nostalgic pull coming for the direction of the community where he'd been born and raised...even if his memories of the Burrow weren't all pleasant ones, (even if MOST of them weren't.)

Well, he could make that decision after sleeping on it, and thank goodness for his assistant Polly Walters. How would he ever manage without that opossum? Wisely, she had sent the executive
motorhome to The Burrow yesterday rather than today; had she not done so, there would have been no place put it, every space in the VIP and the regular campground had been filled by early this morning. She had also sent the Tac Vehicle on ahead of him rather than having it follow behind; Hummel had turned out to be needed elsewhere, so she'd assigned Gully to the task instead. Good choice, Jack thought; that particular wolverine might have relatively new to Aker, but he was a real comer, quick thinking and also fast on his feet.

A pair of red taillights materialized slowly in the distance, a pair of dim red dots that seemed to fade and come back again. Nonetheless, Jack could tell that the driver was moving at a speed nearly equal to his own.

He pressed a button on the center console and spoke into his bluefang headset.

"Fritha, give me a speed and distance on the vehicle up ahead of me."

At once, a silky robotic female responded.

"Vehicle is approximately…point four-six-seven kilometers…"

"In miles please," La Peigne interrupted, his nose twitching irritably. Dangit, why did he always have to make this correction? This stupid car should have figured it out the first time he'd said he miles instead of kilometers, especially after all the money he'd invested.

"Recalculating," The female voice came back again, "The other vehicle is…approximately point two-two-eight miles ahead of you. Groundspeed is estimated at…approximately one hundred and eleven, point seven miles per hour.

The 'approximate' Jack knew, was due to the fact that the other vehicle's range and speed were constantly shifting from second to second. Hrm, a hundred and eleven miles per hour? He could beat that easily. But first…

"Fritha, give me the location of the nearest police vehicles ahead of me. In miles," he added quickly.

The console display changed to a highway map, showing two pulsing dots.

And then the slinky android spoke again.

"Highway Patrol vehicle detected approximately sixteen, point seven miles, Exit 97 Overpass. Deerbrook County Sheriff's Department vehicle detected in approximately Twenty-five, point nine miles, Woodward Creek Rest Area."

For the first time since he'd climbed in behind the wheel, Jack La Peigne smiled to himself. Ah, the perks of being the CEO of Aker Security Management; all the satellite technology a king-sized bunny could wish for.

He decided to have some fun; after a day like this one, hadn't he earned it?

Feathering the accelerator he began to creep up on the other vehicle. At 20 yards distance, he was able to recognize the make and model. A bright red, tricked out Lucifer with two white racing stripes.

"A kid's muscle-car," the big bunny snorted, and then dimmed his headlights, moving closer. Now he could make out the other car's license plate, FST NML. Ohhhh brother, whoever was behind the wheel of this ride, they had 'poser' stamped all over them.
And they still had no idea that he was there.

"Time to give this idiot an attitude adjustment," Jack smiled to himself, flexing his fingers on the steering wheel.

Then he called out "lights up," and swerved out into the passing lane, pedal to the medal as he shot past Mr. Fst Nml at a 140 Mph, watching in his rear-view mirror for the reaction that must surely follow.

Being passed at high-speed by a vehicle with a roaring engine is enough to disconcert just about any animal. But, as Jack La Peigne had discovered several times before, finding yourself blown away by a vehicle coming out of nowhere and making no noise at all is downright terrifying… especially on an empty highway, on a dark night. Jack had seen it in his rear view mirror at least a half dozen times before, the other driver swerving wildly, hitting the brakes, sometimes you could even hear a scream. Once, nearly a year before, the big rabbit had left a Ramborghini Furacán in his wake and watched it spin out of control onto the highway median. (Tough luck as far as Jack La Peigne was concerned. If the other driver couldn't handle it, he shouldn't have been driving a supercar at such high speed in the first place.)

Except…this time, to his utter astonishment, there was no reaction whatsoever. Mr. Fst Nml was continuing to hold course, as steadily as if the Lucifer was mounted on rails. What, now?

Jack turned away grumbling and put the hammer down again.

"Just get me to Bunnyburrow," he mumbled, speaking to no one in particular.

No sooner had he vanished from the Lucifer's field of vision, than the muscle-car began to shimmy on its axles, swerving back and forth across two different lanes while behind the muscle-car's wheel, Flash's eyes went wide and his jaw dropped open in slow astonishment.

"What…
…the heck…
….was…
….that…
….thing?"

Chapter End Notes

This is not the end of the story; only the chapter.
Chapter 4 – The Wizard of Chaos
(Pt. 1)

Dangit, what th'…?

Jerry Guilford growled and pressed his paws tightly against his ears. It was a futile effort at best and the pounding in his skull continued unabated. Grabbing feverishly for...he didn't know what, the thickset coyote rolled over in bed, and tumbled onto the living room floor.

"Dangall!"

Jerry had fallen asleep on the couch (again!); he didn't remember crashing here, heck he didn't remember coming home—but that was hardly anything new. He stood up, bracing with his paws on the arm of the sofa and stretched himself out, first the legs, and then his back. On the latter, he felt the old, familiar snapping sensation, somewhere down around the small of his spine, the legacy of a crash landing in a turnip field some fifteen years ago.

Folks said that was when he had first begun to turn ornery—there'd be some serious head trauma to go with those cracked vertebrae—but then folks said a lot of things about Jerry Guilford...and they could all go take a flying leap off a steel-mill catwalk as far as he was concerned.

Slowly, carefully, he straightened himself out again. There, that was better...except for all that blankety-blank pounding. Funny, it didn't seem to hurt as much as usual.

That was when Jerry realized something, the noise wasn't coming from inside his head; it was coming from the front door.

All at once he tensed, felt his neck fur standing up. Oh for crying out loud, NOW what? He'd been a good coyote; stayed the heck away from the Carrot Days Festival, and the rest of the Guilford
clan had done the same. Jiminy Christmas, did they think he was stupid along with everything else? He wasn't about tangle with any dangfool wolverine, much less three of them…no matter what those dumb bunnies back at the Festival might say.

Bunnies…the bane of his existence! For the hundred thousandth time, Jerry cursed the day he'd come to this stinking rabbit-hole.

It had seemed like a good idea the time, moving his crop-dusting service from Wapiti WA to Bunnyburrow. Up until Jerry's arrival, the nearest crop-service planes had been stationed all the way over in Podunk, at least an hour away, even by air. As if that wasn't bad enough, Triburrow Aerial charged extra for the fuel they spent getting to and from the Burrow—and if you didn't like, it tough carrots, they were the only game within a hundred miles.

Not any more thanks to the Guilford brothers, Jerry was sure he'd hit on a moneymaker if not exactly a gold mine

At first things had gone well enough. Oh sure, there'd been the usual complaints of unreliability and poor customer service, but when weren't there always whiners? Eventually, slowly but surely, Sky-Yote Crop Services had built up a steady list of clientele.

And then the bottom had dropped out.

It hadn't been a sudden fall; no one had sprung a trap door beneath Jerry Guilford's feet. It had been more like a floor that slowly rots out from under you; first there's creaking, then it bows, and then one day a foot goes through. That was how it had been for Sky-Yote Crop Services…and that was why they'd been caught completely by surprise

It had all started when one of those double dealing rabbits, a carrot farmer named Stu Hopps had elected to take his farm organic. At first Jerry had paid little or no attention. Why should he care? The Hopps Family Farm had never done business with Sky-yote; it was Triburrow Air's loss, not his. And if some dumb bunny wanted to go bankrupt, hey, it was no skin off his nose.

That is, not until the following year, when four more farmsteads in the Burrow announced that they were switching to organic farming methods; and these four WERE Sky-yote's clients…or rather former clients; with the changeover to organic, no pesticides or herbicides were needed, thank you very much. The following year, five more farms in the Burrow went organic, and then seven more in the year after that. In three seasons Jerry Guilford's client list had shrunk by more than half. The way things were going, two more seasons and he'd be broke and out of business.

What made it even more galling was that the previous year, a ray of hope had come into the coyote's life; Burrow County made him the proverbial offer he couldn't refuse. Over the past eighteen months, illegal catnip farms had been springing up like mushrooms in the hills surrounding Bunnyburrow—and the County Fathers had finally decided enough was enough. They would attack the illegal spreads from the air, destroying their catnip plants with defoliant…and that was where Sky-Yote Crop Services came in.

The offer had fallen like a godsend on Jerry Guilford, and he'd accepted before even hearing the full proposal; the only problem was that the County's herbicide of choice was Quariline. Jerry had never liked working with that stuff but hey, anything to save the family business, right?

Wrong; two months before the spraying was scheduled to begin, the program was suspended indefinitely, no warning and no explanation. Nearly frothing with agitation, Jerry had stormed into offices of the Burrow County Farm Bureau, demanding to know what the heck was going on. Finally, after being fobbed off on one minor bureaucrat after another, the coyote had been told to
take it up with the Sheriff's Office,

The Sheriff's office had told him to take it up with the County Commissioner's office. When he got to the County Commissioner's office, he was given another runaround and finally told that he'd need to take it up with the County Commissioner himself, the honorable Childers 'Chip' Fielding, who unfortunately wasn't at the office today.

Fielding had never once returned any of the coyote's phone calls, and every time Jerry had paid a visit to the Commissioner's Office, he'd been informed that the sheep had just left for the day. By the time he finally caught up with Fielding at last year's Carrot Days, Jerry was long past the rational stage. The upshot was two months in jail for felonious assault (he'd pled down to menacing) and (finally) an answer to his question. The operation had been suspended not through any fault on the part of Sky-yote Crop Services. Commissioner Fielding had discovered (belatedly) that Quareline had a rather nasty side effect; it was just as effective on fur as it was on foliage.

"No kidding, Slylock!" Jerry had raged when he found out. He could have told that to the County in the beginning—if anyone had bothered to ask him. WHY did they think he didn't like working with Quariline in the first place? (Actually there was another, bigger reason, but never mind that for now.)

As it was, Fielding's Office hadn't made the discovery until a coalition of local farmers, led by that motormouth Douglas squirrel Levon Chatterton, had raised a stink. In the interim, the local Catnip growers had also gotten wind of the proposal and elected to move their operations elsewhere. With them gone, there was no longer any need for the spraying operation and it was called off for good.

That more than anything else was what had enraged Jerry Guilford; while he'd been languishing behind bars, Chip Fielding was being hailed as a hero, the sheep who had so cleverly gotten rid of the illegal catnip farms…and without even taking any action. (Or that was how he'd played it to the press.)

Upon his release from custody, Jerry had found a letter from the County Clerk's Office waiting in his mailbox, demanding the immediate return of the unused Quareline with which the County had supplied him. Jerry had promptly refused to cough up the defoliant until he was paid back for the expenses he'd incurred, modifying two of his planes to carry the stuff. The Burrow Country Sheriff's Department had promptly sent a platoon of deputies to retrieve the unused herbicide, only to be stonewalled at the entrance to the Sky-Yote hangar—not by any physical threat but by a court order. (Not everyone in the Burrow was a Chip Fielding fan.) Burrow County could have their crop spray back only after Mr. Guilford had been suitably compensated for his efforts so far, and not one second before.

The smart thing to do of course would have been to pay Jerry off and be done with it, but by then Chip Fielding's blood was up. Instead, Burrow County had appealed the ruling; Sky-Yote Crop Services had immediately sued and the case had remained in limbo ever since.

In doubling down on the coyote, Fielding had moved more shrewdly that most animals would have given him credit for. He knew—and so did his adversary—that both time and public opinion were on his side.

And that was what had infuriated Jerry Guilford more than anything. Chip Fielding was NO hero, only one very lucky sheep—and as for Jerry himself, well...

All right, yeah…his family had 'liberated' a few items from their neighbors when they'd first arrived in town, but they'd never taken more than they needed…and they had always intended to pay for what they took when they could afford it.
And even if they hadn't, did that make it right, what was happening now? Now every time some local idiot suffered a theft or vandalism the whole stupid Burrow immediately blamed it on HIS family! Someone robbed your mailbox? It had to be one of Guilfords. A harrow turned up missing from your barn? The Guilfords took it, who else? Someone raided your strawberry field? Dirty, mangy coyotes! Crikey, they'd even accused him of torching the Luckyfoot Farms produce stand, (as if he'd be such an idiot!) "Come and get me when you got some evidence!" the coyote had snarled, after overhearing some whispers while gassing up his truck.

The 'scape-yoting' had finally reached a crescendo six months ago, when one of the resident yahoos, a two-faced jackrabbit name Rollie Carratine had dynamited his own storage silo and tried to blame it on the Guilford family; (insurance scam.) Luckily for Jerry, that had been too much even for the bunn-kissers down at the Burrow County Sheriff's Office. Whatever else he might have done Jerry Guilford had never fooled around with explosives.

But then, even after he'd been exonerated, had anyone apologized? What, are you kidding? Not a word, not a single word; it was that hard-case bobcat, Deputy Mac Cannon who had spelled out the prevailing attitude. "Maybe it wasn't you that took down the Carratine's silo Jerry, but you've done a lot of other things that weren't much better."

The hammering on the door abruptly ceased; a split second later the front doorbell rang.

Jerry Guilford relaxed a little. All right, it wasn't the Sheriff's Department (again!) The BCSD NEVER rang the bell; they just kept pounding away on the wood until they got an answer.

The bell chimed a second time, and a peevish voice spoke from behind the coyote. "Are you going to answer that or what, Dad?"

"Shut up and go back to your room Craig!" Jerry snapped over his shoulder as the bell sounded a third time. They younger coyote sniffed and then slunk away

"All right, all right, I'm COMING!" Jerry snarled, stalking in the direction of the front door and almost tripping over a discarded bottle. "This had BETTER be important," he added, grabbing the handle and flinging the door wide open.

It took a lot to make Jerry Guilford reel back in surprise; but there was a lot on his doorstep right now, specifically the biggest rabbit he'd ever encountered. (And living in Bunnyburrow the coyote had encountered plenty.)

No kidding the bunny on the other side of the security door had to be at least half a head taller than he was, and while Jerry wasn't especially large for a yote, he was by no means the runt of the litter…and powerfully built to boot. (He was almost burly for his species.) The bunny standing in front of him however, eclipsed him easily in that in that department; he looked like he squeezed blood out of rocks for fun. It made the coyote glad for a second that he'd installed that extra security door—until he remembered that it could only be locked from the outside.

It was enough to give him a rare moment of pause, and in the moment he realized something; he hadn't checked to see whether he was dressed before answering the doorbell. (He was; thank goodness for small favors.)

Jerry shrugged off his anxiety and felt his ears go back.

"You better have a good reason for waking me up at..." He suddenly realized he didn't know what time it was either and hurriedly checked his watch, "seven in the morning on a Sunday." (That was actually a lot later than he'd thought it was.)
The big bunny immediately raised his paws.

"Ahhh, I'm so sorry," he said, "When I used to live here, we were always up by six, even on Sundays. I guess I kind of took it for granted. Please."

Jerry snarled something unpleasant and was about to slam the door in his (uninvited) visitor's face—but then something pricked his psyche; the rabbit had said...

"When you used to live here?" he queried, raising an ear and tilting his head to the side.

"Yes, this is the house where I grew up." The big bunny replied, offering a paw through the bars of the security door, "Jack La Peigne."

Jerry didn't take the paw, but he wasn't tempted to bite it either. Before he'd owned this property, it had belonged to the County and before that to a family of marmots, the Erfenns or something. But before that...yes, it had belonged to a family of rabbits once, what had been their names again? Jerry couldn't remember exactly, but recalled that it had sounded something like 'combine'. All right, close enough.

But not good enough; he curled up his lip and laid his ears bent backwards.

"Okay, fine." He growled, "Now, you mind telling me what you're doing here, La Peigne?" (Jerry already had a pretty good idea, but he was going to make the dumb bunny say it.)

"Well, I know it's kind of early and all," the big rabbit said, shuffling his feet and looking at the ground for a second. "But I was hoping I might come in for bit and take a look around...you know, for old time's sake."

"I knew it!" the coyote snarled to himself, and to his visitor he said, "Sorry, tour-guide's got the day off!" He was just about to slam the door again when he saw what the bunny was holding between his middle and index fingers.

Was that a...hundred?

No, it was two of them!

"I would of course make it worth your while," La Peigne said, and instead of throwing the door shut, Jerry threw it open.

He did not follow suit with his arms.

"Thirty minutes, and don't touch anything!" he told the big bunny coldly, stepping aside to let him by.

"Agreed," Jack La Peigne said, moving past the coyote and thinking, "As if I'd even want to touch anything in THIS flea-bitten dump! Sweet cheez n' crackers, I knew it was going to be bad, but the old place looks like it's been stinking ransacked."

Even that was putting it mildly; there were holes in the walls, there were cobwebs in the corners, there were stains on all the rugs and debris strewn everywhere. Jack could hear the cockroaches scuttling in the walls, there were so many of them. It made him want to give the order to Gully and Racius right NOW.

Instead he put his paws behind his back and strolled easily through his childhood home, trying his best to blot out the present and recall the pleasant memories of the past, (what few there were.)
For the hundred thousandth time, he wondered why Bunnyburrow—and this house—held such an attraction for him; he had no roots here, no family. When his father had passed, the La Peignes had simply pulled up stakes and moved on. That had been two months after Jack had already left for college, but still…none of the other family members had ever returned. Heck HE was the one who lived nearest to Bunnyburrow, and that was a good 211 miles away. As for the rest of the family, the next closest La Peigne lived in Los Gatos California—or that was what Jack thought; he never talked to any of his siblings and they never called him either, (except when they needed a cash infusion, which of course they never got.)

He paused briefly in the kitchen, trying for a moment to recall the image of his mother standing at the stove, the smell of her homemade ratatouille. He was unable to bring back either memory and moved quickly back into the hallway.

Jack had better luck recalling his childhood when he got to his old bedroom. Even though it had been largely converted over to storage space, he could still remember it the way it had been; yes here he was, the bunny known then as little Jacky, the rabbit he'd been before…before he…

He exited quickly and continued with his tour.

Following along behind him, Jerry Guilford had shed whatever lingering doubts he'd held about this rabbit. Ohhh yes, he'd lived here once all right; the big bunny seemed to know the place like the back of his paw. And now that he was inside the house, Jerry was able to study him a little more closely…and he wasn't quite sure of what to make of his 'guest'.

The rabbit was dressed in canvas pants and a rip-stop shirt and, topped off with what might have been a safari jacket, except it was dark blue rather than beige, a real 'mammal-of-action' ensemble. None of this was exceptional in and of itself, except…it all fit so perfectly, a little too perfectly, as if the big bunny had had it tailored to fit. And then there was that timepiece he was wearing, a mil-spec watch in solid platinum; Jerry had never imagined that such a thing existed. Wellll, he had known La Pinn, or whatever the heck he called himself was loaded even before he'd been allowed through the door; hadn't the big moron offered up a pair of hundreds for a 30 minute look-around?

But there was something else, something Jerry felt he'd missed, and try as he might, he couldn't put his finger on it now.

And there was another small matter as well, and it had as much to do with the coyote's house as with his visitor.

Like most residences in Bunnyburrow, the Guilford homestead was built into a hillside, half of it above ground, and the other half below; it might almost have passed for a scaled down version of the Hopps family warren, except the colors were much more muted—greys and earth-tones as opposed to pink and yellow—and there had also been far less 'gingerbread'. No wooden rabbit ears adorned the eaves…and Jerry Guilford hadn't removed them, nor had anyone else; they'd NEVER been there.

But that wasn't the odd part.

When the Jerry and his family had first moved in here, about half the doors had been too small to accommodate a coyote and had needed to be enlarged; that was half the doors, not all of them. Many of passageways had already been big enough for Jerry's species, but what he had never noticed until now was they hadn't been constructed that way; these doors had also been enlarged…at a much earlier date than the ones he'd converted, but they'd been modified from the original just the same. Jerry wondered why that seemed important and then shrugged it off; the only reason he'd even noticed was because of Jack La Peigne. Every door the big rabbit opened was one of the older
conversions; he was ignoring the more recently enlarged doorways almost as if they didn't exist. What the heck was that all about?

At that instant, as if La Peigne had somehow overheard the coyote's thoughts and was determined to prove him wrong, he halted abruptly in front of one of the 'recent' doors…but instead of opening it, he simply closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Jerry cocked an ear and tilted his head once more. Behind him he could hear a hubbub of mutterings and murmurings; in the last few minutes at least a half dozen other family members had also joined the tour. "Well, is he gonna open it or isn't he?" his brother Joe (the testy one) asked, speaking to no one in particular.

Jack didn't hear him; he was bracing himself. Once upon a time, this had been the door to his father's private office, a room that no one else in the family was EVER supposed to enter, not for any reason…no excuses and no reprieve if you were caught. Many times, when he'd been a young rabbit, one of his brothers or sometimes even a sister had dared and double-dared him to violate this sanctuary. He'd never had accepted the challenge, and at first the teasing had been merciless. Later on the hazing had stopped or rather Jack had made it stop.

He had been kicked out of the La Peigne family warren for two weeks because of what he did…and he hadn't cared a whit; it had all been worth it. That was the last time any of Jack La Peignes siblings ever made fun of him, and it had been one of the most important lessons the young rabbit had ever learned. Make an example out of the first jerk that crosses you, and there won't BE a second jerk.

He grabbed the doorknob and pulled it open; he did not fling it open—not in front of this pack of 'idi'yotes.'

It was the first room he entered since arriving here that had not been re-tasked to another purpose; his father's old office was still an office, different furnishings maybe, but still with the same objective…and that was what brought Jack La Peigne to his moment of epiphany. Now he understood why he wanted to be here, why he needed to be here; THIS was where it had all begun. This place, this room, this office…this was where his father had made those two fateful decisions, one of them heavy with portent and the other of seemingly little consequence at the time. And yet the two of them together had started Jack La Peigne on the road to where he was now.

"This is the place," he thought to himself, "This is where the Fire Triangle was actually born; THAT'S why I'm..."

"Hey I thought I told you not to touch anything!" Jerry Guilford's angry voice came from behind. When Jack looked over his shoulder, he saw that the coyote was showing both his fangs.

He wheeled around, barely in control. "You scruffy little dirt-bag, with one word I could...easy, easy, not until you're out the door again."

"I DIDN'T touch anything," he protested, throwing up his paws.

"Then how'd my laptop get turned on?" Jerry demanded, pointing past him.

A glance over his shoulder told La Peigne that the coyote was right. The laptop computer was alight and a screensaver was showing; Feral's Duty, it figured with this backwoods bumpkin.

"I never..." Jack started to say, right before another voice spoke up, Jerry's other brother Dean, the level-head one, (relatively speaking.)
"He didn't touch it Jer, it was on when he come in here. I been watchin' the whole time."

"Then who…?" Jerry demanded, and pushed rudely past them both and into the office.

He typed two keystrokes on the computer and tilted his head to the side again. "What in the fool-heck is this?" he asked rhetorically, and then moved the mouse and clicked.

For the next few seconds the coyote just stood there, mumbling to himself and blocking Jack’s view of the laptop screen. "Now what in the name of…? What're you doing there, Craig? What's that, a lighter? What are you…? Whaaaaaa…YOU CRAZY, BOY?"

With the speed of a snap-spring, Jerry's muzzle shot upward and he started to howl. Almost instantaneously the others all joined in and Jack was obliged to cover his ears with his paws. Yeesh, these idiots were worse than wolves!

And then Jerry stopped howling and started hollering, "Craig! Where is he? Craig where are you, boy? YOU GET YOUR TAIL IN HERE RIGHT NOW!"

There was no response and the coyote slammed the laptop shut and dashed back into the hallway; Jack barely got out of the way in time.

From his angle inside the office, the big bunny was unable to see what was transpiring out in the hall, but what he heard from the kid's father was enough to paint a picture…and it was all he could do to keep from grinning wickedly.

"Craig, you stop right where you're at! Now, you hear? N… Don't even think 'bout it, boy! You KNOW you can't outrun me. That's better; now you git yer tail into your room. Shut up, I don't want to hear…don't MAKE me come over there! In your room…now!"

Jack looked at the ceiling and bit his lip. Now he was certain of what Jerry must have seen on that laptop screen. And ohhh yes, could the timing possibly be any more perfect?

Meanwhile there was silence in the hallway…for about three seconds and then Jack heard a door slam about fifteen feet away. It was a completely unnecessary gesture, the big rabbit knew. Jerry Guilford was shortly to have bigger problems than an errant son.

MUCH bigger problems…

Jack watched for a second as the coyote stood fuming in the hallway, and then turned towards him again.

"Tour's over, you can go now."

"I understand." Jack answered, nodding. He had seen everything he'd wanted to see. On the way back to the front entrance, he never so much as glanced at his surroundings.

When they got to the front door, he stopped and turned around again. Jerry started to lay his ears back, but then stopped when he saw the big rabbit proffering another fifty.

"You know, I never thought I'd miss this place." Jack La Peigne mused, in as close to a regretful voice as was possible for him, "The time I spent here was not a happy one, and yet…this was my home, the place where I grew up."

He passed the bill to an only semi-grateful Jerry Guilford—and at that moment, shed all pretense of amiability, throwing it to the floor like an assassin's cloak.
"That's why it hacks me off so much to see this place trashed by a pack of worthless, mangy fleabags."

For a hint of a second, no one spoke; Jerry's head tilted sideways again as he attempted to digest the words he could not possibly have heard just now.

Before the coyote could complete the process, Jack La Peigne jumped into the breach. He smiled, more of a leer actually, and waved a finger in a 'tut-tut' gesture.

"I-I-I wouldn't do that if I were you, Guilford. Remember what the honorable Judge Lamar J. Peters told you last time? He said, and I quote, 'Next time son, it won't be jail, it'll be prison…and it won't be days, it'll be years. So just you think about it.'"

Just as he'd known they would, the coyote's ears reversed course, turning forwards again and then standing up straight in astonishment.

"And that was only your last assault charge." Jack went on in an almost merry tone of voice, "You've also been convicted on three counts of destruction of property, two counts of burglary, and no less the six counts of petty theft. Oh, and that's just you, let's not forget the rest of your family." His face split open in that leer again, "Oh yes Guilford; in my business I can get access to just about any police records that I want…and also a few other things." His manner became velvety…and also etching. "What was it on that laptop that got you so upset, I wonder? Could it have been, by any chance, a video of your kid, firebombing a produce stand?"

That finally did it. Jerry Guilford's jaw snapped shut and he snapped instantly out of his trance. He let out a snarl that was almost another howl and then took a step in Jack's direction. But then, perhaps remembering the big bunny's words of warning, he checked himself just in time.

"How the HECK did you know about…?"

Jack felt the corners of his mouth crinkling and his eyes narrowing devilishly. This fool was behaving exactly as he expected.

"Your super genius son posted it on Ewe tube," he informed the coyote genially, thoroughly enjoying the look of horror that spread instantly over his host's face.

He went on. "Or rather, his girlfriend posted it. It was up for less than half an hour, but that was long enough." He folded his arms and winked, "Like I said, I have resources."

"Get off my property!" Jerry screamed hoarsely, taking another step forward…and then back again. Normally such a feeble rejoinder would have prompted Jack La Peigne to laugh his tail off. Not this time; the big bunny couldn't have asked for a better opening; he turned to go but then stopped, snapping his fingers as if he had just remembered something.

'Mmmm, nooooo…thaaaaaat's not quite right." He said, feigning a sheepish look as he spun around slowly to face the coyote again…and more properly coyotes, there were at least three others crowded around Jerry now, "You see…this isn't your property anymore." The big bunny told them, "Or it won't be, very shortly."

"What do you mean it ain't ours?" Joe Guilford snapped, lunging forward and then stopping when brother Dean threw an arm in front of him.

"Yes, what do you mean, it's not ours?" Jerry also asked him, in a voice like a lead brick. He seemed to have sensed what was coming.
"I mean," Jack informed him, smirking again, "That two months ago you defaulted on another mortgage payment. By the terms of your contract, that gives the holder the right to repossess this property."

Now it was Jerry's turn to leer.

"Nice try DUMB bunny. Lem Carey down at Burrows Trust already gave me an extension."

He said this with his paws on his hips, tilting his head from side to side like a kit on a playground telling another kit, "So there!"

"Well yes," Jack admitted, feigning that awkward look again, "except welllll…Burrows Trust doesn't OWN your mortgage anymore; it now belongs to the firm of Waters and Downes Private Equity."

He gave Jerry a moment to let that sink in, and then the tentative manner was gone for good.

"We acquired it last week," he said, making sure to give the 'we' just the right emphasis as he reached into his jacket. This time, he extracted not a bill but an envelope, which he held out in Jerry Guilford's direction, "and we are foreclosing."

For a long, tense moment, nothing happened. Jerry just stared blankly at the envelope while the big bunny refused to budge. If Guilford wanted to know what was inside the letter, he'd have to come to Jack to find out. (This was not in order to humiliate the coyote, but to bring him into the door-frame.)

Finally Jerry took two steps forward and snatched the envelope out of Jack's grip, a well-practiced move; (this was hardly the first time he'd been served with papers.)

"You have twelve days to vacate the premises," Jack told him, cutting directly to the chase. He'd had his fun, now it was time to get serious, "And If I were you, I'd make good use of it, because you're not getting one extra minute of time to make your preparations." He paused for just a second, listening to the voice of Gully inside his earpiece.

"I have him locked on, sir."

That was all Jack needed to hear, he leaned forward, his face a kabuki-mask of contempt…and at the same time moved his paw discreetly behind his back.

"So noooo…YOU get off MY property!" he sneered, and then tensed and braced himself.

But Guilford only stared at him.

"It's still my property for the next twelve days." He said, and then stepped back and slammed the door in Jack's face.

Had he bothered to leave it open, he would have seen the big rabbit's features perform a side-shift from high disdain into unbridled fury. What? This was it; this was all? That mangy flea-bag wasn't even going to…? Arrrrrgh!'

He turned and stalked away from the Guilford's front door, fumbling in his pocket for his bluefang. Wait the belt-holster…! No worries, it was hidden beneath his jacket, where it couldn't be seen. All right then…

Pulling out his ear-piece, Jack replaced it with the bluefang; he didn't care if Guilford saw that.
"Gully…Racius. Pull back and meet me at the rendezvous. We're done here."

"Yes sir." He heard the wolverines respond in unison.

Something detached itself from the side of burrow and was gone…Racius. Jack had no idea where Gully was, but that was the point, wasn't it?

He could have screamed his head off.

So could Joe Guilford.

"I don't believe this." the coyote raged, "I simply do not BELIEVE this; that bunny walks in here, dumps trash-talk all over our family, serves us with an eviction notice and you just let him walk out of here without so much as a how-de-do."

"I got to agree with Joe on this one," his brother Dean said; even he could take only so much.

"Right, are you done?" Jerry asked, leaning forward with an elbow on the table where they were gathered, (He had dismissed the other family members back to their respective rooms.) "Then you got to ask yourselves a question, why would a guy who's smart enough to know near everything about us be DUMB enough to come here all by hisself and make a move like that…even a bunny?"

The two younger coyotes just looked at each, while Jerry nodded grimly.

"That's right, he wouldn't; that boy had something up his sleeve when he come in here. I don't know what it was, and frankly I don't give a hoo-hah, but I wasn't gonna fall for it, that's number one. Number two, did you notice anything weird that first time when he turned 'round to leave? Well I did, it was something that'd been messing with my head ever since he showed up here. Where the dangall was his CAR? There weren't anything parked in the driveway, or out by the road. So what'd he do, hike all the way from town? Not hardly. That's why I let that bunny go. There was something not right about him from Jump Street...about him, OR his routine."

Jerry leaned back again, causing his chair to make a sound like a parrot squawk, "Now to answer your other question, the one you ain't asked yet, no I'm NOT just gonna let this go…but when I deal with that big bunny, it'll happen when and where I decide, and on MY term, not his."

He pulled out the envelope Jack had given him and slapped on the tabletop like an ace of spades.

"They want us out of here? Fine, we're gone…but not in any twelve days, we leave tonight." His lips pulled back in a wicked, feral grin, showing every single one of his sharp, canine teeth, "But first, we're gonna give that fancy-pants jerk a little something to remember us by; him…and every other dumb bunny in the Burrow!"

Chapter End Notes

Easter Eggs:

Aside from the VERY obvious reference to Wile E. Coyote, there's also a more subtle nod to a certain cartoon-strip fox.
Chapter Summary

All right, perhaps a little more fluff...and can there be any remaining doubts that Judy and Erin are sisters?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 4 – The Wizard of Chaos
(Continued…Pt. 2)

Judy was on her way down to the dining room when she spotted her sister Erin, coming up the stairs from below.

She immediately went over.

"Morning sis, you're up early," she told the younger bunny, moving aside to let a troop of younger family members pass by. (This time on a Sunday was always rush hour in the Hopps Family warren)

Erin put a paw on her hip; the look on Judy's face had not slipped past her, "You're surprised, Jude-the-dude?"

Actually Judy was more than surprised, she was astounded. Not only was Erin up and about much earlier than usual, she was already dressed. Instead of her standard Sunday morning ensemble of PJ's and a robe, she had on bush pants, a linen shirt, and a dark green hiking vest. All she needed was a digger's hat and she'd be a regular Crocodile Bun-nee.

"Well yeah," the older bunny admitted, "I mean, after the way you gave it up onstage a last night, I'd have thought you'd want to sleep in for a while this morning." A performance such as her sister had given must have been at least a little tiring,

Erin's face crinkled mischievously.

"Says the bunny who competed in the Rabbithon yesterday…and I notice you're already up and running too."
Judy threw up her paws and laughed. She had reckoned without the possibility of Erin's talent show triumph putting her on an emotional high, (and she was at 'that' age, after all.)

"Okay little sis, you got me," She said, and then dropped her arms again, becoming serious. "Listen, did you see Nick downstairs anywhere? When I knocked on his door just now, he wasn't home."

Erin nodded at once. "Yep, he's down in the dining room, having breakfast. " Her mouth pulled sideways for a second, "Or-r-r that's where he was a few minutes ago." she shook her head in mixture of awe and disbelief. "Cheez n' crackers, can he pound down those blueberry pancakes, or WHAT?"

"Ho, look who's talking!" another voice crowed; Violet Hopps had just joined them.

"You should have seen HER scarfing those flapjacks, Jude," she said, poking a thumb in Erin's direction, "I swear, I'm thought she was going to pop like a balloon."

"I'm a growing girl, I need it," the younger bunny rejoined, with a flippant toss of her ears, and then all three of them laughed. Yep, Erin was riding high this morning.

Then Violet said, "Nick should still be down there Judy, I left only less than a minute ago." Her nose began to twitch. "What do need him for, if you don't mind my asking?" Vi had always been the inquisitive one.

By way of response, Judy reached into her windbreaker and pulled out a receipt, passing it around to her two sisters. Their response was decidedly mixed. Violet only chewed her lip, but Erin's reaction was, "Whoa, tres cool!"

"I know," Judy answered looking satisfied as she put the paper away. "And no, you can't come with us, Erin." She was smirking mischievously…and to no avail. Instead of thumping her foot, the young, white-furred bunny only tossed her ears again.

"Hmmph, nice try Jude-the-dude, but as a matter of fact, I have plans of my own for this morning; Terri Blackburns's stepdad is taking her family on a rafting trip and mom already said I could go."

She delivered the news quickly, as if anticipating an objection. It was a sound course of action; Violet's nose pinched up and her ears fell backwards.

"Awww Erin, you'll miss the rest of Carrot Days."

"Oh I'll be back in plenty of time for the big dance, Vi." The younger Bunny assured her, "We're only going on down the Alsetz; that's just a half-day trip." Her nose began to twitch, "But uhhh… have either of you guys seen Conor Lewis around? They've got room for one more and I want to see if he'd like to come along."

"As a matter of fact, yes I did," Judy told her kid sister, happy to be of assistance. "I bumped him down the hall just a few minutes ago; he was looking for the way upstairs. My guess is he's probably out on the east-side terrace."

Erin's ears perked up at once

"Oh thanks Jude," she said, and then her eyes narrowed playfully and the comers of her mouth became a pair of cooked lines, "Okay sis, I'm going; have fun with your boyfriend."

"He's not my boyfriend, Erin." Judy corrected her coolly. "We're just friends and partners; that's
all."

The younger bunny's face became even more impish. "Yeah right, suuuuuure he is,"

Judy folded her arms and raised an eyebrow. Ohhhhh brother, as if she hadn't been expecting this shoe to drop, ever since the bonfire last night.

"Okay Erin you got me." She said, throwing her arms wide like a suspect giving it up under questioning, "It's true, I admit it; I have just as much of a crush on Nick as you have on Conor. (Mess with ME, will you, little Miss high-as-a-kite?)"

This warning shot across the S.S. Erin Hopps' bowsprit had exactly the desired effect; Violet began to snigger into a fist, and Erin swiftly struck her colors.

"Okay, okayyyy," she conceded, making stopping motions with her paws, "I was only kidding Judy."

"I know, and so was I," the older bunny answered, offering a discreet wink in Violet's direction. It wasn't meant as an escape hatch but Erin took it as such.

"Oops, got to move." She said, pretending to look at her watch and then sprinted off down the hallway, but not without turning and offering a final wave, "I'll be back for the dance, I promise," she said

And then she was gone

No sooner had Erin disappeared around the corner, than Judy became aware of a fast, staccato drumbeat, down by the floorboards. Violet Hopps was thumping her foot.

Judy turned to her.

"All right, what?"

Violet shook her head and then looked away, "I just…I don't like the idea of Erin…uhhmmm, just taking off and leaving everyone during Carrot Days."

"Oh come on, Violet," Judy said, giving her a nudge in the arm. "She was there with us for the dinner and the bonfire—and the Rabbithon, don't forget that. And that's not even mentioning the talent show."

Her sister's expression remained unchanged; she tried a different tack

"Look, Erin promised to be back in time for the big dance, and that's good enough for me." Judy allowed herself a small wry smile, adding, "Besides, you know as well as I do that nothing ever happens on Sunday morning during Carrot Days."

Violet's mouth twisted sideways for a second, and then she sighed and nodded ever so slightly. Truer words had never been spoken but that didn't mean she had to like it.

And on that note, the two sisters parted company.

When Judy got to the dining room, she spotted Nick almost immediately.

It wasn't a particularly difficult task; from the overhead balcony, his red fur stood out like a beacon in the midst of so many duns and greys. Once again, he was surrounded by a gaggle of younger bunnies and there was little Cotton Hopps, seated right beside him as always. Finnick was there
too, an elbow draped casually over the back of his chair as he regaled the group with another one of his stories.

"Nick!" she waved, "Nick, up here!"

The red fox looked, waved in return, and then pushed back his chair from the table. There were muted protests from some of the children, but none of them got up to follow along. That had to be Finnick's doing Judy decided, and went to meet her partner at the top of the stairs.

"Morning Carrots," he told her looking a little guilty, "If I'd known you were coming, I would have waited."

Judy waved away the apology like a wisp of smoke.

"Oh, that's okay Nick, never mind." She said, glancing briefly at her watch…and then performing a swift double-take; (and unlike Erin, she wasn't acting.) "What the…? Oh Lor…where did the time…?"

She hurriedly took his paw, "Come on fox, we've got to get a move on if we don't want to be late."

Nick's ears pivoted upwards and pointed at each other.

"Late…l-late for what?"

Judy turned and began leading him down the hallway.

"I signed us up to go skydiving; come on!"

All at once, she felt a backwards tug, as Nick Wilde's feet began to skitter on the floor.

"S-S-S-Skydiving?"

At the same time this was happening, her sister Erin was exiting out onto the Eastside terrace.

"Conor? You out here?" she called through a pair of cupped paws. There was no answer and she looked around the terrace, frowning deeply.

There were several other members of the Hopps family gathered on the deck this morning, but no sign of any silver fox. That shouldn't have been surprising; Conor could have easily gotten lost on the way up here. (Finding your way around the Hopps family warren wasn't exactly a cakewalk, especially for a first timer.)

And yet… Erin couldn't shake the feeling that he was somewhere close by.

"Any of you guys seen that fox-kid, Conor Lewis?" she asked, speaking to the other bunnies hanging around on the patio.

"He's down there," her brother Jonas answered, not looking up from the game of checkers he was having with Jessie Hopps. "Down there," he repeated, pointing this time in the direction of the stairs leading down to the yard.

Erin started to look where he was indicating, but then she felt her ears standing up. "Just what the heck are you grinning at, brace-face?"

Jessie looked as if she'd just put a 'kick me' sign on somebody.
When Erin finally looked at where Jonas had been pointing, she felt her ears turn twice as rigid, and her nose beginning to twitch. What in the name of all get out was that goofball silver fox doing?

Conor was down on his paws and knees beside a long row of flowers, with a mound of ugly greenery piled up besides his knees. Erin craned her neck forward, was he really..?

She got her answer when he added another weed to the pile. Oh, for crying out loud!

Erin hopped off the deck and down the stair, taking every single one of the steps in a grand total of three bounds.

Her approach was from upwind from the fox, and by rights he should have at least smelled the white-furred bunny coming.

Not this time; he never so much as even glanced in her direction.

"Conor what the heck do you think you're DOING?" Erin demanded, pulling up short beside him.

He got up on his knees and waved, indicating the flower-bed with an open paw.

"These things are a mess." He said, looking up curiously as if the reason for his action was completely self-evident.

Erin shook her head from side to side and screwed her eyes shut. When she opened them again… nope, it wasn't all an illusion; he really WAS...

"I don't believe this," she said, staring wide-eyed at the silver fox. "It's the last day of Carrot Days weekend, and you're out here pulling weeds?"

She had never been so flabbergasted; around the Hopps Family Warren this was the job you were given as a punishment for misbehaving…and here was this crazy fox-kid, yanking them up without even being ASKED? (He had done a good job, too…almost as if it was all a familiar task.)

"The flowers needed it," he repeated, in that same, stubborn tone of voice.

Erin's paws went straight to her hips.

"For the love of carrot-cake, what is WITH you, fox? You've done nothing but work since you got here, selling t-shirts, fixing my bass, okay that was stuff you needed to get done, but then you went and worked the talent show as a volunteer and now you're out here pulling WEEDS! Sweet cheez n' crackers, don't you ever have any fun?"

Conor's ears went back and then his neck fur was standing up; a phalanx of indignant bristles.

"I have fun," he protested getting to his feet, "what about the talent show last night?"

"That was fun but it was also work," Erin pointed out correctly, (and with a condescending nod.) "I mean FUN fun, like where you do something just coz you enjoy it."

"The bonfire last night," the young fox countered quickly—a little TOO quickly and that was when Erin knew she had him.

"All right, and what else?" she queried, folding her arms and thumping her foot.

For the second time since they'd met, Conor was unable to meet her gaze. "Well, there's…I…"
And then his face took on a sudden, false ferocity; (ears back but no teeth showing.).

"It's none of your business bunny, okay?"

Erin lifted her nose just ever so slightly, completely satisfied with herself.

"I thought so," she said, and then reached out and grabbed him by the wrist, "Come on fox we're going on a river-rafting trip."

Conor's eyes went wide and his ears wilted, and then he tried to pull back

"River…rafting? Like going down a ri…"

The young bunny instantly tightened her grip.

Don't even think about trying to argue with me, Conor Lewis. You're going to have fun today if I have to break your arm! Now, come on."

And hauling him towards the terrace steps, she nearly did just that.

"Carrots, I really don't want to do this," Nick Wilde was saying, "Look, I have to be honest with you, I've never even liked flying—and now you want me to jump out of a plane from thousands of feet in the air? I'm sorry, but I just can't." As he told her this, his ears were drooping and his long, bushy tail was curling up between his legs, the perfect picture of foxy contrition.

"I know you meant well Judy," he went on, "and I'm flattered that you would want me to come along with you, but don't forget one other thing; I had a really full breakfast this morning. I know that's not a big deal to your species; bunnies are incapable of puking, but believe me; us foxes know how to blow it all over the floor. To be honest, I'm surprised it hasn't happened already—and I know that you, of all rabbits, wouldn't want me to embarrass myself that way."

He stopped talking for a second, taking a short, deep breath before delivering his declamation.

"So please understand me Carrots, when I say I can't do this, it's not because of you, but…"

"Geronimohhhhhhh!"

"Aaggghhh, grrrrrr!"

It had been a well-reasoned argument, carefully constructed and eloquently expressed.

The only problem was in the timing…and the delivery. Nick probably should have made the pitch before Judy was halfway out the door of the jump plane.

(And he might also have spoken loudly enough to be heard over the engines.).

"Okay, we're up, let's go." said the animal at his back, and two of them began a lockstep shuffle towards the exit.

The reality of the plan had been nothing even close to Nick's expectations. Upon his arrival at the airfield, he had learned he and Judy would not be going it alone; instead they would be making what was known as a tandem jump; each of them would be accompanied by an instructor, who would ride along fastened to their back like a Siamese twin and deploy the chute when the time came. Appropriately enough, both of them were soaring mammals; a Greater Glider in Judy's case, and for Nick, a Colugo or flying lemur. Their companions were also experienced skydivers, with
numerous jumps to their credit.

That news had been both a reassurance and—oddly enough—a disappointment to the red fox; while he was certainly glad to be riding along with someone who knew what they were doing, well…two's company, four's a crowd to put it in the simplest possible terms.

Still, it had been enough to give him a measure of confidence, enough so that he had initially acceded to Judy's wishes. But then, as with so many other things in life, the closer Nick got to the actual event, the more his confidence began to ebb. When they boarded the plane, he could already feel his tail stiffening, and when the aircraft lifted off, his knees had begun to shake. By the time they reached cruising altitude, all the saliva had disappeared from his mouth. Now, poised at the doorway, 5000 feet above terra firma, the red fox could not help recalling the promise he'd made to Judy during their train trip to the Burrow; when they returned to Zootopia after Carrot Days, he was going to go visit his mother.

The HECK with that! Nick wanted his Mommy right NOW…owww…wow…WHOA-OA-OHHHH!

Out the door and into space, the plane shrinking away above him; he could feel the rush of air plastering his fur to his muzzle, his long, bushy tail whipping like a pennant in the slipstream. What he didn't feel was any sensation of falling; it was more like…floating?

No, not floating—flying!

"Woo-hoooo!"

Nick heard the cry from below and to the left. Turning his head, he saw Judy Hopps pumping a fist in the air, "WOOO-HOOOO!"

And then, as the red fox watched in fascination, she tucked in her legs and performed a perfect somersault in mid-air.

"Cheeky little bunny!" Nick thought to himself, "but if she can do it…"

He drew in his legs, the same as her... and nothing happened.

"You need to pull your tail up too." The Colugo advised him, shouting to be heard. (He had guessed what the fox was up to.) Nick did as he was told and slowly revolved into an inverted position. It was amazing; there was absolutely no awareness of being upside down.

He let out a triumphant fox-scream and rolled upright once again.

And found that he was eye to eye with Judy…and less than three feet away from her.

He reached out with his paws and saw her do the same.

As their paws clasped, they began to turn in a slow rotation, whirling through the air together in a lazy pinwheel. Judy's eyes, why had he never noticed them before? He seemed to be gazing into the depths of …

"Uhhh sorry folks, but you need to let go, it's almost time to hit the chutes." It was Judy's instructor talking. And was it Nick's imagination or was there a chill in the Greater Glider's voice that hadn't been there before?
"Yes, come on, almost time," the Colugo added, speaking hastily. (Yep, he was talking fast all right, no doubt at all about this one.)

Slowly, reluctantly, Nick pushed away from Judy and felt her do the same. Almost immediately, he felt a hard, snapping pull at his back and the sensation of being yanked upwards. Nick knew at once what had happened; 100 feet away, a bright, orange rectangle was billowing open above Judy, jerking her to what seemed like an abrupt halt. How had they moved so far apart so quickly?

And, "Why so soon?" the red fox wondered. It seemed like they'd been free-falling for let than a minute before their instructors had deployed the chutes. (Three minutes and 12 seconds actually.)

Whatever disenchantment Nick may have felt, it was all quickly swept away; the roaring in his ears had subsided to a whisper and soon there was no noise at all. (And now he WAS floating!)

A city fox by birth, Nick Wilde had never before experienced a natural silence, and yet here he was, suspended in a perfect stillness high above the earth, a deep blue sky in all directions, and a horizon that seemed to stretch on into infinity. Everything below seemed to be standing out in UHD relief; he could make out the individual patches on the quilted earth, the solid green of the turf farms, the chocolate browns of the fields not yet sown, the long green stripes of the fruit and vegetable plantings, the champagne mist of grain fields on the cusp of ripening. He took it all in and felt his spine shivering and his eyes becoming moist. Never in his life had the red fox experienced such a moment of absolute tranquility.

When Judy Hopps drifted once into his field of vision, Nick could tell at a glance that she was feeling it as well; there were no words necessary between them.

A thought occurred to him then.

"There may be nothing to say now, but when we hit the ground, I'm never going to hear the end of this. She's going bring up this adventure in every conversation we have from now until Jerry Jumbleaux decides moves to Little Rodentia."

And another voice inside him answered, "You say that like it's a bad thing."

2500 feet below, Lucas Jackson's grizzled white ears were standing up and his nose was twitching unevenly.

The old rabbit had seen a lot in 72+ years but he had never seen a car quite like this one; long, low, and silvery grey, it made no noise as it glided towards the booth where he was sitting. It gave Lucas the uneasy sensation of being stalked by a shark...an especially unsettling image for a bunny already missing a leg, souvenir of a tractor accident many years ago.

Well whatever this thing was, Lucas knew what it wasn't...it didn't belong to any vendor; you could take that to the bank, bluebell.

He hopped down off his stool, straightening his reflective orange vest and at the same time motioned for the driver to stop. He watched it ease smoothly to a halt, and then hobbled over, making a rolling motion with his paw.

The window slid down silently and Lucas took a small step backwards.

"What in th' tarn-fool-nation is THIS?"

The rabbit behind the wheel was as big as a house and built like a block-house. His fur was almost
a perfect match for the car's exterior, except perhaps a shade more blue.

Turning towards Lucas, the driver lowered his Gueffi sunglasses and smiled.

"Well well, Hello Lucky…long time, no see. How's the leg?"

The old rabbit leaned in close, peering at the driver through his thick spectacles, nose twitching once again. Lucky? No one called him that anymore.

"It's…fine, I guess. Uhhh, do I…know you, mister?"

The big bunny just smiled ruefully.

"Ahhhh well it has been a long time," He said, extending a meaty paw through the window. "It's me, Jack…Jack La Peigne."

Lucas took the paw, but only very hesitantly, as if he might be seized in a crushing grip and yanked inside the car, like that clown-thing who stalked kits from down a storm-drain. He allowed the other rabbit to shake with him, but made no effort to return the gesture.

"Uhhhh, little Jacky?" the rabbit behind the wheel prompted, his smile become just a little bit forced. Lucas only frowned for a second.

"Can't park in here, young feller," he said, waving a paw at the vehicles behind him "this lot's reserved for vendors and Festival fursonell."

The forced smile vanished from Jack La Peigne's face, leaving behind a frigid expression that made Lucas abruptly wish for a warm blanket.

"I'm head of the firm sponsoring this event," he said, producing a gold-embossed business card and passing it to the old bunny. Lucas nearly gave it back and told him sorry, that wasn't any good; he'd need an official vendors pass to get in here.

Except…something about this king sized rabbit was giving him a very unpleasant sensation; the feeling you get when you realize you're about to turn the wrong way down a one-way street. And what if this Jack…Devine, or whoever, really WAS who he claimed to be? He sure as heck looked like he had enough money to be the Carrot Days sponsor, you could bet the farm on that, bluebell…and did Lucas want to be the one to make that money disappear? He could just imagine what would happen; they'd gang up on him at the next town meeting, and …

A chorus impatient car horns shook the old bunny out of his musings.

"Sorry sir," he said, tipping his plastic pith helmet in an awkward gesture, and then pointing to the fence-line next to the vendor's entrance, "VIP parking's right over thataway…and welcome to Carrot days, Mr. Levine."

Lucas hoped that by directing the big bunny to the choicest space in the lot, he would make up for any perceived rudeness on his part.

He never found out, Jack said nothing, only pushed his sunglasses back up over his eyes and rolled up his window again.

The big bunny was anything but mollified, especially when he happened to glance in his rear-view mirror a few seconds later and saw Gully and Racific being waved through the gate without so much as a second look.
Gahhhh, he had expected not to be recognized by most of the folks at the festival. After all, the last time he had seen Bunnyburrow was more than two decades ago…before half the animals in attendance today had even been born.

But Lucas, 'Lucky' Jackson not knowing who he was? Sorry, that didn't work. All right, so the old guy hadn't recognized his face. Jack had changed a lot in the ensuing years, he could live with that. But then what about his size? That hadn't changed a whole lot since he'd left the Burrow—and how many other rabbits as big as him had ever lived here? Jack could count them all on zero fingers. But all right, all right; maybe Lucky hadn't been able to properly gauge his size while he'd been seated inside his car, (and the old geezer had been wearing pop-bottle glasses.)

But that was where Jack La Peigne (not Levine, thank you,) drew his line in the sand; Lucas hadn't even recognized his name…the name of the bunny that had helped pull that tractor off of him those many years ago. Heck without Jack's assistance, they'd never have gotten Lucas out of there…and the old duffer STILL hadn't remembered him! Ohhh, but he'd recognized the ASM logo on rig that Gully and Racius had been driving…let them right into the vendors' lot with barely a nod.

What did that say for Jack La Peigne's status here in Bunnyburrow? Ahhhh, it just was like Thomas Wolf had said, you really CAN'T go home again.

Had the big bunny not been in such an agitated state of mind he might have stopped to consider that there's a difference between long and short-term memory…that, and also that there had been other ASM vehicles moving in an out of this parking lot for more than two days now.

He pulled up to the fence and shut the motors down, brooding quietly to himself while waiting for the dust to settle. All right; he'd put in his token appearance as the Carrot Days sponsor's rep, and then head straight back to Zootopia. There was no reason for him to hang around here, not unless he wanted to be bored into the middle of next week.

At that moment, six stories above the other side of the Festival, Nick Wilde and Judy Hopps were trying very hard not to panic.

Half a minute earlier, a plug of wind had come out of nowhere, carrying both of them on a sideways detour. Just how far the breeze had taken them, neither one could say, but when they'd looked down again, directly beneath their feet they saw the green rectangle of an irrigation pond.

And not a pretty, emerald green either; the pond surface was a nauseating hybrid of pea-soup, slime-mold, and spoiled cabbage. Farm-girl Judy knew exactly what that meant; the water was infused with fertilizer…organic fertilizer, to put it politely.

She also knew that the average storage pond in Bunnyburrow stood anywhere from between ten to fifteen feet deep.

Meanwhile, up above, she could hear the two instructors offering words of reassurance.

"Don't worry folks, this happens, we're on it."

"'S okay mammals, we've got this."

Judy would have felt considerably more consoled if the Glider and Colugo had been offering some action to go with their words; right now they didn't appear to be doing anything. For a horrible, fleeting second a dark image rose in her mind; the two instructors releasing her and Nick from their harnesses, sacrificing them to the storage-pond God in order to save their own skins.
Oh, she would just die if they went into that filthy water, not literally of course, and she didn't care what happened to her; she'd made her bed, she'd lie in it.

But then, what about Nick? It would be all her fault if he went down in that muck. He hadn't wanted to go skydiving; she had known that from the moment he'd started to drag his heels back in the warren. Twice Judy had almost told the fox that if he didn't feel he could go through with this, then that was okay by her.

She had never said a word, just kept telling herself that Nick would like it once he tried it, and for a while there she'd been proven spectacularly right.

And then this…

"Ohhhh Nick, I'm so sor…"

She heard the Glider calling out to his partner.

"Okay, on three. One…two…THREE!"

They were going to do it, they were going to drop her and Nick into that…

Instead Judy heard a flapping a noise and felt a rippling sensation at her back. Peering over her shoulder, she saw that the glider had deployed his wing flaps. A quick glance forward showed that the Colugo had done the same, and now they began to swing away from the storage pond, aiming for the shoreline.

But the water was coming up fast; much too fast. Judy instinctively tucked in her feet, but that only seemed to speed their descent. The water was close now; she could feel her nose wrinkling as the stench hit her nostrils. She wanted to shut her eyes, but she couldn't; the lids felt paralyzed. The water was only ten feet below now, seven feet…only five feet.

And then it was gone…replaced by grass and solid earth

"Lower your feet," her instructor commanded and then folded his wings and yanked on the guy ropes, putting the brakes their lateral movement. She saw the Colugo repeat the move…a little too hard; he spun with Nick in a 180 and began to drift in her direction. For one frightening instant Judy thought they were going to collide but then she felt her feet touching the ground and the harness letting go, releasing her. In front of her, Nick Wilde had also slipped the bonds of his parachute rig.

The two of them literally hit the ground running, propelled inexorably towards one another by the motion of their landing.

So, what could they do?

Judy opened her arms in a wide embrace and so did Nick…and then they crashed headlong into each other and bounced off, falling down on their backsides.

For a second or two they just stared blankly at each other.

And then Judy began to giggle, and then Nick began to snigger…and then both of them were clutching at their sides and laughing their tails off.

"I could have stuck to hustling pawpsicles, but noooooo," the fox said.
"I could have stuck to farming carrots," the bunny countered.

And then the two of them were laughing even harder.

The Colugo and the Greater Glider were not laughing; they were regarding Nick and Judy with dubious expressions…and quietly promising themselves, no more pred-pred couples.

Chapter End Notes

I threw in a reference to 'It' on account of the fact that Lucas 'Lucky' Jackson was very much inspired by the works of Stephen King. (Lucas also takes his name from another bunny, a character in one of the worst Disney animated films of all time.

Oh, and there's also an Easter Egg ref to Wreck-It Ralph 2
Chapter 4 – The Wizard of Chaos  
(Continued…Pt. 3)

The voice of Gully sounds in Jack La Peigne's earpiece.

"I have him, sir."

That's all the big rabbit needs to hear, he leans forward, moving his right paw discreetly behind his back.

"So now YOU get off MY property!" he sneers, tensing and bracing himself.

Jerry Guilford lets out a howl of rage and lunges at Jack with his teeth bared.

But the big rabbit is too quick for him; he flattens down into a three point pancake-stance, leaving Gully with a clear shot at the coyote.

The wolverine pulls the trigger; the pellet strikes Jerry directly between the collar bones, leaving a blue splatter in its wake; the force of the impact hurls him backwards through the door and into the house again.

Or alternately…the pellet doesn’t strike Jerry with quite enough force to propel him through the doorway, in which case Jack hits him with a flying knife-edge kick and sends him home that way. (He can do this without fear of being poisoned himself; unlike the dart-pellets used by Doug, this one dissolved within microseconds of hitting its target.)

Or alternately… perhaps Gully is able to get off a second shot and hit one of Jerry’s brothers as well. It’s not impossible; they're standing close enough to the front door to make decent targets.

Or… maybe Jack pulls the pistol from behind his back and tags one of the other coyotes himself;
maybe both if he gets lucky. Or maybe he hits one and Gully takes down the other with his second shot.

In any case what happens next is, Jack slams the security door and throws the bolt, trapping the coyotes inside the house. Then he just stands there, drinking in the sounds from beyond the doorway like a fine, sweet nectar.

After a few moments of this, Racius appear from around the side of the house. He gives Jack a mask and dons one himself. Then the wolverine pulls the pin on a small, metal canister and tosses it through the bars of the security door; perhaps he pitches in a second grenade, just to make sure. There is no explosion, only a soft hissing noise, and within less than a minute everything on the inside of the house has gone quiet. Jack gives it just a moment longer, and then he unbolts the security door; he and Racius step inside what's left of the living room and search for Jerry Guilford. When they find him, Jack shoots the coyote with another dart-pellet, this one in dark red rather than blue. Meanwhile Racius gives the same treatment to any of the others that were hit in the first salvo. Perhaps Jack gives Jerry a kick in the chops as a going away present; perhaps he doesn't.

And then he and the wolverine turn and walk out of the house, closing both doors behind them. They hike down the road to the tactical vehicle—parked out of sight where none of the animals inside of the house could have seen it, (and also so as not to have left any tire tracks in the Guilford's yard—or on the roadside in front of the property.)

Gully is waiting behind the wheel when the other two arrive, and then the three of them simply drive away. As soon as they're gone a helicopter flies over, hovering low above the property for a second letting the backwash sweep away any traces of footprints.

Jack meanwhile does not bother to notify the Burrows County Sheriff's department; they'll find out for themselves anyway, sooner or later.

When they do, they'll have no idea what really happened here—but then Jerry Guilford was never the most stable compound on the shelf and is it any surprise that he finally lost it for real? And listen to the whopper he's telling THIS time! Rabbit, WHAT rabbit? There's no sign that anyone else was here. Shot you with some kind of toxin? Then how come there's no trace of it in your bloodstream? Oh, he gave you an eviction notice? Let's see. Hmmm, care to explain the stamp and postmark on this letter which you claim was paw-delivered? Yes, we checked; he never left his trailer; there's at least half a dozen witnesses. Ahhh, I'd advise against that kind of talk if I were you, Jerry. You'll be lucky if you get off with...

Jack La Peigne was thumping his foot and grimacing; that was how it was SUPPOSED to have gone. Instead Jerry Guilford had backed off; can you believe it? The coyote who was supposed to possess all the self-control of a mining disaster had actually backed off!

Shading himself beneath the spreading branches of an alder tree, the big bunny was directly across the Midway from the old, red barn that once been home to the Carrot Days Talent Show. (That thing was still standing?) He had his arms crossed and his back against the tree-trunk; e was partially concealed by the shadows.

The big rabbit preferred it that way; back here he drew a lot less attention than out in the open. Of course every once in a while someone would stop to gawk….and it always followed the same pattern. First there'd be a quick glance in his direction; then would come the double take, (a fast one!) And then finally, when whoever it was realized they were looking a BUNNY, that was when they'd turn around and gape.
That is, until they noticed the expression on Jack La Peigne's face; then their next move would be an abrupt about-face and a forced march away from the vicinity of the alder tree.

And a well-considered move it was; Jack was nearly ready to go postal. After all the mounting frustrations of the week gone by, taking down Jerry Guilford should have given him at least a measure of satisfaction. Instead the coyote had cheated him, declining to take the bait Jack had waved so arrogantly under his nose. Oh sure, the Guilfords were about to be kicked out of the big bunny's childhood home; BIG whoop! It wasn't enough, not nearly enough. It was like going on a fast for ten days and then trying to satisfy your hunger with a single carrot canape; the only that happened was your craving doubled exponentially.

Polly Walters had tried to put the best face on it when he'd talked to her a few minutes ago, pointing out that now he could at least claim public credit for having rid the Burrow of the almost universally despised Guilford clan. "You'll be a hometown hero, sir." She'd said.

Jack had thanked her gratefully, disconnected and ten crushed his cell phone underfoot. (He went through more darn phones that way.) He didn't want to look on the bright side of life and he didn't want to be a hometown hero. What he wanted was Jerry Guilford in the ICU and then on his way to prison, (along with the rest of his mangy family); what he wanted was that busybody red panda, Claudia Nizhang run out of office and then run over by a bus. And what he especially wanted was that filthy, underpawed arctic fox, Dimitri Oloshenko bankrupt, disgraced, and hung out to dry beside a nest of angry hornets!

Jack knew he couldn't carry on like this, and it wasn't long before he decided he had to do something about it.

"Kay, this isn't helping me." The big rabbit finally told himself. "Brooding will only make it worse. I need an attitude adjustment and right now."

He straightened his legs and leaned further back against the tree, closing his eyes and weaving his fingers together into a basket held at waist level.

Then he began to breathe, first through the nose; take it in for three seconds, hold it for three more, then out through the mouth for three more seconds, hold like that for another three, and then repeat the cycle. Now clear your mind as you breathe; if a thought comes, imagine it floating away like a dandelion petal. Nothing is here, nothing but you and your breathing. That's it, let it all drift away.

Taking one final breath, the big bunny opened his eyes. Yes, that was better…much better. All right, maybe now…

"Hey, you kids!"

Jack's ears went up and he leaned away from the tree, craning his neck. That was the voice of a wolverine, not Gully or Racius; it was female for one thing, and for another at least a decade younger. She had to be one of the Aker employees brought in to provide extra security for the Carrot Days Festival.

Only…where…? No wait, there she was, perhaps a hundred feet away with her paws on her hips, standing in front of a tall cyclone fence and gazing upwards with an impatient look on her face.

"Do you hear me?" she said, pointing at the ground in front of her, "Get down from there…right now!"

Jack raised his ears higher, just in time to catch the response; he was unable to make out the words
but the voices were unmistakably youthful—and also unmistakably whiny. Curious, the big bunny moved out from beside the tree. There was nobody climbing the fence, so where was…? Ohhhh kay, there was the explanation.

From his new vantage point, Jack was able to see what was on the other side of the fence—the base of a cell-phone relay tower. He could also see a Furizon Wireless maintenance truck parked near the fence-line, and furthermore that the gate had been left open. He pursed his lips and slowly shook his head. Careless; unforgivably careless; if whoever was climbing that tower fell and hurt themselves Furizon would be held liable. (Any one of his employees making a blunder like that would be out the door so fast they'd catch cold from the breeze.)

Just then a trio of young bunnies jumped down from the tower. Jack almost groaned; instead he only shook his head and sighed.

"Sweet cheez n' crackers kids, since when are us rabbits an arboreal species?"

The Aker Security wolverine was meanwhile taking down their names.

"All right," she said, flipping her notepad shut with a snap, "You three scoot and don't come back here. If I catch you inside of that fence again, I'm turning you over to the Sheriff, okay?"

The three young rabbits just nodded vigorously and then hurried away as fast as their feet would carry them. The female wolverine watched them go, and then moved over towards the open gate. She pulled out her radio, spoke into it briefly and then took up a sentry's stance in front of the entrance. There would be NO further unauthorized access here today


That relay-tower might have been Furizon's property, but the safety and well-being of the Festival patrons was his company's responsibility. He would have to find out that wolverine's name and see that she received proper credit for her actions.

All of the ASM wolverines here at the Carrot Days Festival were new recruits—except for Gully and Racius, (and they weren't exactly old paws themselves.)

That had been Seth Whitepaugh's idea. "We don't really need to waste our experienced operatives on something like this," he'd said," but at the same time, those Guilford 'yotes will think twice before taking on a member of my species. So what I'd like to do is send some of our rookie wolverines in to work security at the Carrot Days Festival. Even our newbies should be able to handle a few rogue coyotes and it'll be a good experience for them."

Jack had immediately signed off on the proposal and was glad now that he'd done it. Clasping his paws behind his head, he leaned back against the alder tree again. For the first time since his arrival at the Festival, he was actually starting to enjoy it.

One of his ears went up again at the sound of an engine chugging. Chugging? Could that be…?

Jack turned and looked, just in time to see a decades-old tractor pass by with a vintage threshing machine in tow, a real museum piece; stove-pipe chute, huge gears, foot-wide wide belts and iron wheels.

So, the annual Parade of Antique Farm Vehicles was still a Carrot Days tradition. Jack smiled at the memory; when he'd been a boy, one of the highlights of the procession had been a genuine steam-powered tractor, complete with an awning and a big, shiny whistle. One year, he had gotten to ride on it and even been allowed give the steam whistle a couple of toots. He wondered if that
tractor would be here again today. Hmmm, it might be the opportunity to put in his obligatory appearance. Yes, take a ride on the old steam tractor, make a few quick remarks afterwards, and then head back to the city.

Only…now the big bunny wasn't quite certain if he wanted to head home so soon. Welllll, he'd see how he felt after putting in his appearance.

Another, deeper rumbling came Jack's way and he turned again, just as a familiar sight came into view…Old # 28, the Burrows County Fire Department's beloved antique pumper, complete with a brass bell and a paw-cranked siren. She was a big rig, standing at least twice as tall as the thresher that had preceded her. (Back in the day when County Fire had been The Bunnyburrows Volunteer Fire Brigade, membership had been limited almost exclusively to larger mammals.) Although #28 was not a farm vehicle, the town fathers would never dream of not including her in today's procession. During one, terrible fire season, when Jack had been a little boy, the County had run so desperately short of firefighting vehicles they'd called her out of retirement. #28 had served with great distinction during that season, never once letting her crew down. With her help, they had almost single-pawedly saved the Chatterton Family's treehouse from incineration. For that and for her other performances, #28 had earned herself the nickname of Old Reliable and also a permanent place of honor in the annual Parade of Antique Farm vehicles. At the end of every procession, she would demonstrate that her pumps still had plenty of life in them, sending up a geyser hundreds of feet in the air.

"Hmm," Jack wondered as he watched the old fire engine pull to a halt just catty-wise from the cell-phone relay tower, if the steam tractor didn't show up today, maybe that was where he should take his ride. Now where was that administration booth again…?

"Judy? Hey, Judy Hopps!"

The mention of this name broke Jack La Peigne's chain of thought and diverted his attention once again. Directly opposite from where he was standing was a pair of cougars, male and female. One of them, the guy-cougar, was waving with an open paw to someone the big rabbit couldn't see; he bore a strong resemblance to Gordon Catmull, one of his sons no doubt.

"Hey Bobby!" a female bunny's voice answered. But then a tractor hauling an antique hay-baler rolled past the alder-wood tree, dropping one of its bales in the process and muffling the rest of her words. When it passed out of sight again, presto; there she was, talking to the cougar.

The big bunny barely noticed him now; his attention was squarely focused on…

"Sweet cheez n' crackers, is THAT Judy Hopps?"

Jack could feel his tail quivering and a billiard ball rising in his throat…and who the heck let that hummingbird loose in his chest?

He had seen the pics and videos of her, on the web and also in the news. (He had also seen her on the surveillance vid from the jewelry store; don't forget that travesty.)

But nothing, none of that could even come close to the sight of Judy Hopps in real life. Even a little disheveled, with her fur out of place, she looked…she looked…

Oh

My

God!
Jack pulled himself back behind the tree, unaware of what he was doing, peering at her around the edge of the trunk.

"I just wanted to tell you," the cougar was saying, "Your sister Erin absolutely crushed it at the talent show last night; she just about blew me right out of my seat."

"Ohhh yeah," said the female big cat with him, "And that fox-kid on the guitar, just …wow!"

A small frown scrolled momentarily across Jack's La Peigne's face. Had he heard correctly? It sounded like Judy's sister had appeared on stage backed up by a fox. That kind of thing went strictly against his principles.

Once again, he had to correct his thoughts

"Ahhh give it up Jack. So they played some music together, so WHAT? It's not as if they were getting flirty or anything!"

"Oh, I'm so glad you saw her, Bobby." Judy was clasping her paws with delight. "You should tell her yourself, though."

"I will," the big cat promised. "Is she around here anywhere?"

"She's off on a river rafting trip this morning." Judy told him, "but she'll be back in time for the big dance tonight."

Once again, the big bunny felt an ear rising up. The dance? He'd forgotten all about that. Hmmm, did Judy like to dance, he wondered? Thanks to all his martial arts training, Jack La Peine could cut quite the figure on the dance floor when the spirit moved him. He should go over and introduce himself—but not yet, wait until the cougars were gone.

It didn't take long; the male answered by nodding and promising to keep an eye out for her sister…and then he and his companion took their leave.

Jack gave it an extra second and then moved out from behind the tree.

…and stopped dead in his tracks as another animal came into view.

He was a fox…and not just any fox, THAT fox, the one called Nick Wilde.

The one from the surveillance video!

And not only that; now that Jack was finally seeing him in the flesh and fur, he recognized Nick as the animal he'd known by another name many years ago, (although there was no chance the fox would ever recognize him.) He felt his ears turn back and face becoming rigid, pulling taut as a drumhead.

Of all the foxes, it had to be that one! He looked even more unkempt and untidy than Judy did, staring uneasily in the direction the cougar had gone, and popping a blueberry into his mouth from a basket in his right paw.

What he heard next did nothing to improve Jack's outlook.

"Do you think he noticed, Nick?"

"Not that I saw Carrots."
She began to brush at her face with her paws.

"Tell me the truth; do I look that much of a mess?"

Nick looked away for a second before answering.

"I won't lie. You look like you've been up to something, Carrots." Another blueberry went into his mouth.

Jack's eyes narrowed into slivers of blue obsidian and his nose began to twitch rapidly; the only reason his foot wasn't thumping was because he was holding it down with the other one.

"I am NOT hearing this!" he told himself.

"Ohhhh, I was afraid of that." Judy turned a half circle and threw up her paws. "And you don't look so good yourself Nick." Now her foot began to thump, "Ohhh, carrot chips! My Uncle Terry would have had to be hanging out by the washroom trailer, pestering everyone for spare change again. If HE sees us like this…"

"I know I know," the red fox told her quickly, "he'll start grilling you and THEN he'll try to blackmail you."

Judy nodded and her shoulders slumped.

"Yeah, and my parents will just freak if they find out."

Nick reached out and put a paw on her shoulder. It was the closest Jack would come that morning to charging out from behind the tree and cleaning his clock.

"Carrots, you're not little kit any more, you're a grown bunny," he said, "a police officer for heaven's sake; I think you're old enough to make your own decisions." A long smile stretched along his muzzle. "And it was fantastic."

Judy curled her head up and the insides of her ears darkened.

"I never DREAMED it would be that amazing." She turned to face him again, "I'm never going to forget it, Nick."

He set down the blueberries on top of the fallen hay-bale and took her by the paws. "Me either."

Twenty feet away, someone else was thinking, "See how amazing you think it feels when I tear your head off your shoulders, fox!"

Once again, Jack La Peigne was approaching critical mass…but then Judy hurriedly pulled away from Nick.

"Listen fox, we need to get off the Midway somewhere and find a place to freshen up—before we're spotted by someone else who knows us."

Once again, as he had so many times before, Nick Wilde was already on top of it.

"Well what about right here?" He said, waving a paw at the old red barn. 

Judy gave herself a face palm. "D'ohhhh, riight. Why didn't I think of that?"

The two of them made a brief survey of their surroundings; (neither one so much as glanced at the
alder-wood tree,) and then they ducked around the side of the barn with Judy leading the way.

Jack waited until he was certain they'd gone, and then moved out from behind the tree-trunk; if rabbits could vomit, he would have lost his breakfast right then and there.

Instead he settled for jamming his paws into his pockets, felt his right thumb stubbing against cold metal, ouch! (Ahhh, he should have left the thing in its holster where it belonged, even if it was more visible that way.)

He didn't know which was worse, his disgust at the scene he'd just witnessed or the fury he felt at having his good mood wiped away. A fox, another dirty fox; arctic or red, they were all the same.

Jack La Peigne was not anti-predator by nature; his most trusted subordinate was a wolverine for crying out loud. No, there were plenty of other species, prey as well as predators, that the big rabbit held in contempt; rats were sneaks, hyenas were cheats, wildebeests were dolts, and don't get him started on sea-mink, the only species he despised above even foxes.

Foxes, the perpetual thorn in his side; how many times had it happened? There were so many different examples; Dimitri Oloshenko, always ready to sink his fangs in your back; then there was that wiseacre fox kid, Dylan Yeats. When he'd escaped from Granite Point he'd caused Aker Correctional Corporation an untold amount of embarrassment—and that had been before he'd hooked up with The Company.

Now he could add Nick Wilde's name to the list.

"How could you do it, Hopps?" the big bunny marveled, "How could you abase your species that way? And do you really think this fox actually cares for you? If you believe THAT, I know this Bank President in Nigiraffia who'd like to be your e-mail buddy."

He shook his head, sighing. Sooner or later Nick Wilde was going to reveal the true nature of his species to her—and when he did it wasn't going to be pretty.

"I only hope it happens sooner rather than later." Jack told himself, "The longer the delay, the more it's going to hurt her when she…"

These thoughts came to a grinding halt as his eye fell on the basket of blueberries, still sitting on top of the hay bale.

He felt in his pocket for the object again and then looked once more towards the bale of hay.

What was it that he always said; what was it that he always telling the board? Seize the moment!

He pulled the pistol from his pocket and shucked the magazine, ejecting a pellet into this palm; a pellet resembling a blue-glass bead …or a glass blueberry.

Perfect, except…

No one knew better than Jack La Peigne how much attention he attracted. If anyone should see him…!

He looked over to the left. There she was; the wolverine, still keeping watch on the relay tower gate. Yes, and animals tended to look away whenever one of HER species approached, at least the smaller mammals did, and at least four fifths of the attendees here today fit that category.

Seize the moment!
Jack palmed the pellet dart and moved out from behind the tree.

He was six feet away when the wolverine turned to look at him. (He had deliberately made his approach from upwind.)

For a tenth of a second her look was one of cool hostility, but then her eyes blinked and recognition dawned.

"Mr. La Peigne." she said, trying not to stammer.

Jack flashed his best PR smile.

"Ahhh, it's nice to be recognized." He said, and the wolverine immediately relaxed, realizing she wasn't in any trouble.

"I just wanted to say," the big bunny went on, continuing to hold that smile, "I was watching you just now and I appreciate your initiative in offering to keep watch on his gate. May I ask you your name?"

(It was not a request of course; nothing Jack La Peigne asked of a junior grade employee was a request.)

"It's Clawson sir," The wolverine answered, straightening up and speaking in her most professional voice, "Sec-Op Provisional Grade, Laura Clawson." The big bunny was pleasantly surprised; her girlish groupie mode had lasted for all of five seconds.

This wolverine had potential…but right now, he didn't have any time to waste.

"Very good Clawson," He said, and then lowered his voice by three notches. "But now listen; I need your assistance; only a small matter, but one of some urgency." He paused for effect and then pointed discreetly, "Do you see that basket of blueberries on the hay-bale over there?"

Laura Clawson craned her neck and squinted; wolverines have only so-so eyesight. "Yes sir." She finally said.

Jack produced the pellet from his pocket and gave it to her.

"Right, what I need is for you go over and put this in that basket…but you need to make the drop without anybody noticing, that's why if can't do it myself." He pretended to look embarrassed, "As I think you know, I tend to attract a few stares wherever I go."

"Yes sir." Clawson answered but then held the pellet up to her face, sniffing and eyeing it minutely. "If I may ask, what is this sir?"

Jack La Peigne was only mildly annoyed; good, she didn't know what it was. That would add yet another layer of deniability to his plan.

"It's a message." He told her, keeping his voice even, "Now hurry; there isn't much time." (And there wasn't; Judy and that fox might be back any second.) "Don't worry, I'll keep watch here," he told her.

"I'm on it sir." The wolverine answered, and then strolled casually away from where he was standing.

Once again, the big rabbit couldn't help but be impressed; if he hadn't been watching for it, he
never would have seen the pellet slip away from Laura Clawson's fingers and into the basket of fruit. All the while she kept looking straight ahead, never slowed down, never even glanced at the hay bale.

Even better, she didn't make the error of turning around immediately after making the 'delivery', and when she did reverse course, she made a brief stop on the way back to the relay tower, browsing for a few seconds at a booth selling souvenir T-shirts; no one watching could have guessed what she'd really been up to.

Definitely someone with potential Jack decided, but right now he needed someone with experience—and also with the proper armament.

He pulled out his back-up cell and keyed in a number

"Gully? I'm on the Midway, near the big red barn on the west side of the Festival. Do you know that location? Good…all right, I need you and Racific here ASAP…No, never mind about that for now, I need you here with me. And listen, I want each of you loaded up with both trank-darts and Morningmew—and be prepared to activate if necessary." His eyes darted to the right. Nick and Judy had just emerged from behind the barn. "On the double, Gully," he said, "La Peigne out."

He disconnected just in time for Laura Clawson's return.

"Nice job," he told her with another approving nod, "You did very well, Clawson."

"Thank you sir" she answered and then took up her position beside the gate again.

"And of course, I can count on your discretion," the big rabbit added. Not bothering to wait for an answer—it was a given that she would keep their interaction to herself—he turned and walked back to his spot beneath the alder tree. This time Jack didn't even try to move quietly, it didn't matter if anyone saw him now.

What did matter was…

Nooooo, the fox was walking away and ignoring the basket of blueberries; he'd forgotten all about them!

No, wait; he was slowing down—he was snapping his fingers…as if he'd forgotten something….come on…

YES! He was turning around and heading back to the hay bale.

Jack's expression was that of a kit watching the jerk that always picked on him performing an epic fail his skateboard. When the big bunny saw Nick Wilde stopping to pick up the basket of blueberries, he had to step on his foot again to keep it from thumping.

"Come on, come on, don't just stand there." he prompted mentally, "Aren't you hungry, fox?"

Almost as if Nick had heard him, he pegged two of the berries into his mouth.

Nothing happened; nothing should have happened for a minute anyway, but somehow the big bunny knew it wasn't going to. No matter…no problem; it was only a matter of time before the fox's lottery number came up.

And when it did, Jack would be ready.
The Wizard of Chaos (Pt. 4...Continued)

Chapter Summary

It was a lovely morning at the Carrot Days Festival...and then all Hell broke loose

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One: Fuel

Chapter 4 – The Wizard of Chaos
(Continued…Pt. 4)

"I thought you said you had a big breakfast, Nick."

Judy eyed the fox curiously with her nose twitching. She had forgotten all about that—until he'd gone back to snag his basket of blueberries.

"Nervous eater I guess," he shrugged, flicking another one into his mouth. Judy couldn't argue; she was a little nervous herself right now. But then the fox's expression turned slyly sardonic, "If your folks find out we went skydiving, guess whose idea they'll think it was?"

Twenty yards away, unnoticed by either one of them, Jack La Peigne's ears—and his lower jaws—were slowly dropping earthwards.

Skydiving? They'd been talking about skydiving? B-But he'd thought…but she'd said…but the fox had sounded like...

Ohhhh, Sweet Cheez n' Crackers!

Judy's ears went back and she punched Nick in the arm.

"Ow!"

"Now just you stop right there Nicholas P. Wilde," she told him, right foot thumping like a war drum, "You know my parents better than that. No matter how crazy they might get if they find out we jumped out of a plane, they'd never blame it on you."

Nick's tail curled upwards between his legs.
"Yeah... yeah, you're right. Sorry, Carrots."

He tried to meet her eyes, but couldn't quite manage it, so instead he settled for another blueberry.

Jack La Peigne could have kicked himself into a coma. Great Burrows of the Bunny Gods, what had he DONE? But it was too late now; the genie was out of the lamp and all he could do was... Ohhhh, NO!

"Here, can I have a couple of those berries?" Judy was asking, holding out her paw. And as Jack watched in helpless horror, Nick offered her the basket and she scooped out two fingers worth of fruit. The big bunny wanted to rush out and knock them out of her paw, but his feet felt as if they were bonded to the ground with iron glue; ditto for his tongue and the roof of his mouth.

"Anyway Nick, I don't think we have to worry about them figuring it out." She gave him a quick appraisal, adding, "I think we look presentable enough."

She was just about to pop a couple of the blueberries into her mouth when the fox abruptly grabbed her by the arm, causing her to drop them.

Jack's head became an instant whirlwind. Could one of those 'berries' have been the pellet-dart? If so, lucky for Judy, but if either one had been the winning lottery ball—and then if anybody but a hoofed species stepped on it....

"Well we're about to find out, Carrots." Nick was saying, "Heads up, we've got company."

Thoroughly annoyed, she followed his gaze anyway; so did Jack. She groaned, and he raised an ear over a twitching nose.

That was because he didn't know the bunny coming Judy's way from B'rer Rabbit, but yikes who was this loser? Uncombed fur, unwashed overalls, and a cap he'd likely found in a dumpster; he looked like he should be standing at the head of a freeway ramp somewhere, holding up a sign saying, 'Bet You Can't Hit Me With A Quarter!' (Jack would have pegged him with an entire roll of quarters—right between the eyes.)

"Hello, Uncle Terry." Judy greeted him in the same flat monotone she'd employed during their first encounter... while at the same time crossing her fingers behind her back.

"Hello Judy, Hello Mick," the plump bunny answered in the same jolly-good-fellow voice HE had used the day before. He looked around for a second and then nodded conspiratorially.

Nick was the first to see it coming; his eyes narrowed and he whispered to Judy out the side of his mouth.

"Listen I hate to ask..."

"Listen, I hate to ask," Uncle Terry said to her, "But you know, they got that car raffle drawing at the dance tonight, right?"

Judy tried not to roll her eyes; as IF she didn't know that. But she kept her thoughts to herself and simply nodded yes.

"Well the tickets are almost sold out." The older bunny was saying, "So do you think maybe you could... maybe lend me...?"

Nick muttered under his breath again. "And he'll gladly pay you Tuesday for a carrot fritter today."
"Ssst!" Judy hissed, but if her uncle had heard what the fox just said, he gave no sign of it. She nodded quickly and answered him, "Oh sure Uncle," then did a fast draw into her back pocket. "How much are those tickets again?"

"Ten dollars," the older bunny answered. (They were actually five.)

"Oh dear," Judy said opening her wallet. "I don't have anything smaller than a twenty, but you're welcome to it."

She pulled the bill from her wallet; Uncle Terry snatched it quickly, as if she might suddenly change her mind.

"Heyyy, thanks Judy, you're all right," he said…while she stiffened, praying to whoever that he wouldn't try to hug her.

He didn't; instead he shifted his attention to Nick…or more specifically, to the basket of blueberries held in his paw.

"Oooo, those look good; mind if I get a few?" he asked, and reached once again without waiting for an answer. This time however Nick was ready and managed to cover the basket before Judy's uncle could make his move. He might have left it like that if his partner hadn't nudged him in the elbow and made an earnest face.

"Okay, a few," he said, and moved his paw away. As anyone could have predicted, Terry Haredigg scooped up nearly all the berries. But once again Nick was a step ahead of Judy's uncle; he winked at her and then added casually, "That is….if you're sure you don't mind eating after a fox."

A cascade of blue tumbled instantly back into the carton, (and also onto the ground in a few, isolated cases.)

"I-I guess I'm not that hungry after all." The plump rabbit told him, hurriedly putting his paws inside his pockets.

"Uhhh, better get going if you want to get one of those raffle tickets, Unk," Judy suggested in a slightly strained voice; (she hadn't called him Unk since she was five,) "They're likely to sell out any second."

"Yeah right, good thought, Judy." Her uncle nodded and then turned and walked away, wiping his paws on his overalls and staining them an even darker blue.

While all of this was going on, a quarter of a mile away, on the other side of the Carrot Days Festival, a seemingly unconnected event was taking place. Inside the campground, an Amur leopard had just emerged from his motor home with a near-to-bursting trash bag…and was finding the refuse container in front of his space was already stuffed to the gunwales—with someone else's garbage.

"Not again!" he growled, dropping the bag and stalking over to the overfilled trash receptacle

It took only a quick examination to identify the culprit; there were at least a half dozen empty Ewe-Hew bottles jammed inside the can, The only folks in the campground who drank that stuff were the Gaur Bison occupying the second space over from his own…and dangit they had their OWN trash receptacle. Just then two other animals arrived, also with full trash bags, a wild boar and a giant Panda. A brief consultation followed; yes their trash cans had hijacked too…and yes, there had been several empty Ewe-Hew bottles in the mix. At once the three of them set off as a
delegation, headed in the direction of the Guars' travel trailer.

When they arrived they found the big bison were all still asleep. They awoke in a foul mood and angry words were exchanged, the words became threats; the threats became shoving…and the Burrows County Sheriff's department never did find out exactly what happened next.

But what happened after *that* was a low-grade riot. No one was injured thank heaven, and there was only minor damage to two of the RVs. But it would require the presence every single deputy working the Festival to eventually restore order…along with nearly every single one of the extra security mammals as well.

Judy of course knew nothing of this as she watched her Uncle Terry disappearing into the crowd; she was only aware that Nick Wilde was studying her with a raised eyebrow.

She sighed and turned in his direction.

"Yes I know; 20 bucks…but it was worth it to get him out my face for the rest of today."

(Like any good mooch, Terry Haredigg knew better than to go to the same well once too often.)

"Well yes," the fox said to her, "But what I was going to say was, an extra 20 and he *still* had to try and cop some of my blueberries?"

"That's my Uncle Terry for you." Judy sighed and shook her head, "He may not have come up with the phrase, 'the best things in life are free,' but he sure as heck lives by it." Her face turned unexpectedly impish; "Uhhh, mind if I get a few more of those blueberries? Some of us *don't* mind eating after a fox."

"Help yourself." Nick sniggered and offered her the basket once again. "But hey I just realized something, Carrots. Your uncle didn't notice anything weird—about either one of us."

"Hallelujah, Unk." Judy proclaimed cynically. To celebrate, she popped a trio of blueberries into her mouth.

But then she suddenly grimaced. That wasn't a blueberry. It tasted like…Oh, no!

"Let me see that basket for a second Nick." She said. The red fox looked at her oddly for a second but then passed it over just the same.

"Uh huh," she said, and wave her paw over the contents, "Just like I thought, there's one or two huckleberries mixed in here…wonderful!"

"What's so bad about that?" Nick asked her, inspecting the basket with his head tilted sideways. It all looked the same to him.

"Huckleberries don't ripen until late July or August," Judy explained, "This time of year they're usually way too sour to…"

That was when they heard the scream, It came from almost directly behind them. Instinctively they wheeled in that direction…just in time to see an irritated young she-wolf push her grinning boyfriend away from her.

"Dang you Johnny, that wasn't funny!"
"I wonder what he did," Nick started to say…but then they heard another scream.

This one was shrill and loud and fearful; no, not just fearful…

Terrified!

It was also very familiar.

"Oh my God, that sounded like Cotton." Judy gasped, and the next terrible shriek confirmed it.

She pulled out her badge; Nick threw away his basket and did the same, and then the two of them went tearing through the crowd in the directions of the screams, waving their badges and shouting. "Make way! Police Officers! Coming through!"

Some of the animals moved aside; most did not, they seemed to be rooted to wherever they were standing. Nick and Judy were obliged to duck and weave to make their way through the multitude. Then, just as it seemed they were about to break free from the crowd, they found their path blocked by the legs of an enormous giant eland. "Police! Move!" Judy shouted, but the animal refused to budge—at first.

Without warning he let out a bellow of alarm and turned to run…right over the fox and bunny standing behind him. Judy yanked her partner out of the way just as a big hoof came down, missing them both by scant centimeters.

There was another scream, but not from Cotton, and now more animals were turning and running, a LOT more; it was almost like a stampede. What the heck was going on here?

They heard Cotton scream again and jumped quickly to their feet; the crowd onlookers had melted away and now they could see what was happening.

The little bunny was cowering against a poster kiosk, nearly paralyzed with fright, shivering and whimpering, her face streaked with tears. Except for a rip in the sleeve of her sun-dress she appeared to be unharmed.

But she wasn't going to stay that way for long. Stalking around her was the specter of someone who might have once been her Uncle Terry.

Judy dropped her badge and her paws flew up to her face. "Oh God, NO!"

Terry Haredig was down on all fours lips pulled back to expose a pair of gnashing, yellow incisors. Spittle flew from the corners of his mouth as he moved back and forth in an ever tightening half circle before the petrified little bunny. All of his fur was standing on end as if he'd taken a massive jolt of static electricity.

But the worst thing was the eyes, those mindless, half-reddened eyes. Glazed and yet blazing, they seemed to crackle with rage and unbridled malevolence.

"A bunny can go savage." The words Judy had spoken two years before stabbed into her soul like the point of red-hot needle.

She known ever since that such a thing was possible, but never had it occurred to her that one day she might actually see it for herself—not until now.

Terry had stopped his pacing and was hunkering down on all fours, his mad eyes focusing on the little bunny girl like a pair of laser sights.
Cotton screamed again, so did Judy.

"Terry, NO!"

Nick Wilde also screamed, but his was the wild cry of a feral fox.

He dropped down on all fours and went tearing towards the kiosk

Cotton pressed herself up against it, as if trying to will herself safely inside.

Terry's nose was twitching furiously and his foot was thumping hard. In a blindingly swift movement, he tensed, pulled back slightly, and sprang forward with his jaws extended

Cotton sobbed and shut her eyes, throwing her arms around her head. She felt a hot breath on her face, jaws closing in around her.

…but instead of biting her, they picked her up. And then she was moving …moving fast.

The little bunny opened her eyes again. It wasn't Uncle Terry that had her, it was Nick Wilde.

But the savage bunny was right behind them and gaining fast.

Nick felt something sharp grab hold of his tail, hauling him backwards; he cried out and nearly let go of Cotton, digging in with his claws and trying frantically to pull away from the crazed bunny. It was no use; fueled by the Nighthowler dart, Terry Haredigg's strength had become nothing short of incredible. He held the fox as easily as flypaper holds a mosquito.

That was when Judy came running out of nowhere, leaping into the air and aiming full force with both feet for…

"No, not the head," her inner voice shrieked, "he'll bite Nick's tail off!"

Judy made the adjustment in mid-air, but was only partially successful; she managed to shift the point of impact to her Uncle Terry's back rather than his head but that turned it into an awkward, almost glancing blow. The other bunny bucked violently with his hind legs, throwing his back upwards and forwards and flinging her away like a bad thought.

Judy came down in a liquid roll and whirled instantly onto her feet again.

The first thing she saw was Terry shaking himself…but there was no sign of Nick or Cotton. Partially effective had been effective enough; he had let them go. But now she could see where the fox was headed and…

"No, Nick…not in THERE!" she screamed. The red fox appeared not to hear her.

But Uncle Terry did; like the turret of a tank, his head rotated slowly in the direction of his new adversary, focusing upon her with those eyes of unthinking fury. An odd thought occurred to Judy just then, Nick had been right, what she'd seen in the alley behind Rafaj Brothers' Jeweler had not been an animal gone savage…not like this.

Terry lowered his head almost to the ground; she saw his feet begin to scuffle the earth, preparing to charge once again.

"Get away from her!" a sudden new voice commanded.

Judy looked and Terry turned towards the sound.
Just behind him and off to the left a female wolverine in an ASM uniform, was slapping a baton into her palm. Judy wanted to shout out a warning, you can't reason with an animal gone savage, but it was too late. Instantly pegging the predator as the greater threat, the crazed bunny turned and leaped to the attack.

The wolverine swung hard with the baton, aiming for the crest of Terry Haredigg's skull; it bounced off like a rubber ball. She raised it again and he leaped again, catching the stick nimbly between his jaws and yanking it out of her grasp like candy from a baby. Heaving it away he gnashed his teeth as if to inquire, 'Is that all you've got?'

It wasn't all the wolverine had; she bared her own teeth and swung a hard right.

What happened next took all of three seconds. The blow swished over Terry's head as he rolled over onto his back and kicked out with his hind legs catching his adversary right in the solar plexus…driving the air from her lungs and folding her double. With nearly blinding speed the crazed bunny rolled over and kicked out again, this time bracing his forepaws against the ground for added thrust.

The twin blows hit Laura Clawson right between the eyes, propelling her ten feet backwards and into the side of the Furizon truck; the sound was like a dumpster-lid being dropped. She seemed to hold like that for a second as if plastered to the side of the vehicle and then she slumped to the ground, unconscious.

Terry spun around and pulled into that stalking crouch again, shuffling his feet and making ready to finish what he'd started.

Stung by rapidity of her uncle's assault, Judy could only stare helplessly at the scene unfolding in front of her…but then her eyes fell on the wolverine's baton, lying marooned on the ground between her and the crazed rabbit. She rushed forward, snatched it on the run and leaped on Terry's back again, swinging with both paws and connecting with the base of his ear. Even a bunny gone savage can't take a blow to that part of the anatomy—as Judy herself knew well. That was where the 'Eee-normous criminal' had tagged her, during her first bout in the ZPD Academy training ring. "Like someone ringing a gong inside your head," was how she'd later described it to Nick.

Momentarily disoriented, Uncle Terry began to turn in a slow circle, like a wolf cub chasing its tail. Judy raised the club again, but he seemed to sense what was about to happen, and the circle became a blinding spin. Somehow she managed to avoid being thrown off, but the baton went clanking away across the ground once again.

"Where the heck are those Sheriff's Deputies?" Judy asked herself rhetorically, hanging on for dear life. (They were at that moment, converging on the Carrot Days Festival campground.)

"Where the heck ARE you, Gully?" Jack La Peigne was barely able to keep from screaming into his cell-phone. Those two bungling idiots should have been here five minutes ago!

"Sir," Gully's voice came back defensively, "you said you wanted us locked and loaded; our weapons are back inside Tac-Vehicle. We have to…"

"I don't want to hear it; you two get over here NOW!" The big bunny was ready to throttle him, wolverine or no wolverine. "We've got an operative down, do you hear me? Operative down, now MOVE!"

He disconnected without waiting for a reply. (At least Gully had been wise enough not to mention that they had stowed their weapons on HIS orders.)
Then Terry Haredigg stood up on his hind legs. For perhaps half a second Jack wondered if somehow the Nighthowler dart was starting wear off.

No it wasn't; the crazed rabbit was falling over backwards—on purpose and right on top of the smaller bunny clinging to his back.

But this time, Judy knew what was coming and sprang backwards and off of her uncle, only a split second before he made contact with mother earth. The impact barely seemed to faze him and he rolled angrily onto all fours again, ears raised and searching like antennae. WHERE was the bunny that was causing him so much misery? He found out when Judy jumped back onto her feet. Terry spun like a dervish in that direction, the wolverine he'd just cold-cocked completely forgotten.

"Carrots! Quick, over here!" Nick Wilde was beckoning from the open gate of the Cell-Phone tower yard.

"No Nick, get out of there!" Judy wanted to shout again, but Terry was already coming at her, and there was no place else to go.

She turned and bolted for the gate.

The savage bunny was coming up fast behind her; she could almost feel his breath on her back. She put on an extra measure of speed, felt the gap between them widening. Almost there, just a couple of more feet and…

"AHHHHHHHHHEEP!"

A sharp, silvery, electric pain shot up Judy's leg and into her thigh, making her cry out in agony; her Rabbithon run from the day before had just come home to roost—with a vengeance; pushed past the redline by the combination of heat, hard use, near dehydration, and finally stressed nerves, the muscles of her left leg were seizing up like an engine with no oil in the crankcase.

She cried out again and began to stumble. She shouldn't keep upright she was going to fall. And when she did, Uncle Terry would pounce on her. And then he would…!

Something grabbed her by the wrist; it was Nick Wilde's paw. Swinging his partner like a grain sack, he all but threw her through the gate and then darted in after, pulling it shut behind him.

He wasn't going to make it; the gate was only halfway closed when Judy's Uncle Terry collided with it, full force.

…and unwittingly slammed it shut; the gate opened outwards, not inwards. But in his mindless fury the crazed bunny hadn't realized it…or cared. Leaping up again, he began to tear fruitlessly at the cyclone wire with his teeth, seemingly unaware that all he had to do was flip a latch to gain access to the cell tower yard. Nick Wilde knew it though and hurriedly picked himself up off the ground. Terry saw him, saw where he was headed and immediately bolted in that direction. Judy saw what was happening too, but still half dazed from her unhappy landing, she didn't realize at first what the fox was up to. When did, she cried out, "No wait, don't!" But he had already reached the gate and was searching feverishly for the padlock.

Uncle Terry was there too, slavering and snapping, trying once again to bite him through the fence. Nick forced himself to ignore the savage bunny, instead trying to focus on…

"Lock, lock; where's the dang…? Wait, there it is!"
The padlock was lying in the dust just underneath the gate. Nick grabbed for it, snatching it away just microseconds before Terry Haredig's jaws snapped shut where his paw had been.

He jumped up and lunged for the gate-latch; he'd have only one shot and he wasn't sure of that one. In the background, Judy was yelling something; what was she saying? Never mind, fix that gate! Jamming the padlock through the latch, Nick twisted and slapped it shut just as the savage bunny bit down again.

This time he wasn't fast enough; something hot and searing swiped across the back of his paw and he let out a fox scream of pain.

But when he looked, there was no blood, only swath of missing fur and some reddened skin.

"Nick!" Judy screamed again.

"I'm all right Carrots, I'm all right." He waved his paw to reassure her and then corked a thumb over his shoulder. "Gate's locked, we're okay now."

"No, we're not, Nick!" Judy clenched her fists in exasperation, "He's a RABBIT remember?"

One of the fox's ears went higher than the other.

"What? Seriously," He said, pointing towards the fence and three rows of razor-ribbon on top of it; his old self confidence was rapidly returning, "Come on Carrots, even a savage bunny couldn't jump that thing!"

Judy pointed over his shoulder, her voice a frustrated air-raid siren. "He doesn't have Nick, LOOK!"

Nick turned, looked…and felt his heart fall into his gut.

On the other side of the fence, Judy's uncle had his head buried in the earth and was digging furiously, the dirt flying out behind him in an almost steady stream.

The red fox's mind began to race…that night at Tundratown Limo Service, when he'd jumped off the fence, only to find Judy already waiting for him on the other side; she had tunneled underneath it faster than he'd been able to climb. Granted, it had been only snow that time, and this was packed earth, but at the rate Judy's Uncle was going, it wouldn't be much longer before he was inside the cell-tower yard. And then he and the others would all be trapped inside, along with the savage bunny.

No, the red fox realized, he would have gotten them trapped; the whole thing was his fault…forget it Nick, and THINK!

He looked around anxiously for a weapon, any weapon; the best he could find was a four foot length of cable that drew a groan from Judy Hopps when she saw it. He could hardly blame her; the thing was no thicker than a licorice stick; that Furizon maintenance crew must have been working on one of the guy-lines…WAIT!

Nick looked up and then outside the tower-yard.

Yes, it could work but…Terry Haredig had already disappeared into the hole he was digging; how the foxtrot did bunnies burrow so quickly?

"Carrots quick, come on!" he said, and hurried in the direction of the tower. Judy started to say
something, but then realized what he had in mind. She tried to run after him, but her leg muscles were still in a Gordian knot and she was forced to follow at a Jake-legged hobble.

Nick didn't notice; he was focusing on little Cotton, clinging to the base of the cell-phone tower like a shipwreck survivor, shivering and whimpering.

"Climb up on my back, honey," he said, dropping down on all fours, "we're getting out here."

The little bunny was shaking uncontrollably but managed to do as he said. Nick looped the length of cable around his neck, hoping it would stay put.

"Come on Carrots." He said again, this time with an edge of urgency to his voice.

Judy shook her head, looking up and over his shoulder at the ladder ascending the side of the rig; it seemed to stretch up into the heavens for miles on end.

"Nick, it's no good," she said, "take Cotton and get out of here; even if I was a squirrel instead of a bunny I couldn't climb that thing right now." As if to prove it, she attempted to flex her cramped leg, it refused bend more than halfway.

The fox responded with something he'd never done before, he grabbed Judy by the shoulders and shook her.

"Yes, you CAN Carrots; don't you quit on me now!"

Taking her by the wrist, he began to drag her towards the ladder, while ten feet behind them, a mound of dirt erupted from the earth growing rapidly.

Nick ascended the first few rungs with Cotton on his back, then stopped and turned slightly. Directly behind him Uncle Terry's muzzle was poking through the dirt.

"Carrots grab my tail with your teeth and hold on!"

"Nick, I don't…"

"DO IT!"

Judy took his tail in her mouth and stepped onto the ladder. At that instant, the mound of dirt behind her exploded upwards like an erupting volcano, and Judy's Uncle Terry burst upon the earth; a demon loosed from the underworld.

The only thing that saved her—and also Nick and Cotton—was that her uncle came out of the ground facing in the wrong direction, away from the cell-phone tower. With most animals, that might have been good for a second's delay at most, but maddened as he was by the Nighthowler serum. Terry Haredigg was literally beyond reason. Instead of focusing on his quarry's most obvious avenue of escape, he began searching crazily in all directions, first left and then right, hissing and snapping his jaws in frustration; where had all his enemies gone?

Wait, there they were…trying to escape up the side of that…thing.

He turned and went after them, this time dispensing with any thumping or shuffling preamble.

"Climb, Carrots!" Nick Wilde shouted, pulling upwards with his charges for all he was worth. They had only managed to get about about seven feet off the ground. Close, but not enough. His only hope, their only hope was that in his crazed state, Terry wouldn't think to climb up after them.
And they were about to find out; he had reached the base of the ladder.

Nick ignored him and pressed onwards; looking back would only slow them down.

Had he been able to, the fox would have seen the savage bunny putting his paws on the lowest rung of the ladder, as if he were testing the weight.

And then he dropped down into a crouch and leaped upwards with his jaws wide open.

Judy saw what was coming for her and knew she didn't have enough distance to avoid those slashing incisors. She hurriedly pulled her legs up; only the right one obeyed; the other remained at a half deployment.

But Terry had instinctively been aiming for her right leg and once again, his jaws snapped shut on nothing.

He dropped back down, tried again, but by now the others had reached minimum safe distance and the gap was slowly increasing.

Nick refused to slow the pace; if they could just make it to that guy line…

"Nick!"

He heard Judy's voice behind him, but still would not look back. But then little Cotton started to shiver—and then he heard her whimpering.

And so he dared a backwards glance.

It had taken Judy's Uncle a while to figure it out, but now he was on the ladder and moving up fast behind them.

(And he wasn't burdened by any extra weight.)

Nick looked up again; the guy line's turnbuckle was too far away; Judy's uncle would be on them before…

He felt the load on his back begin to shift; heard a stutter of faint sobs.

"No, Cotton, don't look!" He tried to shout a warning, but knew it was already too late; the little bunny had seen the thing closing fast behind them and now she began to panic.

Nick felt her arms wrapping tightly around his neck, fueled by fear and adrenaline, she was choking the be-cheezes out of him. He tried shout for her to let go, but all that came out was a wet gurgle. He attempted to reach up and grab her arm; the instant he slackened his grip on the ladder, he felt himself starting to slip. Behind him, the unmistakable, pungent aroma of an animal gone savage was rapidly increasing in strength. Terry Haredigg was aware of what was happening up above him and was closing in for the kill. Little Cotton began to scream again—right in the red fox's ear.

Then, miraculously, her arms began to release their grip…no wait, that wasn't Cotton, it was the length of steel cable, their only lifeline, sliding off his shoulders and falling away into oblivion.

And there was nothing Nick could do to stop it.
Easter Eggs; A reference to Aladdin and another one to Popeye.
Chapter Summary

The best laid plans....

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 4 – The Wizard of Chaos
(Continued…Pt. 5)

Judy winced as she felt something slap across the crook of her elbow. The stinging pain and surprise made her yelp and nearly lose her grip on the ladder. When she regained her grasp, she saw that a length of steel cable was draped across her right forearm.

"Wha…? Where did that come from?"

She shook her arm, trying to rid herself of the offending strand. It bounced once, jiggled once, and then began to slide off her arm.

Judy had almost shed the length of wire when her ears shot up and turned backwards; harsh, heavy breathing was coming up behind her, less than three feet away. She felt her guts turn to water; there was no escape and no place to run. If only she had something to… wait a minute, she DID!

Terry bared his incisors and lunged…and the decision was made for her; Judy swung again and connected with the base of the crazed bunny's right ear. He screamed, tried to reach for the side of his head…and fell.
He dropped a good twenty feet before he was able to latch onto the ladder again. Apparently uninjured he shook his head dazedly for a second, but Judy knew the disorientation wouldn't last for…

She was jostled suddenly as Nick Wilde's foot came down on top of her shoulder; he too was losing his hold on the ladder. Judy looked up and saw that little Cotton had her arms wrapped around his throat in a panicky chokehold. Thinking fast, she grabbed on to the ladder with both paws, let Nick's tail fall from her mouth and summoned up her best impression of her mother in high dudgeon.

"Cotton Miranda Hopps, you let go of that fox's neck this instant!"

The little bunny immediately slackened her grip; an Uncle gone savage might be a terrible thing, but it was nothing compared to having your mom call you by your full name—in that tone of voice.

"Don't lose that cable, Carrots!" Nick's voice was a half-choked wheeze.

Judy mostly ignored him, by now she'd guessed what he'd brought it for and had no intention of letting it fall…and there was another concern at the moment.

"Climb, Nick! He's already starting to recover!"

She took his tail in her mouth again and felt him begin to pull upward. Without thinking she put her left foot down on a rung and put pressure on it, realizing too late what she had done.

There was no pain, and her leg was able to straighten out completely; better late than never.

For the next few moments, they ascended without speaking, the silence punctuated only by an occasional whimper from little Cotton.

After many long moments Nick pulled to an abrupt halt.

"We're there, Carrots. Give me the cable."

Judy tried to pass it upwards, but it was too far to reach; the fox's paw remained a tantalizing ten inches out of range. Mentally crossing her fingers, she spoke to Cotton again, "Sweetie, I need you to take this and pass it up to Nick; don't let go of it, whatever you do." As an afterthought she added, "And don't look down."

Cotton was starting to cry, but she managed take hold of the cable while averting her eyes from everything below. Judy on the other paw, wasn't able to keep herself from looking down and when she did she saw that Uncle Terry was once more coming up after them, only this time he was further away than she'd expected. They could make it—if Nick's plan would work, and unbeknownst to her it had just come up against a major snag, literally!

The problem was that the turnbuckle holding the guy line to the tower was actually much longer than it had appeared from ground level, extending outwards from the frame by a good three feet. And the buckle was anything but a smooth surface; bumps, notches, crannies, and a foot-long spur of wired jutting out from the loop at the end. In order to reach the bare wire, Nick would be required to lean out and away from the ladder…a long way out.

He crooked an elbow through a ladder rung, the same way Judy had earlier, stretching out over the empty space as far as he dared. It was no use; the end of the turnbuckle was still beyond his reach, by only a few inches, but it might as well have been a hundred miles for all the good it did. He
pulled himself back in again, unhooked his elbow and tried to lean out further, this time holding on to the ladder with only his paw; that was another no go, he felt himself slipping almost immediately and nearly lost the cable when he grabbed for the ladder again.

Behind him he heard Judy's sharp voice.

"Nick, whatever you're going to do, make it fast; he's coming!"

Nick looped his elbow through the rung again and leaned away from the mast. This would either work or it wouldn't.

He swung his arm, throwing the cable over the top of the guy wire.

"Cotton, grab my belt, Judy grab my legs, and both of you hang on tight."

He felt two sets of paws take hold of him, and then he took a deep breath. He would have to jump away from the tower and grab the other end of the cable before he fell…and before any one of a zillion things that could go wrong did go wrong; could he grab the cable on the fly without losing his grip? And even if he made it, could he maintain his hold while carrying that much extra weight…and what the heck, would his idea even work? He still didn't…

"NICK!"

Judy's scream and the sudden stench of savagery in his nostrils were all the motivation the red fox needed. He leaped out into space, grabbing for the other end of the cable. He felt his paw catch, start to slip, and then it held.

But then nothing else happened; instead of sliding away down the wire, Nick stayed right where he was, dangling uselessly in mid-air with Judy and Cotton hanging onto him like Quasimodo on a church bell.

And he didn't know how much longer he could hold on.

Nick smelled something behind him, the horrid odor of savagery again; if Cotton started to panic now...

Judy's Uncle leaned outwards with snapping jaws; his quarry was too far out for him to reach. He grabbed the ladder in both paws and kicked out backwards; no, good, his target was still out of range. That was what finally pulled his pin; with a high scream of frustration, the savage bunny grabbed the turnbuckle and began to shake it violently. Nick felt himself jouncing, heard little Cotton starting to scream again as they swayed crazily back and forth more than ten stories up in the air.

But then….they were moving, the tower receding away behind them as Terry Haredigg bade farewell with another scream of rage. His temper tantrum had unwittingly jump-started the makeshift zip-line, and now Nick, Judy and little Cotton were sailing away down to safety—if the wire would continue to hold their weight, (Nick couldn't help reminding himself.)

It would; but not without a price to pay; as the three of them started to pick up speed, the line began to sag a little…and then it began to sag even more. Judy's eyes went wide as she saw that their trajectory was too low to clear the razor ribbon on top of the fence. If they hit it moving at this velocity, there would be other ribbons added to the mix…bloody ones!

And she was the only one who could see what was coming.
"Nick!" she shouted, "When I give the word, swing your body upwards, high as you can."

The fox said nothing, did nothing; Judy had no idea if he'd even heard her, but there was no time to repeat her warning because here was the fence and the razor-wire, practically right in front of them.

"Now!" she screamed, and felt Nick Wilde curling himself tightly upwards, tucking his legs into a red-furred ball. Judy tried to help, swinging her feet up and attempting to push his tail out of harm's way. Something sharp and metallic dug into her shoulder, but then it was gone, leaving only a small rip in the fabric.

And then they were past the fence and out over the festival grounds. From ten feet below Nick could hear the sound of applause and cheering. Then a voice called out, 'jump!' and the cry quickly became a chorus.

It was all academic; he couldn't have held on for another second anyway. He let go of the cable, trusting that the animals below would be as good as their word.

They were; a dozen paws and hooves caught hold of Nick as he fell; he might just as well have dropped onto a trampoline. In a heartbeat he was on his feet again, and saw that Judy and Cotton had also landed safely.

Just then, a frantic voice called from inside the crowd, "Cotton! COTTON!" and he saw Bonnie Hopps pushing her way through.

The little bunny saw her and cried out, "Mommy!" and then she went rushing headlong into her mother's arms.

Bonnie swept her up off the ground, hugging her tight and rocking her back and forth for a moment, and then she reached out and touched her daughter's nose.

"NOW do you see why you shouldn't wander off like that?" she said, and then held Cotton even more tightly. She caught sight of Nick and he saw her mouthing the words, 'Thank you.'

"What the heck is she thanking me for?" the red fox wondered, "I'm the one who got us into that mess."

Meanwhile, at the edge of the crowd, Jack La Peigne, for once, was able to stand out in the open without attracting any undue attention. He was also able to see everything that was going on; his large size was coming in handy for change. Thank goodness Judy was all right. Only what the heck was everybody looking at the fox like that for? If that bushy-tailed fool hadn't locked the gate…!

He became aware of footsteps behind him and turned around to see Gully and Racific had just arrived. He sighed and folded his arms.

"This is not turning out to be one of my better mornings." He decided, and to the pair of wolverines he said, "Let me guess; you don't have your weapons, do you?"

"Sir," Gully started to protest, but the big bunny had already raised a paw.

"Yes, I know…I ordered you to drop everything and get over here right away; my bad."

The wolverines blinked and then gaped at one another. An admission like that from Jack La Peigne was like anyone else getting down on their knees and begging forgiveness with tears in their eyes.

"Yes, I did," the big bunny acknowledged, "but right now, I need you to go and retrieve those
weapons and then get back here ASAP!" To illustrate why, he pointed towards the cell phone tower and the bunny rapidly descending the ladder attached to the gantry. It was all the explanation Gully and Racius needed, they were standing downwind from the relay-mast and even at this distance they could smell it; the animal descending the structure had gone savage.

Jack waved his paw to dismiss them but then a thought came out of nowhere.

"Trank darts only," he added, "No Morningmew."

"Yes sir." Gully answered smartly; he could tell that his boss was in no mood for any further disagreement. Nonetheless, there was one other issue to settle before he departed.

"Sir, do you still want us to be ready to activate if necessary?"

The big bunny frowned for a second. He didn't know why he had given the order for tranquilizer darts only—except that it had felt right. And Jack La Peigne hadn't come so far in life without learning to follow his instincts. But now what did they have to say about the wolverine's inquiry? He had no idea, and so he took the middle course.

"Yes, but only as a last resort, and only on my express orders. Now get moving, both of you."

Gully responded with a quick salute, and then he and Racius were high-tailing it in the direction of the parking lot. Jack watched them go and then his eye fell on the prostrate form of Laura Clawson, lying on her back beside the Furizon van, with a small cluster of animals around her.

He went over, a few of the onlookers moved aside but most just stared at the big bunny; not surprising since almost all of them were smaller species.

"You got business here, Mister?" queried one of them, an old armadillo with a cranky, Latino accent. Jack took no offense; he already had pegged the animal the as physician of some kind, the no-nonsense type most likely, and probably retired. (When you're the son of a doctor yourself and also head of a Pharma company, such recognitions tend to come naturally.)

"Her name's Clawson, Laura Clawson; she works for me," the big rabbit explained.

The armadillo's manner changed instantly...from suspicion to outright hostility.

"You're the one brought in the extra security, right? Then where the heck are they?" Before Jack could answer or even start to bristle, another bunny beat him to it.

"They're over by the campground, Doc," he said. (Jack had been right), "some kind of big brawl is what I heard; they got all the Sheriff's deputies over there too."

Jack La Peigne felt his eyebrows and ears rise up. Why hadn't Gully said anything about...? Well he probably hadn't known either. In the meantime, the old armadillo remained unmoved.

"Well they better get back here before that...thing breaks outta his playpen again," He said, pointing towards the cell-phone tower

"I've got mammals on the way with trank-dart guns." Jack informed him brusquely. "Now how is my wolverine?" The first part wasn't precisely true but it had the effect of taking the edge off the armadillo's attitude. His manner became instantly cool and precise.

"Pretty sure she's got a concussion; won't know how bad till we get her x-rayed though." He
looked at Jack as if expecting him to ask a stupid question.

He didn't ask it; of course *this* animal would have already called for an ambulance; his type never missed a detail. In fact the big bunny thought he could already hear the wail of a siren in the…

A collective gasp erupted from the crowd, and several animals turned to get out of there fast. Jack stood up quickly, knowing what had happened without looking.

Terry Haredigg was back at ground level.

Twenty five yards away, Nick Wilde already had a plan in the works.

"Yes! The tanks are full, Carrots." he said, sliding back down from the side of Old #28.

"Nick," Judy was eyeing the Burrows' County FD's venerable pumper engine dubiously, "I don't think…"

"If you've got a better idea, I'll go with it," the red fox answered, not looking at her, instead running his paws over the dials and levers of the pump controls like a shopper at a Black Friday sale.

Judy Hopps *didn't* have a better idea—but that didn't mean this was a good one; she glanced over her shoulder. Her Uncle was pacing around the cell-phone tower yard. She saw him stop, crouch, lunge at the fence and bounce off. That was good for making another dozen spectators realize that this wasn't the best place to be.

Terry threw himself at the fence a second time; once more it held but Judy knew that it couldn't go on like this for much longer. Soon enough her uncle would spot the tunnel he'd made earlier, (or else he'd simply dig a new one.)

A tug on her arm brought her back to the moment.

"Carrots come on," Nick pulled at her elbow again, "I can't do this alone; help me out here."

Even with the two of them working together it seemed like an impossible task; the pumper's hoses were all geared towards larger species, as thick as logs and—it seemed to Judy—twice as heavy. And she had never hooked up one of these things before; how did it work again? Okay, you screwed it on, but how were you supposed to get the threads to line up? They tried it once, twice; both times the hose seated crookedly and refused to turn any further. On the third attempt it finally began to spin…but not freely. It felt to Judy as if they were working an anchor capstan—on a battleship!

Glancing to her right, Judy saw that her uncle had ceased his assault on the cell-phone tower fence and was stalking about the yard with his head sweeping from side to side. He'd find the hole again at any second…and like it or not, Nick's idea was the only game in town.

And that was assuming the fox could even get his plan to work; at the moment he was still trying to figure out how to start Old #28's water pump.

You got it going apparently by yanking on a pull cord, same as an old fashioned lawn mower. Unfortunately, the cord in this case was thick as a bell-rope and also longer than Nick was tall. It also came with a T-Handle the size of the average rake. The fox would need to take it in both paws and run with it…and Judy couldn't help him because someone would need to press the starter button at the same time.

Nick grabbed the handle and jumped down from the truck.
"Okay Carrots, get ready to fire it up."

Judy threw up her paws in exasperation; now he really wasn't thinking.

"Just a second; don't you think we should uncoil the hose and close the nozzle first?"

In other circumstances, that would have been for a face-pawlm and a 'D'ohhhh, right!' from the red fox; this time he was daunted for less than a second. That was not a good sign, not a good sign at all.

"Oh, yeah," he nodded, and then grabbed the hose and twisted the nozzle shut, "Help me Carrots," he said again.

Together, they unrolled the fire-hose along the ground; Judy couldn't help noticing that the canvas was speckled here and there with little frayed spots. On the other side of the fence meanwhile, her uncle was pawing the ground, looking for a place to dig another tunnel. That was good news on one front, but bad news on another. It would take him awhile to get under the fence that way, but they wouldn't know exactly where he was going to emerge, not until it happened.

"C'mon bunny." Nick yelled again, and the two of them hurried back to the fire-truck. While Judy pressed down on the starter button, Nick slung the handle across his back like a yoke.

"Okay, ready?"

"Just GO!" she yelled. A field goal's distance away, her uncle had abruptly ceased his digging and was looking up as if remembering something, (and she could guess what that something was.) She pressed down on the starter and Nick took off at a run. The pump engine coughed, choked once and then the starter cord recoiled again, dragging the red fox back through the grass and smacking him against the side of the fire truck. He was unhurt and Judy nearly said something choice, but then she saw that her uncle had spotted his original tunnel and was abandoning the new one post haste.

"Hurry Nick!"

She pressed the button and he ran with the starter handle again, this time giving it everything he had. The engine chuffed, growled cantankerously, and then thundered into life. At once the fire hose shot into semi-rigidity, sprouting pinhole leaks all along its length. Judy had been right; this was an older hose, probably kept only for show. She was starting to like her partner's idea less and less, but there was no time to raise an objection. Terry Haredigg had found his original bolt hole and was diving into it….while the few remaining spectators, turned and got out of there fast.

Judy heartily wished she could go with them, but instead took up a position on the firehose directly behind Nick, grabbing on tight with both paws and bracing her legs while the red fox tilted the nozzle in the direction of the tunnel entrance. The hose seemed to quiver and squirm in her grip like something alive….alive and wanting to break free.

"Nick, I don't…" she started to say, but at that instant her Uncle Terry came bursting out of the rabbit-hole. Nick immediately loosed a high pressure blast of water at the savage bunny. It drove him right back into the tunnel again, but he and Judy barely noticed. With the speed of a scrambling fighter jet, the two of them were catapulted ten feet into the air, propelled by the force of the water.

Nick grabbed for the nozzle control and nearly lost his grip on the hose; there was nothing he could do but hang on for dear life; ditto for Judy as the fire hose whipsawed through the air,
drenching the animals below who had still remained.

The water-jet raked across the front of the Luckyfoot Farms Festival booth, caving in the front and reducing the produce to a jumble of mush. It swiped across the information booth, demolishing the roof and scattering the paperwork to the four winds. Changing directions, the discharge ripped a PA speaker clear off its mountings and destroyed the poster kiosk where Cotton Hopps had huddled only a short while before. And then it blew out the back wall of the T shirt stand. It seemed to be gathering strength with every passing second.

Gritting his teeth Nick fought his way along the hose, back to the nozzle. The shut off was still beyond his reach but if he could only…divert….the water….away from its path of destruction.

He took hold of the nozzle with both paws and directed it downward…and fox-screamed.

The hose shot up in a rainbow arc, headed straight towards the cell-phone relay tower, carrying him and Judy with it. With a strength born of desperation the red fox turned the nozzle slightly and the two of them went flying past the tower gantry, missing it by scant inches. But now they were sailing right towards the triple rows of razor ribbon again. Nick gripped the nozzle and turned it harder—and he and Judy shot off to the right. At once, the fire hose began to wrap itself around the cell-phone tower like the cord of a monstrous tether ball. Caught in the grip of the centrifugal force, the red fox was unable to keep control of the nozzle and it shifted in his paws. Instantly, the winding circle became a tight, whirling spiral. Dizzy and growing faint, Nick could feel the fire hose coiling around him like a canvas anaconda.

And then all at once, the water pressure ceased and they were falling; the hose had ruptured midway along its length. Nick saw the ground coming up fast. He shut his eyes, tried to say something to Jud …

His attempt was cut off at the source as he jerked to a sudden halt, the canvas tightening around him like a straight-jacket. He bounced once and then came down again, suspended above the ground in an inverted position. How high he was, the red fox had no idea, but it hardly mattered.

Saved again…or he was, but what about…?

"Judy," he croaked, "Carrots…"

"Nick," she answered from somewhere right beside him. Her voice was weak and wobbly but she sounded unhurt; he tried to turn his head to look, but it wouldn't move far enough, the bunny remained invisible. He shook his head as best he could; attempting to clear his thoughts.

All right they were hanging suspended about five feet off the ground, cocooned in the ribbons of the fire hose, in an upside-down position. It was like Manchas and the rain forest all over again…

Then from beside him, Judy screamed and on the other side of the fence more screams followed.

Nick looked and realized that there were two major differences between now and two years ago. First, fire hose is a lot tougher than jungle creepers; he and Judy were utterly trapped, powerless to escape.

Second, back then the savage mammal stalking them had been manacled to a light post.

No such luck this time; Judy's Uncle Terry remained completely free of restraint.

And he was just now emerging from the hole directly in front of them.
Nick began to squirm desperately, so did Judy, even though the both of them knew it was useless.

Terry Haredigg seemed to sense it as well, instead of charging in immediately, he began to stalk back and forth in front of them, the way he had done earlier with Cotton. It was almost as if he was attempting to savor the moment.

Then he pulled down into crouch and thumped his foot.

On the other side of the fence there were more screams. Judy recognized the voice of her mother. "Somebody do something!"

From beside her, she heard Nick's voice; it was almost like a sob.

"Oh Carrots, I'm so sorr…"

Before he could finish, her Uncle leaped to the attack.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter update coming later this week
Chapter Summary

Sometimes you're the windshield
Sometimes you're the bug

Dire Straits

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**The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction**

**Part One:**

**Fuel**

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**Chapter 4 – The Wizard of Chaos**
(Continued…Pt. 6)

Something shot up out of the hole behind Judy's Uncle, spewing earth in all direction; it was big, bigger than he was. In spite of everything, Judy was unable to stifle her amazement.

"What the…? Is that another rabbit?"

Whatever it was, it came down with both feet on the back of her uncle's neck, driving him face first into the ground, before leaping away again. Terry shook it off immediately and then wheeled to face his new adversary.

"Leave her alone!" Jack La Peigne gave as much of snarl as was possible for a rabbit, and then moved his leg back, taking up a Hop-Ki-Do stance. It felt pitifully inadequate against an animal gone savage, but his skills were all he had right now.

That and the fact that no one here right now knew the effects of Nighthowler poisoning better than he did.

Terry moved to the right; Jack feinted left and then moved with him. It would confuse the other rabbit if he behaved erratically; for a few seconds only, but that precious sliver of time might make all the difference in the world.

"I don't have to beat him," The big bunny reminded himself, "Only keep him occupied until…oh crackers, here he comes!"

Jack held his ground as the crazed bunny charged flat-out. At the last instant he dove to the right,
kicking out with his legs and catching Terry in the ribs, driving him into a sideways sprawl. That was the key, he knew; never try to meet a more powerful enemy head on; duck, feint, and go for a flank attack.

"If you attempt to stop a runaway wagon by standing before it, you will only succeed in being crushed," Master Dae had once explained to him, "Yet with only a light push from your shoulder, you may deflect it sideways, perhaps even cause it to topple."

Terry jumped back onto his feet; Jack did the same. For a moment they circled one another like a pair of gladiators in the arena, both of them down on all fours. When Terry bared his incisors and hissed, Jack immediately mirrored the gesture; the one thing that brings out the wariness in an animal darted with Nighthowler is being confronted by another animal gone savage.

Then Judy's uncle charged again, but Jack was ready for him; he turned and ran for the cell phone tower, leaping up with all his strength. Grabbing for a cross-bar, he swung himself upwards like a gymnast. A half second later he felt the gantry shudder as the crazed bunny crash into it. (That was the other thing about animals on Nighthowler; run and they will chase you—and you'll be the only thing on their minds.)

Jack leaped backward off the tower, tumbling over and coming down squarely on his adversary's back. And then using him for a springboard, he jumped off again, landing on the ground in a tuck and roll, and coming up in a four point stance, facing the savage bunny.

But Terry just lay there, making noises like the creaking of wood timbers.

Immediately, Jack La Peigne's ear went up and he felt his nose twitching.

"What the…? I didn't hit him that hard. Why is he…? HE'S FAKING IT!"

The thought came just in the nick of time; at that instant Terry turned and attacked.

Jack jumped backwards, parrying with a forearm; the snapping jaws missed him by a bare whisker. Terry hissed and lunged again; Jack spun to the right and brought his elbow down on the top of the crazed rabbit's head; he hardly seemed to feel it. Instead he spun sideways, lashing out with his feet…and this time he connected, catching Jack squarely in the center of his chest, heaving him up and backwards by a good six feet. Somehow, the big bunny managed to land upright, inhaling deeply to replace the air in his lungs.

Even at this moment a part of couldn't help but feel a growing sense of wonder.

"He's learning!" the big bunny thought to himself. "Even in a state of full savagery, he's able to learn from his mistakes."

"The ears!" A female voice cried from behind him, breaking his chain of thought, "Go for the base of the ear!"

Jack nearly gave himself a face pawlm,

"Of course, ring his bell; why didn't I think of that!"

But there was no time to think of much of anything, because Terry Haredigg was coming straight at him once again. Jack dived to the side, but this time the crazed bunny adjusted for it and swerved at the last second.

It didn't work; he wasn't the only rabbit here learning to anticipate his opponent's tactics. Jack
flattened onto his back and kicked upwards, heaving his opponent up and over and dropping him onto his back. It was a Hail Mary move; when he rolled over again, he was facing away from the savage bunny.

No time to turn and face his adversary, Jack took off at a four footed run with Terry right behind him. It didn't matter, not as long as the crazed rabbit continued to focus on him instead of…

"That's it, chase me; forget about her."

He ran for the fence, leaped up and bounced off, kicking out with his legs; the blow missed Terry's ear but caught him in the shoulder; it had about as much effect as a basketball on concrete. Jack hit the ground, leaped for the tower, caromed off the side, and leaped again. No time to throw another kick, but Terry missed him with those teeth again. He hit the ground running and went for the fence, scooting up and along the surface like motorcyclist riding the wall of death. He jumped down, onto his forepaws and kicked out with both legs, this time missing completely.

Terry Haredigg had better luck; when he hit the ground, his jaws found the big bunny's left ankle. Wrapping his teeth tightly around it he began to shake his enemy violently back and forth, like a wolf cub with a rag. All around the fence line a chorus of screams erupted; Judy was screaming too.

But this was where Jack's martial arts training came in. Instead of trying to fight the motion he went with it, turning it to his own advantage. On the fourth backswing, he lashed out with a hammer-fist, using the momentum of the shaking to add extra power to the blow.

It worked; he connected hard with the base of Terry's left ear. Stunned and stupefied, the crazed rabbit released him, turning in a circle once again. Jack shook his head, trying to recover. He too was in a daze.

"Have to clear my head, have to get it together before he does. How's the ankle…still good? All right MOVE!"

Fast…but not fast enough. He and Terry leaped up at the exact same moment. Jack swung with his foot in a wheel kick, aiming for the other bunny's ear.

Terry swiped with his arm and parried the blow—in the exact same way Jack had deflected his jaws when the savage bunny tried to bite him. The move caught the big rabbit completely by surprise, but it wasn't nearly as big a surprise as what happened next; Terry fired off a nearly perfect copy of the wheel-kick Jack had just thrown.

But unlike his enemy, he didn't miss; his right foot slammed like a freight-train into the side of the big rabbit's head…right below the ear. A thousand cymbals seemed to crash inside of Jack's cranium and his field of vision became a fun-house mirror; the ground beneath his feet was turning to jelly. He could feel himself dropping like a chopped down tree. And then his slow fall turned hard and fast, and he was crashing into the ground with a weight on top of him. He blinked, tried to see; all that was visible was a pair of gnashing yellow incisors, closing in relentlessly on his throat…closer…closer…only millimeters away.

All at once the weight on top of him seemed to shudder. He heard a whining sound and felt the load shuddered again…and then it abruptly went limp.

Jack let himself lay like that for a few seconds, and then with a supreme effort, he pushed the weight up and off of him and rolled out from under it.

Terry Haredigg was lying flat on his face with a tranquilizer dart embedded in his shoulder and a
second one in the small of his back.

Clutching at his throat and coughing, Jack looked towards the fence-line where Gully and RaciUS were standing, keeping the unconscious bunny covered with their dart rifles. He looked at Terry again, and then made a motion for them to stand down. This rabbit wasn't going anywhere, not for a while at least.

He heard a chinking noise and turned to see a pine marten and a ring-tailed cat in fluorescent vests, unlocking the gate to the cell tower yard. As soon as it opened, the wolverines were the first animals through. (Actually they were only ones through; unconscious or not, no one else wanted to be in close quarters with a bunny that had just gone savage.)

"Sir are you…?" Gully started to say, and the big bunny tetchily waved him off, pointing first at Terry Haredigg and then at Nick and Judy.

"Never mind me; get him secured…and get them down from there."

"Yes sir." The wolverines answered, and hurried quickly to obey.

Nick Wilde smelled him before he saw him, and when he did, he felt his hackles rising up, it was another wolverine. But then he heard a voice, "Hang on folks, we're getting you down," followed by a swaying motion and a soft rasping sound; someone was cutting through the hose Nick felt the coils begin to slowly loosen their grip—and then they let go all at once, dropping him to the ground in an untidy heap. He got up quickly and began to brush himself off. Behind him, he heard #28's pump engine cough and sputter to a stop

"Are you all right?" he heard Judy asking. He turned quickly in her direction.

"Yeah, I'm all right Car…"

But she wasn't talking to him; she was hurrying in the direction of the big rabbit massaging the side of his head. He saw her coming and smiled wearily.

"I'm all right Judy." Jack La Peigne told her, waving a weak paw, "A little shaken up, but I'm okay."

She stopped in her tracks. How the heck did he know who she…?

"Judy, JUDY!"

She turned just as her mother and father came rushing through the gate. Before she had time to react or even to think, she was swept up in their arms and they were hugging her tight.

"Oh Judy," he mother was starting to cry, "Oh Judy." She just kept repeating it over and over

"I'm all right, Mama." She said, patting her mother's back and trying not to start crying herself, "I'm all right." (This was the first time since middle school she had called her mother, 'mama'.) Her father only held her, barely able to stave off the waterworks.

Then his gaze shifted and he let go of his daughter.

"What about you Nick, are you all right?" he asked. The red fox had just arrived on the scene.

"Yeah, I'm okay Stu," he answered—warily. There was something about this bunny's demeanor that was putting his instincts on high alert. He sounded clipped, almost formal.
Then Judy's parents moved their attention to the big rabbit she'd been speaking to a moment before. Now their faces were all warmth and gratitude…and Nick was beginning to understand exactly what that 'something' was.

"Thank you." Bonnie said, sniffing, "Thank you for saving my daughter's life." All around the yard was a hubbub of agreement; more and more animals were coming through the gate now, including (finally!) a pair of Sheriff's deputies, Mac Cannon and a bull elk.

Jack only nodded tiredly again…but then someone touched him on the elbow, a raccoon in a paramedic's uniform. He immediately waved a pawlm.

"Never mind me, take care of her first." He said, pointing through the fence in the direction of Laura Clawson, still laid out beside the Furizon van. The raccoon looked and nodded quickly; however bad it was for Jack, it was obviously worse for her. He and his partner quickly departed.

"Who are you Mister?" another voice asked, and he turned to see Stu Hopps regarding him with his nose twitching.

"My name's La Peigne, Jack La Peigne," the big bunny told him. He didn't offer Stu his paw; not out of any sense of snobbery but because other bunnies had a habit of pulling away whenever he did that.

Stu blinked, his ears went up, and his nose began to twitch faster.

"Jack…La Peigne? Little Jack La Peigne…'Doc' George La Peigne's boy?"

Jack felt his ears standing up as well. Someone had not only (at last) recognized his name…they'd remembered his father, too.

Now he offered Stu a paw, and the other bunny quickly took it.

"Yes, that's me," Jack told him, and then his nose began to twitch. Why was Bonnie Hopps shaking her head and muttering to herself? "Doc La Peigne's son…you're Doc La Peigne's boy; sweet cheez n' crackers. What goes around really does come around."

The big bunny eyed her curiously.

"Uh, ma'am…I'm not sure I…"

By way of explanation, Judy's mother rolled up her sleeve, revealing a spoon-sized divot in her upper arm.

"My name is Bonnie Haredigg Hopps Mr. La Peigne." she said, and then pointed to the rabbit being strapped down to a gurney while the wolverine Racius kept watch, "And that bunny over there is my brother Terry."

Jack's lower jaw fell earthward.

"Wait a minute, that's Terry Haredigg over there? The same Terry Haredigg who…?"

"The same bunny your father cured, the first time he went savage," Stu Hopps finished for him.

The big rabbit could only shake his head in amazement, genuine not faked. Of all the animals that could have gotten that Nighthowler pellet; Bonnie Hopps was right, things did have a way of
coming full circle. But then he felt his eyes narrowing. If that was true, then here might be an opportunity here; only one way to find out though…and he needed to be the one to ask the question.

"What…could have happened to him?" he queried, pointing over at Judy's uncle, with just the right note of unease and confusion in his voice.

"Pretty obvious ain't it?" said a crotchety voice whom Jack instantly recognized as the armadillo who'd attended to Laura Clawson earlier. He looked directly at Bonnie, "Your brother had himself a flashback, that's the only thing that I think could of happened."

There were murmurs of agreement from the animals gathered around, including Jack La Peigne…but inside, the big bunny was whooping, "Yes!"

That was when Judy Hopps snapped her fingers.

"Wa-a-a-i-t a minute; now I remember where else I heard your name before; you're also the head of LPN Pharmaceuticals, am I right?"

Jack just nodded and Judy's father gave her an odd look.

"Well yeah, that's the sponsor of this year's Carrot Days, Jude, but how's that figure into anything? Judy grabbed his arm, excitedly.

"Dad, that's also the company that developed the Nighthowler antidote!"

This revelation changed everything; Stu's face instantly became that of a supplicant in the presence of a saint, and then it was Bonnie who was grabbing Jack's arm.

"Please, can you help my brother?"

The big bunny looked over at the sedated form of Terry Haredigg, being rolled towards the gate on a gurney, attended by two paramedics.

"Not yet, give it a few seconds before you answer. All right, now."

He patted her paw and smiled.

"Of course, I can." He said, and then pulled out his cell phone, "Give me just a second."

Bonnie nodded and let go of him while he dialed.

"Doctor? This is La Peigne." he said, forgoing any preamble, "Listen, I need you to drop everything and get yourself out to the helipad ASAP. No, never mind about that, we have another animal gone savage on our paws. Yes that's right. In Bunnyburrows; I need you out here with a supply of Morn…of the Nighthowler antidote right away."

He said this while looking at Gully, who gazed back curiously for a second and then looked away. Jack could almost hear his thoughts. What did they need HER for…and why the heck did she need to bring along extra Morningmew? They had plenty of the stuff, right here already. One quick shot and Terry Haredigg would be good as new.

"Because I don't want any of these animals here to KNOW that!" Jack answered the wolverine silently. And then to his cell phone he said, "It's different this time than two years ago, Doctor. I'll fill you in once you're airborne. Right now, you need to get out here immediately." He
He shook it off and punched another number.

"Whitepaugh, this is La Peigne. I need you to scramble the executive helicopter and get it out to LPN Meadowland facility right away. Tell the pilot he's to pick up Dr. H at the helipad and bring her directly to…" He covered the phone and called out to the paramedics, who were just getting ready to load Terry Haredigg onto an ambulance, "Where are you taking him, County General?"

"Pawvidence Memorial," the sheep in charged called back.

Jack spoke into phone again. "…to Pawvidence Memorial Hospital in Bunnyburrows…excuse me for a second." He covered the phone again and spoke to the wolverine standing nearest to him. "Racius, I want you ride to the hospital with Haredigg. Go."

That brought an immediate protest from the EMT sheep.

"Sir, we can't allow…"

The big bunny cut him off with a wave of his paw

"If that rabbit on the gurney wakes up while you're still in route, you're GOING to want Racius with you." He rubbed his chest and added, "Trust me, I know."

The sheep looked at Terry for a second and then back at Jack, nodding reluctantly and motioning for the wolverine to join him. The big bunny nodded back and spoke into the phone again.

"We've had another savage incident…no, not a predator this time; another bunny." He looked at the animals gathered around him and added, "I don't know how it happened; that's why I want Doctor H. here. Get that chopper out to the Meadowlands and get her on board right away. La Peigne out."

Once again, he disconnected without bothering to sign off.

"Okay, I'll have some help here as soon as possible," He said, speaking to Bonnie and Stu. Judy's mother sniffled and patted his arm. "Bless you Mr. La Peigne." she said.

"Oh please, just call me Jack," he said, flashing that weary smile again, "I'm a hometown boy after all." He poked a thumb at the gate. "Now come on, let's all get out of here."

Everyone thought that was a splendid suggestion. But when they turn to move towards the exit, Jack winced and made a sound as soon as he put pressure on his leg. When he looked down he saw that the cuff of his pants was shredded. There appeared to be no blood, but his ankle had ballooned to nearly twice its normal size.

"Dangit," he grumbled, "he must have done more damage than I thought."

He had been speaking to no one in particular but Judy answered him anyway.

"Here, I'll help you." She said, reaching up and wrapping her arm around his waist.

"I'm fine, really." He said, trying to push her off. It was half-hearted effort at best, and she remained right where she was.

"Don't be silly, you saved my life; the least I can do is help you out of here." And to a passing
deputy she said. "We're going to need another ambulance."

"I don't need a…" Jack started to say, but Judy immediately shushed him.

"None of that; you don't have to prove yourself to anyone here."

"I know that Hopps," the big bunny answered, annoyed in spite of himself, "What I meant was, I've got my own mammals to take care of me."

She lifted an ear and an eyebrow, "Really Jack, where are they?"

"Over at the campground," he answered, with a dry expression on his face, "or on their way back if we're lucky; some kind of brawl is what I heard."

"Oh," Judy suddenly felt more than a little contrite; that explained a lot of things. "How is it that you knew who I was?" she asked, trying to change the subject.

"The bunny who cracked the Savage Predator case?" Jack La Peigne queried with an even more ironic smile, "I-I-I think I know who she is."

Judy felt something warm rising up in her cheeks and for some reason she was unable to meet the big bunny's gaze…until he grunted when his foot came down on a camera someone had dropped.

"Oops, hope I didn't break it." He said. Judy looked down and shook her head, "Don't worry about it, it was already broken."

Now it was Jack who was looking away; he'd been talking about his ankle, not the camera. He pointed to a nearby bench.

"Just set me down right there. I'll be fine until my animals get here, really."

"Oh-kay," she answered reluctantly and began to steer him towards it.

Following along in the wake of the crowd, Nick Wilde felt as if he was stranded on a raft in the middle of the ocean. No one was giving him dirty looks, or grateful looks—or looks of any kind. It was as if he had become the invisible fox. Everyone's attention was focused squarely on the big bunny Judy was helping and every face was practically glowing with adoration. What was his name, La Peigne, right? Everyone was ignoring him in favor of Jack La Peigne. It was all right, he could handle it; hadn't that big rabbit just saved his life? And Judy, he'd also saved her life, don't forget that. It was all right if she treated him like a hero. Heck, it was all right if everyone was treating him like a hero.

The squealing voice of a little girl bunny brought the red fox down to earth again. Cotton…Oh, thank goodness; by the sound of her voice she had managed to weather the storm. And now here she was, rushing towards him one more time.

Nick turned, just in time to see the little girl bunny scamper past without even looking—and bound straight into the arms of a thoroughly surprised Jack La Peigne.

Okay…THAT hurt.
Chapter Summary

Meanwhile, over by the river side.....

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 4 – The Wizard of Chaos
(Continued…Pt. 7)

"There it is, fox."

Erin Hopps was pointing towards a blue-and-white sign about 20 yards up ahead.

Springwater Cove County Park
1/4 Mile

"About foxin' time," Conor Lewis thought but did not say. He had his arms crossed and was hunkered down in his seat; a little fox cub who doesn't WANT to go visit his Grandma today. Sweet Cheeze Lou-WEEZE, how the heck had he ever let Little Miss Snowdrop jack him into this?

A river…they were going out on a river—on the water! And he couldn't say anything; Erin would razz him from here to doomsday. Noooo, there was nothing for him to do but shut up and ride it out.

They had been on the road for less than half an hour, but to a certain, young silver fox it seemed as if they'd pulled out of the warren the day before yesterday, an impression that wasn't helped by the fact that they were riding in the clunker that passed for the Hopps Family Farm Truck. (And when it came to driving at speed, Stuart Hopps Jr. was no Dale Ermineheart Jr.)

A few seconds later, Junior turned right and down a wide road flanked by low rail fence, coming shortly to a T-fork and two more signs, 'Campgrounds' and 'Boat Launch - Day Use Area' with arrows pointing to the left and right respectively.

Junior took the right turn and just around the next bend, there was the boat ramp.
It wasn't much to look at, only a short concrete slab, ending on a hard-pack, gravel bank. The river beyond was teal-green and moving in stately fashion, the water topped here and there by delicate, lacy patterns. Lined up along the shoreline were a variety of river craft; kayaks, inflatable pontoon boats, drift boats resembling square stern dories, and the ever-present whitewater rafts, looking like heavy-duty life rafts with the ends canted upwards.

"You see 'em yet?" Junior queried from the driver's seat.

"They're here somewhere," Erin answered, rolling down the window for a better look. She scanned the riverside for few seconds and then let out a short whoop. "Wait, there they are, Hiyeee!"

"Hiyeee, Erin!" Terri Blackburn's voice pealed from beside the river. Conor pulled himself up behind the young bunny, peering over her shoulder. Yep, there was Erin's GF, and drawn up against the bank directly behind her were a pair of whitewater rafts in cadmium yellow, one much larger than the other. There was blue lettering on the sides of each one, but the young silver fox was unable make out what it said; with the craft turned at this angle the words remained unreadable.

"Okay let's get over there," Junior told her.

Exiting the truck, Conor caught sight of a young ferret girl, coming their way in company with an adult mink, Terri's stepdad according to what Erin Hopps had told him

She had been more than a little nervous about it; mink were another species with a less than savory reputation.

"You…don't have a problem with that I hope, fox?" she'd asked him tentatively.

There was no way Conor Lewis was going to pass up an opening that juicy. ("Shanghai ME, will you, Snowdrop?") Frowning deeply for a second, he had solemnly informed the white-furred bunny, "One of the biggest jerks I ever knew back in Zoo York was a mink," (actually a sea-mink, Junior McCrodon.) And then after letting her stew for just the right amount of time, he had grinned and added, "And also one of the greatest guys I ever met," (another sea-mink, Kieran McCrodon.)

Erin had slapped him upside the head with her hat for that one; "Oh, you!" (Conor hadn't cared it had been worth it.)

But then his mind had begun to connect the dots. Burrows County, a rafting company, a mink in charge; could it possibly be…?

Well, he was about to find out, because now he could see what was written on the side of the smaller raft, Trask Whitewater Excursions.

Holy Foxtrot, this was the outfit!

No time to think about it, the young fox needed to recover quickly from his surprise before Erin noticed—to say nothing the girl ferret and the mink walking beside her.

He put it away just in time.

"Hiyeeeee!" Erin and Terri squealed again, giving each other a sisterly hug.

"So I see you brought the fox." The young ferret nodded at Conor when they were done; it wasn't said in a derogatory fashion and he took no offense at her words. Then she spoke to him directly.
"Conor, this is my stepdad, Wilson Trask," she said, indicating the mink with a wave of her paw. Like her, he was dressed in shorts, rafting sandals and a hat that looked like something an old-time parson might have worn. His upper frame was encased in a yellow-on-black flotation vest with the same lettering on the front as the pair of rafts. He had a spare, wiry build, with not an ounce of fat to spare.

"Yes, I remember you from onstage last night." he said, offering a paw. "That was one killer solo, kid."

"Hey thanks."

Conor instantly decided that he liked this mink; Will Trask seemed to have the same perpetual twinkle in his eye that Kieran had always owned.

With the introductions out of the way, he escorted the young fox and bunny over to the smaller raft, (the bigger one was reserved for larger species.) Now Conor could see that the air-chambers were braced by a sturdy, lightweight metal framework. There were rows of seats along either side, a cooler box in the center of frame and, much to his surprise, a pair of flyrods and a landing net.

"We gonna do some fishing, too?" he asked, immediately wondering if he had just posed a stupid question.

Erin seemed to think so, rolling her eyes skyward, but Terri's stepdad simply took it all in stride. "That's the plan," he said, "Cutts are hitting really good right now."

"Cutts?" Conor's ears went up and his head tilted sideways. "Cutthroat trout," the lanky mink explained, "If we're lucky we might hook into a steelie, too… errr, a Steelhead Trout that is." He was clearly well versed in dealing with neophytes.

On the advice (read, insistence) of Erin Hopps, the young fox had changed into shorts and a linen shirt for the expedition. He had brought no footwear, but that wasn't necessary, strictly speaking. He also had no headgear suitable for a river trip, so Wilson had Terri fetch him one from their SUV, a carbon copy of the 'preacher hats' perched atop their heads. That was something he would need, and the other item of clothing the mink furnished was de-rigeur; a flotation vest with four interlocking straps. Conor offered no objection when told to put it on. In fact he was very happy to have it—for a reason he absolutely didn't want a certain bunny to know. He was considerably less sanguine about having to be sprayed with bug repellant, something that Erin seemed to find highly amusing.

"Oh quit being such a baby, it's not that bad." She said.

"Easy for you to say, bunny," the young silver fox rejoined, blinking and trying not to cough, "Some of us have a serious sense of smell." (To him it felt like he'd just been doused with a mixture of ammonia and shellac thinner.)

Will Trask's homily on the subject was infinitely more effective than hers. "Trust me son, it beats getting eaten alive by the skeeters." He directed the young fox to a seat on the left side of the raft, second from the front, with Erin directly across from him and Terri sitting behind her. With that settled, they set about getting the beast out onto the river, everyone grabbing onto the rope running along the side and giving a yo-heave- ho! Conor braced himself as soon as his foot touched the water, but it was at least 10 degrees warmer than he'd expected.

Clearer, too; he could see the bottom nearly all the way out to the center of the river. As soon as
the pair of rafts began to float free, everyone climbed aboard and took their seat. That led to another short delay; while Conor's raft continued to remain buoyant, when the larger animals boarded their craft, it caught on the sand again and had to be pushed free. It only took one short heave, and then both rafts were moving out into the current.

The set up was that each passenger had their own paddle—except for the smaller rodents on board, they wouldn't be able reach the water except with a paddle at least twice their own height, (and even if they could, it wouldn't have made a difference.)

Will Trask was sitting perched on a raised platform at the very stern, in charge of a pair of oars that looked long enough to vault a prison wall; these were actually more for steering than propulsion, (so were the paddles, true for telling.)

As soon as they began to move down the river, the mink gave everybody a brief orientation.

"The Alsetz isn't a particularly hairy river, folks—at least not this section; we'll run into a couple of sets of class 3 rapids but most of them will be class 2. Just remember; if we need to turn right, we paddle on the left and vice versa. Okay now everyone, let's go."

And with that, he straightened them out with the oars and they were off.

For the first couple of miles the river moved at a dignified pace and the young fox was able to take stock of his fellow rafting companions. In addition to Erin, Terri, and Terri's stepdad, there was also a pair of marmots on board, husband and wife twentysomethings by the look of them. Next came a family of badgers; Mom, Dad, late thirties and a son and daughter, middle to late teens, plus several species of smaller rodents, ranging in size from pack-rats to deer-mice. How many of these were sharing the raft, the young fox couldn't quite tell.

Erin was the first one to sense it; just past the third turn in the river, Conor saw her ears go up. Wilson too was on the alert; although he knew what was coming from simple experience.

"Heads up everyone, here comes the first whitewater."

A few seconds later, the young fox also heard it, the hissing churn of foaming rapids. And then, coming around the nest bend he saw it, a long carpet of rough-cut water, stretching away for a hundred yards.

"Okay folks," Will Trask called, "grab your paddles and here we go."

A second later, they hit the rapids, the raft rearing up and bucking as they shot through the whitewater. All around Conor, everyone was whooping up a storm—and so was he, unable to resist the adrenaline rush of the moment. The wind and spray in his face, the jouncing and bouncing, and especially the sensation of speed; it made the roller-coaster back at the Carrot Days Festival look like a kiddie-car ride.

And this was only the first set of rapids…and also one of the easier runs.

Coming out of the cataract, they came to a section of the river that was almost still-water. Here Wilson instructed everyone to ship paddles; he wanted to wait for the other raft to catch up with them.

And besides that…

"This is some good water here." He said. At first, Conor had no idea what the mink was talking about; this section of the river was practically a pond.
He got the idea when Wilson extracted one of the flyrods from its holder, and began to cast back and forth, stripping out line as he did. On the end of his leader was a yellow-and-red streamer, bright and loud as a signal flag. Though the young fox had never fished in his life, he couldn't help but wonder, how the heck did he expect to get a bite on anything that ugly?

After letting out perhaps 15 yards of line, the mink laid on a smooth, forward cast, dropping the fly almost delicately on the backside of an eddy. He let it sink for a second, and then gave two small jerks with his finger. At once the fly-line responded in kind, snapping taut and pulling the rod into a dancing 'C' shape.

"Oooo, nice fish." The patriarch of the badger contingent commented, and at once it demonstrated the accuracy of his statement by breaching the surface in a shimmering leap. It was a cutthroat trout; slim and sharp-nosed, with a galaxy of spots running down its polished bronze flanks. Soon after the fish hit the water again it took off in a long, breezing run, and then abruptly the line went slack. Conor thought for a second that the fish had spit the hook, but then it shot off upriver again, taking the line with it. Expertly, Wilson turned the fish back towards the raft, and commenced to bring it in. The cutt made several more jumps and another run, but the outcome was never in doubt. When he brought it in close to the boat, the badger Dad did the honors with the net. After holding up the fish for a brief inspection, the mink slipped it into the cooler in front of his perch.

"There's dinner," he said.

Just then, the second raft caught up with them.

The next set of rapids was a bit more dicey that the first; here the Alsetz was pinched like an hourglass between a pair of gravel bars, producing a series of low humps in the water.

"Okay, folks." Wilson told them, "It's too narrow for the oars through here, so you'll need to steer us through." To prove it, he pulled in the oars and shipped them. "Everybody get ready to paddle. Ready? GO!"

This cataract was way more exciting than the first one; Conor whooped and fox-screamed as the raft leaped and bounded over every crest of the whitewater; it felt almost like he was flying.

They came out of the second set of rapids into more slow-moving water. Once again, Wilson got his fly rod out, offering the other one to the senior badger. This time however, there were no take-downs, but the bear in charge of the second raft—which had managed to stay with them this time—boated a fish that even from ten yards away was clearly bigger than the one Wilson had caught, something the mink seemed to find quietly annoying.

From there, they went into another carpet of Class 2 Rapids, a fast if not especially bumpy ride, and then more still-water with the rods coming out again. This time the badger's son took a turn, hooking two fish, losing one and bringing in the other, a ten incher that joined the first trout in the cooler.

Then Wilson made a brief announcement to the crew.

"All right folks; the next set of rapids is where things get interesting. If you've got anything on you that can't handle getting drenched, you'll want to put in the storage compartment here in the... Make sure you've got your floatation devices on nice and snug, and get your hats cinched on and all your fursonal belongings secured. Okay... it's about another thirty yards down river to the whitewater. Everybody grab your paddles and hold on tight."
Everyone did; if not right away, then certainly after they got look at what was ahead of them.

Directly in front of the raft, the river came to a high-rolling boil as it narrowed between a set of high cliffs on either side of the water. This was no straight shot like the last set of cataracts but a snaking, double S-curve slalom—with whirlpools, eddies, and the whole shebang.

"All right everyone, here we go." Wilson shouted, and pushed them into the canyon with the oars.

Even before they reached the first cliff, the raft kicked sideways in the current. The mink countered by ordering everyone on the right side of the raft to paddle hard. Conor gave it all he had but at first it felt like wasted effort; he was unable to get any purchase in the back current. Finally, on about the fourth or fifth stroke, he felt the water begin to resist and the boat angled skittishly back to the left. What followed was what he would later describe as 'Mr. Tod's Wild Ride'; the raft slewed, yawed, bucked and pitched as it hurtled through the slalom. At one point they almost banked vertically onto the canyon wall, and twice the raft was almost completely swamped when it plunged headfirst down the backside of a rapid. (Will Trask had been sooo right to order everyone to get their great stowed.)

Then the raft dove under the water a third time, going deeper, much deeper than before…and Conor felt himself begin to float up out of his seat. At once a cold panic began to rise within the young silver fox, cold, much colder than the surrounding water. He should have said something before they started; now it was too late; even with a floatation device, there was no way he could survive in this roiling water. Hang on Mom; I'm coming to join you…

And then the raft came up swiftly again beneath the young fox, slapping him in the rump as if in admonition for harboring such foolish thoughts. He was still on board, a foot or two in front of where he'd been sitting before the raft had crash-dived, but guess what, he was still here. He hurriedly pushed himself back into his seat before they hit the next rough spot, (unfortunately not quite fast enough to avoid seeing the expression on the Erin Hopps' face. 'What's the matter fox, can't handle a little WATER?' she seemed to be saying.)

Except this wasn't little water it was BIG water, and here came the biggest water yet; a high, roiling eddy that looked almost like a maelstrom. The instant the raft entered, it began to spin like a top. Luckily, Wilson Trask was a longtime veteran of this river. At exactly the right moment, he ordered everyone on the left side of the raft to pull hard, while at the same moment, back stroking with his right oar. Conor had no idea how, but it worked; the raft straightened up and spurted out of the eddy into a long, rolling rapid.

And then, just like that, all was smooth if not quite placid. They were out of the canyon—into more fast moving water still, but this time it came with a flat surface.

Everyone raised their paddles and the craft erupted in a cacophony of whoops, screams, whistles, and in the case of the rodents, squeaks and shrieks. Everyone was celebrating the simple joy of being alive. And if anyone who thought they were being overly dramatic, then why was Will Trask taking a head-count, answer me that!

Conor cheered too, letting out a raucous fox-scream—but the truth of the matter was, this had been far from his closest call in life. What had happened to him upon his arrival at Granite Point Youth Facility, his later escape from the joint, and then making it out of Finagles one step ahead of the goon squad; on those three occasions he had come way closer to the end times than he ever had just now…even with his nearly going into the water.

And yet…
In none of those previous instances had he felt such a thrill of exhilaration as he did now. Okay, maybe not the first two times, but how about after his escape from Zoo York, when he'd rolled up the window shade and gotten his first look at Zootopia, the city that was to become his new home? Oh yes, he'd felt it then. (However, since he'd been flying on board an airliner at the time, there'd been no such thing as giving vent to his feelings. Later, on a train platform in Sahara Square, he'd finally felt free to express himself, performing an impromptu victory dance.)

They came out of the fast water into another long slough, and once more Wilson took the opportunity to pick up the fly rod, offering the second one to the girl badger; between the two of them they netted three fish, none of which were quite as big as that first one and all of whom went into the cooler. More rapids followed, meaner than the first set, but not even close to the canyon they'd traversed a short while ago. Even so, there was no shortage of whoopin' and a-hollerin' as they made their way through the whitewater.

At the end of a short, narrow chute, the Alsetz took them into more placid water, a crescent bend of the river fronted by a carpet of baseball-sized rocks on one side, and high, soaring cliffs on the other. Here the water was opal green in the shallows, becoming a transparent cobalt-blue as it deepened away towards the bluffs on the other side. It seemed to Conor that the pool was almost bottomless.

As before, Wilson got out the fishing rods again. It was time for someone else to have a turn, but the mother badger wasn't interested; and so he offered the second rod to any takers. The marmots, Erin, and Terri all declined, and he was just about to put the rod away when Conor felt his right paw shooting up.

No one was more surprised than him—except perhaps for Erin Hopps.

"Huh…? What do you know about fly-fishing, fox?"

Conor considered his options for a moment. If this were a cartoon, he would have said that he knew fishing like the back of his paw, Mr. Expert, that's me…and then of course it would have ended with him making a complete mess of things, perhaps even ending with a dunking and then him stalking off in a huff.

Well, this wasn't a cartoon, it was real life and besides…they were on board a raft and in the middle of a river; there'd be no such thing as stomping off anywhere right now.

"Not a darn thing," The young fox shrugged as he took the rod, "but I'm itching to give it a try."

And it was only after he'd spoken the words that he realized they were true.

They were also wise words; upon hearing Conor's admission, Will Trask took the opportunity to give him a quick lesson in the art of casting a streamer.

"When you strip the line out, keep your rod pointed at the spot you're trying to hit; imagine that you're pointing with your finger. When you've got enough line out, slow down your arm and just let the line lay down gently on the water; like you're laying down a sheet on the bed."

Conor nodded; it sounded simple enough—although it probably wasn't. "Where should I aim for?"

he asked.

Wilson pointed with an oar towards the cliff-side bank.

"See that foam, where the ripple meets the smooth water? That's called a seam, try to aim just above it and let your fly drift inside, and then give it a couple of short pulls."
Raising the rod and taking a shallow breath, the young fox commenced to strip out the line, making his gamest effort. His first cast fell well short of his target, but at least he didn't put a knot in the line. His second cast went a mite too far, laying itself down on the water well above the seam; that however was good enough.

"That's okay, just let it drift." Wilson told him. "That's it, reel in your slack. Yeah, that's good. Okay, little more…little more. Okay, give your line a couple of short jerks."

The young fox only managed one short jerk before something jerked back—hard! And then the rod bent almost double and the line was singing off the reel.

"Holy Crike, that's a steelhead!" Will Trask cried out excitedly, "Hold on to him, kid."

He turned quickly, dropping a pyramid shaped anchor into the water. It caught almost immediately and the raft began to waggle in the current. Then he turned his attention back to Conor, who looked as if he was going to lose not only the fish, but also the rod and his breakfast at any second. For half a second, he considered relieving the young fox of his burden but then decided swiftly against it. Fifteen years of river guiding had taught Wilson Trask to recognize the different types of clients…and this kid looked like the type who'd rather lose a fish himself than give it to someone else to bring in successfully. So instead the mink grabbed his own fly-rod, using it as a demonstration prop.

"Conor, hold it like this," he said, laying it flat above the water, "and use your fingers as a brake to slow the run."

The young fox did as he was told, (what the heck else could he do?) At the first application of pressure the fish leaped up out of the water, jumping higher than he was tall. Several animals gasped and the elder badger let out a low whistle. Conor nearly dropped the rod; this thing was a freaking Troutzilla, at least twice the length of any of the other fish they'd brought in so far, and with easily four times the weight. It had broad-shoulders and a green-back and was built like a living torpedo, with flanks as bright and silvery as a newly-minted dime, decorated with a stripe like the insides of a watermelon.

"That's in the teens at least." Wilson commented cryptically as the trout hit the water for another run. This time, after only a short sprint, its strength seemed to peter out.

"Okay Conor, start bringing him in," the mink told him, "Raise your rod and then reel in as you lower it, like this." As he spoke, he pantomimed the action using his own rod, and the young fox quickly followed suit. He had managed to recover about half the distance, when the line turned and began to sweep in the opposite direction.

"He's going to run again, let him go." Wilson's voice was sharp and fast. At once the line straightened and the steelhead darted away from the boat at high speed, this time moving downriver with the current to help him.

"Careful, that's only six-pound leader." The young male badger advised, and Conor got the message right away. You didn't have to be the secretary of weights and measure to know that this fish came in at more than six pounds. The second run was shorter than the first and the young fox had just started to reel in again, when the steelhead rocketed straight up out of the water, twisting and shaking in the air for a good six feet. On the other side of the boat, he heard a repetitive clicking noise, and from the corner of his eye he saw that Mrs. Badger had a long-lens camera out and was busily snapping away.

When the fish hit the water again, the line went limp for a second and Conor felt his heart sink. But
then abruptly it tightened again; the fight was still on.

The next twenty minutes could only be described as a see-saw battle; reel, run, repeat. Once, the young fox managed to get the fish close enough to the raft for Wilson to grab the net, only to have it take off upriver when the shadow fell over the water. It was as if the steelhead knew what was about to happen. Several more times during the contest, the big trout performed an aerial ballet, each time to the accompaniment of the mother badger's clicking camera.

But with every run it made, the steelhead seemed to be losing ground; each flight was shorter than the one just before it. Conor felt that he was finally starting to get the upper paw when the fish turned and made a sudden dash for an eddy on the far side of the river.

"Conor, don't let him get in there!" Wilson jabbed a finger at the swirl in the water. "There's a sunken log, he'll tangle you and break off."

The young fox tightened up the line, holding the rod sideways, the way the mink had shown him earlier. The line continued to strip off the reel, the steelhead moving closer and closer to the submerged log and freedom.

There was only one thing to do Conor decided; tighten up on the drag all the way. The fish would either break off or else he'd turn it away from the snag, but there was no way he was going to just sit here helplessly and let the steelie take him into that logjam.

He pressed down on the line, the rod bent further and further; the tip shimmying like a divining rod. He couldn't hold it; the steelhead was going to…

The line swept away from the eddy, towards the center of the river, and the fish came up again, this time rolling sideways on the surface of the water, its energy finally spent.

"Hurry Conor bring him in before he recovers!" Wilson Trask cried, and the young fox moved quickly to comply.

It was almost anti-climactic, the steelhead came to the boat with only a few more token flips of its tail, and the badger scooped it easily out of the water with the net. That was when Conor learned that the net had a built-in scale. "15 pounds, NICE one," the badger-dad declared, passing it over for him to see. A round of cheers and a quick series of pictures followed, with Conor holding up his prize while Mrs. Badger snapped away with her camera again.

"Okay Conor, give it here." Wilson Trask was holding out his arms.

The young fox duly gave him the fish…and then watched completely flummoxed as the mink slipped it back into the river and let it swim away.

"What the….Grrrr!" He almost said the 'y' word, "You let it go? After all that work, you just let it GO!"

"Yep, didn't want to keep that one." Wilson slapped his paws together as he sat up again.

Conor's jaw nearly fell straight into the river.

"What the heck's the point of even trying to catch a fish like that if you're just going to let it go?" he demanded, sputtering and waving his arms at the river.

Will Trask's face was a portrait etched in innocence.
"To watch it suffer." he said.

A chorus of snarks and sniggers erupted around the raft. The first to start laughing out loud was Erin, (who else?) and then everyone was laughing. And then Conor was laughing too, laughing his tail off. Oh yes, there was a LOT of the old Kieran McCrodon blarney in this mink, even if he wasn't Irish.

"Seriously Conor," Will said when they all recovered, "You couldn't have kept that steelie if you wanted to; it was a wild fish not a hatchery fish; it's not legal to retain them on the Alsetz."

"Oh," the young fox nodded. Okay, now he felt better about things, even though he had no idea how the mink had been able to tell the difference between… "Ow!"

Erin Hopps had just elbowed him in the arm.

"And besides, where's your license, kid?"

"Yeah," her buddy Terri echoed, with a smirk.

Conor sat back in his seat and grumbled silently. "WHY didn't I put my foot down about coming on this ride when I had the chance?" (Later of course, he would decide that it was worth it.)

The next set of rapids was about a class 2.5, not especially fast or high, but seriously kinky and twisting. As they paddled their way through, Conor found that he enjoyed the challenge of trying to anticipate, and then negotiate each bend and switch of the current.

Another slow section followed, but no more fish; even Wilson couldn't manage to entice another strike, and then he instructed everyone to button up again, they were coming to another set of class 3 rapids.

This time, there was no sign of what was up ahead, only a line of foaming water with nothing visible beyond it.

Well whatever was on the other side, Conor was not going to risk drowning a second time; he wrapped his ankle around the base of his seat, locking himself in place.

And then they were over the lip and heading down a long flume. The path here was more or less a straightaway, but this was the steepest drop they'd made so far. No one was whooping everyone was paddling, but there was that sense of breathless exhilaration again, everything standing out in relief; the green of the water, the gray of the rocks, the blue sky overhead, the hiss and gurgle of the river, the scent of pine and moisture, the cold sting of the spray, the taste of it when a stray droplet entered you mouth, and above it all the high sensation of speed…all these came together as the raft went hurtling down the chute.

At the end of the cataract, the river seemed to flatten out abruptly; Conor was certain they were in for another deep plunge, but instead the raft just straightened out as easily as if it were coming down a parking-garage ramp.

Now everyone whooped and cheered, but then Wilson had an announcement to make.

"Okay folks," he said, sounding almost a little shamefaced, "Our take out's just around the next bend."

This news was greeted by a chorus of 'awwws', groans, and grumbles; did they have to go in now? Couldn't they stay on the river just a LITTLE bit longer?
Of course it wasn't meant to be, and when the ramp finally came in sight, they found the big raft already pulled up on the beach. (When had it overtaken them?) Seeing their approach, the bear who'd been guiding raft #2 called out through a pair of cupped paws. "Hey, where you been, slowpokes?"

Wilson happily called back.

"We got a 15 pound native steelie; that answer your question, Toby?"

The bear immediately snapped his fingers in an exaggerated 'Oh pshaw!' gesture.

When they got the raft up on shore he naturally insisted upon seeing the proof—which they had plenty of, courtesy of Mrs. Carla Rodgers photographic skills. (Conor had finally caught her name.)

"Whoa and you got that on a trout rod?" the bear asked, squinting at the display on the back of the badger's digital camera.

"Not me, him," The mink answered, pointing at the young silver fox beside him.

Toby turned and to Conor's surprise, shook his head with a rueful, almost mournful expression on his face.

"Whoa-boy…you done it now, kid." He said, "Now you're gonna be hooked on fishing for the rest of your life."

Then he grinned and offered a high five which Conor eagerly returned…and then the young silver fox had another piece of business to attend to.

"Um, do you think you could send me a few of those pics you took of me and my fish?" he asked, speaking to Mrs. Rodgers.

"I'll do better than that," she said, "This camera's got Wi-Fi. If you have your cell-phone with you, I can upload them right now."

"Great!" the young fox replied. He chose the single best picture of himself holding the fish plus three more shots of it leaping out of the water. After thanking the lady badger profusely and saying his farewells, he became aware of a presence behind him.

When he turned around, Erin Hopps was there, arms folded and a smug expression on her face. Standing behind her and off to the side was her girlfriend Terri Blackburn, grinning and holding her paws up in that curled, devious manner that only a mustelid can get right.

"Well?" Erin demanded, raising an eyebrow.

Conor's ears began to work in confusion. "Well, what?"

The girl-bunny's eyebrow lifted half an inch higher.

"You know what, fox…let's hear it."

"Let's hear what? What the heck are you talking about?" Conor was staring at her with his head tilted sideways.

Erin lifted her nose and sniffed.

"You know perfectly well what I'm talking about Conor Lewis; now come on, let me hear you say
it."

He began to sputter again.

"Hear me say…what the heck? You crazy rabbit, what the heck are you talking about?"

"You know fox, now come on; say it." She was giving him half a stink eye.

"I don't know what you're…"

"Say it, fox."

"Listen, this is…:

"Sayyyy it." Conor balled his fists and jammed them downwards; then he screwed his eyes shut and mumbled something through gritted teeth.

"Ayudvun!"

Erin turned her head sideways and cupped a paw to her ear.

"What was that, Fox? Speak up, I can't understand you?"

He let out a hissing breath and then repeated himself.

"Iyadfun."

She leaned in closer, "Hmmm? I must have wax in my ears. What did you say again?"

"I had fun!" the young fox said; it came out as an almost feral growl.

"Whaaaaat?" Erin asked again…and the dam finally breached.

"I had FUN okay, Snowdrop?" Conor snarled, waving his arms in the air, "I lots of fun, TONS of fun; I had fun, fun, fun until daddy takes the T-Bird away!" Finally he calmed down and his words became sincere, "I did have fun Erin…and thanks for asking me."

Erin whooped and gave Terri a high-five, thumping her foot like a snare-drum. "You heard him Terr, you heard the fox; he had FUN today, whoo-hoo!"

"All right, all right," Conor's ears were moving every which way again. "What the heck is it with you bunnies and all the foot thumping anyway?"

Erin was only too happy to enlighten him.

"It's how we express different emotions, Conor."

She thumped her foot again.

"This how we thump when we're angry…"

And again…

"This is how we thump when we're happy…"
A third time…

"This is how we thump when we're sad…"

And then again,

"And this is how we thump when we're…"

She stopped and a sudden blush rose in her ears as she looked away from the young fox.

He took no noticed, instead making a 'T' with his paws.

"Hold it, hold it; that all looks the same to me!"

Erin peered at him as if he were an idiot.

"Well DUH, it looks the same to you, fox! You're not a bunny."

Conor rolled his eyes, and then his lips.

"Uhhhh…yeah." he said, and then, "all right, I get that, but why are you so happy about me having fun anyway?"

Erin slapped her paws together.

"Because now I don't owe you a thing. Eeee-yes!"

She might have had more to say on the subject, except now it was Conor's turn to look smug.

"News flash, Snowdrop…you never owed me anything to begin with."

Before Erin could respond to this, a familiar car horn sounded at the head of the boat ramp.

They all turned, and saw Junior Hopps leaning out the window of the Family Farm truck.

"Erin, Conor…c'mon, we've got to go!"

The tone of his voice was clearly one that would brook no argument.

Erin turned quickly to Terri Blackburn, "Oops, sorry to turn off like this, Terr."

"It's all good, Erin." The young ferret girl replied.

She too had caught the urgency in Junior's summons. They hugged a fast good bye and then she and Conor turned and hurried for the truck

"Hey, what's going on, big brother?" the white furred bunny asked when they got there, but Junior only opened the passenger door and motioned them quickly inside.

"Okay, what…?" Erin started to say as she buckled herself into her seat; but the older bunny still refused to speak, making a 'shushing' motion with his paw. It wasn't until they had pulled out onto the highway that he finally opened up.

"Erin, it's Uncle Terry…" He looked warily at Conor for a second, "He had another…mmm, "episode."

Erin's ears lifted upwards and her nose began to twitch, but then all at once they dropped and a cold
shudder seemed to run through her…and then she was the one giving the young fox an uneasy look.

Conor wanted badly to know what was going on, but wisely chose to keep his questions to himself; he'd get nothing out of either one of these two and besides, he had a feeling that he'd find out soon enough.

Later, much later, he would reflect that it was probably good thing Junior told had him nothing. Had the young fox known then what he learned that evening, he would probably have bailed out of the passenger window right then and there—and never mind how fast the truck was going.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note:

Conor's fight with the steelhead was inspired by true events…and many other parts of the story have roots in the real world as well.

Wilson Trask takes his name from two coastal rivers in Oregon. The second one was where I had an encounter with a pair of wild mink some years ago. (The two of them were frolicking on the other side of the river.)

The Easter Eggs: a reference to a scene in The Fox and the Hound, and also to certain Disney theme park attraction and a Beach Boys tune.
Seth Whitepaugh's reaction to Gully's report could be summed up in just three words. "He…did…WHAT?"

The wolverine was not in a good mood—to put it mildly. What made it even worse was the fact that only a short while ago, his outlook had been entirely different; things had been developing nicely up to that point.

Now he wanted to sink his claws into something…or someone. Could Jack La Peigne have really have acted that impetuously…NOW, of all times?

Yes he could, Whitepaugh concluded testily; it wouldn't be the first, or the worst such instance.

He spoke into his bluefang again.

"And you heard all this from Clawson?" he asked, arching an eyebrow.

200 miles away, 'King' Cole Gully looked briefly at the door and then glanced at the prostrate form of Laura Clawson, slumbering fitfully beneath the covers of the hospital bed. How should he present this? Straight up, no frills he swiftly decided; that was the only way to talk to Seth Whitepaugh.

A part of him still couldn't believe he had dared to call Aker's much-feared senior operative on the emergency hotline. But if what he'd heard was true…

"Yes sir, but I honestly can't vouch for the accuracy of what I heard; I don't think Clawson knew
what she was saying, Mr. Whitepaw; she took a pretty good knock on the head from that savage
bunny. For all I know, she could have imagined the whole thing." There was silence on the other
end and he added quickly, "Just the same, I thought I should notify headquarters immediately…er,
just in case."

There was more silence and for a second or two, Gully wondered if the call had been dropped, but
then the other wolverine asked him, "And you're certain that no one else heard what she said?"

"Yes sir," Gully answered at once, relieved that finally he was able to relate something he knew for
a fact, "We were alone in here at the time." He paused, wondering if he should say it now, but then
decided it could wait. Instead he told Whitepaugh, "They've sedated her sir, so it's not likely she'll
be saying anything else, but I'm keeping watch just the same." Okay now, now tell him, "However
I should mention that errr, I'm not supposed to be in here Mr. Whitepaugh. If a doctor or a nurse
walks in and finds me…"

"We'll handle it," Whitepaugh told him, snapping his fingers and pointing towards a nutria seated
at one of the work-stations. "You there, our operative Gully will require access to operative
Clawson. She's in Pawvidence Memorial Hospital, Bunnyburrow at the moment. He's to be granted
full admission to her room, 24/7; take care of it."

"Yes sir." The big rodent nodded once and spoke into his headset. "Look up and dial number,
Pawvidence Memorial Hospital…Bunnyburrow…I need to speak to the senior staff member on
duty…"

Whitepaugh listened for a second and then spoke again to the other wolverine.

"You've done well, Gully. All right, I want you to stay with her and report back to me the minute
you hear anything else. Understood?"

"Yes sir," Gully answered, so smartly that Whitepaugh thought he heard heels clicking. He was a
good mammal that one, if a little bit of brown-noser.

"And of course, you're to say nothing of this conversation to anyone," he told the young field
operative, and then paused for effect before adding, "To anyone! Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly sir," Gully answered, and from the tone of his reply, Seth Whitepaugh knew that he'd
gotten the message across; 'to anyone' included Jack La Peigne.

"Right, keep me informed," he said, "Whitepaugh Out."

He rang off, and switched to the PA app. A moment later his voice echoed through the control
center. "Attention all fursonell; the conversation that I just had is not to leave this room." He
paused as if a thought had just then entered his head, "As a matter of fact, as far as any of you are
concerned, I didn't talk to anyone just now; there WAS no conversation." He gave them a few
seconds to register his words and then allowed his tone to soften until it become almost congenial.
"I know I can count on your co-operation."

A moment later, Seth Whitepaugh was inside his private office, having left instructions not to be
disturbed. Like Jack la Peigne's private domain, it was cavernous and fitted with the latest high-
tech gadgetry; unlike his superior's office, the furnishing here were austere, almost Spartan; a dash
of chrome, a splash of oak and that was it; two chairs, a simple, modern desk, a wall of
bookshelves, and a combination couch and futon bed where the wolverine sometimes curled up
after pulling a double all-nighter. No knick-knacks adorned the shelves; no pictures graced the
walls—except for one. It showed Whitepaugh in military garb, posing in company with his squad,
the only reminder of his past that he allowed in presence. All of the faces in the photo except for his had been digitally obliterated.

No one who came in here had ever dared to ask about that picture, not even Jack La Peigne, (but then he probably knew most of the story anyway.)

Whitepaugh seated himself behind the desk and leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers behind his head and letting his eyes turn upwards, towards the ceiling.

He had known much of what happened in Bunnyburrow even before the call from Gully had come in; a rabbit had gone savage at the Carrot Days Festival but had already been subdued and was now on his way to the hospital. Jack La Peigne was unhurt, but one of the Aker security fursonell was down. Dr. H had been dispatched to fly out to Bunnyburrow on the Aker executive helicopter, bringing her with a supply of Morningmew—and she was supposed to arrive there yesterday, (Jack LaPeigne's fursonal orders.) At first Whitepaugh had been inclined to consider the matter settled. No worries, his boss had everything under control.

That had all changed the instant Gully pinged him on the emergency hotline. As of 20 minutes ago, the Bunnyburrow incident was back at priority #1.

Whitepaugh puffed out his cheeks and blew a stuttering breath of air. There was still so much he didn't know. For example how the heck had that bunny managed to get hold of a Nighthowler pellet meant for...what was that fox's name again? Oh yes, Nick Wilde. And then why had Jack La Peigne had intervened fursonally, taking on the savage rabbit all by himself.

Yes, he had; it was one of the few things Seth Whitepaugh knew for certain. Gully—and Racius too—had put an end that fight; hitting the crazed bunny with trank-darts just as he was about to.... What on earth had prompted his boss to take such an incredible risk?

And WHY had he tried to slip that fox a Nighthowler Mickey in the first place? And right in the middle of the Carrot Days Festival! That was the 64 $Billion question—literally, in light of what the wolverine had discovered over the past two days. The more he mulled it over, the less sense it all made. It was like a middle-school prank gone wrong in the worst possible way.

"This could put the whole Fire Triangle operation in jeopardy." Whitepaugh thought to himself, and then asked out loud of no one in particular, "What the heck HAPPENED out there?"

The answer came to him at once, an answer of sorts anyway. He wasn't going to find out by sitting here and stewing about it.

He spoke briefly into his headset. "Operations, this is Whitepaugh, what is the status on the Aker executive helicopter?"

A few seconds of dead air followed, and then a voice came on the line.

"Just lifted off from LPN Meadowlands, sir. Dr. H is confirmed on board."

"Very well," the wolverine replied, and drummed his fingers on the desktop in a slow, steady beat. How far out of the way would it take them? Fifteen, twenty-five minutes at most, he decided.

He spoke into the headset again.

"Contact the pilot and tell him to divert to our downtown HQ and pick me up on the helipad."

Anticipating a protest, he added crisply, "I take full responsibility."
"Yes sir, done and done," the voice answered and rang off.

Whitepaugh listened to the silence on the line for a moment and then leaned back in his chair again. Altering Jack La Peigne's direct orders was a chancy move, even for him. Nonetheless it had to be done, the wolverine concluded. He needed to get to the bottom of whatever was happening in Bunnyburrow and right now.

He pushed himself up out of his seat and strode briskly towards the door.

"But he was given the antidote!"

The thought had been on Bonnie Hopps mind ever since she'd watched her brother Terry being loaded into the ambulance. Only now did she finally give it vent.

"He was given an antidote but not THE antidote," Jack LaPeigne patted her paw, "not the one we have now."

They were sitting in the ER waiting room, watching what seemed like an endless parade of doctors, nurses, interns, and orderlies streaming back on forth in front of them. This being Bunnyburrow, most of the hospital fursnonell were rabbits, with one or two larger mammals in the mix, along with the occasional rodent. The light in the reception area was sharp and antiseptic, so was the air.

Bonnie looked wholly unsatisfied with Jack's answer, so did Judy and practically every other member of the Hopps family present.

The big bunny got up out of his seat and turned to face them, chewing on his lip for a second. This was going to require a careful explanation.

He rubbed his nose with a finger.

"Look, I'm not any kind of a medical expert, but I'll tell you what I know. It all goes back to the savage predator crisis. At first, like everyone else, we had no idea that Nighthowler serum was the causative agent." He showed them his pawlms, as if demonstrating that he had nothing to hide. "Why should we? Why would anyone want to dart predators with that stuff in the first place?"

Everyone nodded and the big bunny nodded back. Then he looked over at Judy, (giving Nick Wilde only a token acknowledgement. ) "But when you and your partner there finally cracked the case, it was the breakthrough we'd been looking for. Nighthowler, I knew that stuff. My father had successfully treated a case of Nighthowler poisoning before I was born and I still had all his notes and papers. From them, we—by 'we' I mean everyone at LPN Pharma—from them we were able to reproduce the treatment my father had used on your uncle."

He let out a small, grumbling noise.

"Only when we tried it on the predators Mayor Bellwether darted, there was no effect; they remained in their savage state. Long story short, we ended up having to reverse engineer my father's antidote to discover the active ingredients. I won't bore you with the details, but my father had developed his Nighthowler antidote from a mushroom called the Splayfoot. You know what that is I'm sure." He looked at Stu, who nodded quickly.

"Anyway," Jack went on, "We did some research and found out that it exists in a higher concentration in the berries of the Morningmew vine, although also in a slightly different form."

"Morningmew?" Nick Wilde's ears went up as he spoke for the first time, "Seriously? That stuff's
considered a nuisance plant in the Rainforest district."

"I know, right?" La Peigne offered the fox a (forced) wry grin, "There's at least two lawn and
garden companies back in Zootopia that specialize in Morningmew eradication; it's that big of a
pest." He turned back to the others. "In its raw form the extract of the Morningmew berry has no
effect on Nighthowler poisoning; we found that out right away. But it was the right place to start,
and eventually we developed Morningmew serum that completely reversed the effects of the
Nighthowler darts." He allowed himself a serene half-smile, "The technical name is almost
unpronounceable so I just call it Morningmew. One thing I can tell you is that it's a lot harder to
synthesize than the Nighthowler serum. Your little friend Doug could never have pulled it off, not
by himself and not with the backyard lab set up he had in that subway car." He was looking at Judy
again.

All the bunnies' noses had started to twitch again, but it was Nick Wilde who asked the question.

"So why don't you just give Carrots' uncle some of that…Morningmew serum right now?"

Jack tensed, and almost took a step towards Nick. For hint of second, the fox felt his hackles start
to rise, but then as if someone had waved a wand, the big rabbit instantly calmed himself.

"Nick, I know it doesn't bother Judy when you call her Carrots," he said, "but it bothers me. An
incident in my youth let's say, and leave it at that."

"I understand, I'll keep to myself from now on," the red fox said, raising his paw in a Junior Ranger
Scout salute. (What else could he do? Every eye in the room was turned on him, and the looks he
was getting were not friendly…except from Judy; her face was almost sympathetic.)

"But to answer your question," Jack La Peigne said, moving the conversation forward, "If Terry…
errr, Haredigg had been hit by a Nighthowler pellet, then yes we could give him a shot of
Morningmew and he'd be good as new in no time." He paused and let his mouth pull to one side,
"Only that isn't what happened; we don't know what happened. And until we do…heck, even if we
did, it's not my call to make. If you'll pardon the cheap cultural reference, dangit Jim, I'm a
businessmammal, not a doctor."

A wave of sniggers circled through the group, but then the big bunny's mouth turned downwards
and his nose began to twitch.

"One other thing I know; what I saw at the Carrot Days Festival was NOT from the effects of a
Nighthowler dart." He looked at Bonnie, "Did you see how your brother Terry almost had me for
breakfast back there? He was learning from me, turning my own tactics against me; we haven't
seen that happen before, not in any other instance of Nighthowler poisoning."

He shuddered slightly, a completely spontaneous gesture…the only one he'd made so far. (As a
matter of fact, right up until he'd made that revelation Jack LaPeigne been lying through his teeth.)

But then he felt his ear go up and saw several other sets of ears also standing to attention;
somewhere to the north the faint thrum of a helicopter was just becoming audible.

He looked as his watch; nearly 30 minutes late, which could only mean one thing. There was
another passenger on board that helicopter besides Doctor H—and he didn't need to be psychic to
guess who it was.

"Only one way to deal with this." the big bunny swiftly decided and that was to meet it head on.
"I'm sorry sir, Terry Haredigg was admitted through the Emergency Room. You'll have to go around to the ER Entrance to see him."

Conor watched as Junior Hopps thumped his foot in aggravation. He could hardly blame the guy; it had taken the dimbulb deer behind the reception desk at least half an hour to retrieve that information—they could have gotten quicker answers from a sloth—and she sounded about as sorry as the repo mammal about to tow your car.

"C'mon kids, let's go," Junior said, and led them back outside to the parking lot.

Like so many other medical facilities, Pawvidence Memorial Hospital was built on a hilltop or, this being Bunnyburrow, it was built INTO a hilltop. You could never mistake this place for a homestead though; the parts of it showing above ground were as boxy and utilitarian as a tool-chest. Steel, stone, and tinted-glass windows; you could tell you were looking at a hospital from a half-mile away.

And also like every other hospital, it was constructed with the Emergency Room entrance clear over on the other side of the building from the main entrance.

Fortunately there was a parking garage adjacent to the ER; not so fortunate was the fact that every space on the first three levels was taken, and the only open spot on level four was a football field's distance from the elevator.

All of this plus the runaround they'd gotten at the reception desk combined to bring Junior Hopps to a slow boil by the time they reached it. Conor, for his part took it all in stride…until the elevator door opened and he saw what was parked in the space beside the stairwell, the one marked 'Service Vehicles Only'.

It was an armored TAC-Vehicle bearing the letters ASM, and it looked very much like one he'd seen three years ago—parked at the perimeter of the police-cordon encircling Finagles Dance Club, batted down and ready to move in. When he spotted the animal in the ASM uniform lounging by the ER entrance, the young fox's anxiety ticked upwards by an extra two notches…but only for half a second. This wolverine was not one of the animals who had taken part in the Finagles raid—Conor would know those goons anywhere. His appearance and scent were both completely unfamiliar to the young silver fox…and the feeling was apparently mutual. Racius never so much as glanced in his direction as he and the others went past.

Conor would have felt considerably less reassured had he known that one of passengers on the helicopter about to touch down behind the ER was also wolverine. And not only was this animal a veteran of the Finagles raid, he was the operative who'd been fursonally charged with returning the young fox to Aker's custody; Seth Whitepaugh would recognize him instantly if they met. In all the time since then, he had never forgotten his target's scent. (And Conor had never forgotten his odor—or Jack La Peigne's)

And speaking of the big rabbit, he was practically right on the other side of the door from where Conor now stood, and if he didn't know fox scent from frankincense, he was all too aware that the kid he'd met those many moons ago, (and who'd later given him all those headaches) was a silver fox….a silver fox with burning amber eyes that he had never encountered before or since.

Pawvidence Memorial Hospital actually had two separate entrances to the ER, both of them fronted by automatic doors and both of them placed at either end of a short, L-shaped corridor. The first door, the one used most often, fronted on the ambulance entrance while the second door, the one employed far less frequently, opened towards the hospital's helipad.
And now, at the exact same instant that Junior moved in front of the door to the ambulance entrance, Jack LaPeigne stepped in front of the door to the helipad.

They slid back simultaneously, releasing an explosive gust of helicopter backwash that blew through the ER entrance corridor like a low-budget hurricane effect. The doors were open for perhaps two seconds, but in that short space of time, the corridor was swept clean of any scent… including that of Jack LaPeigne.

If either he or Conor had looked right then, they might have caught sight of each other, but both of them were had their eyes shielded and their faces turned aside.

Then Jack moved quickly through the helipad door with Judy and Nick right behind him. It slid shut immediately and the wind-tunnel shut off just like that.

Judy Hopps managed about three steps, and then stopped in her tracks; (so did Nick.)

A familiar figure was disembarking from the helicopter, a mammal she was anything but happy to see again. No, not the wolverine, it was the other mustelid with him. She was a honey-badger, none other than Dr. Madge Honeybadger, Mayor Lionheart's former partner in cover-up.

Judy felt her nose twitching as she recalled what she knew of the not-so-good doctor's recent history.

Madge Honeybadger had managed to avoid jail time through that most venerable of all legal tactics, a plea bargain. Specifically, she had offered to testify against Leodore Lionheart in exchange for immunity from prosecution. The episode that followed had been Judy's first foray into the Byzantine world of courthouse politics. Ordinarily, the honey-badger's offer would have been laughed out of the judge's chambers; with or without her assistance, the Zootopia Attorney General's office had more than enough evidence to convict her former employer. But then to everyone's astonishment, former Mayor Lionheart had entered a plea of 'not guilty'—and City Hall had stepped in. The City fathers (and mothers) already had enough egg on their collective faces over having been played by Dawn Bellwether; the last thing they'd needed right then was a courtroom carnival and everything that came with it. And so the Attorney General's office had been persuaded to come to terms with Dr. Honeybadger.

On the surface the accommodation had appeared to be an exercise in needless overkill; in fact it was a shrewd gambit. When Lionheart heard that his 'medical advisor' had flipped, he immediately changed his plea to guilty, no trial required, thank you very much.

At the press conference announcing the plea-bargain, Zootopia's then Attorney General, a red kangaroo named Tucker Clagg had made much of the fact that just prior to her arrest, Dr. Honeybadger had been overheard urging Leodore Lionheart to come clean with the public about what was happening. He had even played back part of the recording Judy Hopps had made of the conversation between her and the former Mayor.

When Judy had gotten wind of the deal, it had taken every single ounce of Nick Wilde's powers of persuasion to get her to calm down.

"Yes, she said that Nick…but then what happened when my cell-phone rang, how clean did she want to come then?"

The answer of course, was that Dr. Honeybadger had initiated a lockdown and a security sweep. And though she had always insisted afterwards that if she’d known one of the intruders was a police officer she never would have done so, Judy Hopps had remained stoutly unconvinced of her
sincerity. "That phony would have said anything to save her own pelt!"

And now here she was again…and in the employment of Jack La Peigne.

Judy felt her face stiffening; the big bunny's halo seemed to slip just a mite.

LaPeigne didn't notice; at the moment, his attention was focused on the helicopter's other passenger.

"You don't seem surprised to see me, sir." Seth Whitepaugh told him, when they came within speaking distance.

"Should I be?" the big bunny asked, raising his voice to be heard over the helicopter blades; though they had finally begun to slow they were still producing a low grade racket. "Frankly, I'd have been surprised if you hadn't shown up," he said.

The wolverine gave a non-committal shrug and Jack said to him, "May I assume you want to talk privately?"

"You may," Whitepaugh answered, equally unsurprised that his boss had correctly guessed he was on board the helicopter.

The big rabbit nodded and pointed towards the parking garage. "We can talk inside the tac-vehicle." He said, and then to the wolverine's astonishment, he turned to speak to the bunny standing behind him.

"I'm sorry, this won't wait. Can you excuse me for a few minutes?"

"Of course."

"No problem."

Nick and Judy answered simultaneously, while Seth Whitepaugh fought to contain his surprise.

Jack La Peigne…ASKING to be excused, instead of simply taking his leave because he felt like it? There was one for the Believe It or Not files!

And one other thing; the big rabbit had been speaking only to the doe-bunny just now; the fox he had all but ignored.

What was going on here?

"You shouldn't have brought them here, son."

Bonnie Hopps had taken Junior aside and was speaking in a hushed voice. Just the same, both Conor and Erin were able to make out her words. (It's pretty hard not to be overheard in a hospital waiting area.)

"The doctors aren't letting anyone but the immediate family see your Uncle Terry right now," she went on to explain, "Sweet cheez n' crackers I had to argue for ten minutes before they'd let your FATHER in to see him…and there's nothing to see anyway. They've got him heavily sedated and…"

"All right Mom, all right." Stu Hopps Jr. was raising his paws in defeat. "How is he, anyway?"
Bonnie's nose wrinkled in annoyance. Hadn't she just told him that her brother was under sedation?

"There's an expert just arrived from Zootopia to help us out," She said, pointing in the direction of the helipad. She arched an eyebrow, "and the best thing we can do right now is just to stay out of his way."

Junior got the unspoken message; that went double for him and triple for his two young companions. He turned and spoke to them.

"Okay kids, looks like we're out of here. What do you want to do, head on back to the Warren or to head on over to the Carrot Days festival?"

"Home," Erin answered immediately, ignoring the young fox standing beside her. "I need to rest up a little before the big dance tonight."

"Yeah, we do," Conor chimed in giving her a caustic sideways glance. The truth of the matter was, he couldn't care less about any stupid dance, but there was no way he was letting Little Miss Snowdrop steal the conversation…again!

They made their exit scant seconds before Judy and Nick came in through the other door in company with Dr. Honeybadger.

Jack closed the door to the tactical-vehicle, locking it firmly and removing a carrot-pen from his pocket. This one was very different than the writing instrument routinely carried by Officer Judy Hopps. It was longer and slimmer for one thing, and for another it was fashioned out of gleaming copper-gold, with tinted platinum for the greens. More to the point, this carrot-pen had no voice recorder function but was built to an entirely different purpose.

He flicked the switch and set it on the dashboard, while Seth Whitepaugh nodded in appreciation.

"Can't be too careful, not even when you're inside an armored vehicle with sound-shielding."

Then he said to the big bunny, "So what happened?" dispensing as usual with any preamble. It seemed it not to matter at all that he was speaking to his superior.

In point of fact, it did matter…but not in any way that an observer might have expected. Jack LaPeigne not only permitted his senior operative to talk to him that way, he endorsed and even encouraged it.

"I need one animal around me who isn't afraid to give me the straight story, even if it's something I don't want to hear," He had once told Seth Whitepaugh.

Now he spread his paws in an almost helpless gesture.

"I messed up, Whitepaugh, I let my emotions get the better of me and acted without thinking. Between that buttinski arctic fox Dimitri Oloshenko and our difficulties Down Under…"

He went on give the wolverine an unvarnished account of the morning's events, beginning with his arrival at the Guilford estate and ending with his arrival at the hospital. He spared nothing and pulled no punches, least of all the ones directed at himself.

"I didn't think it through, I admit that, Whitepaugh. I completely forgot that I'd ordered Gully and Racius to stow their weapons, and it never occurred to me that someone else might get hold of the 'special' blueberry." He looked away muttering, "I'm just glad it wasn't Judy."
Whitepaugh pretended not to hear, but secretly filed away the big bunny's words for later. He had said 'Judy' not 'Hopps'.

"How is Clawson, by the way?" he asked LaPeigne. (He already knew, but didn't want his boss to know that he knew.)

"Minor concussion; she's resting comfortably, under sedation." The big bunny answered, looking uncharacteristically guilty for a second.

"Good," Whitepaugh nodded, filing that away as well, "and how about you sir?" he nodded downward at the big bunny's ankle, now concealed beneath the leg of a fresh pair of Docker pants.

La Peigne flexed his foot and stamped it lightly.

"No worries, just a little sprain; they taped it up and gave me some painkillers. I hardly notice it now."

"Good," the wolverine answered again. That was far from his biggest concern, but he wanted to give his superior the chance to volunteer the information before having to ask about it.

The big bunny did not disappoint him.

"No doubt you're wondering why I chose to take on that savage rabbit all by myself, Whitepaugh. There are two answers to that question; number one, there was no one else available. All of the Sheriff's deputies and most of our security fursonell were on the other side of the festival grounds, breaking up a brawl. Secondly," he looked straight into his senior operative's eyes, "It was my fault, Whitepaugh…and that made it my responsibility to make things right. End of story."

The wolverine met La Peigne's gaze and held it. While the big rabbit's words didn't exactly ring hollow, there was something a little too defiant in his tone. 'I dare you to step across that line!'

Seth Whitepaugh decided quickly not to step across it; if he did, he suspected that LaPeigne might exercise his prerogative to pull rank.

But then the bunny told him, "The good news Whitepaugh is that Aker is in the clear, at least for the moment."

Jack shrugged and threw up his paws.

"It seems the bunny that went savage at the Carrot Days Festival was none other than a certain Terry Haredigg. That name sound familiar to you?"

It did and Whitepaugh sat up in his chair stunned.

"The same Terry Haredigg who…?"

"The same Terry Haredigg that my father treated for Nighthowler poisoning," La Peigne finished for him, "and because of that we have no need of a cover story; everyone is already convinced that he had some kind of flashback episode, a belief that I've instructed Dr. Honeybadger to foster at every opportunity."

Seth Whitepaugh frowned slightly. Dr. H hadn't mentioned anything about that on the flight down
from Zootopia…but then he hadn't really asked her. Still, if La Peigne was right, then Aker *had* dodged a bullet—perhaps only through sheer, dumb luck, but a miss is still a miss.

It was as if the big bunny had read his mind, or perhaps he simply read it in the wolverine's face. He said, "I know, I know, nobody gets that lucky more than once. Believe me Whitepaugh, I've learned my lesson, I'll never fool around with Nighthowler like that again." He slapped at his injured leg, "You can take that to any bank you want." And then without warning he looked up. "How did you find out I planted a Nighthowler pellet in those blueberries anyway?" (Of course Whitepaugh knew that, or else he wouldn't be here.)

It was an old and favored tactic of Jack la Peigne's, pretend to be disarming and then abruptly change the subject and ask a penetrating question. However if there was any animal that knew how to deal with it, it was the wolverine sitting across from him.

"Sir, have you forgotten about all those drone cameras we have patrolling the festival?" he asked, and watched as the big bunny face-pawlmed himself.

"It's been handled Mr. La Peigne," Whitepaugh informed the rabbit smoothly, "As of right now, the footage no longer exists, and no one is going to talk about it."

Of course the footage had *never* existed and no one was going to talk about it because no one had seen it; but it was that or implicate Laura Clawson, and he wasn't about to hit her for a sacrifice fly. It wasn't her fault she'd suffered a concussion and besides, Clawson was a fellow wolverine and while Seth Whitepaugh was no speciest, he believed in taking care of his own…always. (He had already made arrangements to have her moved to the company's Meadowlands facility as soon as she was able to travel, out of earshot of anyone not associated with Aker.)

But now that he knew all the down and dirty, it was time for the wolverine to deliver some news of his own.

"There's another reason why I wanted to come here fursonally Mr. LaPeigne; the information you asked me to check out has been confirmed and verified."

Now it was the bunny sitting up in HIS chair.

"All of it?" he asked, staring.

"Yes sir," the wolverine was nodding tightly, "Mr. Big, the diamond, Rafaj Brothers Jewelers, all of it."

"Son of a sweet…" Jack started to say, but then he slumped back down in his seat, eyeing the wolverine moodily.

"So now, I have decision to make," he said, tapping his index fingers together.

"Yes sir, and it's yours and yours alone." Whitepaugh reminded him.

Jack looked at him sharply for a second; coming from anyone else, he would have read it as an attempt to duck their share of the responsibility if things went south. Not Seth Whitepaugh though, not this wolverine; he had linked his fate with that of his employer practically from day one.

He said, "Yes, and I'm prepared to make that decision Whitepaugh, but first I want your thoughts on the matter." He allowed himself an ironic smile, "I've made *enough* impulsive choices for one day."
"Well sir," the wolverine answered, "If we go now, it's a risky move to be sure, but at least it's a risk we know. If we could be certain of how things will stand a year, even six months from now, I'd counsel you to hold off."

"But of course we can't know that, Whitepaugh." The big bunny finished for him, "Go on."

"One thing I can be certain of Mr. LaPeigne," the wolverine continued, "is that if we decide to move on this now, then we need to move on it right now; our window of opportunity won't stay open for very much longer. If either of those two jackals decide to tell the ZPD about the Red Pig or the diamond they sold, then that's all she wrote, as the mammal said."

"Yes, right," the big bunny responded, and fell into a short, brooding silence with his paws clasped together, considering what the wolverine had just told him, together with everything else he knew.

"Not enough information," he thought, "I don't have enough data to make this decision rationally—so what is my gut telling me? It's telling me to say 'pass', but is that my instincts talking or just me being rattled over my mistake with that Nighthowler pellet? All right, supposing that hadn't happened, what would I do then? Think Jack...think!"

He looked up suddenly, meeting the wolverine's eyes.

"We go," he said.

Whitepaugh nodded as if this were the answer he'd been expecting all along. (It probably was.)

"Very good sir." He said, and LaPeigne pointed in the direction of the helipad. With the big decision out of the way he seemed to know exactly where to go next.

"All right then, I want you back on that helicopter and on your way back to headquarters ASAP." He flashed that ironic smile again, "It's like you said Whitepaugh, if we're going to move on this, we need to move NOW. So get yourself back to Zootopia and issue the order—Implement Fire Triangle Phase One, effective immediately."

Chapter End Notes

Once again, the sections of this chapter involving Conor Lewis refer back to the events of the Prologue.
"What you must understand everyone is that Nighthowler serum is tricky stuff."

All of the bunnies in the waiting area nodded and looked at Dr. Honeybadger. Every face was rapt with attention—every face but one; Judy Hopps was leaning against the wall with crossed arms and a cross expression. (Nick Wilde didn't look any happier.) Hmph, as if she didn't know that already. "No kidding Basil of Baker Street!"

That, however, was the last thing the Doctor said she hadn't heard before.

"Nightowler toxin is an anomaly," the portly honey-badger told them. At some point after her arrival, she had donned a lab coat; it gave her the same busy appearance Judy remembered from their first encounter at the Cliffside Asylum.

"Technically, a poison like this shouldn't exist," She went on, "it acts quickly, but at the same time the effect is not merely long lasting, it's permanent; that's supposedly impossible, especially for an agent that's all but undetectable in the body by any forensic means." She looked at Judy for a second, "Believe me, I know. Not one of the original 14 missing mammals showed even a trace of poison in their systems."

Judy held the Doctor's gaze for a moment and then looked away, biting her lip. What was it she had overheard Hizzoner saying to her again? "I've got a dozen and a half animals here who've gone off the rails crazy and you can't tell me why!" In referring to that statement, was she still trying to duck her share of the responsibility for his actions, even now?

No, Judy decided, what the honey-badger just said had been a simple statement of fact, not a plea of innocence…and also a reminder that, like it or not, there was no one that knew more about the
effects of Nighthowler serum than Dr. Magdalena 'Madge' Honeybadger.

As she now proceeded to demonstrate…

"It's not the Nighthowler toxin itself that causes the victim to go savage, what it does instead is trick the body into producing and releasing a set of very powerful hormones. These hormones in turn trigger what's known the Fight or Flight Response; the heart rate increases, the pupils dilate, the blood pressure spikes, and body liberates any stored fats and sugars for increased muscular action; that's why animals darted with Nighthowler show such a marked increase in speed and strength. The next thing that happens is the combination of hormones suppresses the flight response, while at same time boosting the fight response. Last but not least, they shut down the higher brain functions, turning the victim into a mindless aggressor, an animal who knows only that it must destroy any other animal that comes within its space; in other words, a savage."

She paused for a moment to allow any questions. The first to raise his paw was Stu Hopps, "But how does it manage to drive these animals completely off the deep end like that?"

"I'm glad you asked, Mr. Hopps," the honey-badger answered, waving an appreciative finger. "It's because Nighthowler toxin doesn't merely trigger the hormonal process I just mentioned, it throws it into overdrive. What you get is the aggressive side of the fight or flight response, jacked up to a literally insane level. It's like stomping down on your car's gas pedal so hard that you jam the accelerator open at full throttle."

"I see," Stu nodded, looking thoughtful.

There were no other questions and Dr. Honeybadge went on with her lecture.

"As I said before, we can't detect the presence of Nighthowler toxin in the body, but we can detect the hormonal response to it—and it's a very distinctive reaction; we call it the Nighthowler paw-print, it's never seen anywhere except in response to Nighthowler poisoning." She looked at Bonnie, "That's how we'll determine the best way to treat your brother. In fact, I've already ordered a full blood work-up. Once we know the level of hormones in his system, I'll be able to determine the proper dosage of the antidote and he should be just fine."

A collective sigh of relief breezed around the reception area, coming to an abrupt halt when a skeptical voice piped up.

"Should be?"

Everyone turned, it was Nick Wilde speaking. Several ears went back and several feet began to thump…and not in a friendly manner. The fox didn't care; it was a fair question and he knew it.

So did Dr. Honeybadger; her eyes began to semaphore and she started grasping for words.

"Yes, errrr…since we can't be certain of exactly what happened at the Carrot Days Festival, I hesitate to…ah, deliver a verdict….mmm, set in stone." She looked at Bonnie again, only this time she was barely able to meet the Hopps Family matriarch's eyes.

"Because of that, I'm…afraid I'll need to ask you to sign a release form before I can administer any treatment."

"I'll sign it," Bonnie answered, in that firm voice her family knew so well, "I'll sign it right now if you want."

"I hate to ask." The honey-badger said, unaware that she was quoting one of her patient's most oft
used lines, "But in a situation like this, I'm afraid it's necessary."

Off to the side, Judy was nudging Nick in the side and offering him a thumbs-up. 'Way to go, that's how you cut a fake down to size!' she seemed to be saying.

"But what could have happened to my brother-in-law?" Stu Hopps suddenly lamented, giving voice to the question that had been on everyone's mind ever since the incident at the Festival. "No one was shooting any Nighthowler darts at Carrot Days!"

The query seemed to revive Dr. Honeybadger's confidence and when she answered the bunny's question, she was looking straight at him.

"I won't lie; we may never know exactly what it was that triggered his episode...although we can speculate." She shifted her attention to the group as a whole. "Most of the animals I've talked to since I got here seem to think that Mr. Haredigg suffered some kind of a flashback, am I correct in that assessment?"

She was met by a thicket of nodding faces, and quickly nodded back.

"I agree," she said, "but that episode didn't just happen spontaneously; something triggered it, something that I'm guessing Mr. Haredigg ate."

"Such as?" Violet Hopps' nose was twitching in all four directions at once; some of Nick and Judy's distrust seemed to have rubbed off on her.

"Such as just about anything Vi," her father answered, before the honey-badger could respond, "You saw what kinds of junk-foods they were selling out at the Carrot Days Festival; who knows what was in that stuff?"

"And you know your Uncle Terry," her mother put in, "He'll eat whatever you put in front of him...as long as it's bad for you."

A wave uneasy laughter rippled through the group, and Dr. Honeybadger smiled quietly to herself. Jack LaPeigne had been right; they had swallowed everything she'd told them...because it was what they wanted to believe. Heck if she had given them the truth, they'd have probably thought it was a bad joke. 'Someone accidentally fed Uncle Terry a Nighthowler pellet? Sorry, that's not funny!'

When she had worked for Leodore Lionheart, Doctor H. had quickly discovered how adept he was at manipulating public opinion...but compared to Jack LaPeigne he'd been a street corner heckler with a soap box. (Of course, she hastily reminded herself, much of that had to do with the fact that the big bunny was also far more ruthless than the former mayor; he had no compunction about the use of methods that even the most cynical politician wouldn't touch.)

She said, "I can worry about what caused the episode later. Right now I'm more concerned with deciding on a proper treatment for Mr. Haredigg, and so, if you'll please excuse me..."

"Yes, please go ahead," Bonnie told her and there were more nods of agreement, including from both Nick and Judy this time. Though neither one of them completely trusted Dr. Honeybadger, like it or not, she was the only game in town.

Erin found Conor Lewis on the Hopps Family Warren's eastside terrace again. This time, instead of pulling weeds, the young silver fox was lounging in an Adirondack chair with his laptop propped up on one knee. Okay, that was acceptable, the white-furred, black-tipped young bunny decided, it
didn't count as work.

"Hey," she said, holding up an enameled pitcher and offering him a plastic cup, "I brought some more switchell, want some?"

"Yeah, great," the young fox answered, closing the laptop and setting it aside.

Erin gave him the pitcher and let him pour for both of them, then she settled down on the adjacent chair and pointed to a paper bag she'd she also brought with her.

"I've got scones too; help yourself."

Conor leaned over and reached for the sack.

"Got any blackberry scones in there?" he asked. Nick Wilde liked blueberries; he liked blackberries.

"I think there's one or two," Erin answered him.

Conor found what he was looking for and sat back in his chair again, taking a brief nibble from the edge the scone.

"Thanks."

"Welcome," the young bunny told him. She settled back in her own chair and took a sip of switchell. She had changed into denim shorts and a tank top, with a big floppy hat perched on her head, much like the one favored by her older sister, Judy. Conor thought she looked lovely.

"For a bunny," he hastily reminded himself.

She took another, longer sip and regarded her cup thoughtfully for a moment.

And then she looked over at the fox sitting beside her.

"Say Conor, have you ever thought about trying to get into the Zootopia Academy for the Performing Arts?"

He took a small bite from his scone before answering.

"I used to, all the time," he said.

Erin felt her nose twitching,

"Used to?" she asked, and then wanted to kick herself, realizing what must have happened. He'd wanted to go to ZAPA, but his grades hadn't been good enough; when was she going to learn to think before opening her mouth?

Conor's answer however was completely unexpected.

"Yeah, I don't need to get in there anymore."

That brought the young bunny's ears up and made her want to thump her foot; "Why you arrogant...!"

"Oh you think you're too good for that place. Is that it?" she said, unable to keep the mockery out of her voice.
"Who, me?" Conor answered, looking genuinely surprised, "No way; I could never be that good."

Now Erin's nose wasn't just twitching, it was working around in a circle, as if a fly had landed on it while her paws were full. What the heck, now?

"What don't you want to go there anymore?" she asked. Given his guitar and vocal skills, she found that one nearly impossible to believe. She took another sip of her drink, actually along pull.

"Heck no," Conor answered, setting down his own cup, "Going to ZAPA has been my dream since my first day in Zootopia."

"Then why…?"

Only half of the question had time to form before a brick wall ran into Erin Hopps as full tilt. Sweet cheez n' crackers, it had been right there in front of her all along!

The switchell she'd been drinking exploded out of her nose like the blast of a double-barreled water cannon, leaving her sputtering and choking and nearly beside herself.

"Erin what…?" Conor asked, still holding up his arm to shield himself. (The discharge had missed him by less than an inch.)

The young bunny coughed and shook her head and then she was staring at the silver fox as if he'd just sprouted a pair of dragon's wings.

"You already go there!" It was a declaration, not a question…and also nearly a scream.

"Uh yeah, I got in with the first class last year," he said. He was looking at her as if he couldn't understand what the heck was the big deal here?

"Then…" Erin tried to say but the words hung up on a choke. She coughed and tried again. "Then why didn't you ever SAY anything?" Her voice was nearly shrill enough to crack a window.

"Because I didn't think I needed to," Conor told her simply, and seeing the bunny's expression, he turned in his chair to face her. "Here," he said, offering her a paper napkin. She took it without thinking and began to dry herself as best as she could; (it was about the size of a playing card.)

"Erin, lemme just say this," he told her, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, "I didn't keep quiet about going to ZAPA coz I was waiting for the right time to spring it on you. It was because…" he looked around as if searching for just the right words, and then looked at her again.

"Look, where do you think I'm ranked in my class right now?" he asked her.

She crushed the tissue into tiny a pill, regarding the young fox sourly.

"Dead last?" she offered, nose pinching up into a sneer

"Har, har…no, seriously," he said

Erin's nose stopped crinkling and began to twitch; a tremor came into her voice.

"Are you…class valedictorian?" she asked tentatively.

Conor snapped his fingers and pointed at her.

"No Erin, that's what I'm trying to tell you, there IS no class valedictorian at the Academy; no
Honor Roll or a Dean's List either. At ZAPA, everyone is judged strictly on their own performance, not against each other." He lifted up his paws as if to show he had nothing up his sleeve. "I know what my grades are, but I don't know how I stack up against everyone else; the Academy doesn't post your grades, you get them e-mailed to you at home. Oh, I could ask around and get some idea of where I'm ranked, but the school wouldn't like it if I did." His head tilted five degrees to the right. "You follow what I'm bringing out?"

"I-I…think so." Erin eyed him cautiously. He could see that she had almost grasped it, but not quite, a moth fluttering just beyond her reach.

He said, "I don't talk much about going to the Performing Arts Academy coz that's the first step down a slippery slope; first you're talking, then you're bragging about going there. And prima donnas don't last long in that place. I saw some of the smartest, most talented kids I ever met end up leaving coz they couldn't keep a lid on their attitudes; two quit and one got expelled."

Erin looked at him for a long second, and then she looked away.

"Tell me the truth fox…do you think I'm a prima donna?"

He smiled and almost took her paw; then pulled away before she could pull away.

"No Erin," he told her, "I'll admit that I did when we first met, but when I saw how bad you wanted to get back on that stage again, I knew that I was wrong. If you'd been that kind of bunny your attitude would've been, 'The heck with this, I'm too awesome for your crummy little talent show anyway!'"

The young bunny grinned in spite of herself, "Hey I thought sour grapes were a fox thing," she said, but Conor remained serious.

"They are kiddo, they are." He said, "You want a Prima Donna? I got yer Prima Donna right here."

Erin's eyes widened and her mouth fell open; he was pointing at himself with a pair of fingers

"You?" she said, nose twitching again.

"Me," he admitted with a quiet nod, "I almost washed out of the Academy too. But I got lucky; I had someone who believed in me enough to take me aside and straighten me out. I didn't like what she had to say at first, but now I think it was the best advice I ever got. 'The only animal you have to be better than is the animal you were yesterday,' is what she told me. That's why I don't talk so much about going to ZAPA. I hope you understand that."

"I do." She said…and in some weird and crazy way, she did; she could never explain it to anyone else, but somehow everything the fox had just told her made perfect sense.

But then…’she’ Erin realized abruptly; he had said 'she'…and did that bother her? Noooo of course not…and it had nothing to do with the fact that she was suddenly at loss for words. No! Way!

Groping for something to say in a silence that was becoming rapidly awkward, the young bunny just latched onto the first thing that came to her.

"My audition is in two weeks." She said. "Maybe you could come and join me onstage again."

The young fox instantly shook his head, putting emphasis on the gesture by fanning his pawlms in a flat, sideways motion.
"Can't," he told her, "it's not allowed. When you perform for your ZAPA audition, it's just you and an Mp3, or a tape, or a disc. The school wants to keep the playing field level."

"Yeah, I guess," Erin admitted, half grudging and half contrite. No, it wouldn't be fair when you thought about it; some kids with back up and others all by themselves. Like it or not, it was the fair way to do things. But then she heard a noise and saw Conor was sniggering.

"What?"

He shook his head again, but this time almost gleefully.

"Oh I was just remembering last year, there was this one kid, keyboard guy, his parents brought a whole band along to help him out, bass, guitar, drums, even a sax player...professional musicians, wouldnja believe; I later heard the bill came to something like over four grand." He laughed again, "Whoa, were his folks torqued when they found out he had to go it alone, they threatened to sue the school and every stupid thing."

"Did they?" an obvious question but Erin had to ask it.

The young fox's laughter ceased but a smile remained in its wake.

"Naw, they didn't need to; he got accepted anyway, went out there to his keyboard set up and just crushed it, no-back up required. Later on I heard that when he found out he'd made it into the Academy, he went straight to his folks and told them, "See, I TOLD you I could handle it on my own!"

Now Erin was laughing—and clapping her paws

"I like this kid," She said.

"Me too," Conor told her, "Him and me got to be real good friends. His name's Mike Daehan, he's an Asian black rat. We jam together all the time; whoa, he plays a mean synth-piano."

"Ooo, I want to meet him," the white furred bunny said, mildly surprising herself; (if anyone had suggested even the day before yesterday that she might one day look forward to meeting a rat...)

"But you'll still come to watch my audition, won't you?" She said; her expression almost coy.

Conor smiled, "Now, THAT I can manage; wouldn't miss it for anything Erin."

"Promise me you won't." she said, eyeing him with a sudden, startling intensity

"I won't miss it." he reassured her, raising his paws, "Don't worry, I'll be there.

"No, promise me!" she insisted, sitting up and thumping her foot.

Conor started to laugh but then stopped when he realized she was serious.

"Silly rabbit," he grumbled silently, and then raised his right paw, intoning in a voice of deep, feigned gravity, "I, Conor Severus Lewis do solemnly swear that I will for sure not miss attending the Zootopia Academy of the Performing Arts Audition of Miss Erin Whatever-The-Heck-Her-Middle-Name-Is..."

"It's Kaylee..." she interrupted.

"...of Miss Erin Kaylee Hopps," the young fox corrected smoothly, and then putting his other paw over his heart he added, "And if I should fail to keep this promise, may heaven strike me rich."
Erin swatted him with her hat again, "Oh, you!"

This time Conor saw it coming and ducked neatly underneath, with a sly, foxy grin.

He had no way of knowing that by the time of Erin Hopps' ZAPA audition, he would be running for his life.

"You wanted to see me privately, Doctor?"

"Yes sir, could you come in please and shut the door behind you?" Her voice was meek, but unafraid.

"All right," Jack LaPeigne stepped into the room and closed the door, hiding his irritation. From the tone of Dr. Honeybadger's voice, whatever she had to say to him was important, if not necessarily urgent—and if that was the case they should be meeting in the Command Car, not here in an empty office with a nonstop parade of nurses, doctors, etc. passing by in the hall just outside.

He pulled out his carrot-pen and clicked the switch, setting it on the desktop and settling himself into a chair opposite Dr. H, who had ensconced herself behind a cheap, metal desk; this office belonged to some maintenance honcho, not to any physician or staff member.

"Well?" he said, putting on his favorite, 'this-had-better-be-good' face.

The honey badger looked left and right before replying.

"Sir, I have the lab results from Terry Haredigg's blood workup…"

"What have you found, have you started treatment?" the big rabbit brusquely interrupted her. He wanted to get back to the Hopps family, to one Hopps family member in particular.

Doctor Honeybadger answered the second question first.

"I've started him on a glucose drip and administered 30 cc's of Tessyl….err Morningmew sir. He should be fine by tomorrow morning."

Jack felt his nose twitching and his ears standing at attention. That was only a little more than half the standard dosage needed to undo the effects of a Nighthowler pellet. However, he had another, more immediate inquiry.

"Not until tomorrow morning?" he asked; he had hoped to have everything set right by this evening.

Dr. Honeybadger's face became a mask of contempt.

"I wish it could be sooner Mr. La Peigne," she said, "but the idiot ER doc they have here sedated Mr. Haredigg from here to Dumbjerk Egypt…on TOP of the trank darts; it's a miracle they didn't put him into coma, Nighthowler or no Nighthowler.

"Yessss," Jack's voice came out as a low, frustrated hiss, "And speaking of Nighthowler, I couldn't help noticing…"

"…that I prescribed a much smaller dose of the antidote than you expected," she finished for him. "Yes sir, and that's what I wanted to talk to you privately about. Believe it or not, Terry Haredigg really did have a flashback episode…of sorts anyway," she hastily qualified her statement.
Now it wasn't only the big bunny's ears that were standing upright, his entire body had gone rigid and ramrod-straight.

"Well I'll be fricasseed…seriously?"

"Yes Mr. LaPeigne," Madge Honybadger's nod was a sober as temperance meeting, "I went over the test results three times just to be sure; they clearly indicate that A, Haredigg didn't swallow that Nighthowler pellet; he was exposed somehow through skin contact and B, he did not receive a full dose. By rights, he should have suffered only a moderate-to-severe anger episode, not a full blown case of savagery."

"Then why did he go savage Doctor?" the big bunny asked. He had already guessed the answer—but only the short answer; he needed the full explanation.

"As you know sir," the honey badger told him, "this is the second time Mr. Haredigg has been exposed to Nighthowler toxin; apparently some of the first dose remained er, 'dormant' in his system for all these years. The original antidote didn't neutralize the toxin the way Morningmew does, it only blocked the effects."

"So what happened, the two toxins interacted?" LaPeigne was staring in fascination, the more he heard, the more unbelievable it all became.

Dr. Honeybadger shook her head, but not regretfully; she was actually smiling.

"Not an interaction sir, a synergy…the residue of the Nighthowler blossoms he ate as a child was somehow working in concert with the refined serum he was exposed to earlier today—and it produced some effects we haven't seen before; the way he mimicked your tactics for one; that's what he was doing sir, not so much learning from you as copying you."

"Hmmm, I see," the big bunny told her. For some reason he felt slightly deflated. Dr. H. apparently didn't; she seemed almost energized.

"Copying, learning, it doesn't matter Mr. La Peigne; the end result was still the same. And there's more; when Haredigg went after that other bunny and that fox he didn't just attack mindlessly the way one of the Bellwether victims would have, he was stalking them…hunting them. That would be unusual enough in a predator darter with Nighthowler; in a PREY species, it's absolutely unprecedented!"

"Hmmm, yes." Jack leaned back in his chair, regarding the Doctor with a cool detachment. He might have found her level of excitement ludicrous, except…this was one mammal that was absolutely NOT given to emotional extremes. If Madge Honeybadger was this pumped, there had to be something of substance behind it.

She went on, "Under normal circumstances the Nighthowler toxin produces tunnel-vision and sharply reduced hearing, same as the fight-or-flight response." Her mouth split open in a toothy grin, "Not this time, in this instance, just the opposite occurred; Terry Haredigg's vision and hearing actually became sharper, or that's what his blood workup suggests, sir."

La Peigne made a fist with his left paw and wrapped it in his right one, drumming the fingers against the knuckles in a slow, almost funereal cadence.

"Very well Doctor, now would you mind explaining to me why you seem to think this is good news?"

"Because sir," she answered, leaning across the desk, "I believe it's possible to isolate the element
that was creating the synergy; I already have everything I need, a sample of Terry Haredigg's blood, check… a supply of Nighthowler serum, check…and access to a supply of unprocessed Nighthowler blossoms, double check If I can isolate the synergy agent, I'm almost certain that I can use it to create an improved version of the infusion serum, one that will give our operatives improved vision and hearing and allow THEM to turn an enemy's tactics against him. I might even be able to develop a serum that triggers the hunting instinct." She paused for a second and then added modestly, "But first I'll need your permission to…"

"You've got it, Doctor!" The big bunny was out of his seat and thumping his foot like a war-drum. Now, this was the kind of initiative he appreciated, and wouldn't it be good to get something positive out of this mess? He told her, "As soon as you get back to Zootopia I want you to start work on this immediately."

Yes, sir!" the honey badger responded brightly; this was clearly the answer she'd been hoping for.

Jack debated for a moment whether he should tell her that he'd given his order to commence Phase One of The Fire Triangle. He reluctantly decide against it; if they were back in Aker Headquarters yes, but not here in Bunnyburrow, too much of a security risk—and the only thing more important than speed at the moment was secrecy.

"All right then Doctor," he said, pushing his chair away as he rose to his full height, "Right now, I need to get back to the family and you need to get back to your patient." Anticipating a protest, he raised a finger. "Yes, I know; there's nothing more you can do for him at the moment, but we need to keep up our appearances."

The big bunny turned and reached for the door, signaling that the discussion had concluded, but then stopped as if suddenly remembering something. (He hadn't, but he had just come to a decision.)

He turned to face her again.

"One final item on the agenda, Doctor; when I return to Zootopia, I intend to have myself fitted with an infusion module. Make the arrangements, if you would."

"Yes sir." Dr. Honeybadger's face had gone stiff and waxen. "But are you sure about this, Mr. LaPeigne?" She spoke as if she were stepping out onto thin ice; she also knew the risks of playing with Nighthowler serum better than any other mammal.

"Yes, Doctor, I'm certain," the big bunny told her gravely, "What nearly happened to me at the Carrot Days Festival this morning is never going to happen again…period! So make the arrangements, thank you." He raised and leveled a finger at her. "And one more thing, Mr. Whitepaugh is not to know anything about this until the procedure is completed. Is that understood, Doctor?"

"Yes Mr. La Peigne." the honey badger answered with a hard swallow, and then watched as he turned and walked out of the room.
Easter Egg: Reference to a Disney Mouse. (No, not Mickey.)
Chapter Summary

It's a rough road the Carrot Days Festival's Big Dance

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 4 - The Wizard of Chaos
(Continued…Pt. 10)

From the moment he got in the truck, Nick Wilde knew that this wasn't going to be one of his better evenings.

"Where's Judy?" he asked. (She'd been out of the door well ahead of him, as always.)

"She's riding with Jack LaPeigne," Stu informed the fox, barely glancing at him.

Nick tried not to groan; this was how it had been ever since they'd returned from the hospital. Nobody had given him any dirty looks, no feet had thumped at his approach; no one had spat the word, 'fox!' under their breath whenever he'd walked by.

But no one had looked him in the eye either, and whenever a member of the Hopps Family had spoken to him, their manner had been invariably formal and gallingly polite. Only moments ago, for the first time since his arrival, Nick had gotten lost in the Hopps Family Warren because no one had been available to give him directions. The most infuriating part of it all was hearing the same, constant refrain from every bunny he encountered, 'No, nothing's wrong.'

As if to give the lie to that statement once and for all, right then the door to the Hopps Family Farm truck opened and little Cotton started to climb in. Stu immediately turned to her.

"Sweetie, why don't you go ride with your mother?"

The little bunny thumped her foot, "But I wanna sit with Nick."

Her father looked at her with a raised ear. "Cotton? 1…2…"
She was gone before he could get to three.

Nick wanted to say something but knew he wouldn't—because he also knew that he had it coming. His little faux-pas with the fire hose had nearly gotten him and Judy killed, to say nothing of all the property damage he had caused, in the four-figure range, at least. And no one had forgotten it, least of all her parents. Oh sure, he had meant well by his actions, but what was that saying about the road to Hell again? Only his partner had stood by him in the aftermath of that near catastrophe.

"They'll get over it Nick, give them time." Judy had told him

That may have been so, but for now, it was driving the poor fox crazy. Open hostility, he could have handled that; he'd been dealing with it all his life. But this maddening, 'everything's-fine-now-do-you-mind?' treatment was like nothing he had ever experienced before.

And now Judy was riding with that other bunny, the one who'd saved them both; this was not going to be a good evening.

What made it worse, ironically enough, was that the cold-shoulder attitude Nick was getting from everyone wasn't a species thing. The Hopps family was still treating Conor Lewis like an honored guest, Finnick too.

Come to think of it, where were they?

"There you are, wake up already!"

Conor stirred and sat up quickly. For a moment he had no idea where he was. "Wha…? This isn't Zootop…oh yeah, riiight."

He turned and settled on the edge of Adirondack chair where he'd fallen asleep, yawning, and raising his arms in a V-stretch. Six feet away he saw Erin Hopps doing the same; hmmm, so she had dozed off too.

"Mmmmmm what time is it?" the young rabbit asked, slowly flexing her arms and shoulders… while Conor wondered. why do girl bunnies look so cute when they do that?

"Almost seven," Finnick informed her in that deep, gravel-filled voice of his, "Now…"

That was as far as he got; Erin was instantly and fully awake.

"What…? Oh, no, we'll miss the big dance! Has everybody left yet? I can't go dressed like this, I have to change first!" She was already starting to panic; the hormone fairy must have paid her a little visit while she was sleeping, Conor decided.

"Easy, easy," Finnick was making reassuring motions with his paws and shooting a quick warning glance at his partner, (who hadn't been planning on saying anything; yeeks, did DF think he wanted Erin's foot planted upside his face a second time?) "I got my van out front, you won't miss nothin', just go get changed like you said, you too Conor."

The white-furred bunny was out of her seat like a shot. Conor Lewis was not quite so motivated

"Hey, wait a minute, we haven't eaten yet!" His stomach was already sending up distress flares… all the way into his throat.

"There'll be plenty to eat at the dance," Erin called over a shoulder just before disappearing
through the door.

Conor expected her to take forever to get ready, but he barely had time to throw on some fresh underwear, before he heard her pounding at the door.

"Come on Silver-boy, get a move on!"

"Cool yer jets already, Snowdrop," he snapped, "I'll be out in a second, okay!"

Ignoring her response, ("I told you not to call me that!") Conor made a quick inventory of his wardrobe selection. Not much to choose from; he and Finnick had originally planned to head home after the T-shirts were sold. He finally decided on a stripped down version of the outfit he'd worn on his first day in Bunnyburrow; cargo pants, checked shirt and an apple cap, but this time with a belt instead of suspenders; nothing fancy but at least it was clean, courtesy of the Hopps family's laundry room.

When he opened the door, ("About TIME, fox!") he found Erin waiting in jeans and simple plaid shirt in dark red, rolled up at the sleeves. (No wonder it had taken her practically no time at all to get dressed.) It was an almost amazing transformation; she had never looked more like a farmer's daughter than she did right now.

"You look nice." He said.

"Yeah, thanks, now come on, let's GO!" she said, and grabbed his wrist, practically dragging him down the hallway.

When they got out front, almost everyone else had already left for the dance, including Nick, Judy, and another rabbit the young silver fox didn't know had been here—and whom he didn't ever want to see again.

Just as he had promised, Finnick's trusty van was there waiting for them near the front. They all but threw themselves inside of it and then the desert fox fired up the engine.

They were a half mile down the road before something occurred to Conor Lewis.

"Waitaminnit, what am I even doing here? I don't wanna go to any dumb, stupid dance!"

In another vehicle, perhaps a mile up ahead of them, Jack LaPeigne was turning to speak to Judy Hopps. Like her sister, she was dressed in a simple farm-girl outfit, in fact, the same jeans and pink shirt she'd worn on the day she'd returned to Zootopia, looking for Nick Wilde. Jack too was wearing only jeans and flannel shirt. Being Burrow born and bred himself, he knew that the Big Dance had originally been 'The Big Barn Dance'. And though the event had long since outgrown any barn in the Tri-Burrow area, the unofficial dress-code still remained.

Ever since they had left the hospital something had been eating at Judy—she was the only member of the Hopps Family not treating the big rabbit like a conquering hero—and her mood had followed them into his car, immediately becoming the proverbial elephant in the room; the opulence of the big bunny's ride seemed to make no impression at all upon her. (Of course that would most likely have been her response anyway, something Jack found oddly impressive.)

At first, the big rabbit had wisely held his tongue. But now, in a moment of epiphany, he thought he understood what was bothering his companion.

"Let me guess, you're not happy about my bringing Dr. Honeybadger here, is that it?"
The directness of his inquiry caught Judy completely off guard; she had expected that in the unlikely event he even brought up the subject, he'd either ease into it slowly or tiptoe around the edges first; certainly he wouldn't confront it head on.

As she was just now finding out, that was precisely Jack LaPeigne's way of dealing with difficulties, face-to-face and no distractions; small wonder then that he was such a successful businessmammal.

But even so…

"No Jack, I'm unhappy that she's even working for you at all. Just because she never went to jail…"

"Yes, I know," the big bunny answered immediately. His tone was weary rather than defensive, "All I can say is, without her expertise, we'd never have developed the Nighthowler antidote as quickly as we did." He pulled at an ear, "Oh we would have had figured out it eventually, but it would have been a much longer process…and those predators Mayor Bellwether darted didn't have any time to waste." He turned to look straight at her for a second, "There's one thing Dr. Honeybadger didn't tell you about Nighthowler Judy, an animal darted with it can survive for only a short period of time, a month, six weeks at most, depending on their species; after that they begin to die of adrenal failure." He closed his eyes for a second, letting out a hiss of air between his teeth. "The body simply can't take living in a state of constant savagery for any longer than that."

Judy gasped, she hadn't known that until just this second. She wondered for a moment why Dr. Honeybadger hadn't said anything about it.

She immediately wanted to face-pawlm herself. Why should Dr. H. have said anything? That was the last thing her family would have needed to hear; she could just imagine her mother's reaction if she'd been told that Uncle Terry was living on borrowed time…even it was more than enough borrowed time to save him.

Jack went on. "Bringing in Dr. Honeybadger to help us find the Nighthowler antidote was one of the most distasteful decisions I've ever had to make, Judy." He turned and looked at her again, "That's right, it was my decision; the board of directors kicked it up to me." His face took on a look of disdain, "And I still don't trust that honey-badger, you better believe that; even now, LPN Security watches her like a hawk 24/7." His shoulders moved uneasily, "Just the same, with lives hanging in the balance, I felt I had no choice but to bring her on board."

A knot of guilt formed in Judy's throat at this unintentional reminder of her own past sins. When she'd needed to know who commissioned Duke Weaselton to steal those Nighthowler bulbs, hadn't she made a similar compromise? Who was she to judge Jack LaPeigne for the hard choices he had made? And she hadn't known before that Nighthowler poisoning was lethal in the long run; it put everything in a new light.

"I guess at some point we've all had to make choices we didn't like." She told him, praying silently that he wouldn't ask her to elaborate.

He didn't; he just let out a sigh of relief.

"I was hoping you'd understand." He said. Judy smiled and patted his paw.

"I do," she said; her ire over the honey-badger's presence in the Burrow was at last beginning to ebb.
When they got to the vendor's gate, this time, there was no delay. By now everyone and their aunt in Bunnyburrow knew about the big rabbit who'd so heroically faced down the other bunny gone savage. (The word spreads fast in farming communities.) Lucas 'Lucky' Jackson not only let Jack's car pass immediately, he actually sat up on his stool and saluted.

It was a fortunate thing too; the regular lot was already full to overflowing, with the excess vehicles spilling out along the roadside from here to Podunk and back again. Both Jack and Judy were pleased. After the horrible events of that morning they'd both been afraid that the Big Dance floor would be nearly empty tonight; there had even been a rumor circulating that it might be canceled altogether. Instead, it looked like every family in Burrow County, and then some was here, as if in direct defiance of that suggestion.

That prompted a chuckle from Jack LaPeigne, followed by an observation.

"Typical Burrow bunnies, eh Judy? 'No savage rabbit is going to keep me away from the Big Dance!'"

Judy laughed and clapped her paws. Oh yes, he was from around here all right.

Inside the Festival Amphitheater, the chairs had been cleared from the seating area to create a rectangular dance floor, with benches and tables skirting the periphery. Behind these, a row of food and beverage stands had been set up. (There was none of that deep-fried junk here; everything was fresh, local, and prepared on grills.)

Meanwhile overhead, a latticework of carnival lights had been strung above the celebration in a zig-zag pattern, while up on the stage, a seven piece band was in the process of getting set up to play.

"THAT'S new," Judy thought to herself. The last time she'd been here for Carrot Days, the music had been supplied by a Dee-Jay. She wondered momentarily, how long had they been bringing in live music for the Big Dance? (This was actually the second year.)

Looking towards the stage, there was one thing she knew for certain. Tonight, by hook or by crook she was going to get Nick Wilde out on the dance floor.

But where the heck was he, anyway?

At that moment Nick was waiting in line to get into the dance, a line that seemed to stretch for 20,000 leagues. He was surrounded by most of the Hopps family—and feeling utterly alone. Nobody was talking to him, nobody was looking at him; nobody was so much as angling their ears in his direction. For the first time since coming here, the fox was beginning to think that maybe Judy's invite hadn't been such a good idea after all.

Right now, he wanted nothing more than to say his good-byes and get his tail on the next train back to Zootopia; he had already considered the idea of heading home by himself—no sense hanging around a place where you brighten a room by leaving it—but he knew he wouldn't, he couldn't; Judy would never forgive him if turned tail and ran, or that was how she'd see it anyway.

Besides, with him gone that big bunny Jack LaPeigne would have her all to himself; no, Nick would stay and stick it out, he and Judy couldn't hang for the last dance anyway Chief Bogo had made it very clear that they were to be back in time for roll call Monday morning, and if they wanted to make that deadline, they'd need to be on the 11:00 train back to Zootopia. (The next one wasn't 'til 8:00 the next morning.) That meant they had to be out of here by 10, 10:30 at the very
latest.

Nick looked at his watch, just few more hours of this torment and it would be over.

The line inched forward and a voice piped up from behind.

"Hey watch your tail, fox. That's my face."

"Sorry," he said, without looking back. Those were the first words anyone had spoken to him since he'd gotten in line. He found himself wishing that Judy was here, or he at least that he had Finnick to keep him company. Where was that little guy anyway?

"What do you mean, you threw it out?" Conor's ears were back and his neck fur was spiking. Finnick couldn't have tossed their vendor's-gate pass; it wasn't possible. Without it, they'd have to go park along the roadside…WAY down along the roadside.

And he would have to remember it NOW!

"Hey, I didn't know we were still gonna be here today," the desert fox answered defensively, laying his ears flat as well. "Anyway, I said I think I threw it out. Help me look."

"Okay, okay…"

"Will you two hurry up?"

"Says the bunny just sitting there instead of helping."

"Argue later, look now kid."

Behind them a chorus of car horns was beginning to raise a protest.

"Hey wait, I think I found it."

"Lemme see…no that's our camping permit, look for a yellow slip, not green."

"There's nothing like that under here."

"Scuse me folks, you're going to have to move; we can't hold up this line."

"Okay, okay-y-y-y."

Finnick wheeled the van in a U-turn around the gatekeeper's booth and back out the way they'd come. Several of the drivers who'd been held up behind them made gestures as he passed and at least one of them made a remark.

No one in the van said anything until they got back on the road, and then Erin Hopps lit into both foxes like a whirlwind.

"This is all your fault, both of you. Do you know how long a walk it's going to be…?"

Her tirade came to crashing halt as Finnick turned his trademark scowl on her.

"Not as long as if you gotta walk all the way home, bunny-girl!"

"Hey, cool it you guys; I got an idea where we can park."
Both of them turned to look at Conor, who was smiling and holding up the camping permit he'd found.

When he got out of the van about five minutes later, the young silver fox looked as smug as if he'd just pulled off the granddaddy of all hustles.

"Still think it'll be taken?" he said, showing Finnick a pair of sardonic fangs as he slipped the permit back into place on the dashboard.

Finnick and Erin both just grumbled. No, their camping space was still unoccupied, along with several others nearby. (Conor had guessed correctly that in the wake of that morning's brawl, a number of evictions would have followed.)

What made it even more delicious was the fact that both his companions had insisted that his idea was a complete waste of time. "Someone else is sure to have grabbed our spot by now." Finnick had said over and over.

Well no one had grabbed it, and if the walk from the campground to the amphitheater wasn't quite as easy as a stroll from the vendor's lot, it was still be way more convenient than the alternative. Best of all, when the time came to leave, they wouldn't have to fight a traffic jam on the way out. When Conor reminded Finnick of this, the desert fox looked as if he wanted to grab a rock to throw at him.

By the time they got inside the festival grounds, everything was cool with both him and Erin. It almost wasn't; when they heard the band starting to play. Conor was sure that Little Miss Mood-swing was going to go ballistic once again. He needn't have worried; like him, Erin knew a sound-check when she heard it; they still had plenty of time to get inside. As for DF, he was dancing a salsa-step as he walked.

Now the first whiffs from the food carts assailed the young silver fox's nostrils and he heard his stomach mumbling and felt his mouth getting wet; mmm, whatever they were grilling in there, it sure smelled yummy.

The three of them began to pick up the pace.

"I wonder where Nick is?" he heard Finnick asking of no one in particular.

"Nick, Nick…over here!"

Nick Wilde turned and saw Judy Hopps waving. He waved back, but it was a forced effort; she was standing with Jack LaPeigne again, and "No, I'm NOT jealous!"

Swallowing his non jealousy, the red fox hurried in their direction

He was trying to smile, but he knew it wouldn't fool Judy for very long, (LaPeigne maybe, but not her,) but then he wasn't really trying that hard anyway. No one knew better than Nick that he had never been very good at hiding his feelings—not from that bunny.

"Wow where the heck are they going to put everybody?" he told her by way of greeting; not the best opening he could think of, but it beat falling down on his knees and begging her to forgive him for what had happened earlier that morning.

"I know," Jack LaPeigne answered. "We were hoping for a decent turnout tonight, but wow!"
For the first time since he'd met the big bunny, Nick felt his neck hair beginning to stand on end. "I was talking to Judy, MISTER LaPeigne," he wanted to say, (but wouldn't). Just the same, he hadn't needed the rather unsubtle reminder that it was Jack's company sponsoring this year's Festival, "We were hoping..." he had said, and he hadn't meant him and Judy.

Before the fox could come up with a suitably diplomatic response, a new voice joined the conversation.

"Excuse me, Jack LaPeigne?"

Everyone turned to see a squat beaver approaching. There was nothing remarkable about the animal himself, but his mode of dress was about as appropriate for a barn dance as a tuxedo is for working a fast-food counter; white slacks and a blue blazer (double-breasted,) with a cinnamon tie and matching pawkerchief. There was no mistaking the big rodent for anything other than what he was, a politician.

Judy was the only one to recognize him, former County Commissioner, now acting County Chair, Chip Fielding; that was pretty much all she knew about the beaver. Jack LaPeigne could have told her a lot more. He might not have known Mr. Fielding by sight, but he knew the beaver's business; Fielding had recently decided to make a run for Burrow County Sheriff when Burke Hartley retired from office the following year. So here he was, hoping that a little of the big bunny's shine would rub off on him. Perhaps he even intended to lobby Jack for support; it would hardly be the first time a pol had sucked up to him. Politicians seeking favors from a billionaire are as common as flies around a bug-zapper.

"And often with the same results," Jack liked to remind himself.

Whether or not this beaver was going to GET any favors from him depended entirely on his sense of timing; if he wanted to talk business tonight, Mr. Fielding could go and whistle for his money elsewhere. On the other paw, if he was willing to wait, Jack was more than amenable to the idea. The big rodent was his kind of public official; a wheeler-dealer who wasn't above playing fast and loose with the facts, or getting down and dirty with his opponents. AND Chip Fielding already owed Jack a favor—although he didn't know it yet. It was Jack LaPeigne who had rid Bunnyburrow of the beaver's arch-nemesis, Jerry Guilford, (even though it wouldn't actually happen for another week and a half.)

Fielding would be a tough sell for the Sheriff's Office, the big rabbit knew; he had plenty of administrative experience, but zero law-enforcement experience. But if he could win the elections, it would put him in charge of Burrow County Corrections…and would an animal like him be willing to make an arrangement with Aker Correctional Corporation? Was it cold in Tundratown?

"I just wanted to thank you fursonally for your help this morning," the beaver said, offering a paw which the big bunny readily accepted, "Much as I appreciate the extra security you sent, I never expected you to get involved yourself."

Jack smiled, and it was not entirely forced; Fielding was actually speaking to his constituents, not to him. Not bad, if a little bit trite. But now, here came the acid test. Next, would the beaver ask to speak to him in private? If that was the case, Jack would politely excuse himself and suggest that Fielding call his office on Monday, (a call that would never be returned.)

But then Judy Hopps made it all academic.

"Uh Jack, can you excuse Nick and me for just a moment? There's...something we need to talk about."
LaPeigne's first instinct was to tell her 'no', but he could never be *that* much of a dumb bunny.

"Sure, go ahead." he said and then watched as she led Nick Wilde off into the crowd, leaving him alone with Chip Fielding.

No sooner had she gone than the beaver said, "It's not in my nature to mix business and pleasure Mr. LaPeigne, but can I leave you my card? There's a matter I'd like to discuss with you—at your convenience of course—a matter that I think might be of mutual benefit to both your company and to Burrows County."

Jack didn't seem to hear him at first; he was too busy staring at where Nick and Judy had disappeared into the gathering. But then he seemed to come alive and turned with a genuine smile. Chip Fielding had said exactly what he should have said.

"Certainly," he said, taking the card and then offering his to the beaver…while at the same time wondering absently where Judy was going with the fox.

In a crowd this big, it was hard for Judy to find a place where she and Nick could speak in private. Eventually she led them to a spot behind a trailer, away from all the lights and the noise.

And then she turned to Nick and said just two words.

"You okay?"

His answer was a breezy as a summer beachfront.

"Yeah Carrots, I'm fine. No worries, you know me. I always…always…"

Nick's words began to falter as Judy's foot began to thump. Yes, she *did* know him…and she wasn't buying it.

He sighed and turned away, ears wilting sideways and tail drooping to the ground.

"No Carrots, I'm not okay," he admitted, and then looked at her over his shoulder, "I-I blew it this morning Judy. And now everybody thinks I'm a jerk."

The doe-bunny folded her arms and the tempo of her thumping increased.

"Okay-y-y, so what are you going to do about it Nick, go eat some worms?"

An unexpected smile flitted across his face.

"I wouldn't say that to a fox, Carrots. We *like* worms."

"Ew!" She was unable to stop herself from grimacing.

He turned suddenly to face her again.

"What I don't understand is why you of all bunnies keep standing up for me, Carrots. I almost got you killed with that stupid fire-hose stunt."

Judy's paws went straight to her hips. "Yes you did Nick…and before that you saved my little sister's life."

Usually, that ploy worked, but not this time. Nick shook his head and began to gesture with his
paw, the way he always did when he was agitated.

"And then I got all three of us trapped inside that...pen, or whatever it was with your Uncle Terry," he reminded her.

"And then you got us out of there!" she reminded him right back.

He looked at the ground again, shamefaced. "I wouldn't have had to if I'd been using my head in the first place."

Judy tried to take his paws; he wouldn't let her.

"Nick," she told him quietly, "nobody's perfect, we all blow it once in a while; I found that out the hard way after that press conference two years ago." Now she was the one regarding the ground.

"That was different, Carrots." the fox rebutted her, "That was only some careless words, you didn't DO anything stupid."

Judy's ears went back as if a wind had just blown in her face.

"Oh really?" she said, "Tell that to all the predators who...Ohhhh!" She threw up her paws in mixture of defeat and exasperation, "That's it, I give up; nobody can talk to you when you get like this. Call me when you get back from your guilt-trip, Slick. Right now, I'm going back to the dance."

Judy turned and stalked away from him. She managed only about ten steps before she heard him running to catch up with her, "Carrots, wait!"

...just as she'd known he would.

"Ewwww, are you serious?"

They were passing by a mole selling grilled nightcrawlers from a pushcart, and the hungry look on Conor's face had not escaped Erin Hopps' notice.

"What, YOU eat those things?" she demanded, puckering her nose in disgust

"I'm a fox, deal with it.," he answered archly...but made a mental note to go for them later, when she wasn't around.

"You're just lucky Finnick took off, Snowdrop," he added silently, "You don't wanna know what HE likes to snack on."

"Hiyeee!" A pair of voices called from over on their left, and they turned to see three members of Erin's posse coming their way, Jill Pepper, Cara Combs, and Sue Cannon. Walking with Sue was another feline, a guy; not a bobcat like herself but a Lynx, bigger than her and wearing a T-shirt reading "Burrows High School Lacrosse."

Instinctively, Conor began sizing him up.

He was at least two years older than the young silver fox and probably a head taller with a muscular build, not an ounce of fat anywhere; those were his advantages. The only disadvantage that Conor could see was that he was a jock...but that was a huge handicap on his part.

The average high-school athlete is used to playing by the rules...and in a street fight there aren't
any. In a street-fight, the object is not to beat your opponent, but to hurt him. Conor knew that much if nothing else (and he had the marks to prove it.) If it came to a fight between him and this lynx, he'd go straight for the knees; put some hurt on an athlete's knee and… "What the heck am I doing?"

He wanted to kick himself right out of the Festival. More than three years out of Granite Point Youth Reformatory and Conor was still seeing every other guy he met as a potential opponent. Would he NEVER lose that 'tude?

His embarrassment didn't ease up any when Sue introduced him to the lynx.

"Conor, this is my boyfriend, Craig Roberts. Craig this is Conor, you remember him from last night."

"Heck yeah," the lynx said, offering a paw, "That was really cool, you letting Erin have your slot there Conor."

"No thanks needed, it was worth it," the young fox answered, liking himself even less for his earlier assessment of this cat. Unlike everyone else he'd met, the lynx had made no comments about Conor's guitar-playing; instead he'd talked about the fox's beau geste in stepping aside to let Erin take center stage. This Craig Roberts was an alright guy, (unlike another Craig he'd met recently and speaking of that animal…)

"Erin you heard the latest?" Jill Pepper was asking her fellow bunny, and without waiting for an answer she nudged the elbow of the bobcat next to her. "Tell her, Sue."

Sue Cannon looked around and then leaned in close. Her expression was wickedly gleeful

"Guess what Erin, the Guildfords are getting evicted!"

Both her Conor's ears went up and then the white furred bunny's nose began to twitch. Could this have had something to do with the video of Craig Guilford firebombing that produce stand: the one the silver fox had pirated off his girlfriend's computer and then tricked her into posting on Ewe-Tube? It seemed highly unlikely but still…

"You sure about this?" Erin was peering closely at her friend.

Sue raised a pair of crossed fingers. "Swear to God, Erin. They got served this morning; I heard my dad talking to my mom about it right before we left for the dance. When a bank forecloses on a property, they have to notify the Sheriff's Department; it's the law."

Conor relaxed and saw Erin do the same. Okay, it was a bank foreclosure, nothing to do with him.

"Yeah, and good riddance!" Cara Combs said, speaking for all of them.

But then a wee voice piped up from the young ewe's shoulder, and Conor realized that Lisa Chatterton, the Douglas Squirrel, was also there with them.

"Wait a minute, they got served with a foreclosure on a SUNDAY?" she chittered incredulously, "I didn't think a bank could DO that."

"You'd be surprised as what a bank can get away with," Conor growled, his mouth setting into a thin, grim line.

Before anyone could ask him what he meant by that, a squeal of feedback echoed from the
direction of the stage, followed by a low, brassy voice.

"Hello, good evening everybody…and welcome to the Carrot Days Big Dance."

The announcement sparked a flurry of conversation among the others that Conor Lewis at first found hard to follow.

"Who is that, is that Chip Fielding?" Craig Roberts asked.

"Sounds like him," Cara Combs answered and then grinned, "Bet HE was happy to hear about the Guilfords getting kicked off their property."

"Ho, no kidding!"

"He may not know yet."

"Is he really going to run for Sheriff, Sue?" it was Jill Pepper again.

"Don't know, it's just a rumor," the girl bobcat shrugged "but my dad says he'll quit the Department before he'll serve under that sleazebucket."

"...so once more, I'd like to thank our sponsor, LPN Pharmaceuticals," the beaver was saying, "and now, on with the show."

A smattering of applause followed and then they heard the band tuning up again

Conor looked at Erin and winked.

"Betcha a quarter they open with Summertime Blues."

She grinned and shook her head.

"No bet fox, I was just thinking the same thing." A lively beat and a danceable rhythm, covered by everyone from The Whom to Bruce Springbok to Alan Jackrabbit, Summertime Blues was the perfect opening number for any summer dance-party, anywhere.

And sure enough...

"Well I'm a-gonna raise a fuss,
I'm a-gonna raise a holler..."

Sue immediately grabbed her boyfriend's wrist. "Come on Craig, let's dance."

He was led away towards the dance-floor with a helpless look on his face. That was as good a cue as any, Conor decided, to also take his leave; at this point his stomach was delivering an ultimatum, 'send down some grub or the throat gets it!'

"If you don't mind, I'm gonna go snag myself something to eat." He said.

"Yeah sure, go ahead." Erin answered, not a little skittishly. She had already guessed what was on the menu. (Ewwwww!)

"I'll see you later." She said, and followed Sue and Craig into the crowd, with Jill and Cara right behind her

Conor watched them go, and started to turn away…but then a thought occurred to him. After her
performance onstage last night, probably every eligible young rabbit in the Burrow would be asking her to dance.

Well, so what if they did? It didn't concern him, and....

"Hey, stupid...Feed me! NOW!"

Conor bowed to his belly's demands and headed for the food stalls.

Chapter End Notes

Yes Virginia, foxes do eat earthworms. I saw it in a nature documentary.

Easter Egg, a reference to Disney's first live-action film.
Chapter Summary

Revenge is a dish best served in a Provencale manner with shallots and aubergines, garnished with truffle pate, brandy and with a fried egg on top and SPAM!

And then things gets dicey.

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 4 – The Wizard of Chaos
(Continued…Pt. 11)

Conor was sitting at one of the picnic tables, slurping the remnants of his pop, and wondering what the heck he was going to do next. The grilled 'crawlers had been good, not the best he'd ever had but decent. (The slice of Gideon Grey's blackberry pie that followed had more than compensated; it hadn't just been just the bomb, try a freaking nuke.)

"But whither now, young Master Lewis?" he asked himself rhetorically. Should he just sit here and enjoy the music? While they had a pretty decent band playing tonight, it had never been his style to play the wallflower. Hmmm, head back to the van and get online maybe? There was surprisingly good Wi-Fi reception back at the campground, and he hadn't talked to…

He became aware of a presence behind him; a split second later his nose put a name to the visitor.

"Hi DF," he said, turning around to see Finnick standing there.

"Hey kid," the desert fox answered, offering a small salute with the skewer of grilled scorpions he'd been munching.

"Good thing Snowdrop isn't here to see this," Conor mused …or maybe it wasn't so good. Her reaction would be worth a Ewe-Tube vid at least.

"I didn't know they had those here," he said, pointing to the kebab in the fennec-fox's paws. (Scorpions are largely desert dwellers, not common in a place like the Burrow.)

Finnick's face took on an expression of mild distaste.

"Yeah, but they ain't near as good as the ones you get at the Meerkat Market. Idiots here take the
stingers off before they cook 'em."

As if to drive home the point, he dropped the skewer into a nearby trash bin, slapping his paws together in a 'that's that' gesture.

Then, to the younger fox's momentary surprise, he pulled himself up onto the bench across the table and leaned in close, beckoning him with a crooked finger and narrowed eyes.

Conor blinked, and then pulled himself halfway across the tabletop as well. This was what Finnick did whenever he had a scheme up his sleeve.

"What up?" he asked his partner softly.

The desert fox lowered his voice to a rumbling whisper.

"I gotta little hustle going, kid." He said, "Nothin' big, just penny ante really, but you can help a buddy out, right?"

Conor didn't even hesitate.

"You got it DF, what's the gag?"

Finnick looked around for a second and then dropped his voice by another half decibel.

"That bunny, Erin; I didn't care much for how she was talking trash on you an' me in the van back there. So what I did was, I bet her a 20 that she can't get you to dance with her. When she shows up here, no matter what she says, you act like you ain't interested, okay?"

"Oh-kayyy," the young silver fox answered, hiding his indignation; it was taking every ounce of effort to keeps his ears from swiveling backwards and his fangs from unsheathing. No, it wasn't okay; so what if Erin had gone off on them in the van back there? That was no reason to try and scam her. Dangit but this little guy could be so petty sometimes. For crying out in pain, she was just a girl going through that time of her life; where the heck did he get off…?

"Oops, heads up kid, here she comes."

Conor turned just in time to see Erin Hopps emerging from the crowd. With her were Jill Pepper and her other bunny GF, Tawny Lloyd; Terri Blackburn, the ferret, was bringing up the rear with Lisa Chatterton perched on top of her head. All of five were regarding him intently.

"Remember," Finnick admonished, keeping his voice low.

Conor smiled and discreetly flipped a paw.

"Relax DF, I got this."

And heaving himself off the picnic table bench, he walked straight up to the white-furred, black-tipped bunny.

"Erin, would you like to dance?"

He turned to leer over his shoulder at Finnick. The little guy was going to have a connipt…

"Sure, I'd love to." She said.

Conor's face dived earthward, like a Kamikaze plane. What the…? She said yes? She—said
—yes? What the heck, SHE WASN’T SUPPOSED TO ACCEPT! She was supposed to say 'no thanks', and then collect her money from Finnick. What the frinkity-plink was going on around here?

Well, whatever it was, it was too late to back out now, not with an entire girl-squad looking at him. Somehow hiding his reluctance, Conor took hold of Erin's paw and led her towards the dance floor with her girlfriends—and Finnick—trailing close behind.

With such a large influx of guests the event's organizers had wisely chosen to divide the dance floor into different sections, one for large mammals, one for mid-sized mammals, and the biggest section for small mammals (such as bunnies.) A raised platform over on the left was reserved for rodents.

It took a minute or two to find an open space with so many other dancers on the floor. Conor could feel (or imagine) the eyes of every bunny in the place boring into him like laser-drills. ‘What do you think you’re doing, dancing with HER, fox?’ they all seemed to be saying.

"Please…don’t play a slow song next," the young fox silently beseeched the band, first turning his eyes towards the stage and then canting them skyward. Heaven must have decided to take mercy on him because right then the lead guitarist let loose with a ripping, in-your-face riff, the opening chords of another summer classic.

Erin laughed and clapped her paws. "Whoa, I thought about playing this at the talent show last night, fox."

"We could have, I know it too," he told her, caught up in the moment, in spite of his misgivings.

So what could they do? They began to dance—while in the background a buzzsaw vocal ripped forth from the lead mike.

"Well we got no choiiiice....
All the girls and boyyyyyyyz..."

Erin Hopps turned out to have some pretty mad dancing skills; she knew a thing or two about how to move her hips, (and being a bunny, she had plenty of hip to spare), swaying bumping and then gyrating in a circle with her paws behind her neck.

But Conor was no slouch on the dance floor either; he was street, and this was where it showed; his style was aggressive, almost predatory, with quick, staccato moves. More than once he dropped down on all fours, a move that seemed to stop the breath of his partner in her throat.

That lasted until the refrain came up and brought the two of them together. Along with practically every other kid on the floor, they leaped in time to the music, pumping fists and shouting along with the lyrics.

Schoooooool's out...for...sum-MER!
Schoooooool's out...for...eh-VAH!"

And then they were dancing together again. At one point Erin began to play along on an imaginary bass. Conor joined her on air guitar and soon the two them were pantomiming a jam together.

"Nooooo more pen-cils,
"Nooooo more booooo-hooks..."

It was strange, really strange, Conor reflected to himself. Only a moment ago he'd been praying for
a short song; now he was hoping the band would play an extended version of the old Alice Raccooper standard.

"Out for Sum-mer
Out ’til Faw-hall
We might not go back at aw-HALL!"

When the song ended, the kids on the dance floor sent up a screaming cheer in imitation of the original version's finale. It was only afterwards that Conor first noticed how hard he was breathing and saw Erin doing the same.

"So," he panted, "What are you…going to do…with the money?"

The young bunny's nose began to twitch.

"Money? What…money?" she said, staring at him with one ear higher than the other.

Conor glanced over his shoulder for a second. Yep, there was Finnick, as expressionless as a sphinx. He cocked a thumb in the little fox's direction. "The twenty he bet you that said you couldn't get me to dance with you."

Erin's eyes went wide and her ears fell over backwards behind her head.

"Wha…? He told me YOU'RE the one he made a bet with."

Now Conor was the one staring wide-eyed.

"Wait, what?"

"Yeah," she said, pointing past him and towards the desert fox, "He said he bet you a fifty that YOU couldn't get ME to dance."

"WHAT?" For a moment the young fox's ears were working in confusion…until it hit him like a ton of bricks.

"Fin-NICK!" he snarled turning fangs and spiking neck fur in the fennec fox's direction.

His ire turned quickly to horror as he noticed for the first time the object in the desert fox's paw; a camera-phone…with the lens aimed right at him and Erin.

"I got you baaaaack, boy," he grinned, speaking in his trademark deep-bass sing-song. And then he slipped the phone into his pants pocket, throwing his head back and laughing up a thunderstorm.

Conor was still staring when without warning Finnick leaped up and grabbed him by the shirt.

"I got you back GOOD, kid; told you I would!" He patted the pocket where he'd stashed the phone, and dropped to the ground again, laughing harder than ever. "Whooo, your boyz back in Zoo-tope gonna lose it when they see you been dancing with a bunny."

The realization made Conor's ears vanish into his scalp.

"Why you sneaky little…gimme that cell-phone!"

But the fennec-fox had already darted away into the multitude—and there was nothing to do but stare after him in impotent fury; nobody could melt through a crowd like him.
That was when the young silver fox realized there was something going on behind him.

He turned, and was dumbfounded to see Erin Hopps nearly fainting with laughter, along with every single one of her girls.

"What, you think that's funny?" he demanded, waving an angry paw, "What happens if your folks see that vid?"

"So what if they do?" Erin was recovering rapidly, "It's not like they won't find out anyway. This is Bunnyburrow fox, not Zootopia; everybody knows everybody here." She waved a paw at the crowd behind her. "Heck, I spotted at least five other animals who recognized me while we were dancing."

"And your folks won't be bothered by it?" The young fox was completely incredulous.

Erin gave him that 'what are you, an idiot?' look again.

"Yeah, probably. So?"

"Soooo, you wanna dance some more?" he asked, surprising the heck out of both her and himself.

It wasn't enough of a surprise to stop Erin from saying, "Yeah let's go."

As the two young mammals started to move with the music again they had no way of knowing they were about to be spotted by someone a lot closer to home than the folks who'd observed them earlier…and Nick Wilde had no way of knowing that he was about to give Judy just the opening she'd been hoping for.

"Carrots, look," he pointed, "isn't that your sister Erin over there, dancing with Conor Lewis?"

Judy peered for a second with her nose twitching…and then her eyes went wide with surprise.

"Sweet Cheez n' Crackers, you're right Nick." She gaped…but then she was grinning from ear-to-ear—while the red fox felt his collar beginning to tighten; something about the look on her face was hoisting red flags from here to Outback Island.

They'd been on their way back to join the rest of the family, and had discovered the quickest route was to skirt the front of the crowd. The other Hopps's were just coming into view when Nick caught sight, (actually scent,) of Judy's kid sister and the young silver fox. It was only after his eyes confirmed what his nose was saying that he'd pointed them out to her.

Now, he was beginning to wish he'd kept his big, fat, fox-trap shut.

For the moment, his companion wasn't saying anything, only watching as Conor and Erin danced to the rhythm of Steve Ermine's Copperhead Road.

"Well him an' my uncle tore that engine down. I still remember that a-rumblin' sound."

"They make a pretty decent couple, don't they?" Judy observed, folding her arms and winking at him.

Nick felt his anxiety kick up a notch.

"I-I-I don't think your folks would say so, Carrots," he told her, looking warily over at Bonnie and Stu: had they seen what their daughter was doing? (They hadn't.)
"He uz headed down to Foxville with a weekly load. 
You could smell the whiskey burnin' down Copperhead Ro-ho-hoad!"

Judy turned with a look of feigned indignity on her face.

"Oh, you think there's something wrong with a bunny and a fox dancing together?" she challenged, arching an eyebrow.

"I didn't say that, Judy," Nick protested, raising his paws…and realizing too late that he had just played right into HER paws. "Why did I have to say anything?"

"Oh so you don't have problem with it?" she asked, lifting her brow even higher.

"Now th' DEA's got a chopper in the air
Wake up howlin' like I'm back over there…"

Trapped, cornered…there was only one right answer to that question, and it was the worst possible answer he could give. Ohhhh, couldn't Judy have asked him something simple like, "Does this dress make me look fat?"

Nick barely kept himself from wincing. "No, of course not," he said.

Judy moved a paw to her hip.

"Then prove it fox. Dance with me on the next song."

He could have face-pawlmed himself with a brick.

"Agggggh, grrrrr! I KNEW it!"

He hesitated and she folded her arms again.

"Well come on Nick, how about it? You're not going to let some kid show you up, are you?"

Now his green eyes did wince shut. Oooo, but if this bunny didn't know exactly where to hit him, right in the ego; he opened them again and was about to give in, when the band started to play the next tune.

It was an easy transition; like the previous song, their next number opened with a mandolin riff, only this time with a harmonica joining in.

Nick Wilde felt as if a steel fencepost had just been driven through his heart. And We Danced by The Hoofers; oh God no, not THIS tune!

A flood-tide of memories went tearing through his soul, a horde of barbarians sacking a city. Robyn, the first time he'd seen her, she'd been singing that tune…and from that night on it had been their song. He remembered everything that followed; it was like a DVD playing in his head that he couldn't turn off. He remembered that first time, when the lovely cross-fox vixen had turned him down, his determination to win her fair and square; Wild Times, his joy when she'd finally accepted…and then the night when everything had come crashing down. Even then Robyn stuck with him…until that other fateful night. "You didn't NEED to lie to me Nick." It struck him with the speed of a lightning bolt, a thousand recollections in the blink of an eye.

"I…I can't Carrots, I'm sorry." He told Judy.

She refused to be put off, "Oh come Nick, one little dance?"
Nick felt himself weakening again; but then behind him, the band launched into the vocals, and ohhh, why did they have to give this one to their female lead?

"He was a be-bop baby on a harrrrrd day's night.  
He was hangin' on Jenny, she was holdin' on tight..."

Jenny, not Johnny…that was exactly the way Robyn had always sung it. He wanted to turn away from the stage, but he couldn't; it was as if he was under the control of some unseen puppeteer.

He looked…and he saw her, not with his eyes, but in his heart, the torn tee over the tank top, the stressed jeans, and her red-on-black fur; the way she'd looked that night in The Thaw, swaying before the microphone with a keytar in her paws as she belted out the lyrics…that gleam in her eyes, so beautiful, so full of life.

"And we danced  
Like a wave on the ocean romance.  
We were liars in love and we danced..."

But then she seemed to turn and look straight at him…with a face filled with infinite sorrow.

"You didn't need to lie to me, Nick!"

He felt his eyes slam shut again, but she was still there, inside his head.

"Why Nick...WHY?"

"Make it stop!"

But it wouldn't stop, it shouldn't stop; HOW could he have done that to her?

"Nick? On the dance floor, now," someone was saying. Who was that, was it Judy?

"You promised me, Nick! You swore to me!"

"Come on fox…" someone was tugging on his wrist

"Lever me alone, Robyn." he cried out silently.

"I met my be-bop baby at the union hall…"

"Get out of my way, Nick!" the last words she had ever spoken to him.

"Come on Nick, the song's almost…"

"LEAVE ME ALONE!"

All at once he was back in the present. What, he hadn't said that out loud…had he? No, he couldn't have, except why had Judy pulled her away from him…and why did she look so hurt? He hadn't seen her this way since that time under the bridge, only now she wasn't just heartsick, she was angry…no not just angry, furious; all at once her features hardened into a wall of onyx.

"Fine," she sniffed, her violet eyes moist and shining, "If you don't want to dance with me Nicholas Wilde, I'm sure someone else will!"

"Carrots," he tried to say something but she had already spun on her heel and was walking away with her fists jammed down at her sides. He tried to follow, but his feet felt as if they had taken
root where he was standing. All he could do was watch helplessly as she walked up to Jack LaPeigne.

Judy reached up to tap the big bunny on the shoulder, but even with all the background noise, he must have heard her coming; before she could touch him, he turned swiftly to face her.

"Judy, what is it?" he asked, lifting an ear.

"Ummm, my dance partner kind of pooped out on me," she said, wondering why she suddenly felt so nervous, "Will you dance with me, Jack LaPeigne?"

"Sure, that'd wonderful," he answered, his delight masking his surprise. (Judy's parents seemed equally pleased by this turn of events; Bonnie was taking Stu by the elbow and pulling him in the direction of the dance floor.)

Nick Wilde felt his throat heat up and swell as Judy and Jack LaPeigne disappeared into the crowd of dancers. 'And We Danced' had concluded, but there would be another song …and then the big bunny would put his arms around her, and then she would dance with him the way he had danced with Robyn…

"I've got to get out of here." The realization was like a SECOND thunderbolt, "I have to get away from this place…as far away as I can get."

He turned and began to skulk his way along the line of picnic tables, heading for the exit with his tail between his legs.

Behind him, the music had started up again.

"Oh...Oh...Oh...Oh... I feel so unsure...as I take your paw..."

Nick pushed his way towards the gate with an added urgency, not even realizing that he was taking the long way out. Had he gone for the nearer exit, he would have passed right by where Conor and Erin were sitting.

"Something in your eye-hiiiiies
Calls to mind a silver screen."

"Here you go," the young fox set a tray on the table in front of the white-furred bunny and then scooted around to take the seat on the other side the picnic table. Erin reached for her pong-cup of cider but waited until her companion sat down before taking a sip of—a sip that quickly translated into two large gulps and a half-empty cup; dancing is thirsty work. That was part of the reason why she and Conor had elected to sit this one out; (that…and neither one of them was a particular fan of the George Camel tune, 'Careless Whisper').

They had lost track of Erin's girlfriends somewhere along the line, not a huge surprise in a crowd this size. While dancing to the last number they had crossed paths with Sue and Craig out on the floor. The two felines had been neither surprised nor unhappy to see Erin dancing with a fox, but then they'd been predators themselves, and also her friends. A lot of the other faces watching had held very different expressions, especially the bunnies and of them, especially the older ones.

As with so many other things, the attitude towards predator/prey relationships was very different with the younger crowd than it was with the adults. (That was a big reason why so many young mammals were cool with the idea of preds dating prey species and vice-versa. Mom and dad don't like it? Count me in!)
Of course, the young silver fox reminded himself, attitudes about predator/prey relationships were also way different out here in the sticks than back in the city. As soon as Erin's GFs got her alone they might unload on her. Not over her first dance with a fox, she'd been snookered into that one, along with him. In fact, the girls in Erin's posse would probably never get tired of telling and re-telling that story; they'd be dining out on it for weeks to come.

But then, when he'd asked her to dance a second time, Erin had said yes; she'd looked every bit as surprised by her answer as he had been, but she'd said yes just the same. And then they'd shared another dance, would you believe it? What would her girlfriends say to that? (As for Finnick, when he heard about it, he was probably going to think he'd created a monster—and Conor wasn't going to know whether to thank him or bite him.)

He set down his cup and looked at Erin.

"I still can't believe we danced three times." He said, "Are you really the same bunny girl who smacked me in the face for that kissing thing I said?"

Erin set down her cup and raised a fist.

"You ever actually try that silver-boy and I'll break your face!"

Her manner was playful rather than belligerent and the young fox took no offense. Still, it served as a reminder that Erin Hopps' change of attitude towards his species went only so far and no further.

"No thanks," he said, rubbing his muzzle, "Been there, done that."

"Har, Har," Erin started to say, but then her expression changed when she realized he was serious—and that he wasn't referring to what had happened the first time they met.

(In fact, he'd been referring to an earlier incident…a much more serious incident.)

For a moment, there was silence between them, with each of the two young mammals groping for something to fill the void. It was Erin who found it first.

"I have to say it Conor, you're a pretty good dancer."

"Not 'one, hot, dancer?" he asked, in a bad impression of the voice from the Dance with Gazelle phone-app.

Erin giggled, "Don't push your luck, FOX."

Conor took another sip of his cider.

"Actually, I signed up for a dance class my first semester at the Academy," he said, "I figured it might be a good way to pick up some stage moves." He offered her a single, serious nod. "You though, you got some talent there, bunny. When you get to ZAPA, you might want to take some dance classes yourself."

Erin frowned for a second. "Mmmm, maybe…but before I can think about anything like that I have to get accepted at the Academy."

"Can't argue with you there," the young fox said, and then added his own note of caution. "Zootopia's a heckuva of a different environment from around here, though." Even for him, it had been an adjustment. With its 12 unique ecosystems about the only thing Zootopia had in common with Zoo York City was that both of them were cities.
Something occurred to him then and he moved hastily to qualify his statement. "But you probably know all that from your sister Judy, huh?"

"Pretty much," the young bunny agreed, nodding, "I can't wait to get away from here though...all right, what's so funny?"

Conor was snickering so hard the table was shaking. He forced himself to recover and leaned towards her.

"That's what you say now, Erin," he said, "but if you get into ZAPA, I give it two months, three months tops, before you start getting homesick again."

She thumped her foot on the ground.

"Not me, fox. I'm not going to miss this place." She tapped the table with a finger for emphasis.

Conor sat back on the table-bench again.

"Who said anything about this place?" (He actually thought she would miss Bunnyburrow, but knew better than to argue the point.) "I was talking about your family...and your friends."

"Oh," the young white-furred bunny was suddenly contrite. "Yeah, you're right about that, Conor. I'll miss them for sure."

"Mind if I give you one more piece of advice?" he asked. She nodded and he bit his lip, looking away for just a second as he contemplated how best to put it.

"When I started at ZAPA and started making friends there," he finally said. "I kind of started neglecting my buds from the neighborhood." Seeing her expression, he raised a paw. "No, I straightened things out before I messed it up for good, thank God; we're still tight, all of us."

Erin's face split open in a grin so sly, she could almost have passed for a fox herself.

"This wouldn't have had anything to do with that animal who straightened you out on that Prima Donna thing would it, Conor?"

"Sort of," he flipped a pawl back and forth. "I mostly figured it out on my own...but I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have, if it hadn't been for her." He set down his cup and looked at her. "The thing is Erin, don't make the same mistake that I did; if you get into ZAPA—and I think you got a real good shot at it—don't forget your friends back home; keep in touch with 'em all you can, and try to get back to see them now and then, better yet, invite them to come visit you sometime."

"I'm going to," she nodded solemnly. Whether this was in response to his advice or something she'd planned all along, the young fox couldn't say. What mattered was that she meant it, he could tell.

And then the music started again; a number he recognized, "The Authority Song" by John Cougar Mellencat.

Erin also recognized it.

"Oooo, I love this tune." She was clasping her paws together and almost squealing. Conor wasn't surprised, a rebellious ditty by a small-town farm-boy; why wouldn't she like this one?

He got up quickly and offered her a paw.

"Then what the heck are we waiting for? Let's go."
The two of them hurried for the dance floor, making it just as the vocals started.

"Oh, they like to get you in compromising po-si-tion
Well, they like to get you there, and smile in your fay-hayce…"

For this number Conor smoothed out his dance moves a little; somehow it felt right for this song. Truth be told, he was only a pretty good dancer, not like some of the kids at the Performing Arts Academy that were majoring in Dance; compared to them he was like a kit wearing clogs on a greased floor.

But who cared? He was having fun, and that was all that mattered right now.

"Hey look there's Judy!" Erin, was waving, "Hiyee sis! Awww darn, she can't hear me. Who's that guy she's with I wonder?"

Conor felt his ears prickle up? What the…? Judy wasn't dancing with Nick Wilde?

Erin's next words hit him like a brickbat through a storefront window.

"Wow, I never saw a bunny that big."

Conor felt himself tense up as if 100 volts had just gone through him. It wasn't, it couldn't be him…

He turned to look, just as the band went into the refrain…

"I fight authority, authority always wins
Oh, I fight authority, authority always wi-hins."

The lyrics could not have been more appropriate.

"YOU!" The word burst inside the young silver fox's head like an exploding fireball. It was him, Jack LaPeigne, in the flesh and fur. Conor felt his whole body clenching up like fist; he wanted to rush over, leap up, and sink his fangs into the big bunny's face, "How do YOU like it, dirt-bag? And this is for Danny and Kieran!"

"Ju-deee!" Erin was trying to catch her sister's attention again. Like a magic incantation her words instantly broke the spell. Conor's rage vanished in a flash…replaced by a deep, almost mortal terror. If Judy looked so would her dance partner…and if Jack La Peigne saw the fox dancing with Erin, he would recognize him as the kid formerly known as Dylan Yeats…

He wanted to scream at Erin, "Don't!" but knew that would be his worst course of action. Instead he pretended to grimace and hissed under his breath. "Ow! Hey, watch the tail, bunny-girl."

"Oops, sorry," she said, color rising in her ears as she forgot about her sister for the moment; this was the second time this evening she'd accidentally stepped on her dance-partner's tail, (or it would have been, if she actually had stepped on it.)

"S'okay," he said, "But pay attention to what you're doing, huh? You can go talk to Judy after we're done dancing."

"Got it," Erin said, raising three fingers. Conor felt a rush of relief….until a few second later when the song ended. (Dangit, he should have been paying attention!) Now there was no reason for Erin not to flag down her sister—and the big bunny dancing with her.
"Juuuudyyyy!" Erin raised her paw again, but then abruptly lowered it and began to thump her foot, "Dangit, where'd she go?"

Conor's mind was racing at warp speed; no time to feel relieved, he had to get away from here, just go and get away before…

"Listen I'd love to say hello to your sister," he said flashing another, smaller faux-grimace, "But right now, I really gotta go use the little fox's room; nature ain't just calling, she's screaming her head off."

"Yeah, now that you mention it, I have to go too." Erin answered him, seeming to realize it for the first time. "I'll meet you back at our table, 'kay?"

"Sounds good," the young fox told her. (Thank yooou, cider!)

"See you soon," Erin offered a shy wave as she walked away. Conor watched her go and then turned and headed for the exit, and from there to Finnick's van.

"No, not the van!" his inner voice warned, "That's the **first** place she'll go looking for you!"

Yes-s-s, it would be just like Erin Hopps go searching for him when he didn't show up at their table. And what if she brought her sister and Jack LaPei-rate with her?

Jack La Peigne…only now did it hit him. What the **heck** had Judy Hopps been doing, dancing with THAT psycho-mutant from the planet Hellbender?

"You got NO idea what you're getting into with that lowlife, lady," he thought, "that bunny's a freaking viper with a hundred heads!"

"Easy, easy," Conor's inner voice reminded him, "He fooled you too, the first time you met him, remember?"

An involuntary smirk spread over the young silver fox's muzzle.

"Yeah, but in the end I fooled his butt right back!"

"And he's had a hate-on for you ever since," the inner voice rejoined tartly, "Whatever you do, **DON'T** go back to the van."

Conor passed through the exit and looked around. All right, where else could he go?
Chance Encounters of the dangerous kind.

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 4 – The Wizard of Chaos
(Continued…Pt. 12)

Nick Wilde wandered lonely as a cloud, with no idea where was going, or even where he was… somewhere in the hills overlooking the Carrot Days Festival, right? Yes, there it was, down below. (From up here, it looked like a neon ant-hill.) Every now and then, a fragment of music would find its way up from the stage to the old service road he was following—if you could call this thing a road; it was really nothing more than a pair of winding ruts, with a lane of tall weeds for a center stripe.

Nick had brought no flashlight with him, but he didn't really need one. There was a bright, three-quarter moon out tonight and combined with his built-in night vision, he could navigate the track without difficulty. (Besides, in a pinch, he could always use the light attached to his cell-phone.)

The only other clue he had to his location was that he'd passed by the campground a short while ago. When he'd seen Finnick's van, parked in its old spot, the red fox had given it a wide berth, never mind that it was dark and empty. (Right now, he didn't want take a chance on having to talk to anybody.)

How had it happened, where had it all gone south? Last night, around the bonfire, he been sitting on top of the world with Judy and her family; how had he managed to ruin it all in less than 24 hours?

"Not the first time I messed up like that," he reminded himself, but then stopped in his tracks when a shadow inserted itself into the corner of his vision. Nick was startled, almost stunned; he hadn't used that particular fox-sense in years, had almost forgotten he had it. But then out here in the boonies there was a lot less electrical interference than back in the city.
A scent caught his nose just then, the choking aroma of car exhaust, rich, thick, and pungent; somebody's ride either wasn't firing on all cylinders or else it had a bad muffler. Whatever the case, it had passed this way only a short while ago; he wasn't alone up here.

Nick's first urge was to turn and go back the way he had come; if anybody else was around, then he didn't want to be.

And yet…something in the back of his mind was telling him to stay put, no not just stay put, to follow up on what he'd scented. Once again Nick was surprised; he hadn't felt a hunch this strongly in years, perhaps even longer.

He lifted his muzzle and sniffed the air. Someone else was up here all right, just beyond that grove of oak trees. Actually there were two of them, another fox…and a canine whose species he couldn't quite identify beneath the cover of engine fumes.

Raising his muzzle a second time, Nick checked the wind direction. Another fox and a canid species; they'd have at least as good a sense of smell as him and times two—but they were also upwind of his position; for the moment, he was safe.

He hunkered down on all fours and began to pad his way into the trees, taking care to avoid the road. (Somehow, it seemed like the prudent course of action.)

At the edge of the tree-line, he saw it, a splash of white that could not be from anything indigenous to this hill. Moving quietly as possible, Nick pulled himself up into the crotch of a gnarled oak tree, trying for a better view.

20 yards away, a white pickup truck was parked in the center of a clearing, facing towards the edge of the hill. If it were possible, this rig looked even more dilapidated than the Hopps Family Farm truck. There was writing on the side of the cab, but it was so flecked and faded, that in the dimness of the night Nick was only able to make out the first two letters, 'S' and 'K.'

And there they were, standing in the truck bed and leaning across the cab, both of them propped on their elbows. The smaller animal was a young, red fox, a vixen it looked like, and on her left was a coyote; possibly the same age, it was hard to tell with his companion partially blocking the view. Nick could see that she had a pair of high-powered binoculars in her paws, and was studying the landscape below with an almost fierce intensity. And what was that set-up the 'yote had, was it a telescope? Couldn't be; whoever heard of a telescope with a three-inch tripod? Well whatever it was he was scrutinizing the landscape below every bit as intently as…

The branch beside him rustled suddenly. Someone else was here…in the tree, right below him; his escape route was cut off.

Nick hurriedly unsheathed his claws, and pulled back his lips, exposing his fangs, hoping like heck that whoever was below him, it wasn't an apex predator.

It wasn't; the interloper was a pred all right, but two sizes smaller than him. Nick immediately put his claws away. Where in the world had Conor Lewis come from? (And why hadn't he smelled the kid?)

He put a quick finger to his lips but knew it was a wasted effort; the kid wouldn't listen, kids never listened to…

Conor gave him a silent nod and continued to haul himself up into the oak tree, but much more cautiously and deliberately than a second ago, the leaves barely moved at all.
"What the heck are you doing here?" Nick demanded sotto voce when the young fox came close enough to hear him, "I thought you were downstairs, dancing with Erin."

"Why aren't you downstairs, dancing with Judy?" the kid retorted in a savage whisper, and before Nick could respond to this, he pointed with two fingers at the pickup truck. "What's going on over there?"

"I don't know but I don't like it." Nick told him, hoping the younger fox wouldn't ask him to elaborate. (He didn't.)

Conor offered a quick nod of understanding but said nothing. Moving quietly, he pulled himself up onto a nearby branch. Nick nearly ordered him down again, but didn't dare take the risk; it might lead to an argument and that might lead to his cover being blown.

But then the younger fox's eyes narrowed and his black-furred ears turned upwards.

"Whoa, I think I know those guys." He whispered.

"Really?" Nick's ears were also standing at attention, "who are they?"

"Lemme make sure," the young silver fox answered fumbling in the pocket of his parachute pants. "Dangit, I was sure I had those things…Oh wait, here we go."

He pulled out pair of mini-binoculars, no bigger than two rolls of dimes and pegged them to his eyes, scrolling slowly on the focus knob.

Nick dearly wished he could tell the kid to climb back down again and make himself scarce but sensed the odds of that happening now were about equal to the possibility of being hit by lightning on a day with no clouds. "Can you make out what it says on the side of that truck?" he asked.

"Only three letters," Conor answered him, "S, K, and I think that's an A…wait, hollllld it." His tail became a thicket of hedgehog quills, "Son of a…that's them all right." He passed the binoculars to Nick. "The vixen's name is Amanda-something; I forget her last name, but the coyote dude is Craig Guilford."

Nick almost dropped the binoculars. "Wait, what? He's one of the Guilford family?"

"Yeah, you know about those guys too, huh?" The young fox was only mildly surprised.

"Yes, Levon Chatterton told me about them." Nick answered and then raised the lenses to his eyes. Whoa, these things were no cheapies; the truck stood out as clearly as if it were on an HD monitor, "How do you know about the Guilfords, Conor…from Erin?" he asked.

"Uh, Yeah, pretty much" the young fox answered, but the hesitancy in his voice said that there was more to the story than met the ear. Well, Nick decided, he could question the kid about it later, right now…no, he didn't recognize either the coyote or his girlfriend but now realized that what he'd thought was a telescope was actually a spotting-scope. That meant the Guilford clan owned firearms and…uh, oh.

He passed the binoculars back to Conor, at the same time waving him to silence. "Sssss. he's putting on a blue-fang, just be quiet and listen."

The younger fox nodded and then they each cocked an ear in the direction of the pickup truck.

"Dad, it's me." The young coyote said into the headset, "I just heard from Amanda; no sign of him
The voice was a little faint but Nick Wilde could easily make out the words; it was clear out tonight and he and Conor were downwind of the truck. But what was it Craig had said, that he'd just heard from Amanda? But there she was right next to him, what the…?

"No, I haven't seen anything either." The young coyote was saying, and then paused for several seconds. When he spoke again, his voice had taken on a jagged edge. "Dangit Dad, there have to be three thousand animals down there; how's Mandy supposed to pick out one bunny from a crowd that size? Yeah, I know how big he is. Look, he's gotta be down there somewhere after what happened on the Midway this morning. Why are we wasting our…?"

He stopped again, and this time when he resumed speaking, his voice was quavering and barely audible.

"N-No sir…no, I wasn't giving you no sass."

He fell into a long silence…while Nick felt his ears prick up again; (This time Conor's ears were standing up as well.)

"'One bunny'…'how big he is'? Craig Guilford could only have been talking about…but why? What the heck did the Guilford clan have against Jack LaPeigne? Dangit, the answer felt close but Nick couldn't quite get a grip on it; something was missing. (Though he no way of knowing, the young silver fox beside him had issues of his own with the big rabbit.)

Craig meanwhile had disconnected the call and looked ready to tear off the headset and throw it into the trees

"Well?" the young vixen asked him in low growl. Nick couldn't tell if she was frightened, impatient, or both.

"Dad says to stay put until we find him." the young coyote answered with a frustrated snarl, "so we stay put."

Amanda's next words were inaudible, except for the last fragment, "…tell your dad we spotted him and just go?"

Craig turned to look at her for the first time. Nick couldn't quite see his face, but had the distinct impression he wasn't at all happy with her suggestion.

"Oh yeah, great idea Mandy; he's already that close to skinning my tail."

"He doesn't have to know…" she started to say.

"He ALWAYS knows!" her boyfriend cut her off at the pass. When he spoke again, it was with a mixture of awe and dread. "It's like he's got radar or something, he always knows when I've been lying to him; heck, I'm surprised he hasn't figgered out already that you're up here with me instead of down there on the dance floor, like he told you." He picked up the spotting scope and folded the tripod. "Come on let's go."

His girlfriend seemed to come unglued.

"I am NOT going down there!" she snapped, pointing to the edge of the hill.

Craig let out a sound that might either have been a groan or a whine.
"Dangit Mandy, nobody said…"

"I'm not getting any of that nasty stuff on ME!" She went on, flustered to the point of nearly gekkering.

"I told you…"

"He'll do it while we're down there, Craig; you saw how hacked he was for what happened with…"

"Mandy, SHUT UP!"

She fell instantly into a cowed silence.

"That's better," the young coyote told her. Nick thought he might have grabbed her by the arm, but couldn't quite be sure. What he was certain of was that the smell of fear coming off the young vixen was so strong that he could almost taste it. But what was she so afraid of, her boyfriend or the prospect of being sent down to the dance floor to search for Jack LaPeigne? Nick sensed it the latter scenario; but then what was Craig's dad planning that could bring her to within a hairsbreadth of a panic fit?

"First of all," the coyote was saying, trying to keep his voice level, "Dad wouldn't do that to me no matter how mad he was."

"That's coz you're family, I'm not!" Amanda protested, and then hurriedly stifled herself.

"No you're not." Craig conceded smoothly, "That's why you're up here with me instead of down there looking for that bunny. Second, will you use your dumb-fox head for once? They wouldn't let me into the Big Dance anyway; my family's banned from Carrot Days, remember?"

Amanda said something in response to this but; Nick couldn't make out the words; she spoke in a near mumble

Then he saw Craig pointing upwards and towards the left, "That's where we're going, up the ridgetop; we can get a better view of the dance from up there; that one big light won't be in our eyes."

His girlfriend's voice turned indignant and pouty.

"No way; there's all kinds of poison oak up…"

"Get your tail out of this truck, Mandy…NOW! And shut up!"

She leaped from the vehicle as if it were on fire.

Nick watched as she followed her boyfriend into the trees on the opposite side of the clearing. He give it an extra minute just be sure, and then slid down out of his perch and onto the ground below.

"Ssst, hey where you going?" a young voice hissed from up above him in the tree branches.

Nick looked upwards for a second. "I'm going to go check out that truck; stay here."

Conor immediately landed on the ground beside him. Nick promptly began to unroll the Riot Act, but the younger fox got there first

"What, are you crazy?" he said, "When those guys come back, if he doesn't smell that someone was poking around the truck, SHE will; she's another fox, for crying out loud!"
Nick felt his ears turn backwards. Did the kid think he was an idiot? "I'm not going to touch anything, just look."

Conor reached into another pocket and pulled out a small cylinder. "Well, just in case, here," he said, and tossed it to the older fox. Nick caught it in both paws and saw that it was a plastic spray bottle, approximately the size of a flashlight battery. He scrutinized it for moment, and then looked up sharply.

"Biological deodorizer, what the heck are you doing with this stuff, kid?" (So that was why he hadn't smelled anything when Conor had shown up earlier.)

"What can I say, you're welcome!" the young silver fox responded leeringly. (He had retrieved the bottle from Finnick's van along with the mini binocs and several other items. With Jack LaPeigne in the vicinity, he wasn't taking any chances.)

Nick would have loved to pursue the issue, but right now, he didn't have time for a Q-and-A.

"Okay, stay here." He said, and once again the younger fox balked.

"No way, big guy; someone's gotta keep an eye out in case our new buds decide to come back while you're scoping their ride."

Aggggh grrrr, Nick wanted to growl but knew the kid was right. If Craig and Amanda returned while he was examining the truck, they'd see him before he saw them (and also before he caught their scent.) He pulled out his cell phone and set it on 'vibrate'. "Okay here's my number' he said turning the screen towards the young silver fox, "Put it on speed-dial and call me if you see them coming. And let me have your number, too."

"Right," Conor nodded. He entered the number on his cell-phone and gave his number to Nick. And then without another word he skittered away towards where Craig and Amanda had disappeared into the trees.

As soon as he was gone Nick, gave himself a spritz of the deodorizer and began working his way towards the pick-up truck. Where the heck had Conor gotten this stuff? It actually wasn't that hard to obtain, but very few animals knew about it; he knew, he'd used it himself quite frequently in his street-hustling days. But where had the kid heard about it? More importantly, what did he need it for?

He shelved these thoughts for the moment and picked up the pace.

What he found inside the truck turned out to be an anticlimax. There was nothing of interest in the cab, only some empty pop bottles and an old Chinchilton manual. Propped on the dash was what looked like a crudely drawn map, but he couldn't quite be sure. Other than that…wait a second, something was peeking out from under the passenger side seat. Nick pulled out his phone again and switched on the light, covering it with his paw. Raising it to the window, he slipped the paw aside for just a second.

The phone flashed like a ship's semaphore light, giving the red fox only the barest glimpse of what was underneath the seat…but that was enough, and a cynical smirk spread across his muzzle. He wondered what Craig's father would think, if he knew that his darling little angel was planning to skip out on him as soon as he was done up here.

He moved on to the bed of the truck; it was even more of a bust than the cab. Nick was just about to take off when something caught the corner of his eye, an entire stack of somethings as a matter
of fact.

Being careful not to touch the sides of the truck bed, he reached in and grabbed one of them.

It was the remains of a flattened cardboard box. Printed on the side was a pair of diamond-shaped emblems, one in white, and a smaller one in dull red. Next to the larger diamond were four numbers, '3015' preceded by the letters 'UN' and followed by another number, 6.1 There was also some lettering, but Nick couldn't make out what it said and didn't want to risk using the phone light again. Instead he tucked the cardboard under his arm and keeping one eye over his shoulder, moved off towards the oak-tree where he'd been hiding earlier. Parking himself behind the trunk, he dialed up Conor's cell-phone.

Somehow, he knew the kid would be smart enough to have also set his phone on vibrate. Yes, he was must have; Nick heard nothing from the opposite tree line as the phone began to ring. The young fox picked up almost immediately but said only "Yo!"

"I've seen enough kid, get back here." Nick responded, dispensing with any greeting.

"Right," came the answer, and then the phone went silent.

"He's good," The red fox mused inwardly, "I wasn't half that sharp when I was his age. But he couldn't have picked up those kinds of street-smarts all by himself; someone taught that kid how to handle himself and whoever it was, they knew their job."

Nick Wilde knew what he was talking about; many years ago, it was he who had been the student. Granted, he had been older back then than Conor was now, out of his teens and into adulthood. Even so the episode had been almost a textbook example of just how quickly you could learn the ABCs of survival when your tail was on the line.

'Tail on the line'… Could that be why the kid was…?

He saw the shadow in the rim of his vision again and then a familiar fox-scent was in his nostrils.

Nick turned towards Conor, touched his fingers together, pointed at the road, made a sweeping gesture with his paws, and then a swimming motion, like a fish; next, he rolled his paws over each other, clasped them together over his mouth and offered two thumbs up to the younger fox. A couple of years earlier, when he'd signed to Judy in a similar fashion (this had been while they were trying to get into the Cliffside Sanitarium), she had only looked at him curiously. Conor didn't; he nodded twice, tapped his nose, blew a puff of air, made a sideways pushing motion with his paw, and then offered the same thumbs up gesture as Nick. Unlike Nick's partner, he'd known exactly what the older fox was saying and had even thrown in his own two cents.

The two of them began to move off down the hill, taking care to avoid the road, (Nick's suggestion,) and also keeping downwind of it, (Conor's addendum.) For the longest time neither one spoke. Mostly they walked upright, occasionally dropping to all fours to scoot through the underbrush.

Twice Nick had to catch up with Conor, the kid was fast and he knew how to move both quickly and quietly…and was small enough to get through a space that was too narrow for the older fox to negotiate. He also had the advantage of being a silver phase fox; his grey-on-black fur offered a measure of camouflage in the semi-darkness. If Nick hadn't been able to smell him, he might have lost track of the boy.

Again and again, he caught himself looking over his shoulder, expecting at any moment to hear the
rumble and backfire of the old pickup truck weaving its way down the hillside. But no sound came from above except for the whisper of the wind. It wasn't until they reached main road that Nick felt it was safe to talk—or ask questions.

"Mind telling me what you carry this for?" he said, tossing the bottle of deodorizer back to Conor.

"Yeah, I mind." The young silver fox told him. There was no defiance in his manner, no attitude, only a simple matter-of-factness; he didn't even jam the bottle back in his pocket, instead almost casually slipping it back where he got it.

Even so, Nick could see that young fox's amber eyes were blazing like the vents in a coal furnace, but then abruptly the fire seemed to dampen.

"I can tell you what I don't have it for," Conor told him, "I don't have it for anything illegal; that good enough for ya?"

Not quite, but it would have to do; Nick had bigger problems at the moment, everyone at the Carrot Days Festival had bigger problems at the moment; he could feel it in his bones.

"Okay kid, we need to figure out what those Guilford coyotes are up to and pronto. Let me tell you what I know and then you tell me what you know, okay?"

"Okay," Conor nodded and Nick described what he'd heard outside the vendor's gate on that first day of the festival. Most of it the young silver fox already knew, the thefts, the vandalism, the crop-dusting service. But there were at least two items of information he hadn't been aware of before now. First the deal the County had made with Sky-Yote Crop services to spray those illegal catnip fields…and how it had all come a cropper. Secondly…

"So the Guilfords came looking for that Fielding guy, right in the middle of last year's Carrot Days? Yeah, that sounds like something they would do."

Nick felt his ears prick up again.

"What do you mean kid?"

"From what I heard," the younger fox answered, poking a thumb up the hillside, "That whole family is strictly Old Testament."

"Old…what?" Nick's ears were standing up even higher, and his head was tilting sideways again. The younger fox waved as if gesturing at an invisible blackboard.

"Old Testament, you know, eye for an eye, mess with me and I'll mess with you, and I won't give spit what happens." His expression became earnest, "You know the type; you're a cop, right?"

"Ri-i-i-ight," Nick growled. Oh yes, in his two years with the ZPD, he'd put cuffs on more than a few of that type of animal.

But then Conor sighed and looked away for a second. He seemed to be trying to make up his mind about something. Finally, he met Nick's gaze again.

"I'll tell you how I know that, and everything else I got, but you gotta give me something first, big guy. I need you to promise me, one fox to another, that nothing's gonna happen coz of what I bring out."
Nick raised a paw in a reluctant Ranger-Scout salute, "I swear, no matter what you tell me right now, you won’t be in any trouble.” He didn’t like having to make this pledge, but he had no time, and therefore, he no choice.

"Okay," Conor nodded and then told him the story of what had happened during his rehearsal with Erin, how Amanda had called and tried to cyberbully the young bunny—and how he’d successfully turned the tables on both her and Craig. To the young fox’s apparent surprise, Nick was bothered not at all by the admission that he’d hacked into Amanda’s computer; in fact, he found it rather amusing. But when the kid went on to tell him about the video he’d substituted for the one of Erin’s onstage meltdown—the one that showed Craig firebombing a produce-stand—okay, that was where Officer Nicholas Wilde drew the line. His ears went back and his neck fur stood up in quills.

"You saw that and you never reported it?" he demanded.

"No!" Conor shot back, with that fire in his eyes again. "If I’d done that, Craig would of thought it was Erin who snitched him out. And you heard what I said back there; that whole family's a bunch of revenge-headed jerkweeds."

Nick started to say something else, but pulled up short…not because of what Conor had just told him, but because the kid was suddenly face-pawlming himself.

"Crike! How the heck did I…? Listen Nick, I got something else to tell you, something I heard at the dance; the Guilford family got smacked with an eviction notice this morning."

"What!" Nick’s ears hard turned into steeple again, "Are you sure about his, kid?"

"Yeah, I'm sure," the younger fox answered, bitter with self-recrimination, "One of Erin's girlfriends overheard her dad talking about it…and he's a sheriff's deputy."

"Dangit!" The word burst out of Nick like a sprinter jumping off the blocks. He had suspected all along that the Guilfords were out for some kind of payback on the Carrot Days Festival. The only thing missing had been motive—and Conor had just supplied it.

Except…okay, he had a motive, but what was the means; just how was the Guilford clan planning to exact that retribution?

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the young fox's voice. "What's that you got there, big guy?" He was still mad at himself and was trying to pre-empt the even greater anger he felt certain was coming from the other fox.

Nick wasn't angry but the trick worked anyway. What was the heck was the kid talking about? And then he realized, the folded cardboard box was still there, tucked beneath his arm. Whoa, he’d forgotten he still had it.

He pulled it out and showed it to the younger fox.

"I found this in the back of the pickup truck," he said, and then anticipating an objection he added quickly, "there were at least two dozen of them back there."

Conor leaned close and squinted. "What is it?"

"Haz-Mat container," Nick told him, "see those diamond-shaped labels? The bigger one is for poison and the smaller one means flammable liquid. That number there is the UN identification number, tells you exactly what kind of Hazardous Material was in this box."
Conor looked at him with his head tilting. "How is it you know all this, big guy?"

The red fox shrugged, "Like you said kid, I'm a cop…and the transportation of Haz Mat is strictly regulated." He turned the box around and studied it again, noticing for the first time that there was a third diamond shaped emblem, this one also in white and showing a stalk of wheat crossed out by a black 'X', meaning keep this stuff away from any food products. "Wish I knew what the heck was in here," he muttered rhetorically. No product name was listed on the box, only a systemic name; to Nick it looked about as simple as a calculus equation.

"Lemme see," Conor said to him, making 'gimme' motions with his fingers. Nick passed him the box and he studied it for a second.

"I dunno what this means either," he said, giving it back after a few seconds "But I think I can find out."

Nick tilted his head once more. "Come again?" he asked.

"Online," Conor answered him, "I got my laptop back at the van, come on."

A moment later, he was seated in a camp chair with the computer propped on his knees and Nick looking over his shoulder. "Hey don't crowd me, right?" the kid growled testily.

"Excuuuuuse me," the red fox answered, raising his paws and taking a step back, "Will this take long?" he asked.

"Are you kidding?" Conor answered, not looking up, "Okay, let's try the numbers first, UN 3015."

He typed, clicked, and clicked again.

"Ohhh-kay, it's something called a-a-a Buyyyy-Prid-Lee-Um pesticide, whatever that is, toxic liquid, flammable at a flash point of 23 degrees Centigrade. Let's see what that is in Furrenheit."

He opened a new tab, typed and clicked again.

"All right, the stuff is safe as long as it's kept cooler than 73 degrees Eff."

Nick let out a small growl; it wasn't especially hot out tonight, but it was definitely warmer than 73 degrees. "Okay, so we know it's a pesticide, what's that other number, 6.1?"

The young fox typed some more.

"The 6 means it's a poison, we knew that already. The point-one means it's nasty stuff, don't eat it, don't inhale it; don't even get it on your skin."

Once again Nick felt his neck hairs starting to rise, but this time out of fear rather than anger.

"Okay," he said, trying not to sound skittish. "Now the big question, what is this stuff?"

Conor typed again, but much more slowly. It seemed to take a maddening amount of time, even more maddening when the young fox hit the return key and got back a message reading, 'Not Found.'

"Dang!" Nick snarled, but then the kid held up a paw.

"Wait, I think I got it down wrong. Yeah, forgot the second comma, lemme try again."
He did, and this time he got back a full page of hits.

The first two headers were written in an incomprehensible scientific-jargon, but the third entry was from Trikipedia, easily understood.

"Okay the trade name is Harequateline." Nick rolled the word on his tongue for a second. Something about that name was unpleasantly familiar.

Conor meanwhile had clicked to open the page and was scanning the text.

"Huh, it's not a pesticide, it's an herbicide, a weed killer. Oooo," he looked up for a second, "this is some wicked-bad stuff Nick, it's banned in Europe and even over here it's not supposed to be used for weed control around any comestibles, whatever that mean…oh right, food crops." He looked at the screen again, "Check this out, if you get any on you, your fur falls out and it doesn't grow back for a whole year, sometimes not at all."

Nick leaned close with his ears working. "Whoa, why do they still even use this stuff?" he asked, "And what are Guilfords doing with it?" he wondered.

They don't use it," Conor told him sardonically. "At least not whole lot anymore; it says here that about the only thing it's used for these days is illegal crop eradication."

"Then why…?" Nick started to say, and then, "Oh, my God!"

That was it, the last piece of the puzzle, the last dot to be connected.

A year ago last spring, Sky-yote Crop-Dusting had lost a contract to spray for illegal catnip fields, and the Guilfords had come to the Carrot Days Festival looking for a reckoning. This year, they'd been evicted from their property, a much bigger offense, and now one of them was on the hillside overlooking the Carrot Days Festival, running a reconnaissance mission on the Big Dance…in a truck filled with empty boxes of a defoliant that was only supposed to be used against illegal crop-fields!

"N-Nick? What is it?" Conor's voice was both breathless and quivering. He had almost figured it out himself.

Nick grabbed him by the arm.

"I know kid, I know what the Guilford's are planning; they're going to spray-bomb the Big Dance with Harequatiline."

Conor leaped from his chair, freeing himself from the red fox's grip and sending the laptop tumbling.

"No! Erin's still in there!"

Nick grabbed his arm again, as much to steady himself as the younger fox.

"And so is Judy, come on!"

Chapter End Notes
Easter Egg: A quick reference to Moana
Chapter 4 – The Wizard of Chaos
(Continued…Pt. 13)

"What do you mean, you’re staying here?"

Nick Wilde was staring at Conor Lewis as if the world had caught on fire and the kid had responded by pulling out a fiddle.

"I can do more good from here than from back at the dance, big guy." The young silver fox insisted, hefting his laptop to show what he meant. (It was still working perfectly.)

"Like WHAT?" Nick demanded, waving an aggravated arm.

Conor pointed at the computer screen.

"Like hacking into Craig's dad's cell-phone, and blocking any calls from his kid. That way even if the punk gets lucky and spots Jerk LaPine-Eye in the…"

"WHO?"

"Jack LaPeigne," Conor hurriedly corrected himself. "Look, what am I gonna do if I go with you, except nod my head like a bobble-fox every time you say something? What do you think, you're going to send me around to warn everyone else while you're to talking to Judy, 'The weed killer's coming! The weed-killer's coming!' Yeah, like that'll fly; I'm a fourteen year old kid for crying out in pain…and a fox, yeah, I'll say it. Who the heck's going to believe me? I'll end up in the back of a Sheriff's cruiser—and how's THAT supposed help everybody?"

Nick Wilde said nothing for several seconds, but the young fox could tell he was wavering; he moved in for the clincher.
"Nick, trust me," he said, holding up the laptop again, "I can help you out a lot more by going online than by going with you. Please…lemme do this."

The red fox stared for a second, and then let out a frustrated scream; he wanted to pound his fist against something, but there were no handy objects available.

"All right kid," he said, pointing at Conor with an admonishing finger, "but if you let me down, I'm coming back for you."

"I won't," The young silver fox promised, raising his paw in his own approximation of Nick's Ranger Scout salute, "You got my word, I won't mess this up."

"Better not," Nick nodded, turned, and sprinted for the campground entrance. Before he was halfway there, Conor's voice caught up with him again.

"Wait, hold up a sec."

Nick turned around with his ears laid back.

"NOW what?" If he'd been a bunny, his foot would have been thumping like a telegraph key. Then he saw the look on the young fox's face, determined, but also frightened.

"Whatever you do, please…don't let anyone know I'm helping you, especially don't let Jack La Peigne find out."

In spite of his irritation, Nick felt his ears turn upwards.

"La Peigne, what's your problem with him?"

"Just don't…please." Conor pleaded with an almost forlorn look on his face. "I'm not trying to blackmail you or anything; I'll help you no matter what, but please…keep me out of it."

Nick let out a breath that felt like a ton of lead.

"Okay," he said quietly and took off once again

Conor waited until he was out of sight and then settled down with the laptop once more.

Of course Nick had known at once that the real reason he was staying behind was because he was scared. Yes, he was, but not because he didn't want to get doused with Harequateline, as the older fox had initially assumed. Now—or so Conor reasoned—Nick Wilde had a clue at least as to why he really didn't want to return to the Festival; the possibility of an encounter with Jack La Peigne (and of being recognized by the big jerkweed.)

He wondered for a moment if it been wise to mention the jerkrabbit by name like that…and then decided there was nothing he could do about it now, so get on with the job at paw, kid.

In trying to stay off the big bunny's radar-screen, Conor's motives were not entirely selfish. If Nick tried to sound the alarm while in his company (and if LaPeigne recognized him,) then forget about it; nobody would believe diddly about any coming attack on the Big Dance. For sure Jack La Peigne wouldn't—and this was a guy whose word carried some serious weight.

The young fox also hadn't been lying when he'd said he could do more good on his laptop than by tagging along with Nick—maybe! It all depended on whether there was anyone from The Circle online tonight; Conor could deliver on the promise he'd made, but he couldn't do it alone.
He slipped on his headset and crossed his fingers.

Nick Wilde meanwhile was having problems of his own.

"Sorry, you can't get back inside without a paw stamp."

"Listen you; do you know who I am?"

As if to demonstrate his importance, the sheep in line ahead of Nick folded his arms and planted his hooves, refusing to budge, not even a centimeter.

Nick could have sheared him with a weed-whacker. Only ONE animal in front of him at the Festival's east-side gate, and it had to be some pea-brain with an attitude. He looked at his own wrist; yep, his stamp was still there, all nice and neat and in order.

For all the good that did him; now the sheep was pulling out his cell phone and making a show of dialing a number…and he was still blocking the way. And just Nick's luck, he was a ram on a par with Doug's former enforcers, Jesse and Woolter…big, burly, and with curling horns to match.

And the animal pulling gate duty was a bunny even smaller than Judy, Aaaggghhh, grrrrrr! Give me strength!

Nick took a deep breath and tried to calm himself.

"Uh excuse me, I need to get by?" he said tapping the sheep on the shoulder.

The ram just turned and glared at him. "You wait your turn, fox!"

Nick raised a finger, but another voice spoke just then.

"No, you need to move aside…and right NOW."

The sheep wheeled angrily on the newcomer and lowered his head aggressively…and then he was bleating like a frightened lamb. The interloper was another ram—a bighorn ram—at least head taller than he was and with a much more formidable array of head armor.

"Whoa, I never thought I'd be glad to see him again." Nick thought to himself. It was the same bighorn sheep that had refused to let him and Judy backstage in the wake of Erin's meltdown.

"Move aside, sir." He repeated, this time in a severe voice…and the other sheep practically tripped over his own hooves getting out of the way.

Nick flashed the wrist stamp at him and the bunny and hurried through the gate. Now he had to find Judy. "Dangit Carrots, why do you always have to be such a Bunny Scout? Couldn't you just once have forgotten to turn your cell-phone off?"

There were animals from the Circle online tonight, at least one of them anyway…and Conor had been promised that more were coming.


Feelsogud777%: "Thanks"

The young fox's feelings about Tradge were slightly mixed. He was one of the sharper members of
The Circle, but his posts were about as easy to read as Babylonian hieroglyphics. Conor could only hope that by 'soon' he'd meant right away. Every second was…

Guildenkranz&24X: "Fee, I'm here. Sup?"

Conor filled him and Tradge in as quickly as he could, informing them about the impending herbicide attack. With no time to spare, he divulged only the bare-bones details of what he'd heard on the hilltop up above, saying nothing about how he'd come to be in that particular spot at that particular moment. With such an incomplete version of the story, he had no idea whether or not Guild and Tradge would believe him. (The only thing in his favor was that he had never yet misled them.)

Tradgehipp2+5: "were U with sombody?" (Tradge was dyslexic.)

Feelsogud777#%: "Yes but can't say…made a prms."

Tradgehipp2+5: "K"

Guildenkranz&24X: "Alerted 2 others. 4tSQ and Ant. Need names. U got?"

Conor knew what he meant and typed rapidly. He wished he could have used the headset but they had a rule in The Circle; no voice communications, text only, (and NO webcams.)

Feelsogud777#%: "Jerry Guilford, Dad. Craig Guilford, Kid. Amanda Hill, GF" (He had finally remembered her last name.)

Just then another member of the Circle came online.

4tSQcristo31#&: Hi What's up?"

Guildenkranz&24X: "Tradge, fill him in; Ant 2, whn he shows up."

4tSQcristo31#&: "Is Jab coming?"

Guildenkranz&24X: "NO!"

"Heck, no!" Conor echoed Guild's sentiment aloud. The last thing they needed was for that nihilist head-case to stick his muzzle into this business; knowing him, he'd probably sympathize with the Guilfords. "Stick the system 'yotes, more power to the mammals, woo-hooo!"

A moment later Ant joined the group and then they went back and forth for a few moments, with Guild giving out assignments to each of them. Finally he informed the gathering; "K, got into dad's phone, blocking all calls from his kid. Wil do same with kid's phone."

AntilogmammalXJ77%: "Wn't he figr it out?"

Guildenkranz&24X: "LOL, when's last time U looked at UR blocked calls list?"

Conor almost grinned, but knew they had only bought themselves a reprieve. Sooner or later, dear ol' dad would start to wonder why his son hadn't called and would try to call him. What would he do when he couldn't get through, assume that Craig had messed up…or assume that he'd been busted? Either way he'd probably decide to forget about Jack La Peigne and launch Operation Spraydown immediately.

4tSQcristo31#&: "Okay, I'm inside the Burrows County Airport control tower." (Fort never used shortpaw.)
Guildenkranz&24X: "B Careful. U think UR spotted, get out fast N cover Ur tracks gd."

"A-men!" Conor muttered; if Fort was detected hacking into an airport control tower, the authorities' inevitable first thought would 'terrorist,' and their response would be appropriate to the word.

4tSQcristo31#: "Just looking, won't touch. Fee, what's the location of Mr. Guilford's farm."

The young fox thought for a second.

Feelsogud777#: "Star route 33. Don't know the exact."

4tSQcristo31#: "No sweat, that's all I need."

And then,

"Okay, if anything takes off from there, you'll hear this."

The wail of the Fur Trek 'battle stations' alert sounded in Conor's headset.

Guildenkranz&24X: "Gd wrk. Montor ther radio. Tower might try 2 contact 'yotes if they take off. Fee, I'm trying to fix dad's phone so U can call out on it by proxy. U knw wht hs voice sounds like?"

Feelsogud777#: "No but hrd his son's voice. M sure I can do his dad." He was actually only halfway sure, but he'd figured out what Guild had in mind and there was no such thing as turning back now.

AntilogmammalXJ77%: "Hk Mt, he'd try 2 disg I's voice ne way." ('You don't have to get it exactl; he'd try to disguise his voice anyway') She too had figured out Guild's plan.

Guildenkranz&24X: "How U coming?" he asked her.

AntilogmammalXJ77%: "Redy on cals. Wt 4 Fee?"

Guildenkranz&24X: "Go now!"

Burrows County Sheriff's Office

"How many calls again?" Sheriff's lieutenant Gary Norris, a black bear, was looking over the shoulder of Deputy Sergeant Jeff Winkler, the paunchy moose in charge of the dispatch desk.

"Three, two reporting they heard an explosion, another saying an explosion and what looked like a fire-ball."

"Where at?" Norris asked, leaning closer.

"Not exactly sure," the moose answered. "None of the callers were from around here, but all three calls came in from the south side of Burrow County; the one who says she saw the fireball, was driving down Star Route 33 when it happened."

Norris let out a short, sharp growl, "The Guilfords," he grumbled under his breath. He'd had more dealings with that family than he cared to think about and was well aware of Jerry Guilford's volatile nature—and also that his family now had twelve days to vacate their house.
"All right send Pomeroy and Cairns out to take a look," he said, and then frowned deeply. He hadn't made Lieutenant by going off half-cocked, and he didn't do it now. "Better send Catamount and Rockland to give them some backup. Those coyotes got served with an eviction this morning; and you know what they're like,"

"Don't I know it!" said the moose, reaching for his mike. "Should I notify the Fire Department?"

The black bear's frown deepened slightly.

"Were those 9-1-1 calls, any of 'em?"

"Yep, the one about the fireball," The moose nodded

"Then they probably know already," Norris told him, "but yeah, let's be sure."

Nick Wilde found Judy's parents right where he'd left them. She wasn't there with them but that was hardly a surprise. Pausing for half a second, he took out his cell-phone and punched in some instructions before continuing in his way. That was when he noticed the beaver talking with Stu, what was his name again? Oh yes, Chip Fielding.

"Probably waiting to see Jack LaPeigne, again," The red fox wryly mused. He hadn't worked the streets for all those years without knowing a brown-noser when he saw one. Nonetheless if there was anyone likely to believe his story about a chemical attack coming, it was this animal; Chip Fielding had a fursonal history with the Guilford family and with their patriarch in particular.

Nick took three steps…and paused again, this time involuntarily; his memory had just delivered another piece of late breaking news, something else Levon Chatterton had said when telling him about the Guilford clan…something that just might be the key to the biggest unanswered question still remaining.

But, first thing was first.

"Stu! Nick waved his cell in the air as he approached.

"What is it, Nick." The bunny asked, turning towards him. His manner was chilly but not nearly as cold as it had been earlier that evening. (He was actually glad for the interruption; Chip Fielding had never been one of his favorite mammals.)

By way of response, Nick showed him the phone; on the screen was the scowling visage of Chief Bogo.

"Judy's…got her phone turned off," he said, putting on his best sheepish face, "and…well you know how the Chief is." He quickly put the phone away—before Judy's dad could see that he was looking at a photo file and not the 'last call' screen.

"Oh dear," Stu Hopps put a paw to his chest, looking properly alarmed. (Judy had always said he was a worry-wart.) "She's not in any trouble is she?"

"I don't think so," Nick answered, raising his paws in a reassuring gesture, (while at the same time managing to sound just a teensy bit unsure of himself,) "but I need to find her right away; any idea where she is?"

"She's dancing with Jack LaPeigne again," the bunny said, pointing into the crowd with a shaky finger, "Over there, I think."
"Oh good, thanks." Nick said, trying his gosh-darnedest best to make his neck fur stay flat. ("No, I'm NOT jealous!") An afterthought occurred to him, and he motioned to Chip Fielding. "Sir would you mind coming with me?"

Stu Hopps' ears went up immediately.

"Nick, why would you…?"

But the red fox had already slipped away into the crowd. He didn't know if Fielding would follow him, but he was willing to bet that he would.

He was about fifteen feet inside the crowd when his roll of the dice came up a seven.

"This isn't really about any phone call, is it?" the beaver said from behind him.

Nick stopped and turned around.

"No, it isn't." he said, keeping his voice low, "I didn't want to say this in front of Stu or any of the other Hopps bunnies, but it's about some old friends of yours…the ones who paid you a visit at last year's Carrot Days." He allowed one ear to lift higher than the other, "And what's going on with them this year, better or worse?" He was taking yet another chance; that Chip Fielding would also know about the foreclosure and eviction notice.

This time however, the red fox's gambit didn't pay off, not at first anyway; the beaver knew the Guilfords were getting the boot, but didn't seem all that concerned. He made a small, barking noise.

"They were only served this morning," he scoffed, "Jerry Guilford isn't going pull any shies this soon afterward, not when he's got eleven more days to plan something." His words notwithstanding, there was a tiny thread of uncertainty in the beaver's voice; Nick grabbed it and pulled hard.

"Right, that's the last thing anyone would expect, isn't it?" he said, and then waved a paw at the crowd, "Except tonight is his chance to get even with EVERYBODY."

He turned and went on his way. This time the beaver was right on his heels.

Inside the campground, Conor Lewis sat before his computer, paws clasped and eyes closed. He could imitate Craig's shtick no sweat, but what about his dad? Was Jerry Guilford's voice merely a deeper version of the way his kid spoke? A minute ago, it had all seemed obvious, (or at least probable,) but now the young fox wasn't so certain; he knew plenty of kids back in Zootopia who sounded nothing like their dads. If he messed this, up, if he got it wrong, no one would believe any the rest of it. And then everyone at the dance would be a sitting duck for that spray-down…including Erin Hopps, no!

He tightened his resolve and spoke aloud, "I won't let that happen."

"Won't let what happen, kid?" a deep voice asked from behind him.

If he hadn't been wearing a headset, Conor would have face-pawmed himself. "Not NOW, Finnick!"

What the heck was he doing here? But when the young fox turned around, he almost wanted to laugh…almost. Finnick had his paw cupped over his right eye, and there was swelling and
"What'd you do, try to pick up on the wrong vixen again?" he wanted to ask. What he did ask was, "Where'd you get that, big guy?"

The desert fox's answer was both cryptic and explanatory.

"What'd you have to go an' dance with that bunny two more times for, huh?" he snarled, showing his teeth, "Now her girlfriends think it's all MY fault!"

"That I danced with Erin again?" Conor's ears were pointing skywards. He never thought they'd be that upset.

"No, that you bailed on her," Finnick looked like the top of his head was about to blow off like a pop-bottle cap. "I wouldn't wanna be in your fur when they catch up with you, kid—especially that bunny. She's ready to kick your head for a field goal...an' what-all are you doing here anyway?"

Dangit, there was no time to explain...but maybe, the young fox realized, maybe he didn't need to explain.

"Just watch me Finnick," he said.

The little fox's head tilted sideways.

"Watch what, what you up to, kid?"

Conor pretended not to hear him. On the laptop screen were several messages from Guildenkranz and the others, asking him what was going on. He ignored them too, moving the cursor to 'dial' and clicking twice.

There was a soft 'burring' on the line and then a clipped, precise voice answered.

"Burrows County Sheriff's Office."

The young fox was momentarily speechless. He had expected to be put on hold, (That was what happened when you called the ZPD.) He hurriedly adjusted his voice speaking in low growl that he hoped would be a fair approximation of Craig's father. Remember, keep it short and sweet, he reminded himself, and then spoke into the headset.

"You think you can run me off my property and nothing's goin' to happen? Think again, you sorry-tailed bunch of dumb-bunny jerks!"

He disconnected and turned to Finnick, once more keeping it short and to the point

"There's some coyotes planning to dump a load of weed killer on the dance; I'm hoping the Sheriff will think that call was I made was from the guy in charge."

The fennec-fox's paw fell away from his face. Whoa, shine-on harvest shiner; someone had tagged him good.

"What makes you think that's gonna happen kid? You hardly said nothin' just now."

Conor waved at the laptop.

"Coz when they try to trace that call, it's gonna take 'em straight to his cell-phone."
The good news (for Nick Wilde) was that Judy turned out to be very easy to spot, the bad news was, that was because Jack LaPeigne was holding her over his head in the 'swan-dive' pose made famous by Patrick Squirrelze and Jennifer Drey in Furry Dancing. (It didn't help that the band happened to be playing, "I've Had The Time of My Life.") Nick wanted to rush over there right now, but knew he'd have to wait at least until the big bunny put her down again.

When her feet finally touched the ground, he moved quickly before the big rabbit could pick her up again.

"Judy, Judy!" he called waving a paw as though trying to flag down a cab.

Jack LaPeigne saw him first and moved quickly in front of his dance partner with his arms laced together.

"See here Nick, you had your chance…"

Nick ignored him, focusing on his partner instead.

"Police business Judy, seriously," he said, and she moved quickly out from behind the big bunny.

It was a private code that each of them understood; shortly after Nick had graduated from the ZPD Academy the two of them had made a pact. Any time either one of the said, "Police business, seriously," that meant it was strictly police business and nothing fursonal. It also meant exactly what it implied, an urgent situation had arisen; in the two years that he'd been partnered with Judy, Nick had never once used those words without proper cause.

"Nick, what is it?" she asked him.

"Not here, come on," he said beckoning with a finger, and then seemingly as an afterthought, he turned to her dance partner, "You too, sir. I think you're also going to want to hear this."

Jack's nose began to twitch and for a second the red fox thought he was going to decline the request…until Chip Fielding noisily slapped his tail against the ground. "I-I-I really think you should come with us, Mr. LaPeigne."

The big rabbit sighed and gestured with a paw. "All right, lead on."
Nick led them to the space behind the trailer where had and Judy had talked earlier.

"All right Nick, what's going on?" she asked him again. Her tone was completely neutral but her nose was twitching nervously.

He decided to play his ace immediately.

"I'll give you the full story later, Car...Judy, but right now there isn't time; what you need to know is this; the Guilfords are planning a revenge-attack for getting evicted this morning. They're going to crop-dust the dance with Harequatline." He said this while looking at Chip Fielding, who slapped his paws to his cheeks in an unconscious imitation of Edvard Mewnch's famous lithograph, The Scream.

"Oh dear God, NO!"

"How do you know this?" it was Jack LaPeigne speaking. His tone was neither trusting, nor openly skeptical.

Nick told him and the others the story with only two minor embellishments; he had known the young coyote was Craig Guildford because he'd heard Amanda calling him that, and he'd known the Guilfords had been served with an eviction notice because he'd overheard a young bobcat talking about it with her friends. "I heard her saying her dad's a deputy," he told them, and for Conor Lewis's benefit, he added silently, "I hope you appreciate this, kid."

Judy was the first to react, "Ohhh sweet cheese 'n crackers," she groaned and Nick knew he had her convinced, at least. Jack La Peigne, on the other paw, still seemed to be sitting on the fence. Nick moved quickly to get him down by way of an end run. Once more ignoring the big bunny for the moment, he turned to Chip Fielding instead.

"Mr. Fielding, you know the Guilford family better than anyone." He lowered his ears and ducked his head, pretending to defer to the more experienced animal's judgement. (In fact, he was manipulating the beaver.) "Could what I heard be for real? Would even the Guilford family really go that far, just to get even?"

The query seemed to embolden the big rodent, (just Nick had known it would.)

"Heck YES, they would!" he declared, trying to look fierce. It was an almost laughable pose for his species, but it seemed to bring Jack LaPeigne around immediately.

"Okay," he nodded grimly…and now Nick had something else to tell him.

"Mr. La Peigne, there's one other thing I heard. For some reason Jerry Guildford is specifically targeting you."

"Jack? Why?" Judy's eyes had gone wide and her nose was twitching so rapidly it looked like she was trying not to sneeze.

"Because I fursonally served them with that foreclosure notice this morning," the big bunny told her, looking grimmer than ever.

Nick Wilde was almost floored; he'd expected the big bunny's reaction to be confusion and a profession of ignorance…until he was reminded of everyone of something Levon Chatterton had said earlier, that the Guilford family lived 'out on the old La Peigne place.' Then there should have been denials, hemming and hawing, perhaps even an outright lie. The last thing he'd expected from the big bunny was a terse admission of the truth, a truth no one else had even suspected until just
now.

Chip Fielding certainly hadn't suspected it, "You served them the eviction papers…*yourself*?" He was staring at the big bunny as if he'd just come back from the dead. "Why would you even *do* that?"

Jack turned to him; now he looked defiant… and indignant.

"That was the warren where *I* grew up," he said, poking himself in the chest with a pair of fingers, "And that made it fursonal; no pack of lowlifes is going to turn MY family home into a thieves' den."

From the corner of his eye, Nick saw Judy nod knowingly; even if she didn't agree with the big rabbit's action, she understood his motives. Roots were a big thing with the Burrow bunnies—and not just the ones they grew out in their carrot-fields. Nonetheless, there was one other thing he couldn't fathom.

"How the heck did you get away with it, Jack?" he wanted to know. From what he'd heard of the Guilfords, it was a miracle the big bunny hadn't been carried out of that place in six separate cartons.

LaPeigne only shrugged.

"Believe me Nick, I didn't go in there alone; I had two of my security operatives with me, both of them well armed." There was nothing defensive in his tone, but that was the way Chip Fielding seemed to take it.

"Well then, why didn't you at least leave someone there to keep watch?" He was becoming more and more agitated by the minute. "Didn't you at least notify the Sheriff's Office?"

"Of course, I did." La Peigne answered, favoring the beaver with a withering glance. The look on his face made Nick Wilde want to shudder. Bunny or no bunny, this was a dangerous animal.

And yet…

Oddly enough, he was starting to feel some sympathy for the big rabbit. According to what Conor had told him, the Burrows County Sheriff's Office had been notified of the foreclosure and eviction…so why hadn't *they* put the Guilford house under surveillance? A bunny from Zootopia might not have known of the coyote family's vengeful nature…but the Burrows County Sheriff's Department sure as heck did.

"Can we have this argument later, please?" It was Judy, practical as ever. "Right now, we've got a situation on our paws."

At once the bickering ceased, and then she looked at Nick.

"Did you call the Sheriff's department yet?"

"They've been notified." He answered, hoping it was the truth. "*You BETTER have called them, kid!"

Something else occurred to him and he turned and spoke to Jack La Peigne.

"What about the helicopter that brought Doctor Honeyba…?" he started to ask—and then grimaced and waved a paw. "No wait, you sent it back to Zootopia, my bad."
"Yep, afraid I did." The big bunny answered, and then looked over at Chip Fielding, "Doesn't the Burrows County Sheriff's Department have a helicopter?"

"Well yes, but it's only a medevac chopper." The beaver protested.

"Commissioner we don't have time to be picky," Judy said, addressing him by his title to emphasize the point.

Fielding blew out his cheeks and nodded.

"Right, give me a second," he said, and pulled out his cell phone. While he talked, the others fell silent. There was an elephant in their presence, and no one wanted to acknowledge it.

They needed to evacuate the Festival and right now; that much was obvious, what wasn't so obvious was how they were supposed to pull it off. They couldn't just have someone go onstage and make an announcement. "Attention everyone please move to exits, the Big Dance is about to come under a chemical attack." That would lead to an immediate rush to the exits—and there only two of them for more than 3000 patrons. More mammals might die in the stampede than from the herbicide. And, Catch 22, if they made the announcement without explaining the reason, they'd be lucky if even a third of the animals here complied with the order…and even then they'd only move grudgingly—and slowly.

"Right, thanks." Chip Fielding disconnected and returned to the group. "No luck on the helicopter, it got called away to a car wreck out on the New Lee Highway." And then to everyone's surprise, he actually grinned, "The good news is that the Sheriff's office got a threatening phone call from Jerry Guilford a few minutes ago, and someone else called in earlier to say they heard an explosion out by his place. They're sending every available unit to the Guilford house, code red."

Everyone let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank goodness," Judy breathed.

Nick Wilde just nodded; he suspected that goodness had had nothing to do with it…nor had Jerry Guilford been the true source of that phone call.

"I don't know how you did it kid, but good job."

But they weren't quite out of the woods just yet. If Guilford heard sirens approaching he might decide to take off for the Festival immediately. Hopefully the BCSD would figure that out and go in dark; no sirens and no lights. Probably they would; they seemed like a smart bunch of…wait a minute!

Nick yipped and snapped his fingers.

"I know how to do it!"

Everyone looked at him.

"What Nick?" It was Judy.

He took her by the shoulders, "I know how to get everyone out of here without causing a panic. Remember the year before last when we worked Skunk Pride Day?"

Judy brow furrowed and her ears fell back, but then they shot back up again.
"Sweet cheddar n' crackers! Dang fox; you're right I forgot about that.

Two years earlier, she and Nick had been assigned to help keep order at that third annual Skunk Pride Day event, a street parade followed by a waterfront concert. It had been windy out that day and in the middle of the third set, the power had gone out for nearly six blocks around. When the emcee had announced that sorry, the power wouldn't be up again for at least another three hours, everyone had just packed up and left…quietly.

"All right, but then how do we turn the power off?" she asked him.

"And then how do we make that announcement without any electricity?" It was Chip Fielding.

"Same as at the Skunk Pride show, "Nick answered the beaver's question first. "Through a bullhorn; the Sheriff's Department some of those here with them, right?"

"I know my animals have them," Jack LaPeigne said, and then pulled out his cell, "And they won't panic, I'll alert them right now."

"But we still need to get the power turned off," Judy repeated, this time with a note of urgency in her voice.

At that instant, as if in response to her query, Nick's cell phone buzzed the opening from Foxy Lady. When he looked at the screen, his ears went up; the call was from Conor Lewis's cell, but the face on the display was…

"Finnick?" He answered, surprised.

"Yeah, it's me." The fennec fox replied, and then his face vanished in a blur as he put the phone to his ear. Nick understood the gesture and did the same.

"Okay, keep pretending it's me." Finnick said, and then Conor replaced him on the line.

"All right, we're monitoring Burrow County Airport traffic control and we ran a SWAT on the Guilfords. How's everything on your end?"

Nick swallowed hard, unable to speak for a few seconds. He had suspected the young silver fox had been behind the phone calls to the Burrows County Sheriff's office, but he'd never imagined... Holy fox-trot, no wonder he wanted his name kept out of it. SWATTING, as the practice was known was a fairly new Internet prank…and also one of the most notorious; if you were caught, the penalty ranged from severe to 'you don't want to THINK about it.'

Basically, it consisted of tricking a law enforcement agency into dispatching a SWAT team to the residence of an enemy. Sometimes it happened for the most trivial of reasons. Nick fursonally knew of one instance where a ground-squirrel SWATTED a leopard-cat for beating him at World of Warthog. (Neither one of them had been older than 16.)

Granted if there was anyone who deserved to have SWAT team sent racing to their door it was the Guilford family, but still...the kid had sounded so casual about it; he might as well have been talking about grabbing a snack on the way home. So young and yet so ruthless; the red fox couldn't help but feel uneasy. And who had the kid meant by 'we?' Not him and Finnick; he knew that much without even asking.

Conor's voice came back in his ear again.

"Nick…you still there, or what?"
"Sorry, there's a lot going here" the red fox answered curtly, feeling his cheeks change color to match his fut. And then something else occurred to him. If Conor (and his friends) could SWAT somebody, then maybe they could also…

He shook off his disquiet and spoke crisply into the phone.

"It's good, the Sheriff's got all units heading for the Guilford house, but…"

"Have you seen Erin, is she okay?" the young fox interrupted.

Nick shifted his voice from crisp to harsh, "If you really care about…that, then you need to be quiet and listen to me. We need to evacuate the dance and the only way to do it without causing a panic is to cut the power. (Please DON'T ask me to explain.) Can you help out with that at all?"

Once again the young fox's response was a corker.

"Yeah…I'll go take care of it right now." he answered in an almost breezy voice, and then to Nick's even greater astonishment, he disconnected.

Conor's first action upon breaking the connection was to wave Finnick over.

"DF? I need you to sub for me over here for a few minutes." He removed his headset and held it out to the fennec-fox. "I gotta go take care of something."

Finnick hesitated as if it might be booby-trapped, "What happens when they see I'm not you?"

"Microphone's off and so's the webcam," Conor said to him, vacating the camp-chair. "We only talk by text. I told everyone I'm going into lurk for a few minutes, so no one's gonna ask you anything. Just keep an eye on the screen and if you get an alert that they're coming—it sounds like the Fur Trek Battle Stations call—if you hear that, click the 'call' button in the lower right corner of the screen, that'll hook you up direct to Nick's cell-phone, and mine. Okay, gotta move. Are the bolt cutters in the van? Please tell me you brought 'em." He was speaking as if he'd just slammed a double espresso.

"Yeah, they're in the back behind the tool-chest." Finnick pointed towards the rear of the van. "What do you need them for?"

"Sorry, no time," the young silver fox said, and bounded though the side-door of the van. A moment later he was on his way to the backstage access gate, cutters in paw.

When Nick Wilde had asked him to help, he had assumed, not unreasonably that the kid would try to assist him by way of the internet. It had never occurred to him that the young fox might have a 'paws-on' solution to the problem, but that was exactly what he had planned. He had seen the place while working as a volunteer that first night of the festival. Now, he checked his left-side pants pocket, yep, he still had his badge, but would it still be valid? He mentally crossed his fingers, hoping that it would get him backstage, just one more time.

Well, even if it would, there'd be no such thing as getting through while carrying a pair of bolt-cutters, right?

Looking quickly to the left and right, Conor swung the cutters like an Olympic Hammer Thrower, and heaved them up and over the fence. They landed in a copse of tall grass, right beside the fence-line, but had anyone seen him?
For a few seconds the young fox just held still. Nothing happened, there was no "Hey kid, what are you doing there?" nothing at all.

He sprinted for the loading dock.

"Jack?" Judy waited until he had hung up the phone, "Jack, listen…I just thought of something. There's a third way out of here, the stage entrance."

"What good is that?" Chip Fielding said, "They won't let anyone out that way."

All three of the others gave him a pained look. Finally Jack said, "‘They' work for me, remember?"

"Listen Mr. La Peigne," It was Nick again, "There’s one more thing. You need to get under cover where you can't be seen. If that kid up on the hillside spots you…"

"I thought you said his calls were blocked." Chip Fielding snorted, trying to make up for his faux pas.

"Only on HIS phone." The fox reminded him. "We don't know if that's the only one he has. If it was me up there, I'd sure as heck have a back-up."

"So? Even he does have another phone, no one can see me back here."

This time it was Jack LaPeigne speaking.

"Not from the dance floor no," the red fox countered, waving paw at the surroundings hills, "but what about from up there?"

The big bunny let out a long, slow breath; he also knew a thing or two about surveillance.

"Right," he said, "Okay Nick, you've been up there. Where can I go where I won't be visible from that hill?"

"Behind the stage," the fox answered, pointing, "Even if Craig could see you back there, it's the last place he's likely to look."

'All right," the big bunny nodded, "I'll start working my way over in that direction." He looked over at Chip Fielding, "Need to get that hill cordoned off and get some animals up there, too."

The beaver spread his paws, "Didn't you hear what I said? All the deputies are on their way to..."

"I know that, I'll have my mammals take care of it," The big rabbit interrupted testily, "But first I'll need the County's authorization, that hill's outside of the Festival grounds."

"Authorized!' Fielding said, and then the big bunny began pumping for the cover of the stage with the others following behind. Several times Nick saw Judy looking backwards over her shoulder and at least once he saw her lower lip trembling. He knew why; her family was back there and she desperately wanted to warn them. But she wouldn't, she couldn't; if she did, the word would spread quickly through the crowd…and though the Hopps's would get out all right the animals following behind them might not be so lucky. And Judy would never let that happen, she was ZPD.

Not far away, Conor Lewis slung the bolt cutters over his should like a musket, and moved with a jaunty pace. One of the first things he'd learned from Danny Tipperin was that if you wanted to avoid suspicion, the first thing was to look like you knew what you were doing (and also where
"Best way to look like you belong is to look like you got a job to do," the swift fox had once told him.

In fact, the young silver fox did know what he was doing, and also where he was going, (and he DID have job to do.) Just beyond the far right side of the stage was a small electrical substation, a concrete box approximately the size of mobile storage unit. Conor had only noticed it the first time because he'd nearly tripped over one of the massive cables running into the outside junction box while running an errand.

The two levers on either side that box were each secured with a padlock, but that was why he'd brought the bolt cutters. Snip, snip, throw the switches and get the heck outta there, fast.

Not…quite. When he slipped the cutters around the U of first lock and pressed on the calipers, almost nothing happened; the blades made barely an indentation in the metal. He pushed again, harder. The blades dug in by maybe an eighth of an inch. He tried a third time, using all his strength; it was no use. The lock was built of face-hardened steel and refused to…

Without warning a shadow fell over the young fox…big and looming with two long ears poking out of the top. And then a familiar aroma assailed his nostrils, the smell of anger mixed with rabbit, a rabbit he had desperately hoped to avoid while on this mission.

He closed his eyes and whimpered silently.

"I'm toast; I am sooo toast!"

Chapter End Notes

Easter Egg: An obscure reference to one of the Disney animated classics, (one of the first five)
Conor whimpered and swallowed hard; it felt as if he were trying to force a dried-out tennis ball down his throat.

Then he sighed, feeling his ears wilt; there was no getting out of this, the only thing left for him to do was turn and face the music.

He spun around with his paws raised.

"Erin listen, I can explain…"

"I don't want to hear it!"

If Erin Hopps had looked angry the first time they'd met, now she appeared to be one step away from a conniption; her blue were blazing like welding torches and her voice had turned sharp as a reaper's scythe.

"You no good creep. Where do you think you get off just abandoning me like that? And you lied to me—you liar!"

She had her paws on her hips and one foot cocked, ready to plant it upside his face a second time. In the reflected glare of the stage lights, her amplified shadow appeared to swallow him whole.

"At last she doesn't have her posse with her," the young fox noted, trying to put the best spin on things. And then he answered her question with one of his own. "How the heck did you get back here without a stage-pass?"

The young bunny responded by tossing her head over her shoulder; she said nothing, but now Conor could see that a pair of fresh rabbit-holes had appeared on either side of the fence as if by magic. Ohhh Crike, she really was that mad!
As if to confirm this, Erin began to thump her foot, slowly at first, and then faster and faster; it sounded like the countdown to an explosion, (and it probably was.)

"You have exactly three seconds to explain yourself, Mister!"

Conor racked his brain for something suitable. Finally he just gave up and said the only thing he could think of.

"Help me!"

The white-furred bunny's rage turned into momentary bewilderment.

"What?" she demanded, gaping bewildered with a twitching nose.

He held up the bolt cutters and pointed towards the junction box.

"Help me, Erin! Those locks are too strong for me to cut all by myself. And a lot of animals are gonna get hurt if we can't shut the power off."

Once again, she stared at him for a minute….

While all this was going on, Judy Hopps had just come up with an idea of her own.

"What if we take down part of the fence to make another exit?" she said, pointing, "say, right there?"

She was standing near the opposite end of the stage from where Conor and Erin were working, along with Nick, Chip Fielding…and Jack LaPeigne. Luckily for a certain young silver fox, the chances of an encounter between him and the big rabbit were minimal at best, in spite of their relatively close proximity; the electrical substation was clearly visible from the surrounding hills….and while neither he nor Erin would be of much interest to Craig Guilford, the bunny who had foreclosed on his family's home was another matter; Jack wasn't about to go near that spot.

Right now Judy was indicating a part of the fence-line that butted up against the vendor's lot, a section about the length of a large-mammal tractor-trailer.

At first, Nick was unable to fathom what she had in mind, but then he was distracted at the moment. The wind was blowing in from the opposite end of the stage and he had clearly caught the scent of…what the HECK? He thought the kid was supposed to be dousing the lights, what the foxtrot was he doing back here? And as if that wasn't enough of a complication, he could also smell Erin Hopps somewhere over in that direction and whoa, was she mad!

But then Judy's words finally registered with him. Right, an exit that wide would allow them to empty the dance floor in mere minutes. It was a great idea, except…

"How are we supposed to take down that much of the fence in the time we have?" It was Jack LaPeigne who asked it.

"There's some forklifts and tractors in the old red barn over that way," Judy answered, pointing, her rapid-fire delivery betraying her trademark enthusiasm. "They could bring it down in no time flat."

"Sorry, won't work." Chip Fielding's face was as mournful as a Greek chorus, "That equipment's all over there right now, helping set up the fireworks display. " He was pointing north, towards the Midway, (actually to the field just beyond it.)
"Fireworks display?" Nick asked him, speaking in an almost tentative voice. Yes, now that he thought of it, he'd seen a whole truckload of pyrotechnics in that barn when he'd gone with Judy to visit the site of her talent show skit.

He'd been addressing the question mostly to himself, but Chip Fielding seemed to think it had been meant for him.

"Yes, that's right," he said, "the Big Dance always ends with a fireworks display." The corners of his mouth turned sharply downwards. "If you're thinking about lighting them off now to try and trick everyone into thinking the dance is over, sorry, that won't work either. Three years ago we had a communications foul-up and the pyrotechnics crew set the show off two hours ahead of schedule. The only thing that happened was a lot of animals complaining; nobody left the dance-floor."

But that wasn't what Nick was thinking. What he had in mind was a last ditch, Hail Mary, if-all-else-fails idea. It was crazy, it was reckless, and it probably wouldn't work. After his faux pas with the fire-hose, he should have run away from the thought as soon as it popped into his head.

And yet, it wouldn't go away.

"All right," he said, pretending to nod in resignation while secretly crossing his fingers, "One thing though, where is the Guildford place in relationship to the Festival?"

He had been speaking to Chip Fielding again but it was Jack LaPeigne who answered.

"That way, about thirty-five miles," He said, pointing off to the south.

Nick didn't argue, the big bunny would know that if anyone would, he had been to the Guilford house only that morning. To the south, not good; not good at all if that was the direction from which the coyotes' plane would come.

Or…would they? There was something about a southerly approach that didn't feel quite right to him.

"Once they take off, how long will it be before they get here?" Judy Hopps was asking, "And how many planes will they send?"

"I estimate anywhere from 20-25 minutes." Jack answered her and then shrugged, "but how many aircraft they'll bring, I have no idea."

"I can answer that," Chip Fielding said. "If they're planning to spray the Festival with Harequatiline, they have only two planes capable of carrying it."

He went on to explain that in order to properly deploy the herbicide, an aircraft had to be fitted with something known as a Catnip Eradication Dispersal System. "It's the only way to make sure the pilot isn't exposed," he said.

"Okay," Nick began to calculate rapidly. Two planes, twenty minutes…but from which direction would they come? Straight in from the south, that still didn't feel right…but why? If only there was some way to…

At that instant, the festival grounds went dark and the music abruptly ceased. In response, a chorus of moans, groans, and dismay erupted from the dance-floor on the other side of the stage—and in that instant the red fox had his answer.
"Harder!"

"I'm pushing as hard as I can fox!" Erin Hopps protested, still heaving on the bolt-cutters with what seemed like everything she had.

They had each taken hold of a different side of the instrument, pushing on the handles with both paws and bracing their feet against the ground. Even so the steel of the lock refused to yield by more than another few centimeters. It seemed hopeless.

Conor had no idea why Erin had even agreed to help. Even now he could tell that the young, white-furred bunny was still furious with him.

And that gave him an idea. He pointed at the neck of the lock.

"Pretend that's my neck!" he said.

Erin grimaced and her face became a gorgon's mask; with a grunt of rage she pressed hard on the bolt cutters; her strength seemed to have risen to an almost unearthly level.

The lock hasp groaned once and then snapped apart as the cutters bit cleanly through the metal. Conor should have been elated, but ohhhhh boy, was he ever going to get it when they were finished here.

But first they had to get finished.

"The other lock, come on." he said.

The second lock broke apart much more easily than the first, perhaps the steel wasn't as strong, or perhaps now that Erin had found the source of her extra strength it came to her that much more easily.

She began to thump her foot again.

"All right, fox. Now…!"

"In a minute!" he said, and jumped up and grabbed the levers, one in each paw. They were large-mammal size and at first his weight was not enough to cause either of them to drop by even a fraction of an inch. But then something yanked hard on his tail, (nearly wrenching it out of its socket,) and both of the levers sliced downwards.

At once the dance floor was plunged into darkness and a thousand 'Awwws!' were raised in protest.

Erin didn't seem to notice any of it.

"All right Conor Lewis…!"

"In a second!" he growled; he still had one more task to perform. Feeling in the darkness for the levers again, he reached up with the bolt-cutters and sheared each of them off at the base. (This he could manage on his own,) and then for good measure, he cut through the power cables as well.

And then he raised the cutters up and over his shoulder. Erin's eyes went wide and she lifted an arm to protect herself, but the young fox only swung them up and over the fence again.

Before Erin could speak, he pointed first to the ruined control box and then to the hole she had dug beneath the fence. (His night vision was finally starting to kick in.)
"I really don't think we wanna be here when security shows up, okay?"

It was a gambit, meant to buy time until he could come up with a plausible excuse for having shined her…but it was also 100% true and Erin Hopps could only grumble her acquiescence.

Conor reached out and took her by the paw; she couldn't see in the dark as well as he could and her superior sense of hearing wouldn't help her here.

She immediately tried to yank her paw away, but ceased resisting when the young fox asked her smoothly, "Wanna pull weeds for the rest of the month?"

That did it, and she let him lead her to the hole. It was an easy squeeze-through for her, but a tight fit for him. Luckily, the young silver fox had some experience in worming his way through constricted spaces.

When he emerged from other side of the tunnel, Erin was there, paws on hips, and once again thumping her foot.

"Not yet, we need to get away from here," he said, swiping up the bolt-cutters and beckoning for her to follow. "I'll tell you on the..."

Before Conor could finish, his cell-phone chimed the refrain from Foxy Lady. Waving his companion to silence, he pulled it out and connected.

It was Finnick calling.

"Heads up, they're coming!"

"Who's coming?" Erin Hopps demanded. Her sharp ears had caught the fennec's words.

Conor responded by heaving the bolt cutters into the underbrush and grabbing her by the paw again.

"Erin, run!"

Conor Lewis hadn't been the only one to catch the desert fox's warning; Nick Wilde had heard it too…and was right now within an ace of fox-screaming his head off. Too soon, it was way too soon; the kid had only just now gotten the lights turned out; nobody was even THINKING about moving towards the exits.

Blankety-blank little….he could have wrung the younger fox's neck

"What the heck took you so long?" His inner self snarled, before another, more rational voice overrode it. "Easy Nick, don't go blaming Conor, you're lucky he got the power off at all."

Okay, maybe…but now what were they supposed to do? No way could they get this place evacuated in 20 minutes, especially with no lights; even the animals with better-than-average night vision would need at least half that long for their eyes to fully adjust to the darkness.

There was only one small chance, that crazy, one-in-a-thousand idea he'd had only a minute ago.

No, there was ZERO chance of it working; the red fox had just realized why the direct route from the south hadn't felt right. The Guilfords were coyotes; they'd never take the obvious approach; instead they'd drop down under the radar and come in from the west, using the surrounding hills, as
cover. That way no one would realize what has happening until the planes were right on top of them.

And the west side of the Festival wasn't much better than the south side, still 90 degrees away from where he needed those planes to be. For his plan to have even a chance of success the Guildford brothers had to come in from the north, the one route they'd NEVER take and there was no time to move the...

"Nick what is it?" Judy was tapping him on the arm.

He turned to her and was starting to put the cell-phone away when he happened to glance over the top of her head.

Jack LaPeigne and Chip Fielding were in the midst of a heated argument. Fine thing at a time like this; he could almost begin to...hold it, hold hold it.

"I'll tell you in a minute, Carrots," he said, and hurriedly punched the speed-dial on his cell.

But even if the kid could pull it off, how the heck was he supposed to get anyone else to go along with his idea?

"One thing at a time, Nick," he told himself and then put the phone to his ear, "Conor, listen..."

Twenty-five miles to the southeast, Jerry and Joe Guildford were flying low and hugging the contours of the earth, their two planes maneuvering almost wingtip to wingtip. They were, each of them, at the controls of a Hayres Turbo 720, an aircraft with a long, raked nose that gave it something of the appearance of a flying anteater. These planes, purchased shortly after Sky-yote Crop Services last successful season, were both within a hairsbreadth of being repossessed. Not that it mattered; after tonight, neither one of them would ever fly again, Jerry and his brother would see to that after they landed. It was almost a shame—almost—these were two of the most powerful agricultural aircraft ever built, so effective at making low-level runs that at least one third-world air force had repurposed them as ground-attack planes.

And that in fact, that was exactly what Jerry and Joe Guilford were doing with their planes. Earlier that day, when they'd been fueling up and loading their spray hoppers, brother Darrel had begun referring to them as the, 'Stukas.' Joe had thought that was hilarious; Jerry had only grunted, but then Jerry Guilford didn't seem to think much of anything was worth a laugh these days. What a change from the happy-go-lucky coyote he'd been eight years previously, when the family had first arrived in the Burrow.

Nick Wilde had guessed correctly when he'd surmised that they wouldn't head for the Carrot Day's Festival on a straight-line course. Instead, they were coming in on a circular route, angling for a westerly approach. And also, just as the red fox had predicted, they had dropped down under the radar when the first call had come in from the Burrows County tower. Of course that wouldn't stop them from being tracked by satellite, but Jerry Guilford had been willing to bet that the ZAA wasn't about to waste that kind of resource on a pair of measly crop-dust planes.

His brother Joe wasn't quite so confident.

"Unless," he reminded himself for the nth time, "the Burrows County Sheriff's Office figures out what we're up to."

Unlikely as that scenario was, they couldn't ignore it...especially considering what Joe had seen, shortly after they'd taken off for the Festival. When they'd crossed over Highway 61 he had
observed out the side of his cockpit what appeared to be a line of blacked out vehicles, moving in the direction of Star Route 30. He had immediately brought it to the attention of his brother, who had simply informed him curtly, "Don't pay it no never mind, Joe. Keep your eye on the ball."

When his Jerry had first announced his plan, it had been Darrell, the supposedly level-headed member of the family who'd been the most enthusiastic. Joe had been all for it too—at first. But now, the closer they got to actually carrying out the scheme, the more he felt his fervor draining away. He would let none of those feelings show of course, certainly not to Jerry, but still…

This wasn't some act of petty vandalism they were about to commit, it was…oh say it already, this was terrorism! That was what the authorities would call it, especially if anyone at the dance was killed as a result of exposure to the Harequateline they were carrying—or even worse, if it ignited after they dropped it.

And if you went inside on a terrorism charge, you NEVER came out again.

For a just a fraction of a second Joe considered turning back, but immediately dismissed the notion. Even if he made a beeline straight for Burrow County Airport and came out of the cockpit with his paws raised, it was already too late. He'd still be charged as an accessory to terrorism, and that would be good for at least 25 years in the slam, forget the parole. At his age, 25 years was a life sentence in everything but name.

He glanced over at his brother's plane, and was only mildly surprised to see that the canopy was halfway fogged over. Of course it was; Jerry had been mad enough to eat wire when they'd climbed into their aircraft a short while earlier.

It all came down to his brother's boy Craig; Jerry had given his son the job of scouting the Big Dance wanting to make sure Jack La Peigne was there before they struck.

It had been about two hours after the big rabbit's departure that they'd finally learned his identity. It had been all over ZNN; a bunny had gone savage at the Carrot Days festival, and had finally been subdued, thanks to the heroic efforts of Jack LaPeigne, etc.

Jerry had almost smashed the TV when he'd seen it; the rabbit who'd just ordered him off his property wasn't merely a jerk, he was a super-rich jerk, the worst kind in the Guilford family patriarch's estimation. And NOW everyone was treating him like a hero! If Joe's brother had been only determined to get his revenge on Jack La Peigne before seeing that newscast, afterwards he was obsessed with it. That was why he'd given Craig and his little vix-toy the job of making sure the big bunny was there at the dance before they went in. Joe suspected his brother didn't intend to wait for Miranda, or whatever her name was, to get clear of the Festival before they dropped their cargo; her shooting a video of Craig destroying that produce stand had been stupid enough…but posting it on Ewe-Tube? THAT was unforgivable!

Not that it mattered; as usual the boy had messed things up. He'd called in exactly three times after leaving the house, always with nothing to report, and then he'd fallen silent. When Jerry had finally tried to call him, he'd gotten no answer. He'd given it another half hour and then looked at his watch…and then he'd looked at Joe.

"It's 10," was all he'd said and the two of them had climbed into their crop dusters as per the agreement they'd made earlier; if Jerry didn't hear back from his son by 10 o'clock, ready or not, off they'd go.

Given what Joe had seen on the road right after they taken off, it had probably been a wise decision—too bad really; Darrel and the rest of the family wouldn't get away, but at least they'd be
avenged.

Jerry's voice crackled over his headset,

"We're comin' up on the turn Joe, follow my lead."

(He did not say 'over' because he did not expect—or want—a reply.)

Joe followed Jerry's plane in a wide arc, aiming for a low set of hills, on the other side of which was their target.

"Keep an eye out for the truck." His brother added in an almost toneless voice. Joe nearly asked him which truck he meant, but then realized he must be referring to the one his son was driving. He wondered for a second if Jerry was planning to drop part of the load on Craig as punishment for having failed in his duty. Nooo, even HE wouldn't go that far.

The rabbits of Bunnyburrow would not be so lucky; up ahead, Joe could see the crest of the hill; in another few seconds and the Big Dance would be...WHAT the?!

The festival was...GONE! There was nothing in front of his canopy but empty darkness.

He immediately got on the radio.

"Jerry, we're in the wrong place, over!"

The answer that came back was surprisingly calm, especially considering the source.

"Easy, little brother, we're where we belong. Open your air vents and take a good whiff. You smell that? Over."

Joe reached down, pulled a toggle switch and inhaled deeply. He was immediately greeted by the scent of a thousand mammals, most of them bunnies, wafting up from somewhere down below. Jerry was right; they were at least close to the Carrot Days Festival.

Only...how close were they, and where, exactly, was the Big Dance from here? It wouldn't do any good to drop their load on the Midway or the parking lot; neither one of those places would be half as crowded as the dance floor. And why were the lights out in the first pla...?

The realization hit Joe Guilford like a wallop across the face.

"Holy Crike, they're onto us Jerry!" (This time he forgot to say 'over'.)

"Won't do 'em any good, it's too late, over." the elder coyote answered, grimly determined.

"Roger that, but I can't see nuthin' down there, Jer." Joe answered, peering sideways out his canopy, "We don't want to go laying this stuff down in the wrong spot, over."

For once, Jerry Guilford's answer came with a note of approval.

"Heck knows we don't Joe, so we'll circle around until we figure out exactly where we're at, out."

Before the younger coyote could roger his brother's last transmission a call came in on another frequency.

"BCL 57 calling aircraft Alpha Kilo Two-Four-Niner. This is the Burrow County Sheriff's Office. You are ordered to...!"
Joe ignored it as best he could and turned to follow his brother's plane.

Finnick nearly jumped out of his fur when Conor Lewis came rushing back into their campsite at full tilt.

"DF, get outta that seat and trade places, hurry!"

"Okay, okay!" the fennec growled all but throwing himself out of the camp-chair. (He was actually more than happy to give it up.) But then he noticed his partner hadn't come back alone. Erin Hopps was there with him.

"What the heck is SHE doing here?" he demanded, pointing at the white-furred bunny, "And why hasn't she ripped your lungs out?" he wondered silently.

His partner's only answer was to motion anxiously for the headset

Finnick's puzzlement ceased abruptly the instant he removed it. Now he could hear it, the menacing drone of two aircraft, buzzing overhead. Ohhhh snap…they were here already.

Conor meanwhile had pitched himself into the camp chair and was pulling the headset over his ears. The reason Erin hadn't decided to let him live was actually quite simple, all those earlier delays had given the young silver fox time to finally come up with a decent cover story.

It went like this:

On the way back to their table, he had spotted Amanda Hill moving through the crowd. She had seemed to be searching for someone and at first Conor hadn't had the slightest idea who she might be looking for. But then he'd overheard the young vixen asking a girl-badger about 'that' bunny, and had naturally assumed it was Erin she'd been talking about. And so he had decided to follow Amanda…and ended up trailing her out the exit and all the way up the hillside overlooking the Festival. It was there that he'd run into Nick Wilde, (and no he still had no idea what HE'D been doing up there.)

After that the young silver fox's tale had become 100% truthful, no fillers and no additives.

He didn't know whether Erin had entirely believed him, but she'd certainly believed the part about the Guilfords planning to spray-bomb the Big Dance, or at least now she did; hard to argue that point with a pair of aircraft engines purring somewhere above their heads. (Conor had said nothing about the Harequateline.) She had also believed him when he'd told her that Nick Wilde had already warned her family of the danger, (technically true; he had notified at least one Hopps family member of the impending attack.) Thank goodness she had swallowed that part at least; the last thing he needed right now was for Little Miss Hormones to go rushing off in a panic, looking for her folks.

Speaking of panic, Conor was barely holding it together himself. Nick Wilde's plan was a dicey one at best. And the chance of success would drop to nothing if he messed this up.

He settled down with the laptop on his knee and began to type furiously.

Feelsogud777#%: "K Back. Need help NOW, Guild! xplain ltr."

Guildenkranz&24X: "Go hed."

Feelsogud777#%: "Nd 2 cal dad, nds 2 look lik kid calng, Hry."
While he waited, Conor pulled the headset aside and spoke to Erin. "Is there any fave expression that Craig likes to use?"

The white-furred bunny's nose began to twitch. "Why do you need…?"

"Just tell me!"

"Okay, okay," she answered, nettled. "He's got this weird thing he always says, 'yotey baloney', and he always calls Amanda, 'Mandy'."

"Good, thanks." Conor slipped the headset back over his ears. He had already known the second one, but the first one…come to think of it, he had heard Craig saying 'yotey-baloney' to his girlfriend earlier. (He'd forgotten about it though, until Erin had reminded him just now.)

On the screen in front of him a new message appeared.

Guildenkranz&24X: "K, Ur set."

Conor looked over at Finnick. "You gotta piece of paper on you?"

The desert fox fumbled in his pockets for a second, finally coming up with part of a candy wrapper. "Just this." he said, and the young fox held out a paw.

"That'll do, gimme."

He took the paper and crumpled it, then clicked on the 'call' icon. It rang once, twice, three times—and then it kept on ringing. Noooo, Jerry Guilford either had his phone turned off or else he didn't have it with him; this wasn't going to work. Six rings… seven, eight, nine; one more and the call would be routed over to voice mail.

The phone clicked and then someone was shouting in his ear, "Craig! Where you BEEN, boy?"

Conor brought the paper close to the mike, crinkling it in his paw and dropping his voice to a near whisper…speaking in his best rendition of the coyote's errant son.

"Dad, not so loud, they'll hear."

"Who'll hear?" 'his' father demanded, lowering his voice but still angry.

"Wolverines dad," Conor answered keeping his voice down. "Yotey-baloney there's maybe six of 'em down the hillside from me."

"Then get the heck out of there, boy!" Jerry actually sounded concerned, "I don't need you tangling with that species. We're already over the festival any-a-ways."

"I will dad, but I got something to tell you first," the young fox answered, allowing a note of immediacy to creep into his voice, "I just now heard from Mandy; she saw him dad, she spotted that big bunny. He's not inside the dance; he's just outside the fence on the north-end side."

There was silence on the line and for one, dreadful moment Conor was sure that the coyote had
seen through his deception and dropped the call. But then his voice came back again.

"What the heck-all's he doin' out there?" Jerry Guilford seemed to be speaking mostly to himself.

Conor mentally crossed his fingers and prepared to set the hook.

"He's out there talking with Chip Fielding," he said, allowing his voice to become both grim and sardonic.

"Fieldinnnnng." Jerry drew out the name like taffy, and that was when Conor knew he'd taken the bait, two for the price of one, no way could this unforgiving jerk-weed resist the opportunity. "Good job son, now get the heck off of that hilltop; I'll see you back at the rendezvous."

He rang off without another word and the young fox immediately punched in another number. This time he got an answer on the first ring.

"Finnick, you there?" Nick Wilde asked breathlessly, ('Finnick', that meant he wasn't alone.) "Did you get him? Did it work?"

"Yeah, I got him," the young fox answered, surprised that he was breathing hard too, "And yeah, I fooled him too, (I think); you were right, big guy. When I told him that big jerk was talking with Chip Field..."

"Okay, good job." Nick interrupted, and abruptly rang off.

Conor listened to the silence on the line for a second and then fell back in in his camp chair, ignoring both the messages on his screen and also Finnick and Erin. He could have killed for a cold drink right now...and who'd have thought those acting classes he'd taken at the Performing Arts Academy would ever pay off like this?

"Okay, Nick." He thought to himself gazing upwards into the stars overhead, "I did my part; now it's up to you."
Chapter Summary

The Guilford brothers make their move; can they be stopped in time?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 4 – The Wizard of Chaos
(Conclusion)

Back inside The Carrot Days Festival, a hundred things were happening all at once.

Jack LaPeigne was staying holed up in back of the stage, directing his security mammals from a makeshift command center set up in one of the trailers. The big bunny didn't like the idea of hiding at a time like this, but at the same time, he understood the necessity.

Nick and Judy had left him there; they had duties of their own to perform. Making their way to the Sheriff's station at the other end of dance, they found only one animal on duty...but fortunately for them that one, single deputy was Mac Cannon. On the way there, they had passed by the electrical substation, now fully inoperative thanks to the tender mercies of a young silver fox (and his white furred bunny companion.) While Nick appreciated Conor's efforts, holy foxtrot kid, does the word 'overkill' mean anything to you?

Chip Fielding had also departed, having insisted upon fursonally delivering the message that the power would be down for the rest of the evening, even though he knew he'd have to make that announcement from center stage—directly in the line of fire when the Guilford brothers arrived. Not only that, he'd have to remain there and keep repeating the message until the exodus was at least half-way complete. Nonetheless, he'd all but demanded the job.

"Whoever's going to tell that crowd we can't get the power back on, it has to be someone the animals of Burrow County know and recognize." he'd said, just before taking his leave. Nick could hear him even now, repeating the announcement for the fifth time. He had to admire the beaver. A sleazy politician he might be, but he was possessed of both courage and a commitment to the mammals of Bunnyburrow.
"Ladies and…(inaudible) we're sorry to…(inaudible) due to a technical mishap…"

He'd had to say it three times before the dance attendees had stopped their grumbling and begun moving towards the exits. Only in the last few minutes had the trickle become a steady stream, with everyone being guided along by Jack LaPeigne's security guards. Nick had to admit, they knew their job; they were taking the larger animals out through the stage exit, and the rodents by way of the secondary exit. The mid-sized and small mammals, by far the largest group, were being directed out through the main entrance.

All well and good, but it wouldn't be enough and the red fox knew it; there was no way on earth they could get this place cleared out before the Guilford brothers made their move. (Judy's family at least had already made their exit, not through any effort on her part, but because they'd happened to be close to the main gate when the announcement came.)

Not all of them had made it out, though. Bonnie Hopps had called only moments ago, asking if Judy had seen Erin anywhere. She'd had to tell her mother no, although Nick could swear he'd caught the young bunny's scent again when they'd passed by the electrical substation a while ago. Aaaggghh, grrrr, if only his crazy idea would work. But not only was that a remote possibility, even if the plan succeeded, it could still backfire and in the worst possible way—as Mac Cannon had succinctly pointed out only moments earlier.

"What if either of those planes goes down into the crowd, did you ever think of that, fox?"

Nonetheless the bobcat had endorsed the scheme—reluctantly, and only as a last resort. There simply wasn't time to come up with anything else. "But only if I give the word," he had cautioned Nick.

By now the Burrows County Sheriff's office was well aware of what Jerry Guilford had something planned for the Big Dance; they had heard it from Chip Fielding, they had heard it from Aker Security; they'd first heard it second-paw courtesy of Conor Lewis. But that was all they knew. When the Burrows County SWAT team had swooped in on the Guilford homestead, Brother Darrel had offered them no resistance—or anything else. "I ain't sayin' nuthin' without a lawyer," he'd told them.

Nick of course knew everything, but he had nothing in the way of hard proof, only circumstantial evidence and a gut feeling; he could only reveal so much of what he believed was about to go down without destroying his own credibility. Yes there were a couple of planes out there, but how did he know that they were being flown by the Guilford brothers? That had been the Mac Cannon's first question, and that was why the fox had said nothing about the Harequateline.

That was what made Jerry Guilford's plan for revenge so truly diabolical; if Nick had suggested that the coyotes were planning to spray the dance with fertilizer, the Burrows County Sheriff's Office would have accepted it without question. If he'd said they were coming in with a low-level pesticide like Malathion, that also might have flown…but Harequateline? Forget it, being sprayed with that stuff was literally too horrible for anyone to contemplate. Mac's superior, Sheriff's Lieutenant Cal Hornaday, a bull bison not only believed the electricity going out was the Guilford brothers' act of vengeance, he was all but certain that they had nothing else planned, at least for tonight.

(But at least he'd agreed that the dance should be evacuated.)

Now as the patrons streamed towards the exits, Nick was all too aware of the steady drone of the two aircraft circling somewhere out beyond the perimeter. At first, only Judy had been able to hear them, but now he could as well.
But there was another thing he was aware of as well, the first rule of a good hustle said that it didn't matter what the mark believed, as long as you got him to behave in the manner that you wanted. Even without knowing that the Guilford brothers were carrying such a dangerous cargo, the Burrow County Sheriff's Department had done everything Nick could have wished; they had dispatched a SWAT team to the Guilford Family Compound, they had greenlit the evacuation order, and they had repeatedly ordered the two coyotes to, 'turn those planes around right now!' The department's helicopter had also been ordered to head straight to the Carrot Days Festival after dropping those car crash victims at Burrow County General, but it wouldn't arrive for another hour at least.

So far, so good, but Nick Wilde knew that if it came down to putting his plan into action, the BCSD would NEVER give him the okay unless they knew those planes out there were loaded with Harequateline… and he couldn't just tell them outright.

Fortunately, he had an idea…but even that wouldn't help if they couldn't get everything set up in time.

Raising the binoculars he'd borrowed from the Deputy Cannon, Nick rolled the focus knob and looked to the north. He had a good view of his surroundings; the Sheriff's station was equipped with a raised platform that offered a bird's eye view of not only the Big Dance but also the entire Carrot-Days festival.

Out past the fence-line, in a field just beyond a row of telephone poles, a pack of animals of varying sizes was hard at work. At first glance, they might almost have been mistaken for farm-workers, planting crops for the new season—except that this well after dark and these were no vegetables they were pegging into the soil; they were thick sections of PVC pipe, about three feet in length and with the approximate diameter of a softball.

And the speed with which they were working was also much more feverish than any sort of farm activity.

Returning the binoculars to Mac Cannon, Nick exchanged them for a two way radio and pressed the talk button.

"How's it going over there? Over." he asked.

The voice that came back was sketchy, scratchy, and more than a little aggravated.

"Not as good as if we could work if we weren't being pestered alla time. Over"

Nick's ears went flat and he let out a soft growl, this was exactly the second time he'd called for a progress report. He was about to say so, when the voice came back again.

"We got about a third of the tubes planted, maybe a few more. Over" He had a rough, deep voice that conjured up images of a large, hooved mammal in Nick's mind. You never knew, though. Finnick had a voice like a double-bass rock crusher and how big was he?

"Okay," the fox answered, suppressing another growl, (only a third; that wasn't nearly enough.) "Just keep at it and forget the smaller stuff. Wilde out."

Instead of acknowledging the sign-off, the voice returned sounding even more vexed, "What in heck do you think we're doing?" And then Nick heard someone else talking in the background. "Roy, ask if him if this run'round has anything to do with them planes up there."

He hurriedly switched frequencies before the question could be posed.
Nick had no sooner returned the radio to Mac Cannon than the bobcat abruptly tensed. "There they are!" he said, rolling the focus knob on the binoculars.

"What are they doing?" It was Judy talking, her nose twitching curiously.

"Just cruising it looks like," the deputy answered, sounding even more bewildered than she did.

"I think I know what they're up to," Nick told them, tapping the side of his muzzle, "Whenever one of us canid species can't navigate by sight, we always fall back on our sense of smell. They're trying to get wind of the big dance and home in on it that way," he sighed and felt his ears drooping, "and it won't be too hard for them with so many bodies all packed together like this."

The tone of his voice was not lost on his partner.

"At least you bought us some time Nick," she said, patting his arm, "If you hadn't gotten the lights out, they'd probably have hit us already."

He just smiled wanly at her; that unintended benefit was rapidly coming to the end of its shelf life; already the dance-floor was peppered with the glow of a hundred cell-phones...to say nothing of the beams of at least two dozen flashlights. Why the Guilfords hadn't spotted them already, the fox had no idea.

Right then his cell-phone came alive.

It was Conor Lewis on the other end. In his agitated state, Nick came that close to addressing the kid by his correct name but then hurriedly caught himself.

"Finnick, did you get him, did it work?"

"Yeah, I got him," the young fox answered, speaking between gulps of air, "and yeah, I fooled him; you were right, big guy. When I told him that big jerk was talking with Chip Field..."

"Okay, good work," Nick said and then rang off. He would love to have heard the rest of it, but time was precious.

"Well?" Judy asked him, raising an ear, "did he go for it?"

"Finnick thinks so," the red fox answered, hedging his bets. He hadn't quite given her the true version of his plan; no way could the deep voiced fennec-fox have passed for Jerry Guilford's son. So instead he had told her that his former partner was pretending to be the coyote's brother Darrel, (who, unbeknownst to Nick, sounded even less like the desert fox than Craig did, but never mind, Judy had no way of knowing that and so she'd bought the story wholesale.)

But now that he knew the message had been received, this was the time for Nick to play hi ace; and so he motioned to Mac once more. (He could only pray that the bobcat would know what they were when he saw them—IF he even could see them.)

"Okay, I need those binocs again."

"All right," the bobcat answered passing them over. "But nothing happens unless I give the order, got that?" It sounded as if he was starting to like Nick's plan less and less with every passing minute.

"I understand," the red fox answered raising the lenses to his eyes. "Where are they?"
"There," the deputy pointed, "About three clicks right of the Ferris Wheel, two, maybe three hundred feet in the air. See 'em?"

At first the fox saw nothing but black wool and fuzzy dots. When he adjusted the focus knob on the binoculars, things improved only a little. The view was clear enough, but he saw nothing except the night sky. Hold it, wait a second; there they were, a pair of indistinct shapes moving against the darkness. Nick wondered for a second why there weren't any lights showing and then nearly gave himself a face-pawlm. D'ohhh, right...of course they'd have the lights turned out, they didn't WANT to be seen. He tweaked the focus-knob again by just a hair and finally the two aircraft sharpened into clarity, still moving lazily out past the west-side boundary of the Festival. But where were the...? Yes, there they were, or at least one of them anyway.

Okay this was it, he lowered the binoculars again and looked over at Mac Cannon.

"Say Mac, what's that weird-looking thing on the underside of those planes?" he asked, offering the deputy a look of casual curiosity.

"Weird-looking what, now?" Mac was tapping his arm and motioning for the binoculars.

"Some kind of turbo-gadget...looks almost like a siren." Nick told him, and the bobcat all but ripped the binoculars out his paws. (Yes! He knew what the fox was describing.)

Raising the binocs to his eyes once more, Mac yowled and almost dropped them.

"Holy Catgut...those are CEDS units! Those planes are loaded with..."

He practically threw the binoculars back to Nick and made a fast grab for his radio.

Nick no sooner found the planes again than he felt his throat go tight and his tail starting to frizz. They had gone into a sudden, sharp bank, turning directly east, homing in directly on the Carrot Days Festival; they seemed to be coming straight towards him. His plan hadn't worked, he had messed up again; they were heading in from the wrong direction.

But then as he watched, the aircraft continued to turn, sweeping around and heading north.

"It's working!" he said, feeling his tail fur standing up again, but this time with a sense of exhilaration, "Holy foxtrot it's working, they're headed for the north side."

He felt Judy grab his arm, "Don't let them out of your sight, Nick."

Mac Cannon said nothing; he was still talking on his radio. Nooo, not talking; it sounded more like he was having an argument with somebody.

"Forget about him, keep your eye on those planes," the red fox reminded himself.

For the moment, the pair of crop-dusters just continued on their course. Turned at a different angle than a moment ago their colors had finally become visible to the fox, if however faintly, crystal white with fluorescent orange trim.

He felt his tail shivering in derision.

"Oh for fox's sake, what do you super-geniuses think this is; an air-race or something?"

But then something else occurred to him and he glanced over at Mac Cannon.

"Bright orange and white, are those the colors of...?"
"Yes, that's the Guilford brothers." The bobcat answered tersely. Nick let out a small, short breath. If he intended to get the okay for his idea, every bit of evidence mattered.

For another moment, the two planes continued to recede into the night sky and the red fox was tempted to hope that they'd given up and were calling it quits.

But deep down, he knew better. Jerry Guilford wouldn't walk away, not now, not when he had not one but two of his most hated enemies almost directly in his sights.

As if to confirm this, the planes went into another turn, wider this time. As they wheeled around, Nick saw them settle once more into a side-by-side formation, coming out of the north, aiming directly for the heart of the big dance.

Judy's grip on his arm tightened and he saw her ears go up.

"Nick, they're revving their engines, give the order!"

The red fox swiftly lowered the binoculars and held out a paw to Mac Cannon.

"Mac? Give me the radio."

The bobcat appeared not to hear him, huddled over the two-way and speaking in a low, anxious voice.

"Mac?" he repeated, this time more urgently, "Mac, come on." Now he could hear the engines revving too.

Again, the deputy seemed to take no notice.

"Mac!" Nick almost shouted, grabbing for the two-way. The bobcat hurriedly pulled out of reach... and in that motion, the radio came away from his ear and the fox could hear the speaker on the other end.

"And you tell that bushy-tailed idiot his crazy scheme is NOT happening. Of all the irresponsible, lame-brained..."

"Mac please!" It was Judy Hopps, "Nick knows what he's doing, give him the radio!"

"Please, it's our only chance." Nick was practically begging.

For half a second, Mac Cannon seemed to waver, but then with a heavy look on his face, he opened his jacket and prepared to put the radio back where he'd gotten it.

"Hey Judy, Judy Hopps, is that you up there?" a familiar voice called from below.

She leaned over the railing with her nose twitching. Who in heck...?

"Oh yeah, thought it was you. Hey, have you seen your sister Erin around anywhere?"

Before Judy could answer, Mac Cannon was there beside her, gazing downwards, wide eyed and shaking.

"Wha...S-Susie?"

"Yeah Dad," the young bobcat answered looking up bewildered. "What's going on?"
Mac didn't answer her; instead he turned on his heel and tossed the radio to Nick.

"Do it fox, stop those planes!"

Nick grabbed the paw-held and frantically changed frequencies. In the distance he could hear the Guilford brothers, revving their engines faster and faster.

"Nick hurry," Judy cried, "they're pulling up and getting ready to dive."

The fox had no idea how she knew that and didn't care one bit. He keyed the mike and shouted into the radio, "Fire in the hole!"

What he got back was an irritated groan.

"Light 'em off now? Are you nuts or something, son? There's a couple of airplanes 'bout to fly right over us."

"I know!" Nick almost fox-screamed. "That's the Guilford brothers!"

The voice on the other end promptly shifted from prickly to perplexed.

"The Guilford brothers, who the heck are the…?"

"The Guilfords!" a voice cried out in the background. "Oh my God… Bobby, light those fuses, hurry!"

"But why…?"

"There's no time, light 'em all, light 'em NOW!"

The radio went silent again. At the same instant he heard, Judy's breathless whimper.

"Ohhhh, sweet Cheez n' Crackers."

Nick looked and saw that the two planes had gone into a steep dive; even without binoculars he could see them clearly now.

Both aircraft were trailing thick, white, chemical plumes from their undersides. He'd been right after all, but finding out this way it was no kind of comfort.

Out towards the line of telephone poles, Nick thought he saw movement and perhaps a spark or two but...

**THAMP!**

With a noise like a basement door slamming a white-hot, glowing orb shot up into the sky, and then another and another…and then whole barrage of mortar-rockets burst upwards out of their tubes, trailing tendrils of gray smoke behind them.

But even before the first firework detonated, Nick could see that they had launched too late; the Guilford planes had already passed overhead, the rockets would explode in their wake.

All he could do was watch helplessly as the first one detonated behind Jerry Guilford's plane, a green and white flower. The next one went off behind Joe's aircraft sending a cascade of tracers screaming in all directions. The two aircraft wavered slightly but continued to come on, sowing their toxic clouds behind them. Another rocket exploded; a red and orange fireball and then another
one, a blue and white peony. With every launch, the detonations seemed to be falling further and further behind the approaching planes.

Then a purple starburst exploded perhaps 20 yards behind Joe's plane, directly in the center of his herbicide contrail…and set it on fire! With the speed of a lit gasoline trail, an incandescent carpet of flames shot forward in the direction of the crop-duster, swiftly engulfing the undercarriage. At once the aircraft began to violently turn and jink, as Joe tried desperately to snuff out the fire in the slipstream.

His older brother might have escaped the conflagration and completed his mission—none of the fireworks were detonating anywhere close to the plume trailing behind his plane. But then, in his panic Joe swerved right through it, and with a flash like a thousand camera-bulbs, the second trail of herbicide became a luminous sheet of flame.

Nick watched the spectacle with a mixture of fascination, horror, and something resembling pity. As the two planes wheeled and turned, trying vainly to put out the fires, they resembled nothing so much as a pair of giant moths that had passed too close to a candle flame.

"Why don't they shut the release valves?" he heard Judy say from beside him. (They would later learn that the heat had melted them open.)

From everywhere around them they could hear the sound of 'Ooo's' and 'Aaah's'; at least some of the crowd seemed to think the scene there were witnessing was all part of the show.

That fantasy ended in a chorus of alarm when one of the planes turned and appeared to dive straight for the center of the dance floor. Nick screamed and so did Judy, but then the crop-duster pulled up and away again, making a fast beeline for the northwest, with the other plane following close behind.

Only then did Nick allow the air to escape from his lungs. Safe, the dance was safe.

Then someone grabbed his shoulder and he heard Mac Cannon's voice. "They're heading for the irrigation pond, look!"

Nick looked…just in time to see one of the planes vanish in a tall geyser of steam and smoke. A split second later, the other one came in at a shallower angle, sending up two-story rooster-tail of dirty-green water before it too disappeared in a fog of its own creation.

"Come on!" the bobcat said, and then he, Nick, and Judy were bounding down the stairs and running for a nearby Sheriff's cruiser. As Mac passed by his daughter, he aimed a fast finger in her direction.

"Susie, go find your mother."

"But dad…"

"Don't argue!"

By the time they reached the irrigation pond, several other first responders had already gotten there ahead of them. Nick counted an ambulance, a fire truck and at least two other Sheriff's cruisers, the flashing red-and-blue roof-lights looking ghostly in the dust kicked up by their tires. The pond itself was not visible from ground level; it remained hidden behind a tall berm of packed earth.

Exiting the cruiser, Nick and Judy found themselves in the midst of what seemed like total chaos, shouting voices, running figures and more swirling dust. Then they saw what looked like an
armored command car with 'ASM' stenciled on the side, pulling up about 10 yards away. Then the doors opened and a pair of wolverines exited, followed by Jack LaPeigne. (No need for him to stay hidden any longer.) The big bunny nodded a brief greeting, and then everyone was scrambling up and over the earthen levee that formed the bank of the reservoir.

What they found on the other side was a scene of almost surreal tranquility

The water's surface looked as black as midnight and as smooth as a sheet of glass, crisscrossed everywhere by the beams of what seemed like an infinite number of flashlights and tactical searchlights. Several of these were focused on an object jutting out of the water, about half way towards the center of the pond, the tail section of a crop-duster plane. Standing at an almost vertical angle, it conjured an oddly incongruous image in the depths of Nick Wilde's mind, the rear end of a fox who'd just dived head-first through the snow, in search of a fleeing rodent. No sound was present except for the crackling of radios, not even the croaking of frogs or the hum and buzz of insects.

But then the breeze shifted slightly, and something hot and unpleasant rose up in Nick Wilde's throat. The pond's aroma was sickeningly foul, and not just from the fertilizer that infused its waters; an unpleasant, bitter-burning odor was present underneath it.

It was not only the stench that was making the fox's gorge rise however; the full impact of what he'd done was just now starting to hit home—and it didn't feel good.

The idea behind the fireworks launch had been to put a stop to the Guilford brothers' plans; Nick certainly hadn't intended to hurt them, (although he'd realized from the get-go that such was a distinct possibility.) Like every other ZPD officer, the last thing Nicholas Wilde had ever wanted to do was take a life in the line of duty, not even if he found himself in a kill-or-be-killed situation—not even if there were many other lives hanging in the balance besides his own.

Without warning three of the beams moved to a single point on the surface of the water. In less than a heartbeat, they were joined by practically every other light-source on the levee.

About twenty yards away, perhaps ten feet in front of where Jack La Peigne was standing, something was moving in the water.

At first, nothing was visible but a swirl and an eddy…and then all at once something broke through the surface, flailing and splashing like some primordial thing that had suddenly awakened after centuries of hibernation.

Nick gasped, so did Judy, so did practically everyone else standing along the shoreline. A few of the animals even took a step backwards.

Jerry Guilford had his paw around this brother's shoulder and was half guiding, half dragging him towards the shoreline. Joe Guilford seemed to be barely conscious, his head lolling lazily to and fro and his tongue hanging sideways from the corner of his mouth; his left eye appeared to be swollen almost completely shut.. Nothing was left of either the two coyotes' flight suits except a collection of shreds and tatters.

But it wasn't any of this that was causing the spectators to draw back in horror. Neither one of the Guilford brothers had so much as a strand of fur remaining on their bodies. They were bald as pair of newborn naked mole-rats; the herbicide with which they had planned to take their revenge upon the mammals of Bunnyburrow had instead become an instrument of karma.

Then Jerry Guilford's gaze fell on Jack LaPeigne. His lips pulled back, exposing his teeth, (several
of which had broken) and his voice became the guttural shriek of an engine trying to run at high speed without sufficient lubrication.

"You!" he screamed, "You dirty, no-good… I'LL BITE YOUR DUMB-BUNNY FACE OFF!"

He dropped his brother and came charging out of the water.

Jack LaPeigne did not run, instead he turned and grabbed a T-baton from the wolverine standing nearest him, taking hold of the weapon as casually as if he were only planning to inspect it.

Then he turned and leaped to the attack.

Jerry saw him and came on with his jaws wide open, aiming for the big bunny's throat. They snapped shut on empty air as La Peigne slid underneath him, aiming for the coyote's midsection with the baton. Jerry instantly doubled over and the next blow sent him sprawling on his face, out cold.

Then Nick Wilde saw the big rabbit start to raise the baton a third time, as if preparing to finish off his opponent once and for all. He opened his mouth to shout something, but La Peigne seemed to realize what he was doing and calmly returned the baton to the wolverine from who he'd taken it.

And then he turned and walked away from the fallen coyote without even so much as a backwards glance.

For what seemed like a long time afterwards, nothing happened. No one wanted to touch Jerry Guilford…or his brother, (who had luckily dropped into only a foot of water, face up.)

It wasn't until a foursome of EMTs in Haz-Mat suits arrived that the two coyotes were finally loaded onto gurneys and wheeled away towards a pair of waiting ambulances.

Only after they had gone was Nick Wilde able to summon up the courage ask it, the question that had been gnawing at him ever since he'd stepped out of the Sheriff's Cruiser.

"Is…Is everyone all right?" he queried in a high, shaky voice. It had been intended as rhetorical, but a voice behind him responded anyway.

"Yes Nick, everyone's okay."

He turned and saw Mac Cannon, once more in the process of stashing his radio.

"Everyone's fine, no injuries, except for the Guilford brother s," the bobcat assured him, and then smiled and held out his paw, "thanks to you; that was some darn fine police work, Wilde."

Nick took the bobcat's paw and shook it, or rather he let Mac shake with him; his arm felt utterly drained of strength.

"Well," he smiled wanly, "That's what we do at the ZP….the ZP…"

The words ended in strangled, choking sound as everything the fox had been holding back finally breached the gates, overwhelming him in a flood tide of emotion. He sank to his knees, shivering and hugging himself.

And then another set of arms was wrapping around him and he heard Judy Hopps murmuring in his ear. "Shhhhh Nick, it's okay; you did good, you did real good."

Nick just took her and held her close to him; he had never needed Judy more than he needed her
right now.

"Ahhh you foxes," He heard her say, "you're so emotional." and held her even tighter.

But neither he nor his partner was aware that not far away, another rabbit was watching… observing them with baleful intent, determined that he wasn't out of this game yet…

…not by a long shot!

Chapter End Notes

Easter Eggs: Reference to a certain well-known coyote and also to a certain Pixar spin-off.
Aftershocks (Part 1.)

Chapter Summary

The day after...

Chapter Notes

Took me a while to finish this one, it required something of a gear-change.

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 5 – Aftershocks
(Pt. 1)

ZNN Headline News

"Good Morning, I'm Fabienne Growly."

"And I'm Peter Moosebridge."

On a screen behind the snow-leopardess and bull-moose, a stylized (and sensationalized) flash logo was on display, a map of Burrow County emblazoned with the words 'Terror Attack in the Heartland' and with another word stamped over the top, declaring 'FAILED!' in bright, red stencil-front.

Giving her viewers a second or two to digest the visual aid Fabienne began to speak, looking directly into the camera as it cut in for a close-up, converting her into the proverbial talking head.

"In our top story that we're following, last evening a chemical attack on the Bunnyburrow Carrot Days Festival was narrowly averted, thanks to the combined efforts of The Burrow County Sheriff's Department, the private security firm, ASM, and a Zootopia Police Officer who was visiting the festival at the time."

The map vanished from the screen and two pictures appeared, a pair of Burrow County Sheriff's Department photographs showing Jerry and Joe Guilford, front and side-view; (the legacy of a
previous arrest, both coyotes still had their fur.)

Meanwhile the snow-leopardess continued with her opening monologue.

"The individuals behind the attempted terror attack were reportedly these two mammals, Jeremy and Joseph Guilford of Bunnyburrow, proprietors of Sky-Yote Crop-Dusting Service."

An image of a crop-dust plane appeared on the screen behind her as Peter Moosebridge took over the narration.

"The Guilford Brothers' plan was to spray the festival grounds with an herbicide known as Harequateline, an extremely toxic and flammable compound that's been banned from all use except in the eradication of illegal crops. For more on that we go to ZNN Science correspondent, Zoe Banahaw."

The image on the screen shifted to a grey-furred Philippine tree-mouse, clad in hard-hat and a day-glow safety-vest. She was standing on top of a 5-gallon plastic carboy and holding microphone with the ZNN logo in her paw. Stacked in the background behind her was a phalanx of more containers, all of them locked in cages and emblazoned with Haz-Mat diamonds.

"I'm currently inside the warehouse of Haz-Mat Expeditors in the Zootopia Meadowlands District." Zoe Banahaw began, "What you see behind me are containers of Harequateline, the herbicide with which the two Guilford brothers planned to spray the Carrot Days Festival. As you can see from the way it's stored, Harequateline is a highly controlled substance, required to be kept locked up at all times, and only allowed to be stored in containers with a capacity of five standard gallons or less.

"Zoe, why is that?" Fabienne Growley wanted to know.

The Filipino mouse shifted her microphone slightly before answering.

"It's a question of not putting all your eggs in one basket, Fabienne; a leak from a five-gallon storage container is naturally much easier to contain than say, a leak from a fifty gallon drum."

"Ah I see," the snow leopardsess nodded, and Peter Moosebridge took over with a question of his own.

"Zoe, what happens if an animal is exposed to Harequatiline? We know that it's a highly toxic substance but what, exactly, are the effects?"

The tree-mouse seemed to look down for a second, "Well, for starters it's a skin irritant, and you certainly don't want to inhale it or get it into your eyes; it's also a known carcinogen. But the biggest issue with Harequateline is that it causes what's known as Traumatic Fur Loss. If you get any on you, your fur falls out and won't grow back for up to 20 months. In the event of a heavy exposure, the follicles can suffer permanent damage and in that instance, the victim's fur won't grow back at all."

"Oh, my God." Peter Moosebridge blew a note of alarm through his nostrils and began to stroke his arm, as if imagining all the hair was gone and never coming back. (Fabienne Growley was chewing her lip.)

"Do we have any idea how the Guilford brothers managed to obtain a supply of Harequatiline?" the snow leopardsess finally asked.

Zoe looked off screen for a second, consulting a teleprompter. At the same time she touched the
"I'm told that last year Sky-Yote Crop Services was contracted by Burrow County for the eradication of some illegal catnip fields in the hills outside of Bunnyburrow. But before they were able to begin the operation, the catnip farmers decided to move their operations elsewhere and the project was cancelled. Why the Guilfords were still in possession of the Harequateline more than a year later remains a mystery at this time."

"Thank you Zoe." Fabienne nodded, sensing that it was time to move on. (That was what you did when one of your reporters told you 'I don't know' in so many words.)

A new image appeared on the screen behind her, a red fox in police blues and mirrored sunglasses. At once, the snow-leopardess' voice became both solemn and respectful.

"The plot to spray the Carrot Days Festival was uncovered largely due to the efforts of this fox, Officer Nicholas P. Wilde of the Zootopia Police Department who was visiting at the time. Some of our viewers will remember him as the animal that helped to foil the Savage Predator Conspiracy two years ago. While some details remain sketchy, apparently Officer Wilde overheard Jerry Guilford's son speaking to his father about the plan via cell phone; Craig Guilford having allegedly been recruited by his family to serve as their spotter. At this hour, he continues to remain at large."

Just then Peter Moosebridge waved a hoof, "Excuse me, Fabienne?" The snow-leopardess nodded and Nick Wilde's image vanished from the screen, replaced by a Burrow County Youth Authority photo of the young coyote together with what appeared to be a high-school yearbook photograph of a young red-fox vixen.

"I've just been informed that an Amber Alert has been issued for Craig Guilford 16, of Burrow County. He is believed to be traveling in the company of this young vixen, Amanda Hill, 15, also of Burrow County. They were last observed in a white Furrd F250 pickup-truck, license plate 510NT63, traveling southbound on Highway 61. Anyone seeing this vehicle or either of its occupants should call 9-1-1 immediately."

"Thank you Peter." Fabienne nodded again before turning back to the camera.

"ZNN has also learned that Nick Wilde was the animal who developed the plan for bringing down the two crop-dusting planes. As we reported last night, this was accomplished through the use of a fireworks display as makeshift anti-aircraft battery."

Behind her the screen came alive again, this time showing a camera-phone video of the mortar rocket igniting Joe Guilford's herbicide contrail. Before the aircraft could go into its gyrations, the footage disappeared, replaced by the image of another uniformed ZPD officer, this one a gray-furred bunny.

"Officer Nicholas Wilde is at this hour making a statement to the Burrow County Sheriff's Department and is currently unavailable for comment. However we were able to catch up with his partner, Officer Judy Hopps, also of the ZPD. Officer Hopps are you there?"

As if in response, Judy's face appeared on the screen, replacing the photograph. She looked surprisingly calm considering all that had happened in the past 24 hours. (Not so surprising for those who knew her; by now, Judy Hopps was well-versed in handling the press.)

"Yes, I'm here, Fabienne." she said, offering a shy smile to the camera.

"Officer Hopps," the snow leopardess asked her, "What is the mood in Bunnyburrow at this hour?"
Judy's smile broadened slightly.

"How are we holding up? Well, we—and I say 'we' as a bunny born and raised here—we've always been a resilient bunch in the Burrow. We're going to get through this."

Now she tensed as if sensing that the snow-leopardess's question was the last softball she was going to get this morning.

Fabienne Growly did not disappoint her, at once becoming quietly serious.

"Officer Hopps, there is one thing that's rather confusing. We're told that your partner, Nick Wilde, discovered the Guilford's plan after overhearing Craig Guilford having a telephone conversation with his father. How, exactly, did he come to be in that particular place at that particular time?"

"How did Nick Wilde figure it out?" Judy asked rhetorically, and then tapped the side of her nose. "Well, you have to remember, he's fox; he can smell fear, and there was a lot of it coming off of that young coyote, so me tells me. And he's also a veteran police officer, don't forget. When you sense that kind of fear and tension in someone, your experience will tell you to investigate."

"I see..." Fabienne started to say, but Judy wasn't finished yet.

"There was one other thing as well; something I don't think has been mentioned yet. Nick also found some flattened cardboard boxes in the back of the Guilford's pickup truck. According to the labeling, they'd been used to hold Harequatiline containers."

At this unexpected revelation, Fabienne and Peter Moosebridge regarded each other for a second. No, this hadn't been mentioned before; it was something no one had even known until just this second, and it fit perfectly with what Zoe Banahaw had been saying only moments ago.

"So that was how he figured out the Guilford Brothers plan?" Moosebridge finally asked.

"Well the boxes were part of it." Judy answered, "But there were some other pieces of the puzzle, too. For starters there had been a rumor going around the Big Dance all that day, saying the Guilford family just had been served with eviction papers."

"A rumor that we now know was true," Fabienne Growley interjected, and then turned to the camera again. "To recap, according to a statement released last evening by the Burrow County Sheriff's Department, 'The apparent motive for the attempted attack was the Guilford family having been served with a foreclosure and eviction notice earlier in the day.'"

"Yes, that's right," Judy nodded and then went on, "and also, when Nick and I arrived at the festival on Friday, we had heard that Jerry Guilford and his family had tried to get in earlier and been turned away; that was when Nick and I first became aware of how unforgiving they were. May I assume that you're familiar the incident that took place at last year's Carrot Days?"

"Yes, we are," Peter Moosebridge said and also turned to face the camera. On the screen behind him, an image of Jerry Guilford appeared beside Judy; it showed the coyote being frog-marched towards a Sheriff's cruiser with a crowd of spectators watching in the background. Set in the upper-right corner of the image was a smaller picture of a beaver in a dark blue blazer.

"Last year, upon learning that the contract mentioned earlier had been cancelled, Jerry Guilford and his brothers made an unannounced visit to the Carrot Days Festival where they assaulted the beaver you see here, County Commissioner Charles 'Chip' Fielding, the animal that had initially hired them for the catnip eradication project."
"Yes, and that's why they were banned from this year's festivities." Judy Hopps pointed out. (Both newscasters nodded in agreement.)

"So," she went on, counting off the points on her fingers, "Nick knew that the Guilfords had committed a felonious assault during last year's Carrot Days Festival and that they had an even bigger motive for revenge this year; he was aware that they were known to hold grudges and also that they had a habit of blaming your entire species if you crossed them. He had seen for himself that one one of their family members was running surveillance on the Big Dance and he knew that that the Guilford family owned a crop-dusting service and that they'd been contracted to spray those catnip fields last year. Last but not least, he knew that they had recently opened at least several containers of Harequateline. When you put all of that together with what he'd overheard Craig Guilford saying to his dad, THAT was how he figured out what the father and uncles were planning."

"How did your partner know what Harequatiline was and what it could do?" It was Fabienne Growley. "If you'd mentioned that name to me only yesterday afternoon, I wouldn't have known what you were talking about."

"He looked it up online." Judy told her, "We always have good wi-fi access at Carrot Days. And as I said before, Nick already knew about the contract to spray those illegal catnip fields." The corners of her mouth lengthened in a wry smirk, "and you don't have to be a chemistry major to know that a box covered with Haz-Mat stickers has something inside of it that isn't very nice."

Fabienne Growley snickered and Peter Moosebridge let out an amused snort, then the snow leopardess asked, "Tell us Judy, where did Officer Wilde get the idea for using that fireworks display to bring down the Guilford brothers' planes?"

For the first time since the interview had begun the grey-furred bunny hesitated; when she spoke again, her manner was noticeably more cautious than before.

"Why did he decide to use those fireworks? Well the Guilfords were already circling the Festival, the Sheriff's Department helicopter was too far away to get there in time, and they were ignoring the order from the Burrow County Airport tower to turn their planes around. It was pretty much our last option, one we intended to use only if all else failed. That was what Nick Wilde said and I agreed with him."

On the screen, her ears turned backwards halfway.

"But the important thing to remember Ms. Growley, Mr. Moosebridge, is that Nick Wilde's plan worked. Thanks to his idea no one at the Festival suffered any kind of exposure to that Harequatiline…except for the Guilford brothers themselves. At the end of the day, that's what matters most."

"Well we can only say 'Amen' to that, Officer Hopps." Fabienne Growley responded with her co-anchor nodding in the background, "Thank you for taking the time to speak to us."

"Always a pleasure, Ms. Growley," Judy answered, her tone and expression indicating that this had actually been a chore, not a pleasure.

And then her picture faded from the screen and the snow-leopardess looked towards the camera.

"We'll return." She said, and they cut to a commercial. When they came back, the first image on the screen was of an oversized rabbit with blue-steel fur. This time Peter Mooosebridge led off.
"Hello again; in the latest development regarding the failed chemical attack against the Bunnyburrow Carrot Days Festival, ZNN has just learned that as part of the plan the Guilford Brothers had been specifically targeting this rabbit—billionaire and entrepreneur Jack La Peigne, who was also in attendance at the time. For more on this we go to live to Whitney Miner in Bunnyburrow.

The picture of big bunny vanished, replaced an image of a ring-tailed cat with a microphone. He was standing outside the Guilford family compound, now surrounded by Sheriff's vehicles and cordoned off with yellow crime-scene tape.

"Good morning Peter, good morning Fabienne" the cacomistle said, hefting his microphone slightly, "The property you see behind me is the former Guilford family warren…which it turns out was also once the childhood home Jack La Peigne. According to several sources, one of Mr. LaPeigne's management companies recently acquired the mortgage to this property and he fursonally served the foreclosure notice on the Guilford family yesterday morning."

At this Fabienne and Peter looked at each other wide eyed; she growled, and he blew another note of surprise.

Meanwhile, the ring-tailed cat went on.

"Several mammals told me Mr. La Peigne had taken issue with the fact that the home where he grew up had been turned into what many here are calling a 'nest of vipers'. It seems that there has been long history between Guilford family and the animals of Burrow County, one that goes back even further than the incident at last year's Carrot Days Festival. They are alleged to have been involved in numerous instances of theft and vandalism throughout the Tri-Burrow area. This video we're about to show was posted briefly on Ewe-tube Saturday."

A small image appeared in one corner of the screen, growing quickly to fill the frame. It was the same video Conor Lewis had filched from Amanda Hill's computer, (although ZNN had not obtained it from him.) This time however, the sound had been muted, replaced by Whitney Miner's voice-over narration.

"The coyote you see here is Craig Guilford, the eldest son of Jerry Guilford."

"The one who was acting as the spotter for his father and uncle?" Peter Moosebridge spoke off-camera.

"Yes, that's right." The ring-tailed cat responded. "Now watch what happens next."

The two anchormammals did, but not without offering some running commentary of the own.

"Wait, what's he doing, is that a Molotov cocktail?"

"Yes, that's what it looks like…G-rowr! Oh my God, look at what…! Who did that stand belong to?"

"Luckyfoot Vineyards, Fabienne," Miner answered, sounding very forbidding, "According to the Burrow County Sheriff's Office, the incident took place this past April. One deputy told me they had long suspected the Guilfords were involved, but up until this video was posted, they had no proof."

"Well, I think at this point, being arrested for burning down a produce stand is the least of the Guilford family's worries," Peter Moosebridge offered wryly.
"Getting back to the subject of Jack La Peigne Whitney," Fabienne Growley queried, "Has he had anything to say regarding the foreclosure on the Guilford property or their attempted retaliation?"

On the display screen the cacomistle rolled his lips.

"Not at this time, Fabienne. So far, he hasn't responded to any of our requests for comment. We also have at least one unconfirmed report that he may have already departed from Bunnyburrow."

Both newscasters nodded sagely at this, as if anything else would have been a surprise.

In fact, Whitney Miner's information was 100% correct; the big bunny had indeed said 'adios' to Burrow County. Judy Hopps knew this; she and her family had seen him off at Sheriff's Department Helipad only an hour before her interview.

To say that the relationship between Jack La Peigne and the Burrow County Sheriff's Office had become somewhat strained would have been akin to suggesting that exposure to Harequateline was somewhat unhealthy for your fur. This was another thing Judy knew first paw; while waiting to make her statement to the Burrow County Sheriff's Department she had been privy to a shouting match, taking place in an office just down the hall from where she'd been sitting. The antagonists had been Burrow County Sheriff Burke Sauer and Jack La Peigne's attorney, an Indian Blackbuck named Simon Gurajee who had flown in by helicopter earlier that morning.

Actually, it had been the boar-pig who'd done all the shouting—and not a little squealing—while Gurajee had remained as imperturbable as a lotus blossom floating on a pond.

"My client has made his statement, Sheriff." He had pointed out succinctly, "And he is a very busy rabbit as I think you can surmise. Unless you intend to arrest him, you have no cause to hold him here any longer."

From the tone of Sauer's response it had been clear that he'd have liked nothing more than to hold the big bunny until Sahara Square froze over. It wasn't going to happen though; the BCSD had nothing even close to probable cause and both he and La Peigne's lawyer had known it.

Furthermore Jack La Peigne was not some regular mammal with a mortgage and car payments; he was a multi, multi billionaire with more than a few friends in high places. In that vein Mr. Gurajee had taken every opportunity to remind Sheriff Sauer that it had been the big rabbit's company, LPN Pharma that had sponsored this year's Carrot Days Festival. While the blackbuck had said nothing that could have been construed as a threat, the implication had been clear; with one phone call Jack La Peigne could pull the rug right out from under next year's festivities. so it might not be wise to antagonize him.

The confrontation had ended in a de facto victory for the big bunny. Sheriff Sauer had gotten in the last word, but had been unable to back it up with any kind of action; when La Peigne boarded his helicopter, no one had tried to prevent him from doing so. (Jack had given one of his 'operatives' the job of driving his car back to Zootopia.)

At the helipad, Judy and her family had gathered to bid him farewell. Nick hadn't been there, but that had been perfectly understandable, he'd had a statement of his own to make to the BCSD and it was going to take up most of the morning. More conspicuous by her absence had been Erin—Jack had heard of her performance at the talent show and had wanted to meet her. No such luck, when Judy had awakened earlier that morning, she's found that her sister had already left the warren, along with Conor Lewis…and none of the other family members seemed to know where they'd gone.
Well, it didn't really matter; by the time he was ready to go, the big rabbit appeared to have forgotten all about Judy's younger sister.

It had been a warm if somewhat slightly subdued farewell; her mother had hugged Jack good-bye and both Stu and Junior had shaken his paw. Judy had hugged him too, but there'd been a cloud hanging over the helipad. Ironically it had been Jack himself who'd best expressed it.

"I wish we could be parting company under happier circumstances." He'd said.

Now Judy found herself lounging on the Burrow County Courthouse steps, waiting for Nick to finish up next door.

This was familiar territory to Judy Hopps; Courthouse Square had been a favored gathering place for the local high-school crowd since even before she was born. (It was here, in fact, that her parents had first met.)

Chief Bogo had been none-too-happy with the news that she and Nick would be remaining in the Burrow for an extra day, but given the circumstances, he'd been in no position to argue, much less berate them for their delayed departure. Stopping the Guilford Brothers chemical attack had been the Nick Wilde's biggest coup since the Savage Predator Crisis, never mind that it had taken place 200 miles outside of the ZPD's jurisdiction. Even Bogo wasn't about to discipline one of his officers for succeeding.

A sound caught Judy's ears just then, and she felt them rise up to full attention. On the steps below her, that ringtailed-cat ZNN-reporter had just appeared with a llama following close behind, the latter with his cap turned backwards and a TV camera perched on his shoulder. Judy recognized at once what was happening, a mammal-on-the-street interview was about to take place.

And she wasn't the only one who'd seen it coming; already a small crowd of locals had begun to gather around the cacomistle, each of them hoping for their fifteen minutes of fame. The sight brought Judy back to the interview she'd had earlier with Fabienne Growly and Peter Moosebridge.

She hadn't liked the idea of talking to ZNN; ever since the disastrous presser she'd given following Mayor Lionheart's arrest Judy Hopps had remained wary of the media. Nonetheless, she'd known that there was no getting out of this one, not in the wake of something as serious as an attempted terror attack on the Carrot Days Festival.

In a case like that, best thing to do was just go ahead and get it out of the way

Since that first press conference however, Judy had picked up a neat trick for minimizing media coverage if not forestalling it altogether; all you had to do was offer an exclusive interview to any single news organization and the rest of them would have no choice but to lay off. That, Judy knew, was why she wasn't being pestered by reporters right now; anyone who tried would have to take it up with ZNN, (and their attorneys.)

That was another reason she had agreed to speak to Fabienne Growley and her co-anchor…and also to try and soften the impact for Nick when his turn to face down the press corps finally came. (It was the least she could do.)

Now she could hear the ringtailed-cat going into his prologue. The subject of his inquiry was Jack La Peigne, how did the mammals of Bunnyburrow feel about him having fursonally served the Guilford family with that foreclosure notice? (…and stirring them to take their revenge, although he never actually said so.)
The reaction he got was decidedly mixed.

Lucy Flagg, a mule deer whose family farmed apples was foursquare behind La Peigne's actions.

"It was high time somebody did something about those coyotes. Do you know how many times they stole apples from our orchards? Took a chainsaw to some our trees once, too; if the County wasn't going to do anything, then dangit let someone else take a swing."

Chad Harrington, a tan rabbit took it even further. (No surprise, he was the owner of Luckyfoot Vineyards.)

"Supposing you found out a gang of scalawags had turned the home where YOU grew up into thieves' market, what then? Jack La Peigne only did what any rabbit in the Burrow would have done if they'd been able to get their paws on that mortgage. If he was here right now, I'd be the first one to shake his paw."

But Levon Chatterton (Dangit how had Judy missed him,) took a somewhat different view.

"Look, if I want to get rid of a hornets' nest, I don't go whacking on it with shovel and getting 'em all stirred up. First thing I do is make sure they're all contained, so the little devils can't cause no harm when I go to take 'em down."

Another rabbit, whose face Judy recognized but whose name she couldn't quite recall agreed with the Douglas Squirrel…but only up to a point.

"Well yeah, what Levon says is true, but whose job was it to keep things in line after them papers was served, Jack La Peigne or the Sheriff's Department? If Burrow County Bank and Trust had been the ones to serve notice on the Guilford property would anyone have expected THEM to keep watch on those coyotes, all by themselves? Burke Sauer's got hisself a little explaining to do."

That pretty much summed it up, while most of the animals questioned sided with Jack La Peigne, a good many others thought his actions had been reckless at best, irresponsible at worst. On the other paw, almost nobody had a good word for the Burrow County Sheriff's Department, or especially Sheriff Sauer.

"If Burke wasn't planning not to run for re-election, you BETTER believe he'd have kept an eye on those Guilfords," one antelope had said, summing up the prevailing opinion.

Judy herself thought that while Jack LaPeigne should have gone further than simply notifying the Sheriff's Department of the foreclosure and eviction, he had at least done what was required of him. The BCSD, on the other paw—the higher ups, not the feet on the ground like Mac Cannon—had NOT fulfilled their duty. If Chief Bogo had been running things here in Burrow Country, he'd have had the Guilford family under close watch the minute he'd heard about that eviction notice. She wondered for a moment, if that pronghorn didn't have a point about Burke Sauer.

But then she felt her ears prick up again, twenty feet below her, the ring-tailed cat reporter had changed subjects…and this time the verdict was unanimous.

"All I can say is, thank heaven for Nick Wilde, I don't know how things would have ended if it hadn't been for him."

"I was one of the EMTs who took those coyotes away. Just the thought of that what could have happened if that spray had hit the crowd is enough to give me nightmares…and that's what would have happened if it hadn't been for that fox."
"I was there earlier when that trick with the fire-hose went south; I thought then that Nick Wilde should have slunk back home to Zootopia and stayed there. It just goes to show how wrong you can be about someone."

"Thank you Officer Wilde, thank you for keeping my babies safe."

Listening to this, Judy could feel her eyes getting misty. She had never been prouder of Nick than she was right now. (Of course this meant he was going to be absolutely insufferable for the next two weeks, but right now she wouldn't want him any other way.)

In fact, although Judy had no way of knowing it she could not have been more mistaken about the red fox's attitude. At that moment, Nick had just completed making his statement to the Burrow's County Sheriff's Department and was rising from his chair while being offered a paw by Lieutenant Cal Hornaday.

"Officer Wilde, I have something to confess," the bison told him, "It was me who told Mac Cannon your idea wasn't happening…and I've never been so happy to have one of my deputies disobey me."

Nick took the paw, but warily.

"Mac isn't going to be in any trouble for that, I hope."

At this, the Lieutenant laughed, but knowingly. Like Nick, he knew that even if you didn't want to discipline someone for violating procedure, sometimes you still might have to.

"Well maybe…except that radio of his has been giving us a lot of headaches lately. As I understand it, Mac never heard a word I said." He looked directly into the red-fox's eyes. "You couldn't hear me either, am I right?"

For few seconds only, Nick became his old, sly self.

"Oh, that was YOU Lieutenant?" he queried innocently, "I thought it was just some static feedback."

"Uh huh, there it is." The buffalo smiled and shrugged, but then Nick felt that uneasiness again, descending like a curtain of dry-ice vapor.

His plan had succeeded, it shouldn't have worked but it had; by some crazy, cockamamie twist of fate, the Guilford brothers' attack had been stopped.

But Nick's plan had succeeded only through sheer, dumb, luck…and he knew it. (Igniting the Harequataline before it could do any damage; he'd never even considered that possibility.) He was no hero, just a fox who'd drawn four aces and a wild card on the first deal. It made him feel like a fake, as if he was getting credit for something that had just fallen into his lap.

Judy Hopps would have been flabbergasted if she could see him now. Usually whenever Nick Wilde owned it, he was a one-fox parade. So what was different this time; was his failure with the fire-hose still eating at him? No, that wasn't it; what was the issue?

When he exited the Lieutenant's office, Nick was surprised to see Finnick waiting for him, looking grumpy as ever. He too had been required to stay over an extra day in order to make a statement…but he hadn't had nearly as much to tell the Sheriff's Department as the red fox, so what was he still doing here?
Before Nick could ask him, another voice called from over on his left.

"Hey there, Nick Wilde."

Nick turned to see Mac Cannon approaching. Normally about as upbeat as a Grizzly bear awakened prematurely from hibernation, this morning the bobcat was all smiles. Far from facing any disciplinary action, the fox suspected that Mac might actually be looking at a promotion for having given the final okay to setting off those fireworks; he certainly seemed to be acting like it.

"You all done in there?" he asked, pointing over Nick's shoulder towards the Lieutenant's office.

"Pretty much...for now anyway." Nick answered cautiously; after two years with the ZPD he knew all too well that just when you thought your superiors were done with you, a door would open and you'd be asked to hold up 'for just a minute'...a minute that might turn into hours.

Mac knew it too and wisely chose to move on to a different subject.

"You should have seen that circus over at the courthouse just now." he said, and went on to tell the story of what had happened at Jerry Guilford's arraignment. (Brother Joe's turn would have to wait; he was still in the ICU, and while he was expected to make a full recovery—except for his fur—for the moment, he couldn't be moved.)

At first the coyote had said nothing, merely listened impassively as the charges were read out against him—until the clerk had said the 'T' word. That had had an effect on Jerry Guilford not unlike pitching a chunk of sodium into a swimming pool; he had gone completely ballistic.

"Cal ME a terrorist, you...!" he'd screamed, and then proceeded to tell the court exactly what it could do with that terrorism charge. Judge Arthur Brody, a marmot, had promptly banged his gavel and ordered Jerry to sit down again. This, of course, had impelled the coyote to direct his wrath straight towards the bench. "You ain't chargin' me as no terrorist, whistle-pig!" he'd snarled, using the derisive term for Judge Brody's species.

In the exchange that followed, the judge had banged his gavel so hard the handle had broken, and the coyote had nearly bitten his court appointed attorney. Finally Judge Brody had ordered Jerry Guilford removed from the courtroom and he'd been dragged out screaming threats every step of the way.

"How did he look?" Nick asked, with a small shudder, remembering the thing he'd seen coming out of the pond last night. "Physically, I mean."

"Couldn't really tell," the bobcat shrugged, "He had his face and paws all done up in bandages."

"Did he ever enter a plea?" The red fox asked, crossing his fingers; this was an item that would impact him directly.

"Nope never did." Mac answered, offering him a sympathetic look. He knew as well as Nick Wilde did that when a defendant refuses to plead to the charges against him, the court automatically enters it as 'Not Guilty'. Nick would have to return one day to face the coyote—and his attorney—from the witness stand. It was not a prospect that he relished.

"Ahhh, that won't last Nick," A deep voice spoke up from beside the red fox, startling him; he hadn't even realized Finnick was still there. "That coyote'd have to be an idiot to think he's got a chance of walking."

"That's the trouble...Finnick, right?" Mac Cannon said to him, "Jerry Guilford isn't stupid, he's
crazy; he's the kind who'd rather spend the rest of his life in solitary than admit he was wrong about
something."

"Huh, then maybe he'll plead insanity." The desert fox offered, undaunted by the rebuke.

"He can try, but the court will never go for it." Nick said, and then looked at Mac Cannon, "At
least they wouldn't back in Zootopia."

"Not here either, "the bobcat said. "Mind you, I wouldn't be all that surprised if Jerry
Guilford does try to cop an insanity plea. He got hurt in a plane crash some years back; folks say
that's when his attitude started to change." He shook his head in disgust, "Poor Art Brody though,
he's not getting out of this in one piece either."

"What do you mean?" Nick and Finnick asked him, simultaneously.

Mac Cannon let out a short, angry hiss.

"He's the judge who signed off on that court order saying the County couldn't repossess the
Harequateline, not until after we compensated Jerry Guilford for the expense of modifying his
planes to carry it. When the press gets hold of that story, I wouldn't want to be in Art's robes." He
shook his head again, this time looking almost sorrowful. "What a waste; I think that's about the
only bad decision he ever passed down. And now he can kiss the bench good-bye because of it."

Sensing an awkward silence approaching, Nick moved swiftly to head it off.

"Listen, speaking of courtrooms I was supposed to go meet Judy Hopps out in front of the County
Courthouse as soon as I was done making my statement. Did you see her over there just now?"

Mac Cannon's muzzle pinched together and he let out a sound like a whirring drone.

"Meeeee-yeah, I saw her; she was sitting on the courthouse steps just now. Only I'd stay away from
there if I were you, Nick. There's a reporter holding interviews in the street out front. And you
know what'll happen if HE spots you."

Nick groaned and felt his tail slump; he knew all right. Unlike Judy, he hadn't offered anyone
exclusive access. If he went to go meet his partner now he wouldn't get within a hundred feet of her
before he found himself looking down the barrel of a hundred-zillion microphones.

And that, perhaps, was just as well, because there was something else he needed to do, and now
there was no excuse to put it off any longer.

He looked at Finnick.

"You got your van around here anywhere?"

"Yeah, it's out back." The fennec-fox answered, poking a thumb towards the rear of the Sheriff's
Office. He seemed to know what Nick had in mind.

Nick nodded and turned to Mac Cannon "Any reporters back there, do you know?"

"Couldn't get back there if they wanted to; it's restricted." The bobcat answered. "If you want to
avoid the press, then that's the way to go.

"I do," Nick told him and looked at the desert fox again.

"Care to give an old buddy a ride?" he asked.
"Okay, but you owe me," Finnick said, as if the red fox—and also a certain young silver fox—didn't already owe him, big time.
All foxes have their secrets; when you're the animal other species tend to write off as shifty and untrustworthy, it comes with the territory. Why bother sharing your story with anyone if they're not going to believe it anyway? Nope, best to keep some things to yourself.

Nick Wilde certainly understood this. Look what happened when he'd tried to offer Judy some support after Renato Manchas mysteriously vanished from the light-pole where she'd shackled him. Chief Bogo had cut Nick off at the pass before he could utter even a single word, "You think I'm going to believe a fox?"

It was hardly the first time Nick had heard something to that effect…or the last. He had long ago lost count of the number of times he'd taken the witness stand against a suspect, only to have the defense counsel try to paint him as a flaming perjurer, courtesy of his species. (THAT was why hearing Jerry Guilford had entered a plea of Not Guilty hit him like an ice-bucket test.)

He glanced over at Finnick, seated behind the steering wheel and keeping his eyes on the road. Maybe so but Nick could tell that his former partner's mind was elsewhere, most likely already waiting at their destination.

But then Nick felt the corners of his mouth angling downward. There were secrets even now that he had never shared with the fennec fox—and more than likely some that Finnick had never shared with him. In fact there were a few things Nick knew about his former partner, that even the desert fox himself didn't know—and he strongly suspected that this was something else that cut both ways.

They had made it out of the Sheriff's Department yard without being spotted by the press…or,
more importantly, by Judy Hopps. (Prudently, Nick Wilde had concealed himself in the back of the van until they were well clear of Courthouse Square.)

He hadn't liked making an end run around her like that, but as the red fox saw it, he'd had little choice. He had given his word to another of his species—among foxes that was almost a sacred trust—and the only way he could keep that word was to keep his partner Judy in the dark.

But what about his own secrets, the fox now wondered to himself. There was no rule saying he had to keep THEM to himself. More and more Nick Wilde was coming to understand that he could not; he must not make the same mistake with Judy that he'd made with Robyn.

These thoughts were interrupted by a low, rumbling growl.

"There they are." Finnick was pointing through the van's windshield at the roadside up ahead.

They? There should have been only one animal waiting for them. But when he looked at where the desert fox was indicating, he saw the Hopps Family Farm's produce stand. It was empty now—everything not nailed down had been moved to the Festival Grounds for Carrot Days and none of it would be back until Wednesday at the earliest. The stand was not unoccupied however. Nick could also see a pair of young mammals, seated on stools beneath a Buckeye tree out front.

The first was Conor Lewis, the kid he was looking for, but the other one…Hmmm, so this was where Erin Hopps had gotten to. Well…the red fox supposed he shouldn't be surprised; kids will be kids after all. Likewise, he wasn't surprised that the young silver fox had brought along his 12-string. What WAS unexpected was that the kid wasn't even trying to play it; instead the instrument was sitting idle on his lap.

Then Erin tapped him on the arm and Nick saw the two of them get quickly to their feet.

Finnick meanwhile, had pulled up fast beside the produce stand, killed the engine, and now he was kicking the door open with both feet.

Even before they hit the ground, he was all over Conor Lewis.

"I just hope you appreciate this, boy." He said, leveling a finger at the younger fox, "I don't enjoy having to lie through my fangs to the cops like that—just to cover your sorry tail."

Conor looked at him for second and then reached up to make a minor adjustment on his cap. If Nick Wilde had known him better, he would have recognized it as a sign of guilt. Finnick recognized it of course, and nodded as if to say, 'Dang Straight!'

"I do appreciate it DF," the young fox told him, "and if you get hauled in for it, I'll give it up and tell the Sheriff everything that happened and why you covered for me."

His partner wasn't placated; he whipped off his sun-shades revealing a pair of smoldering brown eyes

"Yeah, yeah…that and two bucks will get me a pawpsicle, kid; the cops aren't gonna care why I lied to 'em, only that I did it…"

"Finnick, this isn't helping." Nick said, moving quickly between him and Conor. The little fox promptly silenced himself, but his crossed arms and the even more tightly crossed expression on his face meant that he was barely holding it in check.

"Okay," Nick said, focusing on Conor for the moment, "No one knows you were involved, kid. I
kept your name out of it." He glanced sideways at Finnick who nodded sullenly, and then shifted his gaze to Erin Hopps, arching an eyebrow for emphasis.

She immediately drew an invisible 'X' across her chest.

"I already promised, I won't say anything about what Conor did either," she told him—but then to the young silver fox she said, "But WHY...why do you want to keep this a secret? You didn't do anything wrong, you're a hero. If it hadn't been for you, Nick never would have figured out that the Guilford brothers were planning to spray-bomb the Carrot Days Festival."

"She's right kid," the red-fox nodded, "and if you hadn't hustled Jerry Guilford into hitting us from the North Side, we'd never had been able to stop him and his brother. You are a hero, make no mistake about it. And maybe no one else knows what you did...but I know, and I'm never going to forget it."

He held out a paw; Conor took it, but warily.

"Okay, so why don't you want anyone else to know about it?" Finnick was practically seething with confusion.

Conor just shook his head.

"If I told you that DF, I might as well go marching into the Sheriff's office and tell them everything. Sorry, but I can't."

Finnick and Nick both seemed to accept this, (only grudgingly in the fennec-fox's case.) Erin Hopps was another matter, she wasn't the same species as Conor and so she wasn't bound by any vulpine code of honor or whatever.

"What do you think is going to happen if you tell, dumb fox," the young bunny-doe demanded, staring as if he'd just won a lottery jackpot and refused to accept it, "you think the Sheriff's going to arrest you or something?"

"It's not the Sheriff I'm worried about." The young fox told her, deadpan.

"Then WHO?" she cried waving her arms in frustration. She was becoming almost as exasperated as Finnick had been.

Conor only clenched his jaw, as if to emphasize that this was all she was going to get out of him.

Maybe she couldn't...but Nick Wilde was another story

"Is it...Jack La Peigne?" He asked the young fox gently.

Conor said nothing to this, but his sharp intake of breath told Nick that he had hit the bullseye, dead center. He pointed away to the northwest,

"He already left, kid...went back to Zootopia; flew out of here maybe an hour ago on that helicopter of his." He looked over at Finnick for confirmation; the desert fox had mentioned it in passing on their way here.

"Yeah, I heard some deputies talking about it," he nodded, "Didn't sound too unhappy about that bunny being outta here either."

For a long moment, Conor looked from one face to the other. When he spoke again, his delivery
was slow and deliberate; every word enunciated, as if he wanted to make absolutely certain that his message would be understood.

"You don't want to know about that guy Nick," he said, and then turned his attention to Erin Hopps, "and your sister needs to stay the heck away from him...as far away as she can get. That big jerk is poison kiddo, a gazillion times worse than that Harequateline stuff."

At once, the insides of Erin Hopps ears flushed crimson, and Nick could swear that he saw her neck fur standing up.

"How dare you, Conor Lewis; Jack La Peigne saved Judy's life." She looked over Nick, "and his life too."

The young silver fox was singularly unimpressed

"Yeah...I heard about that. After your uncle went savage, La Peigne held him off until they could get a trank dart into him, right?" he laced his arms and lifted an eyebrow, "Ain't it funny how Unk Whatever just happened to lose it right after Jerk Pine-eye showed up at the Carrot Days Festival?"

That brought Nick Wilde into the argument.

"Okay kid, now you're going too far."

Conor turned on him with amber eyes blazing

"No, now YOU understand why I'm not gonna say anything more about him. If you're gonna cut me off at the knees for only giving you that much, you sure as heck won't listen to the rest of it."

Nick could have kicked him himself clear across the carrot-field. The oldest fox trap in the catalogue, and he'd walked right into it.

"The rest of what, Conor?" It was Erin Hopps, "You haven't said anything yet."

"That's right, and I'm not going to," the young fox answered defiantly, and then abruptly he seemed to soften and shifted his gaze to Finnick. "It's like you told me once DF, there's always a few things you're better off not knowing."

"How about letting us decide that, kid?" Nick Wilde told him, getting down on one knee, the better to make eye contact.

"Ahhh, someday maybe big guy, but not yet," Conor was shaking his head again. "I'm sorry, but I probably said too much already."

For a long moment, they just looked at each other. Nick was seething with frustration—but not anger. The kid wanted to open up to him, you could see it in his eyes; he honestly wished he could say more. But now, for the first time, the red fox also realized that Conor didn't hate Jack La Peigne so much as he was afraid of him...a deep, almost mortal dread that made his own neck hair want to rise up in spikes. It was more than a little unsettling: before now he'd thought Conor Lewis was about the gutsiest young fox he'd ever met. What was it about Jack La Peigne that frightened him so much?

Well, Nick knew wasn't going to find that out right now; another thing every fox has is a place to go where you're not going to get any more out of him. Nick had been there plenty of times himself, back in his street-hustling days, and he could see that Conor was 'in the zone' himself right now.
He stood up again.

"Okay kid, but if the time ever comes when feel you can talk about…"

"Hey wait a minute, it's NOT okay." Erin Hopps had locked eyes with the young silver-fox, her voice like a scythe through a flower-bed. "You can't just trash-talk Jack La Peigne like that and then not tell us why."

Conor's ears went flat against his neck.

"Oh yeah, whaddaya gonna do if I don't, Snowdrop?"

"All right that's enough, both of you." Finnick had decided it was time to intervene; he started with Erin, "You already forgotten what Conor did on Saturday, giving you his spot at the talent show, getting your guitar fixed after he stopped you from breakin' it?"

"No, I haven't forgotten that!" the young bunny protested, but there was an undercurrent of contrition beneath her words.

"Oh, is that so?" the desert fox demanded, lifting both an eyebrow brow and the right side of his upper lip, "Then you ain't forgetful, you're just ungrateful, is that it?"

"Uh, no." Erin's gaze had dropped to ground; now she was 100% repentant.

"All right then," Finnick nodded, satisfied, and then shifted his gaze to his partner. "As for you boy…"

"Yeah, I know," the young fox answered, also looking at the ground. "I'm sorry Erin that was out of line. Please forgive me." It was one thing to call her Snowdrop when they were alone, but quite another thing to do it in public.

"I'll think about it," she said, folding her arms and thumping her foot…but Nick could see that she was forcing herself not to smile. Ahhh, bunny-girls.

"But you still won't say anything about what Conor did last night?" He prompted.

Erin gave him a look that was half weary, and half irritated, "No, I won't Nick; a promise is a promise." She swiveled an angry gaze on the silver fox, "But YOU better stop talking that way about Jack La Peigne, Mister!"

Nick Wilde nearly face-pawlmmed himself. Just when he'd thought the situation was defused…

Conor's features darkened like a thunderhead, no mean feat for a fox with a black facial-fur…but then his eyes crinkled and a long, sly, foxy grin zipped open along the length of his muzzle.

"Isn't he a little old for you, kid?" he queried, looking just oh-so-innocent.

"Hey!" Erin cried, and Conor pounced like a fox-cub on a rug-toy.

"Your sister's not gonna like it kiddo, SHE saw him first y'know." He was waving an admonishing finger.

The young bunny bunched her fists, and Nick Wilde was amazed; he had never seen a rabbit thump with both feet at once. How the heck was she managing to keep from falling over?

"Oooo, you creep…"
"Okay that's..." Finnick started to say, before his words dissolved in a fit of bass-drum guffaws.

Erin, meanwhile had thrust a finger under the young fox's chin, as if preparing to drive it straight through his skull like a dagger.

"One more word out of you and you're toast, silver-boy."

Nick realized then that Conor's barb had sunk deep; Erin really did have a crush on the big bunny, nothing serious to be sure, but there it was.

And that was when he noticed something else; by rights, Conor Lewis should have been wearing a look of smug insouciance. Instead he appeared almost...bitter.

"All right kid, let's see how you like a shot of your own medicine," the red fox thought to himself, and then folded HIS arms and smirked.

"Jealous much?" he said and now it was Conor's turn to looked like he wanted to rip someone's lungs out.

"Wha...? Jealous of Jack La Peigne, are you kidding me or something? I HATE that jerk."

"Why's that fox?" Erin Hopps had picked up on the thread and was running with it, "Is it because he's my species and you're not?" She was almost purring.

But Conor only let out a yip of harsh laughter. "Maybe he's your species, Erin...but he sure as heck ain't your age. I got NO reason to be jealous of that guy, regardless of anything else."

Without warning, he wheeled on Nick Wilde...and in so doing turned the tables on him, "No such luck for you though, huh big guy?"

Nick felt his ears folding swiftly backwards. He knew where this was going, and ohhh no, it wasn't!

"Hey watch your mouth kid. Judy's my partner and my friend, that's all."

Conor waved a paw is if batting away a mosquito, "Yeah, riiight; keep telling yourself that, big guy."

Nick's ears went back even further and his index finger came out.

"Now you listen to me, you snotty little..."

It was as far as he got before Erin butted in.

"Feh, as IF my sister would ever have a thing for...!"

"For who, Nick...or Jerkface La Pinhead?"

"You are this close to getting my foot in your...!"

Finnick said nothing to any of this; for the moment he was occupied with rolling on the ground and laughing his tail off.

At that moment, the subject of their discussion was sitting in his office, having left instructions with his assistant that he was not to be disturbed. "I don't care if the building's collapsing, no interruptions, period, not even if it's Seth Whitepaugh," Jack had said to Polly Walters, before
shooing her out the door.

Now, he leaned back in his chair, watching the replay on a flat-screen monitor, mounted on the opposite wall; footage from a recent police surveillance video that he wasn't supposed to have in his possession.

He watched Nick and Judy in silence for a moment, and then reached over and opened a desk drawer.

Everyone has an exercise that helps them to jump-start their thought process; Basil of Baker Street, the Great Mouse detective had liked to play the violin. Jack la Peigne's method wasn't nearly as elegant, but it worked and that was what mattered. His version of a thinking cap was to toss an old squash-ball in the air.

For a second or two, he studied the object, dark-grey in color, fading rapidly to a lighter hue, with most of the rubber surface having gone rough to the point of being almost fuzzy. It was the first—and only—squash ball that he'd ever used for this exercise; he couldn't remember when or how he'd acquired it. After weighing it in his paw for a second, he tossed it upwards and then snatched it out of the air.

The mixed reviews that Jack was getting from the mammals of his home town didn't bother him all that much. There were animals right here in the city whose opinions of him were more far more negative than what anyone in Bunnyburrow might be thinking right now…and that was just Zootopia. Mentioning the name of Jack LaPeigne in certain Zoo York City watering holes was a good way to find yourself thrown out by the seat of your pants.

He tossed the ball upwards again, snatching it a second time.

No, if you really wanted to know what was gnawing at him, it was that…that fox. Almost a pariah as of yesterday morning, Nick Wilde had somehow magically morphed into the media's darling—and also Bunnyburrow. Even the animals who were grateful to Jack for having rid them of the Guilford family were putting him one row behind the fox, the heroic fox that had stopped a terror attack and saved them all.

Oh, puh-LEEZE!

The ball went up and he snatched it again.

Somehow the press had completely forgotten Nick Wilde's earlier faux-pas, when he'd tried to turn that firehose on Judy's uncle after he went savage—and ended up hamstrung and helpless along with her, after which it had been Jack who'd saved them both. And how much attention was that story getting? The only mention of it on ZNN hadn't even come from a reporter; an otter had brought it up during a mammal-on-the-street interview, and even he hadn't gone into any detail…much less mentioned the big bunny's part in it.

Toss the ball, grab it, repeat. Blankety-blank press; Jack La Peigne didn't like having his thunder stolen—by anyone, much less a fox, and especially not THAT fox.

One thing he knew for certain was that he had been absolutely right to get out of Bunnyburrow as soon as he was done making his statement to the Sheriff's office. Normally the big bunny might have found it a humiliating experience, forced to leave the field while the ball was still in play. Not this time; Jack had refused to think of it as a retreat, but rather as a strategic withdrawal. There was nothing he could have done to salvage his reputation vis-à-vis Nick Wilde had he chosen to remain in Bunnyburrow, (with one bunny in particular.) No, the smartest and wisest course of action, the
only course really, had been to cut his losses and head back to Zootopia. Only here, could he properly assess the situation, and formulate a plan of attack.

Besides, as Simon Gurajee had so curtly informed that sorry excuse for a redneck Sheriff, Burke Sauer, Jack La Peigne WAS a busy rabbit. Already he had enough unattended business to fill two in-boxes.

Simon Gurajee…Polly Walters had dispatched him to Bunnyburrow the second she'd heard about the attempted chemical attack. ("Never mind driving, take the helicopter." She'd insisted.) Gah, what would he do without that opossum? She was definitely getting something extra in her paycheck this month.

Chip Fielding meanwhile had been keeping his distance from Jack ever since the attempted spray-bombing. Curiously, the big bunny didn't hold that against him, nor was he in any way surprised by the move. In fact he had to admire the way the beaver had handled himself when the press had come to call. "Why didn't we take back that Harequatiline when we had the chance? As a matter of fact we tried, but we were stopped by a court order. Yes that's right. Well, if it had been up to me…"

Of course it HAD been up to Fielding, or much of it had been anyway, but somehow he'd managed to avoid having that factoid pointed out. If the beaver somehow managed to emerge from this unscathed—a possibility but by no means a certainty —Jack might still have to consider backing him in his bid to become the next Sheriff of Burrow County, (discreetly of course.)

But never mind that for now, the big bunny hadn't brought out his 'thinking ball' for Chip Fielding's benefit. Our subject for today was Nick Wilde; how should he deal with that fox?

The ball's movements became shorter and more rapid; La Peigne was no longer tossing it up and snatching it, but simply juggling it up and down in his paw, a sign that he was drawing some conclusions in his mind.

First, there would be no such thing as running a full-court press with that video, not yet, not while Nick Wilde's star was still on the rise; that could only backfire in the worst sort of way. Look what had happened when Jack had tried to slip some Nighthowler to the red fox; things had gone every which way but the one he'd expected. "That's what happens when you act on impulse," Seth Whitepaugh would have reminded him had he been here.

And speaking of how...how about what had happened with Jerry Guilford? Though the big bunny would never admit it publicly, privately he had to concede that he'd botched it; he should have considered the possibility that the coyote would strike back at a time and place of his own choosing. What was it Napolion had said? The worst mistake a commander can make is to assume that his opponent will act in a certain way. Jack La Peigne had made that assumption and now Nick Wilde was occupying the place of honor that only 24 hours ago had rightfully belonged only to him.

He looked over at the wall again.

The video playing on the flat-screen, there was his weapon, but as the Wicked Witch said to Dorothy, "These things must be done dehhh-licately." Jack couldn't simply throw it out there for all to see, especially not the day after Wilde had foiled the Carrot Days herbicide attack, it would be recognized immediately for the spiteful move that it was.

And that wasn't going to happen, he would not repeat his mistakes from the day before; this time he would lay his plans carefully and move discreetly. And in fact, the big bunny wasn't completely
incapable of taking any immediate action; he could always lay the groundwork for later.

Nor would he need to keep that video completely under wraps, even at this early stage he could make known the fact of its existence in certain unsavory quarters. That would be a good first step, but word of mouth only; there would be no letting anyone else actually view the footage…yet. Okay, that was a start, now what else?

Next, the big bunny decided, he should gather more ammunition. That surveillance camera footage was good, but was there any more dirt out there? Was what he was seeing on the flat screen right now the only indiscretion Nick Wilde had ever committed with Judy Hopps? Jack would find out soon enough. In fact, come to think of it, what were the odds someone had shot a video of that fox’s epic fail with the fire hose? Probably better than even, who didn’t have a camera phone these days? If that video was out there, his mammals would find it; he’d have Whitepaugh put someone on it right away. Meanwhile, they would need to find a patsy, someone to take the fall when the vid hit the fan, so to speak. That shouldn't be any kind of a problem; every police precinct has its gossip-monger.

"Most of them have more than one, The big bunny snickered, wryly to himself, "Hrmph, some stations houses are staffed entirely by blabbermouths."

He looked at the flat-screen display once more and spoke aloud.

"Cease playback."

The image of Nick Wilde about to kiss Judy Hopps vanished from the screen—and then the screen vanished into the wall. The big bunny leaned even further back in his seat, lacing his finger behind his head and smiling up at the ceiling. Actually his expression was more of leer; a look that (nearly) all who served the big bunny came swiftly to dread after seeing it for the first time.

He began tossing the squash ball and snatching it again.

"Enjoy it while you can, Wilde," he said to the absent Nick, "You're about to find out what Claudia Nizhang already knows, that there's no more fickle mistress than public opinion. The mammals of Bunnyburrow may love you now, but once the novelty wears off, that's when you're at your most vulnerable. Believe me, I know. The higher you climb the more animals there are who will want to see you laid low. For the moment you're a hero to some—heck, maybe even to most—but you're still a fox; there will always be at least a few animals out there that will never see past your species." He flashed that leer again, "That's another thing I know."

The leer became a frown when something else occurred to Jack La Peigne. Dealing with Nick Wilde could not in any way, shape, or form be permitted to become his top priority; that space was reserved exclusively for Operation Fire Triangle…and if it came down to a choice between that and prying Judy Hopps away from the fox, then so be it, he would let her go. He would do so with deep and infinite regret, but he would make that choice without any hesitation.

He snatched the squash ball one final time, and slipped it back into his desk. Then he sat up in his chair and spoke aloud once more.

"Intercom, Polly Walters. Ms. Walters, I'm ready for my first appointment."
Easter Eggs: A very obvious mention of one of Disney's 'other' mice--masking a much more subtle reference to a character from Walt Disney Comics and Stories.
Chapter Summary

Nick faces his mortal fear..(or that's what it feels like anyway.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 5 –Aftershocks
(Continued…Pt. 3)

"There they are."

Finnick pointed through the windshield and Nick Wilde squinted through a pair of narrowed eyes. Yep…there they were, Judy Hopps, with Conor Lewis leading the way. As soon as she spotted the van she waved—but cautiously; she understood that her partner was trying not to draw attention.

Surprisingly enough, Conor's insistence on keeping his name out of everything had yielded a dividend; he could come and go as he pleased without being pestered by the press—and so Nick had press-ganged…err, recruited the young silver fox to serve as their messenger and go-between.

Nick knew he'd have to talk to the media eventually, but not yet, not at least until after he saw Judy.

Yeah, riight…while it certainly made good sense to see her before doing anything else, deep down the red fox knew that he was stalling. Like every other member of his species, he'd always been chary of reporters, and since joining the ZPD, his natural-born caution had spiked by a factor of 3. (In this, he was hardly alone. As crime writer Joseph Wombat once noted, "Cops in general trust the press about as much as they trust politicians, judges, lawyers, psychiatrists and the Red Army.")

It was for this reason that Nick had made Finnick park his van around the corner from Courthouse Square and sent Conor to go and fetch his partner. (Although Erin might have seemed the more obvious choice, Judy would almost certainly have some questions for her sister, and Nick wanted to postpone the exchange until after they were inside the vehicle together.)

Sure enough, when the van's right-side cargo door slithered open, Judy took one look inside and then her ears shot skyward and her nose began twitching like a seismograph. "Erin, where have you
been? You missed Jack La Peigne, he wanted to meet you before he left."

This prompted nervous glances in Conor's direction from both Finnick and Nick.

The bickering that had erupted back at the produce stand had petered out quickly once they were on the road. Why argue about Jack La Peigne when the big bunny was long gone? Out of sight, out of mind, as the old chestnut went; by the time the courthouse clock-tower finally hove into view, the atmosphere inside Finnick's had become almost convivial.

Now here was Judy, bringing up the big rabbit's name once more and threatening to start the squabbling all over again.

It didn't happen; Conor's face remained as impassive as a stone sphinx, and for once the hormone fairy seemed to be cutting Erin a little slack.

"Awwww, I'm sorry sis," the younger bunny told her, looking properly contrite, "If I'd known Jack wanted to meet me I would have waited, but I wanted to show Conor around the Burrow a little before he left. There's more to this place than just the Carrot Days Festival y'know."

"Yeah, I never knew BunnyBurrow had a shopping mall." The young fox chimed in earnestly, bringing a sly smile to Nick's face. Not only were the two young mammals NOT arguing again, they were even on the same page.

"Okay, never mind," Judy said, pulling herself into the van and sliding the door shut behind her, "Step on it, Finnick; we need to get to Pawvidence Memorial right away."

For a moment, Nick was confused. The hospital; was someone else hurt? Had the Harequateline really all burned up or…?

Then he remembered.

"Is it your Uncle Terry?"

"Yes that right," Judy nodded, before adding quickly, "He's okay, he just woke up in fact. Everything seems to be back to normal, or that's what Dr. Honeybadger told me."

Nick felt his ears working back and forth.

"Then why…?"

Judy sighed and then her ears and shoulders slouched earthward.

"Because he's asking for us."

When they got to Pawvidence Memorial Bunnyburrow, Finnick quickly made the announcement that he would be staying behind in the van.

"No point in my tagging along; your uncle don't know me from Yota." He told Judy—as if that was all the explanation she would require, (and in fact, it was.)

Exiting the hospital's parking garage, they heard a low, rumbling cannonade, echoing somewhere beyond the hills to the west. Looking away towards the source of the discordance, Nick could see a battleship-grey anvil-shaped cloud, peeking over the top of a ridgeline; things were about to get noisy and wet in the tri-burrow area.

The kettledrums sounded again, and he hoped that it wasn't an omen of things to come.
Judy, as always, viewed things through a more pragmatic lens than the fox, hoping the storm would bring more rain than lightning. (After nearly a week of bone-dry weather, the Burrow badly needed the former and didn't WANT the latter.)

At the reception desk, they learned that Judy's Uncle had been moved from the ICU to a private room on the second floor. "Dr. Honeybadger wants to keep him under observation for another 24 hours before we let him go." The ocelot in charge told her.

"Oh he'll love that," she observed to Nick with a sour-persimmon expression. Her Uncle Terry had always hated hospitals, and never failed to share his misery with all and sundry whenever he was laid up.

They found him sitting up in bed, talking to Judy's mother, while Dr. Honeybadger hovered in the corner. There were no IV tubes or bags that she could see, but a network of thin wires was tabbed to various points along his body and just over to the left of his bedside, a flat-panel monitor was keeping constant watch on his vital signs. Judy wondered for a moment why there weren't more family members here, and then remembered that Carrot Days was over and it was Monday again, time for everyone to get back to work; (that…and this WAS Uncle Terry after all.)

The moment he saw her, his ears went up and his arms went out.

"Judy…Nick…" he started to say, but then Bonnie interrupted.

"Erin…Conor? Why don't you kids go wait outside?" she said, making a small gesture with her paw.

Judy tensed, expecting a thumping foot and a protestation of, "Mommmm!" But Erin only nodded reluctantly—or that was how she was trying to look; even her mother could see that it was only an act, (but not her uncle, which was the whole point of the charade.)

"Ohhh-kay Mom," she said, and then turned beckoning for Conor to follow her out the door.

As soon as they were gone, Terry picked up where he'd left off; holding out his arms once more. He hugged Judy and then shook paws with Nick, (wiping his paw on the sheets afterwards—a fact that did not escape the red fox's notice, although he pretended otherwise.)

Then Terry took hold of his niece's paws.

"I didn't…hurt you did I? You…or Nick?" He swallowed hard and looked like he was about to turn on the waterworks, "Or little Cotton?"

At the mention of her baby sister's name, Judy glanced over sharply at her mother, who responded with a tight little head shake. No, Cotton wouldn't be coming to visit her uncle, thank goodness. "We're fine Uncle Terry," she assured him guardedly, feeling her nose beginning to twitch again. For a second or two, she tried to stifle it, but then thought, 'why bother?' She was in a hospital room after all and if her uncle noticed, she could always put it down to the sting of disinfectant. Nonetheless, there was something going on here, a play behind the scenes that she couldn't quite grasp. Nick Wilde could probably have figured it out, but right now he seemed to be completely wrapped up in himself; in fact, he hadn't said a thing since they'd come in here—and Judy was fairly certain she knew the reason why. "Seriously, we're all okay." She said to her uncle.

"Thank goodness," Terry Haredigg buried his eyes in his paws for a moment and let out a half sob, "I-I can't believe it happened to me again…right in the middle of Carrot Days. I thought the first
"time was awful, but...Oh gaw, just when I thought I'd put it behind me..."

At once, Judy felt her ears trying to slam backwards. "Why you bloodsucking...!" NOW she understood her uncle's game...and what a jerk! Not even conscious for three hours and he was already trying to lay another guilt trip on her mother. 'Just when I thought I'd put it behind me...' was his way of reminding Bonnie, none too subtly, that if she hadn't dared him to eat a Nighthowler blossom when they were kids, he wouldn't have gone savage yesterday. It was enough to make Judy want to grab a pillow and push it over his face until he stopped moving. Her only consolation was that for once, her mother didn't seem to be buying into it

An idea blossomed in her head just then...Yesss, and it just might work, too.

She turned and spoke to Dr. Honeybadger.

"Doctor, is there any chance my uncle might have another savage episode?" she asked.

"No worries, Officer Hopps." the doctor told her, with what assumed was her version of a smile, "I checked him out myself; there will be no further flashbacks."

Judy looked at the floor for a second and then back up at the honey badger, appearing to choose her words carefully.

"Doctor, please understand that while I have the greatest respect for your abilities, let's face it, Nighthowler poisoning isn't something you see every day in Bunnyburrow. For that sort of thing, the facilities here at Pawvidence Bunnyburrow are...um, adequate at best." She pursed her lips and pretended to look away for a second. "So...I'd feel a lot more reassured if you could check him out at the LPN Toxin Lab, just to make sure."

Judy knew about that facility from the Savage Predator Conspiracy—it had been there that Emmitt Otterton and the rest of Doug's victims had received their final treatment—and she also knew what kinds of tests her uncle could look forward to when he got there; the kind that would be grounds for a seven-figure lawsuit, if the ZPD ever tried to employ them as interrogation techniques.

"Ahhh, wait a minute, I don't think..." her uncle started to say, but Judy quickly shushed him.

"Now now, Uncle Terry, don't you want to make sure that this can't ever happen again?" (After his performance of a moment ago, there was only one answer he could give.)

"Well...yes," he sputtered, "But Dr. Honeybadger just said..."

"Noooo, I think your niece has a point Mr. Haredigg," she answered, stroking her chin thoughtfully—and making it abundantly clear that she didn't much care for Judy's uncle either; quite the feat on his part considering that that they had met only yesterday...and for most of that time, he'd been unconscious. (It was also pretty obvious the good Doctor was eager to get back to Zootopia, ASAP...and Judy had just provided her with a tailor-made excuse)

"I would call the facilities here a little bit more than adequate," she was saying, "but still, they're nothing like we have back at the LPN Facility; you're certainly right about that, Officer Hopps...and this IS an unprecedented occurrence, after all." She extracted a cell-phone from the pocket of her lab-coat, at the same time shifting her gaze to Judy's Uncle. "Mmmm, I think at least one more round of tests back at Meadowlands is in order, Mr. Haredigg...just to be sure. If you'll excuse me for a moment, I'll go and make the arrangements."

"I don't..." Terry started to say, but this time it was Dr. Honeybadger who cut him off.
"You shouldn't be gone for more than two days at most, Mr. Haredigg. And don't worry about the charges, they're covered."

And with that, she was out the door.

Judy watched her go and then turned to her uncle, smiling brightly.

"There Uncle Terry, once those tests are taken care of, you can finally stop fretting about 'it' ever happening again."

"Thank you," the plump rabbit answered in a wooden voice, and now HE was the one that looked like he wanted to smother somebody.

Judy's mother meanwhile was biting her lip and hugging herself, as if desperately trying to hold something back.

"Is it me, or were you glad to get out of there?" Conor Lewis said to Erin as the elevator door opened.

She led him inside and pressed, 'One'.

"No, you're right fox; I'd rather go get braces than have to hang with my Uncle Terry, for even half an hour."

"Uh-huh, so what's the guy's problem?" the young silver fox asked her.

"He's a leech," Erin answered, with a small shudder, "You know the kind, always asking you for favors and then he pays you back with excuses."

"Yeah," Conor nodded knowingly; he was familiar with that type all right.

Erin shuddered again.

"He probably only asked for Judy to come and visit him because he wants something from her," she said, looking more disgusted than ever.

"I-I-I don't think that's gonna happen," the young fox told her, with a note of cautious hope in his voice, "From what I've seen of your sister, she's nobody's easy touch. And Nick's in there too, don't forget. If had to make book, I'd bet Uncle Moochie's not getting anything out of her but a pawful of air."

The door opened and the two of them stepped off.

"Yeah, I know," Erin sighed, "But it's still a pain….and then there's my mom." She went on to tell him the story of how her mother had dared her Uncle Terry to eat some Nightowler when they were kits. It made Conor's ears vanish into his scalp.

"Aw for crying out in pain," he half groaned, half growled, "When he bit the heck outta your mom's arm like that, it should have squared things up then and there."

"I know, right?" The young, white-furred bunny answered with a thump of her foot. "Stu Junior must have told mom that at least a hundred times, but she still can't say no to my uncle."

"Ah, bummer." Conor shook his head. It was all he could think of to say, and so he opted for a change of subject. "Anyway, this is your turf Erin; any good places we can hang near here while
we're waiting?"

She stopped, looking thoughtful for second and then turned to him.

"Ahhhh, nothing within walking distance, and I don't think Judy's going to be too long anyway," she finally said. "Prolly the best thing to do is..." her words were cut short by another short volley of thunder. The storm seemed to be moving away now, but it might have only sounded that way because they were indoors. "Best thing to do is go wait in the van with Fin...what?"

Conor didn't seem to have heard a single word she'd said. Instead he was staring over her shoulder towards the hospital's front entrance. Erin turned around, and almost instantly her foot started beating a tattoo again the carpet.

"Awww, sweet cheez n' crackers!"

Pawvidence Bunnyburrow's front walkway, which had been deserted when they'd arrived, was now thronged with reporters....and the only thing keeping them out of the lobby was a bevy of muscular orderlies, all of them larger species.

"Where the heck did they come from so fast?" the young bunny demanded in rhetorical frustration. It seemed as if every media outlet from ZNN to PawStory had a reporter out there. More than a few had brought camera-mammals with them, and at least two had come equipped with mobile broadcast vans.

"Well you know who they're here for, right?" Conor's question was every bit as rhetorical as hers had been, but she answered him anyway.

"No, I really have no idea," Erin gave him one of her patented looks, "DUH! They're here to talk to Nick, who else?"

Conor ignored the jab.

"Right, and you don't have to be Hercule Pawrot to guess he was gonna have to show up here, sooner or later." With an ever-so-slight movement, he angled his muzzle in the direction of the hospital entrance. (Being from Zoo York, he wasn't nearly as surprised by what was going on out there as she was,) "Five bucks says of those guys outside slipped somebody an envelope to pass the word if they spotted Nick..." He stopped abruptly and pointed through the door with his ears standing at attention. Okay, NOW they'd caught him by surprise, "Holy foxtrot, they even got a podium set up out there, look!"

Erin looked, and Conor shook his head. Even for a jaded kit like him, this was stepping over the line. Trying to Shanghai Nick into giving a presser, "What's next jerkweeds, you gonna foxnap him or something?"

"We better warn him." The bunny-girl next to him said, reaching for her cell phone.

"For sure, but let's get out of sight first." He answered, once more nodding discreetly at the entrance, "Those media guys ain't dumb and if one of 'em spots you on your cell right now, they just might figure out it's your big sis on the other end." He put his paw behind his back, aiming with a thumb towards the elevators, "And you better believe they know she's in there with Nick."

"Yeah, good thought," Erin nodded, and the two of them slipped quietly around the corner.

"Nick, you can't avoid it forever." Judy waved her arms as if signaling for a cab to pull over,
"Sooner or later, you're going to have to talk to the press."

He stabbed a finger in the direction of the elevators.

"That's not the press downstairs Carrots, that's a lynch mob."

The call from Erin had come right as they were leaving Uncle Terry's room. (For once, he'd been as happy to see his niece go as she had been happy to take her leave.)

For all the rest of their visit, Nick hadn't said two words, which was most unlike him but not entirely unexpected. What was surprising was that now he wanted to sneak out of the hospital without even trying to talk to the media. Judy had been nearly floored; though the red fox had never enjoyed sparring with the press, he'd never gone out of his way to avoid it …until now. Even for him, this was way beyond normal behavior.

"You don't have to go face to face with all of them Nick." she pointed out. "You can pick a small group and see them privately, or even offer one of them an exclusive. Heck I'll bet you anything Bill Diggs is out there. He'd never miss a story like this."

Diggs, a European badger handled the police beat for the Zootopia Times-Post. A former cop himself, he was the few members of the press trusted by the ZPD rank-and-file. He knew the life, he spoke the language, and if you gave William Herbert Diggs something 'off the record', you could count on it never seeing the light of day.

But even that suggestion seemed to be too much for Nick.

"Uh not now, Carrots, maybe later," he said, by which, Judy understood he meant 'never', and then he reached up, waving a finger and trying to get the attention of a passing orderly. "Excuse me, is there…?

"…somewhere that my partner and I can talk privately?" Judy jumped in line ahead of him.

"Yeah, there's an empty room down the hallway there the hippo answered pointing back down the hall, the way he had come. "Number 222."

"Carrots, I really…” Nick started to say, but she was already dragging him in the direction of the doorway.

"All right Nick, what wrong?" she demanded as soon as it closed behind them, paws on hips and nose twitching, "This isn't like you. As a matter of act, you've been acting like you got caught with your paw in the carrot-cake dish ever since we got here."

He attempted to wave her off.

"I'm fine, Carrots…just a little stressed out from yesterday is all."

Judy folded her arms, her expression unchanged.

"But what's wrong, Nick?"

The red fox blinked and then he stared.

"What the…? Didn't you hear me Fluff? I said I'm okay."

She began to tap (not thump) her foot.
"But what's wrong, Nick?"

He waved his arm as if warding off a wasp.

"What are you supposed to be, a skipping CD? I'm fine, dangit!"

"But what's wrong, Nick?"

"I'm Fi…"

That was as far as he got before his ears wilted and his tail sagged.

"No, I'm not," he admitted in a near mumble.

Judy responded with a small, tight nod. After all this time Nick should have known better than to try to fool her. Still, she hadn't liked having to prod him…but then she liked even less to see him in such a state.

A moment of silence followed during which the red fox's gaze seemed to focus on everything in the room but her.

And then finally, his eyes met Judy's again.

"Everyone seems to think I'm some kind of big hero, Carrots…only I sure don't feel like one. That trick with the fireworks…even if I had expected it to work—which I honestly didn't—I never would have thought it'd work out like THAT. Setting those planes on fire? You better believe I didn't see that possibility." He looked away into a corner again then back at her. "I didn't stop the Guilford brothers Carrots, Fate did—or God, Karma, Dumb Luck, whatever you want to call it. Picking the right number on a roulette wheel doesn't make you a hero; it only makes you a winner." He pointed towards the door, "If I go down and try to take credit for last night, it's going to feel like the biggest hustle I ever pulled…and I don't want to do that." His eyes found the floor again, "I-I can't."

Once again there was silence in the room, but this time less awkward and more portentous. Then Judy said, "Nick, look at me."

He raised his head stutteringly, like a theme-park mammalquine not getting enough power.

"Okay," she said, "Tell me something: If that fireworks business was such a shot in the dark… why'd you even want to try it in the first place?"

Once again, he blinked at her.

"What…? You know why Carrots, the Guilfords were coming and I didn't have time to think of anything else. And even then it was only a last resort."

"Uh-huh." Now she lifted an ear, "And just how did you know the Guilford brothers were coming, Nick? Who told you?"

He gave that bewildered look again.

"Nobody told me Judy, I…"

All at once she was in his face with a raised finger.

"That's right fox…no one told you; you figured it out for yourself. Oh, you may have had some
help in finding the puzzle pieces, but at the end of the day YOU'RE the one who put them all together. "

She lowered her finger and took a step back. "Maybe you're right, maybe bringing down those planes was just a piece of dumb luck." She moved towards him again and took hold of his paws, "But figuring out those planes were coming, sorry Slick, that's all on you." She smiled and gave them a little squeeze, "And not only that, you made everyone believe your story; no one thought you were hustling them, that's something else in your favor. Oh and speaking of hustles, did the Guilford Brothers just happen to come in right over those fireworks, or did you haves something to do with it?"

Nick looked at Judy for a long moment, as if he were seeing for the first time. She watched his back straighten up and his ears following suit. Okay, that was good, but there was still one more demon to exorcize.

"But you know what really makes me proud Nick? Even after what happened with that fire-hose yesterday, when you realized what the Guilfords were planning you never hesitated and you never doubted yourself—not for a second."

She saw him wince as if she'd jabbed him with thorn. Just she'd suspected, the fire-hose episode was still eating at him; that was why he'd kept to himself while they'd been visiting Uncle Terry.

"It takes a lot to come back from your mistakes," she said, "Believe me, I know." She did not elaborate and did not need to; both of them knew she was making reference to her press-conference fiasco from two years previously.

And speaking of the press…

"You can do this Nick. You can face those reporters; I know you can. Because you ARE a hero, and you know I'd never tell you that if I didn't think it was true.

His response to this was a noise that might have been a growl, a sigh, or possibly all of the above.

And then he gave her that guilty-little-fox-cub look again

"Carrots, I just don't think I'm ready…"

Judy sighed and tried not to thump her foot. "Oh-kayyy Nick, then we'll do this the hard way."

She fetched him a glare that could penetrate tank armor.

"Nicholas Piberius Wilde, you get that bushy-tailed fanny perpendicular and go talk to the press right now!"

He began to wither again.

"Judy please…"

She spun him around and pushed him towards the door, planting a foot in his backside for good measure.

"You heard me fox, MARCH!"

When Nick got to the front of the hospital the number of reporters waiting to talk to him had increased dramatically if not exponentially. Almost immediately, he saw an axis deer tap his
camera sheep on the shoulder, at the same time aiming his microphone in the red fox's direction. What happened next reminded him of the fireworks barrage last night. In the blink of an eye, another mike was pointing at him, and then another and another…and then it seemed like a thousand microphones were tilting in his direction. It made him wonder, for a wry moment, if he should ask for a blindfold before…'Ready…Aim…'

He glanced nervously over his shoulder and saw that Judy Hopps had shed her 'stern schoolmarm' fursona and was offering him a thumbs-up. And now off to the side, visible to him but not to the press contingent, he could see Conor and Erin were also watching him. The white furred bunny's nod was encouraging, but the young silver-fox's flinty gaze and half smile held a message that couldn't have been clearer if he'd chalked it on a picket sign, 'Better you than me.'

"Well at least he's honest about it," Nick told himself, then took a short breath and pushed his way through the door.

All at once, he was nearly bowled over by a tsunami of questions; an unpleasant sensation to say the least, but at least it gave him an excuse to stall for a few seconds.

"One at a time! Please…one at a time!" he protested raising his paws, "I'll answer some of your questions; just give me a few seconds, okay?" To show what he meant, Nick began moving towards the makeshift podium. The uproar quieted to a noisy hubbub as his feet creaked against the hastily erected steps, but he knew the lull was only temporary. As if to emphasize this fact, another grumble of thunder sounded in the distance.

All right, the first thing he needed to do was take control, talk first, before anyone could hit him with a question. Only…what the heck was ne supposed to say? He had no idea.

"All right, tell them that."

He turned to the bank of jury-rigged mikes and cleared his throat.

"Ladies and gentlemammals, you'll forgive me if I don't make any opening remarks. As I think you can understand, I haven't had much in the way of free time over the past 24 hours."

A low murmur of amusement spread through the crowd. All right so far so good, but where did he go from here? Almost as if in answer to that query, he spotted a familiar, striped face in the front row.

"Bill Diggs, I could almost kiss you." He thought, and then pointed at the badger.

Diggs stood up, nodded, and introduced himself. With his natty suit and straw fedora he looked like a relic from the time when reporters used to call in their stories on land-lines, (using phones with rotary dials.)

"Officer Wilde, I don't think there's a cop…" the badger grinned self-consciously, "…or an EX-cop between here and Zootopia that doesn't recognize that as one heckuva piece of police work on your part. Nonetheless there are a few unanswered questions remaining. As I understand it, you first began to suspect that something was amiss when you overheard a Jerry Guilford's son, Craig speaking with him on his cell phone. Is this correct?"

"Yes, that's right." Nick answered the badger, and yes it was; but that wasn't Diggs' real question, the real one was his next query.

"Then can you clear up something for us, Officer Wilde. How is it that you came to be in that particular place at that particular time?"
If they'd been alone, Nick would have kissed the badger. Bill Diggs had just taken what was essentially the toughest question of the day and turned it into a softball, (and also gotten it out of the way right in the beginning...yes!)

"How did I…?" Nick started to say, preparing to fall back on his tried and true method of answering a reporter's query with a question of his own. No, not this time, he decided...and in that instant, he knew exactly what to say.

"In all honesty Bill, I don't know how that happened." He told Diggs, "But I do know why it happened; I had left the dance because I felt depressed and wanted to be alone or a while." He looked the badger straight in the eye. "Really alone, if you know what I mean." Diggs nodded and began making notes; he knew all right. Not only a former cop, but also, like Nick, of a solitary species, he knew very well the feeling of not wanting ANYBODY around.

It did not, however, stop him from asking a follow-up question.

"Can you tell us why that was?"

"Because of the mistake I made earlier in the day," Nick answered him without batting an eye, "when I and my partner tried to stop Terry Haredigg's rampage with a firehose. I'm sure everybody here knows how that turned out."

Not everyone did remember the firehose incident apparently.

"Terry...Haredigg?" a sheep in the second row asked him. Before Nick could respond, a female impala in a pants suit beat him to it.

"The bunny that went savage yesterday, Walt."

"Oh."

"That's right," Nick said, taking advantage of the break. "Oh and let me say very quickly, I just came from Mr. Haredigg's room and I'm happy to report that he's awake and talking, showing absolutely no after-effects from his, errr, episode."

This was met with a furious scribbling of pens and jotting of notes on tablets...and Nick felt his ears go up. Without even trying, he had steered the presser into safe waters. All he had to do was let things continue in this direction and...

He glanced over his shoulder again and saw Judy watching him through the double-doors...and knew that he couldn't; he would not shy away from what he knew he should say...even if it wasn't what he wanted to talk about.

He turned back to the microphones.

"But...you can get that from the doctors later. Right now...well I'd been feeling bad about it all day and by the time the dance started, the Carrot Days Festival just didn't seem like the place where I belonged...and so I left, just kind of went wandering up into the hills."

He took a short breath and then continued.

"If you really want the truth, I have no idea how I ended up where I did. Maybe I sensed something, maybe I smelled something, maybe it was just pure chance, I don't know. What I do know is that however it happened I was that particular spot right then, I'm very glad and very grateful that things worked out that way."
There, Nick thought, they'd either believe him or they wouldn't; in any case he'd told the truth (mostly.)

He pointed to another reporter, a caribou in a sport-shirt.

"Officer Wilde, Lee DeNally, ZNBC," he introduced himself while, rising to his feet, "Sir, how did you come to be aware that the Guilford Family owned a crop-dusting service?"

Nick smiled; this was a question he could answer without having to prevaricate.

"Well when my partner and I first arrived at the Carrot Days Festival, it seems we showed up right after the Guilfords had been turned away by security; everyone was talking about it. Not being from around here, I had no idea who Jerry Guilford was and so I asked. That was how I found out that his family owned a crop service—and it was also when I heard about their troubles with Commissioner Fielding over that contract to spray for illegal catnip farms; the one that he cancelled."

More jotting of notes followed and then Nick moved quickly to head off any follow-up. For the moment at least, he needed to keep things moving in the direction he wanted.

"And also..." he said, "When I came across Craig Guilford and his girlfriend later on, they were sitting on the roof of a truck marked, 'Sky-Yote Crop Services.' You don't have to be Stephen Hogging to connect those dots."

"But what made you think that they might be up to no good, Officer Hopps?" another reporter, a mountain lioness asked. "They could have just been parking."

"Was it because he was a coyote?" the sheep from earlier queried.

Nick felt his ears go back and he fixed the ram in his gaze.

"I'm sorry, you are..?"

"Walt Carder, Breitbark News. Was that the reason you suspected him, Officer Wilde?"

Nick suppressed a growl; Breitbark, it figured. He would have to choose his next words very carefully, making sure they couldn't be twisted or taken out of context.

"Oh well, at least he's not from InfoWarthog," the red fox told himself, and then proceeded to speak very crisply.

"Mr. Carder, as I'm sure you noticed, I myself happen to belong to a species that's subject to a lot of undue suspicion. Even now if I walk into store where I'm not known—while I'm out of uniform—I can almost always count on being trailed by a security guard. No one knows better than I do how it feels to be wrongly tagged as a perp, simply on the basis of their species. So the answer to your question is no, it wasn't because he was a coyote."

Before Carder could ask a follow up, Nick turned back to the cougar, becoming much more accommodating in his manner.

"In answer to your question, Graig Guilford and his girlfriend weren't just parking; they were checking out the Big Dance through a spotting scope and a pair of binoculars. Believe me; that would have been enough to make any police officer suspicious, regardless of their species," he shot another glance at Walt Carder, "And as a matter of fact, Amanda Hill is another fox. If I'd been on duty and Bunnyburrow were my jurisdiction, I might even have confronted them."
"In which case, Jerry Guilford might have taken off for the Carrot Days Festival right then," another voice pointed out.

"Yes, but that's not what happened," Nick answered curtly and then pointed to someone else he recognized, Whitney Miner, the ZNN reporter who had interviewed Judy earlier.

"Officer Wilde," the ring-tailed cat asked him, "what is your opinion regarding the ongoing dispute between the Burrow County Sheriff's Department and Mr. Jack LaPeigne?"

Nick took a short breath before answering. Okay, now was the time to fall back on rhetorical questions.

"What do I know about the conflict between Mr. La Peigne and the Sheriff's Office?" he said, "Not very much, I've been busy making statements all..." He looked at his watch; whoa, 2:30 already? "...since this morning," he corrected himself, "But I can tell you what I saw last night, and what I saw was everyone pulling together to try and avert the attack. The Burrow County Sheriff's Department, Jack LaPeigne, Chip Fielding, everyone did their part."

"Can you elaborate?" Miner asked him and it seemed like every reporter in the gathering was craning their neck forward. Like it or not, he now had their undivided attention.

"Yes, I can, let's start with Jack LaPeigne. " Nick said, "When I asked him why the Guilfords might be targeting him, he said right up front that it was because he'd served them with that foreclosure notice fursonally, he never tried to dissemble, never tried to deflect. And knowing that, knowing just how badly the Guilford brothers wanted his pelt, it allowed us to deceive them into making their spray run directly over the fireworks battery."

"Yes, how did you accomplish that?" a pig with KZBC wanted to know.

"I had my compatriot send Jerry Guilford a message telling him that was where to find Jack La Peigne." Again the truth...just not the whole truth; Nick could only hope that no one would ask him how he'd managed it or who, exactly, had delivered that message.

No one did, but the follow up question wasn't much better.

"Hold on, you used Jack La Peigne as bait?" Yep, THERE was the reporter from InfoWarthog… troubleshaking jerk! "Did he even know what you were doing?"

"No...I used his name as bait." Nick corrected the aardvark with a mocking edge to his voice, "Jack La Peigne was actually nowhere near that location; he was elsewhere, directing his security fursonell in helping to evacuate the dance. That's another place where he did his part."

"And the Sheriff's Department?" Whitney Miner asked, shooting an annoyed glace at the aardvark and pig for trying to hijack his line of questioning.

"They were right there, helping with the evacuation as well." The red fox pointed out, "And the plan to use those fireworks could never have happened without their approval. I may have given the order to light off those rockets, but that was only after a Sheriff’s Deputy told me 'go'."

Once again, this was the truth, just not the entire truth.

"And what about Chip Fielding?" the ring-tailed cat asked him.

Nick heaved a short breath; at last, another easy question.
"Chip Fielding was the animal who made the announcement that the power couldn't be restored." The red fox answered him, "and he made it while standing center stage; that was practically ground zero folks, and yes, he knew the Guilfords were coming."

"About that, Officer Wilde." A bunny asked him, "Oh I'm sorry Chet Stamp, The Hoofington Post. Sir, what was the rationale behind cutting the power in the first place?"

Nick smiled again, if that question wasn't quite as easy as the last one, it was at least workable.

"We felt it was the best way to get everyone to evacuate without causing a panic. Obviously we couldn't just tell them about the coming attack, and if we'd instructed everyone to leave without giving them ANY reason…well I think you can guess how that would have worked out. Also, dousing the lights took away the Guilford brothers' navigation point. We had to do everything thing we could to stall them while we tried to get everyone out."

He braced himself for what he knew was coming next; HOW did they manage to get the power turned off? The answer to that question, 'with Conor Lewis's help' was one he couldn't give and the covering response, that Finnick had done the deed was somewhat less than credible.

No one asked it. Instead an armadillo raised a pencil.

"Officer Wilde Ernie Ballinger, ZPR. Sir what is your reaction to the news that Jerry Guilford is planning to file a lawsuit against you, for the injuries he and his brother received when they crashed landed into that irrigation pond?"

Nick felt his ears go up; this was news to him. And then his mouth stretched backwards in a long, feral, foxy smirk. "What is my reaction Mr. Ballinger? Let me put it this way." He stretched out his arm with the pawlm turn upwards, and then beckoned with all three fingers in the traditional martial artist's challenge to a fight. And then he said, "Someone asked me a moment ago about the dispute between Jack La Peigne and The Burrow County Sheriff's Department; which one was most responsible for what nearly happened last night? Should Jack La Peigne have put that house under surveillance? Should the Sheriff's Office have acted sooner? I'd like to remind everyone that none of that would have been necessary if Jerry Guilford hadn't been planning to launch that spray-bomb attack in the first place. If he wants to sue me, let him try, I'm not afraid of that coyote…OR his lawyers."

A big drop of water hit the podium then, followed by a boom and a rumble. When Nick glanced upwards for a second, he saw the sky had turned to lead.

Yes, just the excuse he needed. He smiled sardonically.

"Well, ladies and gentlemammals, it looks like somebody up there is telling me that this is all the time we have right now. So, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll just move away from all these live electrical wires before the thunderstorm hits. Thank you and good afternoon."

He hopped down from the podium and scurried back through the hospital's front entrance to where Judy and the others were waiting.

"Well, what do you think, was I okay?" he asked her.

Judy just stared at him goggle-eyed for a moment, and then she threw a fist in the air and whooped

"Okay? Okay! Nick, you crushed it." And then she threw her arms around her partner and gave him a quick hug.
"What the bunny said, you owned it out there, big guy," Conor Lewis agreed, lifting a paw to give his fellow fox a high five.

"Yeah, are you the same fox who was scared to go out there a minute ago?" Erin Hopps was staring with her nose twitching. Outside, behind her, the rain was descending in hogsheads and the reporters were scrambling for cover.

Nick looked from one face to the other, feeling suddenly very tired.

And then, finally, he let his gaze settle once more on Judy.

"Carrots? Let's go home."

Chapter End Notes

Last chapter's Easter Eggs: reference to the great Mouse Detective and to Goofy's alter ego Super Goof. (He used to toss an old softball over and over whenever he wanted to think.)

And yes, there IS a shopping mall in Bunnyburrow, it's visible in the upper left center of this pic.
Chapter Summary

Leaving Bunnyburrow

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 5 – Aftershocks
(Pt. 4...Concluded)

"Awww, can't you stay just a little while longer, pleeeeease?"

Cotton Hopps was clinging to Nick's leg like a shipwreck survivor to a floating spar, gazing up at him with big, winsome eyes, and refusing to let go.

"Now honey," Bonnie chided the little bunny gently, "you know Nick's a police officer. If he stays here, who's going to help your sister catch all those criminals, back in Zootopia?"

Cotton stamped her foot. "It's not fair!"

"Now listen young lady..." her mother started to say, but then Nick Wilde grimaced and yipped in pain.

"Owwp...tail, tail, tail!" He squalled, and that made Cotton let go of him.

"Sorr-ry," she said, clasping her paws and looking very small.

They were gathered together at the Bunnyburrow train station; today there were at least as many Hopps family members as there had been for Nick and Judy's arrival. On this occasion, however, a large group of friends and neighbors was also present—the Chatteron family, Gideon Grey and his fiancée, Bette Renaard, the girls in Erin's posse, Gordon Catmull, and of course, Conor Lewis and Finnick, all there to see Nick and Judy off on the 4 O'clock train back to Zootopia. (Mercifully only a few reporters had shown up...and these were being kept safely at bay by a contingent of Sheriff's deputies, with Mac Cannon in charge.)

For now at least, the rain had stopped and the sun was out. Had it not been for the puddles of water dappling the train-station platform, you might never have known it had even rained at all. No one was taking any chances though; every other animal was either wearing foul-weather gear or had an umbrella tucked under their arm.
And in fact the storm wasn't quite done with Bunnyburrow: a rumble in the distance and the faint tang of ozone in the air was making that clear to everyone.

"It's all right Sweetie, I know you didn't mean to," Nick told little bunny, patting her shoulder.

"You'll come back again sometime, won't you?" Cotton sniffled, looking up and offering another drawn-out, "Pleeeeeease?"

"Of course I will," the red fox smiled, "I wouldn't miss it for anything."

The little bunny-girl smiled wanly and then hugged him tight.

Her sister Judy smiled too. Nick wasn't just saying that to make Cotton feel better, he really did mean to return again, and soon.

"Is this the same animal I nearly had to blackmail into coming with me for Carrot Days?" she mused, and in that instant she realized something; the red fox standing three feet away from her really wasn't the same one she'd arrived with; over the course of the last few days, Nick Wilde had undergone a sea-change.

"No," Judy frowned pensively, "that isn't quite true, better to say that his experiences changed him."

Exactly how he was different, she couldn't quite say, except she knew it was a change for the better.

And yet…

For some reason Nick hadn't quite shed the last of his melancholia; something was still gnawing at him.

Then her father extended a paw in the fox's direction.

"Nick, I can't begin to tell you how glad I am you came here…and I don't just mean that business with Guilford boys. It's been just plain wonderful having you."

A murmur of acclimation rippled through the gathering as the two of them shook on it, and then Nick's mouth became a short, wry crinkle.

"Stu, I have something to confess; when Judy asked to come with her for Carrot Days, my first thought was, 'how can I get out this?' I was SO sure I was going to be bored out of my skull." He shook his head self-consciously and then grinned, "Dumb, dumb, DUMB fox!"

Stu and most of the other Hopps bunnies laughed, but then Cotton thumped her foot again.

"Are NOT!"

Stu laughed some more, and Bonnie picked up her daughter and hugged her. Judy, as always, couldn't resist the opportunity for a little playful banter.

"Now, now Cotton," she said, pretending to wag a finger, "I've known Nick a lot longer than you, and if there's one thing I know, it's that you should never try to argue THAT point with him."

She glanced sideways at the red fox and winked, watching while he laid back his ears and narrowed his eyes.
"Har-De-Har!"

Judy smirked triumphantly, but then she realized something. 'I tried to get out of it…I was sure I was going to be bored.' A week, even a few days ago, you couldn't have pried an admission like that out of Nick Wilde with a crowbar.

He really WAS a different fox.

"You know, I know it's a ways off, Nick," Bonnie Hopps was saying, "But you should come back for a visit over Christmas."

"Ooo, great idea, Bon," her husband agreed.

"Oh yes, I'd love to," the red fox nearly gushed, but then Judy cleared her throat and gave him the eye.

"Ah, that is if I don't have the duty," Nick amended with a hurried shrug, "Life of a police officer and all that. But I'll certainly try to make it if I can."

"We'll keep our fingers crossed." Judy added. She actually liked the idea of coming home for the Holidays even more than he did—but at the same time, she didn't want either one of them making promises that they might not be able to keep.

That was when Erin spoke up. "They should try to get back here for Halloween too, dad," she said, and then shifted her attention two degrees right, "You too, Conor."

"Well, if our studies at the Academy will let us, yeah." the young fox said. Erin started to answer, but then the words caught in her throat. He had said, 'Our' studies… not my studies. He believed in her; Conor truly and honestly thought she was going to get into ZAPA. She blinked…and felt a sting teasing the corners of her eyes. "Oooo, if you even make me cry, I'll....bushytailed jerk!" she thought.

"Oh I hope so," Her mother Bonnie said, "We always have a great time here in the Burrow on Halloween. It's almost as big as Carrot Days."

"Then for sure we're gonna have to try and make it." The young silver fox said with a smile.

"Us too," Nick chimed in, and that was Bonnie Hopps' cue to say farewell to him and to her daughter.

"There's not much I can add to what Stu said," she told Nick; "except, I'm so glad Judy has you for a partner."

"Thanks Bonnie," he answered and let her give him a peck on the cheek. That brought a rapid response from little Cotton. "Ewwww!"

"Cotton!" her mother cried, and turned hastily back to the fox, "That's not about your species Nick; she does that whenever her father kisses me, too."

"Kissing's yucko," The little bunny declared, as if to drive home the point.

"Well, if I can't get a kiss good-bye, then how about a hug?" Nick asked, looking slightly disappointed, as if expecting her to find that yucky too.

She didn't; she immediately threw her arms around Nick Wilde's neck and held him tight. "I like
"I like you too, Cotton." The red fox replied, hugging her back and then returning the little bunny to her mother.

"You better keep your promise to come visit some more," she said, regarding him with a stiff lower lip and glistening eyes. In that moment, Nick thought, she was dead ringer for Erin.

"I will," he affirmed, raising a paw, "Ranger scout's honor."

The next to say good-bye was Gideon Grey, who had brought with him a couple of going away-presents.

"Baked these special, just for y'all," he said, offering Nick and Judy each a pink-wrapped box, and then to Nick Wilde he said, "Our species ain't all shifty and untrustworthy son; you and me, we're proof o' that." And then he quickly looked over a shoulder, adding, "Yeah, you too, boy," for the benefit of a certain, young silver fox who was beginning to get a vexed look on his face.

That got a pretty good snicker out of Finnick, while Nick and the other red-fox clasped arms, "You know it, brother," he said, "I'm so glad, I finally got to meet you."

"Same here Nick, same here." Gideon replied, and then tuned to speak to the rabbit standing next to his fellow fox. "And Judy, it's always great seeing you again."

"Same here and right back at you." She said, offering him a thumbs-up.

Next up were Finnick and Conor. (It probably shouldn't have been their turn, not quite yet, but they needed to get on the road themselves, and right away.)

"Finnick, from now on I promise I'll keep in touch," Nick was raising his paw in another Ranger-Scout salute.

"You better." The little desert fox aimed a finger, "or I'll come looking for you." And then to Judy he said, "I never told you this before but I actually kinda thought Nick was a good fit for a cop that first time I saw you hustle him." A grin sliced across his muzzle. "But I never thought you'd up and make him a real cop."

They both laughed while Nick rolled his eyes and muttered, "There must be ten thousand unemployed clowns..."

"And Conor," Judy went on, turning to the young silver fox, "I can't thank you enough for all you did for my sister."

"Hear, hear," Nick chimed in quickly, "We're all grateful for what you did." And he lifted an eyebrow to show that he wasn't only talking about Erin. (Conor caught the signal and nodded ever so slightly.)

"Amen to that," Stu Hopps was saying, and then he offered the young fox a paw. "Thanks from me too, Conor."

"Well, save a little of that thanks for yourself, Mr. Hopps," the young fox told him, taking the paw and shaking it, "Erin never would of got this far if she didn't come from such a good family."

Nick felt his ears standing up and saw Judy's doing the same. There was a strange, wistful quality to the young silver fox's voice.
But then he winked, and added slyly, "And yeah, you're right, it IS better to burn out than to fade away."

Stu's ears colored and he looked away, while Bonnie, Judy, Erin, and most of the rest of the family all had another good laugh. As IF his daughter wouldn't have shared the note he'd sent her by now. (What none of them could know was just how much the young silver fox admired Stu for that gesture…and the envy he felt because of it.)

Then Bonnie told him, "Any time you want to come and visit us again Conor, there'll always be a place for you."

"Thanks, Mrs. H," he said, and there was that yearning look again, not merely a desire to come back here for a visit, but also for…Nick didn't know what else for.

"Maybe you can come back for Halloween too, like Erin said." It was Erin's girlfriend Lisa Chatterton, "If it's all right with your folks and school and everything."

"Well-l-l-ll, like I said, it all depends on our studies." Conor moved in quickly before the Douglas Squirrel-girl could get her motor-mouth revved up to full throttle, "School's kind of iffy, we don't get time off for Halloween, but I'm sure my dad wouldn't mind it if I came to visit."

Once again, Nick felt his ears rise up on full alert, but this time, for the life of him, he couldn't figure out why.

Then it hit him, but it was only a glancing blow. This was the first time since they'd that met that Conor had mentioned his parents. Yes, but that was only part of that story; what was the rest of it?

Meanwhile Erin was speaking again, the words rushing out of her as if she needed to speak now, or forever hold her peace. "Conor, I want you know that I'm never going to forget you helping me. When we played the talent show that was best performance I ever gave…and it never would have happened if it hadn't been for you."

And with a sudden, unexpected upwards leap, she threw her arms around the fox's neck and gave him a quick hug, startling him and nearly everyone else before she let go.

No one gasped; the hug hadn't lasted long enough raise any alarms, not with her folks at least. But Nick saw Stu Hopps Jr. getting quickly between the two young mammals and Pop-Pop.

"What're y' doin' that fer, Junior?" the old rabbit asked, raising an ear and shrugging. "So what if she hugged a raccoon? S'not like he's a fox or a badger or whatnot."

(Stu Junior wisely chose not to correct his grandfather.)

"You can thank me by kicking it at your audition." Conor was smiling again, as if it had all been no big deal, "I wanna see you blow Gazelle right out of her seat."

Erin swallowed and then stared.

"G-Gazelle?"

"Yeah, she's one of the judges, didn't you know?" For a second, the young fox looked like he wanted to face-pawlm himself, but then he quickly recovered—and Nick agreed with him. Better Erin should learn that now than later; forewarned is forearmed, as the saying goes.

"Listen kid," Finnick cleared his throat and spoke up reluctantly, "I-I hate to break this up, but
we've gotta get going if we're going make it back in time."

"Right, right," Conor bit his lip, nodding, and then turned and offered a final wave. "Bye everyone, bye Erin, bye Stu, bye Bonne, bye Junior, bye Lisa, Terri, Cara, Tawny, and Jill and everybody else I missed; hope I see you guys again, really soon."

"Hey, don't forget Nick and Judy," Erin admonished, thumping her foot.

"Oh he'll probably see us around town sis," Judy reminded her.

Conor grinned, and aimed a finger at the bunny cop, "Not if I see you first," he said in his best Clint Beastwood. (Neither he, nor Erin, nor Nick and Judy had any idea that those words would soon become achingly prophetic.)

"Come Josey Howls, it's time to get out of here." Finnick said, and a final wave they were on their way to the desert fox's van.

When Finnick fired up the engine a moment later, Erin Hopps was standing curbside, and as the van pulled away and onto the road, she offered a final, farewell wave which Conor returned by tooting on the horn.

And then the young, white-furred bunny turned and walked away without looking back.

Welllll, maybe she looked back once.

All right, maybe twice.

Okay, three times.

Four times and that's it!

Inside the van meanwhile, Finnick was favoring Conor with a quizzical, sidelong glance.

"Wha…? We bein' followed or something, kid?"

The young silver fox answered him with a puzzled look of his own

"Followed? What the heck are you talking about, DF?"

"You keep looking in the rear-view mirror," the desert fox said, pointing a finger towards the passenger side window.

"Ah, it's nothing," Conor told him, looking uncharacteristically flustered for a second, and then he angled his gaze forward, becoming stone-faced.

But his eyes refused to stop darting to the right.

Nick and Judy saw none of this; the train was due at any moment and they had arrangements to finalize.

The two of them had picked up a fair amount of swag during the Carrot Days Festival (especially her,) and it was more than they could bring on the train, so Stu Hopps Junior had come up with an idea—that they let him send it along with the Hopps Family Farm's next shipment of carrots for Vegetopia Produce.

"You're sure it's okay?" Judy asked him again with her nose twitching.
Junior tried not to groan.

"How many times do I have to say it, Jude? Yes it's okay. I already talked to Rick the assistant manager at Veg-Top and he said go ahead, no problem."

"It'll be fine, Judy." He mother added, throwing in her own note of reassurance.

"And yes, I have Clawhauser's Gazelle shirt packed in my suitcase," Nick Wilde said, anticipating her next question.

Judy threw up her paws in surrender.

"Okay, ohhhh-kay, I trust you guys."

"Train's coming!" a voice called from the far end of the platform. Nick cocked an ear but didn't bother to look at his watch; if he didn't know by now that the rail service between Bunnyburrow and Zootopia ran like an atomic clock, he'd never figure it out.

"You'll call as soon as soon as you get home?" Judy's mother was asking.

"I will mom, promise," she said, raising her paw in her own approximation of Nick Wilde's Ranger Scout salute. And then Nick saw her smile; even now, after she'd been with the ZPD for more than two years, Bonnie still couldn't help fussing over her daughter but, typical Judy, she seemed to find it endearing rather than annoying.

A double honk sounded and then the long, yellow form of the Zootopia Express pulled into the station, brakes hissing softly as it eased to a stop and the canned announcement came over the PA, "Arriving…Zootopia Express."

A wave of memories washed over Judy Hopps; she hadn't known it would be this train; the very one she'd taken when she'd departed the Burrow for a new life in Zootopia after graduating from the Police Academy. But today, at least one thing was going to be different; this time she wasn't going to (almost) forget to hug her folks a goodbye.

She turned and grabbed them both.

"Ohhhh, I love you guys so much," she said, holding them tight and giving them each a kiss on the cheek.

"We love you too, Judy." Her mother said, hugging her back.

"And we're very proud of you," Her father added, fighting hard to keep the waterworks in check.

"You're going to do it, Jude," a young girl's voice said from off to the side, "You're going to make detective, you and Nick." It was her sister, Erin

"Well, I should hope so, after last night," Junior Hopps offered, thumbs hooked into his suspenders.

Judy turned to the younger bunny and opened her arms.

"Come here, Sweetie." She said, and the two of them quickly had their arms around each other. "And YOU'RE going to make it into the Performing Arts Academy, little sis," Judy told her, "You can do it, I know you can."

"Carrots, it's time," Nick Wilde was tugging at her elbow.
"Okay," Judy let go of Erin and then raised her paw to the others in a final farewell, "Bye everybody."

And then she and Nick were scampering for the train, making it through the small-mammal door just as it closed. When the Zootopia Express pulled out of the station a seconds later, some of the younger Hopps family members went running along beside it, including…yep, there she was; little Cotton, waving harder than anybody.

Judy flicked a finger at the corner of her eye; this really was like that first time all over again…only more so. She felt the train begin to gather speed as it arrowed past the 'Now Leaving Bunnyburrow' sign with its ever-rising tally of the region's population.

She was going to have to find her iPaw, and crank Try Everything again—but first thing's first.

Turning to Nick, she brushed back an ear.

"Come on fox, let's go find our seats."

His expression was almost, what the…did he look anxious?

"Uh, Carrots, is there somewhere on this train where we can talk in private?" he said, green eyes moving this way and that, as if halfway certain that someone was eavesdropping.

"Ummm…sure, okay," she told him.

The overhead observation deck turned out to be occupied, by a binturong and a family of gophers, but the lounge in the last car was luckily deserted.

"Okay Nick, what is it?" Judy asked him as she eased into a small-mammal seat near the very back of the train.

Nick took the seat opposite hers, but said nothing for a long moment. He seemed to be grasping for words that were hovering somewhere just beyond his reach.

Finally he said, "Judy, do you remember last night when you asked me to dance, and I told you to leave me alone? I…"

She already had her paw up.

"Oh Nick, you don't need to tell me about that." She said, but surprisingly, he refused to be deflected, leaning forward in his chair with an expression of edgy resolve.

"No, Carrots, I do need to talk about it. Many years ago, I made a terrible mistake…and I'm still paying the price." His left brow rose up slightly higher than the other one, "What you saw back there at the dance was part of that price."

Judy felt her nose begin to twitch.

"Nick, please don't talk in riddles; you know how much it bothers me." She felt immediately contrite; he wasn't trying to be coy.

"Okay," the red-fox puffed out his cheeks and looked down for a second. When he looked up again, he had his cell-phone out and was swiping his thumb down the screen. His eyes, however, remained fixed on hers.

For a long moment neither one spoke; outside the train, the storm was ramping up again, white
Nick raised his voice a little so as to be heard over the racket.

"Judy, a long time ago, I kept the truth from someone very dear to me; it was the biggest regret of my life...and I don't want to...I CAN'T go down that road again." He stopped scrolling but didn't show her the cell-phone. "I need to tell you, Carrots," he said, tapping his knee with a finger for emphasis, "There's a lot more to me than losing my father or what happened when I tried to join the Junior Ranger Scouts." His face became earnest, almost pleading, "And I need to tell you, right here, right now. And you need to hear it from me, not from anybody else."

For a moment, Judy thought he was going to grab her paw, but his own remained exactly where it was clutching the cell-phone like a talisman.

"All right Nick," she finally said, she couldn't remember the last time he'd looked so...intense? Yes, that was word, "What is it that you need to tell me so badly?" she asked him.

The red fox seemed to deflate a little...but from relief rather than resignation.

"Everything Carrots...everything," he said, and then finally he passed her the cell phone. "First of all, when I said those words last night, I wasn't speaking to you." His eyes moved away from hers again for a second, "I-I was...I was talking to a ghost."

Judy took the cell and studied it. There, on the screen was a slightly washed-out photograph—probably taken with an analog camera and uploaded later, via a scanner she guessed.

It showed an image of a cross fox vixen; a black face with amber eyes and red cheek tufts, black throat, red arms and a black tail with fox-red highlights. She was seated on the edge of a wooden platform looking to her right, with a shy smile on her face.

"No, wait, that's a stage she's sitting on," Judy realized, and to confirm it, she noticed for the first time that the vixen had a keytar slung around neck and that the outline of a band set up was just visible in background behind her. She was dressed in a tank-top covered by a torn military-surplus jacket and stressed jeans over yoga pants. She wore a red bandanna around her head and had a matching kerchief encircling her neck. Judy couldn't help noticing how much this rocker-vixen's outfit resembled the one Erin had worn during her talent show performance; and look at how fit she was; she could almost have been the visual definition of a 'tough grrrl.'

Except for that bashful smile she was wearing...and why was she looking off to the right instead of at the camera?

There was something else Judy noticed about her, too. She was...

"Who is she Nick?" she asked, looking up at him, "she's beautiful."

By way of response, the red fox pressed his thumb and forefinger to the cell-phone screen and pinched them together. At once, the image zoomed out until the whole of it was visible...and now Judy could see that the cross-fox vixen wasn't alone in the photograph. Sitting beside her on the stage and holding her paw was another fox, gazing into her eyes with a look of deep emotion.

It was Nick Wilde, a years-younger version of the fox sitting opposite her but it was still unmistakably him.

"Her name is—was—Robyn, Robyn McFerral," Nick told her in a soft, almost velvety voice, brushing the cell-phone ever-so-delicately with a fingertip, "Once upon a time she and I were
engaged to be married."
Chapter Summary

Nick tells Judy how he came to meet Robyn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 6 - Nick's Story (Pt. 1)

Nooo, Judy Hopps wasn't jealous; of course she wasn't jealous. Nick Wilde was her partner and her friend; that was all. And besides that, he was a fox and she was a bunny—AND he was at least ten years her senior. No, she wasn't jealous, her face was always this green, (or that was how it felt anyway.)

But what the fox said next purged away any such feelings that she might have been harboring, once and for all.

"Robyn's gone, Carrots; passed away more than ten years ago…cancer." He looked out the window for a second, watching the storm, "But that didn't happen until more than two years after she walked out on me."

Judy looked at the cell phone screen and sniffled, ashamed for having held such negative feelings towards…what was her name again? Robyn…McFerral, that was it.

Eventually, her eyes and his found each other once again.

"Oh Nick, I'm so sorry," she said, laying her paw on his arm. He flinched, but did not pull away—and Judy said nothing further; this was another instance where the best thing to do was just sit back and listen; the fox would either tell her what had happened or he wouldn't. Either way, the ball was in then his court.

He would; in fact, he started speaking in a rush.

"Carrots, to understand what happened—and how it happened—you need to hear the whole story, all the way from the beginning." He held up a finger, "but I warn you, at least part of what I have to
say could get me kicked out of the ZPD. If Chief Bogo, or especially the Police Board ever finds out, I'm toast. Do you understand?

For several long seconds, Judy only looked at him, nose twitching and the rest of her face a closed book. Inwardly, she was stunned; she had always known that Nick had a checkered past; heck, he'd been no paragon when they'd first met. Look at the way he'd constantly mocked her, even going so far as to deliberately hold her up at the DMV because seeing her fail amused him.

All right, fine…but now Nick was telling her there was a breach of virtue in his history serious enough to get him fired from the ZPD? She never would have imagined he was capable of such a thing. On the other paw, the fox did have a penchant for the overdramatic, especially when he got himself worked up. Maybe his transgression wasn't as seriously as he thought. On the OTHER paw, what about the way she'd gotten Duke Weaselton to give up Doug? Was she such a saint? And what if the Police Board ever found out about that?

After a short a moment, Judy raised her right paw, not in a Ranger Scout salute, with the little finger tucked under her thumb, but with her pawlm wide open, the same as she'd done the day she was sworn into the ZPD. And then for good measure, she put her other paw over her heart.

"Nick, nothing you tell me will ever leave this railroad car, I promise."

The red fox nodded solemnly, and then settled back in his chair and began to speak.

Things did not, however, get off to what you would call a flying start.

"Carrots I know it's not in my nature to brag but…all right, what's so funny? 'Like it's not in a seal's nature to swim'…har-har, really clever; do you want hear this this or…?"

"Okay…well you may not have known it from the first time we met, but back when I was just starting to work the streets, I was considered a real comer, the hottest young hustler in Zootopia. Remember when I told you, the second time we met, that I was making two hundred dollars a day? Wellll, that was true for right then, but back in the days when… Mmmm, no I guess you don't want to know, do you? Let's just say that two hundred bucks a day would have been chump-change to me back then. I was good…really good at what I did, even Finnick said so, and you know how hard it is to get a compliment out of that fennec-fox."

"Yes, Carrots…that was when Finnick and I first hooked up. Pretty soon we were doing so well that we even caught the attention of Mr. Big… Wait, no, not like that; I mean he was so impressed with the way we worked he started hiring us to run hustles for him. Sometimes he'd pay us a straight-up fee, and sometimes he wanted it done as a 'favor'…and I always obliged, a professional courtesy you might say, to open up more opportunities for making money."

"Anyway, one night he called me to his house. 'Just you, Wilde; leave the fennec home.' I had never been there, so I knew he must have had something really important in the works. We ate a really nice dinner; that was when I met his grandmother, really sweet old lady and she made the best cannoli I ever had, But all during the meal, Mr. Big refused to even hint at why he'd sent for me. The one time I tried to raise the subject, all I got was dirty look from Koslov."

"Koslov…Mr. Big's bodyguard…you met him, Carrots; the REALLY big polar bear; the one who never smiles."

"Yes, that's right, the one who brought him into the office, that night when you first met him."

"But getting back to the story; after dinner, Mr. Big took me into his office and explained why he
wanted to see me; he had a problem I could help him with. (That was exactly how he put it, Carrots; he never asked me for anything.) I didn't even think about saying no, the minute we sat down, I could see that he was fuming, and you never refused one of Mr. Big's offers when he was in that kind of mood, not if you liked walking without crutches."

'I got this guy, this Grey Squirrel, Lanny Braunwald.' He told me, "He's head of the Woodworkers Local 27 in Old Growth City. You know him, Nicky?"

"I know everybody, Mr. Big', I told him. And it was true, I did, even then. 'But didn't he get himself elected to the city council?' I asked, and it was no great intelligence on my part; Lanny Braunwald had been going out of his way to make a name for himself ever since he'd taken the oath of office. Public appearances, dedications; he never missed a camera op, never proposed a measure or an ordnance without calling the press first. A LOT of animals knew who he was. Fursonally I thought he was just another windbag politician, out for what he could get, but Mr. Big didn't see it that way…and for an obvious reason."

"That's correct,' He told me, raising a finger, 'But what you don't know is that Mr. Braunwald never would have made it to the top of that Union Local, much less onto the Zootopia City Council without my help…and now he has decided that he doesn't want to repay my generosity."

"Mr. Big went on to fill me in on the details, but I had already guessed most of it. Lanny Braunwald figured that because he was a union official, AND a member of the City Council, AND because he was so high profile, even Mr. Big couldn't do anything to him. He was right, but not just for any of those reasons; The Big Shrew also considered him too valuable to touch."

"I don't want him hurt, I want him co-operating,' he told me, 'If you can help me out with this Nicky, I will be fursonally very grateful. Mr. Braunwald is my best shot at finally getting that license.'"

"What license? Well, as you know Carrots, there's only one legal gambling casino in the City of Zootopia, in the Palm Hotel, down Sahara Square. Mr. Big's dream was always to open up his own casino in Tundratown, but… What's that? Oh, he owned several Carrots, but they were all ILLEGAL gambling clubs. What he wanted was a legitimate casino, but for that he needed a green light from the Zootopia City Counsel, and for THAT he needed Lanny Braunwald. Normally, he would have had Kevin and Raymond, his two top enforcer-bears go pay him visit…but that wouldn't work, not this time. Braunwald might go running to the press, maybe even the attorney general's office if that happened. Mr. Big said he could almost see the headlines, 'Heroic City Counsel Squirrel Stands Up To the Mob.' Braunwald's offer to him was very simple, you lay off me, and I'll lay off you. Mr. Big didn't like that offer very much."

That was where I came in, Braunwald had forgotten one thing. Maybe Mr. Big wouldn't go near him, but I would. I had no direct ties to the Tundratown Syndicate; even if I got busted, the police would never be able trace me back to the Big Shrew. And besides, I planned to deal with that squirrel using brains, not muscle."

"Hrm? No. you're right Carrots, Mr. Big never did get to open up that casino of his. But that's a story for another time. No, no need to apologize. Well, to make a long story short, I did some research and found out that Mr. Braunwald was a little bit of wheeler-dealer himself, always looking to make an investment that would turn a quick profit. And so, long story shorter, I hustled him into investing in car repair shop I knew of that needed a quick infusion of cash. Braunwald put up the money and pretty soon he was making it back paw over fist…but what he DIDN'T know was that the shop where he'd invested his cash was actually a chop-shop. Not only that, they were trying to operate in Tundratown without Mr. Big's permission. Nobody who pulled that stunt
stayed in business for very long, I can tell you. After Braunwald was in with them, good and tight, 'someone' dropped a dime and the ZPD raided the place. He lost every penny he'd invested. Worse than that, the shop owners knew who he was and were trying to put the screws to him. 'Get the charges dropped, Councilmammal…or you KNOW what will happen.' And Braunwald knew all right; if the word got out that he had secretly partnered up with a car-theft ring, his career with the City and the Woodworker's Union would both be finished. And that's not even mentioning what the press would have done. He had no choice but to go crawling back to Mr. Big…literally."

"What did…? Oh, Mr. Big was absolutely delighted, Carrots. I'd killed two birds with one stone. I not only straightened out Lanny Braunwald, I got rid of a gang of car thieves who thought they could operate in Tundratown without his okay. Two days later, I got a phone call, 'Wilde? The Big Shrew wants to see you, come to The Club.'"

"I went…and it was the night that changed my life."

"The Club' was The Thaw, a dancing and dining establishment in the Tundratown foothills. Mr. Big was the owner, off the books of course, and he absolutely loved the place. The fact that he wanted to see me there told me right away that he was in a good mood. I tried to talk Finnick into coming with me, but he said thanks but no thanks. I guess I wasn't too surprised; being a desert fox and all, Tundratown was never his favorite place to spend quality time—and anyway if Mr. Big hadn't asked me to come alone this time, he hadn't told me Finnick's presence was required either."

"Ahhh before I get into that Carrots, let me tell you a little bit about The Thaw. It was something you had to see to believe; not much to look at on the outside, you could easily have mistaken it for a warehouse, but when you walked in the door, all of that changed. Your first impression was of the color blue, everything was done up in pastel bluish white. It was an amazing place, built like a Renaissance Ice Palace; in fact a lot of it was ice…and also crystal quartz and even some marble, all of it mixed together so cleverly you couldn't tell one from the other without touching. It was a huge inside too, big and cavernous, with ceilings that seemed to stretch upwards for two whole stories; that's why it was the favorite hangout in for the city's larger species back then. And they had that most incredible dance floor you ever saw Carrots, a mosaic, built out of inlaid quartz and marble, showing scenes from arctic mythology, smooth as polished glass, but not slippery at all. There was also stage, nearly as big as the one we had for Carrot Days. And it wasn't just for show; The Thaw featured live music every night. There were meeting rooms, there were booths with private tables, and the longest bar-top in Zootopia, made entirely out of pink quartz. They even had something called a 'plunge pool', an artificial lake of near-freezing water for the locals to 'get back to their roots' as Mr. Big liked to say. "

"Yes, yes…sorry, I got a little sidetracked there, Carrots. Anyway, when I got there I was moved right to the head of the line—there was always a long line to get into The Thaw. I remember one animal, a moose, getting all upset, 'You're letting a FOX in ahead of me?""

"What? No worries, Judy. It was a long time ago and besides…Mr. Moose got moved all the way to the back of the line for that remark."

"Anyway Mr. Big had a private booth overlooking the dance floor. It was one of a kind; there were no other tables within 20 feet of it. When I got there I had to shut my ears and hang back for a minute while he did business with some other animals, a pair of tough-looking sea mink; I later learned they were Gerry and Denis McCrodon, the older and younger brother of The Mister, boss of an up-and-coming Zoo York gang called The Company. For these two, even I had to wait. Lucky for me they were just about done by the time I got there. After maybe five more minutes, they said their good-byes and Koslov finally beckoned me over."
"Well as soon as he saw me, Mr. Big was all smiles. I remember him jumping up, right out of his chair and raising his arms to me.

"There he is, there's my miracle-worker; San Niccolò de Città Felice, the patron saint of all good hustlers!"

"And then he had Koslov lift him up so he could kiss me on both cheeks. 'Come and sit with me Nick.' He said, after Koz put him down on the table-top again."

"Yes, I know, Carrots; he's mellowed out in the last few years, but that night he was like a little bundle of lighting."

"Raymond, where's Raymond? he said, calling for another one of his bears, 'Raymond, give the fox here the envelope.'"

"Okay, that was a surprise, Judy. I had agreed to take the job strictly as a favor; I never expected to get a payoff for the effort."

"That's for also getting rid of those indie car thieves Nick," he told me,' such ingenuity deserves a bonus."

"I thank you for your generosity, Don Grandi. I told him, while I put the money away; I didn't count it, not yet. That would have been an insul…"

"Don…what? Oh that's Mr. Big's real name Carrots, Antonino Grandi. It's how he got his street name, in fact. Grandi actually means 'Great' not 'Big' but the first time he got pinched, the arresting officer mistranslated it and he's been Mr. Big ever since."

"And he STILL wasn't done with me; next he called Louie Carpentieri, The Thaw's manager, to his table. Heh, I almost felt sorry for him Carrots, Lou was a walrus and they're not exactly light on their flippers, at least not on dry land. But when he heard Mr. Big wanted to see him, Carpentieri was practically a one-mammal Loris and Haredy, nearly tripping all over himself trying to get to that table now."

"Mr. Big gave him a minute to catch his breath and then pointed at me again."

"Louie, do you see this fox right here? Well from now on, whenever he comes to The Club, he gets right in, no waiting on line, no cover charge, and anything he wants is on the house. Do you think you can take care of that Louie?' (It wasn't a question.)"

"What? No, Louie actually looked relieved, Carrots. He knew I only had one other associate—so I wouldn't be coming in with a whole pack of animals and expecting a free ride for all of them—and he also knew my reputation for not causing trouble, at least not in public, (a necessary evil if you hustle for a living.)"

"Absolutely Mr. Big; no problem, sir,' he said. 'Any time Mr….Wilde, is that right? Anytime Mr. Wilde comes in here, he'll be welcomed with open flippers."

"You realize Carrots, it was all for show. Mr. Big just wanted to let the world know that when another animal did right by him, they'd be treated well in return. He never did anything strictly out of the goodness of his heart. No mobster does. 'Business is business', that's their motto."

"Yes he did, but we can deal with the Duke issue some other time, okay?"

"All right, well after Louie went away, Mr. Big and I talked for a while, not business just small
talk; I don't remember any of it. And then Koslov grunted, leaned over the table and pointed at his watch. Mr. Big looked at it, looked his own watch and then motioned for the bear to pick him up."

"'Sorry, if I must rush off, Nicky…but it's late and Gram-mamma, she worries.'"

"Yes, well it's not so amusing if you know the story Carrots; Mr. Big's Grandmother raised him all by herself, working three different jobs to keep a roof over their heads."

"But after he left…well, nobody was allowed to use Mr. Big's table when he wasn't there, so I went and found a waiter, and the next thing I knew I had a table all to myself, right on the edge of the dance-floor; Lou Carpentieri hadn't wasted any time in getting the word out about my VIA status. I sat down just as the announcer, an Elk if I remember right, was getting ready to introduce the opening act for their last set of the evening. They always had three acts at The Thaw on Saturdays, an opening band, a comedian, and then the main attraction also a musical act."

"'Ladies and Gentlemammals,' he said, 'please welcome once again, Robyn McFerral and the Hotwires.'"

"Everyone around me stood up and applauded—and I was seriously impressed. The Hotwires hadn't even walked out on stage yet and they were already getting a big ovation; a real surprise to me, since they were only the opener. I remember thinking that their first set must have gone over really well. Then the lights dimmed and I saw them take their places, just shadows, I couldn't make out any one of them individually, and I couldn't get any of their scent either."

"After a couple more seconds, the music started; the synthesizer opening from Dreams by Van Howlen. They let it fade out for a second, and then the lights came up and they hit it head on."

"And that was when I saw her…"

"I remember rubbing my eyes, I couldn't believe it; how could any vixen be so lovely? That picture I showed you of Robyn doesn't even come close to doing her justice Carrots…and not to take anything away from your sister Erin, but whoa, could she sing; the voice of an angel crossed with the voice of a fire goddess. Well-l-l-l that was how it sounded to me."

"'World turns black and white
Pictures in an empty room…!'"

"I never thought it could ever happen to me, but one look at Robyn and I was head over heels. I liked everything about her, her eyes, her face, the color of her fur…"

"Okay, yes, I thought she was a hottie, happy now? But that wasn't all of it, not by a long shot I even liked the way she dressed. The outfit you saw her wearing in the picture? That was her casual kit. When she was playing a serious gig, she wore a two-piece silk suit in the reverse pattern of her own fur color. You had to see her to appreciate it; sexy without revealing anything, this vixen knew how to kill it with understatement."

"And she couldn't just sing, she could play too, Judy. Their next number was …C-Cancer by Joe Jack…Joe Jackal…s-sorry didn't mean to get choked up. But Robyn just killed it…uhm, owned it on piano for that song. All the rest of that set, I couldn't take my eyes off her."

"I know how I must have looked Carrots, elbows on the table, chin in my paws, gazing up at the stage all mushy-eyed…like a kit with his first crush."

"I didn't care."
"I kept imagining what Finnick would say, if he saw me like that; probably razz me from here to Foxburrow."

"I didn't care."

"Once or twice I thought I saw Robyn look my way—okay, that I cared about—but if she took any notice of me, she didn't show it; I might as well have been the invisible fox for all she cared."

"The crowd made them come back for not one but two encores; that's really rare for an opening act, or that's what Robyn told me later. When they left the stage for the third time, I was out my seat and headed for the stage door like a shot, only to find out, 'whoopsie'…just because I was fully comped didn't mean I had an all-access pass. The Kodiak bear minding the door wouldn't budge, and wouldn't call the manager no matter how hard I begged. But then, after a minute…hallelujah, the door opened and Robyn came out, followed by the rest of the band. That was the first time I caught her scent, Carrots—and it's imprinted on my mind to this day."

"The table they took was right next to mine, hallelujah number twosie, and guess who was sitting in the seat closest to mine? Hallejuah number threesie."

"For the first few minutes I just sat there like an idiot, pretending not to look at her, trying to get up the courage to say something. Finally I just told myself, 'Look at you Nick, always ready to jump right into a hustle even when the mark is an apex predator, and now you're afraid to talk to some girl?'"

"That did it, Carrots. I got right up out of my chair, and said, "Excuse me Ms. McFerral, but I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed your performance. Would you care to dance?"

"I-I-I think it might have gone over a little better if I hadn't interrupted her right in the middle of talking to someone else—or if I hadn't sounded like I'd taken a hit of helium after downing five cups of espresso. Anyway, she just kind of looked me up and down for a second, and then she got up, put her paw on her hip and started counting off on her fingers. And this is what she said:"

"'Shave my tail with a weed-whacker; eat live hornets; run naked through a cocklebur patch.'"

"'I just kind of stared at her with my ears working. 'Wha…what do you mean by…?'"

"'Three things I'd rather do than dance with any street-hustler, Mr. Goggle Eyes!' She said. Oh foxtrot, she had seen me!"

"'And then the coati-mundi sitting next to her, he was the guitar player, started laughing his tail off.'"

"'And how you gonna dance with her anyway, pendejo fox, da comedian's on stage right now.'"

"'Now they ALL started laughing and I just wanted to slink out of The Thaw with my tail between my legs.'"

"'Except…'"

"Robyn had seen the way I was looking at her, and told me she didn't appreciate it…and yet she had chosen to take the table right next to mine and was sitting in the chair nearest me."

"I don't know how it happened, but that thought made me see how I must have looked through her eyes right then…how silly, and how insulting. I started laughing too, but very uneasily. Then I
straightened up and nodded. 'Yeah, Okay, I guess I blew that one right out of saddle. Enjoy the rest of your evening, Ms. McFerral…and I really do think your performance was fantastic.'

"And I got up and walked away. No, I didn't leave the club; I still had some pride left. I asked Louie to get me a different table. But I still couldn't stop thinking about that cross-fox vixen."

"What I didn't know at the time Carrots was that my move had knocked Robyn for a loop. She'd been expecting some kind of clever comeback, followed by a lame attempt at being witty and then perhaps a come on. That was why she'd chosen to sit right next to me; she'd decided to have some fun with the moron who'd been gawking at her, (or that was what she kept telling herself, she said to me later.) The last thing she'd expected was for me to turn into a gentle-fox, even show her some respect…but then that was hardly surprising considering her previous experiences with guy-foxes. That's another thing I found out later, I was perhaps the first fox ever to treat her with a little dignity."

"I planned to leave right after the Hoofers, the headline act started to play. Yes, that name should sound a little familiar to you Carrots; you'll find out why in a minute. First, decided I might as well have some dinner. But when I turned to signal for a waiter, something familiar caught my nose, and when I looked, there she was again."

"This time Robyn wasn't with her band, she was sharing a table, one-on-one, with an arctic fox. When I saw him, I felt my ears lay back, and my fangs trying to un-sheath themselves."

"Nooo, it wasn't jealousy Carrots, and for once I can say that with complete honesty, it was because I knew that other fox…and I also knew what kind of lowlife he was. Shifty and untrustworthy didn't even begin to describe Tommy Baldorsson. To give you some idea, he claimed to be from Iceland but he always spoke with a Russian accent, whenever he got angry or excited. I'd never actually met him, but I'd seen him around and I knew his history; he'd been involved in any number of different scams. One of them involved his supposedly having access to a trove of lost Bob Margay tapes—which I can't release because Margay's wife's family is fighting it. However if I can raise enough money to mount a legal challenge…I think you get the picture, Judy."

"Why did I…? Well you have to understand that even street-hustlers have a code of conduct to live by, Judy. Yes it's true. And one of the biggest rules is that you should never, never try to scam someone that's barely scraping by already. Tommy Baldorsson didn't seem to think that rule applied to him, and what he'd been up to lately proved it. His latest gig was to style himself as a music impresario; he'd take on a band as their manager and then take them up one side and down the other. When he'd gotten all he could out of them, he'd set up one of the band members to get busted, thus making their contract null and void, and then fire the others. That was another thing a good hustler never did Judy, it was okay to call the cops on your mark, but you never tried to frame him. And also…it's fine to run that kind of scam on someone without any real talent, but from what I'd heard, Tommy had ruined at least one group that'd had some serious potential. The thought him doing that to Robyn made me want to go over there and bite his face off, and not just because I had a crush on her. Foxes also have rules to live by Carrots, and the big numero uno is that a fox never sticks it to another member of their own species. We get enough scrap from the rest of the animal kingdom without doing it to each other."

"Hrm? Because I could hear what he and Robyn were saying to each other, and she seemed to be holding her own and then some. Here's how it went:"

"'Robyn this is not right. I am the one who handles the money, it is our contract.'"

"'Yeah Tommy, and it's also in our contract that you get 20%, not EVERYTHING.'"
"How many times must I say it? I needed that money to set up this gig."

"Really? Mr. Carpentieri just told me that he contacted you."

"What? Where does that walrus get off talking about me behind my…"

"Quit trying to change the subject, Whitey."

"Don't call me that!"

She ignored him and patted her pocket, 'This time I'M cashing the check; after everyone else gets their cut, then you get your share."

"Tommy almost went right through the ceiling, (and The Thaw had a ceiling like a cathedral, if you recall.)"

No, maybe I just void our contract and put the word around about Robyn McFerral is no good, then best you'll find is playing free gigs in Lionheart Park."

"Ohhhh, I could have laughed my tail off, Judy. This time Tommy wasn't acting; he really was that close to losing control. I could tell by the way he was barely holding that Russki accent in check. Robyn either didn't notice it or else she didn't care; she just kind of shrugged at him."

"Then what happens, happens Tommy… and if you ever threaten me like that again, you won't need to quit, I'll fire ya, an' I won't care WHAT you say about me. Got that?"

"Now I could hear that Robyn had a little bit of an accent herself, down east with an urban twist. And I also knew what was coming next from Tommy; he'd try to lay a guilt trip on her. But I also knew by now that there was no way she was going to fall for it."

"Sure enough, Tommy let his fall ears back, and put on the 'hurt-little-fox-cub' face. You know the look, Carrots; it's the same one I pulled on Jerry Jumbeaux when he refused to sell me that Jumbo Pop."

"After all I've done for you; ungrateful little cross-fox vixen, you wouldn't even have a band, much less have gotten any gigs if it weren't for me."

"Yes, and I am grateful Tommy,' she told him, cool as a glass of iced tea, 'But the way I look at it, you're already been repaid, what with all the money you held back from us. That's why I'm letting you have your full share from tonight's gig, even Steven, ya might say…but don't push your luck, arctic fox. There's at least one band member who thinks you aughta get nothing from tonight."

"I need that money!' Now Tommy was practically begging. For a minute there, I thought he was going to get down on his knees. It got me to thinking that perhaps what I'd heard was true, that the bookies were into him for something like five figures. If that was the case, The Thaw was not the best place for him to be right then, Carrots; Mr. Big never cared much for deadbeat gamblers—even if it wasn't HIM that they owed."

"And you'll get it, but only your 20%, and that's it.' Robyn told him.

"Tommy threw up his paws. 'All right, but this argument isn't over yet.'"

"That made my ears prick up. That arctic fox had given up just a little too suddenly for my taste; he had something else up his sleeve, I could feel it in my bones."
"Why am I looking like…? Because little did I know how right I was, Judy. Tommy Baldorsson LITERALLY had something up his sleeve."

Chapter End Notes

Author's note:

The Thaw Nightclub actually exists in the Zootopia Universe; though it never appeared in the film, it's mentioned in The Zootopia Handbook
Judy listened to Nick Wilde's reminiscences with a growing sense of disquiet. The way he'd described the Lanny Braunwald hustle, he might just as well have been talking about dealing with a roach infestation. That sort of callousness was nothing like the Nick Wilde she knew. Yes, Braunwald had been a crook, a sleazeball who shouldn't have been elected street-cleaner, never mind to the Zootopia City Council, but still…

Nick hadn't scammed that squirrel as part of any moral crusade to remove a corrupt politician; he'd done it to put him under the thumb of a crime boss. And okay, maybe it had happened more than ten years ago, but to hear Nick talk about it now, the con might have gone down last week.

(And he still hadn't gotten to the ticklish part of the story, the part where he'd supposedly done something that could get him ousted from the ZPD.)

And yet…and yet…

Nick's anger at the duplicity of the arctic fox Tommy Baldorsson had been both sincere and genuine; even back in his rowdy youth, there had been lines he wouldn't cross, rules that he wouldn't break. It gave Judy something to hold on to.

She settled back in her chair and continued to listen, as Nick continued to warm to his story.

"Only another fox, another hustler would have caught it, Carrots. It was a-blink-and-you-miss-it kind of move. Lucky for me, I was sitting directly north of Tommy, otherwise I'd never have…"

"What does that have to do with…? Hm, wel-l-lll, I never told you this before Carrots, but us foxes
can use the earth's magnetic field to navigate and to sense movement; it's how we used to track prey under the snow, in the days before we evolved."

"No, I'm serious; it shows up as a shadow at the edge of our field of vision. It was how I first got a sense that Craig was nearby, after I left the dance and went wandering up into the hills, like I said at the press conference. Any time you see me staring hard at something while tilting my head from side to side, that's how you know I'm using it."

"Well, because it's a sense that most of my species has pretty much forgotten, Carrots. Another fox who has it down has to teach you how to use it. Tommy hadn't re-learned it, really surprising, considering he was an arctic fox; neither had Robyn or she'd have seen what he was up to. Oh yeah, Finnick uses it all the time; he's the one who taught me in fact. Oh, and I'm pretty sure he taught that Conor kid… Oops, sorry, I'm getting sidetracked again."

"Like I said, it all happened very fast. Someone a few tables away knocked a plate onto the floor and broke it. When Robyn turned to look, I saw Tommy pretended to reach for his drink…but then he pawmed something out of his sleeve and dropped it into her glass. By the time she turned around again—and she'd been looking away for less than a second—Tommy's paw was already back where he'd left it; she never suspected a thing."

"No, I didn't try to warn her, Carrots; I had a better idea. Tommy had made just one teeny-weensy little mistake when he'd dropped that whatever-it was into Robyn's drink. Her glass had been almost empty; she needed a refill."

"And that's what popped the lightbulb over my head. It was time to start putting my status as Very Important Animal status to the test. I turned, and signaled for a waiter, and hallelujah number foursie, one of them came over right over to my table."

"There was one thing I knew that I had in my favor, Carrots. Tommy wouldn't try to get Robyn to down that drink right away; he'd want to give it minute or two so she couldn't be sure who it was that had slipped her a Mouse. And yep, just as I figured, as soon as she turned around again, he tried to make nice with her."

"'All right, all right,' he said, 'but whatever else, Robyn, congratulations on your most successful performance yet.' He had switched his back to his Micelandic accent."

"The band's best performance," she corrected him. She was like that Carrots; when it came to her music, it was 'we' not 'me.' Talk about a cold shoulder though, I thought the temperature in the Thaw had dropped something like 20 degrees, no easy trick in Tundratown. As for Tommy, he put on that hurt-little-fox look again."

"'Freki's fur! I try to offer up an olive branch and you nearly bite my paw off. Hmph, and I thought cross fox was only a reference to your color pattern. All right yes, you all did a great job, the best you've ever played, happy now?"

"That got Robyn to soften up a little, but only a little. 'Okay, thanks Tommy,' she said, meaning it…but she still wasn't going to apologize to him."

"I remember watching them talk for another few minutes…and I do mean watching; I don't remember a word either one of them said, I was too busy keeping one eye on Tommy and the other on the grey seal who had just brought my order and was waiting for a signal on the outskirts of their table; I had instructed him to hold back until I gave him the nod. For my plan to work you see, it had to be timed just right."
"Ummm, okay, there's something you need to understand, Carrots; I was up against a very tough opponent in Tommy Baldorsson. Don't let anything you've heard so far give you the impression that he was an easy mark—because he wasn't. He might have been a jerk, but he wasn't a bumbling jerk. He'd been running hustles back when I was starting middle school and he'd never been convicted of even a Class-A misdemeanor; that should give you some idea of how sharp he was. And if he figured out what I was up to, I wouldn't be toast, I'd be BURNT toast. But to stop him from messing with Robyn like that, I was willing to run the risk."

"Finally I saw Tommy's eyes stray down to her glass and then to the bottle, sitting on the table between them. That was my cue; I gave the waiter the nod, and crossed my fingers…and now I was listening, not just watching."

"Tommy reached over and picked up the bottle, lifting it up as if offering a salute, 'What say a toast, to tonight's successful gig, ya?' I heard him say to Robyn."

"She seemed to think for a second, then kind of shrugged and said, 'Yeah okay Tommy, why not?''"

"I saw him smile for a second, and then nod and lean over the table to fill her glass…just as the waiter arrived with the sparkling cider I'd ordered. 'Sir?'"

"Tommy stopped what he was doing and looked up, all surprised. "What, now? I didn't order this."

"'Compliments of the fox at the table, over there.' the grey seal answered him, pointing at me with the tray still balanced on his nose."

"Whoa, if looks could kill Carrots, I'd be six feet under right now and Robyn would be doing life without parole. When the waiter set the tray down on the table, she tried to wave him off so hard, for a second there it looked like she'd thrown a slap at him."

"And now, she was pointing at me. 'You go back and tell that red-fox jerk I wouldn't drink anything HE sent over if it was the only thing that could save my life!'"

"I heard the wait-seal stammer an apology and saw him reach for the cider again, but then Tommy spoke up. "Just a second, Robyn, let's not be too hasty, eh? If you send that bottle back without even opening it, your red fox there will get a refund, sure, now won't he?"

"Robyn almost got up and left the table. 'I don't want ANYTHING from that fox!' She was practically gekkering."

"Now let's just calm down, eh Robyn…' Tommy said…and I knew what he was thinking. If Robyn went into a nod after drinking from a bottle of bubbly that I had sent over, then I'D be blamed for it. Uh, what are you looking at me like that for, Carrots? Oh yeah, I was crazy, I'm a fox remember. Seriously, I knew what I was doing…and it was all going according to plan. I let them argue for another minute and then I did something REALLY dumb; I got up and went over to their table."

"I-I'm sorry, I seem to have cause a problem here.' I said. (I could play the hurt-little fox-cub, too.)"

"Tommy tried to say something, but before he could get out more than half a syllable, Robyn was all over me like a cheap suit."

"Darn right you're causing trouble you moosh-eyed jerkfce. Where the heck you think you get off sending a bottle to my table, just like that, I don't even know yer name, huh? HUH!'"
"Uh, it's Nick Wilde." I tried to tell her, and she almost bit my face off.

"No pal, your name's MUD!" she snapped…and then she sniffed, 'and I thought for once I'd met red fox who had a little respect for me.'"

"Whoa, that was like a bayonet right through the heart, Carrots, even if I was only pretending to be a jerk in order to try and help her. Robyn actually looked a little bit hurt—and she wasn't acting."

"I raised my paws. 'Okay, okay, I'm sorry…really. I'll take this away right now.' I said, and then reached for the bottle I'd had sent over. After what Robyn had just said to me, I didn't need to pretend that I was flustered. I saw her watching me for a second, and then she grimaced and let out a whine."

"Not the glasses you red-furred idiot, those were already here!"

"Sorry, sorry,' I said, putting them back tout-suite. Then I grabbed the bottle and began slinking back to my own table. I hadn't gone more than three steps before I heard Tommy's voice from behind me."

"Hey…Wilde!"

"I turned, and saw him and Robin raising glasses in my direction—FULL ones."

"We offer a toast to your wit, your wisdom, and your sense of style," he said, "which should give you some idea for how desperate a fox can be for a drink."

"They laughed, and then the both of them slammed their drinks, right at the same time. For nearly half a minute, nothing happened…and then all of a sudden Tommy got a sudden look of concern on his face. 'Robyn, are you all right? Is anythinng…?"

That was as far as he got before he realized it. I saw him put his paw to his throat and then reach for his glass again. He couldn't manage it; his fingers kept slipping off the stem. Another half second, and now he was wobbling from side to side and trying to raise a finger at me. When he spoke he sounded like an old, vinyl record, being played at half speed, and his Russky accent was back again."

"Yoooooo dirty sookinmn…you swiiitch…the guhlassessssssss.""

"I couldn't resist, Carrots, I saluted him with the bottle and then smirked from ear to ear."

"It's called a hustle sweetheart.' I said, and then I dropped the Mr. Nice Nick act and bared my fangs at him. "And foxes don't do that to other foxes, you white-furred jerk!"

"I just had time to get it in before Tommy did a face-plant into the table, out cold."

"For a moment Robyn just stared at him, not seeming to understand…and then she looked at me with big, wide eyes. "What the…? Switched the…? Oh me Gaw, did that dirt-bag try to put something in my drink?"

"I just kind of nodded sadly, I couldn't think of anything to say. Whoa, it was like pulling the pin from a paw grenade, Carrots. Robyn's ears laid back and she bared her teeth, and then all her fur was standing on end. If you could have seen her, you'd have sworn it was Nighthowler poisoning. Then she grabbed the bottle off the table and raised it over Tommy's head. 'You no-good CREEP!' I heard her fox scream. I managed to grab her wrist just in time. All around us everyone was staring, and I could see Raymond and Kevin already hurrying in our direction.
"'Get out of here, Robyn,' I told her, 'I'll take care of them, just go!'"

"Robyn tried to pull the bottle away from me, but then she saw what was coming and bolted for the stage door; I could see that she was crying. Well, I could deal with that later, but right now…"

"As you know from our encounter in the back of Mr. Big's limo Judy, Kevin and Raymond are a couple of 'choke first and ask questions later' kind of polar-bears. On top of that, The Thaw had a 'zero-tolerance' policy when it came to patrons causing a scene. I was possibly headed for a very bad situation…but, lucky for me, I had three things in my favor. First of all, Raymond had been there when Mr. Big had lavished that praise all over me; he knew I was in good standing with his boss. Second, I hadn't been the one screaming and trying to christen the SS Tommy Baldorsson with a bottle; in fact, I'd been the one who'd stopped it from happening—and at least two other animals had seen me. And third, one more hallelujah, when Tommy had accused me of switching those glasses he'd unknowingly admitted to spiking Robyn's drink; that was how she'd known, and at least one other patron had overheard what he'd said to me."

"When Kevin and Raymond heard it, they were instantly very appreciative; Kevin even shook my paw. You see, Mr. Big didn't like it when someone spiked a drink inside The Thaw, not one little bit. The victim might end up blaming the club for what happened, and that would mean a lawsuit and perhaps him being exposed as the real owner. (Eventually something like that did happen, and he had to sell the place.)"

"Anyway, they threw Tommy out the back door, and he woke up in jail the next morning with his watch and wallet both gone."

"Yes, he did, Carrots, even before he got out of the can, he sent Robyn—and me—a message, swearing to get even. But I'll get to that in a minute, okay?"

"So after Kevin and Raymond left, I figured there was no point in my hanging around the club any longer. But just as I was getting up to take my leave, there she was again, right in front of me."

"'You okay?' Robyn asked me, chewing nervously on her lower lip. 'Not in any trouble?'

"'Naw, I'm good, they know what Tommy did; I'm in the clear…and so are you, by the way.' I felt my ears begin to fall back a little. 'But how you holding up, cross-fox lady, are you okay?' When she'd fled backstage, Robyn had been more than a little upset, and she didn't look much better now."

"She looked away from me for second. 'I-I'm getting there,' she said, and then shook her head in disgust and let out a little snarl, 'Aggghh, grrrr I knew Tommy was a sleaze, but I never thought he'd go that far.' And then she screwed her eyes shut and thumped her fists on the side of her head. 'Ohhh, why did I EVER take on a creep like that to be my manager? Dumb vixen!'"

"'Hey, hey!' I told her, 'Don't go blaming yourself, Robyn. Of course you trusted him, he was another fox, remember?''

"'Yeah, right.' she nodded, looking a little better—and then looking around the club. 'Where is he, anyway?''

"'Bouncers tossed him out the back.' I said, nodding towards the rear of The Thaw."

"Robyn's ear went flat and I saw her her neck fur standing up again; 'I hope he freezes to death out there!' she growled. Sheesh, I thought she was going to bite somebody, she was so angry."

"Yes, you're right, Carrots; that was a little excessive. It made me think that maybe this wasn't the
first time something like that had happened to her…or almost happened. If that's true, I never did find out. I told her, 'Won't happen, he's an arctic fox, remember? Cold won't bother him.' Lame response, I know, but it was all I could come up with on short notice."

"But that was when Robyn knocked ME for a loop. She put her paw on her hip again, and told me, 'Okay Red, one dance and that's at it.' And before I knew what was happening, she was leading me onto the dance-floor. We got there just as the Hooferers were starting their set. They opened with the song, 'And We Danced.'"

"Yes, that's right Carrots, the same number that was playing when you asked me to dance last night. That's why I couldn't…"

"No…no…NO apologies, Judy! You didn't know, how could you have known? But now you see why I was having flashbacks about her just then."

"Annnnd…okay, that wasn't the first time it happened…happened during Carrot Days is what I mean. I'd had another Robyn flashback while we were watching Erin and Conor play the talent show. Yes, that's right. Ahhh I honestly don't know, Carrots…but between the two of them, it was almost like I was seeing Robyn performing onstage again. And it hit me pretty hard, almost as hard as that second flashback. You see, it was the first time I'd had one of those episodes in—oh, more than five years. And before whenever I'd get one of those Robyn flashbacks, I could always feel it coming. Not this time; this one just hit me out of nowhere—WHAM!"

"No Carrots, I do want to keep talking about it; I…I NEED to."

"Well that one dance became another dance, and then another and another…and then we ended up dancing the night away. When we said good night, I asked Robyn if I could see her again, next Friday. She said, 'No, but call me,' and gave me her phone number. I did and we started dating."

"The first time we went out, I tried to take her to Halibuts, but I could see right away that big, fancy restaurants weren't her style. Robyn liked little, out of the way places, with great food and cozy atmosphere, the kind of spots the locals like to keep to themselves. Being a local boy myself, I knew plenty of those restaurants, so we left Halibuts and went to this little Colombian Cafe I knew of in the Rainforest district, Baranquilla. That one was home-run; Robyn fell in love with the place the minute we walked in there. And over the course of our meal, we got to know each other a little bit better."

"Robyn had come to Zootopia from Pawvidence Rhode Island, hoping to start a musical career. Before that, she had attended the Bearklee College of Music in Pawston Mouseachusetts. That surprised me, I had never figured her for a college girl; the first time I saw her, she'd had 'street' written all over her. (In fact, she was both, as I found out later on.) I also learned that we had something in common. She too had lost her dad when she was young, but there was difference, a big one; her memories of her dad, unlike mine, were NOT pleasant ones. She made it very plain to me on our first date that she did not want to talk about her father."

"And then she changed the subject, "Looks like me and the band are going to be needin' a new manager. You know anyone who could fit the bill, Red?" That was what Robyn always called me, Red."

"With anyone else Carrots, I would have tried to play the street-smart big shot, 'Sure I do…me.' But I couldn't do it, not with this cross-fox vixen, not with her. I said, "Honestly, I don't know anything about the music business, Robyn…but I know a lot of animals who know a lot of other animals; I can ask around if you like.""
"I did, and though I never did find anybody to take over as Robyn's manager—she took care of that herself, I did manage to help her find some replacement band members."

"Yes, that's right. Remember when you asked me a second ago if wasn't worried that Tommy would try to get even with Robyn and me? Well, he did; he put the word out on her just like he'd threatened to back at the table. Suddenly Robyn McFerral and the Hotwires couldn't get arrested. And THEN he started talking to the other band members behind her back, offering them paying gigs with other acts if they'd ditch her. Only one of them said no; the rest all quit."

"Yeah, I know, but Robyn managed to hang tough through all of it. "What happens, happens,' that's what she always said. And Tommy didn't manage to walk away clean, either. When Mr. Big found out what he'd done, he felt fursomally slighted—this had all started in HIS club, don't forget. He wanted to turn Koslov loose on that arctic fox, but Robyn said no. She did not, however, object to him banning anyone represented by Tommy Baldorsson from ever playing The Thaw—and also putting the word out that he'd 'appreciate' it, if none of that arctic fox's acts were able to find gigs anywhere else in Tundratown. When I asked her why she'd agreed to it, she just shrugged and said, 'That first thing was revenge, this is justice.'"

"Me? Noooo, before he could move against me, Tommy had bigger problems on his paws. One morning, I was in my usual spot in Snarlbucks, waiting for Finnick to show, when a wild boar came in and slid into the seat next to mine. Without looking at me, he grunted, 'I hear you got problems with Tommy Baldorsson.'"

"'Yeah.' I said, not looking at him either.

"He snorted and still looking straight ahead, he said to me, "Yeah, well that bum skipped town last night. If you got any idea where he's at, I got a friend who'd be willing to make it worth your while.'"

"NOW I looked at him. 'Friend, if I had any idea where that white-furred jerk was, I'd pay you to let me spill it.'"

"He nodded as if that was the answer he'd been expecting. And then he said, "If you hear anything, leave word with Tony at the Savanna Central Pizzeria Pianeta. Like I said, it'll be worth your while.'"

"And he got up and walked out."

"I never did find out what happened to Tommy Baldorsson, Carrots. One time, I heard he'd been deported, but that was just a rumor. Anyway, I'm getting ahead of the story."

"After our dinner at Baranquilla, Robyn and I started seeing each other regularly. The more I got to know her, the deeper my feelings for her became. Not just beautiful, but tough, smart, and funny. She had a day job working sales at Savanna Central Music. I found out later that Tommy had tried to get her fired—and ended up getting himself banned from the place instead. Robyn was very popular with the other guys at that store. I used to meet her there and take her to lunch once or twice a week, and it was during one of those mini lunch dates that it finally happened.

We were just about to sit down at a sidewalk-café table, when without warning Robyn threw her arms around my neck and kissed me. Then she brushed my face with her fingers and said it for the very first time, 'Hey, guess what Red, I'm in love with you.'"

"I was over the moon, Carrots, except…there was something kind of sad in her voice, the way she said it. Eventually I found out why."
"We couldn't see each other as often we wanted. Hustling isn't exactly a 9-to-5 job and Robyn was trying to put together a new band when she wasn't working; Tommy couldn't stop her from doing that. Like I said, I tried to help out where I could; spreading the word that she was looking for musicians, and finding her a place to hold tryouts."

"I remember going to one of the auditions she and Toby held—Oh, Toby was her drummer, the animal I mentioned earlier, the band member who stuck with her after the others left, a mule deer."

"Ohhh God, what a disaster, there wasn't one animal who showed up that day with even a shred of talent. And I knew why, it was Tommy's doing. Nobody who was any good wanted to work an artist who'd been blackballed, no matter how talented she was. But sheesh, I never thought it'd be THAT bad. I remember one guy in particular, cougar, guitar player; the first note he played caused a feedback that nearly blew out Robyn's favorite amplifier. She assured me that not all the tryouts went like that, and the next time I came by, things went a lot better. Eventually she put together a new group and they started rehearsing. There were no gigs yet; Tommy's ban was still in place, but the word on the street was that he was already on the way out."

"Mmmm, well maybe I might have had a LITTLE something to do with that rumor, Carrots. After all I did know a lot of animals. It wasn't enough to get Robyn any work, but it was enough to bring some talent to the auditions and keep them from quitting on her. There was even an upside of sorts. The animals who came to try out for Robyn's new group, were mostly unknowns from out of town, players without reputations, but lots of times with plenty of musical skills. We had one guy, a pine marten out of Quebec named Jean-Guy Zibeline; he played something like ten different instruments, flute, tin-whistle, mandolin, harp, dulcimer, saxophone...he could even take over on piano whenever Robyn wanted to come out front on keytar, (big guy for his species.) By the time she was done holding auditions, she had a really tight group put together."

"Then one night I got an invitation to attend Mr. Big's birthday party on the following Friday. There was no question of my not going, but should I bring Robyn along? How would she feel, being in a room full of wiseguys? On the other paw, if I went without her, what would she think; would she feel insulted? I couldn't make up my mind, and so finally I did what any cowardly fox would have done; I flipped a coin."

"It came up tails and so I bit the bullet and asked Robyn to come with me. When I came to pick her up, she was wearing simple, black dress, which was good, and had a present for the Big Shrew, which wasn't so good. Even with all the wrapping I could tell it was only CD, a pitiful offering compared to what else he'd be getting, big diamond rings, fancy watches, one of his captains had even bought him a boat. Remember that antique chair Mr. Big was sitting in the first time you met him? That was my present."

"They were holding the party at the Timber Meadows Lodge high up in the Tundratown Mountains; this was August, and it was a warm day for the district. When we turned off the road leading up to the lodge, there was a long line of cars up ahead at the gate, waiting to get in. And there were Kevin and Raymond, checking each animal against the guest list...and then searching the vehicles; sometime they'd search the occupants too. (In the case of the rodents, two of Mr. Big's cousins handled it.) I remember glancing nervously over at Robyn, half expecting her to order me to turn the car around and take her home, but she just sat there, looking bored. When it came our turn at the gate, Kevin just gave the car a casual once-over and Raymond gave me only a quick pat-down; Robyn he left alone. Mr. Big wasn't worried about me, you see...but there were several members of other gangs who had come to pay tribute and you better believe they all got a thorough search."

"Upstairs at the lodge, it was just like I'd expected; wall-to-wall hoods. They had the banquet hall
set up just the way you'd expect for mob gathering, too; a dance floor surrounded by tables; round
tables not long ones. White linen tablecloths, and black jacketed waiters; there'd be no buffet for
this shindig. They even had a thirty piece band playing, what else, rat-pack music."

"And there at the head table was the Big Shrew himself along with Fru-Fru and his grandmother.
Robyn and I hadn't been in our seats for twenty minutes when Koslov came over and summoned us
to go see him. That made me nervous, Carrots. When that polar bear had said 'us', he'd meant us,
me AND Robyn; I'd been expecting the call to be for just me alone."

"When we got up out of our chairs, I tried to give Robyn some pointers as how to behave with Mr.
Big, but she just waved me off, 'Relax Nick, I got this.'"

"It didn't help that when we got to where Mr. Big was sitting, he looked at her first. And I'll never
forget what happened next. Robyn kissed his ring, and then she curtsied to him. And then she said,
"Don Antonino, I am both humbled and honored that I, a simple working girl, should be welcomed
so warmly into your birthday celebration. For the justice you have rendered on my behalf, I cannot
begin to properly thank you, only offer you this small token of my appreciation."

"She laid the CD on the table, and Mr. Big motioned for Koslov to remove the wrapping paper.
When he saw what was inside, he nearly fell right out of his chair. 'Jerry Vole, the Meerkat Hotel
Tapes,' he almost gasped, and then stared straight up at Robyn. I swear, I never saw his eyes so
wide. 'Where did you ever…? Do you know how long this has been out of print?'"

"'Well, that's only a copy, Don Antonino,' she told him, 'but I assure you, the sound quality is every
bit as good the original.'"

"'Amazing,' he said, still staring in wonder, 'The cover even looks aged.'"

"'Well, it's amazing what you can do with Photohp these days,' Robyn told him, looking properly
humble."

"On the way back our table, my jaw must have been practically dragging on the floor, because
halfway there, she looked at me and winked, 'Don't look so surprised Red, I grew up around the
Feral Hill neighborhood back in Pawvidence. Heck, half the girls I went to grade school with had
relatives in 'the life'. I ought to know how to behave around these guys.'"

"That was the moment I knew Carrots; I would never find another vixen like Robyn McFerral, and
I also knew, right then and there, that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her."

"Next weekend was Labor Day weekend and the Zoolapalooza festival was playing at the
Animalia arena. I took her, and then afterwards I suggested a stroll along the boardwalk before
heading home. Robyn agreed right away. 'Oh yeah, much better than sitting in traffic for an hour,'
she said."

"It didn't take me long to find the right spot; after a while we came to a pier that was completely
deserted. Heh, and I didn't even have to ask; before I could even open my mouth, Robyn was
suggesting that we go take a walk out to the end."

"It couldn't have been a more perfect night, Carrots. The sky was clear, the stars were out, and a
big, crescent moon was hanging over the hills to the south of Zootopia; even the water was as
smooth as glass—and Robyn had never looked lovelier."

"When we got to the end of their pier, no one else was there; we had it all to ourselves. I pretended
to look around for a second and then pointed, 'Look, is that shooting star?'"
"Robyn turned to look, and then I saw her ears working back and forth. 'Sorry Nick, I-I guess I missed it.'"

"I said, 'No, you didn't, turn around.'"

"She turned…and nearly fell over backwards when she saw me down on one knee and holding out a box with a ring inside."

"'Robyn Mc Ferral, will you marry me?'"

"Ahhh, don't go dabbing at your eyes just yet, Carrots, because she said…"

"'No? B-But why not, Robyn? Don't you love me?' Aggghhh, grrr, I couldn't have eaten those words with ghost peppers; even to me, they sounded like emotional blackmail."

"If they sounded like that to Robyn, she didn't appear to notice; she took hold of my paws and squeezed them, 'Ohhh Red, you KNOW I love you, more than I can ever say.' But then she sniffed and blinked tears from her eyes, "but I can't marry you."

"'Why not, Robyn? ' I said, getting up and almost dropping the ring in the water when I tried to put it back in my pocket; I was starting to panic. 'Is it about your career? Listen, we can find a way to…'"

"She pulled away from me, 'No Nick, it's not my career, it's YOURS! I can't marry a hustler!'"

"She turned around, hugging herself. I could see she was starting to cry. I could hear her too, talking to herself under her breath. 'Ohhh, I swore I'd never…I promised myself!'"

"Finally, she turned to face me again."

"'You ever wonder why I never talk about my old fox, Red? It's because he was hustler; that's how we lost him…and it just about destroyed my Ma, and me."

"She went on to tell me what happened, Carrots. I had to admit it was a pretty neat hustle, (though I never said so to Robyn of course.) What her father did was pretend to be an art expert, and make the party rounds with the 1% Crowd down in Mewport or the Humptons; in the winter he used to work the islands and the ski chalet circuit. A lot the animals he rubbed shoulders with had fancy artwork in their homes, and if Robyn's Dad saw one that he thought he could move, he'd start a rumor that it was a fake, (making sure it couldn't be traced back to him of course.) Needless to say the owners didn't like it when they heard. 'My Winslow Hamster…a forgery? Outrageous, where do they get such rubbish? 'I know dear, but folks are talking; what can we do? 'Wait, I know; that art expert who came to our party last month, the fox, what was his name again?"

"So they'd call Robyn's father, and when he'd get there, he'd be Mr. Sympathy. 'Sir, as much as it grieves me to inform you, I'm afraid that the verdict is yes, this painting IS a forgery.'"

Every time he did that, the reaction was always the same.

"'Ohhhh no, I'll be the laughingstock of the Gold Coast if word of this gets out.'"

"But dear, didn't you tell me that you'd had this painting insured?"

"'It's not about the money Mildred, it's about my reputation. And besides, the insurance only covers theft or fire damage, not if it turns out to be a fake.'"
"Well, can't you get rid of it, then?"

"It was at this point that Robyn's dad would clear his throat."

"Sir…madam, I must warn you that if you're thinking what I think you're thinking, I cannot advise too strongly against it. No one's going to even consider buying this painting without an even more thorough examination than the one I've just made. The only dealer I know of who'd even consider buying a work such as without a proper assessment would only so if it was a STOLEN artwork… blah, blah, blah…and you should absolutely want nothing to do with him…blah, blah, blah"

"Of course, there was no crooked art-dealer Judy, but the mark never knew that. Before leaving the house, Robyn's dad would always let slip a clue to the dealer's identity, 'accidentally-on-purpose.' The painting's owner would do some research, find out who he was and then send a message via a back channel that HE was interested in purchasing the 'fake' painting, (never saying that it was forgery of course…or revealing his own identity.) If there was some way the dealer could obtain it, he was willing to pay handsomely, 'and by the way, I know someone who knows someone who knows the security set up of the owner's house.' More messages would go back and forth and in the end Mr. JP Moneybags would set himself up to be robbed. It was brilliant, Carrots, Robyn's father knew that the mark would never give the cops any useful information; he was not only an accessory to burglary but also insurance fraud…and since the painting was 'stolen', whoever did end up buying it was not about go talking to the law either. Not only that; when Robyn's father would 'burglarize' the house, he would also make off with any cash or jewelry he found. And the owner never complained; his insurance always took care of everything. Better yet, not only was his reputation still intact, his friends were actually pouring sympathy on him."

"Like I said, it was a brilliant hustle, Carrots…but not a foolproof one. When one of the paintings Robyn's dad scammed a turned out to actually BE a forgery, the new owner was none too happy about it, and sent a couple of strong-arms to bring him in for a 'talk.' They grabbed him outside his rented bungalow at the Bruindance Film Festival and threw him in the trunk of their car."

"No one was supposed to get hurt, Carrots. But then they ran a red light, and a State Trooper saw it and went after them. They tried to make a run for it, but this was Mewtah in January and the roads were all slick and icy; the pair of goons took a turn too sharply, the car flipped over, and Robyn's dad didn't make it."

"Ma and me were devastated when we found out Nick," she told me, 'and I don't mean just emotionally, although there was plenty of that too. Dad had exactly $135.00 in his bank account when he died. We had no idea where the rest of it was, and we never did find out. Wasn't long before we ended up losing the house and having to move into an apartment, and I don't mean a nice one either. Ma even had to sell the car, and go to work with United Furcel. We had enough to live on, but that was it. If I hadn't gotten into Bearklee on a scholarship, I would never have made it in, and event then I hadda take a weekend job in order to pay the bills."

"She started to cry again, but this time she stopped herself."

"But the worst part Red, was that right up until the night he died, Ma and I never had a clue that my Pop was hustling for a living; he'd kept that from us both. We'd thought he was in sales; that's why he was always traveling. We never imagined he was running scams to make his money."

"She shook all over and looked away for a second, then back at me again. " Do you have any idea Red, what it's like to grow up with someone you love and respect, and then one day you wake up and find out he's someone altogether different, not just a guy you don't know, but a guy you wouldn't want to know?"
"I had no idea how to answer her, Judy, and so I just shook my head."

"Robyn wiped her nose and looked at me, "That's why I can't marry you Nick, I can't go through
that again, not again. I'm not gonna feel my heart jump into my throat every time the phone rings
late at night, wondering whether it's you, the cops, the hospital, or some guy that's gonna whack
you if he doesn't get his money back by sunrise."

"Now she did start to cry. 'Ohhhh, you red-fox jerk; why'd you have to come into my life anyway?
Aggghh, grrrr, I should NEVER have danced with you that night. I always swore I'd never get
involved with any hustler," She began to sob, "but the minute we hit the floor I knew I was falling
in love with one of you guys."

"I started to say something, but she waved me off, straightened herself up and looked at me with
her eyes flashing, the way they did when she'd made up her mind and nothing was going to change
it."

"'But I still won't marry a hustler, Red. That's never going to happen, never!'"

"Then you won't have to marry a hustler, Robyn...because as of right now, I quit!"

"To this day, I don't know where those words came from, Carrots. They were out of my mouth
before I realized it. But as soon as I said it, I knew that I meant every single one of them. If had to
choose between Robyn and hustling, forget it; that was NO choice. It would be her, all the way and
for all the rest of my life."

"'Nick?' she said, staring at me, "Wh-What do you mean, you quit?"

"To show her what I meant I got down on my knee and took hold of her paws."

"From this moment on, Robyn McFerral, I'm done with hustling, finished. I swear to you, right
here and right now, that I'll never make another dishonest dime as long as I live."

"I let go of her and got the ring out again. But before I could open the box, she covered it with her
paw."

"'No, Nick...you hold onto that for a while until you make an honest fox of yourself. Then you can
ask me again, okay?"

"'Okay' I said, what else could I say...except..."

"I opened the ring box again, just a crack."

"'Are you sure you don't want to take just one little peek before...?'

"'Put the ring away, Red...now!' she snarled. And then she started laughing, 'Ohhhh, why the heck
do I love you so much?'"

"And she flung her arms around me and kissed me again."

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes:
The story of Robyn's father is based in part on an actual events. The Baranquilla cafe takes its name from Shakira's (Gazelle's) home town.

Easter Egg: The most common of all Disney Easter Eggs, (ref to Mickey.)
Nick's Story (Continued...Pt.3)

Chapter Summary

An old concept, rebooted

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 6—Nick's Story
(Continued…Pt. 3)

Judy set the coffee cup on the table in front of Nick, and the other in front of her own seat, trying hard not to grumble. (Trust this fox to get a craving for a blueberry cappuccino just as the story was about to take an interesting turn.)

"All right, so what did Finnick say?" she asked, sliding into the chair opposite and ignoring her own latte for the moment.

Nick tapped at his chin with a finger and puckered his mouth, closing his eyes and angling his muzzle upwards, like some ancient philosopher-fox, seeking enlightenment from the gods.

Then he looked at Judy again.

"I-I-I think the first thing he said to me was, 'Where you get off kicking me outta bed at two in the morning?" He cleared his throat and then added coyly, "Erm, uh…but not in those words."

Judy pantomimed heaving her cup at him. "Oh, YOU!" She might actually have done it if she hadn't been feeling a small flood of relief at the moment. This playful fox was the Nick Wilde she knew, certainly better than the melancholy animal who'd boarded the train with her. Somehow, by some strange twist of logic, Nick's story was helping him to jettison his emotional baggage—but not without laying some of it on her, however unintentionally. At least some of what he'd said had wrung the tears from her eyes.

For a long time now Judy had suspected that that being fitted with a muzzle when he'd tried to join the Ranger Scouts had been the first, but not the only time Nick Wilde had suffered a broken heart. There had been a vixen somewhere in his past, she was sure of it; nothing that he'd told her so far that had come as a surprise.
Except…she had never expected anything quite as wrenching as this; in Judy's imagination, it had always been the age old story; Nick Wilde, back in his high school days, falling for the cheerleader-vixen who refuses give him the time of day; get lost wimp, I'M dating Mr. Touchdown.

But as so often happens in life, the reality had been nothing like the expectation; Robyn McFerral had been no youthful crush, the kind you laugh about with your friends at the watering hole when you get older. She had been Nick Wilde's Pearl of Great Price, the one so rare and special the merchant had sold all his other possessions in order to have it.

The saddest part for Judy Hopps was that she already knew how the story was going to end. Nick had sworn to Robyn that he was done with hustling, and yet when Judy had first met him, he had A), been unattached and B), right in the middle of running a scam; heck, he'd even scammed HER.

How had it happened? How had Nick managed to backslide like that? He was capable of walking away from the hustling life; he'd proven that when he'd joined the ZPD. Not once in the two years Judy had been working with him had the fox made use of his street skills; at least not for fursonal gain. Yes, he'd used them in the furtherance of his duties as a police officer, but that was something altogether different. Officer Nicholas Wilde was a good cop, and anyone who doubted it need only ask the good citizens of Bunnyburrow for their opinion on the subject.

So, what had gone wrong with Robyn; how had he failed to go straight that first time? Judy had no idea, but suspected she was about to find out.

"When I told Finnick what had happened with Robyn, he cooled down almost immediately."

"'Awwww, that's rough Nick; I'm sorry, fox.' He knew how I felt about Robyn, and of course I'd want to talk about what had happened with her right away, no matter how late it was. Mind you, he wasn't quite as understanding when I told him about the promised I'd made."

"'Give up hustling an' go STRAIGHT? Whoa, you really outta your mind with that cross-fox vixen, Nick. You…gone legit? Gimme a break; you been workin' the streets since you was in middle school, you ain't never held a real job in your life. What you think you gonna do, post a resume on, 'Hustling FOX Seeks Honest Work?' Yeah, like that'll fly. Not happening, my mammal; not…happening.'"

"I just let him go on like that for a few minutes—when Finnick gets wound up like that, the only thing to do is let him wind down—and then I said, 'I'm not going to go looking for any job, little buddy. I'm planning to go into business for myself…and I could really use your help.' (Yeah, right…as if there was anyone else I could ask.)"

"Finnick just kind of looked at me for a while, the way he sometimes does; he was touched that I'd thought of him, but I still hadn't delivered the punch-line. 'What…KIND of business.' He finally asked me."

"'Remember that idea we talked about?' I said, and then laid the plan out for him. Instead of answering me, he picked up his cell phone and pretended to dial a number."

"'Hello Cliffside Insane Asylum? Better send over some guys in the white coats, ASAP! There's a crazy fox loose in my apartment…'

"'Give me that!' I grabbed the phone out of his…"

"What, Carrots? Okay, okayyyy, I'll cut to the chase. What I had in mind was—and I'm perfectly
serious—my idea was for an amusement park, but not just ANY amusement park, an amusement park especially for *predator species*. I even had a name picked out, 'Wild Times – Where A Pred Can Be A Pred.' I…"

"Wh-what are you doing with that phone? Hey, don't YOU start. Agggghh, grrrr, at least hear me out before you start making judgement calls, huh?"

"All right; well, it all began about two months before I met Robyn. Finnick and I had just cashed in on our latest score and we were hanging out at the Sweetgum Café, in Savanna Central Park just opposite the entrance to the Natural History Museum."

"Yeah, I know; it's gone now. Anyway, we were kicking back and watching a bunch of predator kids playing Bush Chase. Yes, I know you never heard of it, Carrots; Bush Chase is strictly a predator's game. It goes like this: One kid gets chosen to be 'it', usually by drawing straws, and then the others all turn their backs while he gets into position. When he's ready, he gives the signal and then turns and runs. The object of the game is for the 'it' kid to try to reach a designated safety zone without getting caught by any of the others. Oh, and, it's almost always played by predator kids of more or less the same size; larger species with larger species and smaller with smaller. In the case of the kids Finnick and I were watching, they were all grade schoolers and big cat species, two young lions, a boy and a girl, a leopard, two jaguars, a snow leopardess and a tigress; the 'it' animal was one of the jaguars. I watched him move around for a minute, looking for the best place from which to make a run for it. He finally found a spot, near one of the Acacia trees over by the pond. Then he gave the signal, "Tiagera Falls!"

"Why Ti…oh you just pick any word at random Carrots, but when the Jaguar kid gave the signal, it was as if someone flipped a switch, the other kids were all instantly alert, I could see their whiskers nearly twitching with excitement. Then they all shouted out the signal word together."

"Tiagera Falls!" Slowly they turned…and step by step…and inch by inch, they moved into position for the attack….and then, with a mighty roar they tore after the jaguar kid, who was already running for his life. It was no use; before he could make it even halfway to the safety zone, the tigress was all over him, leaping onto his back and bringing him down into the grass face first."

"What happened next? Oh they got up and it was her turn to be 'it', and uh…what are you looking at me like that for? Oh, of course not; it's no rougher than a game of street football; there's even a 'touch' version of Bush Chase. What now? Oh, if the kid being chased makes it to the safety zone, then he or she gets to choose who's next to be 'it'."

"Because Carrots, all the games that pred kids play are like that, they're all based on using our hunting skills. There's another one, 'silent stalk' where you try to sneak up on another kid and tag him without being seen; if he spots you before the tag you're out. We used to play that one mostly after dark."

"Ahh, I was just getting to that. Watching those kids, I couldn't help feeling a little nostalgic; ditto for Finnick, and looking at the faces of the other preds around me, I could see they were experiencing the same thing. Ahhh, to be a kit again; whatever happened to those carefree, golden days, days when you could just let your fur down and pretend to be one of your ancestors, out on the hunt for wild game? It's a feeling shared by every predator species Carrots, but as we get older we learn to channel our hunting instincts into other activities—sometimes even *before* we grow up."

"Ohhh-kay, let me try to explain it another way. Remember that leopard kid who appeared with you at the talent show when you were little? Remember what he said? "I don't have to be a lonely hunter anymore; today I can hunt for tax exemptions; when I grow up I'm going to be a statuary."
"All right, an actuary, but do you understand what I'm talking about, Carrots? We predators never lose the hunting instinct. I don't mean the 'blood, blood, blood, and death' part, that's all behind us. What I'm talking about is the rush we get from the challenge of the hunt. And that's what Finnick and I got to discussing. Wouldn't it be great if there was place where predator species could go to experience their inner hunter after they got older? That was where it started and the idea evolved from there. Why limit it to grownups, why not have a place where every predator, young and old, can run with their hunting instincts? We bounced several suggestions off each other, nothing serious, just two guys having fun with a crazy idea. I can't remember which one of us first suggested an amusement park; it might have been me, or it might have been Finnick, but when the idea came up, we ran with it; we even thought up some different kinds of rides and attractions for the park. Like I said, none of it was serious, and after we broke it up for the evening, neither one of ever mentioned it again…not until the night Robyn turned down my marriage proposal that is."

"But even before then, I had never stopped thinking about Wild Times. And the more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that maybe, just maybe, it could work."

"Yes Carrots, I knew what kind of odds I'd be facing; I'd be catering to only about 10% of Zootopia's population, I knew nothing about how to run an amusement park—neither did Finnick—and even if we did somehow manage to get our idea off the ground, the city would probably shut us down the minute they got wind of it; the Prey Species Preservation Society was going to have a collective heart attack when they heard about Wild Times. I know they're something of a fringe group now but back then they were mainstream and had some serious clout. So yes, I understood the odds…and yet, deep down, in my heart of hearts, I knew it could work. I'd MAKE it work…for Robyn."

"So I let Finnick rave on for a few minutes and then said to him, "Okay, so yes or no, are you in with me or not?"

"He stared at me for a few second, and then grabbed a pillow off the sofa and shredded it with his teeth."

"Can I take that as a 'yes.?' I asked him."

Finnick spit out foam rubber and then snarled at me, "Stupid, crazy-guts, red fox moron! Yes, that's a yes. Now get the heck out of here and let me get back to sleep!"

We went to work the very next day. The first thing I had to do was wrap-up a couple of deals I already had in the pipeline. Yes, I know what I said to Robyn, Carrots, but if I walked away from either one of them without seeing it through to the end it, I'd have some very unhappy animals looking for me. And these were mostly straight deals anyway, nothing like the hustle I pulled on Lanny Braunwald for Mr. Big.

"And besides, I wouldn't have earned zip off either one of them if I bailed out…and I was going to need every dime I could lay my paws on. The Wild Times project wasn't going to come cheap."

"That was the big question, Carrots; how much was it going to cost to get Wild Times up and running? Before we could answer that question, we needed to figure out where the heck we were going to put the place. It had to be in a neighborhood that was easily accessed from the other districts, fairly close to a ZTA train-stop and with a climate that wasn't too hot for the Tundratown species or too cold for the residents of Sahara Square. Oh, and it had to be in a commercial zone; can't build an amusement park in a residential area. The obvious answer was Savanna Central, but do you remember what I said to Gideon Grey about real-estate costs in that neighborhood? It was as true back then as it is today. Fortunately, I knew of a place that would be almost perfect…IF it was available. It was an old shipping company warehouse on a pier down in Happytown, just
underneath the Tusker Bridge. Yes, I know that area's started getting built up in the past couple of years, but back then, a lot of it was empty space. So I went and checked it out and hallelujah again, the place was still available…and if that warehouse wasn't much to look at, the construction was still rock solid and it had all the room we'd need and then some. It even came with a boat dock."

"With the question of location settled, Finnick and I sat down together to try and add up the total costs for the project. When I showed him the final figure, he didn't say anything at first, he just fainted dead away."

"Okay, he pretended to faint…but he was right. I had a fair amount of cash put away, but even if I called in every favor owed to me, I wouldn't have anything even close to what we'd need—and there'd be no such thing as taking my idea to a bank. Not only was I proposing something a legitimate lender wouldn't touch with a 40 foot ledger but, as Finnick had pointed out, I'd never held an honest job in my life, and—I'll say it—I was fox. Remember what I told you about my father? If he couldn't swing a loan to cover a tailor shop, what chance did I have of getting a bank to lend me the money to open a predator's amusement park?"

"Yes, that's right, you guessed it Carrots. And that's what I did, I went to Mr. Big. My main worry wasn't that he might turn me down, it was that he might agree to stake me, but on the condition that I bring him in as a partner. If he did that, forget it, I might as well stick to hustling. No way would Robyn want to be with me if went into a partnership with a crime boss."

"Well, there was only one thing I COULD do, Judy. I'd have to come clean with the Big Shrew, tell him everything, including why I was planning to go straight—because of Robyn. Then he'd either accept or (probably) tell me 'thanks, but no thanks.' I sent word that I wanted to talk to him, and he agreed to see. We met in the place where it all started, The Thaw, only this time in back, in one of the 'private dining rooms.' After the usual greetings—you never talk to that shrew without observing proper etiquette first—I laid the proposition on him."

'Mr. Big, sir…I know this is probably the craziest idea I've ever come up with, that's why I'm being
completely up front with you about it, but it can work, I know it can. What does every predator in
this town want? An escape from everyday life, a place where the only rule is to have fun, a place
where a pred can be a pred; I have a building lined up, I have the plans, I have a dream, and I have
money of my own to kick in. The only thing I don't have to make it happen is a loan to bridge the
gap. Will you help me make it happen?"

"For a long time, Mr. Big said nothing, just sat there studying his paws while he tapped his fingers
together. That's what he did when he was thinking—and all I could do was wait him out. Well at
least he hadn't told me to get out and stop wasting his time."

"Finally, he looked me. 'This vixen, this Robyn McFerral, she means that much to you, Nicky?'"

"I told him, honestly, 'Mr. Big, before I met Robyn, I never thought there was anything that could
make me go legit. Yes sir, she means that much to me; I love her…more than life itself.'"

"I tensed, waiting for his answer, but instead he heaved himself up out of his chair and went over to
the edge of his desk, looking out the window with his paws behind his back. I remember there was
snow falling outside. Finally after what seemed like a hundred hours, he glanced at me over his
shoulder."

"'How many times has it been that I have wished that I could walk away from 'the life'?' He shook
his head, 'I lost count years ago; someday perhaps…but not today.'"

"He turned around, and looked straight up at me. 'It is good that you have been straight with me
Nicky,' he said…and I felt my heart sink. Saying he appreciated your honesty, or whatever, was
what Mr. Big always did before telling you, 'no'."

"But then he kind of smirked at me; it was an expression I had never seen on his face before. "

"'Why do you think it is that I have been so successful Nick? I will tell you. Shrews may be tiny,
but we are also predators, the most voracious predators on the face of this planet, and that is how I
got to be where I am today, by using my predatory instincts to help me claw my way to the top.'
His expression became almost longing and he started to pace back and forth, something else I had
never seen him do, "and yet even today there are times when I wish that could leave it all behind
for a while—even if only for an hour—and just 'be a pred' as you put it,"

"He stopped his pacing and looked up at me. 'Very well Nick, I accept your proposition, but with
conditions; business is business, capice?'

"When Mr. Big told me what those conditions were, it was the closest I ever came to ditching the
idea for Wild Times. He'd front me the money, but on points, and he expected to be paid back, no
matter what."

"'If this Wild Times, this Volte Folle amusement park of yours does not succeed, if it should fold
up and close down, then you will go to work for me on salary until you have made back my
investment for me, all of it, plus the vig. And if you find yourself in need of more money you, go
elsewhere for it; you will not come to me again.' He held out his paw. "Do we have a deal?"

"It was the toughest decision I ever had to make, Carrots. If Wild Times failed, I'd be working for
Mr. Big until…heck, I'd probably still be working for him today. And he may have agreed to fund
Wild Times, but that didn't mean he was a true believer…as he'd just reminded me. 'Volte Folle’…
translation: Wild Times, except 'Folle' means 'wild' as in 'wild and foolish'. And if I failed, that
would also be the end of my chances with Robyn; if she didn't want to marry a hustler, you
had better believe she wasn't going to marry a guy practically owned by a mobster."
"But what other choice did I have? I swallowed hard and agreed to his terms."

"I didn't tell Robyn everything, not about my agreement with Mr. Big. All I said was that in order to make a go of this project, I'd had to put myself in a position where if it went south, we couldn't be together. She was none too happy when I told her, but finally accepted it. At least I was trying to make an honest go of it."

"What did she think of Wilde Times? Heh, like everyone else I'd told about it, she thought it was crazy...but in her case, 'just crazy enough to work.' She had faith in me, Carrots, and she was touched that I was willing to go so far out on a limb to try and win her. More than anything else, that was what kept me going when things got tough."

"And the going got VERY tough sometimes Carrots; seemed like the minute we'd solve one problem, two more would crop up. We had to get construction permits, design the attractions, hire contractors and consultants, install plumbing, get the electricity wired up; if I listed it all, we'd be here for the next two weeks."

"Just the same, as time went by, I could see Wild Times beginning to take shape. After a while we had mammals passing by the building site, asking questions about we were up to. 'An amusement park,' we'd say, but we'd never let on that it was geared towards predators. That'd be a big enough problem when we were ready to open, much less now, while the construction was still going on."

"How did we keep that a secret? Well, one of the perks of having Mr. Big on board was that anyone who blabbed about Wild Times being a Predator's Park could count on a visit from Kevin and Raymond. Or that's what everyone thought, anyway. No, I didn't start that rumor. If I had, Mr. Big would have brought ME in for a 'talk'; if there was anything he couldn't stand it was someone else using his name without permission. Mind you, I never did anything to discourage that rumor either. Anyway, it was also thanks to Mr. Big that we never had trouble with the unions. Same thing with the contractors; the guy installing the lighting system nearly walked away and left everything half-finished when he found out Wild Times was being built especially for predators. That was the one time I had to go to directly to Mr. Big for help. No, nothing like that Carrots; he just made a phone call...to his lawyer. The lawyer called the contractor, and that was that; the work went on. That was another thing about Mr. Big; he never used muscle to solve a problem when he could take care of it legitimately."

"While all this was going on, Robyn and I were still seeing each other as much as we could. It wasn't easy, both of us were really pinched for time, and I didn't have nearly as much money to spend on dates as I'd had before. (Fortunately, I knew where to get the cheap eats in town.) Maybe it didn't matter though; right then what we needed most from each other was emotional support. Whenever I had a rough day on the worksite, I knew I could count on Robyn for relief...and whenever she was having problems putting that new band together, she knew I would be there for her. (Tommy Baldorsson hadn't yet skipped town.)"

"One thing we kept up on was our lunch-time meetings. It was on one of these dates that Robyn introduced me to her new manager, a striped skunk named Jo 'Meffy' Newsome. I was impressed when I saw her credentials, what I had been to hustling, (before I decided to go straight), she was to managing music acts. Brash and full of energy, fairly new to the game, but a real up-and comer; she knew about Tommy, but was willing to take a chance on Robyn anyway. 'Had to do it, she's that good,' she said. And that first time we met, she had a suggestion for me."

"Why not build yourself a stage and feature live music at Wild Times?"

"I just might do that.' I said to her. I actually thought it was great idea. Lots of amusement parks have built in music venues...and we could use it for live stage shows, too. Of course, I knew what
Meffy was really thinking; if I added a live-performance stage to Wild Times, it would be the one venue in town, where Tommy Baldorsson's word carried no weight. (Not that I had a problem with her reasoning, not at all.)"

"Hrm? So why did I act like was I only lukewarm to her idea? Because I had another problem right then, Carrots; the money was starting to run out; I wasn't sure if I could even finish the park, much less add anything on to it."

"If I'd had any real experience as a business-fox, I'd probably have budgeted for at least double the cost overruns we were facing. But I hadn't, and now our cash-reserves were starting to dry up."

"It wasn't anything we hadn't seen coming, and I was determined to deal with it head-on, before we got to the crisis point. So a couple of nights later, Finnick and I got together to try and figure out a solution. He was even grumpier than usual when he showed up."

"'Meetin' at an iHopped! Six months ago, it would have been Halibut's!' (He hadn't lost his taste for the fancy places.)"

"'We'll be back there soon enough,' I told him, 'Keep your head on Finnick.' (Actually, I hadn't been anywhere near Halibut's in months; once I started seeing Robyn…that was the end of that.)"

"'Well, why can't we talk in The Thaw at least? He just wouldn't let it go. 'That place don't cost us nothin'!''"

"'You know why,' I told him patiently, 'we don't want Mr. Big to know we're having cash-flow problems.'"

"Finnick let out a yip and a snort."

"'You think he doesn't already know that, you even dumber than I thought, Nick.'"

"'Okay,' I conceded, 'maybe he does know; probably he knows. But you know how he thinks; if we go broadcasting it around The Thaw, he might just take it as a backdoor request for more money. Look, do you want deal with this problem, or do you want to waste time arguing over what's already done and done?'"

"Finnick slumped in his seat, 'Okay', and we got down to business."

"We had other cash resources besides Mr. Big; one of the first rules of a good street hustler is to never tie yourself too closely to any one, single source of front money; otherwise you might wake up one morning and find out somebody owns you. We went down the list, discarding names as fast we came up with them. 'Nope, he's in jail; no, if it's not a straight-up hustle, he won't be interested; forget it, if Mr. Big finds out we went to HIM for more money…etc., etc.'"

"'All right,' Finnick finally said, 'what about Mr. Diamond?'"

"'Hmmm, I don't know,' I said, and sat back to think it over."

"I had never met Mr. Diamond, Carrots, not face-to-face; he always worked through intermediaries, usually a wolf named Woolsey…who was actually a sheep in disguise, yeah I know. Weird huh? And dumb…one sniff and I knew his real species right away. Still it was enough to protect his employer's identity; I had no idea who Mr. Diamond was, or even what species he was. On the other paw I had a pretty good idea as to what kind of animal he was. Mr. Diamond was almost certainly a legitimate business-mammal who didn't want his family and/or business associates to know he was in cahoots with any riff-raff street-hustler. And he wasn't the
only one of his kind, Carrots. Even today, Zootopia is full of animals like that, and it was even more common back then than it is today."

"But getting back to Mr. Diamond; the bad news was that I hadn't done business with him in at least a year; that's forever in hustle time. I wasn't sure if our contacts were still good, or even if he was still active. I had also never cared much for Woolsey—and not just because he was a fake and none too bright about it. I had just never liked him, period."

"On the other paw, Diamond had plenty of money and didn't seem to care what you used it for as long as it wasn't for anything extreme…and as long as you paid him back. There was just one other problem."

"I don't know Finnick,' I said, 'You know how he works; he'll not only want his money paid back—on points—he'll also want a favor from us. That's why we turned him down last time; remember what he wanted us to do? Robyn would dump me in a heartbeat for even considering something like that.'"

"Uh, sorry Carrots, that's one thing I'm not going to talk about; let's just say that I have no regrets about walking away from that deal.'"

"'Yeah, that's true Nick.' Finnick reminded me. 'But whatever he wants, he'll ask for it up front at least. We won't be trapped; you'll know right off the bat whether or not it's something we can agree to. And if we can't…well, there were no hard feelings last time, after we shined him on. Let's at least find out if he's good before we decide…and don't forget, the time before last, all he wanted was a pair of good seats for Ham-a-lot.'"

"Yeah, and what I to go through to get those seats, Carrots! Still, if Diamond asked for something similar, I knew Robyn would be okay with it. And so I said, 'All right, go ahead and see if you can get ahold of him again.' (Finnick was the one who'd dealt with Woolsey the first time we worked with for Mr. Diamond.)"

For three days, there was no answer…and then one night Finnick came home and found a note under his door. 'Misty's-On-The-Vine, tomorrow, 9:00PM sharp, table at the back.'"

"Yes, I know Carrots, Misty's may be the biggest tourist trap in the Rainforest District these days, but back before the Zootopia Visitor's Bureau got hold of it, the place was strictly a local hangout. I knew Misty's though…I knew it very well; I'd even taken Robyn there for lunch a couple of times."

"When we got there, we found Woolsey waiting for us, but this time he wasn't alone; there was another animal sitting beside him, a kit fox. Woolsey introduced him as Mr. Carson."

"I know, right? Har, har, har. But that wasn't what really put me off, Carrots. If Diamond thought I was going to automatically trust this animal, just because he was another fox, then I had a bridge to sell him; not after Tommy Baldorsson. Not! Happening!"

"And you never met a smarmier individual in your life, Carrots. The minute he saw me, he started gushing like some groupie. 'Hey, Finnick, why didn't you say were bringing Nick Wilde? Wow, I never expected…listen, can I get you guys anything? What do you want it's on me?' When we shook paws, I wanted to grab some napkins and wipe mine off. This kit fox had to be the worst actor I'd ever seen in my life."

"Finnick was nearly as insulted as I was…but neither one of use was ticked off enough to turn around and walk out the door. We slid into the chairs opposite and got right down to business. I decided right away to tell him everything—except for bringing Mr. Big’s name into it, of course.
Everything else though, I laid right out in front of him, including the fact that Wild Times was an
amusement park aimed at predator species. This wasn't because I trusted him, Judy; it was because
at that point, I wouldn't have been especially bothered if Mr. Diamond turned me down, (which he
would if he wasn't a predator species himself.)"

"When I finished, it was as if I'd blinked and someone had switched kit foxes on me. All of a
sudden Carson wasn't my groupie any more, now he was speaking to me as if I'd just crawled out
of the woodwork, and I realized that his bad acting from a minute ago had been deliberately bad. I
had underestimated him, a mistake I almost never made. Looking back on it, I probably should
have walked away right then and there…except I didn't have to; he beat me to it."

"We'll relay your proposal to Mr. Diamond." he told me, and then he slid out of the booth along
with Woolsey and they left. Of course, the minute he walked out the door, Finnick and I wanted to
kick each other for a field goal; there went our bridge-loan, what had we been thinking? The entire
meeting hadn't lasted more than fifteen minutes, and Woolsey hadn't said a single word the whole
time we were there."

"So imagine my surprise when two days later, Finnick called me, all excited, to say that he'd found
another note under his door. "Same place, 9 tomorrow; he agrees."

"You could have knocked me over with a hummingbird feather, Carrots. When we got to Misty's,
Carson was there all by himself. (Woolsey was around though, I could smell him.)"

"This time, instead of being all smiles, Carson was all business."

"If it were up to me Wilde, I wouldn't touch your crazy scheme with a sixty-foot cargo-boom…but
it's not up to me and so here're Mr. Diamond's conditions."

"The interest rate he quoted was steep, but nothing we couldn't absorb, and honestly not as much as
I'd expected. I was almost elated, except I knew that wasn't the end of it."

"Mr. Diamond would also appreciate it if you would hire on the firm of Akey Refuse Control. to
handle sanitation and trash collection at the park."

"Finnick almost jumped out of his seat when he heard that, 'Deal!'"

"I would have too; that was all he wanted? But little toot-toot had forgotten something. 'Sounds
reasonable, but I'll have to clear it with my other lender first,' I said."

"Actually I was bluffing. Mr. Big had no interest in the trash concession, but I at least wanted to
know how much Akey Refuse Control was going to charge for their services before I agreed to Mr.
Diamond's terms…and how reliable were they? I wasn't about to hire some deadbeat company to
collect our trash, not at any price…especially if I couldn't fire them later."

"So I asked around; turned out they were an almost brand new outfit and hungry for business; they
weren't about to gouge me. The customers I talked to had nothing but good things to say about
them, and so I got back in touch with Carson and gave him the green-light—just in time; our
financial problems were just then becoming critical."

"Once we had the cash in paw, things kicked into high gear. As soon we had all the attractions
installed we were ready to start hiring."

"What kind of attractions? Ahh, what took you so long Carrots? I would have thought that'd be
your first question. Let me see, I think I still have some pictures here on my cell-phone. Ah, there
they are. Let's see…all right, our big attraction was the Roar-a-Coaster. We named it that because it
was designed specifically to make the big preds let out a roar as they went tearing through the twists and drops. It's something you'll see on almost any coaster if you happen to get on with a big cat. Remember that tiger who was sitting at the rear of the car when we went on the Bald Mountain coaster back on…?"

"Yes Carrots, that's why Bald Mountain didn't particularly impress me; that thing was a kiddy ride compared to the Roar-a-Coaster; ours had two corkscrews, three spirals, a four story loop, a section built to look like the tracks were on fire and a drop that took the riders on a nose dive straight into Zootopia Sound...and I mean straight down. At the end of the ride everyone got their picture taken, looking all wet and crazy, and then we took them through a fur dryer before letting them out; a little item we acquired from the bankruptcy sale of a car-wash."

"It didn't work out perfectly, not at first; we had to suspend the end-of-ride picture taking for a while until we could replace the camera with a digital set-up, one that could photo-hop the pics before showing them. Too many animals were...ummm, 'doing the naturalist shuffle' when the shutter clicked, if you know what I mean."

"Hmmm, did I ever tell you how cu...errr, how nice you look when you blush and laugh at the same time like that? Ohhh-kay...and this was the Cheetah Run, a multilevel track that went all around the perimeter of the park. The predators started off by hiding in a thicket of artificial grass...and then the grass dropped an off they went. And no, it wasn't only open only to cheetahs."

"Because a cheetah can beat anything in a short sprint Carrots, but a distance run is another story—and we had made the Cheetah Run just long enough to kind of level the playing field. See how that one cheetah there is just beginning to tire?"

"Here's another ride we had; it was called the Catch-Me-If-You-Can game, kind of a high speed version of the merry-go-round, except as you can see here the riders are all running rather than sitting; the object wasn't to grab a ring, but to jump through that big one on the end over there. This was the game that was based on Bush Chase."

"That? That's Pounce-and-Stick; you jumped off a trampoline and tried to hurl yourself onto a spinning Velcro wall. Uh-huh, laugh all you want Fluff, but that was one of our most popular attractions."

"No, not all of them were rides, The Bite Me game for example, now where...? Ah, here we are. Basically, it was a variation on the old test of-strength game—except you were testing the strength of your jaws, instead of your arms. What you did was bite down on a fake bug-burger and try to see how high you could make the arrow rise."

"One thing I learn from watching that game, Carrots, is that it's not always the biggest animals that have the most powerful bite. Forget the movies, I never saw a lion or a tiger beat a hyena even once in that game; in fact nobody ever beat a hyena at Bite Me...although I did see a wolverine come close once."

"Yep, some of the amusements at Wild Times were geared towards specific species; Howl-a-Long was aimed at wolves and canines; Laser Tag, as you can see, was big with feline species, and for the bears we had Upstream, in which the object was to run on a rolling log and try to snatch plastic salmon out of the air. The day's high scorer got a T-Shirt as a prize."

"Oh yes, we had a game especially for foxes, it was...it was...uh, well, it really wasn't all that popular any..."

"Ahhh, it was nothing Carrots, really, it didn't even last that long; we took it out after...uh, what's
with the foot thumping? Really, it was no big deal, I don't even know why I men…"

"Judy, what the heck is so important that you need to know about one little attraction? Really don't you think you're kind of obsessing…? Wha…? What are you doing, give me back my phone. Hey, don't you go scrolling through my pictures like tha…urrrk!"

"N-Now Carrots, just calm down; I can explain everything. The Bop-a-Bunny game was only supposed to…EEEEP!"

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes:

All of the rides and attractions described in this episode were actual ideas proposed for the original Wild Times (in the Zistopia version of the film.)and yes that includes Bop-a-Bunny.

(Now you know why Judy is ready to send Nick to sleep with the fishes.)
Easter Eggs: This episode's full of ‘em.

1. Reference to a certain animal-themed pizzeria

2. A tribute to the Three Stooges

3. At one point, Nick cribs a line from Disney's Robin Hood

4. Reference to a 'difficulty' with one of the Disneyland rides
Chapter Summary

The rise of Wild Times

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 6—Nick's Story
(Continued…Pt. 4)

Judy Hopps was sitting with her ears laid back and her arms crossed, hunched into herself and looking like an angry little gnome.

Yes, it had happened years before they'd met, and yes…Nick had changed a lot since then. Certainly he was a different fox than the one she'd spotted slinking into Jerry Jumbeaux's two years previously. And, let's face it; she wasn't exactly a babe in the woods herself when it came to the subject of interspecies prejudice.

But still…BOP-a-Bunny!

The thing that had really set Judy off had been that one of bopper-targets had been dressed up as a bunny-cop, as if to mock her ambition of one day becoming a police officer herself. What was it she had said to Gideon Grey, after making the announcement at the Carrots Days talent show, (…probably right around that same time?) 'It may seem impossible to small minds.' Well if Gideon's mind had been small back then, Nick Wilde's had been practically microscopic!

BOP-a-Bunny!

She looked up sharply as he returned to the lounge car, bearing a peace offering of a double carrot-cake latte, (a replacement for one she'd pitched at him.) Yep, and there it was, that hurt-little-fox-cub look again.

"For what it's worth Carrots…"

"Judy," she corrected him, just to let him know he wasn't getting off the hook with her quite that easily.
"All right, Judy," he said, setting the cup in front of her…very gingerly. When she'd first seen the image of the Bop-a-Bunny game, her cup had been nearly drained, (and she never missed twice.)

"As I was saying," Nick went on, choosing his words carefully, "Robyn wasn't very happy either when she saw the Bop-a-Bunny game …"

Judy swiftly interrupted him. "Good for her!"

"And she also pointed something out to me," the fox went on, hurrying a little, "while our other attractions were just about predators having fun with their hunting skills, this one had us playing at trying to hurt another animal. 'You better hope the Prey Species Preservation Society never sees this thing,' she said to me, 'They won't know whether to string you up or thank you for the ammunition.' She was right of course, and the Bop-a-Bunny game was gone by the day of our Grand Opening."

Judy grumbled, sighed, and reached for her latte. All right, she supposed…she'd forgive him, this time.

Nick must have read her body language, because he settled down quickly into his chair and continued on with his story.

"On the day we finally opened, Wild Times drew a grand total of five patrons…and the next day only ten…"

"No, Carrots…that was the general idea. This wasn't our Grand Opening, that wouldn't happen for another two weeks. Our first day in business, we just opened the gates and let the patrons come on in; we hadn't done any advertising or made any announcements, not yet. It was strictly word of mouth."

"Why? Well, for a number of reasons. First off, it would give us the chance to work out any bugs and/or glitches before the Grand Opening. This was nothing unusual Judy; lots of businesses operate that way. When the Cinetopia Megaplex opened downtown last year, they were showing movies for almost a month before they had their Grand Opening. Anyway it was during our 'trial run period', as I like to call it, that…uh, would you mind putting down that coffee cup for a second? That also was when we decided to pull the Bop-a-Bunny game."

"The other reason for holding off on our Grand Opening was, we wanted to get at least a few animals through the gates before the Prey Species Preservation Society found out about Wild Times; everyone knew we were in for a fight when that happened, and we needed to be ready. Especially we needed to get some customers inside the park, before PS-PS could crank up their noise machine. We knew what was coming; they'd try to paint Wild Times as an R-rated gore-fest…or that's what they'd do if we didn't have any witnesses to refute them."

"But in the meantime, on day three we had twenty customers come in through the gates "

"…and then fifty…"

"…and then a hundred and fifty…"

"…and then the weekend came and things took off, four hundred patrons on Saturday, seven hundred and fifty on Sunday. The next morning, I was sleeping in when I got a call from Finnick. 'Better turn on ZNN Nick, they're onto us.'"

"I knew exactly who he meant by 'they'. When I rolled over and hit the remote, the first thing I saw
was the smiling face of Nina Banhados, NOT the loveliest sight in the world, especially after you just woke up. She was nutria…"

"A Nutria? They're members of the rodent family, Carrots…but you'll never see one in Little Rodentia; they're semi aquatic for one thing, and for another, they're about the same size as a beaver. In fact, they look like a lot like beavers, except with a round tail…and they have incisors THIS long. That's why seeing a nutria smile isn't a particularly…"

"Yes, that's right…a coypu, same animal, different name. Nina Banhados was the executive Vice President of the Prey Species Preservation Society—and also the City Council representative for the Canal District. It figured that PS-PS would pick her to be their spokesmammal…or in this case, their attack-rodent."

"When I turned up the sound, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry; a lot of what she was saying was pretty much what we'd expected. 'This park is going to encourage violence against prey species.' 'The very existence of Wild Times is demeaning to all non-predator species…' yakitty-yak…blah, blah, blah… Some of what she said though was just out there. For instance she claimed that the Catch Me if You Can ride ended with the animals pouncing on and 'killing' a stuffed deer. Hah, as if we could do that, even if we'd wanted to. Not only was the idea completely tasteless, even to a predator, do you have any idea how much extra COST that would have added on to the ride? And she had similar things to say about some of the other attractions; no, the Bite Me burger didn't squirt blood when you chomped down on it."

"Wha…? Oh you're just never going to let me forget about that, are you Carrots? What was it you did with that red ribbon and that bottle of ketchup at the Carrot Days Talent Show again?"

"That's better. And to answer your question…no, she didn't bring up the Bop-a-Bunny game; it was gone by then anyway. I'll give you this much though; heaven only knows what would have happened if we hadn't pulled it before PS-PS found out about Wild Times. But getting back to the story, right then I got another call—this time from Mr. Big. Instead of saying hello to me, his first words were, 'Are you seeing this, Nick?'

"'I am,' I told him."

"And what that nutria is saying…how much of it's accurate? It was one of those questions that's not a question; the tone of his voice was saying pretty darn clearly that my answer had better be 'none'."

"'Not one word, Mr. Big,' I assured him…and then I just couldn't resist; I said, 'Well except for 'and' and 'the'; those words are perfectly true.'"

"'Heh, for once, one of my jokes didn't boomerang, Carrots. Mr. Big laughed and told me, 'That's what I thought. So you're just going to give her enough rope, Nicky…is that the plan?'"

"'That's it Mr. Big sir,' I told him. Actually I didn't have a plan, but why tell him that? 'As a wise old fox once said, "When the enemy is committed to a mistake we must not interrupt him too soon."

"'That was said by a shrew,' He snapped, pretending to be indignant (or maybe he wasn't pretending) and then he rang off."

"Wha…? Ahhhh, okay Fluff, have it your own way, it was a BUNNY that said it first; I'm not going to argue with you. But when Finnick called back a few minutes later, he was almost laughing his tail off. "Awrite Nick, 'fess up. How much are you payin' that Nutria to say all that stupid
"Are you kidding, little guy?" I told him, 'I couldn't afford that kind of publicity if I hit the Prowlerball Jackpot."

"Yes, I'm serious Judy. What do you think was on every predator's mind when they heard those allegations? 'Could any of this be true?' That's what I'D have been thinking, and sure enough, not five minutes after that broadcast ended I got a call from ZNN, asking for comment."

"What do you think I told them, Carrots? I denied everything…and then I said, "Anyone who doubts me is welcome to come to our Grand Opening Celebration this coming Saturday at 12:00 Noon, we're offering free admission to all City Council members; come and see for yourselves what kind of rides and attractions we're offering."

"A clever fox…me? Wel-l-l, maybe a little. Still, I was on pins and needles for all the rest of that week. Between fending off reporters and trying to get ready for the Grand Opening, I don't think I got more than six hours of sleep the whole time. Finally, the big day came. When Finnick and I arrived at the park, I could see the picket signs from a hundred yards away. 'Good,' I thought, 'let them come.'"

"When our driver pulled up in front of the pier entrance, (Mr. Big had let me borrow one of his limos for the occasion,) that was when I saw the trouble. From a distance it had looked like the picketers were keeping off to the side. A lot of them were, but not all of them. Now I could see a triple line of protesters, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, stretching from one side of the pier to the other—and completely blocking the entrance. I hadn't spotted their picket signs earlier because these protesters were smaller than the ones, flanking the pier-side…much, much smaller; they were rodents, every single one of them, and not big ones like Nina Banhados. There wasn't an animal in that picket line who couldn't have fit through the entrance to Little Rodentia with half an inch to spare. Worse yet, the line of predators waiting to get into the park was starting to get restless. Ohhh boy, if they up and hurt any of those rodents blocking the entrance—especially with the TV cameras watching—that'd be all the excuse PS-PS would need to shut us down. The cherry on top was that the 'prodentesters' had arranged themselves so that there was no way to get to the turnstiles without stepping on them."

"Yeah, I know, I couldn't believe it either. And there, right in the middle of everything and looking all smug with herself was Nina Banhados. When she spotted me, she shot me a thumbs-up and a wink. 'Got you this time fox…nyah, nyah, nyah,' she seemed to be saying."

"What did I do? Well as it turned out, I didn't have to do anything. Carrots. Just as I was opening the door to my limo, a little pint-sized roadster went shooting out from underneath, and made a beeline right at Nina Banhados. I saw it screech to a halt in front of her, and then the door flew open and Charles D. Lutwidge got out."

"Oh, that's right, before your time in Zootopia, Judy. Charlie Lutwidge was the dormouse who represented Little Rodentia on the Zootopia City Council. Nobody thought too much of him, he had a habit of falling asleep during council sessions, as least the ones held during the day; (dormice are mostly nocturnal.) I couldn't figure out what the heck he was doing there, or what had gotten him all stoked up like that."

"It didn't take long for me to find out. He went stomping over to Nina Banhados—if a mouse can be said to stomp—and then just lit right into her."

"Hey, you long toothed idiot! Just what the heck do you think you're doing here?" Whoo, he was really ticked. That kind of language from Charlie Lutwidge was like anyone else saying...
something that could get their mouth washed out with toilet-bowl cleaner. Nina Banhados wasn't put off, though…not for one second."

"I'm doing what needs to be done, Charlie," she answered, folding her arms and looking all righteous. And then I saw her pointing at the park entrance. "This Wild Times is an insult to each and every member of a prey species in Zootopia.' I could tell she was speaking to the press as much as to Lutwidge—and also to her supporters. A few of them lifted their signs up when she said that."

"Unfortunately for her, Charlie Lutwidge knew how to play to the cameras too."

"'So, you think that it's okay to get someone hurt, maybe even killed because of an insult'? He squeaked, and then pointed to the lines of rodents blocking the entrance, 'Fine, then recruit your martyrs from your OWN district; you do not come here and put anyone from Little Rodentia in harm's way! Do you understand me?"

"Someone nudged me in the elbow, and when I looked, I saw Robyn, holding out a bag in my direction and grinning from ear to ear. 'Popcorn?' she asked me."

"'Don't mind if I do.' I answered, grabbing pawful of fluffy kernels and setting back to watch the spectacle."

"It was a losing battle on Nina's part. As Charlie Lutwidge had correctly pointed out, the rodents blocking the park entrance were HIS constituents, not hers. And besides that, there was something he had thought of that she hadn't."

"'You waterlogged moron; I know what you're thinking, that if anyone in that picket line gets stepped on, they'll sue the park and put them out of business, am I right?"

"Nina didn't answer, not verbally, but the look on her face was practically a neon sign flashing 'YES'."

"Uh-huh, right," the dormouse told her, and then he turned on the sarcasm, "And of course, they WON'T sue the city, even though it was a Zootopia City Council member who put them up to it, right?"

"That ended THAT discussion in a hurry, Carrots. I forget who gave the order, Nina or Charlie, but the crowd dispersed—the ones blocking the entrance I mean, and now we could get on with the ribbon-cutting."

"But not before Charlie Lutwidge gave me parting shot, on the way back to his car."

"Don't think this means I'm on your side, fox." He squeaked, aiming a finger at me, 'Nina's right, this park is an affront to every almost every animal in my district.'"

"Noooo, I almost said something smart, but for once I checked myself. It was a good thing Finnick hadn't heard him, thought; I don't think he could've stifled it."

"I have to admit…after all of that drama, the opening ceremony came off as almost tame by comparison. Part of that was because, thanks to the delay, we had to rush things in order to get the gate open by noon, as we had promised. I tossed my original my speech for a generic canned address and then I cut the ribbon and we were open for business."

"If this had been a movie, the day would have ended in one of two ways. Way number one, a dastardly act of sabotage would have caused a stampede, the cops would have come, and we'd have been sued and out of business. Way number two, the park would be a smash hit, so successful that
never again would the Prey Species Preservation Society dare to impugn our character."

"What actually happened was, we had a successful Grand Opening, not great but very good, and while there were no acts major of sabotage, there were still all the little glitches that come with the opening of any major attraction. The concessions stands ran out of soda in the middle of the afternoon, the lights on the Furries Wheel wouldn't work, we didn't have enough seats on the Roar-a-Coaster to accommodate all of the smaller predators, and Security had to break up at least one fight. Oh, and there was that problem I mentioned with the camera at the end of the Roar-a-Coaster ride."

"But none of those problems were anything we couldn't handle, Carrots. The fight never became a brawl, Finnick managed to lay his paws on some more soda before evening came, and if the lights on the Furries Wheel wouldn't turn on, the wheel itself never stopped turning around. When we opened for business the following day, most of those glitches had been corrected."

"No, The Chimeras didn't play that night—Oh sorry, that was the name of Robyn's new band. I'd loved to have had them, but the stage wasn't finished yet, and anyway she thought they needed more rehearsals. Hmmm, you know…that stage was the only attraction that wasn't completed in time for the Grand Opening weekend. When I look back on it, even I'm surprised by how much we'd managed to get done in the time we had."

"None of the predators on the Zootopia City Council accepted my invitation, not for Grand Opening Day at least—which didn't surprise me one bit. Typical politicians, they wanted to see which way the wind was blowing before they came by. It was only after things didn't end in a disaster on the first day that they started to show up. The first to pay us a visit was Viktor Tighrunov, the Siberian Tiger who represented Tundratown—no surprise there, Mr. Big's turf and all—and the others followed in dribs and drabs. One of them, Matt Le Brunne, the swamp bear who represented the Marshlands District even brought his family along."

"He went back to City Hall with a glowing review of the park, the best we ever got from a City Council Member. No, Mayor Gorton never came for a visit; he was a prey species, (though I've never understood what the heck might prey on an elephant.) He was never openly hostile to the park but he was never a fan, either. It didn't hurt much though, that he didn't get along with Nina Banhados or the Prey Species Preservation Society; he thought they were a bunch of cranks. The Assistant Mayor paid us a visit though…and guess who he was? Yep, good old Leodore Lionheart…and whoa, was I glad when THAT stuffed shirt finally said good night. He expected to be moved to the front of every line, and treated all of the park employees like they were his fursonal servants. Seriously, I barely stopped Finnick from biting him; had to do it, right then we needed every friend at City Hall we could get."

"Oh, yes…Finnick's official title was Park Superintendent. But his actual job was whatever he was needed for. For example the next time it looked like we might have a fight on our paws—two grizzlies got into a shoving match over who was next on the Upstream game—I had the little guy get on the PA system and tell the troublemakers, 'knock it off chumps, or I'm comin' down there!' And it worked; the quickest break up of a fight I ever saw; neither one of those bears had the slightest idea that the voice threatening to get biblical on them was coming from a fennec-fox."

"For the first few weeks we were open, the Prey Species Preservation Society kept up a steady campaign of complaints against Wild Times. They took out full page ads in the paper, they started a blog against us, Nina Banhados began appearing as a regular guest on the Win Hornbuckle radio show. (Win was a red deer and another member of the PSPS.)"

"Heh, glad you asked, Carrots. It backfired…BIG time. The line Nina and her group tried to take
was that Wild Times was corrupting the minds of innocent young predators. And that, of course, only brought more of them into the park."

"How so? Wel-l-l, suppose your sister Erin heard about a place that the predator parents wanted closed down because it was going to 'rot the minds of young bunnies'; what would she do?"

"Right and that's what the predator kids did too, the more the Prey Species Preservation Society tried to get them to stay away, the more they came. 'Heyyy, the prey-species parents don't want us checking out Wild Times; we've got to go hit THAT place!'"

"By the time summer arrived, we had the kinks worked out and everything was running smoothly. We got the stage finished in time for Founding Day Weekend and Robyn finally brought the Chimeras to play the park. It was the first live gig they ever played and they just wowed 'em, Carrots. When they played again the next night, we had whole bunch of prey species show up too; they never even went on any rides, just came to see Robyn and her guys playing. Two days later, that wild boar I mentioned earlier sat down next to me in Snarlbuck's and told me Tommy had skipped town. With him gone, the blackball on Robyn was gone too, and the very next day, her Meffy Newsome was able book the Chimeras for a gig at Barrmundi, a rock club down on Outback Island. Not the classiest spot in Zootopia, but not any kind of dive either."

"One thing I never expected though was that Robyn's success might cut both ways. The day after she got the Barrundi gig, I got a call from the manager of a band called Hollow Ring, wanting to know if I'd be interested in booking them for the coming weekend. It caught me completely by surprise, Carrots. Finnick and I had tossed a few ideas back and forth about producing some live stage shows, but we hadn't come up with anything definite. Hollow Ring...the name sounded vaguely familiar to me, so I told the animal on the other end I'd get back to him and called Robyn."

"'Hollow Ring wants to play Wild Times?' she said to me. 'What are you waiting for, you dumb fox, BOOK them!'"

"That was when I knew it was going to be a great summer."

"Wel-l-l-l, not quite; right about then, Nina Banhados changed tactics on us. No more media blitz...instead, every time I turned around the city was sending another inspection team to check out the park. We were visited by the Health Department, MASHA, the Building Code Enforcement Bureau, the Fire Department and even Interspecies Migration Services; they wanted to make sure our employees were all legal residents of the city. It just went on and on, and any time they found even the smallest problem, we'd get slapped with an order, fix this NOW or we close the park. Honestly, I don't know how we kept ahead of it all."

"But we did, and by the third week in June, Wilde Times was raking it in; seriously Carrots, if I'd told Mr. Big I expected to do THIS well when I approached him with the idea, he'd have had me thrown out of The Thaw on my tail-bone."

"No, Nina Banhados never did find out that Mr. Big had lent me most of the money to start Wild Times; I think she may have suspected, but even if she'd known for certain, there wasn't much she could have done with it. The Big Shrew wasn't my partner, he was only my lender; he had no stake in the Wild Times. And whatever else he might have been into there was nothing illegal about his arrangement with me. Just the same, I kept quiet about it…and in fact, my connection with Mr. Big caused me a lot of trouble later on."

"Hrm? Oh yes, we had prey species coming to the park all the time. Didn't I just tell you about what happened when The Chimeras played the park? Okay, yes there were other prey species animals who came to Wilde Times besides them, they'd come on a bet, they'd come on dare; one
time we had an Elks fraternity bring some of their new pledges as part of their initiation. Almost none of the prey species who visited the park came out of simple curiosity though; who wanted to spend 20 smackers admission just to see what the inside of Wild Times looked like? It was money well saved too, Carrots because the prey species animals that did come through the gates went home feeling either bewildered, or even a little disappointed."

"Why? Because, according to the rumors making the rounds in the prey-species community, Wild Times was a chamber of horrors that made Ratula's castle look like Cinderelephant's castle."

"What's that? Oh, I'm sure you can guess, Judy; prey animals entering the park, never to be seen again, prey kids so traumatized by what they'd seen in Wild Times, they needed to be hospitalized, that sort of silliness. And then when the reality turned out to be nothing even close to their expectations...there was this one kid in particular that I remember, a bunny as matter of fact; I overheard him complaining to his friends on their way out through the gate. And what he had to say pretty much summed up the feeling of every member of a prey species who came to Wild Times, expecting to be terrorized "What the heck do predators see in this stupid place; it's BOR-ing!"

"Relieved? Relieved! Are you serious, Carrots? I was horrified! Boring! That's the last label an amusement park operator wants slapped on his establishment. Lucky for me, the predator community thought otherwise."

"Okay, now there was one prey-species animal that used to come on a regular basis; a crested porcupine. I later learned her name was Penny Squillante. She was there at least twice a week, and she always came with a notebook and a tablet computer. Sometimes she brought a camera with her, and not a cheap one, either. She would spend most of the day at the same attraction, and it always followed the same pattern. She would go for a ride, get off, make notes, and then go on it again. I thought at first she might be from the press, but she never talked to any of the park employees. She spent a lot of time talking to the patrons though. That made me think she might have been sent by Nina Banhados to try and dig up some dirt on the park."

"Well, there was only one thing I could do Carrots, I had to leave her alone. She hadn't broken any of the park rules; if we banned her—that was what Finnick thought we should do—it would be perfect grounds for an anti-discrimination suit, the nicest present we could have given the Prey Species Preservation Society."

"Then one day, after about a month, Penny Squillante stopped coming to the park, just not there anymore. We all held our breath, waiting for the other foot to drop. What would it be, a front page expose, a subpoena? Were we about to be cited for the violation of a city-code we'd never even heard of?"

"It turned out to be none of those things; just before the Labor-Day weekend Finnick came to my office to tell me she was back."

"Where is she?' I asked, and he tilted his head sideways."

"Outside in the hallway; she wants to talk to you."

"Send her in,' I said. I was wary, but I was even more curious."

"Well it turned out that Penny Squillante wasn't with the press and she wasn't associated with Nina Banhados either. She was a graduate student at the University in Zootopia, working towards her doctorate in Behavioral Science. I offered her a chair and she sat down to tell me what she'd been up to over the past couple of months."
"The whole thing started when my girlfriends and I were having coffee and bagels," she told me, 'and discussing some of the claims being made about Wild Times by the Prey Species Society, back when you first opened, I mean; how the park was going promote aggressive behavior in predators, etc. I wondered how true that was and one of the other girls suggested that someone should run a study on the subject. Then my friend Becky said I should bring up the idea with my Professor, George Tarrigan, (He's an aardwolf, by the way.) "Who knows, you might even get a dissertation out of it," she said. Well, Professor Tarrigan loved the idea, and so here I am."

"What she had done was pick fifteen of our regular patrons at random, making sure they were as diverse a group of predator species as possible, from a Bengal tiger all the way down to a grasshopper mouse. Then she selected a control group of preds, same species as the first bunch, except they'd never been to Wild Times and had no plans to attend."

"That was actually the hardest part of the study,' she told me, with a laugh."

"Without getting too deep into the details, Carrots, Penny Squillante was one very thorough porcupine. She kept in touch with not only her subjects, but also with their families and coworkers, keeping close tabs on any changes in behavior; she even had them take an EEG test on a weekly basis."

"Right after she told me that news, she dropped a bombshell."

"We're still in the preliminary stages, Mr. Wilde. But so far, our results show no increase in aggressive behavior on the part of the predators who regularly come to Wilde Times. What it does show—and again it's still early in the study—it seems to show an increase in mindfulness."

"What she meant by that Carrots is that the Predators in the Wild Times group tended to be more thoughtful and innovative than the animals in the control group. They had a much greater awareness of their environment and a much greater tendency to think on their feet than the other predators. If they ran into problem at work for instance, they were far more likely than the control preds to improvise a solution on their own, instead of kicking it up a superior."

"I was floored, Judy. I had always believed that Wild Times wasn't going to promote any kind of BAD behavior in predators…but I'd never expected that it might have a positive effect."

"That was the good news; the bad news was that because Ms. Squillante was an academic and not a reporter, she couldn't even think about publishing what she had so far. Just the same it was cause for celebration and the next night, I threw a big dinner party at The Thaw."

"And that pretty much signaled the end of our problems with the Prey Species Preservation Society. I don't know how they got wind of the Squillante Study; heck I don't even know IF they ever heard about it, but right about then they seemed to lose interest in Wild Times. We still had to deal with those snap inspections by the city, but even they seemed to taper off after a while. I knew we were finally out of the woods when Nina Banhados managed to get through an entire week without mentioning Wild Times, even once, in any of her speeches. That was it; there was no show-down, no courtroom confrontation. Our problems with the Prey Species Society didn't end with a bang or ever a whimper; only with a quiet fade-out."

"By that time, we were doing well enough that I could start seeing Robyn on a semi-regular basis again. We always reserved Mondays for our date night; it was the slowest night of the week for both the park and for bands looking for gigs. The rest of the time though…I remember once when she had to fly home to Pawvidence for a family emergency; I didn't even know she'd been away until she got back. No, she wasn't mad at me, but she was none too happy with Meffy Newsome, who was supposed to have let me know that Robyn was going to be gone for a few days."
"I had started Wild Times with the idea of winning her paw in marriage, but there were times Judy, when that place was reward enough in itself. When I would walk through the park sometimes, and see how much fun everyone was having, when someone would stop me and ask to shake my paw, when some kid would want to give me high five, or when a family would invite me to join them at their table, over by the concession stands; at times like that, I thought that this was just a good place to be. For the first time in my life, I had a future to look forward to, a future with Robyn. But one more thing had to happen first, actually two more things."

"Ah, I'm glad you asked. Well usually Carrots, Independence Day comes before Labor Day, but in my case it was the other way around. Exactly ten days after Penny Squillante's visit, I was able to pay off on my debts to both Mr. Big and Mr. Diamond—ahead of schedule! I sent each of their final payments gift wrapped. (It was strictly cash with those two.) The Big Shrew sent me back a bottle of sparkling cider; I never heard a thing from that…from Mr. Diamond, not then anyway, but I didn't care. Wild Times was mine, free and clear, and I was making more money than I'd ever made as a street hustler. I had done it, I had gone into business as an honest fox, and I'd made it work; even Finnick had to give me that much."

"And that was when I knew that it was time to pop the question to Robyn again."

"I had it all worked out; next Monday after dinner at Baranquilla, we'd take the skytram to the top of Rainbow Falls—and that was where I'd ask her to marry me again; it would be the perfect setting, Carrots. The weather reports called for clear skies and a full moon, and it was the middle of firefly season."

"Instead, as soon as Robyn opened the door to her flat, I had the ring out and was down on one knee again. And this time she said…"

"'Yes?'"

"'Yes.'"

"'YES?''

"'Yes.'"

"'Ohhhh, Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!'"

"I grabbed Robyn and started dancing around the hallway with her. After about half a minute of this, the badger who was her third closest neighbor opened his door and stuck his head out. "What the heck is going on out he…?"

"I ran over and hugged him. "She said YES!" Whoa, you never saw anyone in such a hurry to get back inside his apartment and throw the deadbolt."

"When I turned around, Robyn was almost rolling on the floor, laughing her tail off."

"'Oh my God, I don't know who's crazier Red, you…or me for telling you 'yes' just now.'"

"'I love you,' I said, it was the only comeback I could think of…but it worked. In the blink of an eye, Robyn had her arms around my neck and was smothering me with kisses. Then she nuzzled my face and tousled my ears with her fingers."

"'Oooo, I'm gonna marry you, Nick Wilde….I'm gonna MARRY you!'"

"I was the happiest fox in Zootopia right then Judy, but it wasn't going to last. Within six weeks,
everything had come crashing down."

Chapter End Notes

Easter Egg, Chapter 52:
At one point Nick remembers Tommy Baldorsson trying to slip Robyn a 'mouse'...as in MICKEY Mouse.
Judy Hopps's ears were reaching straight up, towards the ceiling; her nose was twitching like a divining rod and her body was quivering as though a low-voltage current was passing through it.

She had known, almost from the beginning of his story, that somewhere along the line, Nick Wilde had stumbled; she'd begun readying herself for the big reveal almost as soon as she'd heard of the red fox's promise to his beloved vixen, "I'm done with hustling Robyn, it's over, I swear."

But nothing could have prepared her for the news that her partner's fall from grace had taken place right at his moment of triumph. "Never let them see that they get to you," he was always saying. Only, how could Judy fail to be affected by something like this? Even now, she could feel her eyes getting hot and moist.

Life, you're a jerk!

And there was something even worse for Judy. She had also never imagined that her partner's downfall might have come as a catastrophic failure; she'd assumed from the start that it had been a long, slow slide into darkness, not a precipitous drop into oblivion. Nick Wilde…on top of the world one day, bottom of the heap the next? That was almost too painful to contemplate, especially in light of everything she'd heard so far.

What the heck could have happened? How had Wild Times—and Nick Wilde—been brought down so swiftly?

Judy wasn't sure that she wanted to know, but at the same time, she had to know. At that moment she was a moth circling a candle flame…a particularly apt analogy, as she was about to find out for herself.
"Finnick's call came in at about one o'clock in the morning; it was Monday, two days after Halloween."

"It had been our biggest weekend since the end of summer—and we'd been ready for it; after all, who doesn't want to get scared on Halloween? We'd laid it on huge for the occasion, adding spooky props to all the rides, holding contests for the scariest and most creative costumes, selling Halloween treats at all the concession stands and booking 'Nothing to Fear', an Oinko Boinko tribute band to play the stage. (Meffy Newsome found them for us.) What made it an especially great time was that we were finally able to keep the profits from a holiday weekend for ourselves; we didn't have to fork it all over to our backers."

"I can still remember the first thing I said to Finnick when I picked up the phone. 'This had better be good, Mini-Me.'"

"It wasn't good—it was the WORST. In two seconds, I was fully awake and throwing on my clothes; this was the first and only time I had ever heard Finnick getting all choked up."

"Nick," he was almost sobbing, "Nick, you gotta get down here. Wild Times, it's on FIRE!"

"Before I made it to within even a mile of the park, I knew that this was no small dumpster fire; the flames were so intense, I could have turned off my headlights and it wouldn't have made any difference. And that's not even mentioning the smoke, a big, thick column of smoke that seemed to stretch all the way upwards to infinity and beyond; I found out later that they'd had to close the Tusker Bridge because of it; the smoke was that dense."

"When I finally made it to Wild Times, there was almost nothing left of the place; only a burning, blackened skeleton. Ever seen any of those old movies of the Horndenburg going up? That's what it looked like. The Furries Wheel and the Skydance ride had already fallen into the water, and the pier was sagging in the middle like an old, swaybacked couch; it never did collapse though, heaven only knows why."

"They'd tried, Carrots, the Zootopia Fire Department had really tried to save Wild Times, I have to give them that. They sent fire trucks, fireboats; they even dropped a load of fire-retardant on the park from an air tanker. It was no use. Wild Times was doomed even before the first alarm was called in. I found out why later on."

"It took me a good 20 minutes to argue my way through the police line. It wasn't the cops' fault; by that time, at least three other animals had shown up, claiming to be me. (Why, I still don't know.) I might never have gotten through at all if Finnick had spotted me from the other side and told them to let me in. When I finally caught up with him, he filled me in on what had happened."

"By either good luck or bad, Finnick lived right near Wild Times; he could almost see the Furries Wheel from his front window. He'd been up, fixing himself a late-night snack when he happened to notice that the street lights outside his window seemed unusually bright this evening…and why were they some weird, greenish color? That was when he caught the first whiff of smoke."

"Finnick may have trouble controlling his temper sometimes Carrots, but he never gives in to panic; he called 9-1-1 first, and THEN ran to check on the park. When he got there, he found out someone else had called it in ten minutes before he did, but it was still the right thing to do."

"He told me, 'by the time I got here, the whole place was already on fire, Nick. The ZFD was on the scene, but even something like ten fire trucks, an' two fire-boats, it was like trying to put on a bonfire with a squirt-gun. That's when I called you.'"
"What really stunned me, Judy was that I hadn't been on the road for even half an hour before I got there and Wild Times was already a total loss; it had gone up *that* fast?"

"Yes, you're right Carrots. That was *my* first thought too, but I'll get to that in a minute."

"By now, the press corps had started to arrive; it took less than half a minute for a reporter to recognize me, and then the next thing I knew, there were TV cameras all over me and flashes popping everywhere...at least until the cops ordered the media to get back behind the line. Good thing, too...Finnick was halfway ready to bite the next animal that flipped off a camera in his face. Then I felt a paw on my shoulder, and when I spun around, it was Robyn. How she'd gotten through the police cordon without being stopped, I had no idea, but I had never needed her more than I did right then...although I didn't realize it at first."

"Sorry Red, it's for your own good,' she told me, and then she slapped me across the face. I was so surprised, I almost fell over backwards."

"Wh-What did you do that f-for?" I asked her, and that was as far as I got before it hit me; all my work, all my hopes, all my dreams—gone, just like that."

"I started to cry, I couldn't help it. I don't think I'd cried so hard since the night those other kids put a muzzle on me. But this time it was different; this time, someone was there for me. Never let them see that they get to you...but that didn't apply to Robyn; with her I could be vulnerable. When I felt my knees starting give way, she caught me and held me up."

"That's it Red, don't try to hold it in; it'll just hurt even more if you try keep it all inside; let it out Nick, let it go.' And then she started crying too, 'Oh Nick, I'm so sorry!'"

"I remember the two us sinking to our knees, just holding each other and crying like cubs. No words passed between us, but I had never felt closer to her than I did at that moment."

"The rest of that night—excuse me, morning—is a blur to me. Robyn took me home and put me to bed, that's the only thing I remember."

"The next day, the ZFD confirmed what Finnick and I had suspected all along; the fire at Wild Times had been deliberately set, there'd been traces of accelerant all over the water beneath the pier, a mixture of gasoline and polyfoam, what the fire captain referred to as 'Poor Mammal's Napalm.' (The polyfoam was what had given flames that greenish tint.)"

"We'll be turning it over to the ZPD from here on out, Mr. Wilde." he told me, "But there's no doubt, in my mind at least, that this is a case of arson."

"When Finnick heard that, he was ready to explode; I had to get him away from there fast before he said something that could bring us even more trouble. He knew who was responsible for that fire, we both did—The Prey Species Preservation Society."

"No, no Carrots, that's not what I mean; no, they didn't go out and hire anybody to burn down Wild Times, of course not. What we thought had happened—what we were *certain* had happened—was that some militant, anti-predator nutjobs had been 'inspired' by The Society's campaign against to the point where they'd decided to take matters into their own paws. Finnick and I didn't dare say so publicly of course; we'd have had an anti-defamation suit on our paws, on top of everything else. That was why I had to practically drag the little guy away from there, before he could start spouting off."

"We went to the Dockside Diner—there were no Snarlbuck's in that part of town back then—and I
tried to put the best face on things."

"Thank goodness we upgraded our insurance last month, little guy. No way are we not covered for an arson-fire. We'll be back in business before we know it, don't you worry."

"Finnick—rhymes-with-cynic—wasn't reassured. 'IF our insurance company don't find some excuse not to pay then claim,' he reminded me, 'You still a fox, Nick…and so am I, don't ever forget that.'"

"That was true, Carrots…but so was something else."

"I don't know Finnick; it's going to be awfully hard for them to deny our claim after all those fire inspections the City of Zootopia laid on us, especially that last one, where we got a clean bill of health. Uh, are you going to drink that coffee or just keep stirring it?"

"Finnick slammed down his mocha in a single gulp and just glowered at me for minute."

"When he finally spoke up, he said, 'Speaking of which, you did call the insurance company, right?''"

"Oh-kayyyy, now it was MY turn to lay my ears back."

"'No, I'm waiting for them to call ME,' I snapped, "Yeah, I called them! I've got a meeting with an adjuster, later this afternoon.'"

"Okay, yes, I admit it; I was probably a little too snippy with Finnick. But after everything else that had happened, I didn't need to have my intelligence insulted, too."

"The adjuster turned out to be the typical insurance animal, long on assurances, and short on any promises of recompense. Nothing unusual there, but I was still nervous. Finding an insurance company to underwrite Wild Times had been almost as difficult as getting financing for the place. At the end of the day Finnick had been right; it was still an amusement park for predators, and I was still a fox. Because of that, we'd had to settle for an insurer that was anything but the most reputable firm on the planet."

It didn't help much either that the animal the insurance company sent turned out to be a lemming. No, not because I was a fox again…although you're right Carrots, that didn't help the situation either. No, it was because there's no animal anywhere that follows the company line more closely than a lemming; everything he told me sounded as if he was reading it off a teleprompter. 'We really need to have a look at that pier before we start quoting figures, Mr. Wilde….blah, blah, blah…'"

"Wha..? Hee-hee, ha-ha Haw, Haw, Haw! Yeah, you're right Judy; it's too bad I wasn't running the pawpsicle hustle back then."

"For the next two days, Finnick and I were in limbo. It took 48 hours for the Wild Times pier to cool down enough so that anyone could venture out onto it. And when the Arson Squad finally…"

"Mrrrf…never, ever tell yourself, 'There's nothing that can shock me worse than this,' Carrots; that one's right up there with 'The check's in the mail.'"

"Wild Times had been completely gutted—the only time I went out there before the arson investigators showed up, I had to leave before I started crying again. There was nothing left but a pile of black and a few jutting ribs; everything else was gone. Even so, the ZPD's Arson Squad was able to make two big discoveries. The first one was…the closest thing to an undamaged area in the
park was where my office had been. And when the investigators finally located it, the first thing
they saw was that the door to my office safe had been left hanging open…and there was nothing
inside, not even a thimble-full of ashes. That told them that this was no mere firebombing, we'd
been robbed first. Later on, they were able to determine that all the cashboxes in the concessions
stands had been emptied too…and all the food and whatnot in the supply barn had been also been
stolen. The arsonists had even made off with my office computer—but not for the reasons I
thought. They hadn't taken it in order to sell it; in fact, they'd gotten everything they wanted out of
it before they even came to the park. They had grabbed it simply to cover their tracks, but the arson
investigators didn't figure that out until later. When they did it told them that whoever had torched
the park had come equipped with some serious computer savvy. An amateur would have just left
my computer for the fire to destroy. Not these animals; they knew how far computer forensics had
come in the past few years."

"And that leads me to the Arson Squad's other big discovery, Carrots. The animals who'd torched
Wild Times hadn't been any revenge-minded militia types; they'd been professionals, experts who'd
known exactly what they were doing, 'probably had at least some military training,' is what the
lead investigator told me."

"Why? Because the incendiary device they'd used had been far, far too sophisticated to have been
the work of an amateur; it'd had 'expert construction job' practically stamped all over it."

"First of all, the arsonists—the cops were certain there had been more than one of them—had
constructed their firebomb out of readily available materials, stuff you can find almost anywhere,
things that absolutely couldn't be traced. They had even 'borrowed' a few items from the park to
build the device—and they'd used it to create something only a professional arsonist would know
how to put together."

"Okay Carrots, it gets a little technical here, but I'll try to keep it simple. What the arsonists did
first they snagged one of the big, 75-gallon wastebaskets from out by the exit and set it in the
middle of the floor. Then they gathered up all the dust and from our two big shop vats and the
sweeper we used to clean the parking lot. Next, they packed half of the dust and sweepings around
six pounds of Sodium Azide, and six pounds of gunpowder, put it inside the trash bin, and dumped
the rest of floor-dust on top of it. Gunpowder, as you know, is the easiest thing in the world to find;
you can pick it up at any gun shop, no ID or waiting period required. As for Sodium Azide, it's the
propellant used to inflate the air-safety bags in older model cars; you can find all you want in just
about any automobile junkyard. Takes a lot to set it off, but it's got one heckuva fast expansion
rate; that's why the arsonists used it."

"I'm getting to that Carrots, hang on, okay? Last, but not least, they wired the device to a disposable
user phone, and spread that homemade napalm all around the park; that was their insurance policy,
in case the fire bomb didn't finish the job. Then they left and called the cell phone from a safe
distance."

"Here's how it worked. When the bomb activated, the first thing to detonate was the Sodium
Azide; what that did was electrify the dust and propel it into every corner of the building. Then the
gunpowder, a much slower explosive, went off, causing the dust itself to ignite…and whoompf,
Wilde Times was on fire from one end to the other."

"A grain-elevator explosion…? Mmmm. I never heard of anything like that before Carrots, but I'll
take your word for it. Anyway, when the napalm caught, Wild Times was as good as finished; the
only thing the ZFD could do was try to prevent the blaze from spreading to any of the surrounding
buildings."
"I was stunned, Carrots. This had been a professional job? Who the heck would go to the trouble of hiring experts to take down my park? Even the most militant prey species in Zootopia didn't hate Wild Times THAT much. During our clashes with the Prey Species Preservation Society, I had always tried to keep a low profile and avoid offending anybody as much as possible. But the further the investigation went, the more it looked like the fire had been set by a team of experts. They'd known exactly where to place the napalm in order to cause the most damage; they'd known precisely how to disable Wild Times's alarm system; they'd even clocked out the schedule of the security patrol we'd hired. (Waste of money, their guys never saw, heard, or smelled a thing...or that's what they told the ZPD anyway."

"One other thing that episode taught me never to say to myself is, 'Well, at least thing can't get any worse. Less than a week after the fire, a check I'd written on Wilde Time's account came back marked, 'insufficient funds'. The arsonists had hacked into our savings and checking accounts and emptied them both. At first I thought they must have used the computer they'd taken from my office, but I was soon disabused of that notion. Three days after that, I received a phone-call from Aravark, the food supply warehouse that serviced Wild Times. 'When are you going to make good on your outstanding account?' they asked me. 'What outstanding account?' I said, 'We're all paid up through November.' 'Not according to our records' the animal on the other end told me, and that was when I found out that the arsonists had been inside our computer database long before the fire. They'd been ordering large quantities of food and beverages on our account and had it delivered to our warehouse up in the Meadowlands. Fine, except we didn't HAVE a warehouse in the Meadowlands. By the time the cops got there, the place had been cleaned out. But even before then... As soon as I got off the phone with Aravark, I started checking up on our other accounts and found that it hadn't been just them; the arsonists had made all kinds of bogus purchases in the name of Wild Times. They bought cleaning supplies, electrical supplies, fuel, anything they could unload quickly; they'd even managed to purchase two 'company' cars for the park and everything had been bought on credit; we were not only broke, we were six figures in the hole...and now I understood what had really happened; we hadn't just been robbed and had our business burned down, someone had busted us out, one of the oldest rackets in the book."

"No Carrots, I never suspected Mr. Big. He'd been known to bust out businesses in the past...but only if the owner had tried to get cute with him. Me, I'd been up front with the Big Shrew from our very first meeting; for him to have busted out Wild Times after that would have been a thoroughly dishonorable act—and this was an animal that lived, breathed, ate, drank, and slept honor. Just the same, I asked to see him; only to find out that he was away, doing six months for contempt in Llamapoc Pentitentiary. I went down to talk to him anyway; this kind of situation was way over my head. When I got there, I was escorted to the Captain's office and left alone for nearly an hour. Then one of the trustees came in, not a polar bear but a big musk ox. He set Mr. Big down on the desktop and left us alone."

"For once, the Big Shrew wasn't in the mood for small talk; he skipped the greetings and got right down to business."

"'You need to go on the lam Nick, you need to get out of town and right now!'"

"What, was he crazy? I wasn't going anywhere, not if it meant leaving Robyn behind, (and it would have.) I never said any of this to him, of course. But I did ask why he thought I needed to skip town. Before answering me, I saw him grind his teeth a few times. And then he said, 'Whoever torched your place had someone on the inside, Nick—and if I know that, then so do the cops. And the next place they're going to go is that the inside animal was you.'"

"Me?' I said. Oh no, he couldn't be serious."
"He was. "Shut up and listen fox; you're in serious trouble here. When have you ever seen a joint get busted out where the owner wasn't in on it? Or they at least where they knew what was happening, even if they couldn't do anything to stop it."

"I felt my heart fall into the floor. Mr. Big was right and I knew it. And in fact it was worse than he said. I owned Wild Times, lock, stock, and barrel; I could never make the claim that I'd been coerced into busting it out. AND I was fox, a fox who managed to make an enemy out of practically the entire Prey Species, Preservation Society; it wouldn't be long before they came looking for some payback. Even so, I tried to make a half-hearted protest. "Mr. Big, I didn't do it, someone hacked into my computer, and..."

"He just leaned forward in his chair, 'Can you PROVE that, Nick?'"

"No, I couldn't; I got out of there fast and headed straight back to Zootopia to get packed."

"But it was already too late, when I pulled up into my driveway, two police cruisers pulled in behind me, blocking any escape. The next thing I knew I had a pair uniforms drawing down on me with tazers. 'All right, out of the car and keep your paws where we can see them.'"

"I got out, and was immediately put on the ground and cuffed. When they stood me up again there was Detective Lieutenant Sammy Maines, the lion who'd been the lead investigator on the Wild Times arson-fire. Up until then, he'd been treating my with a little sympathy; now he looked like he wanted to duct tape me to a wall and use me for target practice."

"Nicholas Piberius Wilde, you are under arrest, for fraud and accessory to arson. Carbo, read him his rights."

"I'll skip over what happened next, Carrots. We've taken enough suspects into custody ourselves to know. When they got me down to the precinct..."

"Yes Judy, I did put on my application to the ZPD that I'd never been arrested; I lied. But didn't I warn you? Didn't I say when we started this, that part of what I had to tell you could get me kicked off the force? Well, this is that part. And think for a second; you're hearing it from me, not from anybody else. At least wait until you get the whole story before you pass judgement...please?"

"Thanks Carrots. So...they brought me down to the precinct, this was the old Precinct 3, before it closed, and the first thing I saw was that they had Finnick in custody too. They let us see each other but not talk to each other, and you know why, I think."

"Right, exactly. Next, they brought me down to interrogation and let me sweat for a little while. And then finally, Detective Maines came in with a big smile on his face. The first thing he said was, 'Finnick already told us everything Wilde, so you might as well come clean too."

"As IF! I looked at him and said, "Without a lawyer present? Sorry. Finnick's a little smarter than that ...and by the way, I'm not saying anything either until I get an attorney. That wiped the smile off his chops in a big hurry."

"Yes, I know, but I was still in some serious trouble, Carrots. Like the old saying goes, lawyers don't come cheap, and they don't come at all if they don't get what they want. And thanks to the robbery I didn't have two pennies to rub together; I'd have to make do with a public defender. The animal assigned to me was a leopard cat named Dale Flowers. Smart kid...but I do mean 'kid', only two years out of law school and as green as an algae bloom. Still, the city had fulfilled their obligation, and now the questioning could begin."
"They used all the standard tricks, Carrots; good cop/bad cop, we already have you dead to rights, you're only making it tougher on yourself...do I really need to share all the details?"

"Didn't think so; well, after about two hours of this runaround—it felt like fifty—someone knocked on the door and a caribou in plainclothes came in. I made him right away; with that perfectly pressed suit and that silk tie in a Windsor knot, he could only have come from the DA’s office...uh, this was before it became the Office of the Attorney General. He looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't quite place him. One thing I did understand right away was that this was a mammal that knew his game; neither friendly nor hostile, he was all, strictly business."

"After introducing himself—Clark Muskegg, Deputy Chief Prosecutor for the City of Zootopia—he began reading off the list of charges I was facing; accessory to arson, reckless endangerment, fraud, insurance fraud... It must have taken him ten minutes to finish that recital. When he got done with that, he started going over the penalties that each of the charges carried. Then he said to me, 'There are two ways this can go Nick, you can either try to cut a plea deal; the Mammals are willing to negotiate but only up to a certain point, or you can continue to waste everyone's time by stonewalling, in which case I intend to ask for the maximum on each and every one of these charges. Either way, if I were you, I wouldn't make any plans for the next few years.'"

"He stopped to let that sink in for a second. When I glanced over at my attorney, I saw him sitting with his pawlms turned upwards, as if he were praying for me to take the plea deal. But before either one of us could say anything, Muskegg leaned in close and lowered his voice...

"'Or, there's a third option, Wilde. Help us out and we'll put you in the program; you'll do a year tops in minimum security.'"

"It took me exactly three seconds to figure out what he meant, and then everything fell into place; it wasn't ME they wanted, it was Mr. Big—and The Big Shrew had known it; that was why he'd been so eager for me to get out of town. I was a pawn in this game, nothing more."

"Carrots, I never had to work so hard not to bare my fangs. I told him, "I have nothing more to say to you, Mr. Prosecutor...except that you've arrested an innocent fox.""

"He leaned in close again, "That's right Wilde...a fox. And what was it they used to call an arson-job, back in the old days? There's no way I won't get a conviction on you if we go to trial, count on it." He said this while looking at my attorney, a small reminder of how little I had in the bag. "And when I do, you can kiss your freedom buh-bye...for a long, long time."

"He got up and walked out and they took me to a holding cell."

"No Carrots, I never considered his offer, not even for a second. It would have meant pleading guilty to something I hadn't done for one thing. For another it would have cost me something even more precious to me than my freedom; it would have cost me Robyn. If I said that I'd had anything at all to do with that fire, it would have been tantamount to admitting that Wilde Times had been nothing but a hustle all along, the biggest I'd ever pulled—and Robyn would have been gone in a flash. Besides, by then I was completely certain than I'd that Mr. Big hadn't had anything to do with the fire either—and not just for the reasons I already mentioned. Whoever had busted out Wild Times had owned some pretty darn serious hacking skills, and that wasn't how the Big Shrew worked, not at all. He hated computers, wouldn't have one around and no one in the gang was allowed to mess with them either. He wouldn't even let Fru-Fru have one. 'A computer is an indictment waiting to happen,' is how he always described them. And now, for the first time, I was beginning to understand what he meant."

"And even if I hadn't been so sure Mr. Big wasn't involved, there was nothing I could have given
the D.A. on him anyway…not without lying, and that was a line I wouldn't have crossed with ANYBODY, not just him. I still had some pride left."

"Hummm, I'll answer your second question first. No, Robyn stuck by me, all the way; she never stopped believing for an instant that I was innocent. Looking back, I think that having her in my corner was what got me through that time. As for Mr. Big, yes, I'll admit it; I was worried that he might try to silence me, just to play it safe. Show me a mob boss who ISN'T paranoid and I'll show you an animal sleeping with the fishes. I didn't need to fret though; my second week in jail, I was sitting in the yard with Finnick, when a black bear I didn't recognize came up to us."

"'Mind if I sit down?' he asked. (In the slam, you never take a seat without asking first.) Finnick and I nodded, and he took the bench seat next to mine. After that, he didn't waste words."

"'The big guy knows you two been a pair of stand-up foxes,' he said, 'and he appreciates it. There's nothing he can do for you right now, you understand, but he knows and he'll remember.'"

"And then he got up and left without another word. I was relieved, but I was also disappointed. Mr. Big wasn't going to ice me, but he couldn't help me either, not with the DA gunning for him; I knew that much if nothing else. Still…it hit me hard. I needed all the help I could get right then; my court-appointed attorney was turning out to be worse than useless. He'd showed up nearly an hour late for my arraignment and then nearly had a melt-down when I pleaded not guilty to all the charges. At my bail hearing, the judge practically laughed him out of the courtroom. 'Set bail for a FOX? Why don't we just buy him a plane ticket, while we're at it? Motion denied!' It wasn't entirely Flowers' fault Carrots, I was one of something like ten different cases he'd been assigned to handle; par for the course for a public defender, or at least it was back in those days."

"And that was only one three strikes against me. If I hadn't been stuck with a Public Defender for an attorney, if the prosecutor hadn't been hoping to boost his career by convicting me, (meaning he was going to use every resource at his disposal to put me away,) and if—I'll say it again—if I hadn't been a fox, I might have had a chance at beating the case, or that's what I thought at the time. The Mammals had plenty of evidence against me and at least three witnesses to back it up, but all of their evidence was circumstantial, and at least two of their witnesses were felons who'd agreed to testify in exchange for reduced sentences."

"No Carrots, there wasn't any forensic evidence, but this was an arson case remember? Most of the time in an arson fire there's no forensic evidence anyway, it just burns up along with everything else—and juries know to expect that."

"All right, let's start with the circumstantial evidence. First of all, the arsonists had known exactly where to spread their homemade napalm. I'd been aware of that, but what I hadn't known was that the pattern had corresponded almost exactly with the ZFD's last inspection of Wild Times. Where their report had said we were most at risk was where the arsonists had dumped the napalm…and the cops found a copy of it when they searched my apartment."

"Oh, you know why Carrots; those reports are supposed to be confidential. Except for Finnick and myself, no one outside of the Zootopia Fire Department was supposed to have had access to it."

"Moving right along…like I said, the arsonists had also known how to disable our alarm system, and the ZPD had found the schematics for Wilde Time's alarm set up on my laptop at home…fully encrypted, and only I knew the password."

"Yes Carrots, they had one more piece of circumstantial evidence. And I already told you; I was a fox. Back in the old days, if you wanted someone to burn down a property, you hired a member of my species for the job. The practice was so commonplace that cop-slang for an arson job in those
"Ahhh sorry, I still get a little bitter when I think about it sometimes. As for the witnesses, they had two park employees, one of whom claimed to have seen me emptying my office safe before I left for the night, and another who said he'd seen me scoping out the area where the 'dust-bomb' had been planted. There was also a park patron who said she'd seen me leaving with a duffel bag slung over my shoulder after the park closed. Yes, I had but the only thing in there was few changes of clothes, not the money from my office safe. The most damaging witness though, was…remember that chop-shop, the one I tricked Lanny Braunwald into backing? Well, one of their ex 'employees' swore under oath that two weeks before the fire, I had purchased fifty automotive air-bags from them…all of them for large-mammal vehicles, and all of them from older model cars, the kind that used Sodium Azide for a propellant."

"I don't know Carrots; to this day, I have no idea whether it was revenge or just a coincidence. What I DO know is that the raccoon who gave that testimony got his sentence cut in half because of it."

"There was more to the case, but those were the City of Zootopia's biggest points against Finnick and me; any decent defense attorney could have turned it into a lace curtain, but all I had was Good-Deed Dale, the busy little Ranger Scout. Even before our trial date came up—they'd decided to try Finnick and me together—I was preparing for the worst. I told Robyn not to wait for me if the Judge threw the book. She told me to go get lost; she was staying right HERE, no matter what."

"Finally the day of our trial came. I knew I was in trouble from the minute Clark Muskegg walked into the courtroom. Today he was wearing a lapel pin, and even from a distance I recognized it immediately; how could I not after having had it practically shoved in my face for the past few months—a paw-print, over a hoof-print, intersected by a broken arrow, the emblem of the Prey Species Preservation Society. I had been wrong about that caribou, Judy. He wasn't just hoping to convict me in order to burnish his career; THIS was fursonal."

"One thing I had to give him; he was a real smoothie. In his opening remarks, without ever once mentioning the word, 'fox' Clark Muskegg managed to paint Finnick and me as members of the slimiest, most despicable species ever to walk the planet…and it only got worse from there."

"When he called his first witnesses, we found out very quickly that we'd drawn just about worst possible judge we could have had, a mountain goat by the name of Evelyn Ranier. She sustained almost every objection the prosecution raised, and overruled practically all of ours. We never had a chance with her presiding; she even refused to let our attorney attack the credibility of the prosecution's star witness, never mind that he had a record as long as a giraffe's neck. When Flowers tried to bring it up a second time, she even scolded him."

"The real capper came when Clark Muskegg called a surprise witness, a muskrat he described as a Confidential Informant. He was the one who broke the news that it had been Mr. Big who'd lent me most of the money I'd used to start Wild Times."

"Yes Carrots, I know…it proved nothing, but try telling that to the jury; they ate it up like candied blueberries."

"No…no, our attorney didn't try to raise an objection; by that time he was so completely cowed, the prosecution could have put Beelzebuck on the witness stand and he would have let it pass."

"When Muskegg finally rested, our attorney informed us that he had decided to have me testify after all. He… I know, right? I was so mad I tried to fire him, but the court refused to consider it. Not that it would have made any difference; Muskegg destroyed every single one of our witnesses,
(with a little help from the judge.) and the jury was out for only two hours before they came back with a verdict: Guilty on all counts."

"I had asked both my mother and Robyn not to come to court that day, and both of them had complied, but when they saw me in jail afterwards the two of them completely lost it...and so did I. I went so far off the deep end I nearly ended up in a straitjacket. (When Muskegg heard about it, he thought I was pulling a 'bug-act'.")

"Why? Think about it, Carrots. For as long as I could remember, I'd been a street hustler, always living on the edge, always keeping one step ahead of the law. Now here I was, on my way to prison, and why was this happening?"

"Because, for once in my life I'd attempted to play it straight; as irony goes, that was a wrecking ball."

"The rest of the month dragged on for years as Finnick and I waited on the day of our sentencing. We had nothing to distract us. We couldn't even put our affairs in order; we didn't HAVE any affairs to put in order, they had all gone up with the park. The nonstop taunts from some of the guards didn't help much either. I told my mother not to sell any of my belongings, I'd be wanting them again soon enough, but that was just me trying to put the best face on things. Robyn wanted to marry me before I went away, but I told her no, that we could wait until after I got out. Big mistake, she ran from the room in tears; she knew the truth, even if my mother didn't, I was going away for nearly ever. Though I still wouldn't agree to marry her, at the same time I could never quite bring myself to tell Robyn to forget about me and move on with her life."

"Finally the big day arrived. Finnick was sentenced first; the judge gave him ten years—and I nearly lost the breakfast I hadn't eaten all over the defendant's table. Ten years for a first offense...and Finnick had been only charged as an accomplice. If that was HIS sentence, what could I expect?"

"When the judge told me to rise, I caught a glimpse of Robyn in the gallery. I had asked her and my mother not to come again, but this time they'd been unable stay away."

"I don't know how it happened, Carrots, but something about the look on her face gave me a courage I hadn't felt since the opening of our trial. No...I wasn't going to just stand up and take whatever the judge threw at me; if I was going out, I was going out fighting."

"Mr. Wilde, do you have anything to say before I pronounce sentence?" she asked me.

"Yes, Your Honor I do," I told her, "Bottom line, you've convicted an innocent mammal...no, make that two innocent mammals. I did NOT order the destruction of Wild Times, and I didn't bust it out, either. I never tried to deceive my insurance company, and whatever my arrangements with Mr. Big may have been, they are in no way relevant to this case. That's my story and I'm sticking to it; no matter what anyone else might say, I did nothing wrong."

"Talk about hearing between the lines Carrots, here's what she said when I finished."

"By your remarks Mr. Wilde, it becomes obvious to the court that you feel no remorse for your crimes. Very well, perhaps this will make you think twice about your actions. I hereby sentence you to twenty-five years in the Penitentiary."

"When they heard my sentence, my mother fainted and Robyn burst into tears. Half the animals in the gallery gasped when they heard...and I felt like crying too; twenty-five years! That meant ten years at least before I'd be eligible for parole, (and given my species I knew how unlikely it was
that I'd make it on the first go-around.) My only consolation was that the judge hadn't fooled me with that 'no remorse' line. I could have fallen on my knees, pleading for mercy and she still would have given me the big two five."

"As you know Carrots, the wheels of justice don't turn quickly. I languished in the city jail for almost a month before they finally transferred me to the pen. Now that I knew my sentence, I was finally able to tell Robyn to forget about me and move on, but of course, she wouldn't hear of it. She came to see me every visiting day, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't keep myself from going to meet her, resistance was futile."

"From the moment of my sentencing, she began fighting to get me a new trial; she even started a Goph-und-me campaign to get me a new attorney. For the first week she made exactly $22.00...and all but two bucks of that came from my mother. And it only went downhill from there."

"When the day finally came, it came without warning. I had just gotten into the chow line when one of the guards, a lion whose name I forget, put his paw on my shoulder and said, 'Let's go, Wilde.' They cuffed me and bundled me straight onto a bus. I didn't even have time to pack my things. 'They'll be sent along later,' I was told. They weren't; I never saw any of them again."

"It wasn't until we were on the road that I found out where we were headed, when the tiger in charge of our trip—a real comedian—stood up and got on the PA."

"'Congratulations boys, you have all just won a state-expense paid trip to...Lemmingworth!'"

"Lemmingworth Penitentiary, aka the Greenhouse, in those days it was the toughest prison in the Zootopia Penal System."

"'I'm dead,' I thought, 'stick a fork in me, I'm done.'"

Chapter End Notes

**Easter Eggs:**

A rather obvious reference to Toy Story and a more obscure one about an old Terry-Toons character.
Nick's Story (Continued...Pt.6)

Chapter Summary

Nick Wilde goes to prison

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 6—Nick's Story
(Continued…Pt. 6)

"Hold it, holllld it…Time! Out!"

Judy Hopps formed a 'T' with her paws and thrust them in Nick Wilde's direction. The move gave her the appearance of a sorceress, casting a spell to make a demon reveal its true identity. Her brow was furrowed and her nose was twitching; her long, bunny-ears seemed to be glued to the back of her neck. This was all she could stand and she couldn't stand no more.

"Wh-What, Carrots?" Nick was staring at her in confusion.

Judy responded by getting up out of her seat and putting her paws on her hips. Even though she was a head and a half short than the fox, she appeared to tower over him.

"All right, Slick," she said, narrowing an eye, "I can see one, measly, little arrest getting past the ZPD's pre-hiring background check…but do you seriously expect me to believe that the Department somehow managed to miss the fact that you were convicted of a felony and sent to prison? Excuse me, but no bunny is THAT dumb!"

She braced herself for the inevitable angry comeback…which wasn't so inevitable; her traveling companion only heaved a weary sigh.

"I know Judy…that's a big reason why I never told you about any of this; even to me it sounds ridiculous." He held up a paw and put the other one over his heart. "But I swear to you that it's true, Carrots, all of it. And when you hear the rest of the story, you'll understand how I was able to get into the ZPD Academy even after being sent to prison." And then without warning, his face changed and suddenly HE was the one arching an eyebrow and it was his voice taking on an edge, "for a crime I didn't commit; don't forget that part."

Judy blinked and then sat down again, chastened if not thoroughly chastened. In the rush of
surprise over the fox's revelation she HAD forgotten that he'd been wrongfully convicted.

But still… going from Lemmingworth Penitentiary to the ZPD Academy? That sounded like a stunt even Howldini wouldn't have touched. By all rights, Nick should have left that prison in a meat-wagon. Over coffee one morning Claire Swinton had confided to Judy that back in the day, Lemmingworth had been a house of horrors. It was one of the main reasons the city had elected to privatize its prison system, a thoroughly lame excuse in the eyes of the pig-cop and former correctional officer. "Lemmingworth was cleaned up long before Aker Correctional came to town," she had said.

Maybe so, but that clean-up had taken place a long time AFTER Nick Wilde was sent to The Greenhouse. How had he managed to survive the ordeal?

Well, there was only one sure way to find out. Judy held up her paws in a placating gesture.

"Sorry Nick, sorry. Please…go ahead with your story."

"It was my third day on the inside; I was housed in the orientation wing, awaiting my cell assignment. I remember it being late in the morning; I was lounging on my concrete bunk, reading a three year old magazine and hoping that my regular cell would be better than this 'thing.' So far I'd managed to keep out of trouble, but I knew that any real challenges would come after I hit the general population."

"'Hey,' I heard a voice say, and at the same time a shadow fell over me. I tensed, but then relaxed when I caught the scent of my own species."

"I rolled over and sat up. There were actually a total of three other foxes outside of my holding cell, a grey fox, a swift fox, and a red fox, like myself. The swift fox seemed to be the animal in charge. I'll call him 'D'."

"'What's your name kid?' he asked me."

"'Nick Wilde,' I answered."

"'He either didn't recognize the name, or didn't care.'"

"'Where you from?'

"'Happytown, Zootopia.'"

"'Who do you know?'

"'I mentioned my partner, Finnick.'"

"'Yeah Finnick, he's good foxes,' D told me. It kind of annoyed me that he knew my partner's name but not mine. 'Who else?'"

"I named a few other animals I'd known back in Zootopia. My visitors only seemed to recognize one of them, but then I remembered something else and said, 'I know Mr. Big, I've done work for him.'"

"That was a name you had BETTER believe they recognized, Carrots. They all looked at each other and then nodded."

"All right," D said, "When you get into general population, you'll stay with us. We'll teach you
what you need to know…and how to survive in this stinkin' prison."

"We all shook on it and they left. When I was moved into general population a few days later, the
gray fox, whose name was Chuy Arroyo, conducted me to D's cell where he and some the others
read me the rules."

"'First of all, take an oath never to snitch on anybody while you're in here; that includes the guards,
not just the prisoners. You got problems with anyone, you bring it to us, not the hacks, you follow
what I'm bringing out?'

'I nodded, and he went on. The number two rule was one I really didn't care for."

"'If another prisoner crosses you, you have to fight him. And don't hold back, do what you gotta do,
even if it means killing the guy. Remember, if you don't kill him, he'll kill you.'"

"'Uhmm, what if the other guy's a tiger?' I asked, and they all laughed."

"'Not gonna happen amigo.' Chuy Arroyo told me, with a slap on the back, "They got all a' the
large predators housed over in B Block. It's small preds only, here in D."

"'Okay,' I said. I still wasn't thrilled with the idea of having to fight anybody, but I wasn't about to
say so in front of these foxes."

"Most of the other rules seemed like minor stuff to me…but not to D or any of the others; they
made it sound like a matter of life and death…and given my current address, I suspected that was
probably true."

"'There are no 'inmates' in The Greenhouse, Nick.' D told me, "everyone's a prisoner; you call
someone in here an inmate to his face and that's an invitation to a fight."

"And the guards are the GUARDS, Shaygets," Eli 'Greasy' Shual put in, "never 'correctional
officers, you got that?"

Eli was a Blanford's Fox, the oldest member of the crew. A cranky, old buzzard, he'd been in and
out of prison for most of his life. He'd gotten his nickname from a jailbreak he'd pulled the third
time he went inside. He'd drenched himself in motor oil and slid out through a drainpipe, I don't
know all the details. He was caught less than an hour later, but after that, everybody started calling
him 'Greasy' and the name stuck. He wore it like a badge of honor."

"Next, D told me the rules of the yard. 'Every crew has their own table out there. Never, never sit
down at a table that don't belong to our crew, not without permission or an invitation. And never
take a shortcut past someone else's table without clearing it with them first."

"What they had to say next was anything but trivial, filling me in on the guards, which ones were
cool, and which ones were jerks. 'Whatever you do, don't ever lip off to Chops, (Sergeant Rick
Diller a black ram) no matter how much he tries to provoke you, just look away and say nothing.
That guy hates foxes and he'll use any excuse to give one of us a little thump therapy.'"

"'Yeah, I figured that sheep was bad news when I saw him,' I said, and everybody nodded
approvingly."

"'Right, good eye,' Chuy said."

"Last but not least," D told me, "we all stick together in this crew. Anyone who messes with one of
us messes with all of us. But understand this, we ain't no suicide squad. When we make a payback,
we do it on OUR schedule."

"Over the next few days, I found out what that meant. All told, there were about ten foxes in our crew, myself included. If another prisoner attacked one of our guys in the laundry room, nothing would happen right away. But then a week later, the guilty party might find someone had slipped something into his food that could send him to the ER, or worse…or he might wake up to find someone had padlocked him into his cell and thrown in a stink bomb—or worse. The prisoners housed on the upper levels didn't dare mess with any of us foxes; there's nothing easier to sabotage than a stair step."

"It's how we gotta roll, Nick,' Chuy Arroyo told me. 'Maybe half a' the other prisoners on this block are species none of us foxes could ever beat in stand-up fight…so we gotta use what's up here to survive.' And to show what he meant, he tapped the side of his head."

"After only a week in general pop, I had to make use of that advice. D had warned me that sooner or later one of the other prisoners was going to test me, and it happened while I was in the chow line one morning. I was just about to grab the last blueberry muffin, when a hog badger elbowed me aside and took it for himself. Almost at once, I could feel the eyes of the other foxes drilling into me. What was I going to do about it?"

"Yes, I know Carrots. A hog-badger is nothing to mess with; they're one of the meanest, ugliest species on the planet, and this one had me beat in both the size and weight…so I did nothing."

"That is, I did nothing until we got to the end of the line, where we picked up our coffee, (or whatever that black stuff was.) I had a little, flat stone in my pocket that I'd snuck in from the yard and just as Mr. Hog Badger reached the coffee station, I dropped it on the floor by his feet. It sounded just like a coin when it hit the concrete, and when he bent down to look, I dumped the coffee dispenser on top of his head and then jumped him."

"I'll spare you the details, Carrots but I ended up spending a week in the infirmary and another three weeks in solitary for that little stunt. Heh, The Hole was actually easier for me than you might think; foxes are a denning species and solitary by nature. When I got out, I found that my status in the crew had risen by something like five notches….and not just because I had shown that I was willing to stand up for myself."

"Jeez, Nick," D said to me, when I saw him, "You said you knew Mr. Big…but why didn't you tell us you were under his protection?"

"'Because I didn't know,' I told him honestly, and went on to explain how Mr. Big had been unable to help me during my trial. 'The DA was trying to use me to get to him; he didn't dare come near me.'"

"Yeah, well he's sure as heck in your corner NOW, boy." Jimmy Lee Marion, a red fox from somewhere down south told me with a grin. "That there badger you got into that fight with can't wait to apologize to y'all. The word's out, son; anyone touches you goan' have to answer to Mr. Big…an' from what I hear, he don't ask easy questions.'"

"Everybody laughed."

"That turned out to be only the beginning of Mr. Big's appreciation for my having refused to give him up, Carrots. Every month, he deposited the full amount in my commissary and saw to it that I was assigned to a job on the loading dock; I never had to lift or carry a thing, just push the button to raise or lower the dock plate. For a fox, the loading dock was an especially plum assignment; I'll get to the reason for that in a minute. Mr. Big also sent me a 'care package' every two weeks…and
the guards never once tried to open any of them. (I wisely shared whatever the Big Shrew sent me with the rest of the fox crew.) He even got me re-assigned to a cell on the ground floor. Oh, I guess should explain."

"Lemmingworth's cell blocks were built like giant cake dishes, with the cells clustered in the center, and surrounded by a wall and roof. That design made the place get really warm and humid in the summertime, hence the nickname 'Greenhouse.' It was especially hot and wet on the top two layers of the cellblock. That was fine if you were a jungle species, but I most definitely wasn't. When they moved me to the ground floor I had my best night's sleep since the day I entered Lemmingworth Penitentiary."

"It wasn't just me that Mr. Big was looking after either. When I got back to my cell after talking to D, there was a letter waiting for me on my bunk, (unopened, it hadn't come through the mail, it had been smuggled in.) There was no return address, but when I opened the envelope, it turned out to be from Finnick; the first time I'd heard from him since starting my sentence."

"He was doing his stretch in McSeal Island Penitentiary, on Eweget Sound. (It figured they'd send a desert fox to the wettest prison in the penal system.) He was handling things all right though; like me, he was under Mr. Big's umbrella. He had also managed to join a crew of foxes; when I mentioned it to Chuy Arroyo he told me that his cousin Vicente was part of that group. 'Your compadre'll be okay if he's with those guys, Nick,' he assured me."

"Finnick finished up by telling me that he didn't blame me for everything that had happened. 'No one could have predicted it would end up like this, Nick.' he said…and Carrots, I can't begin to tell you what a load that was off my mind."

"Okay, now let me back up a little. Mr. Big was one sharp shrew, Carrots. He hadn't just gotten me that job on the loading dock because it was a cushy assignment, there was another reason."

"It came from the fact that every crew in D Block had a specialty, the hyenas were the enforcers, the weasels and other mustelids were the prisoner's eyes and ears on the guards, and the raccoons were the scroungers. The jackals and coyotes were the forgers and bootleggers, the bobcats and other feline species ran the prison grapevine, and the foxes? Our thing was smuggling; I don't how Mr. Big knew that, but putting me on the loading dock made certain that I'd be left alone. Now I was also too valuable to touch. Nobody—not in any crew—wanted to hurt the only direct pipeline to the outside in Lemming…"

"No Carrots, we never ran weapons or drugs, but if there was anything else a prisoner wanted from the outside, they came to us. Here's how it worked, the prisoner would go see Greasy and tell him what he needed. If it was something Greasy thought we could handle, he'd set a price, no haggling, take it or leave it, and if the other animal agreed to the deal, the ball went into Jimmy Lee's court; Jimmy had the best connections on the outside. Once he found what the prisoner wanted, it would be Chuy's job to arrange to bring it in. After I started working the loading dock though, that all changed. Now everything came through me, and our crew was able to increase our business in a huge way. We brought in food, toiletries, disposable cell phones, you name it, and with Mr. Big as my guardian angel, the guards never once hassled me. (To keep the peace, I continued to defer to Chuy Arroyo; I couldn't have handled it without him anyway.) It was such an easy deal that we even started bringing in specialty foods for a guy over in Cell Block B, the boss of the Sahara Square mob. Whoa, did we clean up on that…Uh no Carrots, it wasn't the Red Pig; he was only a Captain back then."

"Wait, mmmm…listen Judy, if I'm giving the impression that this was some kind of vacation, believe me, it wasn't. I may have had it easier than most of the other prisoners—but I was still a
prisoner myself. And that was never brought home more clearly than the first time Robyn came to see me."

"It wasn't as hard on her as it was for some of the other girlfriends who came to visit—that was another thing I could thank Mr. Big for. The guards didn't paw her or make snotty cracks, and the matrons gave her only a quick patdown. Just the same it was awful for her, and for the first time, I began to question the wisdom of not marrying her before I went away. You see, if Robyn and I been husband and wife, we could have met face to face, but because she was only my girlfriend—the word 'fiancé' didn't exist in the Zootopia penal system vocabulary—we could only communicate by telephone through armored glass."

"The first thing she said to me was, 'You look good, Nick.' And then she kind of grimaced and said, 'No you don't, you look terrible.' That stunned me, Carrots. I thought I was still in pretty decent shape for all I'd been through…but that's what prison does; it eats away at you, bit by bit, so gradually that you don't even notice. When I told Robyn that I loved her, for once it was the wrong thing to say; she managed to tell me 'I love you' back, and then broke down and started crying…ummmm, it's still kind of hard for me to recall the rest of that meeting, so I'll just skip to the end, okay? Our visit ended with her sobbing, 'It's not FAIR, you're innocent!' over and over until they came to tell her that our time was up. I remember two of the matrons trying to help her from the visitor's area, but she pushed them both away. (No meant trick, one was a javelina and the other was an African wild dog.) 'There's NOTHING I want from any of you!' she snarled and then marched out of the room, all dignity."

"Remember what I said about never telling yourself, 'well at least thing things can't get any worse?' That was one of those times. When the guard came to return me to my cell, who should have been assigned as my escort but good old Chops Diller? And as soon as the visiting-room door closed, he went to work on me."

"'Wow, that must really have been hard on you fox, knowing you're stuck inside Lemmingworth, an innocent mammal…while your girlfriend's on the outside, all heartbroken and there's nothing you can do for her.'"

"'I wanted to tell that black sheep jerk to knock it off, but I knew it would only encourage him, so I just looked at the floor and kept walking….while he just kept talking.'"

"You know, I kind of like you Wilde…you're not bad for a member of your species, so let me give you some advice, better brace yourself, because sooner or later, she's going to meet some other fox on the outside, a guy who'll shower her with sympathy and comfort. That's how it always starts, believe me, I know what I'm talking about, I must have seen it a hundred times in here."

"I wanted to tell that black sheep jerk to knock it off, but I knew it would only encourage him, so I just looked at the floor and kept walking….while he just kept talking."

"'Honestly, I don't know if I could stand it, Wilde. The thought of the lady I love…in the arms of some other guy…'"

"I could feel my teeth gnashing together, my lips trying to curl upwards to expose my fangs. I turned away so he couldn't see; I could feel my control slipping away."

"'…while I'm stuck inside, for a crime a didn't commit, helpless to do anything...''"

"'Hey Diller, knock off that stuff.'"

"'Yes, Lieutenant.' he answered; he sounded like a lamb, who'd been told to go do his chores.
When I looked up, I saw Lieutenant Reed Walters, a black leopard whose attitude towards the prisoners could best be described as 'tough, but fair.'

"Diller didn't say another word to me until he got me back to D block, and then he offered me this parting comment."

"'Innocent…yeah, like every other fox in here. Don't you morons EVER give it up?'"

"And then he turned and walked away."

"I let his last remark pass without comment; that kind of talk, I could handle. I was still pretty depressed though, and so I went to my cell and started doing push-ups. That was another thing D had taught me; if you wanted to survive in the joint, you needed to keep yourself in shape. Every day he used to do a thousand push-ups, a thousand sit ups, and a thousand deep-knee bends. I once saw him bench press his own weight for a full ten reps."

"And speak of the devil; guess who showed up in front of my cell at just that moment, but a certain swift fox?"

"'Hey I heard about what happened back in Visiting, Nick. You okay?'"

"'I'll live,' I said, but right then I wasn't sure I wanted to; what if Diller was right? But then D's voice went very crisp, that tone he always assumed when he wanted to talk some serious business."

"Hold the push-ups and sit down for a second; I want to speak to you."

"I got up and sat down on the edge of my bunk, waiting while D leaned back against the wall and folded his arms."

"Then he said, 'In our crew there are no secrets, Nick; it's the only way we can trust each other.' He narrowed an eye and tilted his head to the side. 'So I need to know something… innocent, really innocent, or are you just trying to nail down an appeal?'"

"I looked him straight in the eye and repeated what I'd said to the judge. 'Innocent—for real! That's my story and I'm sticking to it.' Then I told him everything I just told you. When I finished he just kind of shook his head."

"'That's what I thought…but I had to hear it from you, Nick. You see…I know how you feel; I'm also inside for a crime I didn't commit, or lessay a crime I didn't know I was committing.' And then he told me his story."

"D had been a scout sniper with the military, a crack shot with not only a rifle but a side-arm; he'd won the inter-service shooting championship twice and had all kinds of decorations. After mustering out, he'd tried to find work in the private sector, but the opportunities had been few and far between. He'd even applied to the ZPD Academy. No dice, even with his service record and his shooting skills, they'd practically laughed him right out of the precinct lobby. 'Uh-huh, like they'd ever accept a FOX on the force,' I said. (Heh-heh, how's that for irony, Carrots?) Anyway, D finally got a job with an outfit in the middle-east, riding shotgun on a shipment of antiquities on its way to Russia. It was a one-shot deal, but it paid well. They were ten miles from the border crossing when they got jumped by a gang of hijackers. D and the others put up a good fight, but they were both outnumbered and outgunned; the ambushers even had an attack helicopter. When D and his guys had finally surrendered, they'd expected to be executed on the spot. "

"'…and that was when I found out that load of antiquities we were hauling was stolen—and that the 'hijackers' were actually Interpawl agents…and I'd managed to take out three of them in the
firefight. All three survived, but you know what happens to a felon who shoots a cop, right? The prosecutor destroyed any claim that I hadn't known who I was working for with his opening remarks, "Mammals of the jury, let me tell you what you can expect from this fox." The jury bought it, lock, stock, and barrel, and the judge gave me 25-to-life. I'm still trying to get it overturned, but honestly, I don't think that's any kind of a possibility at this point."

"Ahhh, no, that wasn't as big a surprise as you might think, Carrots; I had always suspected there was at least one other wrongfully convicted fox in Lemmingworth, I just never expected it to be D; he was one seriously hard-tailed animal. Still, what he said made me feel a lot better; I wasn't alone in my situation after all."

"After that, things pretty much settled into a routine with only few minor incidents to break the monotony. Jimmy Lee Marion had his parole denied and to celebrate, he got into a fight with two members of the feline crew. D had to sit down with their chief and agree to mule in some catnip in order to smooth things over. He didn't like it, but it was that or a gang war. A week after that, we had a riot over in A Block, the large-mammal prey-species wing. Nothing to do with us smaller preds in D Block, but the warden locked down the entire prison. And then he got on the PA and told us that if anyone else felt like joining the rioters, 'you can start packing your stuff for Marlion right now!' By that he meant Marlion Correctional Facility, the end of the line, the most feared prison in the system back in those days. Lemmingworth was tougher, but that was only because at Marlion the prisoners were kept in solitary 24/7…with only a half hour in an exercise yard each day—by themselves. That kind of set-up didn't make for too many fights."

"One other thing that happened to me in Lemmingworth—a lot—was that I was constantly being approached by guys who wanted me to throw in with them on a hustle when I got out. I swear, in one week I was made more business offers than I'd gotten in the entire year before I decided to open Wild Times. As IF…that was the one good thing about that twenty-five year sentence Carrots, it was all I had to say to get them to back off…get them…to…"

"No, I-I'm okay. It's just that…that plays an important part in the story later on, a-and not a good one."

"No…I need to keep going. A couple of weeks after the riot was settled, my mother came to see me. It wasn't quite as painful as Robyn's visit but it was a lot more awkward. Since mom was a blood relative, she was allowed to see me with no glass between us. As you can probably imagine, she made a big fuss over me, asked all the usual 'mom' questions, was I brushing my teeth, was I keeping my 'room' picked up, was I making any friends? I had to explain to her that this wasn't college, I was in jail. Big mistake, now she started crying her eyes out. When I finally got her to calm down, she looked at me and said, 'When you get out again Nicholas, you'll still be young enough to have children, right?' I told her that….Agggggh, grrrrr, darn it, I promised myself wasn't going to bring that up; me and my big, fat fox-trap!"

"Ahhh well, then you might as well know, Carrots….my mom's had a bee in her hat about grandkids ever since I turned eighteen, comes from my being an only cub. Every time—and I mean every time I try to talk to talk to her, it's grandchildren this, grandchildren that, grandchildren the other."

"Oh, no? When I brought Robyn home to meet her, the first thing out of my mother's mouth was, "'So are you and Nicholas planning to have any children, dear?' And this was before I proposed to her—I mean, even before the FIRST time. Still think it couldn't be that bad, Fluff?"

"Don't get me wrong, I love my mom, but when she gets on that grandchildren kick…Rawwwrf!"

"Mmmm, yeah, get back to the story, good idea. About week after my mother's visit, I was on my
way back from the loading dock detail when Chuy Arroyo buttonholed me. 'Meeting in the can, (meaning the washroom,) D wants everybody there.'"

"What's it about, Chuy?" I asked him.

"Don' know," he said, and for the first time since we'd met, I had the distinct impression he was lying to me. He was, but only because D wanted everybody to hear the news from him. When I got to the washroom, it was already packed, the first time I'd ever seen everyone in our crew gathered together like that. 'What the heck is going on?' I wondered, 'are we in trouble with another crew, with the guards, has one of our guys been caught snitching?' (The ultimate offense in the slam,) I was nervous as heck, but I still needed to find out."

"It turned out to be none of those things; it was something strictly fursonal on D's part…but at the same time, it was something that was going to affect every fox in D Block."

"I just got the word from Jimmy G with the weasel crew,' he told us. 'THAT guy is being transferred back to the Greenhouse from Marlion, he's supposed to be here a week from Friday…which mean probably not for a month, but he's still coming. And yes, they're putting him in our block. And yes, the weasels are sure."

"When D made that announcement, half the crew gasped and the rest of us just looked at each other. 'That guy'…who the heck was 'that guy'?"

"D wasted no time in filling us in; 'that guy' was a wolverine that he'd known in the service; there'd been some bad blood between them—very bad. He never gave us the details, but he and that wolverine had crossed paths in Lemmingworth once before, and the upshot was the incident that had gotten 'that guy' transferred to Marlion in the first place."

"When the wolverine was first arrived at Lemmingworth, D was working in the hospital infirmary's research center…"

"Research center? Oh, it's something you see in Zootopia's prisons even to this day, Carrots. It's called the Beta Program, where prisoners can get time shaved off their sentences if they're willing to volunteer as test subjects for new drugs."

"Darn right, Carrots; D warned every single one of us in the fox crew never to go near that gig. He'd seen the results up close and fursonal. Not that there were all that many preds in the Beta Program anyway. Most of the animals who volunteered came from E Block, where the rodents were housed. It seemed to be especially popular with rats and Guinea Pigs, don't ask me why."

"Well, who else were they supposed to use for test subjects…bugs? That's not from me, Carrots; that's what the animals running the program used to say, whenever someone complained. Look, can we save this argument for some other time, please?"

"Thank you. When they'd first met in Lemmingworth, the wolverine had told D, 'Not so dangerous without a weapon are you, shrimp? I could just off you right now, but that would be too easy. Nooo, I'm going to make you suffer for a while first; I want to hear you beg me to get it over with.'"

"Fort the next couple of weeks, that wolverine was as good as his word. He made D's life a living Nightmare-before-Christmas; he trashed out his cell, destroyed all his care packages, and sent his best friend to the ICU, just to get to him. And he never missed a chance to smack D around a little."

"D never even tried to fight back, he was so shaken he had his daughter send him a good luck
charm, a four leaf clover preserved in plastic. He started carrying it around with him wherever he went, stopping to rub it whenever no one was looking. Most of the guys in the fox crew thought it was a 'bug act'; that he was angling to a transfer to the psych block, where the wolverine couldn't get to him."

"'Actually, that WAS what I was doing,' D said, when he gave us the story, 'No way did I did plan on what happened next. Heh, maybe that charm really DID bring me some luck…but if there's one thing my training on the outside has taught me, it's that when an enemy gives you an opening, don't think, MOVE!'"

"The opportunity came on the loading dock of all places. D had just come down from the research center with a shipment of bio-samples, when he smelled wolverine behind him. Thinking fast, he flipped the lid on the can he was loading and dropped his good luck charm inside. Too late the wolverine grabbed him and threw him out of the way."

"'Tough luck Swifty, I saw that.'"

"D fell to his knees and gave 'that guy' his wish, begging with clasped paws."

"'No, please…don't take my keepsake. Please, m-my little girl gave that to me, it's all I have from her.'"

"The wolverine only showed his fangs, and then he opened the lid of the can and reached inside for the charm."

"And then he screamed and tried to pull it out again. The specimens that D had been loading had been packed in liquid nitrogen. The wolverine pulled even harder but was no use, he was stuck fast. Seeing his chance, D grabbed a tie-down strap from the truck he'd been loading and jumped on the wolverine's back, pulling it tight around his throat. That was also when he dropped the scared-little-swift-fox act. 'Guess what sweetheart, you've been hustled; I don't even HAVE a daughter!'"

"Carrots I don't know what might have happened if a couple of guards hadn't come running and pulled D off that wolverine. What did happen was that the big guy thought they were other prisoners—that's what he said at his hearing—and so, with his paws still stuck in the specimen container, he swung his arm at the animal closest to him and sent him flying off the loading dock."

"The guard wasn't seriously hurt; he was a moose and only suffered some bruises and a broken antler…but the damage was done. If you put your paws on an officer in Lemmingworth, say goodbye, you're headed for Marlion as soon as you get out of solitary. D didn't get off unscathed either, they threw him the hole for 60 days, but he didn't get a transfer and when he came out, the wolverine was gone. I later found out that it was thanks to that incident he eventually became leader of the fox crew."

"What? No, the wolverine didn't lose that paw Carrots, but D had still left him with a souvenir of their encounter. All the fur on that frozen paw fell out, and when it finally grew in again, it came back dirty white. From that day onward, that's what everyone called him, Whitepaw…and now he was on his way back to Lemmingworth."

"'When he gets here, it won't just be me,' D told us, 'It'll be me and anyone else who gets in between us…so I'm laying down the order, stay out of it; this is between Whitepaw and me. I don't want anyone else in this crew getting hurt on my account.'"

"That brought a BIG storm of protest, Carrots… No way, Jose! All for one, and one for all! We're not leaving you to face this animal alone, D! I think it was Greasy Shual who summed it up best. 'If
you wanna commit suicide sh mendrik, at least have the courtesy to leave a note; there's no way you'll get an opening against a kelev like that guy more than once."

"The argument that followed was so loud the guards had to come in and break it up…but that gave me an idea. After evening chow, I paid a visit to D in his cell. 'I think I know how you can get out of this without involving anyone else in the crew,' I said, 'but I warn you, there'll be a price to pay."

"Go ahead," D told me, and I explained what I had in mind. When I finished, Chuy Arroyo, who was also there, was looking at me as if I'd just taken a fall off a turnip truck. 'You outta your MIND, pendejo?' he said, but D quickly overruled him, 'No Chuy, bad as that sounds, it's still better than having Whitepaw all over my tail; if you'd ever met him, you'd know why I say that, believe me. Nick,' he looked at me, 'Nick, I'm not going to go with your idea just yet, but if no one can come up with anything better, it's on…and thanks."

"The next week was like that old movie where the sheriff is waiting for the outlaws to show up on the 12 o'clock train. Everyone in the fox crew was on edge, as if Whitepaw might come strolling into D block at any second. It was during this time that I learned he wasn't just your average, garden-variety wolverine; back in the day, he'd been the leader of a covert, black-ops team, definitely out of my league."

"And then there came another day I'll never forget. It was Thursday afternoon, just after three o'clock, exactly four months and a week since I'd started my sentence, I remember every detail. I had just finished seeing off a shipment of license plates when the guard we called The Sphinx came up down to the loading dock. (We call him that because he was a cheetah who never changed his facial expression.) 'Warden wants you in his office right away, Wilde."

"The Warden? Oooo, that was not good news Carrots. There were only two times in Lemmingworth when a prisoner was called to the warden's office, when he first arrived—if he was a known troublemaker—or if he committed some major disciplinary infraction. I wondered for a moment what I could have done. And then I remembered… my suggestion to D, but no, that didn't make any sense. If simply coming up with an idea was grounds for a summons to the warden's office, the place would be packed 24/7. I finally decided the heck with it and followed The Sphinx to Administration."

When I was ushered into the Warden's office, my first impression was one of neatness, not a speck of dust anywhere and nothing out of place…not that there was much to put out of place anyway. Except for a desk, a bookcase, two chairs, and a small divan, there were no other furnishings in the room; Warden Kaffar could have made do with an office a third the size of the one he had."

"He was an African Forest Buffalo, the smaller cousin of Chief Bogo's species. The prisoners called him Warden Joe Furday, because they thought he sounded like the character in the old Dragnet TV series."

"Who was Joe…? Never mind Carrots, it's not important. He made me wait while read through some documents, and then beckoned me over with a pair of crooked fingers."

"Mr. Wilde, stand here please."

"I went over and stood in front of his desk, while he put on a pair of bifocals and began studying one of the papers he'd been reading."

"Finally, he looked at me over the rim of his glasses."

"Well, Mr. Wilde, it seems we're not going to have the pleasure of your company for very much
"I just stared at him for a second. 'I-I'm being transferred?' I said, and Warden Joe Furday shook his head as if I'd just gotten a test question wrong."

"No Mr. Wilde, you're being released, you'll be discharged effective the day after tomorrow, once we finish processing the paperwork."

"Wha-sir?" Now I was staring, goggle-eyed. Had he really just told me…?

"I believe you heard me correctly, Mr. Wilde.' He said, putting down the paper he'd been reading and picking up another one, holding it out at arm's length. 'Three days ago, the Zootopia Police Department apprehended the animals who burned down your amusement. At 07:25 yesterday, these perpetrators signed a full confession, supplying details known only the ZPD up until that time. They also signed a statement fully exonerating you of any involvement in the crime, or in any of the associated crimes. At 9:30 AM this morning Judge Zachary Plainview, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of Zootopia, signed an order overturning all convictions lodged against both you and your partner. In 48 hours, you'll be free to go."

"Whoa, you should have heard him Carrots, he sounded like a kid who'd just caught a trophy fish and then been told he'd have to let it go."

"But who the heck cared? I would have fox-screamed if I hadn't been in prison. Oh what the heck, I was a free fox, I DID fox scream…so loud that I almost cracked the window. That had The Sphinx making a fast draw for his baton, but he barely time to get his paw on it before I turned the tables on him."

"'Noooo, I don't think so,' I said, folding my arms and shaking my head, "I'm not a convicted felon anymore and you can't touch me, not unless you want to find out what it's like to be sitting the defendant's table.' To be perfectly honest Carrots, I didn't know if that threat carried any weight, but who wouldn't be feeling cocky at a moment like that? Didn't matter, The Sphinx wasn't about to find out either. He took his paw away from the baton and just stood there. Ohhh, I only wished it could have been Chops Diller, I would have paid him back in spades for all those the things he'd said about me and Robyn."

"But wait…Robyn? I forgot about Sphinx and turned my attention back to the warden."

"I want to call my mother and my girlfriend, right now."

"Yes, of course," he said, motioning of The Sphinx to take me to the telephones. I think he was just looking for an excuse to get rid of me. But I wasn't done yet; on the way out the door, I fired off a parting shot, "And no listening in this time, and no time limit!"

"All right!" he shouted waving for Sphinx to hurry up and get out of there before I thought of something else."

"When I called my mother's house, she's wasn't there and I had to leave a message. I could only hope she'd get it, mom didn't have voice mail; she was still using one of those old fashioned cassette-recorder phone machines. Robyn picked up right away though, and when I told her the news, her fox scream was so loud and long, she nearly blew out the phone receiver (and my eardrum—I didn't care, it was worth it.) And then she started crying and I started crying along with her. Now I knew that the two of us not getting married had been the right decision. When I told her I wouldn't actually be released for another 48 hours, I expected her to be all bummed out about it, but she was actually kind of happy about it; it would give her time to get to Lemmingworth to meet
me. "When you walk out of prison, a free fox, Red I want to be there, waiting for you.' Before we hung up, I asked her to pass the word about my upcoming release to 'our friend at the club,' meaning Louie Carpenti the manager at the Thaw. I knew that as soon as he got the word, he'd pass it straight up to Mr. Big. Most likely, that wasn't necessary, The Big Shrew probably knew already that I was getting out, but it was only good common courtesy to clue him in, especially after the way he'd looked out for Finnick and me."

"Yes, you're right Carrots, I did wonder if he'd had anything to do with my release. He hadn't; but I wasn't in any hurry to find out. I was going home, that was the important thing."

"Heh, if you think the word spreads quickly in a police precinct Judy, you should visit a prison sometime. When I got back to D block, every animal who wasn't a guard stood up and started cheering; not just the foxes—everybody!"

"Awooooo!"

"Yeahhh, baby!"

"You rule, fox!"

"MROWWWWRRR, you getting out, boy!"

"Way to go, Nick!"

"Right on, brother. Right…ON!"

"All the way back to my cell, guys were slapping me on the back and giving me high fives. That's one of the few things in prison that'll make everyone in the cell-block forget their differences, Carrots, when someone's getting out because he really didn't do it. I still had 48 hours to go before I actually walked free though, and I knew they were going to feel like the longest two days of my life."

"When the big day came, it was not without its dramatic moments, there were hugs good-bye from D, Chuy, and Jimmy Lee; even Greasy got teary eyed on me. Exiting my cell for the very last time, I saw all the guys in the fox crew lined up in two flanking rows like an honor guard. I also saw something that wasn't so touching. One of the guards detailed to escort me to the front exit was none other than Chops Diller. Wel-l-lll, that might not have been touching, but it wasn't unwanted; as a matter of fact, although they couldn't possibly have known, that was the nicest going-away present the administration could have given me."

"'All right Wilde, let's go,' he told me, tapping his foot impatiently.

"There was a lot I could have said to that sheep, Carrots. I could have thrown back his taunts about Robyn and me, I could have told him that I was on my way to Zootopia while he was still stuck in Lemmingworth. (It was anything but a plum assignment, if you were a guard) Or I could have simply reminded him that as a free fox, I was no longer subject to the prison rules, and then told him exactly what I thought of him."

"I did none of those things; by now I knew his weak spot…and besides I had one more part to play. I looked at D and gave him almost imperceptible nod. He nodded back, just ever so slightly and I turned my attention back to Diller."

"Why the rush Chops, late for a Goth convention or something?"

"Everyone gasped, and some of them groaned; one of the coyotes even howled. Diller was known
to be particularly sensitive about the color of his wool—he was literally the black sheep of his family—and NONE of the prisoners were allowed to call him by his nickname.

"However, I wasn't a prisoner any more…as I proceeded to remind Diller in full, graphic detail."

"Go on, Eight-Ball, smack me with that club, douse me that pepper spray, use your horns on me—and watch what happens. My conviction wasn't overturned on a technicality; I'm out of here because I've been proven innocent…and beyond any reasonable doubt! As long as I don't touch you first, you can't lay a finger on me…and there's not a guy watching here who wouldn't just LOVE to testify against you if you that happens. Go on Charcoal, hit me; you'll be fired if you're lucky…"

"'All right, Wilde, you had your fun.'"

"The other guard got quickly between us. Nice try, but he was a sloth bear; I could easily dodge around him. When I did, I saw that Diller was already teetering on the edge. One more little push was all he needed…and putting my paws on my hips I gave it to him."

"Such a fine, upstanding correctional officer…pure as the driven soot…"

"'BAAAAAAAA!'"

"That did it; Diller grabbed for his bat and came at me, but before he could raise it even more than halfway, D bolted from the crowd and grabbed his arm."

"'No, don't!'"

"'Put it away, Diller.' The other guard had gotten between us again, "Wilde's right, if you hurt him, you're history.""

"For about half a second, I thought Diller was going to head-butt the other guard; but then he looked at me, and I saw a very creepy smile come over his face."

"'That's right Wilde, I can't do anything to you. But your little friend here just touched my wool," he was nodding at D, "and you know what THAT means." I did, but he told me anyway. 'How's it feel, knowing you just got him sent to Marlion, DUMB fox?'"

"I moaned and pretended to slap myself…but I actually felt pretty good. Chops Diller may have thought he'd had the last laugh, but he'd actually just been hustled."

"'Yes, Carrots, that was the general idea; in Marlion, D would be safe from Whitepaw. Even if that wolverine somehow got sent back there himself, it wouldn't do any good. The prisoners in that lockup were kept constantly segregated from each other."

"And D wouldn't be held there forever, either. He had touched Diller's wool yes, but he hadn't been trying to hurt him, only restrain him. He'd do a year in Marlion, two at most and then he'd be sent elsewhere. It was only a reprieve, but it was better than nothing…and a lot can happen in a year or two."

"Chuy and Greasy were mad as heck at me for getting D sent to Marlion…but they were only pretending for the guards' benefit. They knew the score, every fox in the crew knew the score, but none of them would ever spill; that's the kind of solidarity we had there at that time. I was almost going to miss it."

"But only almost; at the far end of the cell-block, the doorway leading to the Administration Building was waiting, and beyond that…freedom!"
"Ohhhh, Nick."

Judy Hopps could feel the tears welling in her eyes; it was something she couldn't help. Even though Nick had walked free from Lemmingworth Penitentiary more than ten years ago, she was still that happy for him.

And now she finally understood how he could have been accepted to the ZPD Academy even after going to prison. He'd been fully exonerated of the crimes for which he'd been jailed—which meant that his prison record had also been expunged, nothing to see here, move on. (And the Department had been so right to give the fox his chance; after the way he'd foiled Jerry Guilford's plan to spray-bomb the Carrot Days Festival with herbicide, could anyone doubt that Nick Wilde belonged with ZPD? Certainly not this bunny.)

But still...by rights, Nick Wilde should have come out of that experience with a deep-black hatred of law enforcement. Instead, he had elected to become a peace officer himself.

"Honestly Nick," Judy shook her head, "After going to jail for a crime you didn't commit, I'm surprised you'd even want to become a cop."

He responded by turning away for a second; in the dim light of the railway car, Judy couldn't see his ears, but she had the distinct impression he was blushing. When he turned to look at her again, she could make out just the faintest outline of a grin on his face.

"Carrots, if anyone had told me on the day I left prison that someday I'd become a police officer, I would have suggested that they seek some professional help. In fact..." the grin slowly melted into a serious expression, "remember that time in Bellwether's office, when we were using the traffic..."
cans to track those wolves?"

"The ones who took Manchas, yes I remember," Judy nodded, equally solemn, "And I know where you're going with this, Nick. When I said, 'You know, I think you'd make a pretty good cop…'"

"…I said, 'How dare you?' he finished for her, "and now you know why."

Judy nodded again but she was also chewing her lip. Yes, but there was so much else that she didn't know. Nick had been exonerated, and yet still he had lied about his arrest on his application to the ZPD. Why would he do that? It didn't make any sense. And also, how had his relationship with Robyn McFerral come to grief? The way Nick talked about it, their bond had been stronger than ever on the day of his release. And last, but not least—Judy was nobody's legal wiz, but like every good cop, she had at least a rudimentary grasp of the law. And it seemed to her that when Nick had walked free of Lemmingworth, he had brought with him some pretty solid grounds for a lawsuit against the Zootopia DA's office. Why hadn't he sued…or had he? She wanted so badly to ask him about it, but by now she knew better; Nick would get there in his own, good time, not before. And so, she offered him only a quick prompt.

"So, when you walked out of Lemmingworth, was Robyn there, waiting for you like she promised?"

To her considerable surprise, Nick tilted his head back, and the railroad car was instantly filled with ringing, raucous fox-laughter.

"Not only was Robyn there Carrots, she brought the band with her, too; she had them set up on a flatbed truck, right in front of the admin building's main entrance…and as soon as I walked out the door the they struck up a tune called 'I Feel So Good'. Hmmm, let me see if I can rememberrrrr…oh yes, part of the lyrics went like this…"

"They put me in jail on a sacrifice play
Four long months, and thirteen days
Now I'm back on the street in a purple haze…

…and I feel so good, I'm going to break somebody's heart tonight."

"Nooo, it wasn't an original number, it was by…ahhh, who was it, wrote that song Conor sang at the bonfire again, the one about the motorcycle outlaw? Right, right, Richard Tomcat, right. I Feel So Good was one of his songs, too, except that Robin changed the lyrics around a little. Originally it went…"

"They made me pay for the things I've done
Now it's my turn to have all the fun."

"Robyn changed that to…"

"They put me away for what I'd never done."

"Whoa, the guards didn't like that very much, but me, I was loving every second of it; so did all the guys in D Block, according to a letter I received from Chuy after I got home; 'We sing it all the time, it drives the hacks loco,' he wrote me. When the band finished playing, I ran over, jumped up on the trailer and took Robyn in my arms. I don't know if that was the longest kiss we ever shared, but it was sure as heck one of the best."

"Oh no, Carrots. I wasn't disappointed that I didn't have her all to myself—because I did, or I was
going to very shortly. Parked right behind that flatbed was a brand-new Cavy Camelro, courtesy of Mr. Big. It was only a rental, but who cared? Robyn and I were going to have plenty of quality time together, except…as soon as I closed the door I felt the guilt bug biting me. ‘We should really go pick up Finnick…’ I started to say, but Robyn shushed me with a finger to my lips. ‘The Big Shrew already sent a limo to get him, Red. Sorry, but from now until we get back to Zootopia, you’re my fox….mine, mine, mine, mine, mine, mine, all MINE.’"

"I uh, don't think it would surprise you to hear that we took the scenic route back to Zootopia, Carrots. Heh, we almost made a detour to get married in Las Vegoats. The only reason we didn't was because both of us thought that kind of wedding was about as romantic as an assembly line."

"Along the way, Robyn brought me up to speed on how she and The Chimeras were doing. She hadn't mentioned anything about the band during her earlier visit because she'd known that it would have upset me. But now she could finally talk about them, and they were doing just fantastic; right after she'd come to visit me, they'd been hired as the house band at Growls and Grooves, a new rock club in the Downtown District. It may not have been a gold mine, but it was a steady gig with plenty of exposure; Robyn said she expected good things to come from that job."

"When we finally arrived back in Zootopia, after an (amazing) week on the road, I had a zillion things to take care of. First up, I had to go see my mother; she had never bothered to check her answering machine, (I had called her something like fifty times on the way home,) and when she opened the door and saw me, she almost fainted. The next thing I knew, she had her arms around me and was crying her eyes out. So was I…and unashamed. Then she insisted that I move in with her until I got settled. I pretended to be uncomfortable with the idea, but she had actually saved me the trouble of asking; my release had been so sudden I hadn't had time to make any plans. I also managed to talk her into letting Finnick stay over for a few of days—and that brought up the next item on the agenda, making contact with my former partner again. We met at our old hangout, the Dockside Diner, and though the little guy denies it to this day, when he saw me, he came running with his arms wide open, jumped and hugged me…with tears in his eyes! We swapped stories about our different prison experiences over breakfast, and then the two of us hit the ground running; before anything else, we each had a big stack of messages to deliver."

"That's another one of the unwritten rules of the joint, Carrots. The Lemmingworth authorities could open the prisoners' mail; they could monitor the telephone conversations, they could listen in on visiting day, but there was one communications pipeline they could never penetrate, guys carrying messages when they got out. And so, if you were on short time and someone asked you to pass along a memo after your release, you always said 'yes', no questions asked. Over the next few days I called this animal's partner, that one's girlfriend, the other one's parents, and the occasional lawyer. A few times, I even visited fursonally and mostly, that worked out okay. The one time it didn't was when I went to see Greasy Shual's daughter. I wasn't there half a minute before I got the door slammed in my face. Finally, with my messenger obligations fulfilled, I got in touch with Mr. Big."

"'He'll see you at The Club tonight, Nick.' The animal on the other end of the phone call told me. 'Come after Nine and bring Finnick along, there's a lot he wants to talk to you about.'"

"What? No, I wasn't worried that The Big Shrew might be offended because I hadn't come to see him first. Just the opposite in fact; if there was any animal who understood the rules of prison life, it was him. And don't forget, he was an 'Old School' boss; fulfilling your obligations was always a big thing with him, 'a matter of respect' he always said. Just the same Finnick and I showed up at The Thaw at 9' O'clock on the nose, it couldn't hurt to be punctual."

"When we walked into the place, it became fairly obvious, and pretty quickly, that we weren't
going to get much talking done, not for a while at least. Nearly the entire Tundratown gang was
inside, waiting for us. And as soon as we came through the doors they stood up and started
cheering—and not just the animals with Mr. Big, I mean everyone in the club, staff and patrons
alike. It was almost like the mirror image of the way the prisoners in Cell Block D had applauded
me when the word of my release came down. And after that…well, here's another rule of The
Slam. When a guy gets out, it's customary to throw him a party…and this was our coming home
celebration."

"I have to admit, Finnick enjoyed that bash a lot more than I did; Robyn wasn't there, she had a gig
that night and it just didn't feel the same, partying without her. Anyway, it wasn't until after
midnight that Mr. Big finally took us into the back room for some serious talk."

"As always, we didn't get right down to business. First, there were the usual greetings and
salutations, and then Koslov slid an envelope across the table for each of us. As before, I didn't
count the money—bad manners if I did, but I could see right away that this envelope was at least
twice as thick as the one I'd gotten for the Lanny Braunwald hustle. When I tried to thank Mr. Big
—for that and for taking care of Finnick and me on the inside—he immediately held up his paw."

"'You don't owe me nothing," he said, pulling himself halfway out his chair. 'You and Finnick kept
your mouths shut and took the fall for Wild Times, even though you could have gotten off with a
slap on the wrist by giving me up to the cops. There's nothing I appreciate more than a stand-up
guy, so I'm calling us even, capisce?"

"What he didn't mention of course, was that in order to give him up we'd have had to lie. I would
have reminded him of that fact, but I didn't have time; the next thing he said nearly blew me
straight through the wall."

"'The DA actually had it at least partway right, Nick—the crew that torched Wilde
Times was working for someone else; only it wasn't me, it was your other money guy, Mr.
Diamond."

"Wha…? Why hadn't I thought of him before, Carrots? Because I didn't really know anything
about him, except that he was an animal who liked to take his profits and run; at least that's how it
had been the first two times I'd worked with him. But the more I turned it over in my mind, the
more sense it made. Diamond's go-between, Carson, had hated the idea of him lending me money
to start an amusement park for predators. And yet he'd still agreed to back me—but only on the
condition that I hire HIS sanitary service to collect the trash from the park. Only now did I
understand the reason for that condition; when I'd agreed to those terms, I'd effectively given his
animals access to every corner of the park, including my office. No wonder that gang of fireflies—
that's what Mr. Big called them—no wonder they'd known the layout of Wild Times like the backs
of their own paws."

"'Your fireflies were only too happy to give Diamond up after they were caught,' Mr. Big went on
to explain. I could see he was becoming angry, but not at the arsonists, at the animal who'd loosed
them on Finnick and me."

"'That pezza de sporcizia double-crossed them, too.' He said, 'They were supposed to be paid five
large for the job, plus whatever they could glom out of the park. Instead, when they got together to
divide up the take from the robbery, a gang of enforcers moved in and grabbed everything for
themselves, they even took the fireflies' watches and wallets. The arson crew blamed Diamond for
the rip-off and when he heard what they were saying about him, he got mad and refused to pay
them a nickel. That's what he told them, but I think it was his plan all along.' I saw the Big Shrew
turn and pretend to spit. 'A mammal without honor; Diamond had a mole buried in with the
arsonists, too…no, not a REAL mole, the inside guy was a fossa, their second-story animal. That was how Diamond knew about the meeting, where and when it was going down. By the time the fireflies figured out they had a traitor in their midst, the fossa was gone, vanished. That's what they said to the cops but me, I suspect otherwise; I think he's on ice somewhere. And that, in fact, is how the rest of the crew came to be apprehended.'"

"What he told me next Carrots was that after the fossa disappeared, the gang had needed a replacement, and the animal they brought in turned out to be jumping from the frying pan into the fire; he was a Russian sable, another species that knows a thing or two about climbing…and he was also a confidential informant with the ZPD. When the police wired him up, they hit the jackpot; they recorded something like 100 hours of incriminating conversations between the arson gang and their CI. And whoa, what a bunch of motor-mouths, they let slip the details of at least five other jobs they'd pulled before Mr. Diamond hired them to take out Wild Times."

"Nooooo, they talked about Wild Times now and again, but there was never anything specific, nothing you could take to court, much less that could get me off the hook. You see, that whole episode had been a big an embarrassment for the fireflies. Most of the time, if anyone brought it up someone else would tell him to shut up. The few instances, when they did talk about it, there were never any details discussed; they never even mentioned Wild Times by name, it was always 'the pier job', that's all."

"What finally happened was, the firefly gang got hired to burn down a car dealership in Sahara Square. As soon as they went inside, the ZPD surrounded the place. They caught the arson crew red-pawed, right in the middle of planting an infernal device, and they also had a barrel of accelerant with them—the same homemade napalm they'd used to burn down Wild Times. That was all the leverage the ZPD needed and eventually, they fessed up to everything."

"Here's how they pulled off the Wild Times job: Three of them, the fossa and two smaller gang members went in first, using an inflatable assault boat, supplied by Mr. Diamond. They entered the park using a partially pre-cut hole in the floor, fitted with removable bracing. (These were the details the ZPD hadn't released to the public; even I hadn't known about them before then.) Mr. Diamond had also supplied the gang with the alarm codes, a detailed map of the park, and a memory stick that would allow them to get into Wild Times' computer mainframe. 'We didn't have a computer guy of our own.' their leader, a sea-otter, explained to the police. After they finished cleaning out my office and the cash boxes, they put together the dust bomb and then opened up the service entrance for rest of the gang, the large mammal species. These animals came in with the barrels of napalm and after getting them unloaded, they filled up their truck with the contents of the storeroom and all the cash and other items they'd stolen. Then they left the park, and 30 minutes later, WHOOMPF! The whole thing, from the time of their arrival to when they detonated the dust-bomb took less than two hours. These guys had been good, really good…but they were still amateurs compared to the animal that had hired them."

"The unfortunate part Nick, is that the fireflies were unable to give the cops anything useful about Mr. Diamond. They would have if they could, believe me; they hate that animal. But he never communicated with them directly, it was always either by go-between…or over the internet, can you believe that stuff? But they never saw his face, never heard his voice, only the guys who worked for him."

"Yeah, well what about those guys?" Finnick demanded, coming halfway out of his chair. He was agitated and I knew why. Going to Mr. Diamond for that loan had had been his idea."

"No Carrots, I didn't blame him for it. After all, I could have said no, but I didn't. And Diamond's double-cross had even managed to slip past Mr. Big. That's a big reason why he was so angry; it
made him look bad, and he didn't like it when that happened."

"You mean that kit fox and that sheep?" he said, raising a bushy eyebrow at Finnick, 'the ones who called themselves Carson and Woolsey? Carson's real name is, or should I say WAS Burke Sage. Two weeks ago, his girlfriend reported him missing to the ZPD. She said they were having dinner in the Chaparral Restaurant in the Canyonlands District, when Sage received a call on his cell phone. According to what she told the police, he departed the restaurant 'in a highly agitated state.' He was last seen getting into a large-mammal-size red van with tinted windows, parked up the corner from the restaurant. The maître d' said he appeared to hesitate before entering the vehicle, and then got in very quickly, "almost as if he'd been pulled inside," Then the van sped off at high speed and that was the last time anyone saw him; the maître d was unable to get the plate number."

"Mr. Big stopped to take a sip of mineral water and then looked straight at Finnick and then straight at me. 'The ZPD still has him listed as missing, but you and I know better, boys; he's not coming back, not anytime soon, not ever. Your Mr. Diamond may be a backstabbing lowlife, with no sense of respect, but he knows how to tie up a loose end. I'll give him that much if nothing else.'"

"Yes, and that wasn't all he was giving up, Carrots. It was something I'd never seen before, and I never would have said so to his face…but at that moment, Mr. Big actually looked a little bit scared. And that takes some doing, believe me; I had been there the first time he and the Red Pig had met face to face; Big never so much as blinked, even though Peccari had brought nearly the entire Razorback crew with him. But the Big Shrew didn't look so calm and collected now, and I knew then, deep down in my gut, that he was never going to catch up with Mr. Diamond—and neither was the ZPD. It wasn't anything I thought so much as felt…but I felt it as strongly as a bad toothache. I was so certain I was right, I didn't even bother asking about Woolsey. Later on, I learned that the cops never found him either."

"Sensing that I'd gotten the message, Mr. Big changed the subject. I'm afraid I can't offer you and Finnick a chance to earn with me Nick; it would bring down heat I can't afford right now. And for that same reason, I can't offer you another loan either.' He spread his paws on the arms of his chair. "I am truly sorry to have to tell you this, but there it is.'"

"No Judy, I had sort of expected something like that; so had Finnick. I said, 'I understand Mr. Big, but honestly, I haven't had time to plan anything. Less than a week ago it looked like the only future I had was behind bars.' He nodded his understanding, and then Finnick spoke up again."

"What I can't figure is how we got let out so fast," he said, and the Big Shrew raised a finger."

"That's because the city is trying to cover its tail," he told us, "They want to be able to say, "Look, see? We're the good guys; even though Nick Wilde and Finnck are both foxes, as soon as we realized they were innocent we let them right out of jail, no red tape and no stalling.'"

"He went on to tell us that there was a big shake-up going on in the Zootopia's District Attorney's Office right then. Clark Muskegg, the caribou who'd prosecuted us had already been fired—it was actually more of a 'You can't fire me, I quit!' kind of thing, and it wasn't just because of Finnick and me. I don't know all the details, but apparently I was the straw that broke the camel's back, if you'll pardon the expression. Later on, they took away Muskegg's law license and he barely escaped going to jail himself." "But if the City of Zootopia thought THAT was going to keep Finnick and me from filing suit over our wrongful convictions, I had a whole new line of bridges to sell them."

"Yes Carrots, I know…I KNOW. I know it now, but I didn't know it then, and when I told Mr. Big
what I just told you, he kind of looked at me for a few seconds and then turned and signaled to the bodyguard closest to him. 'Raymond, get me Michael on the phone.' We waited while the polar bear dialed and then held the cell-phone close to Mr. Big's chair.

"Michael? This is Don Grandi. You over at Halibuts' right now? Good, good…wait there, I'm bringing someone over.' He nodded again to Raymond who disconnected and then crushed the phone in his paws. Mr. Big had never liked computers and he wasn't too fond of cell-phones either. The only kinds he'd have around him were the disposable variety…and even then, they had better be used only once."

"Halibut's was within easy walking distance of The Thaw, but Mr. Big insisted on taking a limo. When we pulled out of the parking lot, I found out why. Parked against the curb, almost directly across the street from the club was an unmarked, large-mammal, delivery van."

"'What kind of an idiot leaves a delivery truck parked in the same spot for three whole hours?' I heard the Big Shrew grouse rhetorically. 'If you're going to run surveillance on me, at least don't insult my intelligence.' I just sighed and shook my head, whoever was in that van, it couldn't be the ZPD—no way would they have made such a boneheaded mistake—but it explained pretty clearly why Mr. Big couldn't stake me to anything, or offer me a job; he really was looking at the much heat. Mmm, actually, that wasn't necessarily such a bad thing, Carrots; I couldn't have accepted such an offer anyway; Robyn would have thrown a fit…and then she'd have thrown me OVER."

"Finnick used to call Clark Halibut's 'the submarine', because the interior of the place was lit in red lighting; it always took a minute for our eyes to adjust whenever we walked into the place, not that we ever complained. Then as now, Halibuts had the best seafood in Zootopia. As soon as we were able to see where we were going, the headwaiter, a sea lion, led us to a booth in the small mammal dining section. It was big enough to seat at least half a dozen foxes, but it was occupied by only a single animal, an impeccably dressed mink in a silk suit and gold-rimmed spectacles. I remember that when we saw him, he was in the midst of a meal of lemon sole over orzo pasta. At first, he appeared to ignore us, but that was only because he was waiting for the sea lion to leave before he said anything. As soon as the waiter departed, he looked up and was all smiles."

"'Don Grandi, what an unexpected and pleasant surprise; please…sit down, have you eaten yet?'

"We hadn't and so Mr. Big sent Kevin to fetch another waiter while Koslov set him down on the table top and Finnick and I slid into the booth on either side of the mink. And then, as he always did, Mr. Big insisted on engaging in some small talk before getting down to cases, something the mink seemed to take completely in stride."

"'So it's true then, Don Grandi?' he asked, in between bites of his meal, "Don Porcini appointed Rocco Peccari to be his new underboss?"

"It was like hitting a hornet's nest with a soccer ball. 'The Red Pig!' Mr. Big spat out Peccari's street-name like a bad taste, 'Che infame! I ask you Michael, what is this thing of ours coming to when a cafone sporco like that can be elevated to such a position of respect?"

"'The mink just shrugged and took another forkful of sole. 'He may be a little rough around the edges Padrone, but he gets the job done. And except for the Palm Hotel Casino, he's the biggest earner in the Sahara Square mob.'"

"'Fah!'"

"While all this was going on, I just sat there and kept quiet. One of the messages I had delivered after getting out of Lemmingworth had been from Don Rafaello Porcini to his consigliere in Sahara
Square. It had all been in code, and I hadn't understood a word of it, but now I wondered, could that have been the order Mr. Big was so upset about? I had no idea, but when our food arrived and the subject changed, I never felt more relieved.

"It wasn't until Finnick and I were halfway through our shrimp scampi that Mr. Big finally introduced us to the animal we had come to see."

"Nick, Finnick, allow me to present Michael Mink Esq, attorney at law. Michael? You haven't met this fox and fennec, but you've heard me mention their names several times. These are Nick Wilde and Finnick, the former proprietors of Wild Times Amusement Park."

"Ah yes, what a shame,' Mink said, reaching across the table to shake our paws, 'My son Jeremy was crazy about that place. Whenever his mother would drop him off for the weekend, there was nowhere else he wanted to go."

"I didn't know how to respond to that, so I just said thanks; there was something about this mink that was a little bit off-putting but I could quite nail it down."

"Michael's specialty is business law,' Mr. Big explained when we sat down again, 'he represents me in regards to…ahhh, certain of my business assets, (meaning his legitimate businesses,) however he is in no way unfamiliar with the subject of civil litigation.'"

"I almost choked on my pasta. So that was why Finnick and I had been brought here…and it took Michael Mink all of half a second to discern our intentions; he was one very sharp mustelid He put down his fork and adjusted his glasses. Then he cleared his throat."

"You realize, I hope, that I cannot formally represent either one of you, only offer you some advice, which you are under no obligation to accept.' That was his way to telling us that that if we followed his counsel and it all went sideways, tough luck, we were on our own."

"I understand,' I said, 'Please continue."

"Mink cleared his throat a second time. "Then I must inform that if you intend to file suit against the Zootopia DA's office in regards to your wrongful conviction, your chances of success are not nearly so great as you might think; certainly your chances of collecting anything substantial are quite slim."

"That brought Finnick straight out of his chair like a jack-in-the-box."

"What do you mean we don't have a chance? We didn't get off on no technicality, we were proven innocent!'"

"Finnick, will you just listen to him for minute?' I said; I didn't like what I was hearing either, but at the same time I knew that Mink was playing straight with us. And if there was one thing my prison experiences had taught me, it was NOT to hear only what you wanted to hear."

"Yes, that's a plus in your favor," Mr. Mink conceded without batting an eye, 'but on the other paw, let's review. First of all you two were wrongfully convicted, but at the same time I knew that Mink was playing straight with us. And if there was one thing my prison experiences had taught me, it was NOT to hear only what you wanted to hear."

"Yes, that's a plus in your favor," Mr. Mink conceded without batting an eye, 'but on the other paw, let's review. First of all you two were wrongfully convicted, but you were NOT falsely convicted; none of the evidence against you was manufactured and none of the witnesses were coerced into giving false testimony. As a matter of fact, the police didn't find THEM, they all came forward of their own accord."

"That only made Finnick even angrier. He slapped the table so hard, the dishes jumped and Koslov took a step in his direction; Mr. Big immediately waved him back; he understood my partner's frustration."
"'Dangit', Finnick was almost shouting, 'the court convicted us on circumstantial evidence alone; stuff that was thin as toilet paper! And that no-good judge was on the prosecution's side all through the trial!''

"Once again, Mink didn't even flinch. 'That may be Mr. Finnick, but can you convince another jury of that fact? Let me tell you something; that's going to be an almost impossible row to hoe…unless you draw a judge who hates Evelyn Rainier's guts. And believe me, the city of Zootopia will never allow that to happen. I can't say this too many times, the Zootopia DA's office did not railroad you, they may have been deluding themselves as to the matter of your guilt, but at the same time they honestly believed it.'"

"Finnick still wouldn't give up. 'We never saw a nickel's profit from that bust out!'"

"'But you would have, if you'd gotten away with it,' Mink countered, pointing at him with a fork, 'Or that was what everyone believed until the real arsonists were caught. Both the DA's office and the ZPD thought you'd either stashed the loot, or—much more likely—that you'd had it stolen off of you after your arrest. In any event, what does it prove? If an animal robs a bank and comes away empty pawed, does that make him any less guilty?'"

"'Well, what about that doofus we had for an attorney?' Now Finnick was shouting. "That fool couldn't have defended his way out of a wet paper bag!"

"Okay that was all; now I felt the need to intervene. Everyone in the dining room was staring at our table; it was just a lucky thing it was late and Halibut's was almost empty."

"'Come on little guy, you already know that's bogus," I said, trying not to sound patronizing. I didn't need Mr. Mink to tell me that his line of thinking was a dead end… and neither did Finnick; he was letting his frustration get the better of him."

"'Half the animals we did time with are on the inside because they had to rely on a two-bit public defender to represent them.' I pointed out. 'Ineffective counsel might be okay for getting a verdict overturned, but if it was good for any kind of a cash settlement, the City of Zootopia would have gone broke twenty years ago.' I was exaggerating, but Finnick got the point and sat back down again. And Michael Mink saw that as the opportunity to deliver the coup-de-grace."

"'Well said, Mr. Wilde; but your biggest problem is that each of you served only a little more than four months in prison. If you'd served twenty, even ten years you might get some sympathy from a jury, but…only four months? Even if the judgement goes in your favor, don't expect any kind of a substantial payoff—especially, sorry but I have to say this, especially since the two of you are foxes. Given that fact, it's not outside the realm of possibility that a jury might decide to award you one dollar, just to show you what they think of you. Trust me; as a member of the weasel family, I'm all too familiar with that sort of thing.'"

"'Even Finnick, as wound up as he was right then, couldn't argue that last point. Conventional wisdom said, 'They're a couple of stinkin' FOXES! What else did the DA need to prosecute?' We'd known that was the biggest strike against us long before we sat down at that table.'"

"'For what seemed like hours afterwards, no one said a thing. And then finally I ventured, 'Well, then what do you think we should do, Counselor?'"

"'He took another bite of orzo before answering."

"'My advice is to go ahead and put in your claim. But do it quietly, without fanfare, and if the city offers you any kind of a settlement, take it and be glad for it'"
"All the way back to my mother's house, Finnick and I were arguing. I thought we should take the lawyer's advice, but he wanted to go full speed ahead on a lawsuit, and dang the torpedoes and the consequences. At first, Robyn was on his side—until she talked it over with Meffy, who referred her to her OWN attorney. 'I can either tell you the truth, or I can tell you what you want to hear Ms. McFerral,' is what I later heard she said. 'Which do you prefer?' (Robyn went with the truth even though it wasn't her preference.)"

"Even if there had been a decent chance of Finnick and I collecting any damages, I didn't have to consult a lawyer to know that it would be a deferred payoff at best; lawsuits don't get resolved overnight, and so…"

"Ah yes, the insurance policy; I was wondering when you were going to bring that up. I'm afraid that was a no go too, Carrots. Right before my trial started, the company that had underwritten Wild Times had been hit with an even bigger claim than mine, and it had sent them straight into Chapter 11. By the time my conviction was overturned, their assets had already been liquidated and there was nothing left for me to take. Not that I would have been awarded much of anything anyway. The term is due diligence; I had brought Mr. Diamond, on board as an investor in Wild Time despite knowing almost nothing about him…and I hadn't informed our insurer of that fact. When I think back on what an incredibly careless mistake that was… Well, it was Cats-22, Carrots; if I had told them, they would have declined to cover us; no insurance coverage, no operator's license—and no amusement park."

"The point is…except for the money Mr. Big had given me, I was flat broke, and so was Finnick. And that cash wasn't going to last very long; I'd already had to dip into it to help pay some of my mother's bills; she'd had to have the house re-piped while I was away. What was left wasn't enough to rebuild Wild Times, but if Finnick and I pooled our resources and brought in a third party, we could start a small business of our own…or so I thought."

"No, Carrots…no, we couldn't; no one wanted anything to do with either one of us business partners. And this time it wasn't only because we were foxes, it was because the last time I'd tried to start a business, one of my other partners had busted it out and then burned it down…and I'd never suspected a thing. I might not have had anything to do with that scheme, but I hadn't spotted it either. It was that due diligence business all over again. No one wanted to sell us their business either, and that WAS because we were foxes. Every time we made somebody an offer, they'd immediately up the price; they were convinced that because of our species we had to be lowballing them. And in the meantime we had bills to pay. It was easier on me than it was on Finnick; I was still living at home with my mother while he'd had to move out and fend for himself after a while."

"With my cash reserves dwindling, I took the only route open to me. I went looking for a job. As I'd expected, no one called me back for a second interview, but then something strange happened."

"I had applied for a job managing a video arcade, and for once, I thought I had a decent chance at getting hired; the proprietor was a hyena, an animal with a rep at least as bad as a fox's. The first time I talked to him, he seemed to like me and thought I'd be good fit for the job, having once managed an amusement park. But I never heard back from him either and then I found out the job had gone to another fox, one who didn't have nearly as much experience as I did. So I did some digging and found out that what he DID have was a clean record; when the hyena had run a background check on me, he'd found out I'd been arrested for torching my own establishment and closed the books without going any further. And that, as I soon discovered, was how it had been with every other prospective employer I'd applied to; my conviction might have been expunged but not my arrest. By the time I managed to get that oversight corrected, it was too late; the information was already in several other database files. No one would hire me…or Finnick either."
"And now you know why I lied on my ZPD application, Judy. I was afraid…afraid I'd be denied the chance to become a police officer before I had a chance to prove myself, the same as had happened before with those other jobs. I know now that it was the wrong decision, but at the time, it seemed like a no brainer…"

"Huh? What do you mean, 'You're right?'"

"'Yes, it WAS a brainless decision?' Oh, har, har, har…don't quit your day job, Fluff. Listen, I'm trying to make you understand something; yes, I lied about my arrest, but what had the truth ever gotten me before, except, 'don't call us, we'll call you?'"

"Okay, I can live with that answer, Carrots. But now I have to tell you something else, lying on my ZPD application was a brilliant move compared to what I did after finding out I'd been unofficially blackballed; the worst mistake I ever made in my life."

Chapter End Notes

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Judy Hopps could have stopped Nick Wilde right there; part of her wanted him to stop. The red fox's tale was pounding towards a heart-wrenching conclusion and she didn't need to hear any more; she already knew the ending, no spoilers required.

She could do it, she could hold up her paw and tell him, "All right Nick, I understand, you don't need to say any more."

Except…HE needed to keep going; he needed to get the weight off his shoulders, even if that was something she didn't need.

Or…did she? Nick seemed to think so; all at once his ears were standing sharply erect and swiveling in her direction—like a pair of antennae, tuning in to her thoughts.

"I know what you're thinking, Carrots," he said, "that I broke my promise to Robyn and went back to hustling. And you're right, I did, but THAT wasn't my horrible mistake—although that is what led to it."

Judy half grumbled, half sighed. If Nick felt the need to tell her everything, fine…but did he have to take the SCENIC route?

She began to thump her foot.

"Nick, will you please stow the drama and just get on with it? Seriously, you sound like you're talking in riddles right now."

His expression became instantly contrite more appropriate to a sheep than a fox.

"O-Okay Carrots."
Closing his eyes and gripping the sides of his chair, Nick took in a long, slow breath, as if gathering his strength for what was to come. Judy waited; she knew this was going to be the hardest place for him to revisit …and she also knew that he was going to go there.

"It started out small Carrots, the way these things always do; it began with the Graffiti Hustle, a scam I'd heard about while I was in Lemmingworth."

"It works like this: Take some watercolor paint, mix it up in sprayer and then go find your mark; you need a business, preferably upscale, with an empty store-front next door. What you do is spray both places with graffiti, and then sit back and wait for the business owner to arrive. When he does, he finds a graffiti-removal service—you—at work on the space next to his, and then this is how it goes from there:"

"'Hey, can you take care of my place too, while you're at it?'

"'Awww, I'd love to help you out friend, but we're on a schedule here.'"

"'Oh, come on…please? I'll make it worth your while, 50 bucks, cash.'"

"'Oh gee…I-I don't know…'

"'All right, a HUNDRED dollars!' You get the idea, Carrots. And since we'd made the 'decorations' using water-color paint, all it took was one quick spray and voila, the graffiti, she is gone! Some of the marks were so pleased by the job we did, they even paid us a bonus."

"As hustles go, it was strictly penny-ante; you could only run it on one storefront per day and you had to keep moving around to avoid any suspicion…AND you were strictly limited in the areas you where you could work that hustle. It was fine for Savanna Central and Sahara Square, but not the Rainforest District, and especially Tundratown, not only because of the climate but because that was Mr. Big's territory. He never did care much for 'unauthorized artwork' in his district, it was bad for business."

"I can't remember if it was Finnick or me that first suggested the running the graffiti hustle, but I do remember promising myself that this was as far as I'd go; one last, little con to get me back on my feet, and then never again, cross my heart."

"Yeah, riiiight! Less than two weeks after I made myself that promise, Finnick and I were running the rain-dance hustle, collecting rainwater in the Rainforest District and selling it as bottled water in the Sahara Square and Savanna Central metro stations; you knew about that one already. And again, I told myself that this was only temporary, a stop-gap measure to build up my bank account and then no more. I don't know, maybe that really would have happened if the word hadn't hit the streets, 'Heads up, Nick Wilde is back!' Before Finnick and I knew what was happening, we had offers coming in left and right: 'We've got everything set, but we still need someone to run the hustle. How about it guys? We'll cut you in for half the score.' That's when I should have walked away, Carrots…but I didn't, I couldn't. After living with my mother and barely scraping by, the payoff on some of those deals was just too good to resist."

"I-I think you can guess how it went from there, Carrots. I would tell myself, 'I just need X-amount-of-dollars and then I can quit.' And then as soon as I'd reach that goal, I'd decide that no, maybe it wasn't quite enough after all; just a little more and then I could stop…and then a little more, and a little more, and a little more. I know now what was going on with me. I wasn't going to quit until I made back every penny I'd lost when Wild Times burned down; life owed it to me."
"Yes, I know, and you're right, Judy…but that wasn't how I saw it at the time. And oh God, how I wish I had."

"It wasn't long before Finnick and I ditched the idea of working with outside partners and struck out on completely on our own. In practically no time at all…well, we'd end up missing work if I took the time to list all of our hustles, so let me tell you about just one of them, the vitamin scam."

"There was a company selling vitamin supplements back in those days, a trendy outfit called Rhi-Chee Performance Supplements. Maybe you remember them?"

"That's right, 'Rhino-Strong and Cheetah Fast' that same company the Zootopia Health Department closed down two years ago. By then they were almost bankrupt anyway…but back in the day, they had the hottest performance supplements on the market. This was when everyone thought carbohydrates were low-grade poison, and that was Rhi-Chee's big selling point, energy without carbs. Fursonally, I thought their products were snake oil by any other name; Red Bison, in pill form, with a jacked-up price tag…and I saw no harm in ripping off an outfit like that, sooo…"

"One of the foxes I'd done time with at Lemmingworth had been partners in a bootleg pharmaceutical operation before he went away. His guys could make counterfeit copies of almost any drug you wanted…but that wasn't what I wanted. What I did was have them run off 1000 K of plain, old sugar pills—in the exact same color and shape as Rhi-Chee's two most popular supplements. Finding the right-size bottles and getting someone to print up the labels was even easier; I'd known who to see about those things even before I went to prison."

"We sold them all over town, never in lots smaller than 500 bottles. Whenever I approached a pharmacy or store owner, I would always make the same pitch. 'I've got some Rhi-Chee Supplements to move that are slightly hot; because of that, I'm prepared to let you have them for half the wholesale cost.' Even at that price, Finnick and I were pulling in something like a 500% profit. And even if the mark suspected that the supplements we'd sold him weren't quite right, he still wouldn't go to the cops; he had purchased what he'd thought was stolen property and paid for it under the table…cash only, no receipts and no sales records; how was he supposed to explain that to the ZPD?"

"But it wasn't the hustling that turned out to be the biggest regret of my life, Carrots. It was… please, don't hate me but the whole time this was going on, Robyn thought I was working an honest job…yes I know, and you're right. You can't begin to imagine all the nights I spent lying awake because of it."

"At first I just kept quiet about my hustling activities. In the beginning, that was all it took to keep Robyn from getting suspicious; to look at me, you'd never have guessed that I was back in the hustling game. I certainly wasn't living large, staying at home with my mother and wearing the same outfit day after day. My idea of splurging back then was to send out for a pizza. Later, even after I started raking it in, I continued to pinch my pennies. The less I spent now, the sooner I'd have enough cash reserves to finally quit hustling for good; that's what I kept telling myself. When I moved out of my mother's house—I just couldn't take being pestered about grandkids any more—I took a one-room, basement flat in the Otterdam neighborhood, only a little bit bigger than my old prison cell. No frills for this fox; every extra nickel that I made went straight into my Walk-Away-From-Hustling-For-Good fund."

"Of course, eventually Robyn began to ask questions, and that was when I told her my first lie. One
morning when she came by to see me, she found a case of bootleg Rhi-Chee supplements in the back of Finnick's van. (The little guy had forgotten and left the back door wide open.)

"What the heck were we doing with a whole pallet-load of vitamin supplements, she wanted to know. Thinking fast, I told her they were samples I was holding for distribution to the other sales-animals…and she believed me. After she left, I wanted to nail my tongue to a tree, but that would be the last lie I'd ever tell her, I swore to myself…and if you believe THAT Carrots, I have a bridge to sell you."

"You know how it goes with these things; one lie becomes another lie—and then another and another, and then every lie that you tell is just a little bit bigger than the last one. Before I realized it, I wasn't just lying to Robyn, I was hustling her; the most beautiful, wonderful thing ever to come into my life, and I…and I…Oh, God, how could I ever have done that?"

"No Carrots…I-I'll be all right; just give me a minute, okay?"

"Okay…After Robyn found those supplements; Finnick and I decided that we needed a better, more permanent place to store our goods; stashing them in his van overnight and hiding them in my mother's basement just wasn't working any more. So I rented a storage unit under an assumed name, and put everything in there. Heh, that unit cost more to rent than the place where I was living, but it was worth every penny; thanks to all that extra storage space, we were able to triple our operations. Pretty soon, we were not only hustling counterfeit vitamins, but running a half a dozen other schemes, too. That was when I first started running the pawpsicle hustle, only back then it worked a little bit differently than what you saw when we first met. We used to get our Jumbo Pops directly from the warehouse instead of having to wheedle them out of retailers like Jerry Jumbeaux."

"No, you're right Carrots…the warehouse managers didn't like selling to a fox any more than that elephant did. But as far as they knew, Finnick and I weren't the buyers, we were only the drivers, the animals who'd been hired to pick up the jumbo pops and then deliver them—by a certain artic shrew, although we never mentioned him by name. That always worked, and if we sometimes had to wait a while to get served, we were never turned away empty pawed."

"What? Oh no, you better believe we made sure to ask Mr. Big's permission first, (and we always cut him in for a slice of the profits.) Even in my worst moments back then, I could never be THAT reckless. Pretty soon, we were making money paw over fist, even better than before I'd quit the streets to start Wild Times…and I was finally beginning to see the day when I'd have enough to quit them once and for all. The trouble was, like I said before, that day never seemed to get any closer. But when it did arrive, I'd be able to tell Robyn the truth at long last. She'd understand, I knew she would; and then at long last, we'd be able to get married and start a family."

"No, Robyn still wanted us to get married right away but she never pestered me about it. I had told her I didn't want to tie the knot until I was promoted to sales manager. When that happened, I said, I'd have a steady income and wouldn't have to work on such a cockamamie schedule—and she accepted it. (That was likely the only promise I made to myself back then that I ever kept. I'd lie through my fangs to Robyn about not being back in the hustling game, but no way would I marry her on that lie. Even with all of my other deceptions, there was one line I still wouldn't cross.)"

"And then…one morning while I was getting ready to go pick up a load of vitamins at the storage unit, I got a phone-call from Tundratown."

"The Big Shrew wants to see you, Nick…he's at Koslov's Drop everything and get over here right away."
"It's amazing how the tiniest oversight can come back to haunt you forever Carrots. I was in such a hurry to answer Mr. Big's summons that I forgot and left the keys to the storage-unit on my kitchen table. I knew from the tone of that phone call that the Big Shrew wasn't angry with me; if that had been the case, I would have been told 'get over here NOW, fox!' But even so, for him to call me that early in the day… whatever was going on, it had to be something serious."

"'Koslov's' was Koslov's Suit Factory. Mr. Big's always had a large interest in the Tundratown Fashion District; that's where he opened his first legitimate business. Ever heard of the Tux-On Tuxedo shops? Right, that's where it all began for him. As for Koslov's it may have had that polar bear's name on the front, but Mr. Big was the one who'd put up the cash to start the place and he always got a piece of the profits. I found him in the sales office, parked on top of Koslov's desk and talking on the phone; Kevin and Raymond were also there."

"As soon he hung up the phone, (and Raymond destroyed it,) Mr. Big was all smiles; you never would have guessed that his call to me had been anything close to urgent. After the usual round of greetings, he started asking after my recent activities; it was driving me crazy, WHY had I been summoned here? Finally, I just blurted it out. 'Mr. Big, sir, if I've done anything to offend you or hurt your business, please tell me and I'll make it right.'"

"All at once, he got very serious. 'You're not causing me any problems right now Nick, but YOU have a problem—something you need to take care of right now. You know this koala bear out of Outback Island, named Hugh Vicks?'

"I shook my head, slowly. Of all the districts in Zootopia, Outback Island was the one with which I was least familiar. "I know one or two koala bears, but no one by that name," I told him.

"He leaned forward on the arms of his chair, showing all his teeth. 'Well, he knows YOUR name Nick, and he's been trading off it behind your back, telling animals that you're partners with him in this debt relief scam he's been running.'"

"'WHAT?!' Now my teeth were showing. 'Why that little jerk! Of all the dirty, lowdown…'

"Hold it, wait…I'd better explain, Carrots. Even as a fox and street hustler, I had certain rules to live by…and one of the first and most important was never to pull a hustle on anyone who was already down and out—and that's exactly how a debt relief scam works; it's basically a boiler-room operation that contacts folks with credit problems and offers to help them settle their debts. 'In return for a small monthly fee, we will negotiate with your lender on your behalf…yakitty-yak, blah, blah, blah…' That's what they promise, but what they really do is take the money and run, leaving their victims bankrupt and facing lawsuits by their creditors. And this stinking, little koala had had the nerve to bring my name into a debt-relief scheme…behind my BACK!"

"It made my blood boil, Judy. These kinds of scammers are the lowest of the low. Sometimes, they'll even register as a non-profit organization, just to boost their legitimacy, (and avoid any tax questions.) But there was still one thing I didn't understand."

"'Why is he using MY name?' I asked, 'Animals aren't exactly going to be rushing to sign up with this koala bear if they hear Nick Wilde is part of the deal.' I was still feeling the aftershocks of Wild Times right then."

"Mr. Big nodded, looking both very sage and very grim. 'No you're right Nicky, it's the animals that work for him he's been telling that you're involved; everyone knows you've never stiffed a partner in your life.'"

"'Sounds to me like these animals are still waiting for their first payday.' I said, getting angry all
over again. Bad enough that this Hugh Vicks was sticking it to some animals with problems enough already, but if he was ripping off his employees as well…well, then I could imagine a couple of koala ears that might also need ripping off."

"You would be correct, Nick,' Mr. Big told me, and that, as they say, was all she wrote."

"Where can I find this jerk? I asked, showing my fangs again, "I think we need to have us a little talk.'"

"Mr. Big worked his lips for a minute and then sat back in his chair. That was his way of telling me I'd said exactly what he wanted to hear."

"He works out of a third-story office in Acorn Heights. Take Kevin and Raymond with you, you'll need them. This koala has some muscle of his own on the payroll; nothing they can't handle, a couple of Tasmanian Tigers."

"Kevin and Raymond both liked that idea, growling and flashing toothy grins at each other."

"We caught up with Hugh Vicks in his office-building's parking garage, just as he was getting out of his car. He was skinny for a koala bear, and dressed like a bad parody of an oil baron, tan suit, string tie, and matching diamond cufflinks. And just as Mr. Big had warned me, he had a pair of Tasmanian tigers with him. I told Kevin and Raymond to stay in the limo and wait for my signal, and then got out and went hurrying over with my arms wide open."

"Hugh, old buddy, old friend, old pal, it IS you! Small world, huh? Come here!"

"I threw myself around him and gave him a big hug…hard enough to make his eyeballs bulge. He immediately pushed me off, and started brushing down his suit jacket as if it was covered in lint. (Well, it was the shedding season.)"

"Hang on then, do I know you, fox?" he said, taking a quick step backwards and away from me. From the tone of his voice and the look on his face, I could tell he was not a particular fan of foxes. But then that was hardly surprising Carrots. After all, we're considered an invasive species Down Under. Wha..? Oh right, so are bunnies."

"Anyway I gave Hugh Vicks my best fox-cub-with-hurt-feewings look. "Awww come on Hughie, surely you remember your old pal, Nick Wilde.' And then I dropped the jolly-good-fellow act and let him see one of my fangs, 'You ought to know me cuddly-bear, after the way you've been telling everybody I'm your partner!'"

"THAT got his attention, Carrots; calling a koala 'cuddly' is even worse than calling a bunny 'cute'. He immediately signaled to his bodyguards. 'Here mates, this fox was just leaving, wan' he?' They snarled and began to move towards me with their mouths open and their teeth showing. Scary sight; Tasmanian Tigers can drop their jaws so wide, they can almost touch their collar-bones."

"I backed off and raised my paws in a gesture of 'I don't want trouble'—which, of course, was my signal to Kevin and Raymond. For couple of such large animals, they sure know how to move quickly and quietly, remember how they snuck up on us in the back of Mr. Big's limousine? Before those Tasmanian tigers could take even another step, Kevin and Raymond had them both in a headlock."

"Once again, I was Mr. Cheerful Fox. 'Guys,' I said to the polar bears, 'why don't you take our new little friends around the corner for some coffee or something?' I poked a thumb at the elevator. 'Me and my old buddy Hugh here have some private business to discuss…upstairs.' To emphasize the
point, I threw an arm around his shoulder, pulling him close. I could feel him quivering; not such a
tough koala without his muscle-boys. He tried to protest. 'Listen mate, I really can't…'"

"'Sure, you can!' I interrupted, digging in with my claws and making him grimace. I turned him
around and began to whisk him towards the elevator, ushering him inside with a hearty slap on the
back…hard enough to make him stumble into the back wall. As the door closed, I could hear
Kevin and Raymond, grunting in amusement…"

"I know, Carrots…that doesn't sound like the Nick Wilde you know, does it? No, you're right, it's
not in my nature to play the bullying predator, but I was just that mad. Not only was Hugh Vicks
ruining my reputation by dragging my name into a scheme I wouldn't have touched with asbestos
gloves…Dangit, I hadn't come out of prison just to get thrown right back inside on the word of
some sleazebag koala bear I didn't even know. Besides, I needed to make an example out of him, a
warning to anyone else who might be tempted to pull a similar stunt. That was another thing I'd
learned while I was in Lemmingworth."

"All the way upstairs, Vicks tried to fast-talk me. 'Lissen sport, there's no need for any of this; we
can…'"

"'Shut up!'"

"When we got to his office, it was pretty much what I had expected, workstations lined up against
dingy walls, with animals of differing species seated at each one; bad lighting, creaking chairs,
practically no ventilation, and a carpet so badly worn, I was almost afraid to walk on it for fear I
might catch the mange; in other words, it was a typical boiler-room operation."

'Two of the animals at the workstations, a goat and a hyrax gave us curious looks as we passed, but
by now, Vicks had finally gotten the message and signaled for them to get back to work. Just past
the boiler-room was another koala, sitting at a somewhat nicer desk than the other employees—
Hugh Vicks' secretary; he told her to hold all his calls. When we got to his private office, I all but
bowled him through the door before closing and locking it behind us."

"'Sit down,' I said, nodding at the chair behind the desk. And you know, for a supposedly slow
moving species that koala could really hit the gas when he felt the need."

"All right, all right…take it easy, mate. There's no need to…"

"…and shut up!"

"While Vicks seated himself, I took a moment to survey my surroundings…and I didn't like what I
saw. While his employees were laboring in what was basically a cyber-sweatshop, he was sitting in
the lap of luxury. No kidding Carrots. that office would have done a hedge-fund manager proud;
oak paneling, a blackwood desk with a Furman Meowler chair, a big screen TV with a CATMOS
sound system, a (presumably) fully stocked refrigerator, and—get this—even a massage table. I
could have bitten that stupid koala's head off; his whole setup was disaster waiting to happen. It
was lucky for me I'd found out about it when I did."

"I took the seat opposite Vicks and leaned back, putting my feet up on the desktop to show him
what I thought of his little inner sanctum. Then I looked him straight in the eye. "You saw my two
friends downstairs; do you know who they're with?"

"Yes, but you don't…"

"Skip the speech, just yes or no. Okay, then you should also know there's plenty more where they
came from, right? This time just nod or shake your head."

"He nodded."

"All right,' I said, 'Now I'm going to talk, and you're going to listen. If you say one word before I'm done…well, I'll just let you guess what's going to happen. Now…how shall I put this?"

"I sat up and put my elbows on the desktop."

"You loudmouth, little jerk, telling your animals I'm partners with you.' I waved a paw around the room, 'I wouldn't get involved with a dirty scam like this if you put gun to my head and a million dollars in my paw…and I said keep your mouth shut!'"

"He had started to speak and I had responded by flashing my claws."

"'And another thing,' I was snarling now, 'I just got out of the joint for a crime I didn't commit … and I am not going back inside for something ELSE I didn't do, understand? Nod if you understand me."

"He nodded….and I decided to make him squirm a little. Though I had no way of knowing it, that was the smarted and wisest thing I could have done right then."

"'Do you want to know what really bothers me cuddy-bear?' I said, tapping the desktop as I spoke, 'When we met downstairs just now, you treated me like I was pond scum, and why, because I'm a fox. Meanwhile here YOU are, running a scam that preys on animals that least deserved to get shafted and cheating your employees…and bringing MY name into it without my knowledge or permission.' I was really steamed now. 'Why would you do that, Vicks? Was it another species thing? Okay, you can talk now."

"Whoa, it was like throwing open a floodgate, Judy. Vicks started waving his arms like a revival preacher and answering all of the questions he WISHED I'd asked him."

"All right, all right…I brought your name into it without telling yer—an' I'm sorry, o-kay? But if I'd known yer'd be so upset, I never would have done it, would I? Look, I'll make it up to yer, fox… mate; I'll cut yer in for a full 15 percent, Hugh's word on it. What d'yer say?"

"It was just a good thing he didn't offer to shake on it, Carrots. I swear, he never would have gotten that paw back."

"I got up from my chair and leaned over him with my paws on the desktop. 'What I say, you cuddly, little jerk, is that I wouldn't take anything from this scheme if it was the last money I was EVER going to make. No, let me tell YOU what's going to happen. We're going to walk outside and you're going to call everyone together, and then you're going to tell them that there's been a dreadful mistake; I'm not partners with you and I never was.'"

"Whoof, you should have seen him, Carrots, for a second there, I thought I was going to have to administer CPR, (much as I would have hated to.) And then, what do you know? I never knew koala-bears could whine."

"'Oi, I can't do that mate, they'll down headsets and walk.'"

"I leaned even further across the desk, showing my fangs again."

"That's your problem cuddy-bear, or do you want an even bigger prob…?"
Right then, three things happened. I saw Vick's ears prick up and felt a buzzing in my pocket; someone was texting me. A half second later, I heard a commotion outside the door; by the time I got my cell out, Kevin was telling me what I already knew. Vick knew it too, and he tried to give me an angry look."

"'You bushytailed bludger; you've grassed on me!'

"It was the closest I ever came that day to biting him; I didn't have to know what those words meant to understand what HE meant. 'Did you just call me a snitch, you little jerk?' I had a lot more to say to that koala—as IF I'd drop a dime on him and then walk right into the middle of it—but just then someone started pounding on his office door and that put the brakes on it; we put up our paws just as the cops kicked it open."

"By then, I knew better than to expect that the police would simply let me go; 'Move along sir, nothing to see here.' They cuffed me, read me my rights, and put Vicks and me in separate police cruisers, the two of us trading insults all the way downstairs. And in all modesty Carrots, I must say that I gave a lot better than I got. When we made it down to the parking garage, there was no sign of Kevin and Raymond."

"What…? No, I wasn't angry Carrots; just the opposite; there wasn't anything they could have done for me right then anyway, and besides…the last thing I wanted was to drag Mr. Big into it, even though I had brought along those polar bears at his insistence. I also knew they'd get word of what had happened back to the Big Shrew, although I didn't know if that would do me any good; he hadn't been able to offer me work or a loan, so how could he help me now?"

"'The police took us to Precinct One for booking. All during the ride, I was as cool as an air-conditioner—never let them see that they get to you—but on the inside I was praying hard that the ZPD had had Vicks' office wired, and that they'd been listening in on our conversation."

"Yes, Carrots, I know that now, of course they would have been listening in; it's standard police procedure. But I didn't know it then, and I had another, bigger concern. I had never been Hugh Vicks' partner in that debt-relief scam, but how much did he know about my other activities? He must have known something or else he'd never have been using my name like that. Was there any chance he might offer to give me up in exchange for some leniency? He had loudly accused me of snitching on HIM, after all; it didn't look good."

"I made my one phone call to Finnick; I knew that by then Mr. Big must have been aware of what had happened. (And anyway, I'd have had to be an idiot to call him directly from jail.) When I told Finnick the story, he was so mad he wanted to come down and bite Vicks' face off…and my only objection was, 'forget it, he's mine', (though of course I never said so out loud; I had already, nearly gotten muzzled again over some of the things I'd said to that koala on the way through the precinct doors.) Finnick asked me what I wanted him to do and I told him just sit tight; I was waiting for Mr. Big's reaction before I made my next move. He understood, but then he asked me, 'Do you want me to call Robyn?''"

"Robyn! Holy foxtrot, I'd forgotten all about her. I told him, "yes, but for fox's sake, make sure she understands that I've been arrested for something else I didn't do.'"

"While that may have seemed like a wise precaution Carrots, it was actually my first mistake. Robyn wasn't stupid and she'd have to wonder, WHY had that koala have been using my name in his debt-relief hustle? What good would do him to bring Nick Wilde's name into it; I had given up hustling and was playing it straight…wasn't I? If I hadn't had so much else on my mind right then, I might have thought things through a little more clearly."
"They put me in a holding cell, and I barely had time to sit down before things (finally) started looking up; someone rapped on the door and I heard a guard telling me, "Wilde, your lawyer's here."

"Lawyer? I hadn't called for any…and then I realized, he could only have come by way of Mr. Big; so the Big Shrew was going to help me, despite the risk. Later, much later, I learned that he'd felt he had no choice; HE was the one who'd put me on to Hugh Vicks in the first place and as such he should have been aware that a police raid was in the cards. He hadn't seen it coming and so now he felt an obligation to take care of me, ever the old-school boss."

"When the door to the holding cell slid back, there was the guard; hard to miss him since he was a water-buffalo, but there was no one else with him. What the…? Was someone pulling my tail? That was when I heard a wee voice, speaking up from below."

"Down here, fox."

"I looked, and saw a grey rat in natty suit, carrying what looked like a newly-minted briefcase. When he introduced himself, I almost fell over backwards. The attorney who'd been sent to represent me was none other than Vern Rodenberg…"

"Yes Carrots, that Vern Rodenberg, the one whose name makes steam come out of Big Chief Buffalo Nickel's ears whenever he hears it."

"He was less than a year out of law school back then; the Zootopia Attorney General's office had barely even heard of him, but he was already a legend in the prison community, the most famous jailhouse lawyer of all time. There wasn't a mammal in Lemmingworth, his old alma mater, who hadn't heard his story; how he'd come into the joint on a murder rap as almost a functional illiterate and taught himself the law via correspondence courses, eventually earning not one, but TWO law degrees. Later on, he had used his skills to get his guilty verdict overturned and then been acquitted on retrial…but not before filing, and winning, a whole stack of motions on behalf of other prisoners."

"After getting out, he'd enrolled in the U of Z law school and picked up a third law degree, 'from a brick and mortar school, so's no one can say I ain't a real lawyer,' was how he put it to me."

"Yes Carrots, I was happy to see him. Look, I know he's not the most popular animal with the ZPD these days, and I'd sooner have my tail shaved than have to face that rat as a hostile witness, but right then I couldn't afford to be picky; if I'd had him as my attorney for the Wilde Times fire, they'd have thrown out my case on the first day."

"As soon as the guard left, Rodenberg had me lift him up on the bunk-bed and sit down beside him. I liked him right away, no phony assurances from this rat, he gave it to me straight, but at the same time he managed to keep his sense of humor. The first thing he told me was that I'd been right, the police had been monitoring my conversation with Hugh Vicks."

"Then the heck am I doing in here?" I demanded, spreading my arms for show."

"Easy, Booby," Rodenberg snickered; (he called everybody Booby.) "The cops are about 90% sure that conversation was legit,' he flipped a paw back and forth, "But that other little 10% thinks maybe you and that koala were playacting, that you knew a bust was coming down and were trying to cover your tail."

"I was flabbergasted. 'What? I wouldn't have walked into that office for any reason if I'd known a raid was about to happen.'"
"He winked and cocked a finger at me, 'Exactly Booby, but you leave it to me to point that out, okay?'"

"I nodded, and then he narrowed his eyes. 'All right Nick, I can tell you got something else bothering you; you been fidgeting like a like a squirrel on espresso beans ever since we sat down here. Wanna tell me about it?' He sounded almost more like a shrink than a lawyer."

"I looked around the cell for a second; Rodenberg nodded as if I were sending a message, and raised his voice."

"'No sweat Booby, if the cops are listening in right now, there's this little thing called attorney-client privilege,' he raised his voice even higher, 'which would be good for not only a dismissal of all charges, but also a lawsuit that'll leave the ZPD so deep in the hole, you bums won't get out until the phone companies go back to rotary dials!' Heh, love him or hate him Carrots, you had to admit that rat had a way with the words. Yes, I know, the ZPD would never pull a stupid stunt like that, but YOU try getting being busted twice for crimes you didn't commit and see if it doesn't make you a little paranoid. I relaxed and told him about my other activities…and also about my worry that Vicks' might give me away to save his own skin. He immediately waved a paw.

"'Don't worry yourself about that Booby; that's one line even he won't cross—and besides, it would make a lot of animals very upset if he did.' By 'a lot of animals', he meant one animal in particular of course, a certain arctic shrew who hated informers more than anything. 'In fact,' Rodenberg narrowed his eyes again, and his whiskers started to quiver; it gave him a wicked appearance. Then his face seemed to fall and his ears wilted; now he looked almost sorrowful, 'In fact, it was none too wise of that cuddly-bear to accuse you of snitching when he knew it was bunk, none too wise at all, Booby.'"

"And finally, I relaxed completely. To Mr. Big's way of thinking, falsely accusing someone of snitching was almost as bad as being a snitch. I would hear no more from Hugh Vicks…not if he liked his face the way it was. Of course we both knew who had really dropped a dime on his operation; cheat your employees out of what you owe them while you live like the Sultan of Tigraba and it's only matter of time. Mr. Big later told me, 'If I'd known this was how that koala did his business, I'd never have let you anywhere near his office.'"

"When we got into the interrogation room, I never said one word; on the advice of my attorney, I let him do all the talking…and I can only describe it as a lovely fuss. Among other things he accused the cops of trying to frame me, 'as revenge for your humiliation over the Wild Times fire fiasco!' It was an unsubtle way of sending a subtle message…not to the ZPD, but to the Zootopia Attorney General's office. They had already suffered a major embarrassment once because of me; did they want to try double or nothing?"

"They didn't; by that afternoon, I was free to go, no charges filed. They didn't even want me as a material witness. When I got my cell phone back the first thing I did was call Finnick. When I told him the cops were letting me go he fennec-screamed so loud that Vern Rodenberg, who'd been sitting on my shoulder, nearly fell off onto the floor."

"Tell ya friend from the sandbox that if he ever needs a lawyer…go look somewhere else!" He squeaked sourly. Finnick had other news for me too, he'd gotten ahold of Robyn; she'd been furious but at the same time confident that I wasn't going to prison again, (that was my cross-fox vixen.) He also advised not to go home. 'I tried to get the storage unit key right after you called the first time Nick, but I couldn't get anywhere near your place, there was reporters all up and down the block.'"

"Dangit, the press! There was something else I'd forgotten about. They'd have dispersed by now,
but once they heard I'd been released from jail, they'd be back again and in droves. And that
reminded me; if the press was staking out my flat, what would it be like in the precinct lobby? I
decided not to find out and told the cops escorting me that I wanted to leave through the side door
exit. They were more than happy to oblige; they didn't want a media circus any more than I did.
Next, I called Robyn, making sure to hit the 'mute' button as soon as I gave her the news. (If Vern
Rodenberg had thought Finnick's scream was loud...) She wanted to come and pick me up, but I
told her no, I was already good. (Whoof, that was all I needed right then, a reporter bugging Robyn
with questions and then me having to bail HER out of jail after she slugged him.) 'There's already a
ride waiting for me and I want to get out of here now,' I said.'

She understood, "We've got a gig tonight at Barramundi, Red. You want to come?"

"I almost said yes, but then I remembered. 'Oh, I'd love to Robyn, but Outback Island is Hugh
Vicks' home turf; that's probably the worst spot for me to show my face right now.'"

"I heard her let out a small groan, and then a whine. "Ohhh, right…maybe we should cancel, do
you think?""

"Oooo, why couldn't she have asked me something easy, Carrots…like 'does this dress make me
look fat?' Outback Island might not have been the best place for her either that night, but on the
other paw, canceling a gig at the last minute wouldn't be a good move, not for her career, OR her
reputation; it might even be worth some legal action. I finally did what any wise fox would have
done in that situation—I punted."

"'I'd take it up with Meffy, if I were you,' I said, 'that's her area, not mine.'"

"'Yeahhhh,' she answered in kind of a slow drawl, 'Yeah, I should at least let her know what's going
on with you anyway.'"

"Good, thought,' I said. I was pleased that she hadn't told her manager anything yet. I said, "Okay,
I'm going to get out of here. I…d'ohhhh, right. Sorry Robyn, I almost forgot to tell you
something.’"

"What?’ I could hear the note of alarm in her voice."

"'I love you,' I said. There was silence on the line for a second or two, and then…"

"'I love you too, Red,' she answered, her voice cracking just a tiny bit, "and you better not ever
forget that.'"

"'Never in a million years Robyn,' I said to her, 'never in a million years.'"

"They took me out through the exit to the police parking lot. When I got there, instead of a limo or
a taxi, I found a medical-transport van pulled up to the curb. Clever; except for an ambulance, that
was the last vehicle the press would have expected to come for me…that is, if it was my ride.
Oops. wait, yes it was, I could see Kevin's face in the passenger-side mirror."

"It was here that I parted company from Vern Rodenberg, attorney at law. He had done his job and
wanted to keep his distance from Mr. Big's soldiers. In fact, to this day, I'm still not 100% sure if it
was the Big Shrew that sent him to me; he never said, and I never asked.”

"When the door closed, the driver, a nervous-looking aardvark, glanced over his shoulder and
asked 'where to?' I immediately face-pawled myself—much to Kevin's amusement—dumb fox, I
had no idea where I wanted to go. Finally, I just gave him then address of my mother's house—
though, of course I didn't SAY it was my mom's place he was taking me to, not in front of that
polar bear. When my mother opened the door and I told her where I'd been and what had happened…Ahh, you would have thought I was seven years old and coming home from school with the sniffles, Carrots. She insisted on feeding me a bowl of hot soup and then putting me to bed. I remember telling her that I wasn't tired and didn't feel like sleeping. Instead, I was out like a light as soon as my head hit the pillow."

"And then while I was sleeping, my whole world tore itself apart."
That time when Nick Wilde's chickens came home to roost

Chapter 6—Nick's Story (Conclusion)

"She found out didn't she, Nick? Robyn found out that you went back to hustling."

Judy wanted to bite off her tongue almost as soon as the words slipped past it. It had always bothered her whenever someone stated the obvious—and now she had just related something only a little less plain than the fact that water is wet. But if Nick Wilde found her query grating, he gave no sign, only nodded, slowly and sadly.

"How could she not have found out, Carrots? It couldn't have been more evident if I'd left a trail of breadcrumbs."

UN-surprised as she was by that reply, Judy could feel a lump the size of a croquet ball rising up in her throat. When she tried to swallow it down again, it refused to budge. She tried a second time and felt it descending her gullet with the blinding speed of an antique elevator on tranquilizers.

She wondered if Nick had any idea; what he'd just described to her had been classic, almost textbook addictive behavior.

It was all there, the lies, the self-delusions; the constant promises of 'just a little more and I'll stop.' She had never realized it before, but her partner was hooked on hustling—'was hooked', not 'had been hooked'—and that brought to mind another, even more frightening prospect. If there was one thing Judy understood as a police officer, it was that addictive behavior doesn't just go away. Was Nick Wilde about to admit to something truly terrible, the real issue that could get him expelled from the ZPD?

She forced herself to meet his gaze.

"Nick, I'm dreading having to ask you this, but after everything you just told me, I need to know. Have you finally walked away from hustling or are you still into that game?"
His answer came almost instantaneously. "Yes Carrots, I'm still into it."

It should have hit Judy like a punch to the solar plexus; instead it made her ears stand up and her nose begin to twitch. Nick had made that admission with…what the…with a wink and a smile?

"Yes Judy, I'm still hustling," he went on, still wearing that impish expression, "only now I hustle for the ZPD."

"Wait, what?" Judy's nose was twitching faster than ever, "What the heck are you talking about, fox?"

He leaned forward, still smiling, but now his expression was slightly peevish. "Oh, come on Carrots, what do you think I'm talking about? Scamming the Rafaj Brothers into selling us a blood diamond, conning the Guilfords into coming in over that fireworks display—and all the other times I fast-talked a suspect into giving up the goods, that's what I mean when I say that."

Judy blinked and felt her mouth falling open. Sweet cheez 'n crack…why hadn't she seen it before? No, you couldn't just make addictive behavior go away, but you could learn to channel it in a positive direction…and that was exactly what her partner had done. Like a computer hacker who switches sides to become an expert on cyber-security, Nick Wilde had come to the good side of the force; he had become what you might refer to as a 'white-hat' hustler.

The next thing he said was, "Huh, what was that for?" Judy had thrown her arms around the fox and given him a ginormous hug.

"Just for being one of the good guys," she said, letting go and sitting back down again.

"Not so good as you might think, Carrots," he replied, also sitting back in his chair, but with a long, rueful expression stretched across his muzzle.

And then he closed his eyes and took in another deep breath.

"The blackest day of my life started out on a high note.' Isn't that how it's supposed to go, Carrots? Not for me, it didn't. First, my mother let me oversleep, and when I finally woke up, I found out I'd forgotten to recharge my cell-phone. When I plugged it in, I discovered I had something like twelve voice-mail messages from Finnick waiting for me. After he finished chewing me out for not answering him earlier, he told me that our vitamin deal from yesterday was off; the buyer had backed out. "They heard about your arrest and got cold feet,' he told me. Aggghhh, grrrrrr…oh if I EVER got my paws on that no-good, backstabbing koala…!"

"When I came downstairs, I found my mother had breakfast waiting on the table. That was nice, but then as soon as I sat down, she started in on her favorite subject."

"Will what happened yesterday put crimp in your plans to marry Robyn, Nick? I certainly hope it won't; she'll make such a wonderful mother…' and then off she went. You know the really awful thing, Judy? I actually had begun to think about us starting a family myself—but not like that, not just so my mother could have grandkits. I finished up quickly, telling her I needed to get home right away. 'I-I think I left the iron on.'"

"Oops, wrong thing to say, I should have known mom better than that. 'You're ironing your clothes now, Nicholas?' she said 'Why didn't you tell me? I could have given you some pointers. Here, come on down to the laundry room and let me show you the right way…'"

"Mom, I really need get going, I'll call you later, okay?" I kissed her on the cheek and then
grabbed my jacket and laid for the door."

"When I got back to my apartment, there was a car parked at the curb and a striped skunk sitting on the bumper. I recognized her immediately."

"Meffy? What on earth are you doing here?"

"She looked at me, and then looked away….but not before I saw the tears in her eyes. 'Oh Nick,' she said, shaking her head at the ground, 'Oh Nick.'"

"For maybe half a second, I had no idea what was going on…and then then it hit me like an express train, the familiar aroma of a cross-fox vixen."

"'Oh no…oh, my God, NO!'"

"I pushed past Meffy and bolted down the stairs. Even before I reached the door to my flat, my nose had dispelled any lingering doubts; Robyn was inside and waiting for me."

"And she was onto me. I hadn't the slightest idea how it had happened, but deep down in my heart of hearts I knew that Robyn had somehow discovered the truth; she knew I was back in the hustling game."

"I found her standing at the kitchen table with her back turned towards me and her paws splayed out against the corners; she looked almost as if she was trying to prop herself up."

"I stepped forward and reached out with a trembling paw."

"'Robyn…Sweetheart?'

"I watched as her paws tightened up on the table-top, thumb-claws gouging furrows in the wood. And then her whole body went rigid; you could almost have sworn 110 volts were passing through her."

"'Don't you 'Sweetheart' ME, Nicholas Libelious Wilde!' She snarled. She was trying to sound angry, but all that came out was the voice of a broken heart…and that was a hundred times worse!"

"Then she turned around; her eyes were all puffy and red and her face was streaked with dark, wet lines. The worst thing was that ugly, brown splotch, pasted to the side of her muzzle; Robyn had cried so hard, she'd given herself a nosebleed."

"I've made some dumb-fox moves in my day, Carrots, but what I did next was a new low in stupidity, even for me. I actually spread my arms and pretended I don't know what was going on. 'Robyn? Robyn, what's wro…'"

"'Nick, stop it!' She cut me off with a throaty growl; somehow my words had managed to pull her back together, 'Just stop it, okay? Haven't you lied to me enough already?'

"'I tried to say something else but she bared her fangs and held out a fist with the pawlm turned upwards. And then she opened it."

"Inside was the key to the storage unit."

"'Just stop it, Red.' She said again, 'I've been inside, I know what's in there; you haven't been at work all this time, you've been running hustles again, haven't you?'

"'I tried to answer, but my voice had dried up in my throat.'
"Robyn took that for more playacting and threw the key at me, 'HAVEN'T YOU!'"

"I thought at first she'd missed, but when I looked down, I saw blood on my shirt."

"And then she told me how she'd found out I was working the streets again. It had happened the previous night, while I'd been sleeping at my mother's house. Robyn and the Chimeras had arrived at Club Barramundi only to be told by the manager that their set had been canceled after all...by her. "And I wouldn't try to book any more gigs wi' us, if I was you, vixen. You and yer blokes aren't welcome to play Barramundi anymore. Matter of fact, I don't even want you comin' in here as customers."

"Loyal manager that she was, Meffy jumped in with both feet on behalf of the band. 'You're going to fire us without cause! What the heck is your problem, Sister?'"

"The manager, a female koala stabbed finger in Robyn's direction."

"'Her boyfriend got MY boyfriend sent to jail. That's the problem, Stinkweed.'"

"That did it; Robyn went off like a depth charge. 'Nick...got your boyfriend sent to jail? Get yourself a blankety-blank clue, Cuddles! It was YOUR guy who tried to frame an innocent mammal, not the other way around.'"

"The manager only folded her arms and sneered, 'Innocent...HAH!'"

"'That's right, innocent!' Robyn snarled, 'Nick had NOTHING to do with that debt relief hustle.'"

"And then she was staring with her ears pricked up. Instead of coming back with something nasty, Hugh Vicks' girlfriend was laughing so hard, she could barely stand upright."

"'What the heck...?' Robyn goggled and the manager stopped laughing. A half-second later, her paws were on her hips and her lip was curling upwards in an icy sneer."

"'Cor, you really are a dumb fox aren't yer, Vixy? You really don't know d'yer? Your Nick might not have been in with my Hugh on that debt relief business, but he's been at it wi' just about every other hustle you might care to name, hasn't he?'"

"'You're lying!' Robyn almost screamed. She would have ended up in jail herself right then if two of her bandmates hadn't grabbed her and held her back.

"'No, sorry, it's the truth,' the lady koala answered; she was clearly enjoying the hack out of this. 'Think about it, Sheila. Why would Hugh have told his blokes that Nick Wilde was partners with him if your fox was walking the straight and narrow, eh? What sort of sense would that have made? But if you don't want to take my word for it, go ask around for y'self; you'll find out soon enough what sort of innocent your darling Nicky is.'"

"Robyn didn't ask around, she had Meffy drive her straight to my place, intending to confront me when she got there."

"Well, because she assumed I'd head straight home as soon as the coast was clear, Carrots. And she was right, if I hadn't fallen asleep at my mother's, I'd have already been there, waiting for her."

"When she got to my flat, there was no sign of me, (or of any reporters, thank goodness for that.) But where the heck was I? She tried to call me, but like I said earlier, I had forgotten to charge my cell phone and she got taken directly to voice mail. And so she let herself into the flat—she had her own key—and settled down to wait."
"And that was when she'd spotted the other key, laying on the kitchen table; the one with the name and address of Ewe-Stor-It printed on the fob. She talked Meffy into taking her there and somehow blurred her way past the manager by claiming that I had sent her. What happened next, I knew already."

"When Robyn finished telling me how she'd found me out, the next thing I remember is falling on my knees and clasping my paws."

"Robyn please, I had no choice. I was broke and no one would hire me or do business with me. If I hadn't started working the streets again…"

"She screamed louder than ever. 'You idiot! You dumb, dumb, stupid fox; I DON'T CARE ABOUT THAT!'"

"I tried not to stare, but couldn't help myself. 'Robyn, wha…?'"

"She grimaced and clenched her fists. 'You didn't need to lie to me, Red! You didn't NEED to lie. Dang you, I would have understood. I wouldn't have married you, but I'd have stuck by you until you got back on your feet. What's the MATTER with you Nick, don't you know me?''

"And then she fell down to her knees and started crying again. 'Don't you know me?' she sobbed."

"I didn't answer her, Carrots; I couldn't…because something else she'd said had gone straight through my heart like a shaft of ice, 'I would have stuck by you…'"

"'Robyn, please…no.' Now I was crying too, 'I'm sorry please, I'll make it up to you. Please Robyn, please…don't go.'"

"She stood up, trying to compose herself. 'No Nick, it's too late for I'm sorry.' Remember what I said the first time you asked me to marry you, that I didn't ever want to go through this again? Well, guess what? I AM going through it again—right now. My worst nightmare just came true.'"

"'Robyn, please listen,' I tried to interrupt her but she brushed me off like a flea."

"'It's no good, Red. I can't be with you if I can't trust you.' She shook her head, and started to cry again, 'And how can I ever trust you again after this? What am I supposed to do NOW if we get married? Every time you leave the house, I won't know if you're heading off to the store, or sneaking off to run another scheme.' She grimaced and shook her head, 'I can't live with that Nick, not ever again. Dang you, I told you I couldn't!'"

"'Oh Robyn, please…please.' I was down on all fours with my head against the floor. 'I'll give up hustling for good this time…I swear I will. And I'll never lie to you again; I can change, let me show you…'"

"She lifted a paw and interrupted me again. 'Save your breath, Red; I've heard it all before.' Now she sounded more tired than hurt…or even angry, 'It's not just about me, don't you understand that? I won't see….' She sniffed and turned away from me as if she couldn't bear to see my face. And who knows? Maybe she couldn't. 'You'll never quit hustling Red, you can't,' she said, 'If you could, you wouldn't have lied to me about it in the first place.'"

"It was the unkindest cut of all Carrots…because I knew that it was true; if I'd told her that I was going back to hustling for good, she'd have left me anyway. And if I'd said that it was only temporary—that I was only going back to working the streets until I made enough money to walk away—it would have been a bigger lie than all the others I'd told her put together. It was only then that I realized; she was right, I could never quit the streets. I'd had one chance to walk away from
the hustling life and I'd almost made it…but 'almost' only counts in ring toss and paw grenades. And then, just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, I saw Robyn pulling off her engagement ring. I tried to say something, but all I could manage was a choking sob."

"She dropped the ring on the kitchen table and then looked at me with an unreadable expression. What was she feeling, sorrow, anger, bitterness, remorse…or all of the above?"

"'Good-bye, Red.' She told me in a small, velvety voice, and then turned and walked out the door. For a second, I just stared after her, too overwhelmed to react. And then something inside me seemed to give way and I bolting for the basement steps with everything I had. But halfway to the top, I found Meffy blocking the way. I tried to move past her but she stamped her feet and waved me back."

"'No Nick…no.'"

"'I called out, 'Robyn, wait!' I feinted left and tried to go around Meffy's other side, but she anticipated my move and got in front of me again, this time turning halfway around and starting to bend over. I could already smell her skunk scent."

"'Don't make me do it, Nick!' she told me in a shaky, cracking voice, 'I'll hate myself forever, but I swear, I'll do it!'"

"I heard the sound of a car-door slamming from somewhere up above…and then the sound of an engine revving and tires squealing."

"And just like that, Robyn was gone from my life; I never saw her again, Carrots. When I went by her apartment later, she wasn't there but a few of her bandmates were…and they made it very clear that if I knew what was good for me, I'd make myself scarce, the sooner the better. Less than a week after that Robyn left town…for good, as it turned out. She took the Chimeras out on the road and never came back—except for one brief visit to get her things. I didn't find out about it until after she was gone again, and I knew this time, she wasn't ever coming back to Zootopia."

"But by then Carrots, I had other problems…problems that nearly got me killed a short time later."

"After Robyn walked out on me, I started getting careless with my hustling activities, sloppy even. I made accounting mistakes, I missed deliveries, I got suckered by my buyers—and I didn't care one way or the other. Why should I, when SHE wasn't there anymore? How I managed to avoid getting busted during that time, I have no idea. Finnick must have threatened to quit our partnership a dozen times, but he never did; he knew he was the only real friend I had left. I didn't dare go anywhere near my mother. If she started in about grandkids again, I knew I'd end up saying something I couldn't take back, so I went out of my way to avoid her."

"Then, one day I got phone call from Mr. Big. He was looking for a present for his Grandmother's birthday, and did I happen to know where to find a nice, wool rug? I did, but it would be spendy, I warned him. And then, when …"

"Yes, Carrots…that was how I ended up selling Mr. Big a rug made from the fur of a skunk's butt. You knew about that, but what you didn't know was that I got taken too, something that never would have happened before Robyn dumped me. That was the only reason the Big Shrew didn't have me iced right away. I found that out when he had me brought in to see him."

"I was walking down the street in the Canyonlands District when a limo came screeching up to the curb in front of me. I saw the doors fly open and before I could even blink, Koslov had me in a choke hold and was throwing me in the trunk I had no idea what I could have done, but I knew it
wasn't anything trivial. Mr. Big hadn't sent Kevin and/or Raymond to come get me, he'd given the job to his top enforcer...AND he'd had me grabbed off the street in the Canyonlands, a place way outside of his territory—and also Koslov's comfort zone. Last but not least I was riding in the trunk instead of the back seat. Whatever was going on, it was something VERY serious.

"After a long, bumpy ride, the trunk popped open and Koslov hauled me out by the scruff of my neck. I could see we were at Mr. Big's house, but I still had no idea why I was there. I kept trying to ask Koslov what was going on, but all I got for my trouble was a few low grunts; finally, he dug his claws into my neck to make me shut up. When he brought me into Mr. Big's private office, the Big Shrew was perched on his desktop, waiting for me, sitting with an arm propped on one knee, and looking like Shrewlius Caesar."

"Put him down,' he said to Koslov, and the big bear dropped me like a sack of potatoes. When I got up again, I saw Kevin standing next to Mr. Big, holding the rug I'd sold him…"

"Mmmm, how come you never asked me that before, Carrots? No, you can't make a rug in OUR size from the fur of a skunk's butt, but a rodent-size rug is no problem, Think of something about as big as a table napkin and you get the idea."

"'Mr. Big…sir?' I asked, trying to sound meek as possible, "I'm sorry, i-is there something wrong with…?"

"That was as far as I got before Raymond threw a wristlock on me and Kevin shoved the rug in my face. With the next breath I took, I understood everything; now I could smell it, the same odor that had come from Meffy when she'd threatened to spray me. This rug was NOT made of wool, it was made from…oh fox, I was in worse trouble than I ever could have imagined."

"'Let him go.' Mr. Big signaled to Kevin and Raymond, and they dropped me to the floor again. For moment, he just sat there looking down on me. Finally he said, 'Did you smell that Nick, what was it?'"

"I got up again, but very slowly, 'I-It's the odor of skunk's butt, Mr. Big.'"

"He leaned forward in his chair, 'That's right Nick. And so I have only one question for you.' He bared his teeth, 'Did you KNOW, fox? Did you know when you sold me this rug that it was made from the fur of a skunk's butt?'"

"'No Mr. Big, I didn't know,' I said…and it was the way I said it that saved my life. I didn't look or act scared, only ashamed of myself. When I told him that I hadn't known the rug I'd sold him was a skunk-butt rug, I had spoken it as a simple statement of fact. And honestly, at least a part of me was hoping that he'd ice me. What was the point in going on with my life if Robyn wasn't part of it?"

"Wha…? Oh, for crying out loud Fluff, that's not how I feel NOW! And anyway, I didn't try to push him into having me iced; all I did was tell him the truth, and then whatever happened was going to happen."

"Mr. Big nodded and then lapsed into a brooding silence. I had no idea what he was thinking; he had his paws clasped in front of his muzzle, and I couldn't see the expression on his face. When he finally spoke to me again, he sounded almost hurt."

"Nicholas Wilde, I cannot believe this. Everyone had the highest regard for you Nick, and look what happened to you; look what you done to yourself, nothing but a shadow of the fox you used to be.' He shook his head, mournfully, and then gave me a penetrating look, 'such a waste…such a
waste. Very well, I believe you when you say you didn't know where that rug came from, and that's why I'm going to give you a pass, BUT…!' He stood up and jabbed a finger at me; now he was angry, 'Don't you ever show your face around here, or in any of my other establishments, ever again. From now on The Thaw is off limits to you, understand? An insult to my honor is bad enough, but you've also insulted my Gramamma, and THAT I will not tolerate!' He was really getting worked up now, Carrots. I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd changed his mind and ordered Koslov to ice me after all."

"'As a matter of fact,' he hissed, snapping his teeth together, 'I think you could use a nice, long vacation somewhere else besides Zootopia, Nick. So here's what I'll do; you'll be free to go when we're done here, but if I find you on the road tomorrow, heading south on the way to Los Antelopes, or you're going east on the way to Zoo York, and you stop for anything but to pee and a cup of coffee and gasoline, I'm going to kill you. Koslov, get this volpe folle out of my sight!'"

"And with that, I was hauled back outside and thrown in the trunk of the limo again. They drove me to the Rainforest District and threw me out into the gutter in front of the Rainbow Falls metro station. And then they drove off and left me without another word."

"No, I wasn't worried that I was being taken for a 'last ride' Carrots. Mr. Big's an old school boss, remember? If he told you that he wasn't going to kill you, he meant it. His promises always came without loopholes, not like some of his rival bosses on the other side of the Climate Wall. On the other paw, that pass he'd given me was a limited-time offer, good only if I got my tail out of town right now."

"And so I hurried home and started packing. I was about halfway done when Finnick called. When I told him what had happened, he insisted on coming with me. I tried to talk him out of it—he hadn't had anything to do with that skunk-butt rug—but he wouldn't budge. 'Forget it Nick, where you go, I go."

"Yes, you're right Carrots, he was…he IS a real friend. And I'm really glad to see he managed to hook up with another good fox for a partner."

"But getting back to the story, early the next morning, we hit out on the highway…and it would be three long years before I saw Zootopia again. Yes, that was the road trip I mentioned on the train ride to Bunnyburrow; it was the first time I'd ever been outside of the city and I had no idea what to expect. Luckily, I had plenty of cash, the money I saved from my hustles that I told you about. Honestly though, I had no idea how long it was going to last."

"That trip remains kind of a blur to me, Carrots, most of the time we kept to the backroads and it was anything but a pleasure cruise; eating in some dirty dive, keeping out of sight, sleeping in the back of that cold van, and then in the morning we'd roll. I never drank more bad coffee or ate more pieces of cardboard pie in my life. After a while, I really grew to hate those crummy, little one-gas-station towns we passed through. Not like Bunnyburrow, I mean the ones with half the storefronts boarded up and the movie theater all closed down, the ones where you were likely to get pulled over by the local law just because you were driving with out-of-state plates. We never dared to run a hustle in any of those little, hick-town burgs. It was only when we'd hit a big city that we'd go to work, but we always kept a low profile and always made sure to hightail it after making a score. That wasn't only because of the cops, Carrots; the local hustlers didn't like it very much if they found out a couple of outsiders had been poaching on their territory. In New Orlions, we nearly got shaved, tarred, and feathered."

"Did I ever try to catch up with Robyn again? Yes…and no. Whenever Finnick and I hit one of the larger cities, I'd always make the rounds of the local music stores and clubs, asking if anyone had
I remember everything about that day, Judy. Bright but hazy, temperature in the low 60's; we were in Bearbank, Californium, topping off the gas-tank at a Chevre station on Otterside Drive, when a car pulled into the lane on the opposite side of us. And there, sitting behind the wheel, was Meffy Newsome."

"Finnick had gone inside to grab a drink and some snacks, so I was out there by myself. I was still trying to decide whether I should duck behind the pump or go over and talk to her when she spotted me and saved me the trouble."

"'Nick,' she called, 'Nick Wilde is that you?' And then without waiting for an answer, she began walking in my direction. I could see right away that she had moved up in the world since the last time I'd seen her, silk blouse and designer jeans; she had traded in her Preyus for a Lepus."

"'Hello Nick, how are you?'

"How WAS I? Couldn't she see that for herself? I would have looked perfectly natural, sitting at the top of a freeway ramp, holding a 'Bet You Can't Hit Me With a Quarter' sign. I felt…shabby in her presence, Carrots. I almost told her she had the wrong fox; instead I just blurted it out."

"'Hello Meffy…H-How's Robyn?'

"She bit her lip and turned away from me; I could hear her sucking air between her teeth. 'Dangit, I was hoping you knew already,' she said, and then finally she looked at me. 'She's gone Nick…cancer, six months ago. I'm so sorry.'"

"It should have hit me like a sledgehammer, Carrots. Instead I just kind of went numb all over. You know those five stages of grief they always talk about? I went through every single one of them in the next two seconds. Yes, Robyn was gone…and this time she was really gone for good."

"After we finished gassing up the van, Meffy took me to a coffee shop and told me the full story; Finnick waited in the van while we talked. Less than three months into her road trip with the band, Robyn had started feeling sick when she woke up. When they got to Purrtland, Boaregon she finally gave in and went to see a doctor. He wrote her a prescription and it did the trick—and Meffy had thought that was the end of it."

"'Except it wasn't the end, Nick,' Meffy told me. 'Three weeks later, Robyn called the band together and said she'd have to leave the tour. 'I have to go home, my mother's dying,' she said, and no one argued with her. But then she never came back, and after the first few calls and e-mails, we never heard from her again. So, the band broke up, I moved to Los Antelopes and wrote Robyn McFerral and the Chimeras off as piece of bad luck…until late last year, when out of clear, blue sky I got an email from her. I almost deleted it Nick, and I'm glad I didn't. That was when Robyn finally told me about why she'd left the tour. When she got back to Pawvidence, she'd found out she had stage 3 pancreatic cancer. 'I didn't lie about my mother Meffy, she really was dying, but the cancer IS why I never came back. And now….I don't know how to make this any easier, so I'll just come right out and say it, now it's my turn; the chemo and the radiation treatments only slowed things down. The docs say I have another month left, maybe two.'"
"'And that's why I'm sending you this email, I don't want to go without having told you the truth. Goodbye Mef, you were a great manager and always a good friend.' (That hit me hard, Carrots. Unlike Robyn, I hadn't come clean with MY secrets.)"

"'There was no address or phone number included in that e-mail, Nick,' Meffy went on to tell me, 'and when I e-mailed Robyn back, she never replied. I finally managed to track her down through her doctor, but by the time I did, she was gone; the cancer got very aggressive towards the end. I tried to get away for the memorial service, but had a commitment I couldn't break. I'm planning to go and visit her gravesite on the next anniversary of her passing.'"

"I said nothing to any of this, Carrots…only stared with an expectant look on my face. There was a question I desperately wanted to ask Meffy but didn't dare. It didn't matter; she knew what it was without my having to tell her."

"'No Nick,' she said, reaching out and taking hold of my paw, 'Robyn didn't mention you in that e-mail, I'm sorry.'"

"She could have stuck me with a thorn, I winced so hard. But that was when I finally accepted that Robyn was gone, Carrots. I had only been pretending up until that point but now I believed it for certain…and the odd thing was, I didn't feel guilty for not having been there when she passed. She wouldn't have wanted me there anyway, not mentioning me in her e-mail to Meffy proved that much if nothing else. In fact, believe it or not, I actually felt a small relief; at least now I wouldn't be torturing myself over what might have been. Cancer doesn't believe in such things as extenuating circumstances, Judy. \ I would have ended up losing Robyn even if we had gotten married."

"'Thank you so much for telling me, Meffy,' I said, 'I really needed to know.'"

"'You're welcome Nick, I only wish it could have been better news,' she said, and then I saw her eyes drop down to the table top for a second. When she looked up again, it was her turn to admit the truth. 'I don't have too many regrets in my life fox, but one of the biggest is having kept you from following after Robyn when she walked out on you. Since then, I've never stopped wondering how things might have turned out if I hadn't interfered. Can you ever forgive me?'"

"I got up and laid a paw on her shoulder, 'Nothing to forgive, skunk-lady. You were right to do what you did. Robyn didn't belong with a street hustler, especially one who lied to her like that. I'll see you around, okay?' It was another lie; we both knew I was never going to see her again."

"I was halfway to the door when she called out after me, 'It wasn't only about her, Nick.'"

"I turned and looked back for second, 'I know Meffy,' I said, quietly, 'I know. And thanks again.'"

"When I got back outside to the van, I found Finnick dozing in the driver's seat. I rapped on the window to wake him up, and then hauled myself in beside him. 'Fire it up Mini-Me, we're leaving town.'"

"He gave me an irritated look."

"'We was leaving town anyway, Nick,' he groused, 'and what the heck happened in there?'

"I gave him the short version of what Meffy had told me; I think that was the closest the little guy ever came to hugging me."

"'Awwww Nick, I'm sorry. You okay, fox?'"
"I'll get there,' I said, 'now come on, let's go."

"Okay, okayyyy,' Finnick started the engine, 'but first, mind telling me where we're going?"

"Back to Zootopia', I said—and he shut it down and whipped off his sunglasses."

"What, you got a death wish or something, Nick? You wanna end up with your pelt tacked up over Mr. Big's fireplace?"

"Finnick couldn't talk me out of returning to Zootopia but he was at least able to persuade me to let him go on ahead, 'to check the water first.' Even in my current state of mind, I couldn't argue with that idea; he had NEVER been on Mr. Big's hit parade, that skunk-butt-rug mess was mine-all-mine. So I saw him off, booked myself into a cheap motel and settled down to wait. It didn't take long. Three days later, I got the call."

"Good news Nick, it's cool for you to come back to Zootopia, long as you stay out of any place owned by Mr. Big. He's got bigger problems than you right now. Guess who just got made Boss of the Sahara Square crime family? Rocco Peccari, the Red Pig."

"Whoa, yeah, that'd get his attention, all right,' I said. If the Big Shrew had never gotten along with the Sahara Square mob before, now he'd be one step away from declaring a vendetta. The Red Pig represented everything he loathed in a crime boss, loud, crude, arrogant, and with a fuse about as long as a mole-rat's eyelash. Finnick was right; as long as I kept out of Mr. Big's way, it'd be safe for me to come home again."

"Why? I just told you why, Carrots; even after everything that had happened, Zootopia was still my home—and I missed it terribly. I took a cab to the Greywolf Terminal and caught the first bus headed back there."

"When I got to Zootopia, I moved back in with my mother and started working the streets the very next day…only things were never the same as they'd been before I left. From that time on, I was strictly a small-time operator, making just enough to support myself and no more. Remember what you said to me, the first time we met? 'No one tells me what I can or can't be—especially not some jerk who never had the guts to try to be anything more than a pawpsicle hustler! No, don't be embarrassed Judy, you were right…that is who I was back then. Not before and you better believe not now…but back when we first met, yes, I WAS a fox with no ambition. After all where had ambition ever gotten me before?"

"And…I guess that's all there is, Carrots. You already know what happened next."

For several long moments, a deep, dark silence filled the train car, and then Judy reached out to put her paw on top of the fox's.

"Nick, I know how hard it was for you to tell me that. Thank you so much for sharing it with me."

He lifted a brow and tilted his head sideways.

"But…?" he had caught the inflection in her voice.

Judy took her paw away and let out a slow, rumbling sigh between her teeth.

"But…there's another reason why you told me all this besides just wanting to be honest with me; what is it?" She could be perceptive, too.
By way of response, Nick got up and went to the window, the reflection of his face split into a Picasso painting by the streaks of rainwater slashing across the surface.

"Nick?" she asked him again

He turned to look over his shoulder.

"Carrots, I've come to a decision. I lived a lie once, and I'm not going to do it again. When we get back to Zootopia I'm going to go to Chief Bogo and tell him the truth about my arrest and what happened to me afterwards." He turned to face her once more, "But I wanted you to know the story first, Judy…so you'll understand why I have to do this."

"Nick," she started to say, feeling the croquet ball in her throat again. Yes, she understood, but that didn't mean she had to like it. She coughed hard, and the lump went away, or at least enough of it so that she could speak again. "Nick, if the Chief doesn't fire you for lying on your job application, the Zootopia Police Board will. You know what a bunch of by-the-book sticklebacks they are."

He nodded, but then folded his arms and leaned back against the wall.

"Maybe, maybe not, Carrots; I like to think that I've built up a pretty decent record as a cop since I joined the ZPD." He allowed himself a wan smile. "Even the Police Board might think twice before letting someone like that go."

Judy Hopps was smiling too, only hers was more of the sardonic variety. Helping to foil the Savage Predator conspiracy, saving the Carrot Days Festival, and everything in between—and he called it a, 'pretty good record'? Sweet cheez n' crackers, whatever happened to the cocky, bigheaded Nick she used so know? Judy had no idea but was more than happy to see that fox was gone, or at least on hiatus. She could really learn to like this new version of Nick Wilde…but then her smile faded as she realized, HE might not be around much longer either."

Her change of expression was not lost on the fox and he came over and put a paw on her shoulder.

"I know Carrots, but you know I have to do this—and you also know you'd do the same thing if it was you."

Judy nearly pushed him away. Yes, she would—dangit! Ohhhh, why did this sly so-and-so have to know her so well?

"And if they fire you?" she asked, looking up at him, bleakly.

His washed-out smile came back again.

"Then as Robyn would have said, whatever's going to happen is going to happen."

Just then, a low hiss of white noise came over the train's PA system and a canned voice spoke in a monotone.

"Now arriving, Zootopia Central Station. Bunnyburrow Express—now arriving, Zootopia Central Station. All passengers are advised to please using the appropriate-size exits when disembarking…"
Chapter Summary

And so it's back to the ZPD for Nick and Judy...and a few unexpected surprises

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 7—A Loose End (Pt. 1)

As a rule of thumb, Judy Hopps was not normally given to pacing—but it was that, or beat her foot against the floor. And as she had learned, the hard way, some time ago, as long as the door to Chief Bogo's office remained tightly closed you could throw a conniption in the hallway outside and he wouldn't hear a thing; you could yell, scream, howl, rant, roar—nothing. But thump your foot on the carpet and it would carry through the floorboards like a seismic telegraph.

"Hopps, will you please stop trying to knock everything off my desk and onto the FLOOR?" the Cape buffalo had bellowed the first (and last) time she had given vent to her bunny instincts while waiting to see him.

And so here she was, striding back and forth in front of Chief's private domain, awaiting the outcome of his interview with Nick Wilde. Every half minute or so, she would pause and glance up at the door, thinking it was about to open, (it never did.) Well, at least the glass wasn't vibrating; the Chief wasn't yelling at Nick.

Nick…

Judy was proud of her partner, but at same time terrified for him. What would happen when he confessed to Chief Bogo that he'd lied on his application to join the ZPD? Would he get off with a suspension, or would Bogo, however reluctantly, be forced to ask for his resignation?

"Dangit, they CAN'T let him go!" she told herself with sudden resolve. "I swear, if Bogo makes Nick quit the force, he can have MY resignation, too."

Before she had time to wonder where the heck THAT crazy notion had come from, Judy became aware that the floor was quivering. It wasn't coming from inside the office, so that could only mean…yep, here came the rotund form of Benjamin Clawhauser, huffing his way up the concourse ramp with a Manila folder clutched in his paw.
"Hello…Judy…" he wheezed, and she was abruptly reminded of the Gazelle Tour shirt she and Nick had purchased for the plus-size cheetah at the Carrot Days Festival; they had remembered to bring it to work, but had forgotten to give it to him before heading upstairs to see the Chief. Darn it, they would have to take care of that before clocking out for the day.

"If Nick still has a job to clock out FROM," Judy's inner voice perversely reminded her. She hurriedly stuffed the message back in the corner of her mind from which it sprung and tried to forget about it.

"Hi Benjamin," she said, hoping he wouldn't mention the shirt; it was the last thing she wanted to talk about right now. As it turned out, he needn't have worried; Clawhauser had either forgotten about it himself or else was too winded to care; he only nodded at her, and then rapped on the door glass. After several seconds, it cracked open just a sliver, and a gruff, familiar voice was heard.

"Yes?"

"Chief…*huff*…It's …Claw…*huff*…hauser…*wheeze*… I…have that file…*huff*…you asked for."

"Bring it in then," said the voice beyond the opening. Clawhauser reached for the door-handle, and as he did, Judy felt her nose beginning to twitch. There, printed on the tab of the folder in his other paw was a single word, 'Wilde.' The Chief had asked for Nick's fursonell file—which of course would include his job application as well.

Hmmm, was that a good sign or a bad one? Judy forced herself not to raise an ear and try to listen through the door-crack. (If Bogo caught her at it, she'd be the one looking at a pink-slip.)

Clawhauser was inside the office for a only a few seconds before emerging through the doorway again. As soon as he was gone, Judy resumed her pacing.

On the other side of the door, Chief Bogo also waited for the cheetah to depart before getting down to business. As soon as the floor stopped vibrating, he opened Nick's file and began to leaf testily through the pages, at the same time muttering to himself.

"Mmmph….hmph….where IS that…? S'in here somewhere…Mrrrrrf."

Watching him, Nick Wilde felt like a schoolkit who'd been called to the principal's office. Yes, yes…he was the one who'd asked for this interview, not the Chief but still…

Bogo ceased his thumbing and extracted a triple-creased sheet of paper from the folder, holding it up in front of his face and examining it for a moment with a short frown. And then his gaze shifted downwards to the red fox seated in front of him.

"Well Wilde, according to what I'm seeing here, you first checked 'yes' response to the question about whether or not you had ever been arrested, charged, or convicted of a crime…but then you seem to have partially scratched out the 'yes' and checked 'no' instead."

Nick saw him reach for his half-moon glasses, and felt his ears pricking up…though he hadn't the slightest idea what they were doing that for.

The Chief studied the form more closely for a minute, narrowing his eyes and pursing his lips, (as much as was possible for a Cape buffalo.) Then he looked over the top of the paper at Nick.

"Doesn't seem to me as if you lied here, Wilde…looks more as if this was your way of trying to say
that yes you were arrested, and yes you were convicted—that's why you checked 'yes’—but then you were fully exonerated; that's why you halfway scratched-out the affirmative answer and checked no instead."

He lowered the sheet and leaned across his desk. "That IS what happened, yes?"

Nick almost answered 'no' without thinking, but then caught himself just as the unspoken part of Bogo's question sank home.

"Absolutely Chief," he said, speaking so rapidly, he nearly treated Bogo to the rare spectacle of Nick Wilde tripping over his own words, "I don't know how I could have forgotten about it."

"Yes," The Chief was adjusting his glasses again and turning the paper over, "But you seem to have neglected to provide an explanation on the reverse side." He slid the application across his desk, at the same time reaching for a pen, "I'd suggest you take care of that immediately Wilde… and don't let it happen again!"

It was all Nick could do to keep from writing so fast that his words became an illegible scrawl. Could this really be happening? He almost felt like pinching himself.

Instead, he nearly dropped the document when Bogo snorted and then mused, "So the Flying Sparks boys were the same gang that burnt down Wilde Times; humph, imagine my surprise."

"Y-You know about that, sir?" Nick was staring open-mouthed. He hadn't mentioned the fireflies by name, so how could Bogo possibly be aware…?

It was as if the Cape buffalo had read his mind; leaning across his desk again, but this time with a sardonic wink.

"Who d'you think was the Officer in Charge when we caught the Sparks trying to burn down that auto-dealer, eh?" he said. And then quickly, before Nick could respond, he sat back and folded his arms—with an expression that clearly indicated the fox's wisest course of action would be to make no further inquiries on the subject.

Nick heeded The Chief's silent caveat, and resumed working on the addendum to his job application. When he finished, Bogo took the document and, almost without looking at it, appended a notation of his own.

"Here then," he said, returning the papers to Nick for a final perusal. The red fox took it and began to read.

"As the subject, Nicholas Piberius Wilde was fully exonerated of the crime for which he was arrested, tried, and convicted, he is therefore considered to be well qualified to serve in the Zootopia Police Department. Pending further examination of the relevant court documents, no disciplinary action is recommended at this time."

"Chief Bogo, ZPD"

With trembling paws, Nick lowered the application and stared again. Although technically, he wasn't off the hook, both he and the Chief were well aware of what those court documents would reveal. Like Mr. Big before him, Bogo had just given Nick Wilde a pass; only this one seemed to come with no strings attached.

His reverie was interrupted when the Cape buffalo thrust out a hoof in his direction.
"That's not for you to keep, Wilde," he informed his officer, drily. Nick hastily returned the
document, and Bogo slipped it back into the folder. "Right then, get y'self along to roll-call,
Wilde," he said, and then turned towards the door with a cantankerous scowl. "And tell Hopps to
stop that pacing!"

As it turned out, Nick didn't need to tell her. No sooner had he opened the door than Judy stopped
what she was doing and, unable to restrain herself any longer, began thumping her foot on the
carpet.

At once, a deep voice belled from beyond the doorway, "HOPPS!" And she ceased her percussion
solo.

Then she took a deep breath and said, "O-Okay Nick, Give it to me straight; how'd it go in there?"
The next thing she said was, "What are you crazy!" The fox was hugging her tight, and whirling
her around the concourse in an ad-hoc ballroom number.

He didn't seem to hear her and at once, Judy's voice became a growling whisper, "Put me down
before someone sees us, dumb fox!"

THAT did it; Nick ceased his gyrations and set her back down on the carpet…too late. There were
at least three other officers close by—Anderson, Barrow, and McHorn—and all of them were
staring. While the two polar bears seemed to find the spectacle amusing, the rhino's expression was
one of unbridled contempt.

"Sorry, Carrots." Nick told her assuming his patented bad-little-fox-cub fursona.

"So I take it things went well in there?" Judy asked him with a wry (and hopeful) smile.

Nick looked at his watch, "I'll tell you on the way to roll-call."

"First things first, we've got a t-shirt to deliver," Judy nodded downstairs in the direction of the
reception desk.

Nick's mouth angled sideway in a dubious pout. "Carrots, I'm not sure…"

"We have time," she answered firmly. (Actually, she wasn't quite sure if they did, but she was fairly certain that if they didn't run this errand now, they'd probably forget to take care of it later.)

Nick told her the story on the way down to the locker room to get the t-shirt. He was so wound up,
Judy almost wondered if he'd been slamming energy drinks on his way to work again, (something
he frequently did after staying up too late on a work-night.)

"And no worries about that 'pending examination of the court documents' business either Carrots."
He was practically whooping. "Heck I wish they'd examine those court docs right now."

"Great," Judy told him. Nick stopped and turned to look at her. Even in his current state of
euphoria, he could hardly miss the almost complete lack of enthusiasm in her response.

"All right Carrots, what is it?" he said, ears canting backwards in annoyance. Darn it, Judy Hopps
could be a one-bunny Greek Chorus sometimes.

She responded by waving a paw at the nearest door; for your ears only, fox.
This time, they found themselves in an empty conference room rather than an office. As soon the door closed, Nick turned to her.

"Okay Fluff, is it me or are you just a little bit less than thrilled that I didn't get suspended or fired?"

Judy barely kept herself from wincing. Oh great, now he was in one of his 'put-up-your-dukes' moods. She was going to have to choose her next words very carefully.

She decided to skip the drama and cut right to the chase.

"Nick, Bogo didn't deal with you lying on your job application...he swept it under the rug. And yes, it bothers me; that's not like the Chief I know, not at all."

Nick's ears went ALL the way back.

"So would you rather I had...?"

"Of course not," Judy cut him off, having anticipated the fox's response, "And if I have to choose between the Chief covering up for you, or you losing your job, I'll go with the cover-up any day of the week, I admit that."

"But...?" Nick's ears had moved forward again, if only ever-so-slightly.

"But...WAS that the only choice?" Judy queried, punctuating he words with upturned pawlms. "Maybe it was, I don't know, but it sounds to me as if the Chief didn't know either, and took the easy way out without even considering the alternatives."

"So what do you want me to do, huh?" Nick's ears had pulled aback again and now he was also waving a paw. "Go to the Police Board and demand a hearing? 'C'mon everybody, let's lay it all out in the open!"

Judy felt her own ears falling backwards. Okay, no more Ms. Nice Bunny, it was time to fight fire with fire.

"I want you to be aware that this isn't something to celebrate, Slick." She said, glowering up at the fox with her paws on her hips. "Look, you did all that could have been asked of you, maybe more than that...and no, you don't need to take it any further. But at the same time, you need to understand that one day..."

"That's it, I've heard enough." Nick spun on his heel and reached for the door, staring daggers over his shoulder at here. "Honestly Fluff, have you ever met a parade you wouldn't rain on?" But then his paw only brushed the knob before dropping back to his side once more.

And then Judy saw his shoulders collapsing; it reminded her of a bridge demolition.

"Darn you Carrots, why do you have to be right so much?"

He turned towards her again, but this time with a look more appropriate to the end of a tough workday rather than the beginning.

"It's worse than you think, Judy. Bogo knew what was on that job application before he even read it."

"What?" Now she was staring—with her nose twitching. "Nick, are you serious?"
The fox seemed not to know whether to nod, or shake his head.

"Perfectly; the Chief described the way I'd filled out the question about whether or not I'd ever been arrested—*before* he put on his glasses."

Judy's paws went up to her mouth. "Sweet Cheez n' crackers, he knew all along...maybe about everything."

Nick grimaced, and then shuddered; his partner had just made a left-pawed reference to that-which-was-never-to-be-discussed-publicly...Mr. Big, Duke Weaselton, and Doug.

"Could be," He finally said, "Did you know *he* was the OIC when they busted the crew that burned down Wilde Times?"

"What, no kidding?" Just when Judy had begun to think her partner had run out of surprises...

"Yep," Nick answered her with a grim nod. "He knew the name of the gang without my having to tell him." He shrugged again, but nervously, "The question is now, where the heck do I go from here?"

Judy sucked at her lower lip for a second.

"Wellll, I think we need to get going on down to roll call...and stop looking at me like that Nicholas Wilde. What, do you think you're the only animal here that knows how to punt?"

The red fox snickered, but then followed her out the door.

"What about Clawhauser and that T-shirt?" he asked, hurrying to catch up with her. Like all bunnies, Judy could move quickly when she needed too.

"No time," she said, looking at her watch and shaking her head, "We'll have to do that later, before we go home for the day."

That was when she finally realized something; Nick DID still have his job...so stop being such a gloom-and-doom bunny, Judy Hopps.

As it happened, they would have had time to deliver the T-shirt after all. When Nick opened the door to the bullpen, Judy saw at once that yes, they were several minutes late—but what she didn't see, (thank heaven) was any sign of Chief Bogo. As sometimes occurred now and then, he was running behind schedule himself.

But then whatever relief she might have been feeling was shunted quickly to the side when Officer Fangmeier abruptly rose from her chair and started applauding. Judy barely had time to register this, before Officers Jackson and Simmers joined her, and then Wolford and Grizzoli were not only clapping but also howling. And then every cop in the bullpen was on his or her feet and banging their paws and hooves together; Pennington, Stevens, and Francine Trunkaby were blowing fanfares through their trunks.

At first, Judy was thoroughly baffled, but then she realized that the object of the other cops acclimation was the fox walking beside her, a fact made crystal clear when Snarlov offered him a big thumbs-up.

"Way to go, Nick!" he growled.

"Good job!" someone else added.
Judy felt her ears standing up and saw Nick Wilde's doing the same. But then everything fell into place when Claire Swinton said, "My sister's family was at that dance, Nick. Thank God, you were there too."

Bang! All right, NOW Judy understood, and she felt more than a little foolish for not having realized immediately what all the fuss was about. Foiling the Guilford brothers' chemical attack had been Nick Wilde's biggest coup since the Savage Predator crisis. Why wouldn't the other cops want to give him an ovation, because it hadn't happened here in Zootopia? Puh-LEEZE, good police work was good police work, no matter where you were.

"DUMB bunny!" Judy chided herself, but not too harshly; Nick had missed what was going on himself, after all.

But now that the fox realized what was happening he was unable to resist reverting to form, raising his arms in a triumphant V as if he'd just scored the winning goal in a soccer game.

All the way to their seats, Nick was basking in it, accepting every fist-bump and high-five offered him, (nearly getting his knuckles broken in the case of officer Rhinowitz.) Judy, for her part, took it all in stride. If anyone was entitled to a little puffing, it was…wait minute, what the heck was he doing?

"Nick, what are you doing?" The fox has walked right past their seats and now he was… "Nick, get away from that podium!" ("Ohhh, sweet cheez n' crackers; parking duty, here we come!")

Nick meanwhile had raised his paws for silence. The frenzy died to a low hubbub, and then he began to speak.

"Guys, I thank you for that…but I have to tell you, a lot of it was just plain, dumb luck, being in the right place at the right time." He paused and his eyes fell on Judy for just a second. "And I think—no, I KNOW there isn't an officer in this room who wouldn't have done the same thing if it had been them instead of me. We're all part of the ZPD folks, the finest law enforcement agency I've ever known." His face crinkled puckishly, "And believe me, I've known a few others—though not necessarily from this side." He paused again as a wave of laughter swept the room. He was about to say more, when Judy's ears shot upwards.

"Nick!"

That was all she needed to say. Quick as the flash of lightning bug Nick dropped from the lectern and scooted away under the table where she was sitting. He popped up into his seat just as Higgins called 'Ten-SHUN' and Chief Bogo banged the door open. Judy didn't know whether to hug her partner or clobber him with a chair.

The Chief was his usual, convivial self this morning. "Right, right, wrap up…pipe DOWN!"

A quick silence fell over the bullpen as the Cape buffalo took his usual place at the lectern, shuffling papers and muttering to himself.

Then he looked up.

"We have several items on the docket today. First off, as you're all no doubt aware, one of our officers was responsible for stopping a serious crime up in Bunnyburrow over the weekend."

There were cheers and hoots and then Bogo adjusted his glasses. "However, since you already know about it, there's no need for me to bring it up again, is there?"
Judy hastily turned her gaze on Nick—and was instantly relieved to see that the fox had no intention of making a 'clever' comeback; he simply folded his arms and sat back with an amused expression.

"Now," Bogo said, moving to the next item, "summer has arrived, and you know what that means; the usual increase in property crime and street gang activity. Commensurate with that is the city's new anti-vandalism ordnance, calling for either full restitution to the victims or a mandatory 30-day jail sentence minimum—to be served in the Zootopia Juvenile System in the case of underage offenders. Be sure to make a note of it...and make certain any suspects you pull in are made aware of it as well."

This was met by grunts, growls and a few painful groans. Catching a vandal in the act these days was about as easy as catching a hard line-drive while wearing Teflon-coated baseball gloves...and a blindfold. The kids who got their kicks by defacing property—it was almost always kids—could sense the cops coming from ten blocks away; it was almost as if they had built-in radar. And even if you did get lucky enough to nab one of them, then you had to deal with the PARENTS.

"My son is a GOOD boy, and how dare you accuse him of something like that? I'm calling a lawyer and suing your department..."

There wasn't a cop in the bullpen this morning who hadn't heard that shtick at least once, Nick and Judy included. Still, you could hardly fault the city for wanting to get tough with these budding nihilists; the previous summer, they had practically wrecked the Lion's Tail shopping district, slashing tires, breaking store windows, pulling down street signs, and spraying everything with graffiti. Supposedly, there were at least two animals on the City Council who thought Zootopia's new anti-vandalism laws didn't go far enough; for sure, there were plenty of citizens who felt that way.

"Right then, assignments," Bogo had moved on to the next page of documents. "Wolford, Grizzoli, Barrow, Delgato and Swinton, you're on that downtown bank stakeout. Rhinowitz, McHorn, of our CI's just tipped us off to a fencing operation, running out of the back of a warehouse in the Canyonlands District." He held up a tri-folded document. "Here's your warrant; get moving."

Several other assignments followed, some interesting, but mostly mundane. And then finally Bogo's roving eye fell on Nick and Judy.

"Hopp's...Wilde." He consulted the documents in front of him, at the same time adjusting his spectacles. "Well, here's something that should be tailor-made for you two; seems your young miscreant, Craig Guilford is hiding out somewhere here in Zootopia, together with his girlfriennnnd..." he scanned the papers again. "Amanda Hill. Right Wilde, according to this, you've got his scent imprinted, is that correct?"

"Yes sir," the red fox answered immediately. Judy could tell that he was relishing this assignment. He tapped the side of his muzzle adding, "And his girlfriend's scent, too."

"Very good," the Chief nodded tartly before passing the folder to Higgins the hippo, who dropped it on the table in front of Nick and Judy. "Go out and find him, then. I want him safely `in custody, the sooner the better...and so does the Burrow County Sheriff's Office."

"We're on it Chief." The red fox said, swiping the papers off the table top. He and Judy were halfway out the door when Bogo called them back again. "Oh, uh... one more thing...Wilde?"

"Yes, Chief?" the red fox queried turning around with beaming smile.
Chief Bogo was smiling too, except his expression was etched in acid.

"The next time I come in here and find you giving speeches from this podium without permission, you'll be on sewer patrol for a month." His smile widened nastily and he let out a satirical snort. "Do I make myself clear, Officer Wilde?"

"P-Perfectly sir," the red fox stammered…while Judy bit her lip to keep from laughing. Then the two of them beat a hasty retreat out the door.

A short while later, they were back in the meeting room, with the documents fanned out on the table before them, wrapped around a purring device that resembled a three-sided boomerang—a conference call phone.

On the third ring, they heard a click and a familiar voice.

"This is Deputy Cannon."

"Mac, this is Judy Hopps, in Zootopia." she said, giving in to the temptation to lean forward so as to be heard better, (completely unnecessary with newer devices such as this one.)

The voice on the other end brightened immediately.

"Ah, hi Judy; to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Not pleasure Mac, business." she informed him, becoming serious. "Nick and I just got word that Craig Guilford is hiding out here in Zootopia; our Chief gave us the job of bringing him in."

"Oh right, should have known it might be that," the bobcat answered with a low self-deprecating growl, "Any way, it's good to hear that you and Nick are on the case, Ju…I-I mean Officer Hopps. What can I do to help?"

"We've got the BCSD's report here in front of us, and we'd like to do a quick review," Nick Wilde answered, joining the conversation. Actually a good 1/3 of that report had come from him, but there were plenty of other details he hadn't been aware of until now. He rummaged through the documents for a second before finding the one he wanted. "According to what I'm reading here, they drove to Podunk, and then took the train to Zootopia—doubling back through Bunnyburrow."

He set the paper down again, "I have to admit Mac, that was a gutsy move, and a lot more clever than I would have given that coyote-kid credit for."

A harsh laugh came over the phone speaker.

"Keep your credit Nick; there's some new information…and you're right. Craig Guilford didn't plan any of that. He only stopped in Podunk because the truck he was driving up and quit on him. We have three witnesses who helped him push it into a parking space. And then we're pretty sure he and his girlfriend jumped onto the first train that came along without even looking to see where it was going. According to the train-conductor, Amanda Hill nearly had a heart-attack when she realized they were headed back towards Bunnyburrow."

"Then why didn't he call you right then?" Judy wanted to know, thumping her foot in annoyance.

The answer was more caustic laughter, but this time with an odd note of respect.

"You can thank her boyfriend for that, Judy; he managed to convince the conductor that Amanda was running back to her mother to get away from an abusive dad—without ever actually saying so. Craig Guilford may be none too bright but you have to give him this much, he knows how to keep
his cool under pressure."

"Except when his father leans on him," Nick offered.

"Except when his father leans on him," the bobcat deputy agreed, "Oh and that reminds me; here's something else that isn't in the report. Jerry Guilford blames Craig for getting hit by those fireworks when him and his brother tried to spray-bomb the Carrot Days Festival."

"He does?"

"Seriously?"

Nick's ears were standing up and so were Judy's.

"Yep," Mac's voice was both terse and grim, "he still thinks it was his son that told him Jack LaPeigné was over on the north side of the dance; swears if he ever gets his paws on that boy, he's apt to do something I won't describe over the phone. I don't know, but if you manage to collar that kid it might be something you can use to get him to co-operate."

"Well, first, we have to make the collar," Judy reminded the bobcat, "Is there anything else you can tell us? What about the girlfriend? It seems to me that she's the weak in the chain."

"What the bunny said," Nick Wilde nodded in agreement, "The vixen I saw up on that hillside Sunday night looked about as tough as a banana-cream pie."

"Has she tried to contact her parents, do you know?" Judy asked.

"No, and we'd know if she had, believe me." Mac told them both, "Amanda's folks are worried sick; her dad even tried to put up a $1000.00 reward for her safe return."

"Whoa, I hope he doesn't," Nick Wilde was shaking his head, "If that happens, you guys'll get buried under an avalanche of crank phone-calls."

"Tell me about it." Mac Cannon growled again, "But like I said, he only TRIED to make the offer; Sheriff Sauer talked him out of it—barely." He stopped speaking for a moment and the air in the conference room seemed to be growing uncomfortable when he opened up again. "Listen…stupid question, but I have to ask it; are you sure Craig Guilford is still there in Zootopia?"

"He was as of 18:05 yesterday," Judy said, picking up another document. A traffic cam caught him changing trains in Zootopia Central Station. We have him and his girlfriend getting onto a Red-Line train, but after that the cameras lost him. It was rush hour and the Red Line is the second busiest one in Zootopia; every station was wall-to-wall bodies right then. We're reviewing the tapes, but so far, no sign of him."

"Well that's certainly probable cause for assuming he's still there," Mac Cannon said, purring in agreement, "But I honestly can't see him hanging around for too much longer. Craig Guilford is strictly a country boy. If he's been to Zootopia more than twice in his life, I'd call that a lot; the big city's got to feel like being on another planet for that kid. If he's there, I predict he won't stick around for more than another day or two; and he's got more than enough cash to move on. That bag of money you saw sticking out under the car seat when you checked out the truck? Almost $3000, according to his dad."

"Hold, it Jerry Guilford told you that?" Judy's nose was twitching again. Though she'd never actually met the Guilford clan leader—except for that one all-too-brief encounter at the irrigation pond—he had seemed to her like the last animal that'd be willing to cooperate with the law.
"Are you kidding?", The bobcat sniggered again, "He won't shut up about it; that's another thing he's mad at Craig for." His voice took on an angry twang, "'Little so-and-so thinks he can steal from ME and get away with it...!' You get the idea."

"We do." Nick and Judy answered in unison, and then Judy said, "Okay, Mac, anything else you can think of that might be useful?"

There was silence on the line while the bobcat mulled it over.

"Mmmm, this is probably a dead end, but there's something else that wasn't in the report. Jerry Guilford has another brother, Jake Guilford; he's the oldest member of the family."

Judy's nose began to twitch again.

"Okay, Mac, why is that important?"

"Because he lives in Zootopia," the deputy told her, "got a place in Meadowfield."

It was actually the Meadowlands, but Judy didn't correct him. This was an important piece of news, and why did Mac seem to think it was so trivial? For that matter, why hadn't it been included in the report?

"Why do you think it's a dead end?" Nick Wilde was asking with his ears pricked up.

"Because Jake and Jerry Guilford don't get along," Mac answered with a derisive chuckle, "to put it mildly; they can't stand each other. Jake's an honest mammal, an airline pilot, and he won't have anything to do with his younger brothers' family. About four years ago, when he came here for Carrot Days, Jerry tried to squeeze a loan out of him and wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. Took five deputies to break up that fight, and that was the last time Jake Guilford ever set foot in the Burrow. Jerry supposedly tried to sue him—Jake knocked out two of his teeth—but he couldn't find a lawyer willing to take the case."

"What case?" Judy didn't mean to interrupt, but couldn't help it. No lawyer with half a brain would go near a lawsuit that frivolous.

"I know, right?" the bobcat was sniggering again, "But that's Jerry Guilford for you; he's threatening to sue Jack LaPeigne too. Anyways, now you know what I mean when I say that Jake Guilford is a dead end; if Craig tries to go THERE for help, he'll get turned in so fast he'll never know what hit him."

"We should be so lucky," Nick Wilde answered with a lopsided smile, and then the corners of his mouth turned downwards. "Is Jerry Guilford still trying to plead 'not guilty'?"

"Yeah, 'fraid he is," Mac's voice came over the conference phone speaker as a sullen hiss of resignation, "He's already had one lawyer quit out from under him because of it, but he still refuses to back down. Stupid coyote, he seems to think he's some kind of folk hero coz of what he did; a martyr for everyone that's ever had their property foreclosed. Even for him, that's nuts. I'm beginning to think the Harequatiline didn't just take off his fur, it wiped out whatever little common sense he still had left."

"Wonderful!" Nick Wilde groaned and threw up his paws.

"Yeah, I hear what you're saying, Nick." The bobcat's voice was not unsympathetic, "I had to take the witness stand against that crazy coyote once or twice myself. Not a lot of fun, I can tell you." His voice seemed to brighten again. "However at times like this, there's one thing I always tell
myself. Never fails to cheer me up."

"What's that?" Nick asked him.

"Better you than me," Mac answered deadpan.

Nick's paw slapped over his eyes. "I'm surrounded by comedians!"

Beside him, Judy Hopps was nearly rolling on the floor, laughing.
Tying Up Loose Ends (Continued...Pt.2)

Chapter Summary

Meanwhile, back at the asylum....

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 7—Tying Up Loose Ends
(Pt. 2...Continued)

Jack LaPeigne jotted a final notation on his tablet and then pressed the 'send' button.

"The contract is on its way to you now, along with my signature," he said, speaking into his headset, "mutatis mutandis; nothing major, only a few minor revisions, nothing I would think you'll find objectionable."

For a number of seconds, there was nothing in his ears but the soft rush of white noise, and then finally a Latin-flecked voice replied.

"Hmmm, I see nothing of a problem here," the animal on the other end informed him. A few seconds later the big bunny's tablet refreshed and the document re-appeared, this time bearing two signatures.

The big rabbit was both pleased and frustrated. He should have gotten this done yesterday—and he would have if it hadn't been for...easy, easy, what's done is done.

In actuality, Jack had made at least one alteration to the agreement that he knew Adrian Arboreas wouldn't care for—but then he also knew the Tayra would let it pass without any complaint. After all there was at least one clause that the head of PAD (Participacoes Amazona Desenvolvimento) had slipped into the contract that he hadn't liked, but had been willing to overlook.

"And THAT is the way business negotiations are supposed to work," the big bunny reflected, shutting down the connection, "at the end of the day neither side gets everything they want, but both parties end up with an arrangement they can live with."

And this was certainly an agreement Jack LaPeigne could live with. PAD had access to literally
millions of acres of virgin rainforest—and now LPN Pharmaceuticals had access to it as well. So what if he'd had to give up a little more for it than he'd have liked? This agreement might end up being worth ten times the concessions he'd made in order to get it signed; who knew what sorts of potential miracle drugs might be lurking out there in that wilderness? Of course, the deal might turn out to be a total bust, but it was nothing LPN Pharma couldn't absorb, especially if the plan he was ready to implement paid off.

Wellll, maybe not quite ready; there was still one more hurdle to clear before he gave the order.

Jack allowed himself a contented groan, and then stretched and settled back in his seat, reaching for the decanter of his favorite single-crop carrot juice; at LAST he was caught up with his leftover work-load, and could move on to more important matters.

It had been inevitable that the extra half day he'd had to spend in Bunnyburrow, (answering questions for Sheriff Yay-hoo!) would generate a mountain of unattended business. And sure enough, by the time Jack had made it back to Zootopia, the pile of memos on his desk had been stacked up halfway to the ceiling…and that was only the \textit{paperwork}; you didn't want to know about the unread e-mails and unanswered phone messages he'd found waiting to greet him upon his return.

Thank goodness for his fursonal assistant, Polly Walters, he reminded himself. That opossum was worth her weight in gold…no, make that platinum. Without her help, he'd \textit{still} be trying to sort through the backlog.

"\textit{Blast that stinking Jerry Guilford—and all his family!}" the big bunny hissed inwardly. He had already made up his mind that when the coyote finally received his sentence, by hook or by crook he was going to end up serving his time in an Aker Correctional Corporation facility. THEN maybe he'd see…

Jack cut himself off and put the thought away; there was no point dwelling on the Guilford family now.

He turned to look out at the passing scenery.

As a rule, Jack LaPeigne didn't care all that much for traveling by limousine, preferring instead to drive himself. "Mr. Control-Freak, that's me," he always said, and it was never said entirely in jest. Although he had learned to curb that impulse a few years back, it had never gone away entirely…and that was just how the big bunny liked it.

Unfortunately there were times when you simply had to let it go and leave the driving to someone else…and this was one of those instances. As much as Jack would have preferred to be behind the wheel himself right now, even \textit{he} couldn't work and drive at the same time, especially not up a twisting mountain road like this one.

The limo rounded a curve and his destination became visible in the distance, a tall, imposing façade that Nick Wilde and Judy Hopps would have recognized immediately had they been here, the former Cliffside Sanitarium, now Aker Correctional Corporation's VIOMAX facility; (Violent and Incorrigible Offenders, MAXimum security.)
Nick and Judy would have recognized the place all right, but they'd have had to be blind not to notice the sea-change the one-time sanitarium and hospital had gone through since when they'd last been here.

At least one of the alterations was cosmetic; the edifice, which once been painted in the color of a nimbus cloud had been redone in an almost cheerful sandstone hue; a color scheme that highlighted the vine motif, threading its way up the front. Jack LaPeigne had always found that particular adornment to be a delicious paradox…especially considering the facility's new purpose. As the name implied, VIOMAX was where Zootopia incarcerated the worst of the worst, perpetrators who had either A. committed particularly heinous crimes, B. were considered beyond any hope of rehabilitation, C. had messed up everywhere else they'd been housed, or D. had been adjudicated as criminally insane. (There was an entire wing in the facility dedicated to just these felons.)

It was VIOMAX’s new role that had brought about the other changes, the ones which were anything BUT superficial. First of all, the access bridge that led to the facility's front entrance was now a draw-bridge—and to reach it, you had to pass through not one but two steel gates topped with razor ribbon. Even to get that far you had to get through Checkpoint Alpha, the main gate, a mile down the hillside….now kept closed, and guarded 24/7. Everyone, even the correctional officers, had to submit to a thorough vehicle search in order to gain access to the entrance road; mirrors, sniffers, the whole shebang.

And then there was the prison itself. Impregnable didn't even begin to describe the-facility-formerly-known-as-Cliffside these days; there were searchlights on the roof; there were motion sensors in the halls, and also a state-of-the-art CCTV camera system; there was even a fleet of RC drones ready to be deployed in the event of an attempted escape.
Anyone trying to escape from VIOMAX could forget about flushing themselves, the way Nick and Judy had done to avoid being caught by Mayor Lionheart's wolf-guards. The drainage system was now two stage; all waste-water went into a holding tank before being discharged over the face of the cliff.

And then there were the guards…while many of the animals keeping watch over the VIOMAX Prison were still timberwolves—their keen sense of smell made them ideal for detecting intruders and/or escapees—no longer were ALL of the animals on guard duty here of lupine stock; no one was going to succeed at sneaking into (or out of) this place by way of starting a howl, not any more. And of course, there were many more officers on duty now than there had been two years ago. (Back then the number a guards protecting the place had barely amounted to a skeleton crew.)

The limo rounded another turn, and the prison disappeared from view again.

Jack felt no contempt for Leodore Lionheart's inadequate security arrangements. The big cat had been working on a shoestring after all; he'd had to fund the capture and incarceration of those 14 missing mammals while somehow keeping it off the City Ledger. At the end of the day, he'd done the best he could with what he'd had; it just hadn't been enough was all.

"Not enough to keep Judy Hopps out of there," the big bunny told himself with a mental note of admiration—conveniently forgetting the fox that had accompanied her on her foray inside the former psychiatric hospital.

They rounded another turn and the limo slowed as the first gate came in sight.

Sometime later, Jack was stepping on board an elevator, a drab, utilitarian box that might otherwise have been mistaken for a cargo lift.

It had taken the big bunny a good half-hour to get here. His limo had been searched at both gates, and he himself had been searched three times, the third time after passing through the entrance to the administration wing. The officers on duty had known exactly who he was, but had treated him no differently than any other visitor, subjecting him to a thorough wanding, sniffing, and pat-down at all three checkpoints. Even now, a scowling tiger with a nightstick was standing beside him, reading to spring into action at the first sign of trouble.

Jack LaPeigne could not have been more pleased. Yes, this was the way to run a maximum-security prison; no exceptions for any visitors, not even for him. Everyone on duty here today would be getting a plus-mark in his or her jacket.

The door hummed open and he stepped out into a corridor that was only slightly less Spartan than the elevator. It was also deserted, except for the pair of wolverines pulling sentry duty in front of a set of double doors at the end of the hallway. Neither of these were correctional officers; instead they were part of the big bunny's fursonal security contingent.

Security…

The same factors that made this place impervious to both escapees and intruders also made it an ideal location to discuss matters of a particularly sensitive nature. The ambience was also more than a little bit intimidating, something else Jack found useful from time to time. Since the procurement of the facility by Aker Correctional Corporation a little more than eighteen months ago, the place had acquired a number of nicknames, The Castle in the Sky, Dragon's Lair, Castle Greyscale, The Fortress of Solitude. All of these had been discarded when the prison had received its official designation; not one of those aliases could compete with VIOMAX, a name that fairly screamed that it was NOT a place where you wanted to go…as an inmate or a visitor.
(Unless, of course, you were Jack LaPeigne, and had business to discuss that the other party might find less than palatable.)

At the double doorway, the wolverines subjected him to one final scrutiny before allowing him to pass through.

When he stepped inside the conference room, the first thing the big bunny saw was Seth Whitepaugh, head of Aker Security field operations, seated near the end of a long, rectangular table. (The seat at the head was reserved for Jack, of course.)

Sitting beside the wolverine was Dr. Madge Honeybadger; the only animal here besides the big bunny and his senior operative who knew the purpose of today's meeting. As Jack moved towards his seat, he observed that her eyes were downcast and that she was fidgeting nervously. Hmm, well of course she was; the last time she'd been here, she'd ended up leaving a in police cruiser with her paws cuffed behind her back.

As for the other five occupants of the conference room, although they might not know for certain why they had been summoned here, they probably had at least a vague inkling.

First of all there was Stan Troupe, a ring-tailed lemur and Chief Counsel for The Aker Group. Stan had been with Jack for longer than anyone else here, and was loyal to a fault; there'd be no flak from him.

One space down was Dan Lingula, a carabao or water buffalo. The CEO of Aker Correctional Corporation, he had yet to question, much less overrule, even a single one of Jack LaPeigne's directives. Behind his back, he was known as 'the cowed bull'; the big bunny knew exactly what to expect from him; again, no worries.

To Lingula's right was Dr. Dorothy, 'Dotty' Tufts, an Abert's Squirrel and the head of LPN Pharma. Okay, now she was a different kettle of carrot-chips; she neither liked Jack La Peigne, nor was she particularly intimidated by him. And she was sharp; if she didn't already know about the deal Jack had concluded with PAD on the way up here, he'd eat his cell-phone. Dottie had also been wise enough to leave the discussions with Adrian Arborea to her superior; she knew how terrible she was when it came to negotiations. In short, she was the one animal in this room with both the brains and the chutzpah to block the big bunny's proposal, if the spirit moved her.

Except the spirit WASN'T going to move her—Jack's announcement would come as good news to the tassel-eared rodent; she'd been urging him to accelerate the timetable on the Fire Triangle project for some time now.

Chad Whittlesly, a grizzled badger, was the Aker Group's Chief Financial Officer and easily the oldest mammal present, only two years away from the firm's mandatory retirement age. He was also the biggest toady in the group, a surprising fact, considering his age. At least one wag had described his relationship with Jack LaPeigne as being not unlike the relationship between Jim Humpson and Kermit, the Frog. (Jack had later tracked down the would-be wit and had him fired.)

Last—and least—was Anton Cole, a black bear and also chief of Aker's Communications Division. While neither easily intimidated, nor a lackey by nature, Cole had his own sort of pressure-point; he was almost insatiably greedy. It was said that he would swim though broken glass—drenched in acid—if you stood at the end of the pool holding a large enough bankroll. (The originator of this bit of humor had NOT lost his job—for the simple reason it had been Jack LaPeigne himself.)

Wasting no time, the big bunny opened the proceedings even before he finished sitting down.
"Good morning, mammals, let's call this meeting to order. I know that none of you are particularly happy to be here—as am I—so I'll get right down to business. The purpose of this gathering is a proposal to move up the timetable on Project Fire Triangle and implement it immediately… At least wait until I make the motion, Dorothy!" he amended with an amused snicker; the Abert's squirrel's paw had already shot up.

But then the big bunny's smile quickly faded.

"Hmmm," he thought to himself, "I bet she thinks I'm making the proposal as a result of her nagging—excuse me, recommendations. Need to disabuse her of that little notion, chop-chop."

"This proposal is made in light of some new information recently unearthed by Mr. Whitepaugh over there," he went on, nodding in the wolverine's direction. (They had actually been his own discoveries, but he didn't want to come off as too much of an autocrat.)

He followed this up with a carefully redacted version of the new information, and then stood up, assuming a solemn visage.

"The proposal is made that we implement Project Fire Triangle immediately."

"Seconded!" Dan Lingula's hoof was aiming skyward; so was Dorothy Tuft's paw, but the carabao had beaten her to the punch. No surprise there; they had never much cared for each other, (even if they did work well together when the situation called for it.)

"All right then, any objections?" Jack queried, moving on quickly. There were none, (he had known there wouldn't be,) and he called immediately for a vote.

"All in favor?"

The first to raise her paw was Dottie, with Dan Lingula right behind her, Stan Troupe took half a second longer and then it was Anton Cole's turn. The last to vote in favor was Chad Whittlesly, but his expression was one of boredom rather than reluctance. In that moment, he reminded Jack of a much younger animal. "Yeah, okay, whatever you say. NOW can I go hang with my buds?"

"All opposed?" Jack queried, looking around the table. It was a farcical question, given the fact that they had already voted in favor unanimously, but protocol was protocol; he needed to provide at least the appearance of giving them the opportunity to change their minds, (not that any of them would.)

"Very well," he said, "the motion is carried unanimously. This meeting is adjourned."

And that was that; the entire procedure had taken less time than the big bunny had needed to get through security.

An outsider watching the proceedings might have concluded that the whole thing was a joke. There had been no discussion of the proposal and no suggestions made. Except for LaPeigne's asking if there were any objections, there had been no chance whatsoever for anyone to offer feedback. And even then, no one had uttered a peep; by any other name this group was a rubberstamp committee—and also a complete waste of time. Why had the big bunny even bothered with this little charade? Why not just give the order and be done with it?
rubberstamp committee—and also a complete waste of time. Why had the big bunny even bothered with this little charade? Why not just give the order and be done with it?

Jack LaPeigne could have explained why; every animal in attendance at the meeting had been part of a privileged elite; the select few who knew about Project Fire Triangle, (although none of them were aware of the full details of the project—collectively yes, but not individually.) Jack hadn't liked sharing the information with even a group this small but unfortunately, he'd had no choice; every single animal at the meeting was essential to carrying out the plan.

More to the point, now that the big bunny had put the project to a vote, none of his underlings could later claim that they'd been acting under duress, much less that they'd been ignorant of the plan. "You agreed to this willingly, you can't back out now." When things started to go south, (and when did things ever NOT begin to go south, even in the most successful operation?) it might be necessary to remind them of that—they had climbed on board the roller-coaster and now all they could do was hang on until the ride was over. And if any of them might later be tempted to blow the whistle in order save their own skin...well, that was why Seth Whitepaugh had been in attendance; an unsubtle reminder that no one trying to drop a dime on the big rabbit had ever gotten away with it. (The LAST animal foolhardy enough to make the attempt had been James 'The Mister' McCrodon, and how had that worked out for him?)

When Jack adjourned the meeting, most of his underlings quickly vacated their seats and headed for the door. The exception was Anton Cole, who had news to deliver.

"Mr. La Peigne, about...errrrr, that other matter, sir; everything is in place and ready to go, I just need your approval before we move forward."

"I'll get back to you on that shortly," Jack answered while managing a smile. Privately, he wanted to throw this mealy-mouthed idiot off the Cliffside drawbridge; over the black bear's shoulder, he could see Seth Whitepaugh cocking an eyebrow. Great! The big bunny had intended to discuss the 'other matter' privately with his senior operative as soon as the meeting broke up, but now the wolverine would think it was only because of what he'd just overheard. (Otherwise his boss would have told him nothing.)

"IDIOT hunny-grubbing, moron!" the big bunny raged inwardly at his communications chief, while somehow keeping his face straight.

When they were finally alone, he turned to speak to Seth Whitepaugh.

"The 'other matter' Cole was talking about is a fursonal project of mine, involving ZPD officers Judy Hopps and her partner, Nick Wilde. I wanted to discuss it with you first before giving the final go-ahead. If it might even possibly interfere with Project Fire Triangle, I'll nix the plan toute-suite."

"All right sir, then why don't we sit down first?" Whitepaugh answered, indicating a chair. Nothing showed on his face, but Jack was certain that the wolverine was still harboring doubts; he hadn't completely rejected the idea that this discussion was only happening because of Anton Cole's indiscretion.

When they took their seats, Jack once again dispensed with any preamble and explained what he had in mind. The whole time, Whitepaugh only sat there with an expression chiseled in granite.

Jack LaPeigne's proposal was essentially a black-propaganda operation, something with which both he and Seth Whitepaugh were more than passingly familiar; Zootopia City Council member Claudia Nizhang had been on the receiving end of an Aker Group disinformation campaign for more than a year now. Only after he had finished laying out the particulars did the big bunny offer
any explanation as to his motives.

"My feelings on predator/prey relationships are a matter of record, Whitepaugh, as you well know. And I'm far from the only animal who feels this way. Judy Hopps might very well end up destroying her career by getting in too deep with Nick Wilde. Normally, I wouldn't care, except that she happens to be the first bunny police officer in the history of not only the ZPD, but law enforcement, period. If she goes down…my God, I can hear it already, 'See, didn't I SAY that a bunny can't make it as a cop?' As a matter of fact, I happen to know that the ZPD academy has received applications from at least three other bunnies hoping to follow in Hopps' footsteps. What will they say if she loses her job because of that fox?" He allowed his expression to become suitably humble. "And I'll admit it; Judy Hopps is not only a member of my species, but also hails from my hometown of Bunnyburrow. Hmmm, what is that expression the kids like to use? Oh yes, she's my 'homegirl', you might say."

He paused, waiting for a reaction from Whitepaugh, but the wolverine only nodded impassively. Jack nodded back and then got up and turned around with his paws behind his back, something he often did before delivering his peroration.

"But as I said before, I will not give the green light on this if there's even the smallest possibility that it might interfere with Project Fire Triangle. That operation takes full precedence over everything else—period." He looked over his shoulder at the wolverine. "That's why I'm speaking to you in private, Whitepaugh. You remember what I said, shortly after I brought you on board, 'I need at least one animal around me that isn't afraid to tell me what I don't want to hear.' So tell me what you think, could what I have just proposed possibly jeopardize the Fire Triangle, even to the smallest degree?"

Seth Whitepaugh frowned for a moment before answering.

On the one paw, Jack LaPeigne wasn't fooling anybody with his pretensions of a brotherly concern for Judy Hopps. The big rabbit had a crush on her, Whitepaugh had suspected it ever since their meeting at the Bunnyburrow hospital; now, he was certain of it.

But on the other paw, LaPeigne hadn't been trying to deceive anyone with that song and dance, least of all himself. He knew what his real motivations were…and he also knew that Whitepaugh knew.

THAT was why he had asked for the wolverine's private opinion, because was furthermore aware that he was acting on emotion rather than reason. Animals in that state of mind tended to see only what they wanted to see, sometimes even when the truth was staring them right in the face. Seth Whitepaugh wouldn't miss any such details, and he if he spotted a problem with 'the other matter' he'd say so immediately.

Only…would Jack LaPeigne's little side-project have any possible impact on the Fire Triangle project? Whitepaugh was tempted to say 'yes' just on principal; the big rabbit's scheme was downright petty, beneath the efforts of a mammal of such high stature. It was also overkill, like using an air-tanker to put out a campfire. Yet try as he might, the wolverine could think of no possible way in which the two operations might interfere with one another, at least not in their initial stages. And so he mulled the problem for moment before answering; he might have had the big rabbit's blessing to tell him an unpleasant truth…but only if it WAS the truth.

"Can you stop this once it starts?" he finally asked. "I can't see it causing any trouble for the Fire Triangle project now, but you know as well as I do how circumstances can change without warning."
"Absolutely," LaPeigne reassured him, "I'd have rejected it myself already, if it didn't come equipped with a 'dead-mammal's switch'. Unless Anton Cole gets a memo from me at the end of each week, he's under orders to shut down the operation. That's the set-up."

The corners of Whitepaugh's mouth turned upwards into a neutral position, (if not a smile,) but his eyes remained dubious.

"Then I honestly can't see any reason not to go ahead," he told the big rabbit cautiously, "but only if you give me the authority to abort this 'other' operation of yours any time I see fit. Is that acceptable to you, Mr. LaPeigne?"

"Accepted," the big rabbit replied, with an odd look of relief on his face; it was almost as if he'd been hoping for this. No, strike the 'almost', Whitepaugh decided, this was exactly what Jack LaPeigne had wanted.

As if to prove it, the big bunny already had his cell-phone out and was punching speed-dial.

"Cole? This is LaPeigne. The word is given; I want you to move forward with that 'other matter' at once. Yes, that's right." His eyes shifted in the direction of his senior operative. "And I also want you to keep Seth Whitepaugh apprised of any and all developments; if he gives the order to shut it down, you're to treat it as a direct order from me, is that understood? Very well, Cole…get moving on this."

He disconnected without saying anything further, and turned back to the wolverine.

"All now that's settled for the moment, let's move on to more important matters. Now that we have the votes, is everything in place to initiate Project Fire Triangle?"

"The balloon goes up Saturday," Whitepaugh replied, almost smiling again. He had anticipated the meeting's outcome—and then, having also anticipated his employer's next question, he added, "As you know sir, we need to ensure that no innocent animal gets hurt, at least not the first time we strike. We want to make our principals angry, not the public, not yet at least; the last thing we need is a repeat of what happened in the wake of the Finagle's raid."

"That was different Whitepaugh." The big rabbit regarded his nails for a moment, "The Mister had a gun to our heads; we either moved right then, or else it would have been too late."

"Oh I agree Mr. La Peigne, we had no choice," the wolverine answered, making a throwaway gesture with his paw, "but this time we DO have a choice; this time we're not under the sword of Ramocles, and we can afford to take it step by step."

"Very well then, proceed." the big bunny answered, not entirely satisfied, but wise enough to defer to his senior operative in matters such as this. That was why Seth Whitepaugh had always respected Jack LaPeigne, even if he didn't especially like him. His employer had never been one of those rich jerks who insisted on having everything HIS way, never mind the facts. (Had he wanted, he could have ordered the 'other project' to go ahead without even telling the wolverine about it.) Unlike a few of his contemporaries that the Whitepaugh could name, Jack LaPeigne had always understood that you can't buy reality. On top of that, he was capable of not only admitting to his mistakes but of learning from them. True, he was sometimes prone to acting with astonishing rashness, but he never tried to deny it afterwards.

"That's what makes him so dangerous," the wolverine concluded, mentally folding his arms, "He not only knows his own weaknesses, he's willing to accept them. It's why he's never really been beaten; I can't even begin to count the number of times he lost a battle, and then came back to win
"The initial operation won't require the use of any of our 'enhanced' operatives," He said, "if they're not in a position to pull it off quickly and without being detected, we abort. The name of the game this first time is, get in, get done, get out."

"Leaving behind the appropriate clues, of course," La Peigne reminded him, arching an eyebrow.

"Of course," The wolverine answered with a rough smile, and then explained the details. "Just enough, but not too much," he concluded and the big bunny nodded in approval.

"All right then, I leave it your capable paws," he said, not bothering to tell the wolverine to keep him informed of the operation's progress; some things went without saying.

He stood up again and turned towards the door…but then he paused with an ironic smile crossing his face.

"Before we leave Whitepaugh, I think I'll pay a courtesy call on our 'special guest'; only appropriate considering the occasion, wouldn't you say?"

Without waiting to hear what his senor operative might have to say on the matter, he turned and reached for the door. Had he still been looking, he would have observed Seth Whitepaugh's ebony eyes rolling upwards at the ceiling; bunnies will be bunnies.

On the way downstairs in the elevator, La Peigne seemed to remember something and abruptly snapped his fingers.

"Oh, I almost forgot to ask, what is the status of our operative who was injured at the Carrot Days festival, Ms. …uh, what was her name again?"

"Clawson, sir…Laura Clawson," Whitepaugh answered, his voice, and his face, betraying none of the wariness he was feeling. "She's expected to make a full recovery, only a minor concussion and some bruising, however…"

"Yes?" LaPeigne was lifting an ear.

"However," the wolverine sighed, "She's officially tendered her resignation from ASM, and won't be persuaded to change her mind; getting trounced by a bunny, even a bunny gone savage was too much for her, apparently."

"Ahh what a pity," LaPeigne answered, looking equally resigned while shaking his head, "I'll be sorry to lose her, Whitepaugh. That one had…potential." It was said in a tone of genuine regret, but the wolverine couldn't help noticing the narrowing of his employer's eyes.

"Yes, well the good news sir, is that she poses no security risk." Whitepaugh said this while taking care not to rush his words, "Ms. Clawson knows it was you who ordered her to put that Nighthowler pellet in with the fox's blueberries, but she has no idea that it WAS Nighthowler; she thinks it was some kind of tracking device. Furthermore she missed seeing the bunny that went savage filching some of those berries from the fox's basket; she never even saw the two of them together. Like everyone else who was there, she believes that the savage rabbit simply had a flashback to the Nighthowler exposure he suffered as a kit."

"Ahh, well that's one piece of good news," La Peigne nodded, facing the front of the car again, unawares that his chief operative hadn't quite told him everything. That was what Laura Clawson had SAID she'd seen, (or rather hadn't seen,) but Whitepaugh had yet to confirm it. Had she been
telling the truth? He thought so, but wasn't 100% sure. What he WAS certain of was that Laura Clawson was a fellow wolverine…and he was equally certain of what Jack La Peigne would do if he decided that she was a security risk after all. That was why he was keeping certain details to himself; his employer wasn't the only animal in this elevator for whom loyalty to one's own species trumped nearly all other considerations.

The car slowed, and then stopped.

They got off at the main rotunda, and took the left side hallway to what had once been the examination theater. Taking a sharp right, they found themselves in front a three-inch thick, jet-black, polycarbonate door, guarded by a bighorn sheep. After examining their ID badges, the ram saluted and spoke into his radio.

"This is Crags, open up 2-B."

"Opening 2-B," a tinny voice answered, and the door slid sideways with a low hiss.

Beyond the doorway was another sight that would have been familiar to Nick Wilde and Judy Hopps had they been present this morning, a long, sterile hallway, lined with rows of winking red lights, the place where they had found the 14 (actually 15) missing mammals two years previously. The cells were more-or-less unchanged since then, but with two notable differences, the alterations in the plumbing arrangements and the fact that only half of the cubicles were occupied.

And there was one other difference, not with the cells but rather with their occupants. As La Peigne and Whitepaugh made their way down the corridor, none of the inmates leaped at the glass, ready to tear the interlopers to shreds, as the predators darted by Doug would have done. Just the opposite in fact; at the sight of the wolverine and the big bunny, most of them retreated even further into the depths of their cells. One of them, a huge rhino with legs like basalt pillars even cringed in a corner as they passed.

The two visitors ignored them all, there was only one animal in here of any interest—to Jack LaPeigne if not to Seth Whitepaugh, the occupant of the last cell on the left.

Anyone familiar with this animal would have wondered what they were doing here, especially in such company. This particular part of the VIOMAX facility was known unofficially as the 'Basket-Case Block', the dumping ground for prisoners with no idea as to what planet they were on. The animal occupying that last cell was by contrast nothing if not self-aware—clever, even calculating, in fact.

That is…whenever they were allowed that privilege, (which wasn't often.)

And then, of course, there was the size difference. Except for the animal Jack LaPeigne had come to see, every denizen of this wing was a member of a larger species, and most of them were predators—whereas the animal in cell 17 was both a prey species and smaller than he was; no bigger than the average bunny, in fact. But if this animal wasn't especially violent in her own right, she was certainly capable of ordering it…or rather she HAD been so inclined, once upon a time.

That, however, was not the reason that this particular inmate had been transferred to the Basket-Case Wing of the most secure prison in the Zootopia Penal System. It was for a reason Jack LaPeigne was only just now going to reveal.

"Hello there," he said, offering his most ironic smile

At first glance, he appeared to be talking to an empty cell…until you noticed the pair of eyes
peeking out from under the bed.

The big bunny turned and signaled to Seth Whitepaugh.

"Bring her out of it; I don't want to talk to her like this."

The wolverine nodded and stepped forward, drawing a plastic rectangle from his breast pocket, swiping it across the card-reader and then putting it back while entering a security code with his other paw. As the door slid open, he reached into his jacket and drew out a pneumatic dart gun, taking aim at the cell's occupant. There was less than five inches of door space open at this point and seeing what was happening, the target had secreted herself even further under the bed.

Even so, when Whitepaugh pulled the trigger, a low grunt from within the shadows told LaPeigne that his senior operative had scored a direct hit. Sliding the pistol back in its holster, the wolverine punched the control panel a second time. At once, the cell-door did an about face and glided shut again. The entire action had been conducted in a single, fluid move that had required all of fifteen seconds to complete; one might almost have called it graceful.

It took a moment, but then a wan, orange-clad figure emerged from beneath the bed, crawling on all fours and then getting shakily to her feet.

"Hello Ms. Bellwether," LaPeigne repeated. This time his smile was almost beatific.

The former Mayor of Zootopia did not respond at first, instead dabbing at the spot on her cheek where Whitepaugh had tagged her with the pellet dart. Her fingers came away stained with a dark blue color she knew all too well. She did not panic or show any fear, not like the first time the wolverine had done this; she knew by now that she wouldn't go savage, the Nighthowler she'd been given would serve only as a counter-agent, nothing more.

She glared balefully through the Plexiglas at her visitors.

"You have no right to keep me here, LaPeigne, I'm not dangerous and you know it."

If Judy Hopps could have seen her former nemesis, she would have found the sheep's appearance disturbing if not shocking; Dawn Bellwether's stint behind bars did not seemed to have aged her significantly, but on the other paw, two years ago she would never have hidden herself under a bed at the approach of a visitor. Even more striking was the fact that her prison coveralls were hanging off her like clothes on a line; she appeared to have shed thirty pounds at least since her encounter with Nick and Judy in the Natural History Museum.

In fact, she was slightly heavier now than she'd been back then; her scrawny appearance came as a consequence of having been shorn of all her wool.

Instead of responding to her, the big bunny turned and nudged his companion in the elbow, (something the wolverine seemed to find quietly irritating.)

"Two years behind bars, and still showing some spirit; I have to say Whitepaugh, I'm impressed."

Now the big bunny turned to face the former mayor, his face morphing into the trademark oily leer that all who served him had come to dread, narrow, burning, merry eyes above a mouth stretched wide in a feral smirk, the incisors prominently on display. It was a sight calculated to make the big bunny's enemies draw back in fear, and it had precisely that effect on Ex-Mayor Bellwether; she backed away from the door so swiftly, she nearly tripped over her own feet.

On the other side of the Plexiglas, Jack LaPeigne winked and raised a finger
"Wrong Bellbottom; in case you've forgotten, the Zootopia Penal System is now under the auspices of the Aker Correctional Corporation. And you should remember; you were the one who first signed off on the proposal, after all." His smirk widened as he savored the irony. "Suffice it to say we can do whatever we want with you: 'In me power', nyah-ha-haaa, and all that."

"You didn't have to take my wool," Bellwether sniffed, looking away with a hurt expression. Jack LaPeigne remained unmoved.

"Oh stop your bleating, that's nothing special; every sheep held in one of our institutions gets the same treatment. Wool's a very nice place to hide contraband after all—including weapons." He let out a short, harsh guffaw. "Seriously, you should see what we found in your little chums Jesse and Woolter's fleece when they went under the shears."

"What do you want, cute bunny?" Bellwether demanded, folding her arms; she had assumed her defiant stance again.

But LaPeigne only threw back his head and laughed.

"Oh goodness me, someone called me cute, I'm sooooo hurt."

When he looked at her again, his face became almost an olive branch.

"Well since you asked Bellwether, I just happened to be in the neighborhood so I thought I'd drop in to explain something. The reason you're here, instead of one of our other facilities is that you not only had the nerve to steal fire from the gods, you tried to use it to light a birthday candle—and if there's anything I can't stand it's a piker."

Bellwether blinked, and then stared as if Cliffside was still an insane asylum, and SHE was the animal on the outside looking in.

"I don't know what you're talking about, bunny."

His expression remained coy. "No Lambchop, you don't…but you'll understand soon enough, and so will everyone else." He was about to say more when a reproachful look from Whitepaugh caught his eye.

The big bunny quickly changed his tack, "Darting predators to divide the city and keep yourself in power! A more frivolous waste of a precious resource, I can't possibly imagine, Bellbottom." He abruptly turned to the wolverine standing next to him. "Whitepaugh, put her under again, I've had enough of this."

Dawn Bellwether bleated in terror and dived for the underside of the bunk bed. She only made it halfway there before the second dart-pellet caught her in the nape of her neck. Unlike the first dart, this one was not blue but a deep, iridescent red.

LaPeigne waited until it had begun to take effect and then turned and walked away, signaling for Whitepaugh to accompany him.

"Feel better now?" the wolverine asked him a moment later, as they waited for the guard to open the door again.

La Peigne just shrugged. "What can I tell you? I needed to get that out my system. If I hadn't paid former Mayor Bellwether a visit while I was here, I'd have spent the rest of the day wishing that I had." He turned to look at Whitepaugh. "And today especially, I need to stay focused—because from this point onward, there's no going back. Alea iacta est!"
The door slid open and the two of them stepped through the opening.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note:

For this piece I wanted to get away from the old cartoon-cliche of the autocratic CEO, a king in his realm. answerable to no one but himself. (Eg Thaddeus Plotz, the Animaniacs series.) On the other hand, (paw) if I were to show how it really works, this whole thing would take up 30 more pages and be about as interesting as watching grass grow.

I finally opted to split the difference...mostly towards the autocratic side.
"Oh no, not YOU again!"

"Wil-LIE! Now, is that any way to talk to an old friend?" Nick Wilde was spreading his arms as if preparing to embrace a long, lost brother.

Willie Pond did not return the gesture; instead, the muskrat turned hurriedly away, preparing to make a fast exit, stage right …only to find his way blocked by a smiling Judy Hopps. Behind him, he heard the fox's voice again. "Is that any way to talk to an old friend, Carrots?"

"I should say not, Nick," she answered, smile fading rapidly as her paws moved to her hips. "Walking away from us without even so much as a 'how-de-do'…and after all the time we've known each other!" She flicked away a stage tear, "I-I can't believe he's treating us like this."

Nick's ears turned backwards as he and his partner closed in on the hapless rodent, "There, now look what you've done, Willie; you hurt Hopps' feelings. Are you happy with yourself?"

The big rodent only backed himself against a pillar and threw up his paws, as though awaiting the order to 'assume the position.' All around him, the late-morning commute continued; animals of all sizes and species moving to and from their trains. Here and there, a few of them paused briefly, but most just continued on their way, with hardly a sidelong glance at the spectacle.

Willie had been working the Zootopia Central Train Station for a number of years now. His forte was one of the oldest hustles known to mammal-kind; he was a bunko-steerer, a scammer who specialized in directing unsuspecting animals to crooked games of chance—and his favored marks were always out-of-towners from rural areas. Anyone showing up in ZTA Central dressed like
Farmer John was a magnet for the devious muskrat.

Unfortunately for him, a year previously he had spotted what looked like the juiciest mark in months, a rabbit-hick and his wife, fresh off the train from Bunnyburrow. Willie had immediately put his hooks into the hayseed, blissfully unaware that Stu and Bonnie Hopps were supposed to meet their daughter Judy for lunch at any moment.

And also that she had just arrived and was standing right behind him.

When she'd brought the muskrat into Precinct One, Nick Wilde had been there, and he'd had a suggestion for his partner.

"I've known Willie Pond off and on for years Carrots; he'll do anything to stay out of jail. If it was me who'd busted him, I'd try to develop him as a snitch instead of pressing charges."

That had turned out to be one of the best pieces of advice Judy ever got from the fox. If Willie Pond wasn't exactly a gold mine of information, he was no dry hole either. Once he had even volunteered an especially scintillating piece of intelligence—about an illegal cage fight in the Nocturnal District where the antagonists were given hits of Nighthowler before entering the arena; sometimes, they even fought to the death.

Only the part about the Nighthowler had been untrue; the rest of the muskrat's information had been spot on. Judy and Nick had gotten a nice, little commendation out of that episode, and Willie Pond had gotten a fine when he could have gone away for more than a year.

Most of the time, however, he wasn't so free with his information, "That's one tree needs a little shaking now and then." Judy had once observed to her partner.

Lately, Willie's favorite hangout in Zootopia Central was the 'small-mammals' map', located on the wall beside the hippopotamus entrance-ramp.

It had been there for about a year—and should have been put up a lot sooner. The big overhead map of the Zootopia Transit System, posted over the main concourse was difficult for the smaller species to read and downright impossible for the residents of Little Rodentia; they'd been clamoring for 'a map we can understand' for ages. Finally, they'd gotten one and Willie Pond had zeroed in on it like a homing missile; it was the perfect place to spot an out-of-towner that didn't know their way around Zootopia. Even better, it was in a location that was all but invisible to the security cameras. When Judy had suggested to Nick that they go have a talk with Willie, they'd known exactly where to find him.

"So what's the game today, ol' buddy?" Nick Wilde was asking, at the same time laying his paw on the holster where he kept his pawcuffs, "Cards? Dice? Or maybe you're pitching for Goro again?"

Goro Kyujitai was a tanuki who ran a (literally) floating Pachinko parlor down in the Canal District, an establishment that was about as honest and trustworthy as an-email from a Ligerian bank president

Willie threw up his paws again, but this time in a gesture of exasperation. "Hey fox, I told you before, I'm OUTTA that game, my mammal."

"Of course you are, Willie." Judy said, addressing him in a mock-soothing voice—while at the same time giving the big rodent the once over. Sweet Cheez N' Crackers, who did this idiot think he was fooling? He was decked out in blue serge-pants with a white shirt and a checked vest, topped off by a bright-red tie, done up in Windsor knot. It was the kind of outfit most mammals wouldn't be caught wearing to their own funeral—but exactly the sort that might prompt you to ask
someone wearing it for directions. "And that's why you're dressed like a theme-park tour-guide today, am I right?" She smirked and raised a jaded eyebrow.

"Hey, it's all I got that's clean." Willie's arms flew upwards a third time, and his voice had become a pathetic wheedle. Judy ignored it and shifted her attention to Nick, nodding a silent signal. *Okay, fun time's over; let's pump this scaly-tailed sleaze-ball.*

The red-fox was only too happy to oblige. He reached into his shirt pocket—taking his time so Willie wouldn't know what he was up to—and after several seconds, drew out a folded sheet of printout paper, which he offered to the muskrat.

"Seen that coyote kid around here recently, pal?"

Willie took the photograph and frowned deeply, an expression that usually heralded a negative answer from him. The way his eyes shifted upward and to the left when he first glimpsed the picture told the fox an entirely different story.

"Sorry…" he started to say, and Judy swiftly cut him off at the pass. (She too had seen his eyes move.)

"Willie, we're on a really tight schedule here, so please don't waste our time, mmm'kay? Here, let me unpack this for you." She moved behind the muskrat, pointing up and over his shoulder, first to the left, and then to the right.

"There Willie, see that CCTV camera there…and that other one over there?"

"Of course he sees them, Carrots," Nick Wilde said, pretending to butt in, "He knows all about those cameras, that's why he always makes sure to keep in their blind spot." He offered the muskrat a conspiratorial wink. "Don't you, Willie?"

The big rodent said nothing and Judy took over again.

"Now the coyote whose picture Nick showed you was spotted by those two cameras around 5:15 in the afternoon yesterday, but here's the strange part." She feigned clearing her throat, "It should have taken that kid all of three seconds to get from camera 'A' to Camera 'B', but instead, he dropped out of sight for nearly ten whole minutes."

"Almost as if he stopped to talk to someone while he was in their blind spot," Nick Wilde added, folding his arms, and tagging off to Judy with a nod of his head. She picked up on it at once.

"Oh, and did I mention that another one of the security cameras caught YOU leaving the station around 8:30?" she said. That was it; Willie's shoulders fell like a house of cards. And *that* told the bunny-cop it was time to deliver the closer.

She whipped off her sunglasses and looked straight into muskrat's oily, bead-shaped eyes.

"You know who that is in the picture there?" she said. "It's Craig Guilford."

Willie only looked at her blankly, (as she'd known he would,) and she threw in a quick addendum. "He's the son of Jerry Guilford…the coyote who tried to spray down the Carrot Days Festival with weed-killer. Craig was the spotter—and the Burrow County Sheriff's department wants him bad."

She paused for just the right amount of effect and then added a dash of bitters, "And so do I."

Okay, *Jerry* Guilford was a name even Willie Pond recognized. He squared his shoulders, a faint glow seeming to come alight behind his eyes.
"Officer Hopps is from Bunnyburrow," Nick reminded the muskrat, attempting to stoke the flame even further.

It worked like a charm. Judy could almost read Willie's thoughts, the look on his face was so palpable; they didn't want him, they wanted the coyote-kid who'd tried to help spray bomb Carrot Days…and that was someone he could give up with no fear of being branded an informer (again.) Even the most hardened felon in Zootopia would have no qualms about snitching to the cops on a junior terrorist.

And who knew what might be in it for him if he played ball with Judy Hopps on that coyote-punk? Hadn't she just said she wanted his tail bad? Willie's mouth pulled back, exposing his long incisors.

"Why didn't you just tell me that right outta the gate, cute bunny? You could have saved us all a whole bunch of runaround."

"Because," Judy thought but did not say, "If I did that, you'd try and bargain with me…quid-pro-quo, and we'd be going at it until midnight." She felt her ears starting to turn backwards and forced them to stay put; Willie had unwisely chosen to drop a 'c' bomb on her. Well, she could deal with that later, right now she said, "Skip the whining and just tell us what you know."

"Okay, okay," the muskrat said hastily, having realized his mistake a moment too late, "Yeah, I saw that coyote kid." He pointed to the right. "Him and his girlfriend stopped to check out the map, and then got into a big argument with each other."

"About what?" Judy was thumping her foot.

"About why they had to come all the way here to Zootopia Central," Willie told her with an exasperated wave of his arm. 'We should of got off back at Glacier Falls station,' I heard her say, and he just lit off on her, 'One on more word out of you Mandy and I'm leaving you here on your own.'"

Nick and Judy looked at each other; Mandy...as in Amanda, Amanda Hill, the fugitive coyote's girlfriend. They were on the right track all right; Judy could feel it in her bones. But just to make certain, she asked, "this girl, Mandy, was she a red-fox vixen?"

"Yeah, that's right," the muskrat said. "Didn't look none too happy about being where she was, neither. Between you and me, I think she halfway wanted that coyote kid to ditch her."

"So they went and got on the red-line train for Glacier Falls?" Nick Wilde queried. Stupid question, but it needed to be asked, just the same.

Or…maybe it wasn't so stupid. Willie shook his head in disgust.

"Naw, that's what she said too, and it got her boyfriend mad all over again, 'No, you dumb vixen, VINE Street! Why do we want to go all the way back to Glacier Falls and then have to change trains twice?"

"And…?" Judy prompted, raising an eyebrow.

The muskrat shrugged. "And…that's it; they walked away and that was the last I saw of those two kids,"

"And you didn't even try to steer them towards one of your little games?" Nick Wilde was pushing his sunglasses up off the bridge of his muzzle with an index finger. "What the heck Willie, were you asleep at the switch or something?"
"Hey, I told you I don't do that anymore," the big rodent responded indignantly. That was good for another exchange of glances between Nick and Judy. Yeah, riiight. Willie had probably shined on Craig because he'd figured, why waste his time on some coyote kid who looked like he didn't two nickels to rub together?

Or that was what he'd thought, and it gave Judy an idea. She put her paws on her hips yet again.

"Oh Puh-LEASE Willie, do you seriously expect me to believe you let more than $3 thousand smackers just up and walk away from you?"

"Say what?" the muskrat was staring and his whiskers were quivering like guy wires in a high wind.

Instead of answering, Judy looked at Nick, who caught the unspoken message in her eyes.

"That's right, Willie; you didn't know?" he said, "Craig Guilford had more than $3 Grand on him when he skipped out of Bunnyburrow. Trust me, I know; I saw it for myself inside the truck he was driving."

"I…don't do that…stuff…I don't work the steer any…more." The muskrat was protesting once again, only this time he seemed to be stumbling over his own tongue.

"Anyway, thanks for the information, Willie." Judy had closed her notebook and shut down her carrot pen, once again reverting to Miss Congeniality, "I'd love to stay and chat," She said, "but Nick and I have places to go, things to do, and coyotes to catch. Talk to you later, okay?"

"Yeah…o-okay," the rodent answered, dully. Now his whiskers were drooping halfway to the floor and he seemed nearly on the verge of sinking into a catatonic state.

"Later, Willie," Nick said cocking a jaunty finger, and then he and Judy turned and strolled back the way they had come, with the bunny-cop aiming an ear behind her and mentally counting down, "Four…three…two…one… annnnd…"

And from behind her she heard Willie's anguished cry of frustration, "Three THOUSAND bucks!" followed by a sharp, slapping sound as the muskrat face-pawlmed himself.

Judy turned and smiled sweet venom over a shoulder, murmuring under her breath.

"THAT'S for calling me cute!"

Beside her Nick Wilde sniggered and raised a thumb, "Good one, Carrots."

A short time later, they were back across the square in Precinct One, seated at a table in the ZPD commissary lounge. Like many another of their fellow officers, Nick and Judy found it easier to think—and work—away from the noise and clutter of the office cubicles. (Besides, there were donuts and pastries in here and both of them had skipped breakfast.)

At the moment Nick was speaking with dispatch and brushing away the remnants of a blueberry croissant with his fingertips. Judy, meanwhile, was on a ZPD laptop, alternately nibbling on a carrot-cake muffin and entering text. (No mean feat: like most Department Issue, this computer was built for a much larger animal than a bunny and she had to use her paws rather than her fingers to get the job done. Fortunately, she was used to it by now.)
"So," Nick was speaking into his cell, "if they boarded a Red Line train in Zootopia Central at 17:22, they would have arrived at the Vine Street Station at approximately-y-y-y…" he consulted his notes, "17:45. We need the guys in forensics check Vine Street's security camera tapes again for…hm, let's make it from 17:30 to 18:00 just to be…"

He paused again, this time rolling his eyes. Finally, he said, "I know they did Clawhauser, but now that we know what time and what station…just have them take another look, okay? Okay, good… thanks. What's that? Yes, I'll tell her."

He cupped a paw over the phone and looked at Judy.

"He says the T-Shirt fits perfectly and thanks again," (They had dropped it off at Dispatch on the way to talk to Willie Pond.)

"Tell him he's welcome," Judy answered without looking up from the screen. (Officer Hopps had never been one to mix business and pleasure.) Nick dutifully relayed her reply and then got back down to business himself. "One more thing; tell forensics to look especially for the girlfriend, Amanda Hill. If either one of those two is likely to get careless in front of a security camera, it's her. Craig Guilford might know a thing or two about how to dodge the law, but I'll bet she doesn't. That little vixen is in way over her head with the likes of him; I saw it for myself, up on that hillside. Right Clawhauser. Thanks again. Bye."

He rang off and looked over at Judy

"So, anything on your end, Carrots?" he asked, putting away his phone for the moment.
"Yes-s-s, I think I may have something, Nick," she said, beckoning the fox to her side of the table with a finger. "Come over her for minute?"

Sliding in beside her, he saw a map of the ZTA Subway lines displayed on the laptop screen.

"By the way, I agree with you," Judy told him, "Amanda Hill is definitely the weak link here. Okay, now there's one interesting thing about the Vine Street stop, it's the first station out of Zootopia Central that connects with a Green Line train."

"You think they switched to the Green Line, Carrots?" Nick asked her, responding to the nod that followed with a skeptical frown. "Hm, I don't know about that; remember what Amanda is supposed to have said? 'We should have gotten off at Glacier Falls Station.' There's no connection to a Green Line train from there."

It was a good argument, but not enough to dissuade his partner.

"No, Nick…there's no connection to the Green Line from ANY station on the Bunnyburrow line."
She traced a path on the computer screen with her finger, "In fact the only stations where you can switch to a Green Line train are all on the Red Line…and you CAN make the change to a Red Line Train at Glacier Falls."

Nick's ears worked back and forth for a moment.
"All right," he said, still playing the Devil's Advocate, "Then why, Carrots. What the heck kind of business could a kid like Craig Guilford have in that part of the city?" (The ZTA Green Line ran almost exclusively through the Rainforest District.)

"I don't know, Nick," Judy admitted with a shrug, "it's just a feeling I have. But I'll still bet you a fiver that Craig and Amanda switched over to the Green Line at Vine Street."

Nick lifted his paws in mock surrender.

"No bet, Judy." He laughed, "I'm not sure you're right...but I'm not sure you're wrong either. In fact..."

"Dang!" the word burst out of Judy like a popping bag. "Why didn't I think of that be...? Of course!"

"Wha...? Nick had backed his chair away from Judy and was staring warily at his partner; her ears were standing up in a 'V' and her nose was twitching like e telegraph key; something had just put a bee in her hat. "Carrots what the heck are you talking about?" he asked her.

Judy typed rapidly and then stabbed a finger at the map.

"Haymarket, Nick."

His ears began to roll in confusion

"Haymarket...WHAT?" Sheesh, now which one of them was talking in riddles?"

"The Haymarket TRANSIT station Nick," Judy said, still pointing at the screen, "That one's not in the Rainforest District, it's over in the Meadowlands."

"Wha...the Meadowlands?" Nick was more confused than ever, "What's so special about...?"

And then he saw it; less than two miles away from the Haymarket Station, a pulsing red dot was glowing on the screen. Nick recognized the location immediately.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa; you're thinking that they went to Craig's Uncle's house?" He began to make short, pushing motions with his paws. "I-I-I don't think so, Carrots; remember what Mac said? If Craig Guilford is even halfway smart, he won't go anywhere near that place."

Judy had a ready answer for that one, "That's just it Nick, he ISN'T that smart, remember?"

For a moment, the fox just looked at her. And then, slowly at first, but soon much more rapidly, the skepticism drained away from his face.

"No, you're right Carrots," he told her grimly, "Craig Guilford ISN'T that smart," and then, almost to himself he added, "and I should know." He pulled out his phone and called dispatch again. Judy knew what he was up to almost at once.

"Right," she said, "you see if you can get hold of that coyote-kid's uncle while I try and figure out what time he and Amanda would have arrived at Haymarket Station—if that's where they went," she added yielding just a sliver of ground.

Nick nodded and then said to her, "If they did, we might have a chance at spotting them on the security cams. Even at rush hour, Haymarket Station's not that bus..." he halted as dispatch finally picked up, "Clawhauser, it's Nick Wilde again. No, I know they won't have anything on those tapes
yet. Listen, can you look up a number for me? It's for…" he flipped rapidly through his note pad
"Jake Guilford 12100 Creekside Drive, Meadowlands District, Zootopia. No I'll make the call, just
give me the number…wait, hold up for a second." He nestled the phone in the crook of his
shoulder, holding it in place with his chin while he reached for a pen, and flipped his notepad to a
blank page. "Okay, go ahead."

(More than one of Nick Wilde's fellow officers found it strange that he preferred to use an old-
 fashioned notepad rather than a tablet—and the red fox always had the same answer for them:
"Because this thing's batteries never go dead.")

"Okay…yeah, better have both the home and cell-phone numbers." he was saying, "right, okay, got
it. Okay, one more thing: Have forensics check the security tapes for the Haymarket ZTA station
from… He looked at Judy, who mouthed the numbers '6' and '40' "6:30 and 7 PM. Got that? Okay,
Thanks Clawhauser." He disconnected and scratched at an ear with his leg for a second. "Hmmm,
let's try the home phone first," he said.

"You know Nick, it wouldn't hurt to call him 'Benjamin' once in a while," Judy Hopps noted from
her seat behind the laptop.

"After hours maybe, but not while I'm working," the red fox countered. He was just about to enter
the last digit of Jake Guilford's phone number when Judy's laptop pinged. She squinted at the
screen with her nose twitching, and then moved the cursor and clicked 'enter', at the same time
slipping a headset over her ears and mouthing another word for Nick Wilde's benefit, "Bogo."
The confirmation arrived less than half a second later.

"This is Chief Bogo," came the familiar basso-profundo. "Are you there Hopps…Wilde?"

"We're here, Chief," Judy answered, glancing at Nick, who had temporarily shelved his phone-call.

"Anything to report on that Guilford boy?" the Cape buffalo asked them, "I've just had a call from
the Burrow County Sheriff's Office, asking for a progress report."

Judy looked at her partner again and saw the slight, almost imperceptible nod. She immediately
nodded back, the fox was almost certainly right. The phone-call Bogo had just now taken couldn't
possibly have come from Mac Cannon, not this soon; it must have originated somewhere further up
the chain of command. And now Nick sat back and rolled his paw in another familiar gesture, 'he's
all yours.' (They had long since agreed that when it came to dealing with Chief Bogo, it was best to
let her do the talking—in theory if not always in practice.)

"We think he switched to the Green Line train at the Vine Street station Chief; may have gotten off
again at Haymarket," Judy told the Chief, "Forensics is reviewing the tapes from both stations
right now." She went on to recap the conversation with Willie Pond, and then said. "It's just
possible Craig Guilford may have tried to get to his Uncle's place."

Bogo's snort of disbelief came over the laptop speakers as a blast of white noise.

"Hold on, the one who despises his father so much? I know you told me earlier that our young Mr.
Guilford isn't all that bright, but could he really be that stupid?"

"Don't know Chief," Nick Wilde answered, unable to keep out of it any longer, "But given what
we've learned so far, it's a possibility we can't ignore."

"Quite right," Bogo conceded; he had been around the block enough times himself to know that the
lead you write off as not worth following may be the one that comes back later to bite you in the
"Have you tried contacting the Uncle then?" he asked,

"Nick was just about to do that when you called." Judy answered, taking over again, "and if you still have the Burrow County Sheriff on the line, could you ask them if they know whether or not Craig Guilford was there when his Dad and his Uncle had that fight two years ago. Maybe the boy doesn't know that they don't get along. Jerry Guilford wouldn't be the first dad to hide things like that from his kids."

"Hold on, I'll ask." Bogo said and then his voice disappeared as he switched lines. After only a few short seconds, he came back again. "Yes, Craig was not only there, he even tried to jump in and give his father some help."

"Darn!" Judy groaned, wincing. There went that theory out the window.

"Okay, then try to get us some background on Jake Guilford," Nick Wilde interjected. "We still can't ignore him, and it might be important."

"I'll…see what I can do," Bogo answered him in a voice sheathed in hoarfrost, while Judy favored her partner with a pained look. This was why Nick was supposed to let her be in charge whenever they talked to the Chief; speaking to HIM in such a peremptory fashion was borderline insubordination. The fox seemed to realize it himself after a second, and quickly resumed his dialing as soon as Bogo was gone.

"Put it on speakerphone," Judy suggested, and a 'burring' sound quickly filled the space around their table. After four rings, no one had picked up and Nick Wilde growled, "Aw nuts, you watch Carrots, we're going to get his voice mail."

On the very next ring the red-fox's prediction came true; there was a click, a long pause, and then a canned voice came on the line.

"Hello, this is Jake Guilford, sorry, I'm out of town right now; if you want to get hold of me, try calling me on my cell-phone…"

Nick shook his head and looked at Judy, who responded with an expression of morbid pity. He waited until the beep and then said, "Mr. Guilford, this is Officer Nick Wilde of the Zootopia Police Department. I'll try your cell-phone in a minute but…” He went on to offer a brief summary of the events in Bunnyburrow over the weekend, following up with a quick explanation of the reason for his call. "I know this is probably not necessary, but if you hear anything from your nephew Craig, call us back at this number right away."

He disconnected and raised a sardonic eyebrow.

"Does stupidity RUN in that family, you think?"

"Now, now; be nice." Judy said, but her feelings were much the same as the fox's; admitting on your voice-mail message that your home is going to be empty for an extended period of time is like putting up a neon sign on the roof; 'Nobody Home! All Thieves, Come On In!'

But then all at once, Judy realized something else, "Sweet cheez N' crackers, Nick!" Her ears shot up in a 'V' again, only this time they were quivering.

"Wha-What, Carrots?" He had nearly dropped his phone in the midst of dialing the second number.

Judy reached out and grabbed his elbow
"Nick, if Craig Guilford tried to call that number, HE would have gotten that same message we just heard…and he's not exactly a ranger-scout when it comes to staying out of other mammals' property."

That sent the fox's ears shooting skywards as well. "Whoa-HO! I hadn't thought of that, clever bunny; you are soooo right. The coyote kid I saw up on that hill the other night would have made a beeline for his uncle's house as soon as he heard that message." But then a sudden frown crossed his features, "Even if he did, though...it might not have done him any good—and maybe his uncle knew that it wouldn't. That's why when he recorded that phone-message..." He trailed off into a pensive, brooding silence.

Now Judy was the one staring in confusion.

"Wha-What do you mean, Nick?"

He sat back in his chair, tapping the side of his muzzle with a finger, and then began to dial again. "One of the first things I learned back when I was working the streets is that pilots are lousy marks, especially airline pilots. Those guys don't miss a lot of details, Carrots, they can't; they work in a job where a whole bunch of lives depend on it."

"Okay, so...?" Judy prompted, not sure if she liked where he was going with this..

"Soooo," the red fox told her, pressing the 'dial' button, "I'll bet you five bucks that Jake Guilford has his house wired up five sides from Sunday with a state-of-the-art security system: THAT'S why he thought he could afford to...aw nuts, voice-mail again. Hello, Mr. Guilford? This is Officer Nick Wilde..." He went through the same recitation as before and rang off with a frustrated look on his face.

"Dangit, if we could just get a hold of him, we could clear up so many things. Uh, what are you doing, Carrots?" She was back on the laptop again.

"Calling up Goggle Earth, Nick," she said, keeping her eyes glued to the screen. "Maybe there's another way to find out if Jake Guilford has an alarm system installed in his house."

Nick tilted his head to one side, "Enlighten me, O sage bunny." This time, he was curious rather than dubious.

"Well," she said, still scrolling, "As you know, a lot of animals who install alarm systems in their houses like to advertise that fact...make sure any would-be burglars know about it before they try to break in; that way, they won't try it. And if Jake Guilford is as detail-oriented as you think he is....Okay, here we are."

Nick craned his neck over her shoulder at the image on the screen.

It showed a white-painted, split level, ranch house, with a big, rambling porch and yard full of rose-bushes...and also a number of blue-and-white signs, posted at irregular intervals. They were too far away for either one of them to make out the writing, but in a familiar shape nonetheless, exactly like the badges she and Nick were wearing. Dangit, it looked like he was right—but she needed to make sure anyway. She put her thumb and forefinger against the screen and spread them outward to zoom in on one of the signs. At once, the shield adjacent to the driveway became perfectly legible—and Judy Hopps groaned inwardly.

"Protected by Mink's Home Security,' Dang, Dang, Da....hold it, hold it, holllllld it."

"Holy Bunnyhopper....he's there, Nick!"
The fox's ears shot up like antennae again and pointed at one another

"Huh? Carrots, are you serious?"

It was a silly question and both of them knew it; Judy was staring at the computer screen with the intensity of a searchlight and tightly gripping the edge of the tabletop, limbs rigid and shaking; it looked almost as if she was attempting to stop the table from sliding forward and crushing her against the wall. In short, she had never looked more serious in her life.

She reached for the laptop again.

"There Nick," she said, panning the image to the right. "See that building, over there on the left, the one right behind the house?"

Still nonplused, the fox leaned dutifully forward. Just past the driveway, behind the main house, was a squat structure with a curving roof. "What's that, a barn?" he asked.

"Nope that's a hangar, see the windsock on top?" Judy thumped her foot excitedly, "And I've seen something like this before Nick; watch."

She typed briskly for a moment, and the image shifted sideways. A few more keystrokes and a ZNN news item appeared beside the picture. The headline read, 'The Guilford Family, Who Are They?' Beneath it was an image Nick recognized immediately from the BCSD file photographs he'd seen, the coyote family's compound, surrounded by Sheriff's vehicles and cordoned off with crime-scene tape. As he watched, the picture detached itself from the news article and expanded to fill the space beside the Goggle-Earth picture of Jake Guilford's house.

Using her fingers again, Judy zoomed in on the second image until both pictures were the same size. Then she sat back and pointed at the screen.

"There Nick, do you see it?" she asked.

He studied the laptop screen for second, and spotted it almost at once.

"That hangar behind Jerry Guilford's house, it's…"

"...almost an exact copy of the one behind his brother's house," Judy finished for him. "He's there, Nick," she pointed at the screen again. "Craig and his girlfriend are at his uncle's place."

"All right," the red fox answered, lifting an ear and an eyebrow. "What makes you think so, Carrots?" He sat back with his arms folded, awaiting her answer. Judy couldn't tell if he was serious or only humoring her, but she forged ahead anyway.

"Nick, remember what else Mac told us? Craig Guilford is a country mammal." She looked away, for a second, oddly embarrassed, "like me; I grew up in Bunnyburrow too. I know how strange it feels, finding yourself transplanted to the big city when you've lived in the sticks all your life."

"All right," Nick said, and Judy decided he wasn't patronizing her after all. Even so, he was going to need a lot of convincing.

She went on.

"When I first started to get homesick after moving here, I found that the thing I missed most, wasn't my friends or even my family, it was just—how shall I put this? It was just being in a place I knew." She pointed at the screen again, "That's why I think Craig Guilford is at his uncle's house."

"That's why I think Craig Guilford is at his uncle's house."
It's going to feel like a little slice of home for him.

Nick also looked at the screen for a second, and then began to chew his lip

"Carrots, I hear what you're saying but…"

Judy hurriedly cut in again. "I know what I'm talking about Nick; remember that time when I came back to Zootopia and caught up with you under that bridge in the Meadowlands? I never told you this before, but that place felt a little bit to me like being back in the Burrow—and I WANTED to come to Zootopia." She shook her head, "but Craig Guilford didn't; he and his girlfriend only ended up here after getting on the wrong train, remember? Mac Cannon knew it too, 'Being in the city is going to feel like being on another planet for that kid,' he said, and he was absolutely right."

She pointed at image on the laptop screen a third time. "But THAT place won't feel weird to Craig Guilford; I'm telling you, he's there Nick." Without waiting for reaction, she closed the laptop and snatched it off the table with both paws. "C'mon fox, let's take a ride."

"Carrots…" he started to say, but she was already getting down from her chair. The laptop looked as big and heavy as a mammalhole cover in her paws, but she handled it with the ease of an empty pizza-box

Nick stifled a grimace; he knew what that meant. Judy had made her decision and that was that. You might as well try derailing a freight train with a pawsicle-stick as get her to change course when she was in this state of mind.

"Ahhh, what's the use?" the fox sighed inwardly and got up to follow her out the door.

Chapter End Notes

As a rule, I don't like long chapter summaries. I feel that stories are like jokes; if you need to explain them, you didn't get the message across.

However, I want to say a few words about this installment because it deals with an area I've been wanting to explore for some time now--Nick and Judy's professional relationship, (as opposed to their personal relationship,) I.e. how they work together as a law enforcement team.

I flatter myself that I got it right while still keeping them in character. Nick Wilde is still a wee bit cynical after all these years and there's Judy, full of boundless energy as always and still given to flights of intuition.

And that's it.
Chapter Summary

Nick and Judy close in their suspect

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 7—Tying Up Loose Ends
(Pt. 4...Continued)

"Nick, you're the one who said it, remember?" Judy changed lanes and hit the gas, repeating the homily the fox had delivered, three weeks into their partnership, after taking down his first perp. "Witnesses are good; evidence is better, but nothing beats being able to put yourself inside a suspect's head."

Nick Wilde just nodded and suppressed a whine; yes he had said that, and now he was beginning to wish that he'd kept his big, fat, fox-trap SHUT. Judy's insistence that Craig Guilford and his girlfriend Amanda were hiding out at his uncle's place was going to yield them nothing; nothing except a razzing from their fellow officers and maybe a tongue-lashing from The Chief.

By the time they reached Tundratown however, his attitude had undergone a serious re-adjustment. This was due, not so much to Judy Hopps' powers of persuasion as it was to three new pieces of information they'd received in the interim.

The first tidbit had come from Chief Bogo, who had (testily) informed his officers that Jake Guilford was twice married and twice divorced, with four kids from his first marriage and none from the second. All four of his offspring either lived with their mother full time or were off, attending college. In other words, the house was empty.

Strike one…

About a half hour later, Benjamin Clawhauser, (much more cheerful than the Chief,) had called with the news that ZPD forensics had confirmed Judy's hunch. Amanda Hill had been caught by the Vine Street Station security cameras at 18:18 on the previous day…barely a glimpse, but definitely her. 25 minutes later, both she and her boyfriend been spotted by the security cams at the
Haymarket ZTA Station, debarking from a Green-Line train.

Strike two…

The third strike, the one where they'd struck gold, had come when Jake Guilford had finally returned their call, (in a fretful state of mind.) He had promptly told them yes, the house and the hangar were both alarmed, but had then confided that he also owned a guest cottage—and that it wasn't monitored by Mink's Home Security.

"You might not have caught it on Goggle Earth, it's between the house and the hangar and mostly underground," he'd said, and then added defensively, "I'd like to put it on the alarm system, but Mink's wants to charge me an arm and a tail for..."

After letting Jake ramble on for a bit, Judy had asked him to describe the guest cottage in detail and then Nick had asked him if there were any vehicles on the premises. (Craig Guilford knew how to drive, and an auto-theft charge would be the least of his worries, right about now.)

The coyote's answer had been the best piece of news they'd gotten all morning.

"Nope, thank goodness… my regular ride's in the shop, so I had to take the truck to the airport Sunday," he'd said, "nothing at the house right now but the tractor and that junk-heap runs like a sloth on sleeping pills."

"Ehhh-xcellent," Nick had muttered under his breath, offering Judy a thumbs-up; if there had been a vehicle left at the house for Craig and his girlfriend to appropriate, you could most likely have colored them gone hours ago.

"All right," Judy kept her eyes on the road while she spoke, "one last thing before we let you go, Mr. Guilford. Can you check your home phone and see if your nephew tried to call you there?" She did not explain why and the coyote didn't ask her to.

"Sure, I'll check right now," he'd said, and then his voice had tightened like a 100 lb. bowstring, "and listen; if you need me to testify against either that little snot nephew of mine or his worthless excuse for a dad…"

"We'll be in touch," Nick Wilde had cut in quickly, having sensed that Jake was working himself up into a rant. He could hardly blame the coyote; as soon as Jake Guilford got back to Zootopia everyone and their aunt would be asking him, "Hey, are you any relation to Jerry Guilford?"

Animals were like that.

Less than ten minutes after Jake rang off, a text message from the coyote popped up on the cruiser's computer screen.

"Ys Craig called.
Yes, I'm sure
Forgot to turn off his caller ID.
Little IDIYOTE!"

That was what finally clinched it for Nick, a decidedly unpleasant experience for him; if he knew Judy, she'd be milking this for weeks.

"All right Fluff, but you don't have to look so smug about it," he grumbled, crossing his arms and hunkering down in his seat.
Judy only eyed him curiously. Smug, what smug? She hadn't been looking smug...no, of course not. Why, her face hadn't changed a whisker...right?

To get to the Meadowlands from Savannah Central, you had one of two possible choices; you could go by way of the Rainforest District, and then cut through Old Growth City—the shorter option, or else drive straight through Tundratown—the long way but with far fewer traffic stops. Being as it was early summer, Nick and Judy had opted for the arctic route; at this time of year the roads through Tundratown were mostly clear of snow and traversing the district was relatively easy.

Nick spent the rest of the journey studying Goggle-Earth images of Jake Guilford's house, trying to figure out the best angle of approach. That they would need to make their move from downwind was a given; Craig Guilford was a coyote and his girlfriend was another fox, two keen noses to Nick Wilde's one. A much more difficult proposition was how they were supposed to get close to that guest cottage without the neighbors raising fuss. (There wasn't a cop in the ZPD that hadn't seen a suspect turn and run after hearing a well-meaning citizen say; "Is there a problem here, officer?")

Ever the stickler for protocol, Judy had already informed the Meadowlands Precinct of her and Nick's mission.

"Right, will you need back up?" the officer in charge had asked, excitedly. (Upper Meadowlands was such a low crime area, garden shed burglaries were big news.)

"No, but we might need assistance if he's there, so please stand by," the bunny-cop had answered quickly. She had caught the OIC's gung-ho inflection and the last thing they needed was for a whole platoon of cop cars to come swooping down Creekside Road, lights and sirens blazing; Craig and Amanda would be gone before they got within a hundred yards of his uncle's place.

"So have you spotted the guest-cottage yet?" Judy asked, glancing sideways for half a second.

"Yeah-h-h, I think so," Nick answered her, frowning shortly at the on-board computer screen. "It just barely shows up as a shadow, but that's right where Jake Guilford said it would be." He let out a short growl, "Wish we could get a side view." Goggle-Earth only showed this part of the Meadowlands from an overhead angle.

"What about the houses on either side?" Judy glanced his way a second time.

"Pretty much the same arrangement as Jake's," he said, "House, with a hangar out back; same thing with the whole neighborhood in fact. Hmmm, looks like they all share some kind of communal runway."

"Mmm," the corners of Judy's mouth turned downwards. "I sure hope the wind's not blowing in from that direction, Nick. Even if the kid can't catch your scent, imagine trying to get across THERE without being spotted,"

He turned to her with a wry grin.

"If you'll pardon the expression Carrots, we'll cross that runway when we get to it." (Judy groaned but couldn't help smiling.) "Anyway there's one good thing about this set up, if Jake Guilford has a hangar with a windsock, at least a couple of his neighbors will have one too; we'll be able to tell which way the wind is blowing without needing to get too close."
"Yeah, that's one piece of good news," Judy conceded, "All right, Meadowlands tunnel, coming up."

Nick put the computer on 'sleep' mode; there was be no Wi-Fi inside the tunnel and he didn't want to lose his place.

Exiting the viaduct was like entering another world; one minute everything was stark, white, and vertical, and in the next instant, it was lush, green, and rolling. Looking out at the vista before him, Nick reluctantly had to admit something; Judy was right, this place really did have a Bunnyburrow vibe to it, and why hadn't he noticed it before?

"Because you just came back from a weekend in the Burrow", Nick's inner voice reminded him, "DUH!"

That prompted the fox to fetch a quick glance at his partner. Yes, he had, and it had been one of the most meaningful weekends he'd ever spent.

"And to think I tried to get OUT of it." Nick reminded himself with a mental slap upside the head. (When he had nearly missed their train to Bunnyburrow, it hadn't been entirely by accident.)

A few minutes later, they came to an intersection and turned left. Almost immediately, Nick felt his ears coming to attention and his heart beginning to pick up speed.

"Hey Carrots, you know where we are?"

She turned to him with a grin and he thought he saw her winking behind the wraparound shades she was wearing.

"I was wondering when you'd notice, Nick. Yep, should be another mile or so ahead of us."

They were coming up on the bridge, the place where two years previously, he and Judy had reconciled, after she'd come back to Zootopia, looking for his help.

"The bravest thing she ever did,' who said that again?" Nick Wilde wondered silently. Had it been her father, her mother; had the fox himself said it? He couldn't remember now. Well whoever it was, truer words had never been spoken, and so what could he have done but forgive Judy and agree to help…?"

"Sweet Cheez n' crackers, when did that happen?"

Jolted from his reverie, Nick found himself looking through the windshield at what should have been a familiar sight, the rooftops of the old, dilapidated factory buildings, just behind the little, stone bridge…only now they weren't so old or so decrepit; both structures had been refurbished and repainted in a gleaming, nearly translucent white.

And that wasn't the only change; the larger building, the one with the rounded roof no longer resembled a mouth with half its teeth missing. No, the broken windows hadn't been replaced; there simply were no windows—in either structure that he could see. The smokestack behind the smaller building had been replaced by what looked like a relay tower, and the cranes that had once graced the skyline above the old factory appeared to be absent altogether.

A half mile down the road was where the scenery really changed, they came upon a massive, chain-link fence, high enough to keep a giraffe from peering over the top. It was topped by three rolls of razor-wire and fitted with a layer of titanium mesh, so fine that a pygmy shrew couldn't have squeezed their way through it. Planted behind the fence-line was a solid row of tall plants,
each one nearly as high as the fence itself. Odd looking specimens, they resembled rough-cut bamboo stalks with leaves like maple trees; all of them crowned with flat, spreading copes of tiny, white flowers. It was a singularly ugly-looking piece of horticulture and Nick was just about to ask Judy about it when he got his answer the hard way. Without warning her foot jammed down on the brake pedal and he found himself heaving violently forward, missing the dashboard thanks only to his seatbelt, and even then by scant centimeters.

"Carrots, what the heck?" he started to say after pulling himself back up again, but then he noticed that her sunglasses were gone and that she was staring slack-jawed through the windshield with a furiously twitching nose.

"Carrots, what…?" he said again, and she pointed at the fence-line with a quivering finger.

"Oh my God, Nick; that's Heracleum Mantegazzianum!"

"Hera-WHAT?" He was staring in complete confusion.

"Giant Hogweed," Judy translated and then peered through the glass again, this time with a horrified expression. "It's some seriously nasty stuff; makes poison ivy look like blueberries. Touch it and you'll get blisters on your paws as big as golf balls—and if the sap gets on your skin…ewwww, you'll end up with scars." She pointed to the base of one of the stalks. "Wherever Hogweed grows, it leaches that same blistering agent into the soil to get rid of any competing plants, so don't even think about trying to burrow under it." Her nose stopped twitching and wrinkled in disgust. "Puh, what's it DOING here?"

"Well, obviously, whoever owns that fence doesn't like trespassers," the red fox offered, trying to be diplomatic…though for the life of him, he couldn't say why. He lifted an ear, "But how do you know about it, Judy?" It was a stupid question given her background, but he needed something to relieve the tension.

Her face became a mask of flint.

"I ought to know about Hogweed Nick, would you believe it's a member of the carrot family?" She pointed through the windshield a second time, "Yep, that's right… and it's also every farmer in the Burrow's worst nightmare. If that stuff gets loose in one of your fields, it'll crowd out the carrots faster than you can get rid of it; only thing you can do is burn everything, plow it under, and wait until next season…and then pray that it doesn't come back again. It's one tough weed, I'm telling you."

"Well, okay," Nick conceded, nodding, "but right now that's not our concern." He gestured with a paw in the direction of the road, "Come on let's move."

"Yes, let's," Judy agreed, a little flustered for having allowed herself to be distracted so easily. She moved her foot from the brake to the gas pedal and the cruiser rolled smoothly onwards.

As Nick and Judy continued on their way, one thing became abundantly clear, the bridge where she had finally caught up with her once-and-future partner was going to be somewhere on the other side of that fence and phalanx of Giant Hogweed. The thought of it filled the bunny-cop with a slow sadness. That place, that special place where their lives had reconnected and changed forever was now off limits to them both.

"We should have come back here for a visit," she told herself, "we should have come back at least once."
And then she forgot about it and pushed on.

About two hundred yards further down the road, she and Nick got at least a partial answer to their question—when they came to a massive, steel gate set into the fence-line, On one side was a concrete guard-post that might have been transplanted from a cruise-missile base. On the other was a white-on-burgundy sign that read simply,

L P N
PHARMACEUTICALS
Meadowlands Campus

Beside it was a series of 'No Trespassing' signs, printed in varying languages.

"Well, at least that explains all the security," Nick Wilde offered, poking a thumb over his shoulder as the entrance gate disappeared in their wake. No industry was more plagued by corporate espionage than big pharma, even he knew that much.

Behind the wheel, Judy Hopps only sniffed and touched up on the accelerator. That wasn't why they were here.

Creekside Drive turned out to be a loop road, exiting the main drag at one point and hooking with it again, later on. All of the houses were widely spaced, but nothing like Bunnyburrow…a place where you might leave home and drive fifteen minutes before encountering another residence.

The good news was, just as Nick had predicted, all of the homes had hangars out back, and of these about half were sporting windsocks on the roof. One or two of the houses even had them mounted on poles out front. Determining which way the wind was blowing was going to be a cakewalk.

The bad news was that there wasn't any wind; every sock within 100 yards was hanging limply on its pole and looking practically forlorn. In these conditions, it would be impossible for Nick to get close enough to the guest cottage to catch Craig or Amanda's scent, not without his scent being detected by THEM.

And if the wind decided to pick up in the wrong direction while he was making his reconnaissance, then as Judy's father would say, that'd be all she wrote.

He spotted a school-bus turnout, just up ahead on the right.

"Carrots, can you pull in there for second? I need to call dispatch and see if we can get a weather report for this place. Maybe the wind will pick up later on." It was weak but all he could think of at the moment.

"Right," she answered, almost slewing the police cruiser into the space.

Judy wasn't still miffed about the fence-line and the Hogweed; Nick knew much if nothing else. No, she was torqued about the lack of any air movement, (as was he.) After all of their effort, after all of her insight and shrewd deductions, they were that close to taking down their suspect…and unable to proceed any further, thank you Mother Nature! Ahhhh, wasn't that just the life of a police officer?

"I wouldn't bother with dispatch," Judy told him, pointing at the computer screen, "Go to instead, and click on the 'weather' button; they're a lot more accurate than the ZPD weather station. Like most scions of a farm family Judy Hopps was climate-conscious by nature.
She had to walk Nick through the website, but they swiftly determined that a weak low pressure system was building to the southeast; the wind might kick up in an hour or two, but in their present position, they'd be upwind of Jake Guilford's place when the blow began. They couldn't stay here; they'd either have to drive past the house and then turn around, or else turn around now and come in by way of Creekside road's other entrance.

"How far away are we from the Guilford house?" Judy asked, and Nick switched screen over to 'map' function.

"Mmm, maybe 400 yards, give or take," he said.

Judy leaned over and scrutinized the map for a second. "Nearest neighbor on the other side is about 20 yards away," she said, "Is that close enough for Craig to be able to smell us?"

"No," Nick answered and then added a caveat, "IF that weather report is accurate Carrots; one puff of breeze blowing the wrong way and he'll know we're around in a heartbeat."

For a long moment, silence reigned inside the cruiser, broken only by the intermittent thumping of Judy's foot and the drumming of her fingers on the steering wheel. Finally, she let out a short breath.

"I'm willing to take that chance, Nick. Better that kid smells us coming than we miss him altogether; I've got a feeling we're fighting the clock here."

"Right." Nick actually wasn't sure about that, but at this point he wasn't going to argue.

Judy eased the cruiser out of the space and swung it around in a U-turn; she was bold, but she wasn't reckless, she wouldn't risk driving past the place where Craig and Amanda were holed up. She would come in unseen from the opposite direction.

It turned out to be a fortuitous decision on her part. About another half mile down the road, they came upon a mid-size grocery-general store. Without a second's hesitation, Judy turned and swung into the gravel parking lot. No words were spoken between her and Nick, nor were they necessary; the store was of earth-and-timber construction and half sunken in the earth. It told them both that the place belonged to another bunny.

Wel-l-l-l...not quite. The animal behind the counter turned out to be not a rabbit but a fairly close relative, a Ladakh Pika. When they showed him the picture of Craig Guilford, he immediately brushed it with his fingertips.

"Yes, I remember him; he was in here yesterday afternoon, together with a young fox vixen."

Nick looked at Judy and then back at the pika. Whatever shreds of doubt he might still have been harboring, they had just become chaff in the wind.

But were Craig and his girlfriend still at his uncle's house? That was the million-dollar question.

"You're sure that this is the coyote sir?" Nick asked. The reply he got was almost brusque in its certainty.

"Positive," the pika said, returning the photograph, "I kept a close eye on that one while he was in here; he couldn't stop looking at the security cameras." He pointed upwards at the ceiling. "I had him for a possible thief because of that, but no, he paid for everything and then left."

Nick and Judy knew, of course, why the young coyote hadn't been able to keep his eyes off the
security cams, even if he hadn't been planning to steal anything. They would get to that in a minute, but right now the bunny-cop asked, "Did either one of them say anything to you?"

"Only 'thank you' when I gave the boy his change," the pika shrugged.

"Do you remember what he bought?" it was Nick this time.

"Let me see…" the pika answered, consulting his cash register. (Luckily for the two ZPD officers, it was a nearly new electronic job.) After studying it for a second, he entered a quick set of instructions and the machine ejected a copy of the young coyote's receipt.

"Hmmm," Judy read aloud for the benefit of her partner, "according to this, he bought two six packs of soda, two sandwiches, a couple of frozen dinners, two breakfast burritos, a flashlight, a bag of chips," she frowned over the receipt for a second with her nose twitching, "and a pair of… safety goggles?"

"What the heck did he want those for?" Nick Wilde asked, craning forward with his ears working. Like her, he had caught the significance of the purchase, but hadn't been able to fathom its meaning.

"Beats me," Judy shrugged in frustration.

"Well, I cannot say for certain either, but I believe he wanted them for the girl, rather than for himself," the proprietor said, spreading his paws on the counter, "There were in her size, not his, that I know."

Judy nodded but said nothing. That was helpful but it still didn't answer the question, what HAD they wanted with a pair of safety goggles?

Nick Wilde, meanwhile, was doing a few quick, mental calculations.

"If they came in yesterday afternoon, that would have been just enough food to last them through this afternoon," he scratched his chin and then looked at Judy, "I think you're right, Carrots, the clock IS winding down on that kid. If he's still at his uncle's place, it won't be for very much longer."

"Mmmmm, maybe," Judy said, nose twitching as she turned to speak to the pika again. "Did Craig and Amanda look like they could have carried anything more when they left, or were their arms pretty much full already?"

He responded with a lopsided grin.

"Honestly, I am surprised they were able to carry all they had, as it was," he said, and then changing gears, he asked her, "Would you like to see the security camera disc now?" Whether he was trying to be helpful or simply wanted to get this over with, Judy couldn't tell.

The security footage was both grainy and indistinct but Nick recognized the two young fugitives almost at once. Craig Guilford turned out to be especially easy to make; at one point, he made the silly mistake of looking directly into the camera lens.

"Whoa, that kid really IS a little dimbulb," Nick observed, with an expulsion of air between his teeth. He would have expected something like that from Amanda but not from her boyfriend; back in his wilder days, the red fox would NEVER have made such an amateurish mistake.

Judy Hopps could not have agreed with him more.
"I know, right? Makes you wonder how he got this far without getting caught." She looked at the pika again. "Sir, do you happen to know the name of whoever lives in the house on the right side of Mr. Guilford's place?"

"Better than that, I have their phone number," he answered, sliding a drawer open beneath the counter.

After copying the number on her cell, Judy reached over the countertop and offered a paw. "Thank you very much for your assistance Mr…" She stopped, with her nose twitching. "You know, I never did get your name."

"It's Sudhir, Vijay Sudhir," the pika answered, taking it, "And I am happy to be of assistance."

He concluded with a smile and a short bow.

Nick and Judy each left the store with cups of coffee in their paws. The price had been enough to make a Snarlbuck's Barista blush, but after all the help the proprietor been given them, it had only seemed like the right thing to do.

As soon as she settled in behind the wheel, Judy dialed the number she'd been given. For once, she got a prompt answer, and this time it wasn't voice mail.

"Hello?" the voice was mid-to-high range, bespeaking a smaller mammal, and suffused with a southwestern twang.

"Hello, Mr…" Judy racked her brain for a second, "Mr. Pye, this is Officer Judy Hopps of the ZPD. Sir, I'm calling in regard to your neighbor, Mr. Jake Guilford."

"Oh dear lord," Mr. Pye's voice had turned agitated, "Jake's not in any trouble over that business down in Bunnyburrow, I hope."

"Oh no sir, not at all," Judy moved swiftly to reassure him, "But we have reason to believe his nephew, Craig Guilford, is hiding out on his property. He was the spotter for the attack on the Carrot Days Festival and we have him on tape, purchasing supplies from the Meadowmart store up the road from you, yesterday afternoon." It was something she had learned early on in her career; if you wanted a citizen's co-operation, hit them with the hard evidence first.

"I see," the animal on the other end sounded relieved and cautious at the same time. "How can I help?"

Judy looked out the window before answering. The grass was moving now and the breeze seemed to be blowing in the right direction. She decided to risk it.

"We need to confirm that he's still on the premises before we call for back-up—and it looks like the best way to get close without being seen or scented is by way of your property…"

"Oh sure, certainly," the voice answered at once, "I know Jake'd do the same for me; c'mon over."

"Ask him if there's somewhere close by where we can park the car out of sight." Nick Wilde said from beside her. That had been their biggest glitch of the morning; the ZPD motor-pool had been fresh out of 'plain-wrapper' cars small enough to accommodate them, and they'd had to settle for a cruiser with a light-bar on the roof. One look at that rig sitting next door, and even a coyote of Craig Guilford's limited brain-power would know that his cover was blown.

"I heard," Pye answered, "And yes there is, I'll just go open up the garage for you and have mother
keep an eye on next door."

"All right, we'll be there in a minute." Judy told him

It was hard to miss the Pye residence, a faux adobe split-level that would have looked perfectly natural in the Canyonlands district; here in the Meadowlands, it stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb, a testament to the eccentricity of its owner, as Nick and Judy were about to find out for themselves.

Charlie Pye turned out to be a spotted skunk with grizzled ears and a slight stoop. He must have been 70 if he was a day, but was remarkably spry for his age. After guiding Nick and Judy's cruiser into the garage, he led the way into the house as if he were leading a bayonet charge. (Nick's excuse for not being able to keep up with him was that he was weighted down by the cases he was carrying.)

Entering the kitchen, they found Mrs. Pye waiting for them, a plump matron who reminded Judy a little of her mom.

It took her all of three seconds to get her henpeck on.

"There Charlie, didn't I TELL you that something next door didn't feel right? Did I not say it?" Her arms were folded complacently across her chest.

"Yes Mother, you said so," Charlie Pye answered her, with the weary patience of someone who has endured a thousand such diatribes already.

The obvious question for Nick and Judy to have asked right then would have been, then why hadn't the Pyes already called the police…except they knew the answer; nobody dials the law on just a hunch, (nobody except cranks, busybodies, and animals hoping to claim a juicy reward.)

Instead Judy asked them, "Did either of you notice anything odd yesterday or this morning."

"Mmm, we were away most of yesterday," Mr. Pye admitted, "Went to the movies, and then did some shopping. I don't frankly care much for driving all the way to Sahara Central, but…"

"Oh Charlie, they don't want to hear about THAT," his wife interceded. Now she really sounded like Judy's mother, "And it's Savanna Central, not Sahara Central."

"Yes, Mother." The piebald skunk repeated with that same infinite patience, and then he squinted curiously at Nick. "Lookin' for something out there, Off'cer Wilde?" The fox was peering through the kitchen window with his head tilted sideways.

"Just checking out your windsock," Nick answered, pointing to the roof of the hangar out back. (The Pyes had one too.) "I'm going to need a little more wind than that before I try to see if I can catch those kids' scent."

Charlie squinted for a second and then answered with a knowing nodding, "Mmm, yup." His species also had a pretty decent sense of smell.

"In the meantime, there's something else we can do," Judy said, hefting the two cases Nick had brought from the cruiser. "May we use your kitchen table, sir…ma'am?"

"Yes, of course," Mrs. Pye answered, gesturing towards it with a black furred paw.

The purpose of the first case was obvious; it was the police laptop Judy had used earlier. When she
popped the lid on the second one, it opened to reveal a six-bladed drone, fitted with a Hi-Def camera.

The sight of it was like a jolt of caffeine for Charlie Pye.

"Sayyyyy now," he said, pointing through the window with an eager finger, "if'n you really want to get a good look at Jake's guest cottage, I got myself a helicopter in the hangar out yonder."

Nick and Judy regarded each other for a second. Some animals lived by the code of a jury-rigged Omerta; you never talk to the cops, ever, not even if there isn't any risk and it runs against your own best interest. At the opposite end of the spectrum were the police groupies, the ones who wore dark blue shirts and mirrored sunglasses on ride-alongs, and dreamed of rushing in to save the day when a bust went wrong. At this point, it was pretty obvious to which of those cliques this spotted skunk belonged. Luckily for the fox and bunny-cop, Pye's suggestion brought an immediate scowl to the face of his wife.

Judy quickly cemented it by pointing in the direction of the house next door, "Sorry sir, we can't let you take the risk; while we're pretty certain that the Guilford boy isn't armed, we do know that he's capable of violence."

She went on to give a quick description of the fruit-stand firebombing that Craig and his girlfriend had pulled; it brought Mrs. Pye's foot down, once and for all. "Charles Edward Pye, you are NOT going out there in that...helicopter? Helicopter! It's an ultralight auto-gyro. And you haven't flown it in six months; of all the hare-brain...I-I mean cockamamie ideas!"

She coughed and looked rapidly away from Judy, who barely suppressed a giggle. "Yes, Mother," her husband replied.

There was a hedgerow separating the two properties, but Nick and Judy chose to launch the drone from behind a tool shed, just to play it safe.

"Smell anything yet?" Judy asked as they set the tiny aircraft in place. The fox raised his muzzle for a second, but then lowered it and shook his head. "Not yet, but at least they can't smell US either." He nodded up at the windsock on the hangar roof. It was barely fluttering, but pointing away from the Guilford residence.

Back at the kitchen table, Judy took the controls while Nick monitored the camera on the laptop screen. There was always the chance that Craig or his girlfriend might spot the interloper but the odds were strongly against it. The drone's ducted blades ran almost silently and it was capable of taking high-res photographs from a height that would render it as no more than a speck in the sky.

"Okay," she said, "3...2...1..."

She thumbed a switch on the control console and the little drone shot up vertically with barely a sound.

Jake Guilford's spread was a large property for an animal living by himself, but Judy already knew why the coyote had kept it; he'd inherited it from his father. She understood; the Hopps Farm had been in her family for going on five generations now.

They began with a slow circuit around the guest cottage, which even from this angle appeared as nothing more than a low mound of earth. If it hadn't been for the entrance stairs, skylight, and half
angled chimney-pipe, you might almost have mistaken it for a burial mound.

"Funny looking guest house," Nick Wilde observed, keeping his eyes on the screen.

"Actually it's more of a storm shelter," Charlie Pye said from behind the fox, "Most of the older places round here have 'em. Leftovers from the big blow of...when was that again?"

"Hush Charlie, and let them work."

"Yes, Mother."

"Nick, I'm going to zoom in on the skylight," Judy said, barely suppressing another snicker. "Tell me what you see."

On the screen, the image locked in place for a second and then expanded rapidly.

"Yep, they've got the curtains drawn," the red fox noted without surprise, "just like those goofy kids to up and blind themselves."

Judy pulled back the camera and nodded in concurrence. "Great place to hole up, huh? You can't see anything outside, and there's only one way in or out of there."

That prompted Charlie Pye to clear his throat.

"Welllll, not quite; there's a tunnel between there and Jake's hangar..."

"Charlie, what did I just say?"

"Yes, Mother."

"We're aware of that Mr. Pye." Judy explained, still focusing on the remote, "But it won't be an option for those kids; if they try to sneak out through the hangar-tunnel, they'll end up tripping the alarm system." Even as she said it, a frown creased her features. Something...those safety goggles Craig had bought. What the heck? Why had that popped into her head all of a sudden?"

For the next few minutes the Pye's kitchen remained steeped in silence. But then the spotted skunk abruptly cleared his throat again.

"'Scuse me..."

"Charlie...!"

But this time, he ignored his wife.

"See those two trash-cans, out front of the hangar there?" he pointed, "One's full and the other's about half...and that's not like Jake Guilford at all; he'd never up and leave on a flight without emptying them first."

Nick and Judy looked at each other while Mary Pye promptly silenced herself. A zoom of the camera quickly confirmed that the spotted skunk's observation was correct.

"All right, thank you, Mr. Pye." Judy said, offering him an appreciative nod. Now he was being helpful.

Two more circuits of the 'guest bunker' (as Nick Wilde was calling it now) revealed neither movement nor any further clues. However something else of significance came quickly to the red
fox's attention.

"It looks like the wind's picking up out there Carrots," he said, indicating the windsock on top of Jake Guilford's hangar. "I think I can get a scent on those kids without them spotting me now."

'I...think,' Judy chewed on her partner's words for a moment and then decided to roll the dice.

Bringing home the drone, she parked it and shut it down, while Nick switched the laptop screen over to his body-cam display. At the same time, he slipped on a headset, flicking the mike with a fingertip to test it. A small 'bipping' sound came over the computer speakers and he got up and headed for the door.

As soon as Nick was outside, he dropped to all fours and scurried in the direction of the hedge. Although Judy couldn't see, she knew that he was making for the point closest to the guest bunker. For the next few seconds, the fox held close to the ground, until he reached the hedgerow. And then got up, quickly and quietly, and raised his muzzle, sampling the air once more.

Judy heard him sniffing deeply, once, twice...a third time. And then he dropped back to a four point position and scooted around to the back of the tool shed, rising swiftly to his feet again as soon as he was safely concealed behind it.

And then finally, she heard him speak.

"Carrots, call for back-up."

It was all she needed to hear.

Chapter End Notes

Sooo, anybody catch the Genesis reference? (The band, not the game console, Peter Gabriel era.)
"Dangit, where the hack ARE they? Chief Bogo would have had back-up here 30 minutes ago!"

Judy began to thump her foot and for once Nick didn't tell her to cool it; he felt almost exactly the same way. While his partner was certainly exaggerating, (she had called for assistance exactly 35 minutes ago,) there was no denying that she was essentially correct. Maybe Precinct One wouldn't have had more officers here within 5…but they certainly would have had them here by now.

In the meantime, there had been no sign of activity from the property next door; the place was as dead as the proverbial doornail. Just the same, Judy Hopps had not the slightest doubt in her mind. Craig Guilford and his girlfriend Amanda were still holed up in that bunker on the other side of the hedge.

And yet…and yet…

*Why* were they still in there? Why had they not come out yet? According to Nick Wilde's calculations—with which she agreed wholeheartedly—the young coyote and vixen should have run out of provisions hours ago. Why hadn't they left on a supply run, at least? What were they waiting for?

She sipped at the coffee Mary Pye had brought (much better than the brew from the store up the road,) and furrowed her brow, as if trying to make the local cops move faster through sheer force of will. Okay, yes...Meadowland was the most sprawling of all the Zootopia ecosystems, and yes, it had even fewer roads per square mile than Sahara Square. But dangit, so did Bunnyburrow, and the Burrow County Sheriff's Office would have back-up here by now, too.
"Okay, the heck with this," Judy told herself, setting her cup down firmly on the table and trying to come to a decision. She'd get nowhere fast by just sitting here and fuming. For a moment, she considered calling Precinct One and seeing if Chief Bogo could 'persuade' the Meadowlands officers to get a move on. That idea was good for about three seconds before she dropped it. Even if it worked, there'd be a price to pay later on. Nobody enjoys having a co-worker go over their head and police officers like it less than most.

And anyway what was the point? The only way in or out of that guest bunker was either A, by setting off the hangar alarm or B, by way of the front door—and she and her partner could keep that covered without even leaving the Pye's kitchen; the wind outside had kicked up to a stiff breeze in the last half hour. If either of the two young fugitives so much as opened the door to their hidey-hole a crack, Nick's nose would alert him in an instant.

No, galling as it was, their best course of action right now was just to sit tight and wait for reinforcements, Even if Craig and Amanda did try to make a run for it, Judy was certain that she and Nick could keep them boxed in until the cavalry showed up.

"Need a refill there?" Mr. Pye asked, nodding at Judy's nearly empty coffee-mug.

"No thanks, I'm good," she answered covering it with her paw. It really was excellent coffee, but the last thing she wanted right now was the crying need for a pee-break.

Since making the call to Meadowlands precinct, she and Nick had gotten to know a little bit about their hosts. Unlike his neighbor to the left, Charlie Pye was strictly a pleasure pilot. He hailed originally from Bulbuquerque Zoo Mexico, where he'd run a pest-control business for thirty years, eventually selling out and retiring to the Meadowlands. It was a subject that Judy Hopps found tedious but not distracting; rather like the background music in a shopping mall. And so she was content to let the spotted skunk drone on. (Besides, Nick seemed to find his reminiscences at least mildly interesting.)

At the moment, he was saying, "Mind you, I can still handle that helicopter, but…"

"Autogyro," his wife corrected, looking up from her Zoodoku puzzle.

"Helicopter," Charlie repeated, overruling her for the second time that morning, "If that's how the fool government's going to treat my aircraft, then by thunder, that's what I'll call it, too."

"Yes, dear," his wife answered wearily, in yet another quirky role reversal.

"Wait, what?" Nick's ears were working and his head was tilted, "Charlie, what are you talking about?"

It was Mrs. Pye who answered him

"Oh the ZAA passed a rule this year, said from now on, you need to have a rotary-wing license if you want to fly an autogyro. There was some kind of accident, last summer I think, and everyone just went crazy… 'Pass a law, that'll fix it.' You know how these things go."

"Ummm, do you know what an autogyro is, Officer Wilde?" her husband queried. The uncertain tone of his voice suggested that most animals had no idea of what that was, at least not the ones he'd met.

Nick Wilde, however, was not part of that group.

"Yes, it's like an airplane with helicopter blades, except the blades aren't powered; it's the air
"Not quite but close enough." The spotted skunk nodded and raised his coffee mug in salutation. The logo on the side read, 'ExTerminator Pest Control' and beneath that, the slogan, 'They WON'T Be Back.' He took a sip, adding, "Anyways, I'm hanged if I'm going to plunk down another $175.00 for a rotary-wing license and then have to take another exam; not on an aircraft I've been flying for close on six years now without a speck of trouble."

"Hang on, you need a separate license to fly a helicopter and a fixed-wing plane?" In spite of herself, Judy was beginning to take an interest in the subject.

"Heck, that's nothing, Officer Hopps," Charlie told her. He set down his cup and started ticking off points on his fingers. You need to have different licenses to fly a single engine plane, a twin engine plane, a water plane…" He waved a paw at the property next door, "Heck, 'ol Jake there's a commercial airline pilot…and he still had to spring for another license to fly that old Stearmink biplane of his…"

"Wait, stop!" Judy was holding up her paws in a T-formation and her ears were on full alert. That name, it was vaguely…sweet cheez n' crackers, of course!

"A Stearmink, is that an open cockpit plane?" Her voice was airy and breathless, as if she'd just completed a three-mile run.

"Uh, yeah that's right," Charlie Pye replied, thoroughly confused by the question. So was Nick Wilde.

"Carrots, what the heck has that got to do with…?"

She wheeled in her chair to face him

"The goggles Nick, the safety goggles. THAT'S what Craig wanted them for."

Now her partner got it…almost.

"But…he only bought one pair of…"

"For Amanda, Nick, remember? He's probably got his own goggles that he brought from home…fine for him, but too big for her."

The red fox still wasn't convinced.

"But…he can't, he's only what, sixteen…seventeen at most."

Judy was convinced, "That's old enough for pilot's license, Nick." she said, and then looked across the table for support. "Am I right, Mr. Pye?"

"Yes that's right," the old skunk answered, clutching his coffee mug in what nearly amounted to a death grip. He too had caught on to her reasoning.

"That kid comes from a family of fliers, remember?" Judy was speaking to Nick again, "And you know as well as I do that he's just desperate enough—and dumb enough—to try it."

It was the final clincher; before she had even finished talking the fox already had his cell-phone out.
"Right Carrots, you call Minks while I get hold of the Meadowlands Precinct."

"Got it," she said, needing no explanation. The biggest hitch in Craig Guilford's escape plan was that the only way inside his uncle's airplane hangar was by tripping the alarm system. Under the present circumstances, he probably considered it a chance worth taking; with a little luck, by the time John Law arrived, he and Amanda would be long gone.

"Except guess what kid? We're already here!" Judy sniffed, and pulled out her cell. "Mr. Pye, do you have Mink's number?" (He had the same signs out in front of his home as his neighbor.)

"Oh, yes," the spotted skunk nodded, taking out his wallet, "Got it right…..errr mother I don't have my reading glasses, can you…?"

His words were cut off as Nick went shooting out of his chair like a jumping jack.

"What! Why the heck didn't you notify us?" He listened for a moment with a pained expression, and then his eyes rolled upwards in a look of, 'Give me strength!'

"All right, tell them to hurry; those kids may make a run for it at any second. Yes…yes, bye."

He disconnected and stowed the cell.

"Forget the call to Minks' Carrots; we've got to move …now! Jake's Guilford's hangar alarm went off five minutes ago."

Judy's ears slammed backwards against her neck, "What?! Why didn't they…? Never mind, you're right, let's go!"

She bolted for the kitchen door with the red fox right behind her.

"Stay here and lock the door behind us," Nick called over his shoulder as he and his partner exited into the breeze and sunlight.

"And keep out of sight," Judy added, and then the two of them were running full tilt for the property line.

No time to be stealthy, the two of them scrambled straight for the hedgerow, keeping low, on all fours and diving into prone positions when they reached it. One thing in their favor was that the hedge was sky-high and nearly solid as a wall, but with just enough space underneath for a fox wriggle to through—which meant there was more than enough for a bunny.

Easing herself as far through the greenery as she dared, Judy pulled out a pair of binoculars and trained them on the door of Jake Guilford's hangar.

"So why the heck didn't Meadowlands call us right away they got the word from Minks?" she asked, keeping her eyes locked onto the hangar door as she rolled the focus knob back and forth.

Nick wasn't quite able to answer her immediately; the passage under hedge was a tighter fit for him than it was for her. It took him several extra seconds to worm his way into position, and several more to brush the twigs and debris from his face.

And then he rolled his green eyes once again.

"Whoever I talked to at the Meadowlands Precinct said they were just getting ready to notify us when I called; I don't believe it, but that's what they said."
Judy shook her head and made a sound that would have been more appropriate to a member of her partner's species than her own. She had heard many times—in the Precinct One commissary and elsewhere—that Meadowlands Station was the ZPD scrap-heap, a dumping ground for slackers and ne'er-do-wells. She had never given the rumor much credence; it was only gossip after all, but now she was beginning to revise that opinion.

"All right, you watch the front, while I try and circle around…" Her ears abruptly shot skywards. (As much has was possible in a tunnel of foliage) "Wait, you hear that?"

Nick cocked his head, then shook it, "Sorry Carrots, you know my hearing isn't as good as…wait, wait; yes I do—whaa, look there!"

Judy looked, and saw the hangar door slowly beginning to rise, folding upwards like an old-fashioned window blind. And now there came a sound that even the Pyes must have been able to hear; the swirling rumble of a radial engine coming to life. The noise brought Judy's teeth together like a vice.

"Sweet cheez n' crackers Nick, he's going to do it; that dumb coyote-kid's really going to do it!"

"Not just dumb, crazy." The red fox started to say; the next thing he said was, "Carrots WAIT!"

But Judy was already scurrying for the hangar.

There was an ancient tractor parked next to the building, and just behind it a storage-shed of approximately the same vintage. Vaulting over the hood, Judy leaped onto the tractor's spring-seat and jumped down hard, employing it as a makeshift catapult. Though composed of practically nothing but rust, the seat had plenty of oomph left in it and she propelled herself easily onto the roof of the outbuilding. Landing in a bunny-crouch, Judy leaped again, bounding up onto the roof of the hangar and dashing for the front. Down in the hangar below, she could hear the airplane's engine increasing in pitch and tempo. It wouldn't be long now, as soon as the door was all the way open…

Judy put her head down and switched on the afterburners, running, leaping, and bounding for all she was worth. With a little luck—actually, it would take more than a little—the noise of the Stearmink's engine would drown out her footfalls. If not…well, it was a chance she'd just have to take. Better that, than Craig Guilford making it out of the hangar before she could catch up with him. If that happened, there'd be no stopping his escape. As Pop-Pop had told her when she was little, "Rabbits are quick and sloths can climb…but neither one should fly."

Reaching the edge of the hangar, Judy dropped into a hunkering crouch, looking a little like a bunny-gargoyle. Now she could hear not only the roar of the engine, but also the swash of the propeller.

The propeller…

Judy gulped down a cue-ball; she'd have to time this just right, otherwise she'd be rabbit-chops. AND, she was only just now starting to realize, she would have to make the jump backwards; otherwise, when she landed, she'd be facing the wrong way.

No, this was too risky even for her. It was best just to let it go; no one would blame her for the kid getting away. If the Meadowland's cops had shown up when they were supposed to…

She tensed and began to back away from the door …but then she saw movement underneath the edge.
Nick Wilde saw it too, a biplane the color of pomegranate juice, emerging from the hangar and onto the concrete apron. He already had his dart-gun out, but knew it was a hopeless gesture; the prop wash would bat his shot away before it got within ten feet of its target.

And speaking of that target, there he was in the plane's front cockpit—Craig Guilford, in all his felonious glory. And now Nick saw the young coyote turn in his direction, mouth spreading open in a toothy sneer while his thumb went up to his nose. 'Too late Copper…ha! ha!' he seemed to be saying.

Oh yes, it was him all right; even with his face wrapped in flight goggles, Nick could never mistake that punk coyote for anyone else. And seated right behind him in the second cockpit was the young vixen Amanda Hill, huddling deeply into herself and also wearing goggles—only these weren't flying goggles, but safety goggles; not exactly your standard flight gear, but good enough in a pinch.

"Dangit Carrots," the red fox growled to himself. Judy's intuition had served her well yet again. Only...what the foxtrot was she doing up the…?

"Oh my Gaw…No, don't!"

"JUDY, DON'T!" Nick fox-screamed, but his partner had already sprung backwards off the door lip, turning a somersault in mid-air. Nick's heart was in the back of his mouth as he watched her tumbling down and down and down, the prop blades waiting to slice and dice her into so many Judy Hopps cutlets.

And all he could do was watch…and hope.

Judy made the final spin and saw the biplane coming up fast beneath her, already feeling the wash from the propeller in her ears…and thinking to herself, "In heaven's name, what am I doing?"

The original plan had been to land with both feet on Craig Guildford's head and send him on a quick trip to dreamland. Now Judy wondered where she'd gotten that silly idea; even if it worked, then what? She didn't know how to shut down a stupid airplane; what the heck had she been thinking?

Well, none of that mattered anyway because she'd jumped too early; nothing to do now but grit her teeth and brace herself, do or die.

"I really AM a dumb bunny," she told herself, hoping like heck it wouldn't be the LAST thought she ever had.

She landed on the fuselage between the top wing and the propeller, the prop so close it was threatening to strip the fur off the back of her head. Then Judy felt herself starting to slip and snatched frantically at one of the center struts, grabbing it and holding on tight. When she looked up again, she was staring into the face of a bewildered Craig Guilford.

"Stop this plane, NOW!" she shouted, her words barely audible over the noise of the engine.

The young coyote didn't stop the plane. Perhaps he meant to, but in any event, caught completely by surprise he pushed forward on the throttle rather than back. The plane lurched forward and Judy fell sideways, crying out as she flailed with her paws, catching hold of another In a desperate Hail-Mary, Judy hooked her elbow through the strut and swung her feet up hard trying to wrap her legs around it. She made it just as the Stearmink smacked down onto the runway with a teeth-rattling impact, bouncing once, and then coming down again still rolling. Judy's head hit the wing, and her eyes filled with stars, but somehow she managed to hold on to her perch. Craig screamed again and tried to gun the engine—he had runway to spare for another take-off attempt—but the airplane
stubbornly refused to give him more power.

He pounded the dashboard with his fists, and was preparing hit the throttle again when something flew past the Stearmink in a cloud of dust—two things actually, one on either side of the plane. Judy saw flashes of red and blue, heard the shrill, familiar whooping. And then out of the dust-cloud came a pair of ZPD black-and-whites, slewing onto the tarmac and turning sideways in a tire-scrunching drift—coming to a halt directly in front of the Stearmink and completely blocking the runway.

Now Judy did let go of the strut, sliding off the wing into a liquid roll and coming up on one knee, with her trank-dart gun in her paws. She touched the trigger, activating the laser-sight and a red-dot bloomed just beneath Craig Guilford's left ear. Even with the prop wash, she couldn't miss at this range.

"There's nowhere to run, kid!" she shouted, "Shut down the engine and show me your paws; do it…or I swear I'll drop you right now!"

Craig cut power and raised his paws. But in between those moves, he tore off his flight goggles and gave Judy a look that made her feel as if someone was pouring ice-water down her spine.

There was nothing in that face, no fear, no anxiety, no sorrow or remorse, not even hatred or defiance; it reminded her of a line from a song, she couldn't remember which one; 'Now there's a look in your eyes—like black holes in the sky.' That was the way Craig Guilford was looking at her right now, with about as much emotion as a shark eyeing an aquarium visitor. He didn't care what had just happened…no scratch that; this kid didn't care about ANTHING. It was nothing Judy hadn't seen before, but never in someone this young, only in much older criminals, (and also much more hardened.) It made her want to hug herself and shiver. This kid really could have dropped her from a hundred feet up in the air.

She shook it off, keeping him in her sights as she became aware of the figures running towards the aircraft through the swirl of the dust and haze.

"Don't move!" she commanded, waggling her weapon a little to show she meant it.

From the rear cockpit, Amanda Hill let out a wailing fox-scream, "I wanna go home!"

Judy ignored her and spoke in clipped, harsh tones.

"Craig Guilford, you're under arrest, for accessory to felonious assault and accessory to attempted murder…"

"Go smoke a tail-pipe, cutie-pie!"

"I wanna go home!"

This time Judy ignored them both.

"We're going to take you down from the plane now," she told the two young runaways. "After that, one of the officers will read you your rights." She waggled the gun a second time. "And don't try anything stupid Craig; I will dart you."

"And if she doesn't get you, I will," another voice growled, and it only then that Judy became aware of Nick Wilde's presence, right there beside her with his weapon drawn. She felt instantly reassured but the sight of him sent Craig Guilford straight into the ballistic zone.
"That's right, stinkin' traitor-fox, side with the BUNNY!" he snarled, a cauldron of boiling acid. He really was one messed up little 'yote, Judy decided.

"I wanna go home!" Mandy Hill bawled again from cockpit behind his.

While Nick and Judy kept Craig and Amanda covered, the Meadowlands officers hauled them down from the plane, (none too gently in the coyote's case.) Taking no chances, they assigned their two biggest heavyweights to the front cockpit, a buffalo and a panda-bear. At first, Craig offered no resistance…until Amanda wailed, "I wanna go HOME!" for something like the twelfth time in a row. That was all he could stand, and he couldn't stand no more; he began struggling wildly in the arms of his captors, screaming his rage and dismay

"Will you SHUT UP, you whiny little…!"

That was as far as he got before his words were cut off in a choking gurgle.

"Better put them in separated vehicles," Judy heard someone say, and then realized the words had come from her.

She heard someone answer, "Right," and for the first time noticed that she was still on one knee with her dart gun in her paws. She put it away and got up again.

Instantly, Judy's legs began to give way; it was as if all the tendons and ligaments had turned suddenly to rotten rubber bands.

"Please, not in front of the other officers!" She silently begged whoever might be watching over her. It was no use; the heavenly help desk was unoccupied at the moment and Judy Hopps was going down.

Or…no, she wasn't; at that instant, a pair of strong arms caught her and lifted her up again.

"It's all right Carrots, I've got you." She heard, Nick Wilde saying. She wrapped her arms around the fox, clutching him tight. "I've got you." He said again, still holding her.

At that moment, though neither one of them was aware, they were under the scrutiny of three different body-cams; much less could they know that the faces attached to two of them were wearing VERY unpleasant expressions.

Judy almost made it worse when she recovered, nearly going off on the Meadowlands OIC (for his officers' tardy arrival.) Not only had their suspects nearly gotten away, she had almost…

Luckily for her, Nick Wilde saw it coming and moved quickly to block her path.

"Easy Carrots, just take a deep breath," he told her, angling his eyes in the direction of the sloth bear running the show; ('more sloth than bear' he had already heard her grousing.) "Look at his sle-e-e-e-eve, Carrots," he hummed softly. Judy did, and saw that it was decorated with not one, but two stripes. Nick was right, dang him…and at the same time, bless that fox; he had probably just saved her from a write-up for insubordination. Or no, not probably…definitely; that bear was already giving her the stink eye. Had he overheard what she'd said? No, he'd been talking on his radio at the time, so why the hostile gaze all of a sudden?

Never mind, she decided; it was time to get this show back on the road. Craig and Amanda were safely in custody and Meadowlands forensics could handle the crime scene from here.

Judy heard later that after taking the obligatory pictures and dusting for prints, the Meadowlands
officers had enlisted Charlie Pye's help to get Jake Guilford's plane back in the hangar. (They couldn't just leave it blocking the runway.) That was when they'd learned exactly what had gone wrong with his nephew's escape plan.

"Kid made the fuel mix a mite too rich," the spotted skunk told them, "If he hadn't tried for a full throttle take-off with the engine not warmed up, he just might have gotten away with it."

But all of this was in the future, and by then Judy would have bigger problems than Craig Guilford…much bigger.

They went in three cars, the cruiser with Craig on board in the lead, the SUV carrying his girlfriend following, and Nick and Judy bringing up the rear. (This time, the fox was driving.)

As far as Judy Hopps was concerned, she and her partner had earned the right not to have to put up with any more of Craig Guilford's snarking—or his girlfriend's blubbering. The Meadowlands cops had come late to the party; let them deal with it. (She was still ticked off about it, even now.)

Midway to their destination, a call came in from Chief Bogo. Change of plans; they were to bring the two young suspects directly to Precinct One. Judy could tell by the groans coming over the radio that officers in the other cars were none too happy with this turn of events. Tough carrots, they could take it up with the Chief if they didn't like it; it certainly wasn't her fault.

(Had Judy stopped to think about it, she might have considered that perhaps the Meadowlands cops wouldn't see it that way. Chief Bogo might be the one responsible for this, but he was also unassailable; she wasn't.)

They had just turned onto the main road when, without warning, Nick Wilde spoke up from behind the wheel.

"Want to talk about it, Carrots?" he asked, still looking straight ahead

Judy's ears went up and her nose began to twitch.

"Nick…?"

"And please don't say 'about what?' He was still focused on the car in front of them

"I wasn't going to," she answered defensively, feeling her ears beginning to change course and turn backwards. "And don't you tell ME that you're surprised by what I did; you knew from the first time we met that I don't know when to quit." Even to her that sounded weak and she looked out the window for a second. Yes it was true; she had always been like this, even when she was little; going after Gideon Grey when he's tried to bully her friends into forking over their tickets…and that other incident at the Burrow County Fair, the following year. Nick didn't know about that one, but he knew about the time she'd abandoned her post as a meter maid to chase down Duke Weaseltton—and you better believe he was aware of her offer to Mrs. Otterton, "I'll find your missing husband."

And that wasn't even mentioning later on, when she'd stolen that subway car right out from under the noses of Doug the sheep and his two flunkies. And how had THAT worked out? In a train-wreck—literally—and they'd walked away with no more evidence than if she'd listened to Nick and run with what they had.

That was Judy Hopps all right, think fast, move fast; it had always been the way she rolled. So what was different this time; what was wrong with this picture?
It took Nick Wilde all of two seconds to put his finger on it, and if his instincts were a bit off the mark, they were close enough for police work, as Chief Bogo might have put it.

"I know what's coming next Carrots." He said, "you're going to ask me how is what you did any different from ME trying to bring down that kid's dad's plane with a fireworks display, am I right?"

Wrong! Judy hadn't been planning to ask him that—but now that he mentioned it…

He held up a pair of fingers; under different circumstance, it might have passed for a 'peace' sign.

"Not quite Carrots; two things. First of all, I didn't try to stop Jerry Guilford by risking my OWN pelt."

Judy's ears went back even further and her nose pinched up into a prune.

"What do you mean, you didn't risk anything? You were right there at ground zero…"

"Along with everybody else at that dance, including you." the fox reminded her, "and that brings me to difference number two: Craig's father was trying to launch an attack on the Carrot Days Festival when we hit him with those fireworks; if we hadn't stopped him, a lot of innocent animals could have gotten hurt…or worse." He corked a thumb backwards, in the direction of Jake Guilford's house, "But Craig? He was only trying to make a getaway when you jumped down onto that airplane. No one else was in danger back there…only you."

Now Judy felt her ears pull back so far it was as if a larger mammal was yanking them. What the HECK? Who did this…this fox think he was, getting all high and mighty with her? If it had been up to him, those two kids would have been miles away from Jake Guilford's place by the time they got there. She turned in her seat, ready to give him a piece of her mind…and saw the look on his face. It was anything but haughty, instead her partner looked…he looked torn.

She immediately felt herself sagging.

"Nick, you're right," she told him, her voice weakening to a near mumble. "It's just…I was so frustrated, I wasn't thinking straight. We were that close…that close to taking down Craig Guilford and he was going to get away." She looked out the window and coughed, "You know, right up until I made that jump, I was actually backing off?"

The red fox didn't answer this, but Judy saw him raising an eyebrow behind his sunglasses; it was enough to make her raise a paw, as if she were about to be sworn in on the witness stand.

"Swear to God, I was, Nick" she said, offering a small shudder before adding, "a-and I still can't believe I did that."

"You sure you're okay?" he asked her, his anguish giving way to concern for just a moment. At that instant Judy thought she knew the real reason he was unhappy with her. It was sweet, but she was going to make him say it just the same.

"I'm fine Nick," she answered, waving a paw, "Really, it's just that….that…"

Ohhh, why were there never the right words around when you needed them? In the end it didn't matter; that was all the prompting her partner needed.

"Judy I know that you're—that we're in a hazardous occupation; I accepted it years ago." He rolled his lips for a second and then continued. "But that doesn't mean I have to accept it when you take a needless risk. Was stopping Craig Guilford from getting away worth DYING for? You tell me."
"No Nick," she admitted her voice now barely audible. "No, it wasn't."

Something in her manner seemed to dampen the fox's fire and he eased up a little.

"It would tear me to pieces if anything ever happened to you, Judy," he said, "but if it was a worthy sacrifice, if you lost your life saving someone else from dying, I'd learn to live with it, eventually, and move on." He sniffed and shook his head, "But if you died pointlessly, if I lost you over a chance you didn't need to take—that's something I think…no, that's something I know I'd never get over."

He sniffed again and looked straight at her for a second.

"But that wasn't what I was asking about, Carrots. In all the time we've been partners, I have never seen you nearly collapse the way you did back there. So…do you want to talk about it?"

Judy didn't…but she knew she had to, for herself as much as for him. She sighed again, but this time she kept her eyes on her partner.

"Nick, if Craig had managed to gotten that plane off the ground all the way, I could never have held on…and he would have let me fall; I saw it in his eyes when he gave himself up." She shuddered again, but this time, she didn't try to fight it. "When that realization hit me, it hit like a runaway semi, scared me to bejeebus and back again."

Nick's foot nearly jammed down on the brake pedal. Now he was staring at her, never mind that he was driving—the heck with traffic!

"Hang on…are you the same bunny that jumped out of an airplane with me a few days ago?"

Judy's mouth crinkled sideways in a wry expression.

"Different story, Nick, I was wearing a parachute and had a skydiving instructor pinned to my back. But if Craig had gotten that plane up, I’d have had nothing to break my…” She trailed off into another shudder. Nick stared again, but this time his expression that was half surprised and half sympathetic.

"You…You really are that spooked, aren't you?"

Judy started to sigh again, but this time she stopped herself.

"Nick, I'm going to tell you something that may seem irrelevant at first. But please bear with me, it's important, okay?"

"Okay," the red fox nodded, returning his attention to the road and touching up on the accelerator. (They had fallen behind the other police cars in the midst of their argument.)

"It happened at the Burrow County Fair," she told him, "the year after I performed that skit at the talent show. They had a hot-air balloon ride and I really wanted to go, but Pop-Pop thought it was too dangerous for kid my age…and no, I didn't, or at least a I didn't plan to. (Nick's face was beginning to stretch into a smirk.) But then I saw my friend Dinah trying to sneak onto it…she was a sloth, so it wasn't hard to spot her…"

"Hang on, you went to school with a sloth, too?" Nick was pushing his sunglasses up the bridge of his nose and looking at her again. Whooa, small world they lived in; he had also been friends with a member of that species when he was younger…well-l-l-l okay, it had been high school not grade school, but still… Hmmm, what was his old buddy Flash up to these days? He'd been dismissed
from the DMV after being busted for street racing; a shame really. After that, Nick had lost track of him.

"Yes, that's right," Judy answered, annoyed at having had her train of discussion shunted to a siding. Nick either didn't notice, or else he didn't care.

"So what'd her father do, cable guy?" he asked, offering wink and a smirk.

Judy's face pinched up as if she'd sunk her teeth into an unripe persimmon.

"No, he ran the Burrow County Records Office. Do you want to hear the rest of this story or not?"

Nick let his shades slip back into place, and lifted his paw in a placating gesture, "Sorry, go ahead."

Judy eyed him for a second and then continued.

"When Dinah climbed into the balloon basket, the porcupine in charge lost control of it—I forget exactly how—and then it started to drift away with her still inside."

"So you jumped on board to try and rescue her, right?" Nick's face remained fixed on the road but there was that smirk, creasing his muzzle again. This time however, Judy wasn't nettled; she grinned right back at him.

"What do you THINK I did? Duh!" she winked, and then her mouth abruptly flat-lined. "Wasn't funny though, I found out pretty quick that I'd bitten off more than I could chew; ever try to steer a hot air balloon? What was even worse was that the darn thing kept on rising and rising and we couldn't make it stop. Finally I decided that the only way to get us down was to swing up top of the balloon and pop it.

Nick nearly hit the brakes again.

"Cripes, and I thought what you did just now was crazy! You're lucky you didn't end up as bunny pancakes, you know that Carrots?"

He immediately steeled himself, but Judy only shrugged.

"I know, I know. What can I say? I was ten years old. But you're right; if there hadn't been a release value on top of that balloon… Anyway, long story short, we landed on top of a tree and Dinah carried me down on her back. She got grounded, and I ended up pulling weeds out in the fields for a week. The balloon operator paid a hefty fine for not properly securing his rig, and never came back to the Burrow again."

"And the point of all this is…?" Nick raised an eyebrow, still not looking at her.

"The point," Judy wasn't looking at him either, "Is that I thought I was okay afterwards. But on the way home, I started shaking so badly my dad had to pull over for a minute…and then I had nightmares for a week. Sometimes I still get them; I wouldn't be surprised if I have another one tonight."

She paused, searching once again for the right words.

"Everyone has their weak spot Nick, and that's mine; no…not flying, or heights, or anything like that, it's being in a place where I have no control. That's why I jumped down onto that airplane like I did; I couldn't just sit there, I had to DO something."
She saw his ears and mouth working for a second, and then the fox seemed to come to a decision.

"Okay Carrots, I understand…sort of. No one knows better than me what it's like to be that age and feel like you have no control." He winced and bit his lip for a second—and Judy felt a sudden wash of guilt; he was revisiting the muzzling incident again, the last place she would have wanted to take him.

"Nothing you just told me will ever leave this police-car," he promised her, raising a quick paw, "and if the Chief chews you out for what happened, I'll back you. Only…"

"What?"

For a very long moment, Nick said nothing more. Then he turned to her again.

"Only you need to get a handle on this issue, Judy. You need to talk it over with someone more qualified than me—because I don't see it getting any better on its own."

Judy felt her ears pull back again.

"What, you mean the ZPD shrink? No! Way!" She could just imagine the whispering if she went down that road. Nick however was unperturbed by her expression; in fact, his own face bordered nearly on a look of compassion.

"There's no shame in talking to a Police Counselor, Carrots. If you really want to know, I've been to see one a couple of times, myself." He lifted his sunglasses again, offering her a short wink, "Maybe you noticed lately that I haven't been as much of a wise-mouth in the bullpen as I used to be? Now you know why."

He turned his attention to his driving again—while Judy pulled herself thoughtfully into her car-seat, nose twitching slowly. Yes-s-s, Nick had learned to curb his enthusiasm of late.

But counseling…her? Mmmm, she didn't know. Maybe she could talk to her mother instead; mom might not be any kind of a psych professional, but she had loads of wisdom and to spare. One thing was for certain, though; Judith Lavern Hopps had better start dealing with that reckless streak of hers, and sooner rather than later.

Because the next time she gave in to that part of herself, it just might be the last time.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note:

Judy's recollections of her experience at the Burrow County Fair are taken from the Zootopia graphic novel, 'Friends to the Rescue.'

Find it by clicking here
"Blast it Hopps, I said I wanted those two young miscreant brought in ASAP; I never said I wanted it 'Hold my carrot juice' fast!"

Under different circumstances, that line would have been good for a laugh, or at least as smile—except that Chief Bogo's expression was anything but amused. "What d'you think, you need to bring in EVERY case you're assigned within 48 hours?" he said, harking back to his deal with Judy over the missing Emmitt Otterton, and also hovering over her like a wasp searching for the proper location to insert its stinger.

"No sir," Judy answered, following up with a small swallow. In the next chair over, Nick Wilde's paw began to move towards hers. But then the fox realized what was happening and wisely pulled it back again. He had promised to back her up if this happened, but she had insisted upon carrying the burden herself.

As either one of them could have predicted, the Chief saw things pretty much the same way as Nick had; luckily for Judy, he also saw something of himself in her.

"You're not the first officer I've had in here that looked before leaping, Hopps," he said, softening his manner just a hair, "Truth be told, I did it meself, once or twice, when I was younger."

He got up from his desk and went to the window, leaning an elbow on the sill and gazing through the blinds. Judy recognized instantly what was happening, he was revisiting his early days with the ZPD, he was back there on the streets once more.

"Happened my third year on the force," he said, turning to face her again. "Should have known better by then, but I didn't. I'd chased a robbery suspect into one of the subway tunnels, and then
the next thing I knew, there were lights coming up behind me." His face twisted in a rueful smile. "It was only then I realized I'd gone too far, I'd got into the narrowest part of the tunnel; enough space for my suspect to dodge the train, he was a wallaby, but not for a Cape buffalo. If there hadn't happened to be an alcove nearby, they'd have been scraping what was left of me off of the walls. Anyways, I got off with a torn shirt and a scuff on one horn and my suspect got away...from me, but not from the ZPD. He was captured on the Lion's Gate station platform an hour later. It was only then that I realized my mistake Hopps, and d'you know what that mistake was?"

Judy wasn't certain if the question was rhetorical, but then Bogo's gaze hardened into bits of volcanic glass, and she knew she'd better say something, pronto.

"Um..." she tried to answer, but once again words failed her.

Bogo sat back down hard in his chair again, with a thump that made the springs creak; his eyes never left her face.

"My mistake was that I'd forgot I was part of a TEAM, Hopps. I was thinkin' 'me', not 'we'; I'd run off after that wallaby without even so much as a word to my partner." Here, he nodded at Nick Wilde. "It wasn't that I didn't want my suspect to escape, it was that I didn't want him to get away from ME...and I spent more than a few nights afterwards thinking on it, I can tell you."

"Yes sir," Judy answered, this time with a little nod. It felt like those were the only two words left in her vocabulary, but what else could she say? She too had abandoned her partner to chase down a suspect and with what could have been disastrous results.

An unhappy thought reared up in her head just then; could she possibly have been motivated by… envy? All those accolades Nick was getting for stopping Jerry Guilford's chemical attack on the Carrot Days Festival; had she been hoping to grab a few for herself by single-pawedly apprehending his errant son? The idea seemed utterly ridiculous…and yet it wouldn't let her go.

Then a snort from the Chief brought her back to the present.

"I said you weren't the first officer I've had in here who acted without thinking, Hopps; well, it also happens I've had to preside at the memorial services for a few such officers," he pounded his fist on the desk and leaned over her again, "And I've NO desire to go through that again. Perhaps you remember what happened to Officer Tiguan?"

Judy swallowed and nodded again, this time hard and slowly. Of course she remembered; every cop on the force knew the story. A year previously Albertina Tiguan, a jaguar out of the Rainforest precinct had gotten into high speed chase with a carjacker, who had then tried to get away by detouring through the Twin Falls tunnel and into the Tundratown District. According to the ZPD procedural rules, Officer Tiguan should have stopped her pursuit as soon as she crossed the border and let the Tundratown cops take over—her vehicle had not been equipped with snow tires.

Instead, she had insisted on continuing the chase, and as result, both vehicles had lost control. The only survivor of the crash had been Officer Tiguan's partner, a hippo named George Kiboko, who had walked away uninjured.

That is...physically. Shortly thereafter, he'd resigned from the force, and according to the ZPD grapevine, he'd been unable to hold a steady job ever since.

"That's two good officers lost Hopps," Bogo seemed to have anticipated her thoughts, "And all because one of them couldn't follow procedure." He leaned over her again, "It's one thing if you want to play chicken with your own life, but you've NO right to take Officer Wilde down with you. Do I make myself clear?"
Okay, that pushed Judy's buttons; Nick had never been at risk, only her. She stood up to raise a protest...but then the fox's words from earlier that day came back to her, *That's something I KNOW I'd never get over.*

She immediately sat herself down again.

"Perfectly clear, sir," she said.

"Right...so what do you think you're going to do about this?" Bogo concluded by folding his arms, the way he always did when coming to the point.

Judy didn't hesitate; an hour ago she might have, but not now.

"I think I need to make an appointment with Dr. Hindly, sir." She said, glancing sideways at her partner for just a second. Dr. Robert Hindly, a red deer was the ZPD's consulting psychologist.

Chief Bogo nodded approvingly, "I'm glad to hear you say that Hopps, the ZPD needs you, not another throw-rug; that was some excellent police work on your part, trackin' down Craig Guilford and his girlfriend so quickly—regardless of what may have happened later on."

"Thanks Chief," Judy answered, glancing over at Nick again. It had never ceased to amaze her the way Bogo could transition from one subject to another so effortlessly ...and wasn't it just like him to tack a caveat onto a compliment?

"So where do we stand with our young Mr. Guilford right now?" he asked, folding his hooves on his desk, "has he said anything of interest yet?"

"Errrr, nothing that's...safe for work if you know what I mean, Chief." Judy answered, offering up a lopsided smile.

"Kid's a regular little cell gangster," Nick Wilde added, "Keeps threatening to bite the face off of anyone who comes near him." He let out a short yip of laughter, "Of course no one CAN get near him where he is right now, so no one's paying too much attention." They had moved the young coyote straight into an isolation cell upon his arrival at the precinct.

"Mmm, hmmm," Bogo nodded, unsurprised, "and what about the girl...Amanda Hill is it...what's her story?"

"Just the opposite," Judy said, "She hasn't stopped talking since we put her in the police car, told us pretty much everything." She allowed herself a snicker, "As a matter of fact, if what she says is true, it's thanks to her that we were able to catch up with her and her boyfriend before they got away.

Bogo's eyebrows went up and his mouth compressed inwards.

"Eh...? How's that, then?"

Judy let Nick explain it.

"She got cold feet about getting in that airplane and Craig had to spend more than an hour and a half trying to talk her into coming with him. If it hadn't been for that, those two kids would have been halfway to Podunk by the time Officer Hopps and I arrived on the scene." (THAT was why Craig and Amanda stayed on in the guest bunker, even after running out of supplies.)

"Ah, I see," the Chief answered, nodding sagely, "Have you notified the parents, then?"
"No, the Burrow County Sheriff's Office asked us to let them make the call," Judy Hopps said. She had no idea why, but had been perfectly willing to accommodate the request.

"Hm, well that answers my next question." The Chief said, "You've also notified the BCSD, then?"

"Yes, we have Chief," Judy told him, "They'll be sending a couple of deputies up from Bunnburrow tomorrow to interview our suspects. But in the meantime, they have a request. They want to know if we can keep Craig Guilford in custody here in Zootopia for a while."

Bogo's brows shot upwards a second time, "Really? What for?"

Once again, it was Nick who answered him.

"To keep him as far away from his dad as possible," he said.

"Ahhh yes," the Chief nodded, sitting back in his chair with the expression of someone who has just completed a particularly difficult jigsaw puzzle. "Yes, the old 'yote has been threatening to do his boy, hasn't he?"

"Well, that's part of it, Chief." Judy said, "But there's another reason; the Burrow County Prosecutor thinks that if they keep those two separated, there's a good chance Craig can be persuaded to take the stand against his father." It brought the Chief back up to full attention with a snort.

"Cor, what do they need that for? They've got his old dad dead to rights, I shouldn't wonder."

Judy stepped aside for Nick once more.

"You know that sir, and I know that…but just try telling it to Jerry Guilford; were you aware that he entered a plea of not guilty?"

The Cape buffalo's brow dropped down again, forming a thick, hard line.

"No, I did NOT know that," he rumbled, and then, apparently to himself, he added, "stupid git."

"Not stupid sir, crazy," the red fox corrected, "Anyway, the Burrow County Sheriff's office thinks if they can get Craig to flip, it'll give them enough leverage to get daddy to change his plea; it'll for sure bring the kid's Uncle Dean around; he's already sitting on the fence, according to the deputy I talked to."

"In that case, you tell the BCSD we'll be more than happy to co-operate," Bogo nodded and pointed, but then snorted and stopped short. "Errr, we have got proper cause to hold Craig Guilford for longer than 48 hours, yes?"

Nick's muzzle unzipped in a sly, foxy grin, "When we busted him, he was trying to steal an airplane worth almost six figures; I'd say that counts as a felony." And then his expression became immediately serious, "To say nothing of endangering Officer Hopps' life."

"Oh yes, THAT," The Chief rumbled, features darkening into a volcanic cloud. Neither Judy nor Nick were surprised by this; Chief Bogo was known to take a very dim view of anyone who raised a paw or hoof against one of his officers. "I'll be having a few choice words with Captain Brierly soon enough," he said, changing topics once again. (Nate Brierly, a Barbary Sheep, was head of the Meadowlands Precinct.) "However rashly you may have acted Hopps, it still doesn't excuse his officers taking as long as they did to reach the crime scene."
"Yes sir," Judy answered once more, trying not to frown. She didn't like the idea of trouble between the Central and Meadowlands precincts and was even less enthralled by the prospect of her being at the center of it. Still, it was the Chief's call, not hers.

"When are those deputies from Bunnyburrows supposed to be here?" Bogo was asking, shifting topics yet again.

"About 10:30," Judy answered, drawing yet another surprised look from the Cape buffalo.

"Huh, they'll have to be up at the crack of dawn to make it here by then, won't they?"

"Well what can I say, sir?" Judy allowed herself a grin, "That how we roll in the Burrow; it IS a farming community after all."

Bogo's face crinkled up in amusement, a rare spectacle where he was concerned.

"Riiight."

But then Judy felt the corners of her mouth turning downwards.

"Seriously Chief, they want to get their paws on that kid real bad; they'd have had someone up here already if they could."

"That I can well understand," Bogo nodded, his face becoming equally grave, "Right, when the Burrow County deputies get here, I want you two to assist them. " He lifted an eyebrow adding, "And I think I needn't remind you to show them all proper courtesy, yes?" The Chief was known to be stickler for protocol where other law enforcement agencies were concerned. "Never know when WE might be the one that needs a favour," he always said.

"Of course we will Chief," Judy answered, only dimly aware that her ears aware starting to turn backwards. "That's my hometown, after all." She couldn't help feeling just a little bit offended; as IF she'd be rude to one of the Burrow County deputies. Bogo however seemed to take no notice of her change of expression.

"Right then, I think we're done here. Go and finish up your reports and then I'll see you at roll call, tomorrow morning; off you go then."

The rest of the day went by at an uneven pace. While Nick and Judy completed their reports, other officers kept stopping by their workspace, either to offer their congratulations on the takedown, or see how she was doing. (And of course, the Burrow County Sheriff's Office needed to be notified that Chief Bogo had agreed to their request.)

Surprisingly, none of the visitors had any criticism for Judy Hopps...or perhaps it wasn't so surprising; there was nothing they could have said that either the Chief or her partner hadn't said already—or that Judy hadn't already said to herself—and all of them seemed to know it One of the visiting officers however, a cheetah named Kii Catano, had a curious question for the bunny-cop.

"I know a little bit about vintage airplanes," she said, "My grand-dad used to own one, and those old Stearmink's are supposed to have the pilot's compartment in the rear, not up front."

"Wish this one had," Judy grumbled, almost to herself, "If that had been the case, I wouldn't have missed my jump." Other than that, she had no answer for Officer Catano—but Nick Wilde did.

"According to what Mr. Guilford told us—that's the kid's uncle, not his dad—he said he bought that plane after the previous own cracked it up and ordered some modifications done when he had
it rebuilt. He never said exactly what they were, but I'll bet you anything that one of them was having those cockpits switched around."

"Hrm, why would he do a thing like that?" Catano asked, the tip of her tail ticking back and forth on the carpet.

"Beats me, you'd have to take that up with Jake Guilford," Nick shrugged, and the cheetah walked walked away only partially satisfied. That turned out to be their last interruption for the day and things proceeded smoothly from there. Even so, by the time they hit the 'send' button on their respective reports and headed for the locker-rooms, the sun was down and the stars were out.

On the steps outside the precinct, they were just about to say their goodbyes for the evening when Nick Wilde's ears stood up, and he poked a thumb off into the middle distance.

"Want to hit The Lodge before we all it a wrap, Carrots? I'm buying."

"You're on!" Judy answered eagerly; that sounded like just the ticket right now.

The Raccoon Lodge, (known simply as 'The Lodge' to the officers of the ZPD) was Savanna Central's cop shop. Located at the corner of Veldt and Bermuda, about a block behind the Natural History Museum it was a three-story affair, painted in lichen-green. Nick always said it looked more like safari hotel than a waterhole and grill, with its high-peaked roof and cross-timber construction. It had been the retreat of choice for the Precinct-1 officers ever since the day it first opened.

As soon as they walked through the door however, Judy began to question the wisdom of accepting her partner's invitation. The Lodge was packed, mostly with patrons clad in blue serge, and even before the door closed behind the bunny-cop, a whole slew of them were raising glasses in her general direction, "Hold my Carrot Juice!"

Judy didn't know whether offer them a thumbs-up or turn around and crawl right out of there; that greeting was going to be following her around for a long, lonnnnng time. (It was nothing she shouldn't have expected, really; par for the course in just about any police precinct, but still…)

When Nick and she began to make their way across the floor, Judy soon felt better; it was clear that most of the glassed being lifted on her behalf were of a salutary not sardonic nature. Yes, she had made an incredibly rash move, but at the end of the day, her suspects were in custody and no one had gotten hurt. To the cop on the street, that was the thing that mattered above all else.

Looking over the interior décor of the Raccoon Lodge, the casual visitor would never have guessed it was a cop hangout. No police memorabilia on wall behind the bar, and no photos of fallen officers posted anywhere within sight. In fact, the place appeared to live up at least partially to its name, looking like nothing so much as a Safari Lodge, although not necessarily of Afurican lineage.

Down the hall in the banquet room however, it was a very different story, here was where ZPD's Precinct-1 held its retirement parties, and here was where you found the photographs and framed newspaper clippings. Here too you would find the End-of-Watch Wall, where cops getting ready to, 'pull the pin' in police parlance, chalked a farewell message to their fellow officers. Nick and Judy had seen it many times; some of the graffiti been heartfelt, some of it ribald; a few of the retirees had offered tributes to fallen comrades, and one or two of the messages—from cops being forced to take early retirement—had been downright bitter. (Nearly all of them were posted at a level that required a step-stool for the fox and bunny to be able to read them.)
Like most of Zootopia's watering holes, The Lodge featured different seating arrangements for different sized mammals, in this case separate floors, large mammals at ground level, and then smaller and smaller species with each ascending balcony.

Exiting onto the second floor landing, it looked at first as if the fox and bunny were straight out of luck, all of the tables were occupied and every seat was taken. (There was a reason why The Raccoon Lodge kept the cop stuff in the back; it was also popular with the City Hall crowd.) Judy was just about to suggest a rain-check when from somewhere near the end of the terrace, a dark-brown paw shot upwards and a slightly familiar voice hailed them. "Hey, you two, are you looking for a place to sit? I've got a couple of empty chairs right here."

"Thanks," Nick Wilde called, waving back, "C'mon Carrots."

Arriving at the table, they found it occupied by a mammal they recognized, even if they didn't actually know her, Zootopia City Councilmember Claudia Nizhang.

Judy forced back a sigh; didn't it figure that this red panda would be sitting by herself, pariah that she was in certain circles? Claudia herself seemed to take it all in stride, motioning with a paw to the seats on the opposite side of the table.

"Take a load off," she said, her choice of words betraying her Zoo York roots.

Judy's chair was little bit large for a bunny but still manageable. She had just scooted up to the edge of the table when Claudia snapped her fingers.

"NOW I remember where I've seen you two; didn't you work that presser I gave last Friday?"

"'Presser'…not 'press conference'," Judy thought, "Yep; definitely from Zoo York." She was surprised though that Claudia had spotted them, much less still remembered them; surprised and also not a little impressed.

"Yes, that's right, Nick answered offering a paw, "I'm Officer Nick Wilde and this is Officer Judy Hopps."

Claudia's brow went up another half inch as she shook paws, first with the fox and then with his partner. She seemed remarkably spry, even in spite of the fact that she required the assistance of cane in order to stand and shake with them.

"Ah, the officers who took down that father and son team, the ones who tried to lay that herbicide on the Carrot Day's festival. That was some darn fine police work—both times," she said, reminding Nick and Judy that while she might now be serving on the Zootopia City Council, once upon a time, this red panda had been a decorated Zoo York City Detective Sergeant. (Most likely she would be still, had it not been for the crippling injury she'd suffered in the line of duty.)

"Is it true that kid was trying to steal a plane when you made the collar?" she asked, as the fox and bunny took their seats again.

"Yes, that's right," Judy answered, shifting in her chair as if it had suddenly become too hard for her. She had already learned her lesson for the day and didn't need another one.

But Claudia Nizhang was on a different track. "Heh, reminds me of a case from back east. I…oops, hold on a second." The waitress had just arrived with her order, a tall glass of emerald-green liquid, garnished with a stalk of bamboo. "What are you having, it's on me," she said, as the raccoon set it in front of her.
"Sorry Councilmammal," Nick Wilde was grinning, "but I already reserved that privilege for myself." He turned and raised a finger to the server, "Blueberry Colada for me…and for the bunny...uhm, the usual, Carrots?" Judy nodded and he said to the server, "Three-Veg Cooler."

"And bring us a grilled snack-chip sampler and I'M paying for that." Claudia Nizhang said, in a voiced that brooked no argument.

"Coming right up," the raccoon said, and departed to get their order.

When she had gone, Judy eased back in her chair and looked at Claudia Nizhang

"You were saying something about Craig Guilford reminding you of a case from back east?"

"Yes, that's right," the red panda answered. "The Bearfoot bandit we called him; that's bear, B-E-A-R."

Nick and Judy regarded each other for a few seconds and the looked back at her.

"The...who?" the red fox finally said.

Claudia laughed and then explained. "You wouldn't have heard about it here, but it was big news back in Zoo York. The Bearfoot Bandit was this kid who liked to rob migration houses when the owners were away; you'd be surprised at the things mammals leave behind when they take off for the season. He worked the Humptons and the Zoo Jersey shore in the fall and winter and the Furrida Gold Coast in the spring and summertime."

"I see," Judy was nodding slowly, "but where'd he get that name?"

Claudia laughed and pretended to hold up her paws defensively, "Don't put that one on the ZYPD, guys... it was the Zoo York Daily Gnus's idea. They called him that because he always wore these fake bear paws on his feet when he burglarized a house, trying to disguise his species. Didn't work though, forensics had him pegged on his first time out."

"So what species was he?" Nick Wilde asked her. He seemed to find her story fascinating.

"Well what the heck, me too," Judy realized with a smile.

"A sea-mink," Claudia Nizhang answered, and was there just little edge to her voice? Judy thought she heard it, but wasn't quite sure.

"He was some piece of work, that kid," she went on, shaking her head, "Sometimes he wouldn't just rob a place, he'd move in for a while. One time, down in Furrida, he took up residence in some poor guy's home for nearly two whole months. The owner finally found out about it when he got an electric bill for something like three thousand semolians; the Bandit had been using his place to hold RAVES. Of course, by then, the kid was long gone."

Nick let out a low whistle and Judy asked, "You say he was kid, how old was he?"

"Same age as your guy," the red panda answered, "That's what made me think of him. The Jersey State Police finally caught up with Bearfoot Boy down in Wildwool, or rather it was the Coast Guard who caught up with him." She leaned across the table with a gleam in her eye, looking almost conspiratorial. "Get this; he stole an ultralight airplane and tried to escape across Delawere Bay in it; didn't even make it a third of the way before he went down. Lucky for him there was a patrol boat right nearby."
Now, it was Judy who was whistling, "Sweet cheez n' crackers, and I thought what...Craig did was nuts."

She bit her lip against the rising heat in her cheeks; she had almost said, '...what I did was nuts...' She never did find out if her tablemates had caught it, because just then, the waitress arrived with their order. After the obligatory sips of their drinks and a few bites of their snack chips, Claudia continued with her story.

"From that day on, that's what everyone started calling the kid; no more Bearfoot Bandit, now he was Crazy Wez—that's Wez with a 'Z', after the character in the Mad Yax movies. His attitude eventually got him sent to Granite Point Youth Facility, toughest Juvie Jail on the east coast." She shrugged and took another sip of her drink, "at least it was back in those days. Normally, I wouldn't have wished that place on Niu-mo-wang's calf, but Wez was practically begging to get sent there from the minute they picked him up; the kid was just out of control."

Nick Wilde listened to this, and then set down his glass on the table...very carefully, Judy noted.

"Can I ask you something Councilmammal Nizhang?"

"Please, call me Claudia...and yes, go ahead."

"Well, if you don't mind, I'm kind of curious about something," the red fox queried, choosing his words carefully, "If I remember correctly, you were part of the ZYPD's Organized Crime Task Force. What was your interest in a kid like Crazy Wez?"

Claudia grinned for a second and sat back in her chair, looking properly inscrutable.

"Ahhh, I don't believe I mentioned his real name, did I? It was McCrodon, Wesley Patrick McCrodon."

For several seconds, Nick and Judy just looked at each other in confusion. But then the fox's ears shot up and pointed at each other.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa; McCrodon...as in James 'The Mister' McCrodon?"

"The very same," the red-panda answered, raising her glass in an ironic salute, "Wez was his youngest sister's kid."

Nick winced as if a splinter had just entered his paw, "Ooch, good riddance to that animal; I heard horror stories about him, back in the day,"

That prompted a quick, sharp look from Judy. Although her partner wasn't saying, it was obvious where he'd heard those stories—from Mr. Big. But yes, now Claudia's interest in the Bearfoot Bandit—Crazy Wez, if you like—made perfect sense.

"Whatever you heard, it was probably an understatement," the red panda was saying, but then her smile abruptly vanished, and her brow knitted into a rocky outcropping. "But there's worse out there, believe me." She looked towards the stairs, lower lip trembling, as if something dark and unspeakable had just appeared on the landing, "a whole lot worse."

She remained that way for several uneasy seconds, but then sat back in her chair again, blinking as if she'd awakened from a trance, and then went on as if nothing had happened.

"Anyway, The Mister had never taken much of an interest in his nephew before then; he and his sister didn't get along—to put it mildly. But when he found out Wez was the Bearfoot Bandit, his
attitude changed completely; he spared no effort trying to get the kid sprung. Why he did that, I still
don't know; I guess he figured he could use someone like that in the Company, a kid who was
crazy enough for any job." Her melancholy mood returned without warning, "It never happened
though, for once that dirt-bag bit off more than he could chew." She drained her glass in a single
gulp, and slipped into that brooding silence once again.

For a long moment, Nick and Judy just looked at her and then at each other, unsure how to
proceed. Then the bunny-cop cleared her throat.

"So, what finally happened to Crazy Wez?"

Claudia waved a paw almost dismissively. "He went crazy for real, complete breakdown. Last I
heard he's in a psych-ward lock-up somewhere. As my boss used to say about head-cases like him,
'the tougher they talk, the harder they crack'."

Her mood still refused to lift, and Nick Wilde tried a change of subject.

"You know there's something I always wondered. What the heck did a vixen like Amanda Hill ever
see in a jerk like Craig Guilford? Or heck, let's take it one step further, why are nice girls like her
attracted to thugs like him in the first place?"

His inquiry brought a sharp look from Judy. "I wouldn't call Amanda Hill 'nice' Nick, she tried to
cyberbully my sister, remember?" She had heard the story over breakfast, the day after the
attempted chemical attack, along with her Mom and Dad, (and even now, she couldn't quite shake
the feeling that Erin had been holding something back.)

"No, he has a point Judy," Claudia Nizhang said. The fox's question seemed to have had just the
desired effect. "I got my start with the ZYPD working cybercrimes, and that's the textbook profile
of a cyberbully, a high achiever that's outwardly a model student." She leaned forward again,
laying her elbows on the tabletop. "Let me guess; Amanda Hill's folks think she's completely
innocent in all of this and are demanding that the ZPD release into their custody right
now; is that
correct?"

"Y-Yes that's right." Judy answered, gaping as if the red-panda had just performed an amazing
sleight-of-paw. Yes, it was true, and she herself had only learned of it right before clocking out for
the evening. (Well, Claudia WAS a former police detective, after all.)

"That's it, that's how it works," the red panda threw up her paw, as if to say, 'elementary, my dear
bunny'. "The parents are always the last to know," she said, "And you can hardly blame them: I
once busted a cyberbully who could have been ME at that age. Seriously, if I hadn't seen it for
myself, I never would have believed she was capable of that kind of cruelty." She waved her paw
again, and shifted her attention to the right. "But I never did answer your question, Nick. I'd also be
willing to bet that up until she met Craig Guilford, Amanda Hill's life was about as interesting as
watching grass grow…at least offline. Same old school, same old friends, same old boring parents;
she probably couldn't wait to get out of Bunnyburrow when she turned eighteen."

That was too much for Judy to resist; she snickered, "Just goes to show, be careful what you wish
for eh, Nick?"

"You got that right, Carrots," the fox responded with a gleeful yip, and then for Claudia Nizhang's
benefit, he explained. "After we finally caught up with her and Craig, Amanda kept on crying 'I
wanna go home,' over and over."

"Like a skipping DVD," Judy added.
Claudia threw back her head and laughed, "Ohhh yes, why does that not surprise me? But you see what I'm getting at; when Craig came along Amanda's dull existence suddenly became exciting. Also, kids like him are whizzes at spinning their stories." Her voice became high and whiny. "I'm just a poor, innocent animal, being 'scape'yoted' because of my species.' Girls like Amanda are suckers for that line, especially since she's a vixen…errr, no offense Nick."

"None taken," the red fox answered, raising his glass, "and I'm sure your right; that's exactly the line Craig's dad is taking."

"Did he REALLY try to enter a not guilty plea?" Claudia looked as if she'd spotted a roach crawling across the table.

"Yep, afraid so," Nick admitted, looking equally disdainful, but then adding hopefully, "The Burrow County Sheriff thinks they can get him to change his mind, though."

"Let's hope so." Claudia answered, and then turned to signal a passing waitress, "Refill over here, please?"

"Us too," Nick said, and when the server had gone Judy had a question for him.

"Did you ever have any nice girls attracted to you, back in the day when you were working the streets?"

The red fox immediately shook his head.

"Once or twice, but I always tried to stay away from females like that; they're strictly bad news." He angled his muzzle across the table and in the direction of their host, "Like Claudia said, girls like that tend to have parents who think they can do no wrong. And that means if Daddy finds out they're dating the likes of you…ka-BOOM! 'Try to ruin MY little girl, will you? Get him, boys!"

"A most wise course of action, Officer Wilde," Claudia Nizhang said, assuming that Buddha's expression once again.

"What about you Carrots?" Nick asked her, "You ever been attracted to a bad boy?" Turnabout was fair play after all.

He was only teasing, but for a sliver of an instant, Judy hesitated…and then her answer was both firm and full of conviction.

"Nope…not me. For one thing, there aren't a lot of rogue bunnies running around, especially in the Burrow. And for another…well, a girl whose ambition is to become police officer isn't exactly attractive to the outlaw type, either."

That wasn't entirely true and Judy knew it; some guys get off on trying to corrupt the supposedly incorruptible. Any further discussion however was curtailed by the arrival of their refills.

"Sooo, what shall we drink to?" Claudia Nizhang asked, snatching up the check before Nick Wilde could get to it.

"To nice girls and bad boys," the red fox answered, raising his glass with a sly wink,

"Hear, hear," Judy Hopps responded also lifting hers, "May heaven always bless and keep them…as far apart as possible."

"Nibbler on the Roof!" Nick shot a finger in his partner's direction, grin lengthening by a full inch
as his eyes narrowed into merry slits.

"What can I say?" Judy shrugged. "It was the best I could come up with on short notice."

And then the three of them clinked their glasses and drank.

Chapter End Notes

**Author's Note:**

Chief Bogo's experience in the subway tunnel was inspired by an actual incident, as related in the memoirs of a former New York City Police detective on the NPR program, Fresh Air.

The Raccoon Lodge is based on an actual location in Beaverton, Oregon, (though to my knowledge it was not a police hangout.) It has since changed names and owners.

Lastly, Claudia Nizhang's Bearfoot Bandit is based on a real individual, Colton Harris Moore, aka the Barefoot Bandit. You can learn more about him by Googling his name.
Chapter Summary

The opening salvo, and then a chance encounter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—a Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 7—Tying Up Loose Ends
(Pt. 7…Conclusion)

"Now folks, let me point out that my engineer is an otter and my daughter's two best girlfriends are a weasel and a fennec…and I have absolutely no problem with that. But would she ever date a predator? The answer is not on your life, and I wouldn't allow it anyway. If some of you do-gooder species have a problem with that, I suggest you change the channel and go look after your own families. But don't come whimpering to me when your kid…"

Erin Hopps thumped her foot and tried to drown out the harangue coming from down the hall. She wished like heck that someone, any one of the other girls would finish up showering so she could take her turn and be done with this.

She was sitting on a bench outside the girl's bathroom in the Hopps Family Warren, waiting to get cleaned up before turning in for the night. What the heck was taking Liddy so long?

Fifteen yards away, in one the Hopps Family Warren's many dens, Rock Hardesty continued with his televised diatribe.

"It's fine to have a predator for a business partner or a schoolmate…even a BFF, but a romantic relationship? I'm sorry mammals, we have to draw the line somewhere…"

Erin sighed and stopped thumping her foot, it wasn't helping and if she made it any louder, her brother Billy would come out of his room and start complaining. Ohhh, why did this particular tunnel have to act like a blankety-blank echo chamber?

She could picture the scene in the den one flight below; the Hopps family adults all gathered in front of television #3, occasionally nodding in agreement with what they were hearing. Her father was only a causal viewer of the Rock Hardesty show, but her big bother, Stu Hopps Junior tried
never to miss a broadcast, even saving the episodes he couldn't catch on Tivole. (He was an avid listener of the hyrax's radio program, as well.)

Rock Hardesty's program—or rather programs—originated in Zootopia, where his radio talk-show was the #1 in the ratings. (His TV show wasn't doing too shabby either.) Here in the Burrow, where there was less competition, he all but owned the airwaves.

It was easy to see why; Hardesty's standard delivery style was a kind of old-fashioned folksiness that could charm and disarm. Usually, Erin found him easy to ignore. When he 'got his evangelical on' as her mother liked to say, then it was 'like trying to tune out someone dragging a rake across a chalkboard.' (Her friend, Terri Blackburn's words; Terri heartily detested the hyrax.) When he went on the attack, it was even worse; he had a habit of hanging up on callers who disagreed with him, and then belittling them once they were off the air. To Erin that smacked of cowardice; trash-stalking animals who couldn't defend themselves. And just to add insult to insult, whenever Hardesty booted a caller off his show, he would play the sound effect of a toilet flushing and then declare, "Back to where you came from, do-gooder."

That never failed to get a laugh out of most of the Hopps Family adults; most of the kids just rolled their eyes.

Erin Hopps wasn't one of them; Hardesty's methods were eerily similar to those once employed by a certain mean vixen named Amanda Hill…when she'd launched her online campaign against a certain young, white-furred bunny.

Amanda… Erin couldn't help smiling wickedly at the thought. Earlier in the day, the news had come down from Zootopia; Craig Guilford had been captured up in the Meadowlands District, along with his girlfriend, (by Officer Judy Hopps no less; who-hoooo, way to go big sis!)

"Erin, shower's free." A voice spoke from beside her, breaking the trance.

"Thanks Liddy." She said, bounding up and scampering through the door.

She allowed herself the luxury of an extra lathering; something about the rhetoric she'd been forced to endure while awaiting her turn demanded it…and besides, Lidia had taken longer than usual too.

When Erin emerged from the shower room a short while later, smelling faintly of mint and lavender, Hardesty was still at it; in fact he seemed to have amped up his oratory.

"If we allow public displays of affection between predator and prey, where does it end, mammals? Where…does…it…end? Well, let me tell you where it ends. Dateline, Pawley-Furham, North Carolina…"

He went on to describe the case of a cougar that had become engaged to marry a white-tailed deer and had instead ended up getting killed by her in self-defense. Okay, that was too much. Never mind the 'Dateline', Erin happened to know that story, and it was more than two years old. Not only that; how, exactly, had that episode started with a public display of affection? There'd been no mention of that in the original news item, not that she could remember now.

She scurried down the hallway, headed for her hutch as fast as her feet would take her. Enough of THIS!

It was only after she closed the door that the young bunny began to relax. Now, at last, the voice of the hyrax was inaudible. She checked her clock, only 8:30. Hmmm, she hadn't been waiting as long as she'd thought; still a good half hour to go before the chat started. Well that was okay, better early
than late; she could finish brushing her fur and maybe surf the web for a while.

A short time later, after changing into her robe and her favorite PJs, Erin opened the door to her hutch just a crack and slipped her 'Do Not Disturb' sign into place. (It actually read 'Bug Me and DIE!'—with a hastily scrawled note underneath explaining that the warning did not apply to her parents.)

Though she tried to pretend that she was winging it, Erin knew exactly where she was going from the instant she opened her laptop. Rock Hardesty's topic of choice this evening had gotten seriously under her skin…and it all came down to a silver fox she'd recently met by the name of Conor Lewis.

Of course, his remark about kissing her had only been meant to push her buttons; Erin understood that now, he hadn't actually been suggesting anything of the kind. But still…imagine if her mom and dad had heard about it after instead of before tonight's edition of the Rock Hardesty Show; her father and Stu Jr. would be loading shotguns!

(Oh-kayyy, they wouldn't go that far, but they'd still be plenty riled; so would her mother, let's be honest.)

Species aside, there was something about Conor that Erin found both a little bit frightening and oddly alluring. He wasn't a bad kid—they wouldn't have let him anywhere near the Zootopia Academy for the Performing Arts if that was the case—but at the same time, there was no denying that he was a tough kid. He was smart, too…and not just book smart, this fox had street smarts in spades. Look at the way he'd conned Jerry Guilford into making his approach over the fireworks display. (Okay, okay…that had actually been Nick Wilde's idea, but Conor was the one who'd pulled it off.)

Yep, there was something of the rogue about that young fox. He might not be a bad boy, but he wasn't above 'playing the sly' when it suited his purpose…as he had when he'd bought her bass guitar to keep her from breaking it and then sold it back to her at cost. (And whoa, did he play one mean-tailed electric six himself or what?)

Erin laced her fingers behind her head, stretched her back and groaned, lamenting to no one on in particular.

"N'ohhhh, I finally meet a guy who's exciting to be around—and that isn't a jerk—and he turns out to be a stinkin' fox!"

Erin Hopps was a lovely, young thing and she knew it, soft blue eyes and creamy white fur tipped with black around her paws, feet, and the point of her ears; her lithe figure was a far cry from the chubby little bunny she'd been only a few years previously. It went without saying that a girl like her would attract the attentions of the boys at her school. Unfortunately for her, the cutest bunny-guys at Rogers Middle School were also the biggest jerks. Max March, there was a good example, sooo certain he was going to be a soccer superstar someday. Yes, he was a great player, the Raiders' star striker, but he showed up on time for practice only when the spirit moved him, and maintained a GPA just barely high enough to keep him from getting cut from the team. Not once but twice, he had stolen the ball from one of his own teammates so that HE could score the winning goal…and both times he'd put on a grandstand show afterwards, in the second instance nearly getting sent off the field for his antics.

All that, Erin could have tolerated, but Max also seemed to take it for granted that one day she was going to be his girlfriend.
As IF... Gah, she couldn't wait to get away from Bunnyburrow.

Banishing these thoughts as best she could, Erin cracked her knuckles and then opened Zooble.

She typed the name 'Rock Hardesty' in the search window and then as an afterthought, added 'Wiki'.

"No WAY is that macho-mammal handle his real name," she thought as she clicked on the appropriate entry. Her hunch turned out to be a no-brainer, Hardesty's birth name was Ernie Van Daas—and there were a few other tidbits about him on Wikipredia that she hadn't been aware of.

First of all, there was his species. Most animals assumed that a hyrax was either a large rodent, or a relative of the rabbit family, (Erin herself had always thought that was the case.)

Nope... much to her surprise, the hyrax's closest animal relation was, of all things, the elephant. Hmm, well that explained one thing if nothing else; elephants were known to take an especially jaundiced view of predators, at least certain species of predators. It certainly fit in with what Hardesty had been saying during his broadcast.

The most interesting item had come from his biography; Hardesty had been born and raised in Las Vegoats Nevada, where his father had served as the entertainment manager at a number of the major hotels. The article didn't specify which ones, but that hardly mattered. Never mind his down-home delivery style, Rock Hardesty was about as country as a Furrari Dealership—yet another reason for Erin to loathe him, (yes, she was coming to feel the same way about the hyrax as Terri.)

But then her laptop pinged and she saw that it was time. Closing the page, she clicked on the icon for Discorps and waited for it to load.

When it did, the young bunny was presented with a choice of several different servers. She immediately chose the one marked YRC (Young Rockers Community.) She spent a few more seconds deciding on which of two rooms to hit first, #General or #Bass-slappers..

She finally clicked on #General.

211 Miles away Conor Lewis was starting the dishwasher, and also preparing to join the YRC chat.

A casual visitor to the young fox's loft might have been tempted to assume that he was a prisoner here, perhaps even the star of a junior version of The Shrewman Show; the every wall, and even the ceiling was lined with stout cyclone-fencing. In fact, the purpose of this barrier was not to keep him from escaping, but to prevent any sensitive information from getting away ...and also to keep any prying electronic eyes and ears on the OUTSIDE of the loft; it was actually a giant Furiday cage, heavily grounded at several key points.

And then there was the living space, easily mistaken for a television soundstage; except for the bathroom, (and another enclosure which the young fox never entered,) there were no separate rooms as such; the various spaces —the kitchen, the bedroom, the living room, etc.—were divided off from one another through the use of panels of the type normally employed to create office cubicles.

It was a plush residence to say the least; the Grand Suite at Palm Hotel had nothing on these digs. The loft boasted a giant, flat panel, UHD TV with a CATMOS sound system, a state of the art gym, and a top-of-the-line Jackalzzi Spa. All of the furniture was rendered in oak and all of the kitchen appliances in brushed steel. A back-up generator on the floor below stood ready to take up the slack in the event of a power outage. There was track lighting overhead, a state-of the art of
climate control system beside the elevator, and hardly a speck of dust to seen anywhere, courtesy of a pair of industrial strength HEPA-LUMP filters.

None of this was unusual given the loft's pedigree; it had originally been built at the behest of James 'the Mister' McCrodon, then head of the Zoo York City crime syndicate known as The Company. A sea-mink with tastes that ran to extravagant, The Mister had ordered it constructed as a hideout in the event he ever had to go on the lam, (something that had been a distinct possibility, only a few years back.)

The design and most of the construction work had been overseen by his nephew, Kieran McCrodon, The Company's resident cyber-genius, (someone Conor tried to avoid thinking too much about these days.) With the demise of The Mister and all his lieutenants, it had fallen into the young silver fox's possession, his fortress, sanctuary, and great keep. Here was where he had lived for the past three years since escaping from ZooYork City.

He watched the dishwasher's light go on, heard the familiar hiss of water, and then went to the fridge to grab a bottle of pop and some blackberries before heading on over to the Furrison Hotel.

The Furrison was the loft's computer center; it had been given that name by Kieran, a left-pawed reference to the old Dormice tune, Back Door Mammal, "The Furrison's got access to like a million back doors, boyo," he had said, in his farewell message to Conor, recorded at a time when the need for the young fox to take up residence here had seemed about as likely as getting hit by a subway train while riding in a blimp. Instead, it had turned out to be a remarkably prescient action on the sea-mink's part…and hadn't that been just like him?

The Furrison hotel was placed roughly in the center of the loft, the optimum location for its purposes. It looked something like a kitsch-art igloo, or perhaps a beaver lodge, a geodetic dome, woven from copper cable and overlaid with copper mesh. (Conor always thought it looked like a funky, giant tortoise shell.) Like the surrounding box of cyclone fencing, it was also heavily grounded, a Furaday cage within a Furaday cage. You could aim a ZASA radio telescope at this building from two blocks away and never know it was in here.

Placing his paw pads against the access panel beside the door, Conor solemnly intoned "Fo-E-N-X Two Two Three times One Nine."

The door responded by unlatching with a click and a hum.

The password had been another one of Kieran's innovations; anyone seeing it written on paper—Phoenix 223X19—would assume it was pronounced 'Feenix Two Twenty Three, Ecks Nineteen'. If that happened the Furrison Hotel would immediately lock itself down and encrypt all its data files. And just in case some military type got their paws on the pass code, the final nine would likely trip them up; they'd be inclined to pronounce it 'niner' rather than nine, and the results would be the same.

Conor opened the door and stepped inside; it locked automatically behind him.

The array inside of the Furrison looked like a cross between a Nautilus shell, a lunar landing module and an online gamer's lottery fantasy. It boasted a 32 inch UHD display screen (interactive) with two more screens on either side, plus another one mounted overhead.
And then there were the peripherals, an ergonomic keyboard, and the choice of a mouse, a trackball, a joystick, or a stylus control. Beneath the task table was a Blu-Ray drive with eight separate bays all of which could copy any DVD in seconds, even an encrypted one. The set up came with both standard and VR headsets, both with 5 channel capability and noise cancelling earphones. The external speakers were 7.1 surround.
The only thing missing was the hard drive; that was kept on the floor below, along with a small server farm; both of these also inside Furaday cages. It might have seemed odd to put such computing power inside a location that was all but impregnable to an outside signal—how the heck were you supposed to access the net? But there were ways around even a double Furiday cage; to get on the internet, Conor had a choice of ten different heavily shielded DSL lines, (three of the routed to server farms in countries with little or no regard for international law,) and six different Wi-Fi routers, the closest one terminating in Tundratown. But just in case even that wasn't enough security, the computer had the capability of piggybacking onto someone else's Wi-Fi router. (Conor's favorite was located in Litvarks, a video game parlor in the downtown distract; after that place closed its doors for the evening, the sky was the limit.) He would not use that router tonight though; piggybacking was strictly for 'going where angels fear to tread', (another of Kieran's favorite terms.)

The sea-mink had christened his computer set-up The Beast, and was (had been) justifiably proud of his creation, which he considered his piece de resistance. Conor had never thought of it as anything less; this computer's capabilities were almost fearsome. With the Beast as your guide, you could access almost any database in Greater Zootopia, City Hall, the Zootopia Transit System, Zootopia Gas and Electric, the local TV and radio stations, and yes, even The ZPD's computer firewalls were as tissue paper before The Beast. And if you wanted to tap into someone else's private conversation, less than a mile uphill from Conor's loft was the peak where the city planted most of its transmission towers, a veritable fountain of information if you had the means to siphon it off, (which Conor obviously did.) There was, in fact, probably only one database in whole of the city that was impervious to The Beast…and the young fox had no desire to go anywhere near that place.

For all of its power, the Beast was a surprisingly easy machine to operate; Kieran McCrodon had designed it that way. While The Mister had always planned to have his nephew accompany him in the event he had to go to ground, both of them had recognized early on that in the real world, such a thing might not be a possible; there was every chance that if James 'The Mister' McCrodon was forced to make a run for it, he might end up in Zootopia completely on his own, with no one else to assist him.

Unlike his Tundratown counterpart Mr. Big, McCrodon had embraced the digital realm early and hard, the first mob boss to incorporate cybercrime into his rackets. Even so, he had never quite gotten the hang of working with a computer himself. Not to put too fine a point on it, he didn't know Lionux from Zootopia ON-lion. And so his nephew had been required to create what he called an 'idiot proof' operating system for the computer, (although he never used those words within earshot of The Mister…or especially that spoiled-brat kid of his.)

Conor Lewis on the other paw, DID possess some computer savvy—he was no Mr. Roebuck, but he more than got by—and so working a set-up like The Beast was a snap for the young silver fox, (and he was learning more and more every day. Kieran had left a whole stack of tutorial DVDs in the loft, to say nothing of the members of The Circle, always ready to assist the young fox with a problem.)

The zero-gravity task chair was just wee bit too large for him; it had been designed for a fully grown sea-mink not for a juvenile silver fox. Before seating himself, Conor always needed to add a cushion to the mix in order to elevate himself to keyboard level. It was nothing he couldn't handle; heck, when he'd first moved in here, he'd needed THREE cushions to get the job done. (And at least now his legs were long enough to reach the footrest, if it was cranked in all the way.)

Placing his paw against the main, interactive screen, (it had a built-in print-reader,) Conor greeted The Beast with a cheerful "Good morning, Mother," his private joke, and recited the access code
"Gee-ni-ton, Are-of, Why-enom, thirty-four" ('Money for Nothing' spelled backward with the first letter of each word pronounced phonetically and 'For Free' reversed and pronounced numerically.)

All around him the screens turned blue, and then his desktop appeared, a panoramic view sweeping across all three of the frontal screens; the main stage of the Hopredy Music Festival, with his number one guitar hero, Richard Tomcat playing for the crowd. (Someday, the young fox vowed, he would attend that gathering in furson…and not as spectator.)

He slipped on one of the headsets—the non-VR one—and adjusted the cans and microphone, grateful that he was finally growing into it. (He'd once had to use a rubber strap to keep it in place.)

Before anything else, Conor had a duty to perform and he spoke three words into the headset.

"Picture, mom, enter."

At once, the familiar image of his mother appeared on all four screens, the only picture he had of her. He spent a moment studying her features and then dismissed the image with the word, "Escape."

Conor had begun this daily ritual back in Zoo York City, when he'd begun having more and more trouble remembering what his mother looked like. Having long since sworn never to forget her, he had immediately made a habit of looking at her picture on a daily basis, making certain no was watching while he did. (Back then he was getting razzed about everything by some of the guys in The Company.)

No similar ceremony existed for the young fox's father; Conor had no idea who he was, much less what he looked like. They had never met, and his mother had only mentioned him once, (and not in a complimentary fashion.)

Checking the clock, Conor saw that he had plenty of time left before the chat started, and as with Erin Hopps, he decided to surf the net awhile.

UN-like the young, white-furred bunny, he didn't bother looking up Rock Hardesty's name. He knew about the hyrax of course—you couldn't get away from his billboards, here in the city—but he had zero interest in the Hardesty Show or anything that its host might have to say.

Besides, when he called up his newsfeed, he found a much more interesting tidbit. Craig Guilford had been captured along with his girlfriend, up in the Meadowlands; the details were sketchy, but….what the? He'd been busted while trying to make his escape in a stolen airplane!

Forgetting the computer for moment, Conor leaned back in his chair, directing his gaze upwards, towards the roof of the Furrison Hotel. Holy fox-trot, he had known from first glimpse that Craig was missing a few keys from his piano, but this? This was Crazy Wez all over again!

"And how the heck did that punk coyote end up here in Zootopia?" he asked himself rhetorically, and then let his mind drift backwards. Wez McCrodon…now, there was a name that hadn't crossed Conor's mind in a long, long time. Was he still locked up in the psycho ward? Probably, unless he was dead; if they'd done to him what the young fox thought they had done…. Aggghhh, grrr, don't go there, kid!

For the longest time after his escape from The Point, Conor had been completely unable to fathom why Wez had backed out on their plan…just like that, no warning, not even a hint that he was getting cold feet.

But now the young sliver fox thought he knew the reason for his erstwhile partner's sudden loss of
courage…this is, when he chose to think about it, which wasn't very often; if he was right, it was something almost too horrible to contemplate.

He shook himself hard, as if attempting to dry off, (nearly losing his headset in the process) and sat rapidly upright again.

Conor spent the next few minutes browsing through Zebray, hunting for guitar bargains; he didn't find any worth bidding on, but he did come across a couple to drool over. (Oooo, a Yakmachine F8, if only…!)

At 9:00 sharp, a lilting note pinged in his ears, 'puh-WONG!', and he spoke aloud into his headset. "Open Discorps, enter."

Unlike with Erin, here it took the application only a fraction of a second to load. But very much like her, Conor had a choice to make between one of two rooms, #General and #GuitarHeroes. He immediately clicked on the first one; there was practically no one else in GH yet, and there wouldn't be for at least another half hour, the room always filled up later on in the evening.

As soon as he entered, a familiar name hailed the young fox.

Diredark: "Yo silver, where you been, mammal?"

Conor answered him immediately

Eljaysliver: "Down state at this fair-type-thing, doing some selling, doing some playing."

Conor had taken his screen name not from his fur color but from the title of Richard Tomcat tune, Long John Silver, a song dedicated to the fine art of hustling, (and he WAS a silver fox)

Lectricat5: "Cool beans, you make good money?"

Eljaysliver: "Yeah, worked out really good. I didn't plan on playing just getting in some practice, but they had this talent thing show going, and I wasn't gonna turn that down."

Diredark: "Whoa, neat. Did you win?"

BlackPakR: "He said show, not contest, dude."

Diredark: "D'ohhhh, right! Was it a good gig anyway?."

Eljaysliver: "Kicked tail, I was onstage with this girl I met, amazing voice and a great bass player. We gave 'em Tie Your Mother Down and just tore it up."

Lectricat5: "Who Hoo, was she cute, mammal?"

Conor sighed and shook his head. Typical Lectric; mentioning girls in his presence was like peeling open a sardine can in front of a starving otter. He smirked as he typed his response.

Eljaysliver: "No dude, she was really ugly."

He gave it another two seconds and then let Lectricat have it.

Eljaysliver: "She was your mom."

THAT was good for an entirely predictable response
BlackPakR: "LOL!

Diredark: "LMTO!"

Lectricat's response was an emoticon of a rude gesture.

211 Miles to the south, Erin Hopps was gaping at her computer screen. What the heck? Eljaysliver was CONOR?

She had seen him here in Discorps chat many times under that name, even talked with him once or twice, but if she hadn't just seen it for herself, she never would have believed that this was the same boy she'd shared the stage with only few days ago.

But who else could it be? Eljay had played guitar onstage with a girl and so had Conor, she'd been a bass player with an amazing voice, and so was Erin, (well she WAS!), and they'd played Tie Your Mother Down together…just like her and Conor silver fox. Could all that be just a coincidence? Could a sloth beat a cheetah in a footrace?

"The heck with #Basslappers," she told herself, and then moved the cursor to Conor's screen-name and right-clicked.

Conor heard the 'Puh-WONG!' in his headset again. At first he didn't know what was going on… but then saw the pop-up window in the lower right corner of the screen.

Saintgirl Has Sent You An Invitation To A Private Chat
Do You Want To Accept?

Yes[ ] No[ ]

Conor felt his ear and eyebrow rising. Saintgirl, what the foxtrot could she possibly want? If he'd chatted with her a half dozen times in the past, that was a lot. Still…his vulpine curiosity was up; he clicked on 'Yes' and then pressed enter, at the same time using a voice command to move the new window to the right-side of the screen. Then he typed a quick message.

Eljaysliver: "Hey Saintgirl, what up?"

In the next half-second he understood everything.

Saintgirl: "Conor, is that you? It's me, Erin."

The young fox laughed and clapped his paws, and then typed rapidly.

Eljaysliver: "Yep, you got me."

It was no surprise that he hadn't known Saintgirl was Erin Hopps before tonight. Like any sensible kid, she had always made a point of never revealing any fursonal information online. Where she lived, her exact age, her telephone number, her email address, and even her species had all remained hidden until now. Heck, if it hadn't been for the 'girl' attached to her name, Conor wouldn't even have been certain of her gender. Other than that, the only thing he knew about her was that she'd taken her screen name from the movie, The Boondog Saints.

Erin had guessed who he was from his description of their gig together, of course. Otherwise his identity would have remained as much of a cipher to her as hers had been to him. (In fact, Conor was even stingier with his fursonal info than she was. He had to be; if the wrong mammal latched on to any of HIS secrets…)
Saintgirl: "Wanna go to voice-chat?"

Eljaysliver: "Works for me. Webcam?" He thought he should ask first.

Saingirl: "Yeah, I'm good."

A second later, her face appeared on the screen. Conor felt his throat tighten and then shook it off; Erin was speaking to him.

"Well? Come on already, fox."

Conor spoke as well but to The Beast, not to her. "Voice-chat, headset, surround. Webcam, Green-Screen, Bedroom, Night, Enter."

Erin almost started to thump her foot; what the heck was taking him so long, but then there he was in front of her.

He wasn't wearing his usual poor-boy cap, only some kind of sports jersey in cobalt blue; she could just make out the words 'Hurling Club'. Behind him, she could see a dresser and some posters. He was in his bedroom. (Actually, he wasn't; the backdrop was a projection, courtesy of an app Kieran McCrodon had devised.)

That was when she noticed the way he was looking at her. A week ago, she would have blocked him for it; not now. She pretended to sigh.

"Awww do I really look that bad tonight?"

Conor responded with a wink and sharp, foxy grin.

"Name a gift, then speak my name; if it's bread and honey, I own a hive."

Erin giggled and shot a finger at the monitor screen.

"Heinlion, The Zoon is a Harsh Mistress." Whoa, it hadn't taken him long to snap out of it. "Darn it, why couldn't you be another bunny?" she thought to herself. She said, "Hurling, what's that?"

"It's an Irish sport," the young sliver fox explained, pointing at the word on his jersey. "The best way to describe it is, thirty guys beat each other with sticks until a whistle blows. Then they start all over. No seriously, it's kinda like a hybrid of Lacrosse and Field Hockey." He did not mention that the jersey was gift from Kieran, who had taken up the game after his uncle had forbidden him to participate in Mixed Martial Arts any further. Back then it had been three sizes too large for the young silver fox.

"I play field hockey," Erin said, "Does the Academy have a team?"

"Nah, they don't have much in the way of team sports," Conor shook his head. "They've got an athletic field, and a basketball court; the kids play there all the time, but nothing's organized, just pick up games."

Erin blew a stray tuft of fur off of her nose. Darn it, the shedding season was supposed to be over. Well at least ZAPA had a place to play; maybe she could start a field hockey team when she got there.

"IF I get accepted," she reminded herself archly. As her mother always said, 'Don't cross your bridges before you get to them.'
"So, what'cha doin'?" she asked, returning her attention to the here and now.

"Not a lot just hanging out in chat," the young fox answered, reaching for his bottle of soda. He took a swig and then said, "Had a good day, though. You know that double-neck guitar I snagged the parts from to repair your bass? I took it down to the Peace Rock Guitar Co-Op with me this morning, and Eric told me it's completely fixable; we're gonna do a full refurbish on that bad boy."

Erin threw up a fist and whooped, "Wow, that's so cool, Conor. You're going get a new guitar out of this." She had always thought his reward for all the help he'd given her had been way too insufficient.

Conor tilted his head and felt his mouth pull sideways.

"Welll, that depends on whether or not I can afford to buy it back after the work's all done," he said (He could and he would, but he wasn't about to say so just yet; now was not the time.) "To quote Heinlioni again, 'TANSTAAFL;' I'd love to have it though. I know parts of a few songs that'd sound killer on a twelve-string."

"There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch," Erin translated the quote for him, and then nodded soberly, "I know what you mean, Conor. Someday, I want to learn how to play a fretless bass; I love that sound."

"Yeah, me too," the young fox answered, smiling. It was on the tip of his tongue to inform her that she'd get the chance to learn all that and more at the Performing Arts Academy but again, not yet—not until she got in. While there was no doubt in his mind that this bunny had the goods to pull it off, 'TANSTAAST', There Ain't No Such Thing As A Sure Thing', either.

So instead he told her, "And then after work, a bunch of us got together to watch Carlos Sandcata's online guitar class. Whoa that was just sick, bunny-girl."

Erin felt her nose starting to pinch up, but then remembered that 'sick' in city-speak was another word for mega-cool.

"Ooo neat, I heard about that. Have they got one for bass players, do you know?" she asked.

Conor's mouth pulled sideways again. "Mmmm, no…I don't know that. I bet they do though, there's a whole bunch of those online master classes, you could prolly look it on Zoogle. Tom Furello teaches one, too." He felt his brow starting to furrow and his ears pulling backwards as he remembered something; his buddy Saad was a huge fan of Cage Against The Machine.

"Aagghh, grrr…those dirty slime buckets, just WAIT until I…!

"Hello-oooo? Ground Control to Major Fox, come in, please."

Oops, he'd forgotten about Erin for a moment.

"Sorry, sorry," he told her, raising his paws. "I kind of reminded myself of something there; friend of mine at the Co-Op asked me to help him out with something tomorrow. Can't talk about it, he made me promise, but it's not a happy thang, if you know what I mean."

Erin knew, but she wasn't thinking about it. The look on Conor's face just now had sent a slow chill up the back of her neck. Somebody had cossed that friend of his…and that somebody was going to regret it, big time. This was exactly the way he'd looked when he'd hacked into Amanda Hill's video files.
Amanda? There's your change of subject, Erin. Grab it quick, before it gets away.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Have you heard yet? Craig and Amanda were busted up there in Zootopia earlier today."

"Yeah, saw that on my news feed right after I logged online." The young fox answered her, "Up in the Meadowlands; would you believe stupid 'yote tried to rip off a stinkin' airplane?"

To the young fox's surprise, Erin responded to this with a twitching nose. Okay…so this was news to her, but it shouldn't have been that big of a surprise. Craig's dad was a pilot and so was his uncle. It naturally followed that…

"Uh, you didn't see who caught them?" her voice was cautious, almost tentative, and then she said, "It was my sister, Judy and Nick Wilde."

Conor reeled back in his chair as if a plug of wind had burst out of the monitor screen and hit him, full in the face. Oh yeah, that explained her reaction, and no…

"No, I didn't see that; the story I read didn't mention it. Wow, cool on them. Craig didn't give them any trouble, I hope." From what he'd seen of the young coyote—and smelled of him—that punk was just mean enough and dumb enough to try and fight it out with the cops, (especially if they were members of a species smaller than he was.)

Erin fanned a paw in front of her webcam.

"Naw, they had plenty of back up; Judy's the one who figured out where they were hiding, though." There was an unmistakable note of pride in her voice.

Conor thought, "Welllll why not? She's entitled," and then he said, "Whoaf, I wouldn't wanna be in Craig's fur right now; they'll try his coyote butt as an adult for sure."

"You think?" Erin's, nose twitching again.

"Positive," the young fox answered, reaching for the bowl of blackberries. "You seen the latest news on his father? They're gonna charge him as terrorist…and sonny-boy Craig was his spotter. You don't end up in juvie for something that messed up; it's prison for him."

He frowned and added a qualifier, "Unnn-less he can cut a deal of course, but I don't think he's got too much of a shot at it. Burrow County has more than enough to convict his dad without any help from him."

Erin's nose began to twitch even faster and the felt the corners of her mouth curving earthward. Just how the heck did he know all this? Sweet cheez n' crackers, he seemed to be aware of it almost instinctively.

But if he knew that much then maybe he could tell her something else.

"What about Amanda, what do you think will happen to her?" she asked him.

Conor answered her question with one of his own.

"Mmmm, that depends; she got any kind of a record?"

"Not as far as I know," Erin ventured, carefully. It was possible she supposed, but doubtful.

"Then she'll probably get off with probation," Conor told her, "especially if she co-operates; and according to what I read, that's already happening." (Actually he hadn't read anything of the kind—
but he'd *seen* Amanda up on that hillside with Craig. Oh yeah baby, *she'd* give up her boyfriend to
save her own pelt...in a heartbeat!)

Erin, meanwhile, felt a punch of disappointment; Amanda Hill wasn't out of her life just yet. It
must have registered on her face because Conor added a quick coda.

"For what it's worth Erin, I don't think she'll be giving you any more grief; after today she can
probably kiss her online privileges buh-bye."

"Don't bet on it, silver-boy!" The young bunny's laugh was high, dry, and bitter, "If I know
Mandy's folks, they'll probably buy her brand new computer...just to help her cope with all the
trauma, poor baby."

Conor nodded again, this time warily. Eeee-yipe, could girls get vicious with each other sometimes
or WHAT?

"Ah, I see. Spoiled, huh?"

"Like last month's cabbage!" Erin spat out the words, coming as close to a snarl as was possible for
her species, "She's had it for me ever since school let out, the year before this one."

"Really, what for?" the young fox had his ears pricked up.

Erin threw up her paws as if signaling for a field goal, "I don't KNOW! That's the part that drives
me crazy. It's like she just came at me out of nowhere. I didn't even know it was *her* harassing me
online until Lisa Chatterton caught her bragging about it in the school cafeteria."

"I see," Conor's face had gone tombstone-cold and his voice had taken on a velvety sheen, "Well if
she gets in your face again Erin, you know where to find me."

Erin Hopps hesitated for a second. She had the feeling that if she took that step, Conor would deal
with Amanda the way a swatter 'deals' with a fly.

"*You say that like it's a bad thing,*" her inner voice reminded her, and she quickly banished the
thought from her mind.

"Thanks, but I don't think it'll come to that; she's out my hare for now, excuse the pun. Uhhh, can I
ask you something?" It was time to change subjects again.

Conor's face became instantly piqued, "No, I *won't* do a pole dance."

"Har, har...Yeah, like *that's* something I'd ever want to see." She was laughing derisively, but the
derisive part was forced. "Be serious, 'kay? I wanted to ask you a question about the Zootopia
Performing Arts Academy."

"Okay, sorry, shoot," he said. He sounded sorry, but didn't look that way, he was getting his sly on
again. Never mind let it pass, she told herself.

"All right," she said, "Well I know you can't actually help me with my audition, but are there any
tips you can give me, any advice?"

"Oh yeah, I can give you some pointers," the young fox answered, happy to be of service, "first off,
lay something on the judges that they'll recognize. Like the saying goes, you can't go wrong with
the classics—but at the same time, you wanna try and put a new spin on it, show 'em something they haven't seen before. And last but not least, catch 'em by surprise, hit the judges with something that they totally won't be expecting; that's how you really get their attention."

"Oh-kayyy, Erin chewed her lip and nodded very slowly. Conor had just given her a lot to think about. "Is that what you did?" she asked him.

"Yeah, pretty much," he answered, tossing a paw in a 'whatever' gesture, his way of saying that this was ALL he was going to say.

Erin wanted to groan, talking with this fox could be like trying to pull a hippo's tooth with a pair of tweezers sometimes.

"All right, what did you do?" she asked him, trying not to sound exasperated.

Conor looked uncomfortable for a second

"Ahhh, it'd be easier to show you than to tell you," he said, "hold on a sec."

He did something and then a pop-up window appeared on her screen. She recognized it immediately as a Fuzztube window. The caption read simply, ZAPA Auditions, #29—Conor S. Lewis."

And then the playback commenced

"Hi, My names Conor," she heard him say—but she couldn't see him, the window was too small. She clicked to expand it to full screen, but then hit pause.

"Just a second, I need to go pee." She got up from her chair and disappeared off screen, returning about five minutes later with a bottle of apple cider.

She took a short swig and then seated herself.

"Kay, let's see what you've got, Conor," she said

She pressed play and heard a voice speaking from somewhere below the stage—one heckuva stage, like one of those grand old theaters from the days before TV…or even movies.

"Hello Conor, what are you going to perform for us, today?" a friendly female voice was asking him; Erin couldn't be sure but it sounded like Gazelle.

"Hi….Um, I'm going to play something by…uh, Led Zeppelion okay?"

Erin blinked, and then stared at the screen. What now? Conor was wide-eyed and trembling, and… where the heck was his electric guitar? All he had on him was an acoustic six, and he was holding onto it as if it was a life preserver and he was standing on the deck of a sinking ship.

"It's all right son, don't be nervous," someone else said, causing the young silver fox to fidget even more.

"Is this the same kid I played with at Carrot Days?" Erin wondered, nose twitching as she took another swig of her cider.

"I-I'm not nervous," the Conor on the screen insisted, looking sideways for a second. "I'm….just kinda pinched for time; I'm only gonna be able to do the short version of this song…just the short version. O-Okay…here we go."
He strummed a couple of notes, a familiar tune but Erin couldn't quite place it.

And then he began to sing.

"Hangmammal....Hangmammal
Hold it a little while
I think I see my friends a-comin'
Ridin' many a—GYACK!"

The cider exploded out of Erin's nostrils like twin shotgun blasts. On the last word, Conor had snapped his head sideways, and stuck his tongue out the side of his mouth. (He had even managed to make his eyes bulge.)

Erin jumped up out of her chair, shaking her fingers and grimacing...and also laughing herself sick.

"Aahhh, eyeww...fox, warn me if you're going to do that!" she said, sitting down quickly and grabbing a pawful of tissues from the dispenser she kept on her work desk.

She began wiping furiously at herself, (least she'd missed the laptop,) listening to Conor laughing his tail off...no wait, was that him or was it coming from the video? No, it was both, Erin finally decided. Oooo, she was SO going to get him back for this.

But then she heard a stentorian drumbeat come thundering off the Fuzztube vid, the opening rhythm of another Led Zep tune, a number much more familiar than the last one, and... and what the fresh heck? Conor had exchanged his unplugged six for the Strat he'd played at Carrot Days talent show. When had that happened?

Now he began to play along with the drumbeat, and he didn't look so unsure of himself now...or sound like it. (In fact, that had never been the case, Erin realized; the whole thing been an act.)

Conor played with the same flash and flourish she remembered from the Carrot Days show, whipping his finger against the strings on the concluding eight notes of each riff.

And then he began to sing.

"If it keeps on rainin', levee goin' to break
If it keeps on a RAIN-in', levee, she goin' to break."

Conor had said to put a new spin on an old song, and now Erin understood just what he'd meant by that, he sang the tune in a semi-Cajun accent, just enough, but not too much. He was also changing the lyrics when it suited him.

"She got just what it take to make a swamp fox leave his home.
"Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh, yeeeeeah."

And yeah, he had great singing voice, too.

When he came to the first bridge that was Conor really began to show off his guitar chops; putting on a slide and turning his instrument into a slithering anaconda.

And then, when he started to sing again, he was belting it full force.

"Don't it make you feel bad
When you tryin' to find you way home.
An' you don't know which way to go-ho...?"
It was awesome; everything about the young fox's performance was just...awesome. His singing, his playing, and don't forget his timing, switching to his electric and starting the music again just as the judges' laughter had begun to subside.

No wonder they'd admitted him to the Academy, Erin decided. When Conor finished his performance, she stood up and gave him a one-bunny standing ovation. (And from the sound of things on-screen, the judges' panel had been equally enthusiastic.)

"Wow! That was just amazing," She said, and then she felt her eyes crinkling mischievously, "I can see why you got in...although fair's fair, you did have kind of an unfair advantage."

"Huh, what do you mean?" the young silver fox asked, tilting his head sideways; the Fuzztube window had vanished and it was just the two of them again.

"Wellll," Erin looked coyly at her paws and then up again. "Everybody knows rock guitarists get real ugly faces on when they're heavy into a solo, and in your case that's a cakewalk."

She saw his ears turned backwards and his face abruptly lengthen; he looked like the seat of his pants had just ripped wide open. Good!

"Oh nyuk, nyuk, nyuk...really funny there, Snowdrop. When you get to ZAPA, don't bother signing up for any of the comedy classes; you ain't got the cred."

Erin just sniggered quietly to herself; that didn't quite make up for the way he'd caused her drink to come out of her nose.

...but it was a pretty good place to start.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:

Conor's experiences with The Mister, The Company, and Kieran McCrodon are detailed in The Fire Triangle Prologue, Escape From Zoo York

https://archiveofourown.org/works/12187398/chapters/27669060
Chapter Summary

Another day, another assignment... that will take Nick and Judy on an unexpected journey.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 8—Where There's Smoke... (Pt. 1)

"A lot of the internet is positive for the most part, but... there are horrible things..."
—Phil Johnston, Co-Director Wreck-It Ralph 2

"You're not coming to work dressed like that are you?"

Judy Hopps stared at Nick Wilde with her nose twitching. The uniform he was wearing today looked like something he'd picked up at a Rescue Mission; the pant-cuffs were frayed, the knees were worn; the shirt was so badly faded that he could almost have been mistaken for a bus driver. The only good thing you could say about the red fox's ensemble was that at least it was clean.

They were ascending the front steps to Precinct-1 together, their standard morning ritual. As always, bunny-scout Judy had arrived first, and Nick had caught up with her a few minutes later, (yet another part of their daily routine.) What wasn't so customary was that Nick seemed to have designated today as his own, private, casual Friday. Judy hoped he had something nicer to wear in his locker, but suspected that wasn't the case.

"Yes mom, I'm going to work like this, mom." the fox replied, pushing his sunglasses up the bridge of his muzzle and regarding her with a sullen eye. At first, Judy thought he was only being sarcastic, but then a thought came buzzing into her head.

"You... went to see your mother last night, is that it?" she asked.

Nick didn't answer her immediately, but the way he seemed to find the middle distance interesting...
told the bunny-cop everything she needed to know.

"No," he finally said, "I called her to try to set up a time for me to come and visit, but..." here he half growled, half sighed, "I never got around to asking her; mom had...'something else' on her mind."

It didn't take much of a leap for Judy to guess what that 'something else' was.

"Grandkids again?" she asked—and hit the target, dead center.

"From the minute she picked up the phone," Nick answered her, rolling his tongue as if something unpleasant had become lodged underneath it. When he stopped, it seemed to trigger an attack of the guilt bug...mea culpa; I've been a bad little fox-cub.

"I tried Carrots, I really tried," he told her, "But after five minutes of that, I just couldn't bring myself to ask if I could see her."

"Okay," Judy said to him quickly, having decided this was as far as she could push the fox. While she still didn't necessarily approve of him showing up for work in his 'grubs', at least he had a semi-decent reason for it.

But dangit, why today? They were supposed to be assisting a couple of deputies from the Burrow County Sheriff's Office this morning. What kind of an impression was Nick going to make, dressed like a low-rent security-guard?

That was when Judy's inner voice raised its paw.

"Uh, 'scuse me...Jude-the-dude? I-I don't anyone from BUNNYBURROW is going to care very much about what the fox that stopped the Jerry Guilford attack is wearing today."  

It took a second or two for that thought to sink home. The result prompted Nick to turn and look at her with his ears pricked up

"What, Carrots?"

"Oh, nothing," Judy answered, still carrying the wry smile that had caught her partner's attention.

At the door to the precinct, she paused for a moment to square her shoulders and steel herself.

"Here it comes again," she thought, "'Hold my carrot juice.' Better get used to it, Judy."

She pushed through the door and into the lobby, with Nick Wilde right beside her.

No one said it; no one said much of anything as a matter of fact...to either one of them

Judy Hopps would later admit that it could have been a lot more dramatic. All talk in the precinct foyer didn't cease completely at their appearance, but the hubbub DID tone down to 'front pew level'. She had no idea what was going on, but just before someone hit the 'mute' button, she could have sworn she heard Francine Trunkaby saying something about a... hyrax? ("...he knows what he's talking about.")

And was it her imagination, or was everyone in the lobby trying to avoid looking at her and Nick—but at the same time watching them out of the corner of their eye? (Okay, it wasn't everyone, but there were more than enough animals pretending to avert their gaze for the effect to be easily noticeable. )
Well, Judy reasoned, there was one quick way to find out if she was right. And so, making a swift course-correction, she pivoted in the direction of the reception desk. She did not bother looking to see if Nick was with her; she knew that he would be.

It wasn't necessary for them to check in with Benjamin Clawhauser, each and every morning; it wasn't necessary for anybody in Precinct-1 to stop by the reception desk on their way to morning roll-call—but almost everybody did, at least once or twice a week; the plus-size cheetah was both popular and well liked.

That…and he was always up on the latest precinct scuttlebutt.

"Morning, Benjamin." Judy greeted the big cat cheerfully

"Morning, Clawhauser." Nick Wilde's salutation was a mite more perfunctory than hers.

Benjamin Clawhauser didn't answer them right away; his mouth was currently occupied with his new, favorite, morning treat, a cronut, (like the name implies an amalgam of a croissant and a doughnut.)

Even after he swallowed, the big cat needed two large swigs of Dr. Lepperd to get his voice back.

"Only THIS animal would wash down a doughnut with soda-pop," Nick Wilde observed to himself with a silent, amused head-shake. He wondered a moment if it was possible for a cheetah to contract diabetes.

When Clawhauser finally spoke, he was as always, the soul of conviviality.

"Annnd good morning to you, Officer Wilde, Officer Hopps, gonna be a warm one out there, huh?"

*That* was putting it mildly, to say the least; Zootopia was looking at near-record heat for today, not such a bad thing for an animal who spent his work-day inside an air-conditioned lobby but pure purgatory for the officers on the street—and not just because of the uncomfortable working conditions. High temperatures also meant high tempers; the ZPD would be breaking up a lot of fights today.

Oh well, Judy figured, at least that gave her an opening.

"Yeah, well, speaking of warm," she said, choosing her words carefully and then nodding backwards, over her shoulder. "Is it me, or did there seem to be a just little chill in the air when Nick and I walked in here?"

"Oh, that!" Clawhauser clutched his ample belly and laughed, "Rock Hardesty was on a tear last night about 'public displays of affection' between predator and prey-species, 'unnatural', 'immoral,' you know what he's like when he gets rolling. Anyway, someone remembered that surveillance tape of you two in that jewelry store…the one where Nick…uh, you know…and so everyone's kind of, well…." he tugged at his collar for a second, "So, that's what going on." He seemed to take for granted that the fox and bunny would know which Rock Hardesty he was talking about.

Actually he was right, they did; the bunny more than with the fox. While Judy never tuned in to either of the hyrax's programs herself, her parents and many of her older siblings often did…and of course she'd seen those billboards plastered all over town. Love him or loathe him, there were very few citizens of Zootopia who were unaware of Hardesty's radio and TV talk-shows—including her partner, who let out a low, soft growl at the mention of his name.
Unfortunately for everyone, Benjamin Clawhauser seemed to find the whole thing highly amusing, not the best tack to take with Nick Wilde when he was already in a cranky mood. (A quick, sideways glance at the fox confirmed it.)

"Okay, thanks for the heads-up, Benjamin." Judy smiled and waved, looking for a fast, if not necessarily graceful exit. (Nick just mumbled something unintelligible.) "We'd better get along to roll call, talk to you later."

They were halfway to the bullpen door when a whistle from the reception desk drew their attention backwards. When she turned around, Judy saw the plus-sized cheetah grinning and cocking a finger at her.

"Hold my carrot juice!"

Judy grinned and aimed a finger back at him; she never thought she'd be glad to hear those words.

When they got inside the bullpen, she heard it several more times; it was as if the infection of the lobby had not quite spread this far.

And yet; and yet…

There they were again, those glances out of the corner of the eye, followed by a brisk turn of the head in another direction—from Officer Jackson, from Officer Rhinowitz, even from officer Fangmeier. The only one looking at them directly it seemed, was Officer Kii Catano, whose expression was completely unreadable. To Judy, it felt like the longest walk ever to their seats.

When they finally sat down, she offered a sunny 'Good Morning' to Officer McHorn, who only grunted and barely looked at her.

Okay, okay…the big rhino was always this taciturn; the first time they'd met, he'd only snorted and rolled his eyes, but still—there was something different about it this time, an air of…Judy couldn't quite put her finger on it.

"Holy foxtrot…all this because of a crummy talk-show?" Nick Wilde whispered to her out of the corner of his mouth. Yes, he'd caught it, too.

When Francine Trunkaby came into the bullpen, the situation appeared to worsen. No, the glances being directed at her and Nick didn't ramp up into outright hostility, but it seemed—to Judy anyway—that the cow elephant was being greeted more than the usual measure of warmth.

And she had been there for the Rafaj Brothers raid, and seen what was on that surveillance camera, live and in real time. Could Francine be the 'someone' Benjamin Clawhauser had referred to a moment ago?

"Simmer down Judy," she told herself, glancing sideways as Nick again, "You're letting your imagination run away with you. G'ohhh, I really need to go make that appointment with Dr...."

These thoughts were cut off as the front door banged open and Chief Bogo came into the briefing room.

"Right, quiet!' he blared, offering his usual greeting to his officers. Unnecessary today, Judy noted, no one was talking loudly—for once. (And when was the last time that had happened?)

"And notify the motor-pool, I want every vehicle topped off with coolant before they leave the precinct today," Bogo was speaking over his shoulder to someone out in the hall, "and have our tow-trucks prepped and on standby; best be prepared, just in case."
"Right Chief," the officer around the corner acknowledged. (It sounded like the hippo, Higgins.)

Bogo nodded his approval, and moved to the lectern, leaving the door open for someone else to close. (Officer Jackson) And then shuffling his papers and adjusting his spectacles, he took his usual place at the podium.

"Why he doesn't just get that thing enlarged?" Nick queried in a sideways *sotto voce*, referring to the doorway by which Bogo had entered the bullpen. (The Cape buffalo was always required to turn sideways and duck his head low in order to pass through it.) Judy had no idea…but thank goodness; her partner's jovial fursonality seemed at last to be on the comeback trail.

"Mornin' everyone," Bogo announced looking up from the documents, "Well, I don't think I need remind you that it's going to be hot one out there today," he peered over the rim of his spectacles. "But I will, because it's important. Everyone, be sure to keep well hydrated when you're out on the streets today, and keep an eye on y'selves, and on each other, for signs of heat exhaustion. If you start to feel goosebumps or dizzy, if you start to get muscle cramps, don't keep silent about it, tell your partner and notify dispatch; there's no shame in it."

He paused, sweeping his gaze over the bullpen to make sure his officers got the point, and then continued "Now, tempers will flare when it's hot outside, and that applies not just to the citizenry but to ourselves as well Keep that in mind, and keep yourselves under control…and again, keep an eye on each other. That's what your partner is there for, am I understood."

"Yes, sir!' the officers responded, with more enthusiasm than they probably felt. It was one thing to promise to keep your head here in the bullpen…and quite another to put it into practice when you had a pack of angry citizens in your face, offering graphic descriptions of what they'd like to do to your mother, (because you wouldn't let them open that fire hydrant.)

When the Chief called "Assignments," Nick and Judy both relaxed. They already had their task for the day, assisting the Burrow County Deputies with their questioning of Craig Guilford and his girlfriend, Amanda Hill. (indoor work, yay!)

The task assignments went pretty much as anyone might have expected, Bogo put the cold weather species in Tundratown and Old-Growth City, and consigned the animals from warmer climes to Sahara Square, Savanna Central, and the Rainforest District.

"Good thing it wasn't this hot yesterday," Judy observed to Nick, "it's probably going to be yucky up in the Meadowlands." Being a farm girl, she knew better than most the joys of working outside during a hot spell; carrot crops *don't* take 'mental health days.'

Bogo put extra officers on the roads leading into Tundratown from The Rainforest District and Sahara Square; there'd be more than a few mammals trying to find relief from the heat in Zootopia's arctic zone today, and the tunnels through the mountains and the Climate Wall could accommodate only so many vehicles at a time. Heavy traffic through a bottleneck like that inevitably led to fender-benders and on a day like this, to possible altercations.

Judy thought the Chief had finished passing out the assignments when, much to her surprise, his gaze fell on her and Nick.

"Hopps, Wilde…see me in my office after we're done here. I've got something else for you, when you've finished assisting the Burrow County deputies. Right then everyone; dismissed!"

The briefing broke up a lot more slowly than usual; no one was in a rush to hit the streets *today.*
"What do you suppose this is all about?" Nick asked Judy as they made their way up the concourse towards the Chief's office.

"Well, we're not in trouble or anything," she answered with a shrug and a twitch of her nose. For some reason, the fox's prickly outlook had given way to a mood of apprehension.

"Oh I know that," he answered, offering a shrug of his own. "I'm just worried that he's going to give us an assignment out there in the heat." He was nodding in the direction of the Precinct's front entrance.

"Well, we'll see," Judy answered, having nothing better available. Privately, she was thinking, "Hmmmph, City animals...!"

When they entered Bogo's office, they found not only the Chief, but also another familiar face, waiting to greet them.

"Mr. Gamsbart, well this is a surprise." Judy told him, reaching up to offer the chamois a paw. (She had to elbow Nick in the ribs to get him to follow suit.) "Nice to see you again," she said.

"Same here," the Zootopia Deputy Prosecutor offered, shaking hooves with each of them.

"So, is this about the Rafaj Brothers?" Nick Wilde asked. He sounded like a teenage fox, insisting for the twentieth time, 'Yeah, I got my homework done'. Rudy Gamsbart either didn't catch his tone of his voice, or else he wasn't interested.

Neither, apparently, was Chief Bogo.

"No, it's not about that," he said, motioning for his officers to take a seat. "It's....Mmmmm, best wait until everyone's here." He reached over and keyed his desk intercom, "Clawhauser, where the devil is...?"

As if in answer to the Chief's inquiry, someone rapped at his door just then, (down low, Judy noted with her ears up and her nose twitching.)

"Hopps, get that will you?" the chief asked her.

Opening the door to Chief Bogo's office required a little finesse on Judy's part; she had to leap up, catch hold of the door handle and then use gravity to help her turn it downwards. She had it pretty much dialed in by now, but still... Why hadn't Chief Bogo simply told the new arrival, 'Come' as was his usual habit?

She got her answer when the door cracked open. For the first time since joining the ZPD, Judy Hopps found herself in the presence of an officer who was actually smaller than herself, a tassel-eared Kaibab squirrel to be precise.

Although they had never met, Judy had heard about Lieutenant Albert Tufts; the head of the ZPD Cybercrimes unit; he had a reputation out of all proportion to his size—and not necessarily a good one. Whenever she mentioned to another officer that she'd never actually encountered him, the response was invariably something along the lines of 'lucky you!'

Albert Tufts, was the quintessential cyber-genius; arrogant, abrasive, and condescending to everyone in his immediate vicinity. Certainly he looked the part on this hot, Zootopia morning, dressed in stained, urban-camo bush-shorts and a black tank-top, worn beneath an open, tie-dye shirt...so loud, that Judy couldn't decide which was more appropriate, sunglasses or shooter's muffs. The final touch was his police badge, dangling from a gold rope-chain around his neck. Any
other member of the ZPD showing for work dressed like that would be written up in heartbeat, unless they were working undercover—and Al Tufts had never played that game in his life.

"Well, are you just going to stand there or what, bunny?" he demanded, folding his arms by way of greeting.

Judy dutifully moved aside and without another word—or an invitation from Chief Bogo—Tufts scooted across the floor and shot up one leg of the Cape buffalo's desk, pulling up a paperweight to use as a makeshift chair and planting himself squarely in the center of the desk blotter, as if claiming it for himself.

"Nice of you to make it, this morning," Bogo informed him sardonically. He looked halfway ready to sweep the bushy-tailed rodent straight into his wastebasket.

"Ahhh no problem, Chief dude." Tufts responded, flipping a pawlm back and forth.

He could get away with such frivolities for two main reasons. First, Lieutenant Albert Tufts, ZPD, was good at his job; even his biggest detractors had to give him that much. Only two months previously his Cybercrimes Unit had made the biggest ransomware bust in the last ten years, only one of a war-bonnet's worth of feathers in the Kaibab squirrel's cap.

But the main reason Tufts could get away with talking to Bogo like that was because he knew—and so did everyone else—that if the Chief ever did fire him, he'd find a dozen offers from the private sector waiting in his mailbox when he arrived home...at three times his current salary, minimum.

And so Bogo just gritted his teeth and let the remark pass.

"Right," he said, ignoring the squirrel for the moment and focusing his attention on Nick and Judy, "The reason you're here Hopps…Wilde, is that we may have finally got a lead on the Phantom… Yes Hopps, what is it?"

Judy's was waving her paw in the air.

"Sir, I know that name," she said, "But that's pretty much all I know. Who is 'the Phantom' exactly?"

"Well, he's…" Al Tufts started to answer, but his time the Chief was quicker, nodding in deference to the bunny-cop's partner.

"Wilde?"

It was the right call to make; Nick Wilde, former a-level street-hustler, knew exactly to whom the Chief was referring.

"He's a shylock Carrots, a loanshark…practically a legend on the street." The red fox warmed quickly to the subject as he went on. "No one's ever met him; no one's ever seen him. Heck, nobody even knows what species he is. The ZPD's been trying to bust him for…ohhh, going on three years now."

Judy's ears stood up and reached up for the ceiling. And then she turned to speak to Bogo again.

"But…how, sir? Not getting caught is one thing, but three years and we don't even know his species? How…how does he DO it?" She found this news almost impossible to believe.
Reluctantly, (very reluctantly,) Bogo yielded the floor to Albert Tufts.

"By keeping his distance," the squirrel told her, (after favoring Nick with an annoyed look,) "he only communicates with his 'clients' via the net and even then only by text-message or e-mail, no voice, no webcam. We know of at least one instance where he broke off a deal after his 'client' insisted on hearing him speak. He's one seriously paranoid cyber-dude."

"Well, you know what they say," Rudy Gamsbart observed with a smirk, joining the discussion for the first time, "Just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean they're NOT out to get you,"

That was good for a snicker from the Chief, Nick, and Judy…and an even more vexed look Lieutenant Tufts.

"Maybe so, but he's not the only one. Even AFTER the Phantom shined on that dude, he still wouldn't talk to us."

"Why was that?" Nick Wilde asked, intrigued. This part of the story appeared to be news even to him.

"Because the Phantom isn't just a shylock, fox-dude; he's also a hacker," Tufts answered him with his tail flipping, a sign of wariness in a squirrel, "The best I ever came up against; we're talking almost Druid-level abilities here. ZPD Cybercrimes hasn't even been able to track down his servers…much less crack his encryption code." And then to Nick's amazement, (and also Judy's,) his tone became one of grudging admiration. "Whit his kind of mad computer skillz, the Phantom is exactly the kind of dude you don't want torqued at you if you're dependent on computer tech for a living…or even at home."

"And by necessity, every single one of the Phantom's 'Clients' is just that," Gamsbart concurred, and then nodded at the squirrel, "Tufts, tell 'em how he got his name."

The Kaibab squirrel bristled at the question but answered it anyway…if you wanted to call that kind of babble an answer

"I forget who first came up with it, but back when the dude first showed up on our radar, we used to call him the Phantom Blot…coz the closer we got to him, the more he was like, there's no 'there' there. It was like he didn't even exist, and we'd dreamed the whole thing. Every time we thought we were closing in on him…it was like 'zap!' and every trace of him was gone. After a while, he started getting primo at concealing his presence online. Eventually, we dropped the Blot part, and just started calling him The Phantom."

Relating the story seemed to depress Tufts, typical of what happens when an online warrior finds himself overmatched. That prompted Rudy Gamsbart to throw him a lifeline.

"ZPD Cybercrimes might never have spotted him again, except for another case they were working. Someone was hacking into the databases of some of the big Zootopia banks and finance companies. At first, the two cases seemed to have no connection, but then a pattern started to emerge." He nodded towards the Chief, who in turn passed the ball back to Tufts.

"And where did it go from there, Lieutenant?"

The tassel eared squirrel took the ball and ran with it. "I noticed that this hacker, or hackers, whoever they were always went straight into the same file-folders whenever they hit one of the bank's databases, the lists of loan applicants who'd been rejected as bad risks, for whatever reason. I began to wonder about that; most loanshark customers are animals that got shined on for a bank-
loan. And so I ran a comparison and yep, it was the Phantom...still no way to trace him, but it was him all right, the exact same security measures." He sounded frustrated, rather than heartened by the memory of his coup.

"And THAT'S why we want him so badly," Rudy Gamsbart said, picking up the thread again, "As loan-sharks go, the Phantom is pretty much a small timer. At least that we know of," he hurriedly qualified his statement, "The thing that's really serious is the way he keeps hacking into the bank's databases and getting away with it."

"Right and it's driving the Zootopia banking community half barmy," Chief Bogo put in, "What was it the President of Lemming Brothers said to me the other day? Oh yes, 'This animal's worse than bedbugs; just when you think you've got rid of him, he's back again.' Yes Wilde?" Now Nick was the one with his paw in the air, (and his head tilted sideways.)

"Excuse me sir, but that sounds like some pretty odd behavior for a loan-shark. Hacking into a bank's data-base to find customers? That's not right; in my experience, shylocks always let animals come to THEM."

"True, that." The Chief was nodding, "But what we think is happening is, he does it to verify his clients' stories. 'You say you've come to me because the banks won't lend you any money? Well, let's just see about it, then.'"

"Oh yes, of course sir," Nick was nodding, but to Judy Hopps' ears, he sounded singularly UN-convinced.

"Look, it doesn't matter why he's doing it, as long as he's doing it." Al Tufts broke in with his long, bushy tail flipping again, this time in exasperation, "So far, the Phantom has only run what I call a stage-one hack on the banks' databases...but that could change in a heartbeat."

Judy felt her ears go up again, and then her paw lifted upwards as well. "Eh, excuse me Lieutenant, um...a stage one hack?"

The Kaibab squirrel looked at her as if she were drooling and spouting gibberish. She could almost hear him thinking, 'Dumb bunny...!'"

Finally, he said, "A stage one hack; going into a database to steal data. Not nice, but it doesn't cause any damage, at least not in the short term if you don't make any changes to the files you're copying."

"Which is why that kind of hack is also the hardest one to spot," Rudy Gamsbart observed from the sidelines.

Tufts simply continued as if the chamois wasn't there. "A stage-two hack is where you go into a database to manipulate the data—but not necessarily with malicious intent. Maybe you have a traffic ticket you'd like stricken off your record, maybe you'd like to improve your credit score; there are individuals out there who can do that for a price. A stage three hack is a cybercrime with larcenous intent, infecting someone's computer with ransomware, or hijacking it to use as a coin mine."

"Wait, what?" Rudy Gamsbart was staring at Tufts—exactly as the tassel-eared squirrel had planned it, Judy suspected.

"Oh yes, that's the big new trend in cybercrime these days," the squirrel responded with an almost triumphant smirk on his face, "And it can happen without you even realizing it. The only sign the
virus is on your computer is if it starts to run hot for no good reason. That's why 'bit-jackers', that's what I call them, like to target online gamers, the average gaming computer has a heavy duty cooling system and it's built handle large amounts of data in a short space of time. You know those online games where you compete for money, like Stalker Race? You wanna stay the heck away from those bad boys; they're the bit-jackers' happy hunting ground."

"And...a stage-four hack?" Nick Wilde asked him. He didn't even know if there WAS such a thing, but he wanted to shut this know-it-all squirrel down before he really got going on the subject of coin mining. (So did Chief Bogo, judging by the approving nod he was directing the red fox's way.)

Tufts' tail ceased its movements and his features turned ice-cold and grim.

"A cyberattack," was all he said. Nick's query had done the job.

"And although the Phantom is still at...stage one as Lieutenant Tufts put it," the Chief rumbled, "he's been deep enough inside the banks' servers to have gone all the way to that fourth stage, had he chosen to do so."

"Not only that," it was Rudy Gamsbart again, "he's also been deep enough inside some of the local banks to steal tens of millions of dollars if he felt like it; he could have skimmed the dormant accounts, set himself up for a loan and then erased it once he had the money, even put himself on the payroll for a six-figure salary. So far, he's done nothing of the kind...but how many times can you put that kind of temptation in front of somebody before they finally give in to it?"

Nick didn't reply to this and neither did Judy; after two years with the ZPD, they both knew the answer to the chamois' question. Dawn Bellwether had once told them, 'fear always wins.' She'd been wrong about that one; fear doesn't always win—but try greed.

"I see," the bunny finally said, "but what has that got do with Officer Wilde and me?"

Bogo leaned across his desk with a frosty smile.

"Ah yes, the $64,000 dollar question."

"The 64...WHAT?" Albert Tufts' tail was flipping again.

"Never mind,' Rudy Gamsbart waved a hoof, and then to Nick and Judy he said, "It's because of the method the Phantom uses to pay out and collect his money. He absolutely refuses to deal in any kind of online monetary transaction, cash or cyber-currency."

"Just goes to show how smart he is." Tufts interjected, refusing to be brushed aside, "Like I already said," (he hadn't) "crypto-currency transactions are risky little stinkers. Just last February, Zoo York City indicted a guy who ripped off nearly a million smackers in cryptocurrency by accessing his victims' cell phones. And that's not even mentioning the Bitecoin collapse from a couple of years ago."

"All right, fine, "Nick was scratching at an ear. "I get why The Phantom doesn't like cryptocurrency, but why no online money transfers, period?"

"That, we don't know," the chamois started to say before Tufts cut him off again.

"Who CARES why; it works for him, doesn't it?"

"Maybe not quite as well as you think, Lieutenant," Chief Bogo rumbled, freezing the squirrel in
his patented 'not-ONE-more-word' look, enough to silence even him. He held Tufts in that gaze for an extra two seconds and then shifted his attention to Rudy Gamsbart.

"Mr. Prosecutor? I believe this is where the Attorney General's office comes into it."

Gamsbart nodded and turned to Nick and Judy.

"As I said, we've known for a long time that The Phantom doesn't use the net for money transfers; what we didn't know was how he WAS conducting them." His mouth cocked upwards into a droll expression, "That is, not until recently. Now, we're fairly certain that he uses a dead-drop for his exchanges, cash only."

It was here that Chief's silent warning to Albert Tufts finally wore off.

"A dead-drop, that's…" he started to say, and Nick Wilde swiftly interrupted

"I know what a dead-drop is, Lieutenant," he said, laying his ears backwards. He had clearly had enough of this officious little jerk, "Pre-arranged location, one animal leaves the money, another one picks it up and they never see each other."

"That way if either bag-mammal gets caught he can't give the other one away, even if he wants to."

Judy Hopps also had an edge to her voice. Even a rookie police-officer knew what a dead-drop was; sweet cheez n' crackers, just who did this arrogant so-sand-so think he was? It was one thing for him to lecture her and Nick on computer science, but the street was her turf (and the fox's even more.)

Rudy Gamsbart just continued as if there'd been no interruptions. He hadn't lasted this long in the Zootopia AG's office without knowing when to ignore someone.

"And that's why you're here, Officer Hopps, Officer Wilde. Three nights ago in Tundratown, one of our Confidential Informants was arrested while attempting to burglarize a cold-storage warehouse."

That prompted a derisive yip from Nick.

"Heh, he's just lucky it was the ZPD who caught him. Mr. Big doesn't LIKE it when street criminals try to operate inside his territory."

Judy expected another angry stare from Bogo for this, but the Cape buffalo only nodded ironically.

"You're quite right about that, Wilde." He said, capping the line with a dark chortle, "'Bad for business', as Mr. Big himself might put it. However in this case, it may be ourselves who've been smiled upon by the goddess of good fortune. Our C.I. claims to know the location of a cash pick-up the Phantom is making this coming Saturday. He says he'll give it to us in exchange for dropping the burglary charges."

"Just…let him walk?" Judy's nose was twitching in disbelief.

"Out of the question," Rudy Gamsbart answered flatly. "The Attorney General's Office is prepared to reduce the charge from burglary to possession of stolen property…IF our informant's information is valid, but that's it, that's all he's getting." He looked at the floor and then up again; something Judy had seen many times before…ironically, when a suspect ran out of excuses and was finally ready to admit to his crime.

"The problem is," the chamois said, "This particular informant sold us a bill of goods on at least one prior occasion. A year ago, he was caught lying on the witness stand and nearly cost us a case
we'd been building for more than a year. Frankly, if it was anyone less than The Phantom he's offering, I'd tell him to go peddle his papers elsewhere.

Judy felt her throat tighten and from the corner of her eye, she saw Nick Wilde trying not to grimace. This conversation had just taken a turn that neither one of them liked very much. A suspect, caught lying under oath? Didn't they know someone who fit that description?

Once again, Rudy Gamsbart either didn't catch the changes of expression or else, much more likely, he didn't care.

Ditto for Chief Bogo.

"Now, it so happens, you've had dealings with this informant before," he told his officers. "You know him and you know how he thinks. When you've done assisting the Burrow County Deputies with the Guilford interrogation, I want you to go and have a similar chat with our CI. Find out what he knows, try to determine whether or not his information is valid…and then report directly to me. I'll make a determination as to whether or not we pursue this any further."

Someone had to ask it and that someone turned out to be Judy Hopps.

"Sir, with all due respect, why are we even pursuing it this far, if our informant has already proven himself to be unreliable?"

The answer she got was not a friendly one. Rudy Gamsbart stiffened.

"Officer Hopps, I believe I already told you that…"

"Because, quite simply, we've everything to gain and nothing to lose," Chief Bogo interjected, moving quickly to give his officer some cover. "If our informant's lying to us, it won't help with our investigation into The Phantom's activities…but it won't hinder us either." He lifted his hooves in a cynical gesture. "And then what does HE get out of it? The judge throws the book at him and the ZPD never trusts him again. That's why we've decided to move forward on this information."

"And as I said earlier, this is the Phantom we're trying to catch," Rudy Gamsbart said, calmer now, "Given the potential damage he could cause, The Attorney General's office is prepared to hold its nose and play ball with this informant, regardless of any past issues." A lopsided smile crossed the chamois' face, "If you'll pardon the quote, we need to nip this in the bud. That cryptocurrency hijacker Lieutenant Tufts mentioned earlier? A rank amateur compared to our little troublemaker. When the police raided Mr. coin-Bandit's house, they found a laptop containing a folder labeled 'Hacker Stuff' and another one marked 'Finished Targets.' You'll never see The Phantom making such a brazen mistake; if he was even half that careless, we'd have caught him a long time ago."

Lieutenant Tufts' response to this was a pained look, directed at Chief Bogo.

"Sir, if you're done with me here, can I go now?" To Judy, he sounded like a kit who wanted to get back to his cartoons.

"Hang on just a second, we're almost finished." The Chief told him.

"One thing I need to emphasize." Rudy Gamsbart said, ignoring both the Kaibab squirrel and the Chief, "The most the AG's office is prepared to offer our CI is that reduction to possession of stolen property charge…and he's lucky to be getting THAT much after the way he embarrassed us last time."

"How much jail-time are we talking here, Mr. Gamsbart?" It was Nick again, "he's going to ask,
and we'll need an answer."

"Tell him that's going to be up to the judge," the chamois responded with a nod, "But you can also inform him that if his information pans out, he'll serve his time in City Jail not the Zootopia Penitentiary."

"Yep, that'll make a difference," the fox responded. "Especially if that CI is who I think it is," he added quietly, to himself.

Just then, the intercom rasped on Chief Bogo's desk.

"Yes, Clawhauser, what is it?"

"Chief, the deputies from Burrow County are here."

Bogo rolled his wrist and checked his watch.

"Right on time…Right then, Hopps, Wilde, off you go."

It wasn't until they were well away from the Chief's office that Judy turned to her partner.

"Is it my imagination Nick, or is there something the 'squirrel-dude' said in there that's bothering you?"

"No, it wasn't your imagination, Carrots," the fox answered her at once. He chewed his lip for a second, mulling his next words. Then he said, "Only it wasn't just him, it was Chief Bogo too… what he said about The Phantom cracking those bank files to do background checks on his customers." He stopped walking and turned to face her, "That doesn't make any sense, Judy. A loanshark doesn't need to hack into your bank account to know you got turned down for a loan… and isn't just 'most customers', like Lieutenant Tufts said; nobody goes to a shylock unless they can't get money from a bank. And a shark wouldn't care about that anyway. The only thing that matters to him is getting paid. If the Phantom was hacking into those bank files looking for leverage—something he could use to blackmail his customers if they don't pay up—then yes, I could see it, but being turned down for a loan is hardly extortion level info." He pressed his paws to his cheeks in a faux-rendition of Benjamin Clawhauser, "O-M Goodness, the bank won't loan me any money, woe is me; my reputation is toast."

Judy's ears turned backwards and her mouth hardened into a scowl. "Not funny, Nick."

Actually, it would have been funny if Nick's joke hadn't been at the corpulent cheetah's expense. Sweet Cheez, his mother must have really given him a hard time on the phone last night. Still… everything he'd just told her made perfect sense.

"And HE should know about shylocks, after all the times his father got turned down for a bank-loan." She reminded herself.

"So why DO you think the Phantom keeps hacking into those bank records?" She asked him.

Nick looked away for a second, and then looked straight at her.

"I think it's exactly what I said earlier, Carrots. I think that's how he finds his clients… Yes, I know." He could see her nose twitching again, "I know what I said, loan-sharks don't go looking for customers; they let mammals come to them—only not this time, Carrots….not this time."

"All right Nick," Judy spoke slowly and cautiously, "But why are you so certain that's the case?"
"If you want the truth, I'm not," the red fox admitted. He tapped his head and then patted his midsection, "It's not something I think, only something I feel. But the last time my gut talked to me this way was when it told me to go check out a certain hilltop, overlooking the Big Dance."

At that instant, as if triggered by the red fox's reference to the Carrot Days Festival, a familiar voice hailed them from beside the reception desk.

"Hey Nick, Judy…over here."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:
Some parts of this episode are based in actual fact.

'Bit-jacking', as Lieutenant Tufts called it, is a very real phenomenon. Likewise Prosecutor Gamsbart's 'coin Bandit' is based on an actual person, The discovery by the police of those folders on his laptop is also a real event.

The different levels of hacking described in the story are real as well, (although the terms, Stage 1, 2, 3, etc were my own create for the sake of brevity.)
Chapter 8—Where There's Smoke... (Continued...Pt. 2)

Judy Hopps could not have been more pleased…or less surprised.

Standing beside Precinct-1's front entrance, waving and grinning, was the familiar, feline form of Burrow County Sheriff's Deputy Mac Cannon—and who else would the BCSD have sent to talk to Craig Guilford? After all the previous times the bobcat had been questioned him, that choice was a slam dunk. The hog accompanying Mac, on the other paw, was a wholly different story. HE looked like someone who'd be more at home sitting in a rocking chair, sipping lemonade and telling stories to his grandchildren; his liver-spotted face was grizzled with gray, and his ample belly hung over the rim of his chinos like a loaf of bread baked in too small a pan. The rest of his ensemble consisted of suspenders and a striped shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and—especially inappropriate for a hot day like today—a bow-tie. The topper was pair of tiny, steel-rimmed spectacles perched precariously on his muzzle as if preparing to take flight. The only sign that he was a law enforcement official was the well-worn badge clipped to his belt.

Looks, however, could be deceiving…and no one knew that better than Judy Hopps. Sheriff's Detective Walter Root had been with the BCSD since before she'd learned to walk…and don't let that laid back grandpa routine fool you. Around the Sheriff's Office, he was affectionately known as Ol' Razor-Head for the sharpness of his mind. (He'd been a big factor in the bunny-cop's decision to become a police officer.)

"Deputy Cannon, Detective Root," she said, thrusting out a paw. This was business, not pleasure and she thought she should keep things on a professional level.

Root however, had other ideas. "Aw never the titles, we're all friends here, Wally and Mac'll do." He spoke in a curious mixture of Midwestern twang and Southern drawl.

"Same here," Mac Cannon said when it was his turn to shake.
When they moved on to her partner, Judy was surprised to hear the old hog say, "Good to see you again too, Nick."

What the…? When had HE ever…? Then she remembered, Detective Root had been one of the animals who had taken Nick's statement, the morning after the Guilford Attack, (as it was coming to be known in the Burrow.)

"Likewise, I'm sure," The fox responded, warmly pumping the hog's hoof. Whether his sullen mood had finally evaporated or whether he was simply putting in his best behavior for their visitors, Judy couldn't say.

"So," Root asked them, reaching around to scratch the back of his neck, "Our boy have anything new to tell us since last we talked?"

"Nope," Nick shook his head, "Same old, same old; nothing but threats and insults."

"Yeah, I figgered as much," the Sheriff's hog answered, snorting indifferently.

"What about his girlfriend, Amanda Hill, anything new out of her?" It was Mac Cannon.

"No, it's more or less the same old story there, too." Judy said. "She just keeps hugging herself and whimpering that she wants to go home."

"We'll want to talk to her first, of course," Wally Root sounded a little embarrassed at having to state the obvious. Naturally, they'd want to question Amanda before they talked to Craig; she was being cooperative. Get her statement on tape, play it back for her boyfriend, and see if that might put a chink or two in his defenses. It was a police interrogation technique as old as Good Cop / Bad-Cop.

"What's the latest on Craig's dad and uncle?" Nick Wilde asked, unable to keep the hopeful note out of his voice.

"Not good," Root answered him, "you heard yet who they finally got to represent them? Dare Kaprinos."

Darius 'Dare' Kaprinos, Attorney at Law, was a wild goat and an even wilder conspiracy theorist. He specialized in representing other extremists in court, and was noteworthy for turning every trial at which he appeared into a burlesque show. (He also had a less-than-enviable conviction rate, but who cared, as long as he got headlines?) The only attorney Nick would have less preferred to face as a hostile witness was Vern Rodenberg, his own former counsel.

"I know, I know," Root nodded in grim sympathy, "That boy should've been disbarred years ago. But, it is what it is, son; we can't hardly tell Jerry Guilford, 'Sorry, Mr. Kaprinos ain't acceptable as your lawyer'."

"Probably only encourage him, if we did," Mac Cannon observed sardonically from the sidelines, "I guess you don't want to know that sleaze-bag goat is standing 100% behind him and his brother's decision to plead not guilty."

"Course he is," Wally Root responded with a cynical grunt, "If them boys DO cop a plea, Mr. Kaprinos don't get hisself the spotlight anymore."

"Well the good news is, we got a deal worked out with the Zootopia Attorney General's office." Mac's smile was both wicked and feral, "If Jerry, Joe, and Dean decide to insist on going through
with that plea, they're gonna end up serve their sentences in that new Viomax Prison, just opened up here in Zootopia." He seemed to take for granted that the three coyote brothers would all be found guilty.

At the mention of the name Viomax, Nick Wilde shuddered inwardly. Although and he Judy had never been back there—not since the days when it had still been known as the Cliffside Sanitarium—the memories of what they'd found inside were still as fresh as yesterday. Imagine having to spend the rest of your natural life inside of that place, brrrrr,

Judy Hopps, for her part, didn't think even that bit of news would be enough to persuade the Guilford brothers to change their plea. But then she realized something; neither did Mac, the bobcat was simply relishing the thought; he loved the idea of the three coyotes serving their time in a place that made Lemmingworth look like an amusement park.

"Sweet cheez n' crackers, he really hates the Guilfords," the bunny-cop thought to herself, wondering if maybe their history didn't go back little further than she'd first believed. Then she asked, "How'd you manage to work that out?"

"T'weren't hard," Detective Root answered her with a laconic shrug, "There were more'n a few folks down from Zootopia at that dance, y'know."

"Right, right," Judy answered, wanting to face pawlm herself. Yes, there had and she should know, she'd been one of them.

"Before we start, I need to go find me a restroom," Wally Root was grimacing slightly, "Dang docs've got me on these new meds."

When two Bunnyburrow deputies stepped through the door of Interview Room 'A', the effect was like opening up a floodgate. Amanda Hill leaped from her chair, speaking so rapidly, Judy had trouble following what she was saying. The gist of her remarks revolved around a promise to tell the Sheriff's deputies everything she knew if they would only just let her go home.

"Now, now little lady," Wally Root made gentle pushing motions with his hooves, "We'll try to get you back with your folks as quickly as possible, but first we need to ask you just a few quick questions, all right?"

"O-Okay?" the young vixen answered, sniffling pitifully and then sitting back down again.

On the other side of the one-way mirror, Nick turned and winked at his partner, "Detective Root sounds just like your favorite uncle, doesn't he? I can see why the Burrow County Sheriff's Department sent him here."

"You got that right," Judy answered, keeping her eyes on the action inside the interview room, (the ZPD never called them an 'interrogation rooms'). Privately, she was hedging her bets; this was the easy part. Craig Guilford was going to be a much tougher nut to crack than his girlfriend...MUCH tougher, even for someone as skilled and experienced as Burrow County Sheriff's Detective Walter J. Root.

As things turned out, Amanda was so eager to co-operate with the two deputies, they had to tell her to slow down every few minutes. In the end, she looked so wretched and pitiable that Judy almost began to feel sorry for her.

Almost; there was still the small matter of the way the young red-fox vixen had trolled her sister, Erin. As for Nick, he appeared to be feeling even less sympathy for Amanda Hill than she did. Judy
thought she knew why; it was foxes like her that gave their species a bad name.

When the two Sheriff's Officers emerged from the room an hour later, the looks on their faces could only be described as expressions of quiet satisfaction. Amanda had answered all of their questions and signed everything they'd put in front of her; she had even told them, point blank, that she didn't want a lawyer. "I just wanna go home!"

"Mac, run that back to where Amanda told us the Guilford kid threatened her family if she wouldn't come with him. You know the spot." Root was pointing at a voice recorder tucked underneath the bobcat's arm.

Nick and Judy said nothing to this; the fox only buzzed for someone to come take Amanda Hill back to her cell, while the bunny-cop's face remained implacable.

Of course, Amanda had been exaggerating when she'd said that. The furthest Craig had probably gone in that direction was when he'd tried to lay some emotional blackmail on her; "I thought you said you CARED about me," etc.

But that wasn't why the grizzled old boar was having his partner wind the recording back to that particular point. He had something else in mind, and Judy was all but certain that she knew what it was—exactly what she would have done, had she been in his place.

"Okay, got it," Mac looked up from the recorder again.

"All righty," Root answered, pressing his hooves against his kidneys and stretching his back. The sound reminded Judy Hopps of someone shuffling a deck of cards, "Then I think we're about ready for the boy."

"He's down here in Room D," Nick Wilde answered, indicating the direction with a paw. (They had wanted to keep him as far apart from his girlfriend as possible,)

This time, the two Burrow County Deputies didn't go inside right away; they wanted to have a look at their suspect through the one-way mirror first. They saw him sitting with his paws clenched on the table-top, staring fixedly at the wall with no expression on his face. His fur was going in every which direction, as if he'd just taken a ride in a tumble-dryer.

"I see you got him cuffed," Detective Root said, peering narrowly through the glass. He turned to Nick and Judy, "Mind lettin' us have the key?"

Judy's nose began to twitch.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" she asked while Nick flipped open his pawcuff holster, searching for the requested item.

"Yeah, that boy's more like to come at you if he's shackled than if'n he ain't," the old hog answered her, "he's funny that way. Anyway, he won't try nothin' with Mac in there."

"Not if he remembers what happened last time," the bobcat added with that vulture's grin again.

When they entered the interview room, Craig Guilford said nothing at first, only looked up at the deputies with his eyes flashing, first in recognitions and then in open hostility.

"Well boy," Detective Root said, putting his hooves on his hips and shaking his head, "you sure tore the rag off the bush this time, didn't you?" He sounded more disappointed than angry.
"Don't call me boy, you fat load of snail guts," the young coyote snarled, starting to rise from his chair…and quickly thinking better of it when Mac Cannon took a step forward.

Root just continued on as if he hadn't heard a thing.

"You ain't going to Youth Authority Camp this time, son…"

"Don't call me son!"

"…this time it's prison you're lookin' at."

Craig Guilford just slumped in his seat with a baleful expression. Nick Wilde, however, wasn't fooled.

"That's right kid; let them see they're getting to you." He sniggered.

"I know, right?" Judy agreed, throwing a nod in her partner's direction. Could it possibly have been more obvious? She had to admire how quickly Detective Root had located his suspect's weak spot.

"Okay, I'm going to have deputy Cannon uncuff you," the old boar was saying, "I know you won't try anything—coz you know what'll happen, if you do."

Mac bared his teeth and claws to make sure the young coyote got the point, and then unlocked the cuffs.

Craig Guilford spent the next minute massaging his wrists and looking in every direction but at his visitors, another sign that they were getting to him. And then without warning, his eyes bored straight into Detective Root.

"I wanna talk to my dad!"

The hog said nothing to this and his face showed no expression whatsoever. But Mac Cannon hurriedly turned his face away from the young coyote—and towards the one-way mirror.

"Huh, what's up with him?" Judy's ears were standing on end and her nose was twitching rapidly. "He looks like he just drew four aces in poker game."

"I-I-I think I know," her partner said, suppressing a grin of his own. On the other side of the glass, Detective Root's face had turned somber and mournful.

"No…Craig, you don't want to talk to him," he said, shaking his head sadly.

"Yes, I do!" the young coyote snarled, "I know my rights and you can't keep me from speaking to my father."

Out in the hallway, Nick and Judy moved quickly away from the mirror, so the animals on the other side couldn't hear them trying not to bust a gut. Dang, this kid was even dumber than they'd thought; he should have been insisting upon speaking to an attorney, not his dad.

He never did; instead he just kept on escalating his demands to speak with his father—while Detective Root's attempts to dissuade him became more and more plaintive. After five minutes, he was practically begging the young coyote not to go down this path…which was tantamount to trying to get rid of ants with maple syrup. The more he tried to dissuade Craig Guilford from making that demand, the more belligerent the young coyote became…until finally the grizzled old boar abruptly raised his hooves and turned his head away.
"Okay…Okayyyy,"

Judy watched as Craig sat down again, folding his arms and smiling triumphantly from ear to ear. She wasn't bothered; by now she too had figured out the hog detective's game-plan…or at least enough of it to smile in anticipation of the other hoof dropping.

Root gave his suspect a few extra seconds before he dropped it.

"All right, I didn't want to have to do this," he said, reaching into his jacket with a snuffling sigh, "but I guess now I got no choice."

He pulled out a weathered voice recorder, laying it on the table between them.

"Better brace yourself kid, this is gonna hurt." Mac Cannon said, as his partner pushed the playback button.

Right away they heard Jerry Guilford's voice…and he was not a happy camper.

"Craig? Craig! That stupid, worthless, incompetent, little snot! He had one job…ONE job! Don't mention his name in my presence again, Dean. As of right now, I GOT no son!"

"But Jerry…"

"I said, SHUT UP!"

Craig Guilford plopped back into his seat with a dazed expression on his face. Judy thought he looked as if he'd been sucker-punched. (Actually that was a pretty good description of what had just happened.)

And it only went south from there; in the next segment Craig’s father was heard to say, "I hope that kid gets caught; gets caught and they put his worthless tail in here with us. When I get my paws on him, he's dead, you hear me? DEAD! MEAT!"

"Jerry…you don't mean that…!"

"Yes, I do!"

That was enough to make the young coyote's eyes water and bring a quiver to his lower lip. Bad enough to be disowned by your father, but to hear him say he wanted to kill you? Mac had been right; this DID hurt…a lot.

What Jerry Guilford had to say a few minutes later brought his boy full circle, right back into a state of high fury, (although the tears never left his face.)

"Craig had no idea where that Jack La Peigne was. He only told me that big, jerk-bunny was over on the east side of the festival to get me off his back…and look what happened because of it. Of all the lazy, stupid, idiotic…!"

"WHAT?!" The young coyote came rocketing out of his chair…and this time Mac Cannon didn't move to stop him. "That's totally bogus; I never told him anything like that; I didn't talk to him AT ALL after him and my uncle Joe got their planes off the ground!"

"Hey kid, tell your dad not us," the bobcat answered, shrugging. And then there was that wicked smirk again, "only better make it fast, boy—coz I don't think you'll have much time to get it out."

Craig fell back in his seat again and buried his face in his paws. They didn't quite have him yet, but
"Sorry son, but I did warn you," Wally Root sounded almost compassionate. And then he added, "For what it's worth, your daddy ain't got his head on right at the moment; he's even tryin' to plead Not Guilty, never mind there's about a hundred witnesses and a warehouse full of evidence against him."

"Yeah, and you know where he's going for that, kid?" Mac Cannon appeared to be unable to restrain himself any longer, "Viomax, ever heard of that place? It's only the meanest joint in the Zootopia prison system. And get this, it's a private slam…run by Aker Correctional Corporation!"

"Mac…!" Wally Root interjected sharply but the bobcat appeared to ignore him.

On the other side of the one-way, Nick Wilde snickered. "Root wasn't serious there, Carrots. Did you notice?"

"Yep," she answered, nodding dryly. If the hog had really been upset with his partner he would have addressed him as 'Deputy Cannon,' not 'Mac.'

For his part, Mac was wearing that feral smirk again.

"Aker Correctional happens to be owned by Jack LaPeigne…and don't tell me you don't know that name, kid. If your dad thinks he can get some revenge on Burrow County by putting us though the expense of a circus-trial…"

"Mac, that's enough!" Root slapped his hoof on the table.

The bobcat wheeled on him.

"I don't care, my little girl Susie was at that dance!" This time his anger was genuine.

Judy wasn't surprised. Hurting a child was considered the Cardinal Sin in the Burrow. As far as she was concerned, the bobcat deputy had every right to feel the way he did.

Meanwhile Detective Root was pointing at the door.

"One more word, Mac; I mean it now."

The Deputy hurriedly forced himself to calm down. "Sorry," he said, sounding anything but apologetic.

Craig Guilford seemed not to have heard any of it. He just kept shaking his head and mumbling. "My dad wouldn't do that, never do that to me…never say that about me…"

His whining seemed to revive Mac's ire…but this time he held himself in check.

"Well, you better believe it kid." He said, "And did you hear what ELSE your father said? He basically told us everything we need to know about the part you played in the attack on the Big Dance. That's right Craig, thanks to him we've got you dead to rights."

At this, Craig's head snapped up as if spring loaded; he clearly hadn't thought about it that way, not until now; the bobcat was right, in his wrath at his son's failure Jerry Guilford had unwittingly sold him out to John Law. And as that realization finally began to seep in, the young coyote's features commenced to harden into chilled flint.

"I'm afraid that's true, son." Root said, giving the deputy another sharp look, "Everything your
daddy said about you on those recordings has already been ruled admissible in court. And by the way, yes, we have corroboration."

He nodded to his partner, who pulled out the second voice recorder and switched it on. This time, the voice they heard was high, female, shrill…and frightened, "I didn't want to go with Craig, but he said he'd come back and hurt my mom and dad…"

This time the young coyote came up out of the chair so fast, it was as if someone had lit off a cherry-bomb under his tail.

"That lying…! She wanted to come with me, I NEVER THREATENED HER!"

That was enough to set Mac off too. He leaned across the table with his fangs showing, getting right in the young coyote's face.

"Yeah, kid…everybody's lying except YOU!"

For a moment, it looked as if Craig might actually be foolish enough to make a move at the bobcat, (something Judy suspected Mac would have enjoyed.) But then he fell back in his seat again, totally spent and demoralized. Now, at last, he understood, he was utterly and completely alone; him against the entire world.

Finally, he looked up, teary-eyed and miserable.

"I want to make a plea deal." His voice was little more than a frog's croak

Wally Root removed his spectacles, shutting his eyes and rubbing the bridge of his snout.

"Ahhh…for that to happen you have to have something to give us, son. You can't just plead guilty and expect the court to go easy on you, cuz you saved them the trouble of a trial; doesn't work that way." He appeared to be starting to ramble, "If you plead not guilty, make extra trouble for the county, like your daddy's doin', well…much as we'd like to save ourselves that trouble, even if he does change his mind and plead guilty, he's won't get anything better than if he'd done it in the first place."

"And that's not happening anyway," Mac Cannon added with a hiss, "Your super genius dad still thinks he has a chance to beat this case, as long as him and your uncles stick together."

Craig Guilford didn't respond to this; huddling deep into his chair and hugging himself, he looked shockingly like his girlfriend at the moment—or no, it was even worse. He appeared to be on the verge of slipping into a state of catatonia.

Root studied him for a second, and then turned to his partner.

"Okayyy, looks like we ain't getting any more out of him right now; let's go, Mac."

Outside in the hall, their mood changed considerably, smiling broadly and slapping each other on the back

"Nice work in there," Nick Wilde told them. Detective Root just waved a hoof.

"Awww, fish in a barrel, Nick; that boy played right into our paws."

"Yep, for sure, that." Mac Cannon was shaking his head as if he couldn't quite believe their good fortune, "I knew Craig'd ask to talk his dad eventually, but right out of the gate?" He raised his
pawlms upward, towards the ceiling, "Hallelujah!"

"So, what happens next?" It was Judy Hopps.

Root rubbed the back of his neck again, "We'll see him again tomorrow—unless he asks to see us first."

"That's actually what we're hoping for," Mac Cannon explained. "We'd much rather Craig offers to testify against his father, than for us to have to suggest it."

"Right, that way it'll be a lot harder for him to change his mind later on." Judy said, while her partner nodded in agreement. And then she asked, "What about Amanda Hill, what do you think will happen to her?"

It was Root who answered her.

"Probably not a whole lot," he responded with a shrug, "Probation, a couple hundred hours of community service, counseling; she might get a week or two with the Youth Authority Camp if the judge is having a particularly bad day, but that's about it." He lifted an ear, "But is it my imagination Officer Hopps, or do you have kind of an interest here?"

Judy tried not to wince; she should have known that a sharp, old hog like Wally Root would figure it out.

But before she could speak, Mac Cannon intervened.

"Well yeah, she does Wally. Remember what we found on that Hill girl's computer? Judy's little sister Erin was one of her targets." Root looked at him with his ear raised even higher and the bobcat added quickly, "She's good friends with Susie, that's how I know."

"Right, right," the old boar said quickly and then looked at his watch. "Gettin' on about one, I see. Nick…Judy, any good places 'round her to grab a lunch?"

"Yep, try the Raccoon Lodge Pub and Grill," the red fox offered, helpfully, "It's just across the plaza, hang a left as you go past the Natural History Museum and you can't miss it."

"Okay, sounds like a plan," Mac Cannon answered, mentally jotting down the information.

"And be sure to show your badges when you walk in," Judy added, "They'll treat you right."

"Ahhh, cop hangout, huh? Sounds good," the bobcat said, raising a thumb.

"You're not joining us?" Wally Root asked, sounding disappointed. Somehow, he knew without asking; 'Ol Razor-Head.

Judy sighed and shook her head. "We'd love to Wally, but right now, Officer Wilde and I have a suspect of our own to talk to."

"Duty before pleasure, you know how it goes," the red fox added.

"Really?" Root's expression morphed from disappointment to one of keen interest, "any chance of us sitting in? I'd like to see how y'all work."

""Sorry Detective, but no can do, it's a sensitive case," Nick answered him with genuine regret.

"Yep, our Chief would have our heads on a spike if we did," Judy Hopps put in.
"It's all right, we understand," the hog replied, raising his hooves again. He'd no doubt worked a few sensitive cases himself, back in the day. "If you get the chance, come on by and join us after you're done.

"We will," Judy promised, although she knew that was about as likely as a blizzard in Sahara Square; their upcoming Q-and-A session was going to be long one, which meant the sooner they got started, the better. When the deputies had gone, she unclipped her cell phone and punched in an inter-office number.

"This is Officer Hopps. Do you…? Yes, that's right, we're ready for him…Ahhh, let's see…" she peered down the hallway with her nose twitching. Outside the third door down, a green light glowed, meaning the room was unoccupied. "Put him in room C…yeah, and we'll need someone to ride shotgun, too. Do you have…? Oh good, perfect. Yep…thanks."

She disconnected and looked at Nick.

"They're sending down Officer Swinton."

"Good deal Carrots," the red fox said to her. "but right now, we need get out of sight." There was no need for him to explain; they had both agreed earlier that the informant shouldn't know it was them until they came through the door to the interview room; the less time he had to prepare the better.

And so, they ducked swiftly around the corner and waited.

It didn't take long, after only five more minutes, Judy's phone buzzed.

When they returned to the corridor they found Claire Swinton seated outside of Room C with a voice recorder on the table in front of her, hooked up and ready to go. (Judy had one of her own, but wanted back-up just in case.)

At her and Nick's approach, the pig-cop's nostrils swelled.

"Hmmmm, does my nose deceive me, or have you two been keeping company with another member of my species?"

Nick grinned and threw his paws up as if to say 'Ya got me, copper.' It was Judy who answered her though.

"Nope, your nose is working fine. Burrow County Sheriff's detective Walter Root; we just got done assisting him with an interrogation."

"We were helping him and his partner with that coyote kid, Craig Guilford." Nick Wilde added.

Swinton grinned and aimed a finger at Judy, "Oh right, Mr. Hold-My-Carrot-Juice. Anyway, your suspect is inside, ready and waiting."

As if he didn't believe it, Nick leaned in close and peered through the one-way mirror. At once his face became a mask of contempt—and that told Judy all she needed to know; yeah, it was him in there all right.

"We'll have a recorder with us," she said to Officer Swinton, "but I want you to keep monitoring as well. This CI may have some extremely valuable information for us."

"I doubt it," the pig cop answered, shaking her head. She was clearly familiar with the individual
"Maybe so, but orders are orders,' Nick told her, neatly curtailing any further discussion of the matter. And then to Judy he said, "Come on Carrots, no sense in putting this off any longer."

He went to the door and waited for her to join him, and then after each of them took a deep breath, he opened it and they went inside.

It was even worse than they had expected. As soon as they entered the room, Duke Weaselton was all over them.

"Well welllll...if ain't Cutie and the Beast!" And just to make sure they knew what he was talking about, he lasciviously pantomimed the act of kissing.

Judy Hopps wanted to slap a paw over her eyes and leave it there all year. It was a given that by now every officer in the precinct would be aware of what had happened between her and Nick during that blood-diamond sting...but sweet cheez n' crackers, even the city jail inmates knew about it? She had never needed to scream so badly.

"Don't call her that, WESELton." Nick Wilde told him flatly. (You push my buttons, I'll push yours.)

Not this time; for once, the gibe had no effect...or at least not the one Nick was hoping for. The Dukester's face seemed to wilt halfway and then a look of exaggerated contrition crossed his features.

"Aw geeeae, I forgot ...anyone else calls her a 'beast' an' you'll rip their lungs out."

He fell back in his chair, clutching his sides and laughing uproariously, loving every second of this. His whole manner seemed to be telling them, 'and THIS time, you ain't got Mr. Big to help you!'

But Judy had already recovered from her initial shock. Taking the seat across from the weasel, she set the voice-recorder down on the table top and pressed the record button, reciting the usual litany:

"This interrogation is taking place in interview Room C, at 12:57..."

"Exactly one week after the kiss-heard-round-the-world!" Weaselton interjected smarmily.

Nick looked as if he'd like to pounce on Mr. Smartmouth, but Judy just calmly continued...ever the bunny-scout.

"The suspect's name is Duke Weaselton..."

... or maybe she wasn't such a girl-scout.

"...alias Corkscrew-Face..."

"HEY!"

Judy just went on in that same monotone.

"...alias The Duke of Bootleg..."

"Knock it off, bun-bun!" his voice had become a high, staccato chitter.
"...more commonly known as Duke Weselton."

"That's WEASELTON, lover-girl." (Now, she was getting under his fur...while in the background Nick Wilde had to stand on his own tail to keep from laughing.)

Judy leaned forward, slapping an arm on the table.

"I can do this all day, Weaselton...can you?"

"Kiss my tail, sweety cheeks!" the weasel sneered, and then pointed at Nick "Or do I have to wait in line behind him first?"

The answer to this was Judy shutting down the recorder and swiping it off the table.

"Uh-huh...just as I thought," she said, and then waved a paw at her partner, "Come on Nick, we're out of here."

She got up and strode to the door, beckoning for the fox to follow—while Duke Weaselton popped out of his chair like a jack-in-the-box on espresso beans.

"Hey, where ya think you're going cutie-pie?"

Judy looked at him over a shoulder, "To make our report to the Chief...that you don't know a thing about The Phantom, that you're just playing games—again."

Nick Wilde immediately raised his paws.

"Hey, hold it, Carrots. We can't just leave before we even..."

"Watch me."

Duke Weaselton aimed a warning finger.

"You walk outta here now Flopsie, and you can kiss busting The Phantom good-bye."

Judy leveled her finger right back at him.

"As IF we were going to get anything about him from a mammal that's already been caught lying on the witness stand," She offered him a honeyed smile, dipped in lye, "You really don't get it, do you, Weselton? We were sent here to verify the truth of your story, not to take your statement...and I've seen and heard enough to know there isn't anything here." At once the honey vanished, leaving only the caustic behind. "The only thing YOU have to offer is more of your fake news," she said.

"Waiiiiiit, we don't know that." Nick tried to intervene a second time. While he didn't appear to trust the Dukester any more than his partner, even less did he want to risk losing a shot at nailing The Phantom.

"Oh come on, fox." Judy sniffed, waving her fingers at the weasel, "You know him as well as I do; if his information was any good, he'd have given us a peek when we came in here and saved the slimy stuff for later."

Nick pursed his lips and growled. He still didn't like it, but he had to admit that she was she's right. Duke Weaselton let out a growl of his own, more of a hiss, actually

"Okay, fine...go on and take a hike, Cutie. But first you gotta ask yourself a question. What if you
shine me on and it turns out what I got on The Phantom is legit? What happens to you then, huh? You ever think of that?"

Judy turned a smug face on the weasel.

"Nothing happens to us, Duke...because if no one acts on your so-called lead, no one's going to KNOW whether or not it was any good." She smirked showing her front teeth, "Too bad...you were looking at getting that burglary charge reduced to possession of stolen property...which would have meant the city jail instead of prison; no such luck, now."

That was what finally broke through Weaselton's oily façade. Judy saw his eyes expand and his lips pull back in a horrified grimace. What she had just told him was 100% accurate—and he should have thought about it before he'd tried to have some fun at her and Nick's expense.

Chittering like a kit, he threw out a paw as if making a last-ditch grab for a lifeline.

"WAIT!"

But Nick and Judy were already out the door.

A moment later, it opened again, and Officer Sam Simmers entered, his arm still bandaged from his encounter with the hippo Rashid in the alley behind Rafaj Brothers Fine Jewelry. A pair of small-mammal paw-cuffs jingled between the grizzly bear's inch-thick fingers.

"All right, Weaselton, assume the position."

The weasel waved his arms as if trying to ward off an apparition.

"Wait no, listen...c'mon, if I go down on this burglary rap it's my third strike."

"Turn around and put your paws behind your back," the big bear informed him, coldly. "You know what happens if I have to ask you again."

The Dukester complied, but continued to protest.

"Wait, c'mon, you can't do this...I tell you I got good information over here."

Simmers turned him around and began to move him towards the door. All at once, he stopped, screwing his nose into a prune.

"Eeeeyeeeeewww, did you just let your musk glands go, Weaselton?"

Duke squirmed uncomfortably for a second.

"Hey, I'm a weasel, that's what happens when my species gets agitated, okay?"

"Just be glad he's not a mink or a wolverine," Officer Swinton noted from around the corner.

Being none-too-gentle about it Simmers hauled Duke Weaselton through the door. Outside in the hallway, Nick and Judy were in the midst of a heated argument.

"I'm telling you, we're giving up on this way too quickly, Carrots."

"Oh come on Nick. Didn't you hear what he said, 'a three time loser'? A felon in that bind would say anything to ..."
"It's good, I swear!" Weaselton shouted as he was frog-marched past the fox and bunny, scuffling his feet every step of the way.

Judy folded her arms and raised a sardonic eyebrow

"Uh-huh, isn't that's what you always used to say about those bootleg DVDs?"

Struggling desperately, Duke managed to turn partway around for a second. His scream was like claws on a blackboard.

"IT'S MY BROTHER-IN-LAW!"

Nick Wilde's paw shot upwards towards the ceiling

"Wait, hold up a second."

Judy's reaction was a little different; she looked as if she'd just been told the lamest joke ever.

"Seriously, Weselton? Out of something like a zillion-odd animals in this city, The Phantom just happens to be your brother-in-law?" She laid a paw on her hip and narrowed her eyes, "What's next, Mr. Bootleg? No wait, don't tell me, let me guess; your second cousin runs the Royal Bank of Furona, right?"

The weasel's voice became half panicked, half-pleading.

"Noooo, my sister's husband ain't the Phantom…he borrowed from The Phantom!"

That put the brakes on it; Nick and Judy regarded each other for a long 20 seconds

And then, very reluctantly, the bunny-cop motioned for Weaselton to be brought back inside of the interview room.
Where There's Smoke... (Continued...Pt.3)

Chapter Summary

How to Train Your Suspect, Part III

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 8—Where There's Smoke…
(Continued…Pt. 3)

It was your typical police-interrogation room, done up in post-drab dreary. The light from the single, metal-shaded lamp was at once both harsh and dull, the table and chairs were minimalist at best, (and also about as ergonomic as orange crates,) and the walls were painted a dark, pea-soup gray—from floor to table height; above that level, they were the color of dead skin. Every sound made within the room seemed to hang lifelessly in the air and the smell was one of perpetually damp concrete.

And yet, in spite of the melancholy ambience, the atmosphere inside of Interview Room C was as charged up as an electron microscope, every surface seeming to crackle with St. Elmo's fire. (Nick Wilde would later liken it to a poker game with a mile-high stack of chips on the table.)

The word was out; Duke Weaselton was ready talk about The Phantom…and although Nick and Judy couldn't see them, they knew Claire Swinton had acquired some company in the past few minutes. Chief Bogo, Deputy Prosecutor Rudy Gamsbart, and Police Lieutenant Albert Tufts were all there, clustered around the one-way mirror and watching them with a fierce intensity. This was it, do or die; they'd either come away from this interview with the first solid lead on the mysterious loan-shark known as The Phantom—or else they'd come away with nothing, there was no middle ground here.

After another quick glance at the mirror, Judy Hopps flipped open her notepad and clicked her carrot-pen.

"All right Weaselton, let's have it."

In the exchange that followed, the weasel did most of the talking, with Nick Wilde offering the occasional mostly kept quiet and took notes. There were times to prod a witness, and there were times to just let him run. (And when this animal started running off at the mouth, he need about as much urging as a flash flood.)
"Okay," Duke was saying, "So my sister's married to this other weasel; came over across the pond from Edinburrow a few years back. Name's Shortal, Ian Shortal. He's what they call a stoat over there."

He turned suddenly sideways as if looking for a place to spit, but then seemed to catch himself in the nick of time.

"If you wanna know, I never much cared for the guy. Disgrace to our species, if you ask me."

Nick Wilde raised an ear.

"A disgrace to your species, what do you mean?"

In response to this, Weaselton stiffened, hissed, and then his face became study in distaste.

"Whaddaya *think* I mean lover-boy? The guy's, hard-working, loyal, helpful, trustworthy…" he braced himself as if preparing to slam down a noxious cocktail, "And HONEST! Can ya believe that stuff, an *honest* weasel!" He shook his head at the table-top, wincing as if he'd just stepped on a bee. "Tell me, WHAT is this world comin' to, huh?"

Judy rolled her eyes at Nick, who only shrugged with his pawlms turned upwards. 'Don't look at me, I'm a fox myself.' He seemed to be saying.

The Dukester, meanwhile continued with his statement.

"Ever since my brother-in-law first moved here to Zootopia, he's had this dream of opening up his own candy-store…ahhhh, no that ain't quite right, what'd he call it again…confederacy?"

"I think the word you're looking for is confectionary." Nick Wilde corrected him, after exchanging an amused glance with Judy.

The weasel snapped his fingers.

"Confectionary…yeah, that's it. Fudge, toffees, and all kinds of candies…including some weird stuff I never heard of before. What'd he call it? Oh yeah, Edinburrow Rock. And he coulda made it work, too. According to what my sister says, he…"

Here was where Nick first interrupted him.

"I thought she never spoke to you."

"Well not to ME she don't," the weasel admitted, "But that don't mean I can't still lissen in on her when….heyyyy! You wanna hear the rest of this story or not?"

Nick rolled a paw in the air.

"Get on with it, Duke."

"Fine, thank you," the weasel responded, putting plenty of extra emphasis the second word, "Anyway, before he came over here, Ian was an apprentice under one of the best confess…ah, confectioners in Edinburrow. He had letters of recommendation from here to Meowria, a great work record, practically no debts and enough character references to fill a tractor-trailer…but he couldn't swing a bank loan to save his life. And no loan, no candy store."

A small silence filled the room as Judy waited for her partner to pose the inevitable question. When
he didn't ask it, she did.

"Well, all right Weaselton, if he's so conscientious and such a hard worker, why couldn't he manage a bank loan?"

To her considerable befuddlement, the weasel exchanged a knowing look with her partner before answering.

"Didn't you hear me, copper? My brother-in-law's another weasel. Sheesh!"

Seeing where this train of conversation was going, Nick Wilde moved quickly to shunt it to a siding.

"What Weaselton means Carrots, is that if you're a weasel…" he took a deep breath, "or a fox, or any of a few other species I could mention, even these days it's nearly impossible to find a bank that will stake you to a small-business loan."

It took all of half a second for Judy's ears to turn backwards. "But that's illegal Nick," she protested, "I know it wasn't…before." (She had almost said, 'back when you were a kid' but caught herself just in time; not in front of the Dukester.) "But today it sure as heck is; the law specifically states that no animal may be refused credit for reasons of species, gender, or…"

Duke Weaselton interrupted her with a quick burst of laughter, a hard, bitter bray that shut her off like a switch.

"Oh, pul-LEASE…You really are a dumb bunny ain'tcha, flatfoot? The banks never tell you it's coz of your species they ain't lending you no money…they always got some other reason. And if you think a two-bit nobody like my brother-in-law has a chance of provin' otherwise against an umpty-million-dollar bank, I got this bridge in Brooklynx might interest you."

Judy struggled not to fall over backwards in her chair. She was knew of course that Nick's father had been unable to secure a bank loan back when he was a cub, but that was then and this was now…wasn't it? That kind of thing didn't still happen today…did it?

And how the heck had this happened? Less than half an hour ago, she'd had Duke Weaselton practically begging for mercy. Now he was the one cracking the whip.

What he'd just told her couldn't be true…could it?

She felt her eyes darting anxiously towards the mirror again, imagining the scowl that must be plastered across Chief Bogo's face. She could only hope that he and Rudy Gamsbart wouldn't come barging through the door at any second. "Thanks you Hopps…Wilde; we'll take it from here."

Then Nick cleared his throat.

"Fine Weaselton…but that still doesn't explain how you know he's doing business with The Phantom."

The weasel settled back in his chair with a self-satisfied expression.

"Found out entirely by accident, fox. And who'd a' thunk a straight-laced ranger-scout like my brother-in-law would ever go to that guy for help, huh? I knew he was startin' to get desperate, but sheesh…"

Telling the tale seemed to transport the Dukester back in time. On that particular night, he'd been
standing at the door of a red-brick home in the Otterdam neighborhood of Savanna Central, frantically pressing the buzzer. It had been a filthy night, lashed by fierce winds, and a hard, driving drizzle; with no umbrella or raincoat, Weaselton's only recourse for shielding himself had been to pull his shirt up over his head.

No one answered him on the first ring, so he'd tried it again. After a moment that seemed to last forever, his sister Grace had opened the door.

"Lesssee….when was it, again?" Weaselton tapped his fingers again the side of his mouth. "Oh yeah, Sunday…the Sunday before last was when she invited me to dinner."

"When you invited yourself to dinner," Nick corrected him. The Dukester just hissed and then continued.

After one look at who was standing on her doorstep, Grace Shortal had nearly slammed the door in his face. And she would have too, if her husband hadn't appeared just then and invited his brother-in-law to join them for dinner.

"Can't leave anyone out in this muck, dear." He'd said to his wife.

Once inside the house, Duke had found himself looking around in wonder and surprise.

"It was the first time I'd been inside my sister's digs in like almost a year…"

"The first time you'd been ALLOWED inside…"

"An' I was just amazed at all the new stuff they had…"

"And wondering which ones you could fence."

"Hey fox, who's tellin' this story, you or me?"

"Sorry, go ahead."

Around the dinner table, Ian had been in a jubilant mood, talking animatedly and gesturing with his paws. Unlike the Dukester, with his scrawny frame, Ian Shortal was of an almost burly stature (for a weasel.) Seated on his right had been his two kids, Katie and Gordon, while his wife had sat on the left, keeping a jaundiced eye on the younger brother sitting by himself on the other side of the tabletop, (her insistence.)

"While we were eatin', Ian let on that he'd done it, he'd managed to open up that candy shop…and it was going like sixty. He was doin' so good, wouldja believe, somedays, he sold OUT of his best stuff. I tell ya Wilde, if I hadn't awready seen it for myself, I never woulda believed it."

In Tundratown, the day before, Weaselton had goggled in amazement at the mile-long line of animals waiting to get into Sweetie's Scots Confectionary Shop.

"It almost blew me outta my seat when I made the connection," he was saying, "So I asks my brother- in-law, 'Wait a minute, that was YOUR place I saw?''"

"That you were CASING…"

"Hey, you wanna hear this or not?"

"Nick, let him talk."
"Sorry, Carrots."

"Thanks, cutie-bun."

"Think nothing of it, burned-match-nose."

"Heyyyy! So I asked my brother-in-law how he done it. Where'd he get the dough-ray-me to open that candy-store when none of the banks would back him?"

Before he could answer the question, Ian's wife had shot him a look that caused him to become suddenly and deeply engrossed in his dinner.

"Well, he just kinda waved me off after that." Duke shrugged as he recalled it, "Wouldn't talk nuthin' about how he'd managed to get the green to start that place. Every time I tried to bring it up again, he'd change the subject. The only thing I knew for sure was that wherever he got that money, it wasn't from no place he wanted anyone else to know about."

"That he wanted YOU to know about..."

For once Nick's barb drew no blood

"No Wilde," Weaselton folded his arms beneath a sneering expression, "that he wanted anybody to know about. One of the kids tried to ask him about it too, and my sister nearly sent him to his room."

That prompted Judy to join the discussion; this was all very interesting but it wasn't what they'd come here for. She leaned over the table, tapping a finger.

"Nice try Duke…but just because your brother-in-law wouldn't say where he got the money, that doesn't mean it came from The Phantom. It could have been from any one of a hundred other places." She looked at her partner and then at the door, "Come on Nick, I told you this was a waste of time."

"Hold yer lizards powder-puff, I ain't done yet!" Weaselton rose up halfway from his chair with his paws on the table…and then he sat back down again, remembering the dinner once more.

"So then right before dessert, my brother in law gets this text message..."

And when he got it, Ian abruptly excused himself from the table and went upstairs. When he came back down a few minutes later, the Scottish Stoat was almost giddy with excitement.

"It's all set, my bonny Grace," he said, giving his wife a peck on the cheek, "After Saturday next, Sweeties will be all ours."

Instead of hugging him back, Grace hissed though her teeth while shooting an icy look at her brother….and Ian had scurried back to his chair, thoroughly chastised.

"So after we finished eatin'," Weaselton was telling them, "I excused myself to go use the little weasel's room..."

"... and get out of helping to clear the table." Nick Wilde put in, "Which one of the kids did your sister send to check up on you?"

"Katie, but I can always give her the slip...HEYYY! So I goes upstairs to use the head offside of the big bedroom..."
"Find anything interesting in the dresser?"

"Nothing worth…willya quiddit, already, fox? So, I was just about to leave, when…"

The Dukester had just about to make his exit when he'd happened to glance over in the corner. There, neatly ensconced on blonde-oak workstation was a desktop computer; the screen was dark but the tower lights were still aglow, meaning it was running in 'sleep' mode.

"So, just maybe, accidentally, I kinda moved the mouse. And poof! There's this e-mail, right in front of me….and whaddaya think it said, foxy?" He flashed Nick Wilde a toothy smile,

Nick flashed him one right back.

"Here is our price for packing your brother-in-law in a crate and shipping him to Koala Lumpurr?"

"Ha, Ha…yer a real comedian, bun-kisser. No, this is what it said…"

"Mr. Shortal:

Once again, do not open this message except on your desktop and while you are alone

Meerkat Market, Saturday after next. Before 9 AM, LB6. Use the pelican case again and the last of the codes I gave you. Please acknowledge as soon as you get this, but do not expect a reply. If all goes well, this will be my last communication with you. After you respond, be certain to delete both emails.

PS. Congratulations on all your success. I am very pleased we were able work things out. And BTW, that vanilla fudge of yours isn't just the bomb, it's the dang NUKE."

"Not bad," Nick had to admit.

"Thanks fox."

"Not you Weaselton, whoever sent that email. Never signed it, and didn't leave a clue as to his true identity…but threw in that little blurb at the end, just to let your brother-in-law know that he's watching."  

Judy Hopps felt her nose begin to twitch and tapped a finger against her cheek. There was something else about that last line of that postscript; it had been written in a style completely at odds with the rest of the email. She was about to ask Weaselton if those had been the exact words when a crooked grin spread outwards along the rim of his muzzle.

"Yeah, well that ain't the last of it, kissy-fox. There was this little arrow up in the corner of that email, too."

"Meaning your brother-in-law replied to it." Judy said, forgetting her question for the moment; (that had probably just been Weaselton's interpretation anyway.)

"Hey look at that." he smirked at her, "Well, they say even a blind, deaf, and dumb bunny finds a carrot once in a while. Yeah, that's right…so I went to the 'sent' file, and my brother-in-law may be honest, but he ain't so bright. He forgot to toast THAT one, too."

"So what did it say, Duke?" Nick Wilde said to him, "And this time, skip the drum-roll and just give it to us straight."
The weasel looked instantly disappointed, "Awright, awright…"

Face bathed in the light of the monitor screen, Weaselton had moved his lips as he read. His brother-in-law's reply had been short, but (literally) sweet.

"Message Rcvd. Package will be dlvrd as promised at appt'd time & plc.

I. Shortal.

PS Cannot thank you enough for all you've done for me and mine. You came along just as I was ready to give up hope. Bless you, sir. If there's ever anything I can do for you, you know where to find me."

Weaselton leaned back in his chair again, folding his arms and chewing on an imaginary toothpick.

Judy Hopps seemed unimpressed and raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"And that's it? That's all you have?" (It was one of the first things she'd learned about police-interrogation techniques; no matter how valuable your suspect's information is, NEVER let them see it.)

"Not quite, cutie." Weaselton's wink was almost conspiratorial, "When I got up from the computer, I accidentally dropped my keys under the bed."

"Accidentally…uh-huh, right." Nick's growl was like two cinder blocks, scraping against each other.

But when the Dukester had reached for his keys, he'd found something else lying sandwiched between the mattress and the floor, a king-size, bullet-proof briefcase, done up in dull carbon-fiber black. And when he turned it over…

"Never seen nothin' like it," he said, "The darn thing had a digital display and a keypad. For a second there I thought I saw a keyhole, but no, it was only one of them USP ports."

"I think you mean USB port."

"Whatever fox," the weasel answered, flipping a paw back and forth, "But I'll betcha a sawbuck that was the case the Phantom was talking about."

"Yes, IF it was The Phantom," Judy told him, folding her arms, "You're giving us an awful lot of 'maybes' here, Duke."

"Hey, whaddaya want from me Flopsie, a bronze plaque with pawprints?" Weaselton was fuming. "No, I don't got the Phantom's name, but I got my brudder-in-law able to open up a business after every bank in town showed 'im the door, I got him makin' a delivery at some prearranged location, just like the way The Phantom always works, and I got 'im talkin' with the other guy by email and text, also how The Phantom does his business." He tapped the table with a finger, inadvertently mimicking Judy's earlier gesture. "And then there's all that secret stuff, 'delete after reading' and whatever. So no, I ain't sure it's the Phantom…but I AM sure of where a drop is going down this Saturday that has the way he operates written all over it!"

"Not quite, Duke," Judy leaned forward, "Where the heck is LB6?"

The weasel just shrugged. "You're the copper, Kissy-Face...you figger it out. That's all there was in that e-mail."
Once again, Judy didn't rise to the bait; instead she simply rose up from her chair.

"All right, Weaselton," she said, motioning for her partner to do the same, "I think you've possibly given us something we can work with. We'll let you know how it pans out. Nick, get the recorder?"

They were halfway to the door when Duke Weaselton suddenly remembered something, and went shooting up out of his chair.

"Heyyy, wait a minnit. What about my plea deal? You promised me I could plead down to possession of stolen property if I helped yas with The Phantom."

Judy turned at the door with her paw resting on her hip and one knee slightly raised. In another circumstance, it would have been a sultry pose.

"Actually, Duke…no. I only said that was what you weren't getting after you decided to play it snarky instead of talking business. I never made any kind of promises after that." She paused to let that sink in a little, and then fixed him with that sweet-venom smile again. "Oh, and by the way," she tapped herself in the chest with her carrot-pen, "It's called Officer Hopps, sweetheart…not, 'Flopsie', or 'Sweety-Cheeks', or 'Kissy-Face'…and I may be a dumb bunny, but I'M not one walking out of here with nothing to show for it."

She turned and headed for the exit once more…while the Dukester's claws etched furrows into the table-top and his voice became a ragged fury-scream.

"WHY YOU NO-GOOD, DOUBLE-CROSSIN', LONG-EARED…!"

His rant was cut off as the door closed.

When Nick and Judy returned to the hallway, they found the animals waiting for them were also screaming.

…with laughter. Rudy Gamsbart was nearly doubling over and Chief Bogo was practically rolling the floor. Even Albert Tufts was chittering with glee.

The first to recover was Claire Swinton.

"I swear," she said, raising her hooves to Judy as if offering a Hosanna, "That had to be the best twist on good cop/bad cop I have EVER seen!"

Nick, meanwhile, was peering through the one-way mirror with a disappointed look on his face.

"My…My," he said, shaking his head in a 'tut-tut' gesture. "You know, there are times when I almost wish I'd never learned to lip-read." He pointed at the little, black box, mounted on the wall beside the doorway, "Whatever you do Swinton, don't turn that speaker on, it'll probably explode."

"I didn't know you could lip-read, Nick." Judy said to him, nose twitching once again. Even now, more than two years after they'd first met, he was still able to surprise her.

"Wel-I-LLl, only with sharp muzzled species," the fox admitted, pointing towards his nose and then through the mirror, "With any other animals, I run into trouble."

"So what's he saying then?" It was Chief Bogo.

Nick cast a wary eye on Judy before answering.

"Ahhh, it's…mostly stuff about rabbits in general and what he'd like to do to them."
That got another laugh from everybody.

But then the fox grew serious.

"Uhuh, Carrots?" he said, picking his words with infinite care, "You're not…REALLY going to stiff Duke Weaselton on that plea-deal, are you?"

Judy's left paw found her hip again and she waved the other one dismissively.

"Oh, of course not, Nick…a deal's a deal. If Weaselton's info turns out to be legitimate, he'll get his charges reduced." She looked for confirmation to Rudy Gamsbart, who responded with a short nod. Judy nodded back and then her eyes narrowed and her face split open in a wicked grin. "Only why should I tell HIM?" she said, corking a thumb at the weasel going into meltdown on the other side of the mirror.

That got an even bigger laugh, although Nick's was just a tiny bit edgy.

"Are you sure you're not part fox, Carrots?"

Judy tossed her ears while pretending to look indignant, "Hmph, how dare you?"

"Right then." Chief Bogo was back in 'take charge' mode. "Swinton, I believe we're finished with you for the moment—and thanks for your assistance. Everyone else, let's re-convene in my office in fifteen minutes; we've got a decision to make, haven't we?"

On the other side of Savanna Central plaza, Burrow County Sheriff's Detective Wally Root was just then settling back in his chair with a belch and a grunt of contentment. Nick Wilde had been right; the eats here at The Raccoon Lodge were excellent. Oh, he and Mac Cannon had had to sit down on the floor with the larger animals, (the upper tiers had all been packed,) but luckily the lower deck had a mid-sized 'overflow' table for just such occasions, and it was still unoccupied, (and Root was none too small for his species anyway.) And as soon as he and the bobcat deputy had shown their badges they been seated here straightaway; Nick had been right about that, too.

At the moment, Mac was exchanging texts with the Burrow County Sheriff's Department, verifying their expense voucher for the meal they'd just eaten, and the overnight stay still to come. (The BCSD was a first-class stickler when it came to travel expenses.)

There'd been the usual snickering and whispered comments when Mac had submitted their application for an overnight stay in Zootopia. Root had quickly lost count of the number of times he'd heard someone muttering, 'free vacation' under their breath. What irked him the most was that the individuals making those comments didn't know Mac Cannon, and they certainly didn't know him. All he wanted to do right now was lay down and take a nap. As for Mac, if the old hog knew THAT bobcat, he'd end up spending most of the evening on the phone with his wife and kits; there was no more dedicated family mammal in all of Bunnyburrow.

Wally Root grunted again and studied his erstwhile partner. Mac could be a little bit too much of a hardcase for his liking sometimes, and he occasionally took thinks a little too fursonally…but no one was perfect and other than that, he was a darn fine deputy. In fact, the old hog was already considering the idea of grooming him as a possible successor. (The year after next, Detective Walter J. Root would reach the mandatory retirement age for the Burrow County Sheriff’s Department.)

Mac meanwhile, had finished with his text exchange and was stowing away his cell phone.
"So, did they approve it?" Root asked him.

The answer came out as half a yowl.

"Meeeyeeahhhh, but it was like pulling teeth, Wally. I swear, you think they'd cut us a little slack; the Guilford attack is only the biggest case to hit Bunnyburrow since...heck, I can't remember the last time we ever had something this big."

"It is what it is, son," Root answered, folding his hooves across his ample belly and speaking in the voice of a wizened sage, "That's how it was with the Burrow County Sheriff's Office back when I first started, and that's how it'll be long after I'm gone. Death, taxes...and budget cuts; it oughta be three things, not just two."

"Amen," the bobcat said, raising his glass in a satirical toast, and then he grew serious again. "So, how long do you think it'll take that Guilford kid to crack?" It was a given that he would, the only question now was when.

Root let out a small snort and then shrugged.

"Can't rightly say Mac; if that boy had any smarts, he'd have given it up already."

"Only he doesn't have too many smarts, that's the problem." The bobcat laid his ears back slightly, and then they swiveled forward again. "Course, of he did, we'd probably still be back at the precinct, talking to him."

"Probably that," the old hog acknowledged, with another grunt. He could tell that Mac was gearing up to change subjects.

The bobcat did not disappoint him; growling and leaning in closer, he queried, "What do you think of the way Judy Hopps took down that Guilford kid and his girlfriend, huh? Jumping off the roof of that hangar and onto that airplane? Crikes, and I thought I had a Jones to nail that yay-hoo coyote-kid."

Root snorted again, but this time uncomfortably.

"Well, I can't call that anything but leading with your head, Mac. Much as I don't like to play Monday morning quarterback, what she should have done was scooted on back to her car and then driven 'er out onto the runway—like those officers from the other precinct did when they finally showed up. If they had time to make it before them kids could get airborne, so did she. That being said, I have to give Judy Hopps credit for one thing, figglering out so fast where Craig and has girlfriend were...Mac what is it? The bobcat's ears were raised and his whiskers were quivering

"I-I'm not sure, Wally," Mac Cannon finally admitted and then leaned in close again, this time lowering his voice. "But I could have sworn that both times when we mentioned Judy's name just now, a bunch of the other animals in here kind of looked at us, and then looked away."

"Yeah, I noticed that too, actually." The old hog replied, raising an eyebrow and letting his eyes drift around the room. Yes they had, and all of them had been wearing police uniforms. He allowed his voice to kick up a little. "Wonder what that's all about; can't hardly have had anything to do with the Craig Guilford bust."

It was the type of rhetorical question that isn't really rhetorical...and it didn't long to get an answer; almost immediately, they heard a voice blurt out from somewhere nearby, "It's doesn't."

Wally and Mac spun sharply in their seats. At the next table over, a big cow elephant in police
blues had her hooves clasped over her mouth and mortified expression on face.

But then she let them drop away again, sighing with resignation.

"Ohhhh what the heck," Francine Trunkaby shrugged, "the whole precinct already knows about it anyway."

In response to this, one or two of the other officers made slashing motions with their paws; a few more nodded in agreement, but most just looked away, appearing to have heard nothing and seen nothing.

"All right," Francine went on, toning down her voice to a near-whisper, "I can't give out any details you understand, but late last week, when Hopps and Wilde were out on an assignment in Sahara Square…"

"Right, you've all heard what the weasel said; opinions, anyone?" Chief Bogo swept his gaze over the gathering in his office as his spoke.

The first one to answer him was Nick Wilde.

"He had me at, 'It's my brother-in-law,' Chief. Selling out his family to save his own hide? That's classic Duke Weaselton."

"It felt real to me too, sir." Judy Hopps nodded, "He left out at least one key detail that we're going to have to figure out for ourselves before we move. So, either Duke Weaselton's a lot smarter than he looks—I don't THINK so—or else what he gave us is genuine." She looked at him directly.

"And like you said Chief, he isn't getting anything in advance, for his information."

"Yesss," Bogo ruminated thoughtfully, and then shifted his gaze to Rudy Gamsbart. "Mr. Prosecutor, what are your thoughts?"

The chamois frowned slightly before answering.

"Well, I'm inclined to believe him too, but like the old saying goes, 'trust everyone…but cut the cards.' Does Duke Weaselton have a brother-in-law who owns a candy shop…and WAS that animal recently turned down for a bank loan? Before I can say yea or nay, I need to know those things."

Chief Bogo only nodded, unsurprised by the Deputy Prosecutor's reply; it figured that Gamsbart would be the skeptic here. After all, he had the most to lose if it turned out that Weaselton was playing them.

But then Bogo turned his gaze on Nick and Judy; the bunny got the hint before her partner.

"I'll get on it as soon as we're done here, sir."

The big Cape buffalo nodded, snorted, and then moved on to Albert Tufts, who seemed irritated at being called on last.

"I think it's good," was all the Kaibab squirrel had to say. Bogo rumbled again and then sat back with his arms folded across his chest.

"Right then; it's tentatively unanimous…unless someone here has an objection.

Someone did…and it came from a wholly unexpected quarter. Nick Wilde swiftly raised a paw.
"Excuse me sir, but someone has to say this…".

Everyone turned to look at him. Nick flexed his paws on the arms of his chair for a second and then stood up.

"You're not going to like this," he said, "and I don't like it either, but even if Weaselton's information turns out to be spot on, we're not going to get the Phantom…at least not yet."

At this, four sets of eyebrows lifted upwards and the red fox hurriedly explained.

"Look, if this Phantom character is really as smart as everyone says he is, then there's no WAY he makes his own pick-ups and deliveries; I'll bet you just about anything he has a courier and I'll double down on my bet that he uses two dead-drops, not just one. That's what I'd do if I was running that cash, and I'm just a two-bit, former pawpsicle hustler. If I can think of it, HE sure as heck can."

What happened next made him wonder what the squirrel on Bogo's desk had done with the real Lieutenant Tufts.

"Right!" the bushytailed rodent chittered, slapping his paw against his knee to emphasize the point, "After all, why would The Phantom risk letting his borrowers see his face after all those times he refused to let them even hear his voice? I think the fox is right, Chief; he's using a mule to make those exchanges…and I'll bet you anything that bag-mammal has no idea who he's working for."

"And he almost certainly has no idea how much money he's handling," Nick added, trying not to look surprised. Albert Tufts was the LAST animal he would have expected to give him a vote of confidence. Oh well, any port in a storm; he looked at Bogo again. "That's another thing you said Chief, you can only put that kind of cash in front of someone so many times before they finally give in to temptation."

Bogo was almost, but not quite convinced. He leaned across his desk at the fox, "And just how many times can a bag mammal be expected to make that kind of blind transfer without their curiosity getting the better of them?"

"More time than you might think, Chief." Nick responded immediately, waving his paw in a throwaway gesture. If Bogo could play the Devil's advocate, then HE could get his street fox on, "I could walk out of here right now, and in ten minutes I could find someone willing to make a weekly delivery for me, no questions asked, at hundred bucks a pop."

"And what about that case Duke Weaselton says he found under the bed, sir?" It was Judy again. "That didn't sound like something anyone but an expert could get open very easily, no matter how badly they wanted to see what's inside." She paused for a second and then threw in a wrench of her own.

"But sir…I think need to remind everyone of something. Remember that key detail I mentioned, the one Duke Weaselton left out? We still don't know the exact location of The Phantom's dead-drop; only that it'll be somewhere in the Meerkat Market this coming Saturday, at a place called LB6." She looked across the desk at Bogo. "Have you ever been to The Market, Chief? It's not some little yard-sale."

It was probably stupid to remind him of something so obvious, but the Cape buffalo only nodded and then grimaced.

"Hmmmph, I see what you mean Hopps, the Meerkat Market IS a huge place, especially at this
time of year, with all the tourists about. Yesss, I'm afraid you're right; until we figure out exactly where LB6 is, *who* is making the pickup there won't matter very much will it?"

Judy started to answer him, but then she noticed that Nick was looking at her as if he wanted to bite her face off. What, now? What the heck could she possibly have said to put him in *that* frame of mind?

She found out quickly when Bogo said, "Right then, when you're done talking to the banks Hopps, you and Wilde had best run along to Sahara Square and try to see if you can find this LB6, yes?" It was phrased as a suggestion, but the tone was, 'that's an order!'

Judy wondered for a moment if it was possible to bite her *own* face off. Sahara Square—*today*, and the hottest part of the day, too. Sweet cheez n' crackers, no wonder Nick was looking at her like that. She could almost hear his thoughts. 'Way to go, Fluff! Anything *else* you'd like to put in your mouth while it's open?'

And she was none too happy with herself right now, either.

"D'ohhhhh, darn *that* weasel, he was right; I really AM a dumb bunny!"
Where There's Smoke... (Continued...Pt.4)

Chapter Summary

Hot on the trail...and we do mean HOT.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 8—Where There's Smoke...
"Oh, come on Nick, it's not *that* bad; you haven't even broken a sweat."

"Of course...*puff!*... I'm not sweating, Fluff...*gasp!*...*wheeze!*...foxes don't perspire...*huff!*...they pant!...*wheeze!* (Sheesh, you'd think by now she'd remember that little factoid.)

When they'd exited the police cruiser a moment ago, it had been like opening the door of a blast furnace. And now, Nick felt as if his body was starting to shrivel and his eyeballs were turning to sand; he was breathing so rapidly, he thought he was going to hyperventilate.

And this was just getting from the curb to the door of the Meerkat Market's administrative offices, a stroll of no more than twenty-five feet.

"Whoa, I was SO right to wear my old uniform today," the red fox grumbled to himself. Sweat or no sweat, he felt as grimy as a doormat, "I'm just glad Finnick can't see me right now." (With his two built-in radiators in the form of those oversized ears, the little fennec fox was far more adept at dealing with heat than his former partner. Ohhh yes...Mini-Me would just have a ball with this.)

It had been a rocky road to get here...at first, anyway. Judy had encountered no difficulty in determining that Mr. Ian Shortal was A. a real animal, B. Duke Weaselton's brother-in-law, and C. the owner of a candy shop in Tundratown called Sweeties' Scots Confectionary.

But when it came to the question of whether or not he'd been rejected for a bank loan, that was when things got dicey; the first two institutions that Judy talked to had stiffly informed her, 'Sorry, but we cannot give out that information."—banker -speak for 'begone, peasant!' On her third try, Nick had suggested that she mention The Phantom and it had worked like a charm. When the manager of Lemming Brothers Bank heard that name, he'd been only too eager to perform his civic duty...and the next three places she'd contacted had been similarly cooperative.

Of those four, three had indeed received loan applications from a Mr. Ian James Shortal, (and promptly denied them.). That had been more than enough for Judy...and also for Deputy Prosecutor Rudy Gamsbart. On hearing the news, the chamois had at last signed off on Duke Weaselton's story...tentatively. His full approval remained contingent of the fox and bunny being able to locate the elusive drops site, LB6.

And that was the reason Nick Wilde was ready to kick himself from here to downtown Meowria. If he hadn't suggested dropping The Phantom's name, Judy would likely still be trying to pry that loan information out of Zootopia's banking community—from the inside of a nice, air-conditioned police-precinct. "Me and my big, fat, fox-trap! DUMB Nick...stupid, stupid, stooopid!"

When they completed the ten-mile hike to the office door—that was how it felt to Nick—he let Judy be the one to open it, even though reaching the handle required her to make a short jump. (She was the one who had gotten them into this after all.) Once inside though, he quickly felt better; the room was not only air conditioned but equipped with a ceiling fan. The animal behind the reception desk, a Nubian ibex helped even more by turning out to be both cheerful and eager to assist the two ZPD officers, ushering them straightaways into the presence of the Meerkat Market's Chief of Operations, an oryx by the name of Ali Al-Yaabis.

The name notwithstanding, Sahara Square was home to animals from many of the world's other desert regions as well. Ali for example was an *Arabian* oryx, a distant relation of the gemsbok—although he was far more gracious in outlook than Judy's neighbor, Pronk. No sooner had the bunny-cop and her partner taken their seats, than he insisted upon offering them something to
"In Sahara Square, especially on a day like to today, it is always important to keep oneself well hydrated," he said, pressing a button on his office intercom.

Judy mercifully didn't decline the suggestion, and when the receptionist brought them a pitcher of strong sweet tea, cool but not cold, Nick downed his glass in a single gulp.

"So how may I be of assistance," the oryx inquired, settling back in his chair after taking only small sip of his own beverage.

It was Judy who answered him.

"Mr. Al-Yaabis…"

"Mr. Ali, if you please," he corrected her without reproach.

"Mr. Ali," Judy told him gravely, "we have reason to believe that some criminal activity is in the works for the Meerkat Market, this coming weekend."

He only smiled cynically. "Is there not always?" he asked, spreading his hooves and then becoming serious, "but may I presume this goes somewhat further than the usual pickpockets and automobile break-ins?"

"You may," Judy nodded, "We have information that an illegal exchange is scheduled to take place at The Market sometime Saturday morning."

Ali's ears flicked sideways and he made a sound as if clearing his throat.

"Ah, Bismillah…kat again?"

"No," the bunny-cop hastily assured him, "We're not at liberty to say exactly what's happening, but it has nothing to do with drugs."

"Well can you tell me this much at least," Ali asked her, his eyes were alert and his nose slightly elevated, as if he had scented something stalking him. "Has this anything to do with…" He looked around as if the walls might be listening and then leaned in close, lowering his voice, "Has it anything to do with…the Red Pig?"

Judy smiled and told him. "No sir. I can categorically assure you that Rocco Peccari is not involved in this."

Nick Wilde tried not to frown as he listened; Judy was stretching things a little. Probably the Sahara Square Mob wasn't in on it, but who could be sure? The Phantom WAS making his payment pickup on their turf after all.

"Good," Ali let out a long, slow breath and relaxed.

Though Nick still said nothing, he understood the oryx's apprehension. For as long as anyone could remember the Sahara Square Mob had adopted a 'hooves-off' policy when it came to the Meerkat Market, no shaking down of vendors, and no protection schemes. This was the supposed arrangement, but given the Red Pig's cavalier attitude towards gangland protocol, nobody knew for certain how much longer that policy was going to last. (Peccari's nonstop flouting of mob tradition was one of the major reasons why he was so despised by Mr. Big. "This porco di sporno; he has NO respect for cosa nostra!" Nick had heard the arctic shrew saying that on more than one
"The problem is, Mr. Ali," Judy was telling him, "we don't know the exact location of the exchange, only that it's supposed to happen somewhere in The Market …at a place with the designation, LB6. Does that combination mean anything to you sir; could it be the location of a vendor's stall perhaps?"

The oryx immediately frowned and shook his head.

"No, it could not be that; the letter-codes on the vendor's booths go only as high as 'C' and they are all only single letters…A-12, C-26, and so on."

"Can you think of anything else that it might mean?" Judy asked him. The sinking quality of her voice told Nick that she was expecting a negative answer. Ali, however, stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Not immediately, but I wonder about something. Could the letter 'L' mean 'EL', E-L? There are many streets and establishments in Sahara Square with that prefix you know, especially around the Beach Promenade."

"Oh, right." Judy answered simply, but Nick saw her ears stiffen. They should have asked Duke Weaselton if 'L' meant 'El' when they'd talked to him earlier; now if they asked him, they'd probably get only a rude remark for their troubles. Still, it was something to work with.

"Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Ali" she said offering the oryx a business card, "If you happen to think of anything else, please give us a call."

"I shall, certainly," he replied, offering a slight bow as he took the card.

Something occurred to Nick just then.

"Before we forget," he asked, "would you happen to have a map of the Meerkat Market to spare?"

"Certainly, I shall print one up for you right now," the oryx replied. He moved and clicked his computer mouse a few times and then said, "You may pick it up at the reception desk on your way out. Oh, and you are aware that during the summer season, the Meerkat Market is relocated from the Great Souk to the Beach Promenade?"

"Yes, we knew, but thanks for reminding us." Judy answered him.

"Better for the tourists, right?" Nick queried with a sly grin.

"Quite so," Ali replied, and then returned the fox's grin, "And also, it is always a few degrees cooler down by the water than elsewhere in Sahara Square." His eyes darted to his wall clock and he flicked his ears again, "Ahhh, I hope you will not think me rude, but I have a meeting scheduled with The Sahara Square Chamber of Commerce and I must not keep them waiting."

"No problem, I think we're done here," Judy answered, rising quickly from her chair and motioning for Nick to do the same. "Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Ali, you've been a big help."

"Always happy to be of service to the ZPD," the oryx responded with another slight bow, and then he raised a pair of fingers as if offering a benediction, "However, if I may be so bold, do not forget that in Sahara Square, it is always the desert that sets the pace."

"Especially on a day like today,' nodded Nick, who knew the expression well from his association with Finnick, "and thanks again."
As far as he was concerned, however, that warning about not moving too quickly in the desert heat
did not apply to closing a car door and when the red fox yanked his shut again, he nearly cracked
the window glass; (he wanted out of the convection oven right now.) "So, where to next, Carrots?"
he asked, hoping she hadn't noticed.

Judy might have done, but shortly had other concerns.

"Well, I…EEEEP!"

She yanked her paws from the steering wheel, waving them frantically in the air; "Ow, ouch… hot,
hot, hot!" In the time they'd been inside the office, the sun had heated it nearly to the temperature of
a pancake griddle.

"You okay?" Nick asked his partner, a concerned expression on his face. (His irritation over her
having landed them here had long since faded away.)

"Yeah, I'm all right," the bunny-cop answered, sucking at her fingertips one by one, and then
offering him a wry smile, "It's just a good thing my species doesn't have paw pads. Pass me one of
those towels and that water-bottle, 'kay?"

"Just a second," Nick answered, and reached behind his seat to grab the requested items.

"So, in answer to your question," Judy told him as she wetted down the steering wheel, "There's
only one thing to do that I can think of—start pounding the pavement and see if we can spot
anything that flips a switch."

Her plan, if you could call it that, wasn't actually as bad as it sounded; they did nearly all of their
'pounding' from inside the cruiser…with the A/C turned up to maximum.

The Beach Promenade area was a much different animal than the rest of Sahara Square; no sand or
mud-colored buildings here; the entire neighborhood was as white as tumble of sugar cubes, with
the doors, awnings, and window-shutters all painted a cheerful coral-blue.

It was also practically a ghost town; every door was closed, and every shutter bolted, with hardly a
soul to be seen on the streets. There weren't even very many cars on the road.

None of this was surprising; the high afternoon was always Sahara Square's 'quiet time'. Even on a
regular day, these were the hours when everybody kept inside and out of the heat, awaiting the
cool of the evening. On an abnormally hot afternoon like this one, staying out of the midday sun
was a no-brainer.

It didn't take long for the fox and bunny-cop's survey to become an exercise in frustration. Just as
Ali al-Yaabis had suggested, there were plenty of streets near Beach Promenade with an 'El' prefix,
El Veyrah, El Vis, El Merfudde, but nothing beginning with 'B'. The closest they came was the Rue
El Kahbong, and none of the houses on that street had addresses with less than three digits. In fact,
nowhere in the area of the Meerkat Market was there an address with less than two numerals.
Whatever the combination LB6 meant, it wasn't a house or a shop.

Nor did it seem to be the number of a flat, every apartment house they visited had doors with either
a number or a letter beside it; never a combination of both. Luckily, there were very few apartment
buildings near the Beach Promenade; checking the numbers required either Nick or Judy to exit the
police cruiser. (They took turns.)

Back and forth, zigging and zagging, up one street and down the other, studying the street signs,
squinting at the numbers beside each door, and each time coming up dry.
"Hurry sundown," Nick thought to himself, as they cruised along the beach-walk for maybe the third or fourth time Sahara Square always cooled down quickly after twilight—but for now even the beach was mostly deserted, only few bathers out on the water and no sails visible anywhere. Not even the rooster-tail of a jet-ski could be seen, splitting the surface of Zootopia Sound; the water was as empty as it was glassy-smooth. And now they were once again coming up on the heart of the Beach Promenade, Yassmina Circle and its famous bandstand; a soaring, whitewashed gazebo, with Moorish arches and a blue-domed roof. (There was always live music at The Market) On any other day there'd be a flock of kids hanging here, but right now it was as empty as a bombed out pillbox.

That was what made it all the more surprising when on the sidewalk up ahead, they spotted the blue and white umbrella of a food-cart vendor.

At once Nick felt his stomach grumbling.

"Carrots, can we pull over and grab a quick bite? I haven't eaten since breakfast…and I skipped breakfast."

"Yup, I could go for something myself right about now," she agreed, easing the cruiser up to the curb.

Exiting the vehicle, they quickly discovered that Ali al-Yabbis had been exactly right about at least one thing; it was a few degrees cooler, down by the water than elsewhere in Sahara Square, (which, on a day like today, was kind of like saying a tarantula bite doesn't hurt as much as a scorpion-sting.)

The vendor turned out to be a Ruppell's fox, smaller than a red fox but larger than a fennec. He had a perpetual grin plastered on his muzzle, and barely spoke the local language…but he was as clever as befit a fellow member of Nick Wilde's species; he had surrounded his cart with wicker mats, so that his customers wouldn't burn their feet on the sidewalk.

And posted beside the cart was a signboard, showing pictures of all the items he sold; his patrons could order what they wanted simply by pointing.

Nick selected a foot-long wurmwurst while Judy opted for a carrot-dog with everything.

Almost everything…

"I-I-I wouldn't do that if I were you, Carrots." Nick pointed to the spoonful of neon-red she was about to slather over her sandwich, "That's harissa sauce; really spicy, you'll burn your tongue off."

"Ohhh, thanks Nick," she said, hastily returning the spoon to its tub.

"No sweat," the red fox answered, a rueful smile spreading along his muzzle as he recalled his own first encounter with the fiery condiment. Ohhhh, Finnick had gotten a HUGE laugh out of that one…

Wait a minute…Finnick?

Nick lifted his nose and sniffed. Judy noticed him immediately

"What…What is it?"

"Finnick's around here somewhere," the red fox answered, scenting the air again, "And Conor Lewis is with him." A third sniff, and then a head-shake, "Ahhh, I can't quite get the direction, but
they're here all right, not too far away either."

At first, Judy thought he was just making small talk. But when they got back inside the police cruiser, the red fox had a suggestion for her.

"Carrots, there's nobody who knows Sahara Square like Finnick. I bet he might have some idea about where to find this LB6."

Judy's left ear pulled backwards and her nose began to twitch.

"Mmmm, I-I don't know, Nick. We need to keep this under wraps and no offense, but Finnick's not exactly the soul of discretion."

"To put it mildly," the red fox agreed, nodding over an ironic expression, "but he's not especially nosy either; he won't ask for any details. And he'll keep quiet if we ask him to."

"Mmmmmnn, oh-kay," Judy agreed reluctantly, while wiping her paws on the napkin she'd brought. (Nick, typically, wiped his on the leg of his uniform pants.) "So, where is he again?"

By way of response, Nick rolled down his window and sniffed again; then he waved a paw, vaguely, off to the left. "Over there somewhere."

Those rudimentary directions turned out to be more than sufficient for their purposes; the next time he lowered the window, Nick was able to get an almost precise fix on the location of his former partner, "Second street ahead and turn right." he said, pointing ahead, through the windshield.

"You nose told you that?" Judy couldn't help marveling. How the heck could even a fox's sense of smell be so pinpoint accurate?

"My nose and my magnetic sense," Nick tapped the side of his head as if that explained everything.

When he cracked the window a third time, Judy no longer needed his assistance to determine Finnick's location, she could hear the little desert fox for herself.

As matter of fact they could probably hear him in Bunnyburrow. "Whatchoo you think you doin'? Dangit, we ain't got TIME for this!"

"Well, at least we caught him in good mood," Nick Wilde observed sardonically as he rolled up the window again, "They're in that alley, up ahead on the left."

As soon as they made the turn, it became instantly clear what all the fuss was about.

Finnick's van was pulled up in the center of the alleyway, shaded by the surrounding buildings, with a bucket and soapy rag planted on the roof. Yep, that made sense, getting it cleaned up on a hot day like today, when does anyone ever wash their car without getting wet themselves—either by accident or design?

As for the fennec himself, there he was, perched on top of a packing crate with a long-handled brush in his paws—raging impotently at the pair of young mammals that were apparently supposed to be helping him.

The first, a young black rat of Asian heritage was standing atop a thick sponge, balancing precariously on the rim of the van's windshield. Down below, a more familiar animal, a young silver-fox was sitting hunkered against the front grille. Held high in his paws was a curved piece of sheet metal, with the edge pushed up against the hood to create a makeshift ski-jump.
Nick couldn't help laughing and neither could Judy; kid will be kids. He opened his door just in to hear the young rodent saying, "...little bit lower, Conor."

Finnick meanwhile continued to rant, "Will you stoppit with that stuff, and get back to...?"

Both boys ignored him.

"Okay, that's good," the young rat squeaked.

"Go for it Mike!" Conor Lewis fox-screamed, and the rodent pushed off from the roof of the van, surfing his way down the windshield with his arms angled backwards in the classic 'cowabunga' pose.

He gathered speed rapidly as he left the glass for the metal hood, and then he was up the ramp and airborne, performing a neat, triple-twist, somersault in the air, and coming in for a perfect landing on a nearby upturned barrel, facing backwards in the direction he had come..

Conor whooped, Judy applauded and Nick Wilde groused silently, "Aggggh, grrrr...the things you see when you don't have your phone-cam out." (If THAT hadn't been Fuzztube material, such a thing did not exist.) Even Finnick seemed impressed, if still disgruntled. The young rat meanwhile was raising his arms in a 'V' for Victory.

"And once again, young Master Daehan proves that there is more to this rat than just his mad music skills."

"Yeah, well how you gonna get down from there, O great one?" Finnick demanded, with his arms on his hips, "That drum's too dang high for either me or Conor to reach up top."

Yes it was, but not for Nick and he almost went over to help. No need; the young rat had his own solution to the problem. He simply heaved the sponge off the side of the barrel and jumped off after it, employing it as makeshift trampoline and bouncing once, twice…and then coming down again in a perfect three-point stance.

"NEVER question the young master's abilities." He informed Finnick, straightening up again.

In response, the fennec's eyes narrowed wickedly, an expression Nick Wilde knew all too well.

"Uh-huh? Well, it ain't ME gonna be asking the questions, boy." He pointed the new arrivals, "Now you done it, the cops are here."

The black rat squeaked in terror and turned to scurry for cover.

"Wait Mike, it's cool." Conor Lewis hurried over, throwing an icy look at Finnick on the way, "You're a creep sometimes, ya know that DF? Mike, hold up...that's the fox and bunny I was telling you about earlier. Hey Nick, hey Judy."

"Hey yourself Conor, who's this?" Judy dropped down into a bunny-crouch. The rat responded by squealing again and attempting hide himself behind one of the young fox's legs.

"Ease up, big guy, I told you they're my friends." Conor looked down at the rodent for a second and then at Nick and Judy. "You'll have to excuse him, guys. Before Mike and his family moved to Zootopia, they lived in a place where...ahhh, where the cops didn't cut rats a whole lot of slack, if you follow what I'm bringing out—especially if they were immigrants."

"We understand," Judy nodded and so did Nick. Just because the ZPD had an enlightened attitude
about different species, that didn’t mean it was the case with *every* law enforcement agency.

She hunkered down a little bit more.

"It's okay Mike, uhhh..." she looked up at Conor for assistance.

"Mike Daehan," the young fox filled in the blank, "Friend of mine from the Academy and one killer keyboard player." He knelt and laid the flat of his pawlm on the ground. Mike hesitated for a second and then climbed cautiously aboard.

"Can you hurry it up over there?" Finnick smoldered from somewhere in the background. The others all pretended not to notice him.

"It's okay Mike," Judy said again, as Conor lifted him up until they were eye-to-eye, "You're in Zootopia now, where anyone can be anything." By now, that slogan had started to feel tired and a little corny—even to her, Nick Wilde knew, but in this case it seemed to be appropriate. And then she said, "I bet you never saw a fox and bunny cop, back where you used to live."

"N-No," the young rat admitted, skittishly but he was finally starting to relax.

Conor promptly eased the tension even further by telling him, "Judy here is the big sis of that bunny-girl plays bass I was telling you about, Erin Hopps."

That was what finally broke away the last of the ice...though Mike's wing-fox soon had reason to wish otherwise.

"Wow yeah, can't wait to see her at the ZAPA auditions," the young rat said. "Conor tells me she's one...she's got one hot, smokin' voice."

"You'll hear it for yourself, kid." Nick Wilde grinned...more at Conor and Judy's discomfort than in any appreciation for her sister's vocal talents. 'Hot smokin' was not exactly an appropriate way for a young fox to describe a young bunny, even if he was only talking about her voice, and especially not in front of a family member. Judy seemed to be trying desperately not to thump her foot, while Conor's expression fairly screamed, "I could have *kept* my muzzle shut, but nooooooo!"

Nick decided to give them both a little break.

"I don't know if you heard yet Conor, but Judy and I busted Craig Guilford up in the Meadowlands yesterday afternoon."

"Yeah, I read about that online," the young fox answered, setting Mike down on his shoulder. And then his ears began to pivot and his head tilted sideways. "Did that moron REALLY try to rip off an *airplane*?"

"Yep, that's right," Judy answered quickly. She was obviously hoping that the conversation wouldn't progress from there to the method by which she had brought down the young coyote.

It might have, but then Mike Daehan piped up, "What'd Dana say when she found out, Conor?"

"Dunno," the young fox shrugged with his free shoulder, "I haven't talked to her since I got back from Bunnyburrow." And to Nick and Judy he explained. "He's talking about another friend of ours from ZAPA, Dana Alchesay, plays fiddle and native flute. She's a coyote herself and doesn't like it very much when another 'yote drags their species' rep through the sewer."

He said this last while looking at Nick, who nodded his understanding at once. That was how HE
felt about renegade foxes like the young coyote's girlfriend, Amanda Hill—and he knew Conor also held that attitude.

Then Finnick cleared his throat again, and the red fox decided it was time to get down to business.

"If you don't mind Conor, we need to borrow DF for minute." He pointed in the desert fox's direction, and then at the police cruiser

"Ohhh, NOW what?" Finnick grabbed the brush, threw it down and then jumped off the crate. Nick thought he looked like a kid who's just been called to the principal's office even though he hasn't done anything. "And can you two get back to work now?" the fennec-fox growled; this was meant for Conor and Mike.

Judy insisted on pulling the car around the corner before explaining why they were here. Nick might have been able to talk her into soliciting his former partner for advice…but NOT with a couple of kids listening in; they were risking a rocket from the Chief as it was.

She needn't have worried. Nick Wilde was no fool and didn't even broach the subject of LB6 right away.

"What was with all the rush back there Finnick? " he said, poking his thumb in the direction of the cruiser's rear window, "Your van's not going to disappear if you don't get it cleaned up right NOW."

The fennec-fox narrowed his eyes, and then his mouth crinkled. "That's what I'm TRYING to get it to do; got a buyer coming by, later this evening."

Nick's response to this was wholly predictable; his ears shot up and then his jaw dropped all the way open. "What you're selling it?"

"Yup," Finnick folded his arms, smiling for the first time since the ZPD officers' arrival, "She's been a good ride to me, but it's time to trade up; got my eye on this used Springhare van that Conor found on Stagslist. I can close on it, soon as I got mine sold, but I got to get it done real quick."

"Oh," Nick Wilde let out a big breath of air. Oh-kayyy, Finnick didn't need to sell his van because he was broke, just the opposite; he had enough to be able to afford something better; everything was good now. "When then we won't keep you too long," he said "but Carrots and I need some help."

"We can't give out any details," Judy told him, taking over, "but there's a location Nick and I are trying to find, here in Sahara Square, and we're not having any luck. Do you happen to know where LB6 is? It's supposed to be somewhere in the Meerkat Market."

Finnick's mouth stretched backwards in a fox-grimace and he beetled his brows for a moment. "Mmmmm, that ain't no place I know of. You tried that new parking garage yet?"

Nick and Judy looked at each other and then at the fennec fox.

"Parking garage?" Judy finally said.

"Yeah, they only opened it up a coupla weeks ago," the desert fox told them, "it ain't even on Zoogle maps yet." He looked thoroughly pleased with himself, no surprise to Nick. His old partner had always liked nothing better than one-upping somebody. To prove it, he fell instantly silent, offering nothing more.
"All right then where IS this new garage?" Judy asked him, exasperated. She was in no mood for games right now.

Finnick pointed off to the right, "Entrance is over that way, corner of Ghibli and Camel's Thorn.

"Wha…? That's nowhere near the Meerkat Market." Now Nick was beginning to lose patience with his former partner too. Ghibli and Camel's Thorn was at least two blocks away from the Beach Promenade.

"I said that's where the entrance is," The little desert fox looked almost smug, "But the garage is right underneath Yassmina Circle. An' yeah, you can get to the Meerkat Market easy from there. They got stairs, they got escalators, even a freight elevator; Conor and me saw a couple of guys fighting over it, that time when we sold the first batch of Gazelle Tour Shirts here."

Once more Nick and Judy looked at each other; the red fox could almost feel her thoughts. *How come YOU didn't know about that parking garage, Mr. Street-Smart, I-Know-Everybody?*

Nick didn't know whether to thank Finnick or choke him out; he finally settled on the former.

"Okay, thanks for the information little Toot-Toot," (The fennec-fox wasn't getting off that easy.)

"What can I say, you're welcome," Finnick responded—in the tone most animals usually reserve for someone who just cut them off in traffic, "I only hope them kids didn't wreck my van while we been talking."

When they returned to the alleyway they found that the desert fox's van was not only still intact; it was clean as the proverbial whistle. Heck, even *that* was an inadequate description; Finnick's ride looked almost as if it had been detailed; the windows were spotless, the flanks had been polished to a high gloss, even the tires were gleaming. And there was Conor, sitting on the packing crate with Mike Daehan beside him, in the midst of a cell-phone conversation. When Finnick tried to get his attention, the young fox waved him away as if he was being pestered for spare change.

"Yeah Saad, we're done here." He was speaking to the animal on the other end of the line. "Any sign of 'em, yet? Nahhh, didn't think so, it's still too early. Lemme know as soon as…what's that? No worries, I talked to Treo and he's down with us, gonna come by with his crew. Yeah, Jason's still good…yes, he's bringing his brothers with him; will you quit it already? I told you before, we got this. What? No don't thank me yet, wait'll it's done. See ya in a bit, okay? Later cat…bye-bye."

By the time he got the phone put away Finnick was nearly fit to be tied.

"What, you finished ALREADY?"

Conor looked at him with pitying eyes.

"Yeah DF, it's amazing what you can accomplish when no one's leaning over your shoulder, bugging you."

No way was Nick Wilde going to resist an opening that juicy. He leaned in close to his former partner's ear.

"Now, now Mini-Me…Conor and Mike just did you a big favor. What can you say, but 'you're welcome?"

What Finnick *did* say made Judy want to clamp her paws over her ears.
Nick's breezy mood was destined to be short lived, however. When they found the parking garage, they discovered that the different levels were color rather than letter-coded…and the blue (b) level was reserve for rodents; you weren't going to move briefcase full of cash through that part of the garage.

"Maybe…LB6 stands for Loading Bay Number 6?" Judy offered hopefully. But even she seemed to know that she was grasping at straws. And yes, the loading dock turned out to have only three spaces.

When they emerged from the parking garage a few minutes later, their only compensation was that the sun was finally setting and the heat of the day was at last loosening its grip.

Unable to think of anything else, they returned to the beach-walk, pulling into a space marked 'Police Vehicles Only' and then sitting there in a brooding silence. Predictably, it was Nick who broke it.

"Okay Carrots, I admit it, I'm out of ideas," he said, throwing up his paws in frustration…and banging his knuckles on the roof of the cruiser, "Ow!"

Fortunately, Judy Hopps was too frustrated to be amused.

"I know Nick, I know," she said, "I feel the same as you. And the worst part is, I just can't shake the idea that the answer is almost right there in front of us…Nick!"

Her partner's head had snapped around, focusing on a shapely corsac-fox vixen in a string bikini, just then passing by his window…and no, Judy was NOT jealous!

"Nick!" she started to say again…but then he turned to her quickly with his ears pricked up.

"Carrots, start the car!"

Her nose began to rapidly twitch. "Wha…? You want us follow her?"

"No," the red fox's tail was frizzed and shivering with excitement, "No Carrots, I want you to follow back the way she came from….oh, foxtrot, why didn't I think of this….c'mon, go!"

Judy stared at him again for a second and then she turned the key.

They retraced the corsac vixen's path to a mostly empty parking lot, just off the beach. Planted between the sand and the parking area was a cluster of buildings, resembling half-buried Quonset huts, constructed in whitewashed stucco.

"Pull into that space over there," the red fox said to her, indicating the one closest to the entrance walk. Judy dutifully eased the cruiser in the place where he was pointing and then killed the motor.

"All right Nick, now do you want to tell me…?"

But the red fox was already out the door.

She found him standing at the head of the walkway, pointing to carved, wooden sign with blue painted letters, "Carrots, look."

Judy looked…and didn't get it. The sign read simply

**Lockers, Showers, Changing Rooms**
But then she saw what was printed underneath, an arrow pointing to the left with the caption,

**Building R – Rodents**  
**Building S – Small Mammals**

…and beneath that one, another arrow, pointing to the right with the title,

**Building M – Mid-Sized Mammals**  
**Building L – Large Mammals**

"Come on," Nick said, hurrying down the path in the direction of the Building L and beckoning for Judy to follow him. This time, she didn't need to be told twice.

What they found inside of building L was almost an anti-climax. Down a short flight of stairs and around the first bend they came upon a long bank of lockers, two rows, one on top of the other, top row, A and bottom row, B…and six spaces to the right on the lower tier…bingo, there it was, locker LB6.

Judy whooped and threw her arms around her partner

"Whoo-hoo, Nick, you found it, you FOUND it…clever fox!"

Caught by surprise, he nearly toppled over backwards, but then almost as quickly he was hugging her back. After a long, hot, frustrating afternoon, and just when they'd been about to throw in the towel for the day, they'd….

"Eeyeesh! Hey fox…bunny do that gross stuff somewhere else, right?"

Ten feet away, a late-teens fossa in head-banger clothing was looking as if he was about to lose his lunch all over the locker-room floor. (Nick almost felt like doing the same; the interloper smelled as if he'd just taken a bath in clove-oil. Kids today…)

"What the heck are you guys even doing in the large mammal's building, anyway?" the fossa demanded, speaking as if he owned the place.

That broke the spell and broke it quick. Nick let go of Judy and turned to let Mr. Snarky see his badge and uniform.

"I could ask YOU that same question, kid," he said. (A fossa isn't much all that much bigger than a red fox.)

He was rewarded with a loud screech and the fossa nearly dropping his guitar case, followed by a mumbled apology and a fast sprint for the stairs.

"That kid's up to something, Carrots," Nick observed, but she quickly waved him off.

"Never mind that fox, listen."

He cocked an ear…and instantly got the point; the sound of the fossa's footsteps on the stairs was as loud as a snare-drum solo. And if the acoustics in here made it easy enough to hear someone leaving, well then, it went without saying that it would be equally simple to hear someone approaching.

This HAD to be the place they were looking for; Judy certainly seemed to think so. She already had her phone-camera out and was snapping pictures of the locker. (The fossa's appearance hadn't
fazed her at all, and wasn't that just like this bunny?)

But then she stopped and pointed, frowning. "Uhmmm, I-I-I don't know, Nick."

The set up here was more or less the same as the lockers in the Savanna Central train station, coin in the slot, turn the key, pull it out and then the door locks automatically when you close it.

"I would have expected the Phantom to use something a little more secure." She said. "These lockers are the easiest thing in the world to break into.

Nick had to agree with her there, the lockers in Zootopia Central were pilfered on an almost daily basis. However, here there was a small but significant difference.

"True Carrots, but see those rings there?" he pointed, "You can add you own padlock for extra security if you want. Look, there's one on that other locker there."

"Oooo, yes," Judy grimaced as if she'd just stepped in something, "I hadn't noticed that Nick, you're right; this has to be it."

She snapped two more pictures and then switched her phone's function from camera to speed-dial.

"Hello, Clawhauser? This is Officer Judy Hopps; I need to speak to Chief Bogo, ASAP."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:
Yes, I'm aware that strictly speaking, foxes do perspire. However, not in a way that's readily noticeable, and I don't think Nick's in the mood for a long discussion on the subject right now.
Chapter Summary

A stinging rebuke...or maybe just a sting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 8—Where There's Smoke… (Continued…Pt. 5)

"Sorry Officer Hopps, Chief Bogo went home about an hour ago."

The voice was high, flat, nasal, and also completely uninterested in anything she might have to say…either to him, to the Chief, or to anyone else.

Judy tried not to groan as she looked at her watch. Was it that late already?

The animal she was speaking to was Benjamin Clawhauser's night-shift replacement, Officer Robert 'Bob' Sparks, an Asiatic Wild Ass. About as upbeat as the average canker sore, he was known throughout Precinct-1 as 'The Melancholy Donkey', and NOT affectionately. Whenever he was on duty, folks tended to avoid the dispatch desk like the plague.

"Do you want to leave him a message?" Sparks was asking her, still speaking in a dull, lackluster voice.

"No thanks, I'll shoot him a text," Judy answered, quickly. She was not about to relay the results of her and Nick's efforts by way of this indifferent character; what they'd found in locker-room L was much too important for that.

"Okaaaay," Sparks responded in that same leaden monotone, and disconnected without another word.

"That guy brightens up a room by leaving it," Nick Wilde observed, as Judy thumbed out her text-message for Chief Bogo.

"Tell me about it," she answered, hitting 'send'. She put away her phone and then hugged herself,
shivering slightly. "Brrrr, is it just me, or did it get really cool out here all of a sudden?"

Nick only smiled. "No, it's not just you Carrots—and you can thank the Climate Wall for the temperature drop." He pointed north, towards a line of glowing red slats in the far distance. "See, it doesn't just heat up the air; it also sucks out the humidity. And dry air cools off a lot faster than moist air. Over in the Rainforest District, they probably haven't noticed a thing yet."

"Is that something else you learned from Finnick?" Judy asked him. Was it really that much cooler now, or did it only feel that way? After the broiling day she and her partner had suffered, it was hard to say for certain.

"No," Nick answered, beetling his brows for a second, "I picked that up back in grade school, on a field trip to the Climate Wall. Funny how some things stay with you." He frowned slightly, "But speaking of Finnick, I wonder if he got that van sold."

His change of expression was not lost on his partner.

"If you don't mind my saying so Nick, you don't seem very happy about it."

The red fox growled and looked away for a second.

"Ummm…can't help having some mixed feelings Carrots. " He turned to face her again. "Look, I know it's Finnick's ride, and he can do whatever he wants with it, but still…I have a lot of memories of my own to go with that van."

"Such as…?" Judy prompted, not sure at all if this was a good idea.

The response she got was Nick folding his arms and canting his gaze upwards, chewing on his lower lip.

"Ohhh let's see. There was the time we blew out the radiator and were stuck in the middle of nowhere for a week, there was the time we got carjacked and the cops found it propped up on blocks with the tires, wheels, and radio gone, there was the time the heater quit while we driving through a blizzard, and then of course, there's all the times it got towed and we had to get it out of the impound yard, and then …uh, what are you looking at me like that for, Carrots? I never said they were good memories."

"Oh, YOU!" Judy punched him the ribs…but it was only a glancing blow. Nick wasn't fooling her; he'd been visiting with another memory of Finnick's van—of the times he'd spent there with the cross-fox vixen he'd loved and lost, those many years ago.

But then she saw him tilt his nose upwards, scenting the air.

"Finnick?" She asked.

"Nope, Conor." The red fox answered, pointing to the right, "he's over that way, by the bandstand, with a bunch of other kids."

As if to drive home the point, someone started playing a guitar solo just then. Judy recognized the tune, an ironic choice for Sahara Square, 'Welcome to the Jungle', by Guns n' Rodents.

She felt her nose starting to twitch, "Is that him playing now, you think?" She hadn't seen a guitar-case around when they'd bumped into the fox-kid earlier, but that didn't mean much. He'd been helping with a car-wash wash at the time; water, water everywhere, and not the best mix for a guitar.
"Mmm. I don't think so, Carrots " Nick scented the air again, "but he's over there somewhere, by the steps I think."

"Well, maybe we'll get a chance to hear him play; come on, let's go."

Nick hesitated for a second, "I-I don't…"

Judy grabbed his paw. "I won't ask you to dance, come on."

He slipped away from her, shaking his head "That's not it Carrots," he told her, nose wrinkling like a three-day-old orange peel, "The fossa-kid from the locker room is over there too—and did you get a whiff of that guy? Like walking into a clove-oil refinery; I'm liable to puke all over the sidewalk if I get too close to him."

Judy started to say, 'Oh come on, already…' but then stopped herself. Maybe it hadn't been all that overwhelming for HER, but for Nick Wilde, with his keen sense of smell…okay, yes, now she got it.

But that didn't mean she was going to be put off completely.

"So we'll stay upwind of him, and didn't you tell me you thought that kid was up to something?"

Nick didn't answer her, not verbally anyway, but the expression on his face said two things quite clearly. One—yes, he'd told her that, and two—when was he going to learn to keep his fox-trap shut?

Just the same, he followed her…but only so far, insisting that they pull up the wagons a good 20 yards away from the bandstand.

"What is the smell that bad?" Judy's brows were raised and her nose was twitching again, but this time, the fox's answer was all business.

"No, I don't want that fossa-kid to see us." He looked around for a second, his ears shifting in several directions at once. "Mrrr, is there someplace around where we can…? Yeah, okay…over there, come on."

A moment later, they were crouching in the lee of a battered forklift; it was a small mammal machine, little more than two thirds the size of Judy's old meter-maid car, and it offered them only limited cover. Nick seemed to think it was enough, though.

"Won't that fossa-kid be able to smell us?" Judy asked him. Fossas were another species with a good sense of smell and as per her earlier suggestion she and Nick were watching the bandstand from an upwind location.

He turned and flashed her a sardonic smirk. "Not with all that clove oil he's wearing; that boy won't be able to pick up the scent of anything but himself for a week. Hmmm, wonder what he's doing over there…" Answering his own question, Nick pulled out a pair of mini binoculars, aiming them in the direction of the bandstand. Judy saw him roll the focus knob and then abruptly lower them again.

"Well, what do you know? HE'S the one playing the guitar."

Judy reached for her own binoculars, "Really? Let me see."

What she saw was the fossa standing center stage in the bandstand, backed up by two other
animals, a striped hyena with a Deejay setup and some other animal—Judy couldn't quite make him out—playing percussion.

"That animal on the drums, can you see him?" she asked, glancing briefly at Nick.

"No, but I can smell him," the red fox answered, still focusing on the bandstand, "He's an Afurican Wild Dog…Oops, I'm sorry, we don't call them that anymore, I should have said Painted Wolf."

He was smiling cynically and Judy didn't entirely disagree with him; even for her, that was going a little bit too far into PC territory. Just then the fossa wrapped up his solo, and took a bow. All around him, kids were whooping and applauding.

Judy felt her mouth pull sideways and turned to look at Nick.

"What the heck, now? He's good, but he's not that good. Conor's a hundred times better."

The red fox only grinned slightly, still keeping his eyes on the bandstand.

"Wellll, not that much better Carrots maybe fifty…" His tail frizzed suddenly, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, speak of the devil, there he is, look there…about halfway up the steps."

Judy looked, and saw him…a young silver-fox, standing on the steps of the gazebo with a slightly older coyote-girl beside him. That had to be Dana, Dana—Dana whatever-her-last-name was, the girl Conor had mentioned when they'd run into him earlier. At the moment he and the fossa were in the midst of an animated discussion.

"Can you make out what they're saying?" Nick asked her. Foxes had sharp hearing but nothing as good as a bunny.

"Let me turn on the radar and we'll find out." Judy raised her ears and swiveled them in the direction of the bandstand. Almost immediately she heard Conor speaking… in a decidedly aggressive tone of voice.

"…want that guitar, I've had my eye on that bad boy for months." He was pointing at something the fossa was holding; Judy couldn't quite see it, but there was no missing the superior expression on the treetop predator's face.

"Okay-y-y kid, what have you got to bet for it with?"

"Ouch, there's a kid who's not aceing his language classes," Nick Wilde sniggered from over on her left.

Conor meanwhile was answering the fossa's challenge.

"Same deal you had with that other kid last Saturday, my axe against yours." He was holding up a guitar case as if to prove that yes, he had one.

That guitar case…

Judy bit her lip and felt her nose begin to twitch again. That wasn't the same case Conor had brought with him to the Carrot Days festival, it looked almost as worn as the guitar he'd been playing; so either he had a different instrument with him tonight or else…she didn't know what else.

"Okay fox, let's see what you've got." The fossa replied, flipping his paw in an upward gesture. His
lofty attitude reminded Judy of a king commanding a courtier. In response, Conor set down his
guitar case and flipped it open…or that was what it looked like; Judy couldn't quite see. But she
saw the reaction that followed all right; that was impossible to miss. The fossa and his crew all
started laughing themselves sick.

Nick Wilde was laughing too…quietly, under his breath.

"Wh…What, Nick?" Judy stared at him, bewildered.

"Just keep watching Carrots," he said. She did and saw the fossa pointing scornfully at something
on the ground.

"You want to bet THAT piece of junk against my new Mooserite? No way, dude. Crikes, I thought
you foxes were supposed to be clever or something."

"It's a decent guitar," she heard the young fox protest; he sounded more than wee bit whiny, "and
anyway, you're entitled to a handicap."

This show of bravado got exactly what was coming to it; the fossa sneered dismissively; a
superstar, being pestered by a paparattzi."

"Ho, you think you're that good kid?"

"Better than YOU," Conor taunted, "and I don't think, I know."

When Judy repeated what she'd heard to Nick, he muttered softly under his breath, "That's it kid,
now sweeten the pot."

From his lips to Conor's ears…or that was how it appeared. The next thing the young fox said was.
"Okay your guitar against mine—plus three hundred smackers."

The fossa immediately shook his head. "Nope…five hundred bucks and your guitar and you got
yourself a bet."

"Five hundred and my guitar, against your axe and another two hundred." the silver-fox countered
immediately.

Before the fossa could answer this, the coyote-girl grabbed Conor by the arm.

"What are you doing, are you crazy, fox? You don't have fifty extra much less…" a sudden look of
horror washed over her face. "Oh my God, you didn't; your dad'll KILL you."

Conor only brushed her off.

"Relax, I'll have it back before he knows it's missing."

The 'yote-girl threw up her paws and howled. "Owooo, that's what you said LAST time! Okay
that's it, I'm out of here; it's your funeral, stupid."

She spun on her heel and stalked away from the bandstand with her paws jammed downward,
growling at nobody. The fossa watched her go, laughed again and then said, "Okay kid, it's a deal."

60 feet away, Nick Wilde was laughing too. "Dang, he's good."

Judy gaped at her partner, wide-eyed and trembling; now she wasn't merely twitching her nose, she
was tilting her head from side to side. "Nick what the heck?" Had he completely lost his mind?
Poor Conor had just bitten off way more than he could chew—and set himself up who-knew-what—and HE thought it was funny?

By way of response, Nick pointed at the departing coyote girl, "It's called a shill, sweetheart. Don't worry, Conor knows what he's doing...and I bet he has few more cards up his sleeve." Without waiting for an answer, he stood up and put the binoculars away. "Come on, this I have to see."

"What?" Judy nearly dropped her own binoculars. "Nick what the heck is going on with on you? One minute, you want to keep out of sight, and then the next..."

"Conor already knows we're here, Come on."

"But want about...Ohhhh, what's the use?" Judy shook herself in frustration and trotted to catch up, the irony of the situation completely lost on her. Less than five minutes previously, Nick had been the one who'd needed to be dragged along.

Again, she needn't have concerned herself. The red fox wasn't about to get TOO close, stopping just short of the edge of the crowd, and hanging in the shadows on the periphery.

By now the gaggle of onlookers had swelled considerably; Judy couldn't help noticing that many of the new arrivals were either painted wolves or hyenas, and all of them seemed to think that Conor had made a very bad mistake. "That silly fox, he has no idea what's coming," she heard a girl-jackal say to the brown hyena standing next to her. The hyena-girl only shrugged indifferently. "He brought it on himself, girlfriend."

Judy felt her ears lay backwards. Dangit, couldn't Conor hear any of this, didn't he KNOW what was about to happen? The only animals the young fox seemed to have in his corner were a pair of young sand-cats, about 20 feet to her right. The older feline was watching with crossed fingers and a hopeful expression, while the smaller one had his eyes closed and seemed to be praying hard. Were they brothers, perhaps? They certainly looked the part. They also seemed to be trying to keep out of sight, watching the proceedings from behind the trunk of date-palm tree.

Up on the bandstand, Conor was performing his familiar ritual of spitting into his paw before offering it to the fossa. The treetop predator looked disgusted for a second, but then took it and shook with him anyway.

The bet was sealed.

"Okay," the fossa said, wiping his paw on his pants, "as the mammal accepting the challenge I claim the right to pick the tune, Paws in the Air by Joe Catrani, you guys know that one?" He was speaking to the hyena-deejay and the painted wolf on the drum-kit, both of whom nodded immediately.

"Yeahr, I've got that one in me mix," the hyena said, speaking in a broad, south Liondon accent.

The fossa nodded and offered him four; he didn't seem to care whether or not Conor knew how to play the tune. Not that it mattered; the young fox answered him anyway, "Done!"

That earned him a scornful look from the fossa, as if he were saying, "When did I ask you, fox!" and then he made another announcement, "'Kay, we need someone to hold the cash, anyone?"

"I got it, mammal." The Deejay hyena spoke up again, reaching over the top of console to take the money from him and Conor.
By now the tension on the bandstand was thick as a pea-soup fog, and it didn't lessen any when the fossa said, "Okay, I need to go use the restroom before we start," and then turned and walked away before the young fox could respond.

From beside her Judy heard a low, contemptuous growl, "Holy foxtrot, what is this, amateur night in Zoocamonga?" Nick sounded as if he wanted to spit on the floor.

Judy looked at him for a second with her nose twitching again, and then at rest of the animals occupying the bandstand. Ohhhh, Conor was even more seriously outnumbered than she'd thought; in addition to the striped hyena and the painted wolf, she could also see a pair of jaguars and a spotted hyena, much bigger than his striped cousin, lolling about the gazebo. All five of them were dressed in the same thrasher get-up as the fossa, even the one on the deejay console, studs, chains, leather and chrome; each one had a bandanna wrapped around either a neck or a forehead. Occasionally one of them would offer a disdainful, sideways glance to the young silver-fox who had foolishly dared to challenge their champion.

Conor just ignored them all, calmly setting up his pedalboard and plugging it in. And now Judy could see that yes, he had she same guitar with him that he'd been playing at the Carrot Days talent show.

When the fossa returned to the bandstand a moment later, the atmosphere changed completely; there were whoops, fist bumps, and double high fours all around, and then he turned to give Conor the degrading look that every fox knows all-too-well.

"Okay Shifty, you ready for this?"

"Nahh, I changed my mind, I'm out of here," the young fox answered smartly. It was obviously meant as sarcasm, but the fossa responded as if the words had been spoken in earnest.

"Sorry kid, we already shook on it; you back out now, you forfeit."

For just a hint of a second, a smirk seemed to flit across Conor's black-furred muzzle; there and gone, in the blink of an eye.

"Uh-huh, right…we gonna do this thing or what?" he said.

"Let's rock," the fossa responded, and then turned and crouched down beside a guitar case, (which Judy couldn't help noticing was trimmed in chromed studs, much like himself.) he gave Conor another smirk and then flipped it open.

What he pulled out drew a flurry 'Ooos' and 'Ahhhs' from the crowd of onlookers, even a few gasps. It was a guitar in gleaming, pearlescent black, and fitted out with gold hardware—all of it, even the frets and the twang-bar. It also came with a rather strange feature, a paw-grip carved out of one side. When Conor saw the instrument, he stabbed an angry finger in the fossa's direction.

"Hey, that's not the guitar I'm playing for."

The fossa gave him a toothy grin, showing both his fangs.

"No, but it's the one I'm playing WITH. Sorry Shifty, but we never agreed in advance on which axe we were gonna use."

Judy took a step forward, but immediately found her way blocked by Nick Wilde's outstretched arm.
"Easy Carrots, I already told you…Conor knows what he's doing; watch."

Yes, he did; instead of looking flustered, the young fox pointed to something behind the fossa.

"Then in that case, I want someone to hold that guitar, same as the cash." He sounded like an angry kit.

"Yeah, whatever dude." The fossa replied, and turned to one of the leopards, "Tino? You wanna slip my new axe over to Tre there?" The big cat nodded and picked up another guitar case, passing it to the striped hyena, who stashed it behind his deejay console.

But when the fossa turned around again, he found that his opponent's expression had changed completely, from a darting gaze and a quivering mouth to narrow eyes, and a wicked smile

"Welllll, " Conor pointed at the guitar draped around the fossa's neck, "I gotta admit, an Ibanex Jemsbok's a nice instrument," he patted his own guitar, "But me, I always go with my trusty Denfur Custom-Shop Strat."

The response to this was a screech of derisive laughter from the fossa, but with an anxious undercoating that made Judy Hopps wonder if Nick wasn't on to something; maybe Conor DID have this handled.

"Get lost fox," the treetop predator snarled, "you want me to believe that piece of junk is a Denfur Custom shop guitar? How stupid do you think I am?"

Conor just shrugged, "Wellll, not that stupid; smart enough at to have least heard of a Heavy Relic guitar…uh, you DO what that is, right? Anyway, check out the headstock if you don't believe me."

Judy watched as the fossa peered close and then then pulled back sharply. She turned to look at Nick, who was nodding his approval.

"That's it, kid…rattle his cage a little." And then he said, "Ohhhh, I don't know if I can bear to watch this, Carrots." It would have cranked up her anxiety all over again, except he said it with a wink and a grin.

The fossa, however, had already recovered…sort of.

"So you got a fancy guitar, big deal," he sneered, and flashed his fangs again, "I'm gonna enjoy adding it to my collection."

Instead of responding to this, Conor just preened his claws for a moment, and then regarded his opponent insouciantly.

"Yeah, yeah…you come here to rock or to flap your yap?"

By way of response the fossa wheeled and shouted to his deejay and drummer. "Punch it!"

The striped hyena reached for his console and did something. Judy couldn't see it, but she did hear the music start, a rolling riff, finishing on a pair of power chords. On the second riff, the painted wolf joined in on his drums, and on the third, the fossa began to play along, a hard fuzz-guitar.

Judy felt a ball of ice forming in the pit of her stomach. This animal was good—VERY good—a whole lot better than he'd been when she and Nick had first arrived. And Conor wasn't even trying to play along…oh wait, no, it wasn't his turn yet. He just kept watching the fossa without any sort of expression on his face—or in his eyes.
Now the treetop predator changed gears, playing a series of slide licks, each one more slithering than the last; on the third one, he held the final note.

Then he looked at Conor and grinned over his fangs again. The young fox nodded and took up the melody.

It was an inauspicious beginning, to say the least; he only seemed to be imitating his opponent. But then Judy noticed a strange look on the fossa's face…and she realized what was happening.

"Whoa, Conor's not imitating him, he's matching him—he's playing the exact same solo, note for note."

At the end of the first line, Conor looked at the fossa and yawned sleepily, 'Is that all you've got?' he seemed to be saying…as clearly as if he'd been shouting it from the rooftops.

And then he punched his pedal board and began to show what HE had.

He had a lot; under Conor's sure touch, the notes seemed to blend together into single, unbroken stream. As it that weren't enough, he capped each lick by using his whip-finger technique, snapping his fingers against the string and catching them with his other paw. But where he really began to strut his stuff was on the slide notes at the end. The fossa had played each of them on a descending note, helped out by his twang-bar. Conor played the first one on a descending note, then the next one an ascending note, and the final one an undulating note.

And his instrument didn't even have a twang-bar.

On the next section, the two of them went toe to toe, power-chord against power chord. The fossa seemed to be holding his own, but even Judy knew that wasn't good enough. Having fallen behind, he'd have to do better than his opponent, not just as good, if he wanted to win the contest.

That was what he tried to do on the next section; where one animal played rhythm guitar while the other played lead and then switched roles on the following riff. What happened instead was that he stumbled out of the gate, missing the second and third notes of his first lick.

Conor nodded to let him know that he could try again and was rewarded with a look that would have turned this contest into a death-match if such a thing were possible. And in the next few minutes the fossa had reason to wish that it was possible, because this was where Conor utterly destroyed him. Every riff his opponent played the young fox answered in a different tone, first inquisitive, then imperative, then whining, and finally sarcastic.

Judy felt Nick nudging her in the side. "When that kid makes it talk, he REALLY make it talk."

When they went into the finale, the song was all Conor's; even by using his twang bar, the fossa couldn't match him around the bends, and when the silver fox used the whip-finger to make his axe let out a fox-scream, no one watching could doubt that it was scream of victory.

The song ended on a chopping chord and frenzy of whoops and cheers from the onlookers.

What it didn't end on was a friendly note from either competitor, no paws were offered, no high-fours or fist bumps were exchanged. Instead, Conor and the fossa glared daggers at each other for a long, interminable moment, until finally the young fox said, "Okay dude, you lost; I'll take my guitar and my money now."

Instead the fossa planted a pawlm in the young fox's chest and shoved him backward. Although as a species, they might be closely matched, the treetop predator was at least three years older and a
head taller than his opponent.

"You think I'm gonna pay off a *fox*?" he said. "You're even dumber than I thought." And then he and his crew erupted in a chorus of raucous laughter.

Judy started to take a step forward again, and once more Nick restrained her. "Relax Carrots, just watch."

On the bandstand the fossa was beginning to lift his paw again. Conor just looked it him with a cool expression...and unsheathed claws

"If that paw touches me again, 'burbs, you're not getting it back. Now pay up."

The fossa just laughed, but lowered his paw just the same...and now Judy could see that it was trembling. Was that rage or fear, she wondered...or maybe both?

"Okay," he said, and then nodded at the Deejay hyena, "But I'm taking the money, punk... *all* of it." He pointed to at Conor's guitar, leering, "and just be glad I don't take that too." The leer broadened until all his teeth were showing and then he leaned in mockingly close, "It's called a hustle sweetheart."

Conor only shook his head; he seemed more disappointed than angry.

"Nope...nope, *that's* called a rip-off, you wanna see a hustle? I'll show ya a hustle, Okay, guys,..."

In response to this several things happened at once, the deejay hyena tossed something to Conor. It was only when he caught it that Judy saw what it was; a wad of bills. Meanwhile, the big spotted hyena was pushing past the fossa, elbowing him aside as easily as a cardboard-cutout standee-figure. As he passed by the Deejay console, the striped hyena passed him the guitar-case he'd been minding. The spotted hyena then passed it on to the young silver fox, and took up a protective stance in front of him. At the same time the painted wolf on drums let out a whistle between his teeth.

The fossa instantly turned to the pair of jaguars. "Gustavo...Tino!"

The pair of big cats started to move towards Conor and the spotted hyena...but then pulled up short when they looked over his shoulder and saw that the bandstand was surrounded by a phalanx of hyenas and painted wolves. Only moments before these animals had been looking at the young silver fox with piteous expressions on their faces; now they were regarding the fossa and his friends with dark menace...and bared teeth.

Both jags stopped instantly in their tracks.

"Wait, wait...we don't want any trouble with you guys," the first one said, hurriedly raising his paws. Someone grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around. It was the big spotted hyena.

"You want trouble wit' de fox, de fox is us!" he snarled, getting right in the big cat's face and snapping his jaws, a none-too-subtle reminder that hyenas have the most powerful bite of any mammal.

"Uhm, Tino...Gus?" Conor Lewis piped up helpfully from the sidelines. "I-I-I think *now* would be a swell time to take a hike, don't you?"

"Yeah, yeah...we're going, we're going." The other jaguar answered, looking briefly at the fossa, "Sorry dude" and then he and wing-cat were hurrying down the bandstand steps; the crowd parted
to let them pass and then they were gone.

Conor looked at the fossa and winked, "THAT'S a hustle, 'burbs!"

One thing you had to give Conor's nemesis; he wasn't the kind of animal to say 'die' very easily, even in the middle of a hopeless position. That made him either very brave or very stupid, (the latter, in Judy Hopps' humble opinion.)

"You dirty cheater!" he screeched at Conor, but the fox only waved a finger.

"Uhhh…no Ray, sorry; I didn't cheat, YOU did….or at least you tried to….again!"

The fossa staggered as if the young fox had backpawed him, but once again swiftly regained his composure.

"You lying jerk, I never tried to cheat…and by the way DUMB fox, my name is Jay, not Ray." He sounded righteously indignant…but the way he averted his gaze told Judy that Conor had just landed a verbal haymaker.

The next one he threw landed even harder.

"Noooo, your name is Ray, Ray Savok," he said, still wagging that correcting finger, "Jay Savok's your brother, and… Ohhh, whaddaya know, here he comes now."

Conor craned his neck to look past the fossa's shoulder. Judy followed his gaze and saw the crowd parting yet again. She was unable to see much of anything else, but the animal they were making way for seemed to moving towards the bandstand at a double-time trot. Seconds later, another fossa stumbled into to view, a pair of painted wolves close at his heels. He was dressed exactly like the fossa up on the bandstand; in fact, he was exactly like him in every respect; same fur same height, same physique, same face, same clothes…and the same reek of clove-oil; the two of them might well have been clones.

…but twins.

"Ohhh," Judy heard herself groaning NOW she understood. Nick, on the other paw, had known all along, and cocked a finger in the hapless newcomer's direction.

"Bingo!"

The painted wolves marched him onto bandstand and stood him up next to his brother. Now they really looked like peas in a pod. Conor gave them the once-over with his eyes and his nose, and then he folded his arms.

"Soooo, let's unpack this thing," he said, nodding from one brother to the other and then back again. "After you two bums got thrown out of three bands in the last six months…what was that last one again? Oh right, Waterball…after they kicked your tails to the curb, you decided to form your own group. But when you tried to hold an audition, almost nobody showed up. In fact, you only had three takers—the word was out about what couple of jerks you were to work with—and one of the animals that did show up was only like eleven years old. Ahhh Saad, Yusuf…you here, guys?"

In response, the two sand-cats Judy had seen earlier stepped out of the crowd, the older one resting his paw on the younger one's shoulder. At the sight of them Jay Savok quailed and Ray Savok bristled. The two fossas might have looked like near-perfect copies of one another, but in terms of fursonality they were obviously leagues apart.
Ray pointed with a shaking finger. "I don't know who the heck…"

"Shut yer pie hole!" Conor's voice was like a slap across the face…and had exactly the same effect; the fossa's head spun sideways and he clammed up at once.

The young fox stared for a second and then shifted his attention to Jay.

"How about it dude; you recognize this kid?"

The tone of his voice suggested that if the fossa knew what was good for him, he had better answer in the affirmative. He did, nodding tightly while clasping his paws and looking downwards.

Conor nodded back and then went on. "Long story short, Jay tried to laugh him out of the rehearsal space—you were out back, Ray—Yusuf got mad, one thing led to another, and instead of auditioning the kid, you hustled him out of his guitar, using the same routine you tried to pull on me just now, the old bait-and-switch gimmick—except the first time you skipped the clove oil, of course."

He leaned over and spat, as if unable to hold it in any longer, then turned to look at the pair of fossa with an expression that made Judy reach unconsciously for her fox repellent…event though she hadn't carried that stuff for almost two years now.

"Taking advantage of a kit who ain't even in middle school yet," he snarled, "and then you show up here, calling me 'shifty', and accusing ME of cheating YOU? If I wasn't in such a good mood right now… I SAID SHUT IT, RAY!"

Ray Savok did as he was ordered but continued to regard the young silver fox with a stink-eye. Conor swiftly returned the favor, staring down the fossa as if he'd seen him emerging from a compost-heap just now.

"And that was when you two burbies REALLY messed up," he snarled again, this time showing his fangs, "You actually thought you could pull that score again. Lil' news flash, idiots, it only worked the first time coz your mark was just a kid.\" His expression became almost sorrowful—almost. "I mean seriously, trying to mask your scent with stinkin' CLOVE oil? How newbie can you get!"

"Exactly!\" Nick Wilde was pointing again…and Judy was once more looking at him with her nose twitching. Sweet cheez n' crackers; he almost sounded proud of the younger fox.

And then surprisingly Jay Savok spoke up, voice quavering as if he was standing in an ice-storm with nothing to wear but a smile.

"But…h-how did you KNOW that it was…th-that my brother…that w-we…how did you know?"

Conor smirked at the fossa, the closest thing to a smile on his face in many long minutes. Then he tapped his right temple.

"You forgot punk…us foxes have the ability to sense another animal's magnetic field; you two may have looked alike…and smelled alike, but your magnetic auras are totally different."

Judy's jaw dropped open and she turned to Nick.

"You never told me that foxes can…"

He raised a paw to the side of his muzzle, speaking sotto voce.
"We can't, Conor's spinning him a line."

"Oh." But then how HAD he known, Judy wondered.

"Now," Conor held up the guitar case, and nodded at the older sand-cat, "Saad could have just gotten this back the easy way, but….Ahhh, I'll let you tell it, cat."

The feline was only too happy to take the baton.

"Conor is right," he spoke in a rolling North Africian accent with just a touch of the Gallic. "You won that guitar by foul means; I would have perfectly within my rights to have had Turoc and his boys track you down and simply take it from you." He nodded at the spotted hyena, who nodded back with a grim smile, "But I thought it better to teach you a lesson. Now, you have not only lost back the guitar you cheated from my brother, but you are two hundred dollars poorer as well."

"Won't matter much to these 'burbies, Saad," Conor shook his head warily, "Not with all the money their stepdad has, vice-prez or something with this big Pharma outfit, LPN. You know the drill, fancy car, tree-mansion up in the Rainforest Highlands, indoor pool and tennis courts, the works." He looked swiftly in the direction of the two fossas, as if just now realizing something. "Or…did your mom send you two morons to go live with your dad again?"

For the second time that evening, Jay Savok reeled backwards while his brother stepped forwards. Even now, he refused to give it up.

"You fox-jerk thief! I'm calling the police."

Everyone laughed—THAT threat wasn't just lame, it was quadriplegic—and then Conor smirked sardonically, his amber eyes turning into crafty little slits.

"You wanna call the cops? Here, I'll save you the trouble," he turned and beckoned with a pair of crooked fingers, "Hey Nick…Judy! This guy over here wants to talk to you."

"See, Carrots?" Nick turned to her with smirk of his own, "I told you he knew we were…"

"Yes, yes," Judy interrupted, nettled, "Of course he did; we've been standing upwind of him the whole time we've been here. Give me some credit, Slick."

"Oops, sorry," the red fox answered sheepishly. It had been a long time since he'd made this error and for some reason, it made Judy think of something. Did Nick see Conor as perhaps a younger version of himself? Hmmm…she'd never known her partner as a kid, so who could say? Still…it didn't feel like quite the snug fit.

At the sight of the two officers approaching—one of whom happened to be the same species as Mr. Smartmouth Silverfur, Ray Savok finally sagged in defeat. He wasn't going to have anything to say to these two officers; they had obviously seen everything that had happened. And if that was the case, it was a no-brainer that brother Jay wouldn't want to have a conversation with Nick and Judy. Their change of demeanor did not escape Conor Lewis' notice, and he looked over at Saad again.

"You got anything else for these two?" he said.

The sand-cat only hissed and laid his ears back, an answer Conor seemed to take as 'no.'

"Okay," he said, speaking to the fossa brothers, "you burbies can go ahead and take off back to the Rainforest District, but before you go, lemme offer you a couple of parting thoughts."
His eyes crinkled and his fangs appeared once more.

"Thought numero uno, you guys don't know a thing about me, not even my name. Thought the second, I haven't told you guys even half of what I know about you. Oh and here's a bonus thought, I may be a dumb fox but at least I get my homework done."

From the edge of the crowd a voice shouted. "Look out, cops are here for real!"

Conor laughed and signaled to the deejay hyena, who spoke quickly into his console mike.

"No worries mammal, everything's cool; Conor knows these coppers, they're both all right."

As if to reinforce this, the young fox immediately raised a paw and waved.

"Hi Nick, Hi Judy…whassup?"

Judy couldn't help sniggering…and this time, she was the one who took the lead, bounding up the bandstand steps with Nick Wilde right behind her.

When they arrived, Conor reached out to offer each of them a high-four. And then he said, "Anything you wanna say to these guys?" pointing at the two Savok brothers.

It was Nick who answered., "Nooo, I think you've pretty much got it taken care of."

"As long as you two are on your way home within in the next five minutes," Judy added, speaking directly to Ray and Jay.

Conor nodded at her and then at the two fossa. "You heard her, burbies; pack it up and get outta here…right now!"

But Judy wasn't done just yet, next she turned to speak to Conor, raising her voice so the other kids could hear as well. "And this is where it ends, okay? You got your friend's guitar back and you taught these two a lesson—and that's as far as it goes. There will be no further harassment of these boys, by you or anyone else…or you'll answer to me, kid. Do I make myself clear?"

"I getcha," the young fox answered simply, as if he'd been expecting this from the get-go, (he probably had,) and then he raised his voice as well, "You heard the lady; we're done with these guys okay? We got our justice; we don't need any revenge."

No one answered, but somehow Judy knew that they understood what the young fox had just said to them.

And then he turned to Ray and Jay, who had just finished packing up their gear. "However don't think that means you two just got yourselves a license to go looking for any payback. You try that schtick and YOU'LL be the ones that end up having to answer to Officer Hopps here…and trust me, she doesn't ask the easy questions." He looked at Judy for confirmation, and she nodded back immediately; that had been exactly the right way to handle it.

When the fossa brothers were gone, she saw Nick exchange a fist-bump with the younger fox.

"Pretty nice hustle there, kid."

Conor waved him off and turned away for a second, looking almost a little embarrassed.

"Ahhh, fish in a barrel, big guy; those jerks-from-the-'burbs had about as much street smarts between 'em as your average trees stump." He looked at the painted wolf on the drums and grinned...
sardonically, cocking a finger, "just like I told you, Jason."

The canine immediately threw up his paws…in frustration rather than defeat.

"Okay, I will say it; yes, you were right fox…yes, they thought we were part of their posse just because we dressed like them." He pointed with a drumstick, "But you still owe me Conah. Gah, if I nevah have to put on metal head clothes again, it's too soon."

The young fox remained unmoved. "Consider it a contribution to a worthy cause," he said, "and anyway, you never paid me back for last February, remember?"

The painted wolf growled and stood up from his drum-kit, "Whatevah…I'm going, go get out of dis idiot costume."

"Yeah…me too," The striped hyena said. His spotted cousin said nothing, only followed him off in the direction of the locker and changing rooms

Conor turned back to Nick and Judy again, but then he seemed to remember something.

"Oops, 'scuse me just a second."

He went over to the young sand-cat, offering him the guitar he'd just won.

"I think this is…"

Before he could say any more, it was snatched out of his grip by the older sand-cat.

"Sorry Conor, but when I told him never to touch this again, I meant it."

"I said I was sorry!" the younger feline all but yowled. His older brother was having none of it.

"I'm sorry' does not get my guitar back, Yusuf." He said, holding it up the case like exhibit 'A', "Bad enough you took it without asking, but then you go and lose it in a bet?" He sounded equal parts angry and hurt.

"You won't tell father…please?" the younger sand-cat begged, "You said you wouldn't tell him if…"

"Yusuf, go home," his brother interrupted, wearily.

"Please brother, I said I was…"

Saad raised an arm and pointed left, "Go…HOME!"

The younger sand cat lit off down the street, mewling pitifully to no one in particular. Saad waited until he was gone then turned to Conor, shaking his head.

"Ai, brothers…what can you do with them?"

Conor held up his paws. "Don't look at me, cat. I never had any." It was meant as a wry jest, but there was a wistful quality to the young fox's voice Judy Hopps couldn't help but notice. (Nick hadn't missed it either, judging by the expression on his face; he too had been an only child.)

Judy swiftly decided she'd better move things on to another subject before the situation turned awkward. A simple clearing of her throat should take care of it.
It did; Conor immediately picked up on her cue.

"But hey, I'm being rude over here. Nick, Judy...this is another of my buds from school, Saad al-Zaqir, fantastic musician and the meanest surf guitar this side of Chip Dale."

"Heaven rest his soul," the sand cat answered, and then offered a paw to Nick and then to Judy, "Nice to meet you, Salaam."

"Judy's the older sister of that bunny plays bass, I was telling you about, Erin Hopps." Conor said to his friend, and then instantly seemed to regret his words; 'Here comes more embarrassment.' Fortunately, Saad al-Zaqir was bit more tactful than Mike Daehan had been.

"Well, I hope, truly, that she gets accepted at The Academy, "he said, "We need a good bass-player to round out our group."

"You have a group?" Judy asked, looking at Conor. This was news to her.

The young fox just flipped a pawlm back and forth. "Ahh, nothing serious Judy, I wouldn't even call us a group, just some guys that like to get together and play once in a while; heck, we don't have name. There's Saad, me...oh, here come Jason and Treo again."

More introductions quickly followed. The painted wolf on drums was named Jason M'beke. He also sang vocals and like Saad al-Zaqir, was keeping his fingers crossed for Erin to make it into ZAPA, "Every good drummah needs good bass playah," he said.

Mike Daehan of course, they had already met, and Dana Alchesay, who had also returned, was someone they had heard of; (her stomp-off earlier had been part of the hustle of course.) She wore a broad bandanna around her forehead and had a beaded pouch on a lanyard around her neck. It was her other item of jewelry that drew Judy Hopp's attention however.

"Love your necklace," she said. It was a made up of tiny birds, each one carved from a different colored stone, strung together with bright, turquoise beads.

"Aw, thanks," the young coyote said, not nearly as self-conscious about her ensemble as Fru-Fru had been.

The odd mammal out turned out to be Treo, (no last name.) He was a friend of Conor's not from school, but from the hood. They had met at a street party the year before, where the striped hyena had been working the crowd, looking for a Deejay gig. No, he didn't go to the Performing Arts Academy, but it certainly wasn't from any lack of smarts; he had designed and built his deejay console himself...and it carried with it a unique feature—three turntables, (the source of his street-handle.)

"How the heck do you control all three tables at once?" Nick Wilde asked him, confused and fascinated at the same time.

"Use this foot-control for the third one," the young hyena explained, pointing beneath the console, "thought it up meself; still a few kinks I got to deal with, but she works pretty good, I don't mind sayin' so."

"Nice," Judy nodded approvingly. In truth, for all she knew this machine could be a glossed over piece of junk. Erin could probably tell her, but this was way outside of a bunny cop's area of expertise.

Then Saad spoke up again, touching his forehead and bowing slightly. "Before I forget Conor, I
cannot thank you enough for getting this back for me." He had opened his guitar case and retrieved the contents. It looked almost like a left-pawed version of Conor's Strat—bottom horn longer than the top—done up in an eye-catching candy-apple red.

Once again, the young fox downplayed it for all it was worth.

"Ahhh, forget about it Saad, you could have taken that 'burbie punk at least as easy as I did."

"Probably, yes," the young sand cat agreed without the slightest trace of irony in his voice, and then held up his guitar again, "Only how was I supposed to do that when he had THIS?"

Conor's brows tilted upwards and the corners of his mouth turned downward.

"Yeah...yeah, right." he said, and then patted his pocket, flashing a foxy grin, "But still, there's no need to thank me, cat. I didn't exactly come outta this empty-pawed y'know."

"For certain you did not," the sand cat grinned back, offering a fist-bump which the young fox heartily returned. He hefted his guitar once more, "Well, I don't know about you Conor, but I feel the need for a jam."

The young fox frowned slightly. "Ah, you should have had Yusuf snag your pedalboard for you."

"No need, I have it with me," the sand-cat grinned and pointed, "In one of the lockers down there. Don't worry I used the small mammals locker room."

"Yeah, we brought our gear too," Dana Alchesay said, speaking for both herself and the black rat parched on her shoulder.

"So what say you then, Conah?" Jason spoke from behind his drum-kit. "I think you hardly can no to friends who had such faith in you, eh?"

The young fox held up a pair of fingers. "Two words, guys, let's...rock."

This was met by a chorus of whoops and cheers, followed by high fives and fist bumps. Then someone in the crowd called out, "Anybody got a cooler?"

"I got one at home." another voice answered.

"Okay, go get it."

"I'll go get mine too. We'll need more than one."

"Okay, we'll go snag the drinks."

"First things first, let's pass the hat."

It looked like they were going to turn this into a party. "Well, why not?" Judy thought to herself, but then she felt someone jerking at her sleeve; it was Nick.

"Think we've got time to hang around, Carrots?" he asked...and she really didn't want to laugh, but...well, it was his own darn fault; he sounded exactly like little Cotton, when she'd begged him to stay on in Bunnyburrow for, "just a little while longer....pleeeeeeease."

"I don't see why not Nick, we're done here." she said. In fact she didn't want to miss this any more than he did. Ohhh, if only Erin was here.
But alas, it was not meant to be. At the very instant the words were out of her mouth, Nick's cell phone buzzed. He growled as he picked up; seeming to know as well as she did what was coming.

"This is Wilde," he said, "Yes? Yes sir, yes…uh, still in Sahara Square. We…” He stiffened unexpectedly. "What, sir….r-right now? But… Yes sir, okay…we'll be right there… but what…? Yes sir."

When he put the cell away, Nick was sorely disappointed …and even more puzzled.

"Wh-What's going on?" Judy asked him; whatever it was, it was a lot more serious than she'd thought.

Instead of answering, the red fox pointed to a nearby alleyway, beckoning for her to follow.

"Was that Bogo?" she asked. He only nodded and repeated the gesture.

It wasn't until they were around the corner and out of earshot of the bandstand that Nick finally spoke to her.

"Yeah, that was Big Chief Buffalo Nickel. He wants to see us in his office…right now."

Judy's ears shot up and she felt her nose twitching. It sounded as if Chief Bogo hadn't even mentioned their discovery of the location of LB6.

"What? I thought he went home."

Nick's ears also went up…and then fell back down again.

"He did; he says he's on his way back to the precinct and for us to meet him there."

All at once, Judy felt small and defenseless.

"Holy sweet cheez n' crackers Nick, what did we do?"

She dared not say it but she couldn't help thinking it; Duke Weaselton, that had to be the reason for the Chief's peremptory summons. Infuriated by the bunny cop's faux double-cross, he'd decided to spill the beans regarding a certain incident involving himself, Nick and Judy…and also Mr. Bi…"

"I don't know Carrots," the red fox answered, looking even more confused, "that's the weird part. He didn't sound angry; well yes he did, you know the Chief, but he also sounded, well…” he looked around for a second as if to ensure that no one else was nearby, and then lowered his voice even further, "He sounded…you're not going to believe this Carrots, but The Chief actually sounded like he felt guilty about something."

Judy felt her mouth twist into a knot

"You're right Nick…I don't believe it; what on earth could have happened to make him come on like that?"

"I don't know," the red fox answered, "but there's only one way to find out," By way of explanation, he shifted his gaze in the direction of Savanna Central, "and anyway, we don't have a choice."

There was no response to that; Judy didn't even try.

She and Nick were halfway to the police cruiser when they heard Conor Lewis hailing them.
"Hey, are you guys leaving?" he sounded surprised and also mightily disappointed.

Nick held up his cell phone. "Sorry kid, duty calls…literally. We'll catch you next time, okay?"

"Just a second," Judy Hopps interjected, raising her paws in a 'stop' gesture. "Conor, can you come here for just a second?"

The young fox nodded and started towards them, raising an immediate protest on Nick Wilde's part.

"Carrots, the Chief said…"

"This won't take a minute." Judy assured him, and then to the younger fox, she said, "Conor before we head back to the precinct, there's something I have to know. How did you see through the scam those fossa brothers were trying to pull?" He had obviously known the score long before confronting them.

From the direction of the bandstand, a voice called out, "Conah, where are you? We ready here, fox."

"Hang on, I'm coming!" he called back, and then to Judy he said. "No biggie; like I told those bums before they scammed outta here, I did my homework,…and lemme tell you it didn't take a whole lot of effort to get the down and dirty on those two. They've been bragging all week about how they conned Yusuf…only to their friends, and only online, but you remember what Ben Panglin said, right?"

Judy laughed and repeated the quote, "Three can keep a secret, if two of them are dead."

"Especially on the web, I bet." Nick put in with a grin.

"You got it, big guy," the young fox answered, "That, and those two burbies had eyes all over 'em the minute they showed their tails in Sahara Square…and of course, Jason, Treo, and Turoc were already waiting on the bandstand when they got here; they never had a chance." A second look of disappointment swiped across his face. "Listen, are you sure you guys can't hang for even a little while? We were gonna play a song just for you."

"Wish we could, but we've probably stayed too long already." Nick answered him immediately, a statement that Judy knew was intended for her as much as for the younger fox.

"Okay," Conor nodded. "Anyway, I gotta get going, too; the guys are waiting. Talk to ya later, okay? He offered each of them a final fist bump and then took off, shouting through cupped paws, "I'm here guys; I'm here!"

Judy was in the middle of opening her car door when the music started playing. It was a familiar tune, a fast punk-rocker…very familiar, but somehow she couldn't quite place it.

That is, until Conor started in on the vocals.

"Brrrreakin' rocks in the…hot sun.
I fought the law, and the…law won.
I fought the law, and the…law won.

On the other side of the car, Nick Wilde let out a short, sharp fox-laugh.

"Cheeky little guy isn't he?" Those lyrics were not exactly appropriate for within hearing range of
two police officers…which left no doubt in Judy Hopps' mind; *this* was the tune Conor had been referring to when he'd said, 'We're gonna play one just for you.'

"Like another fox I know," she said to Nick, winking and starting to get in again…but then, on the song's refrain, she hesitated once more.

"*I miss my baby and I feel so bad, I guess my race is run.*
But she's the best girl that I ever had.
I fought the law, and the…law won.
I fought the law, and the…law won."

"*What, now?*" Judy thought to herself. Had she heard right; had Conor just sung, 'I miss my bunny and I feel so bad'?

No, of course he hadn't.

She slipped into the driver's seat, closing the door behind her.

Chapter End Notes

**Author's Note:**
Originally written by Sonny Curtis of The Crickets, *I Fought the Law (and the Law Won)* is possibly the most covered rock-and-roll tune of all time. Among the artists who have performed it, the list includes...

- The Bobby Fuller Four (The first version to hit the charts)
- The Clash
- The Pogues
- Bruce Springsteen
- The Stray Cats
- The Dead Kennedys (in a seriously mangled version)
- Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers
- The Grateful Dead (!)
- Bryan Adams
- And my personal favorite, the *cover-version by Green Day*. (Billie Joe Armstrong was *born* to sing this song.)
Where There's Smoke... (Pt.6...Continued)

Chapter Summary

Isn't this where we came in?

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:
Fuel

Chapter 8—Where There's Smoke...
(Continued...Pt. 6)

Their first inkling of how bad things were going to get came less than a minute after Nick and Judy landed back at the precinct.

It happened while they were crossing the front lobby, on their way upstairs to meet with Chief Bogo. Just a few yards shy of the concourse-ramp they spotted a pair of familiar faces—Burrow County Sheriff's Deputy Mac Cannon and BCSD Sheriff's Detective Walter 'Wally' Root. They were coming from the direction of the City Jail, and judging by the looks on the bobcat and the old hog's faces, it appeared that they too had enjoyed a productive evening.

Judy raised a paw and waved. "Hey Mac, hey Wally!"

The reaction was not at all what she might have expected; the pleasure abruptly vanished from the two deputies' faces and then just as quickly returned…but with an artificial quality that made her teeth want to stand on edge; the cookie-cutter smiles of a pair of thrift-store mannequins.

And was it her imagination, or had Mac laid his ears back for half a second there? Glancing sideways, she noted that Nick Wilde's ears were standing up and pointing at each other; had he seen it too?

"H'lo Officer Hopps, Officer Wilde," Root was unable to meet their eyes; Mac Cannon did, but it was the defiant look of a kit daring another kit to step across a line.

"Evening Officers," he told them, flatly.

"What the holy HECK?" Judy almost wanted to pinch herself, was this for real? When they'd greeted the two deputies earlier that day, it had been 'Nick and Judy', not 'Officers'…Wally Root had all but insisted on it.
Now here they were, back to formal titles again…and why? What on earth had happened while she and Nick had been chasing down that dead-drop in Sahara Square? (A part of Judy thought she knew—but still another part of her didn't want to know.)

"So I take it things went well with Craig Guiford?" Nick Wilde asked, hoping to break the ice. His efforts had about as much effect as trying to crack a hundred-kiloton glacier with a rubber mallet; the deputies' faces never wavered for an instant.

"Yep," Wally Root still wasn't looking at him, "The kid called for us a couple of hours ago; he's agreed to testify against his father in exchange for a recommendation of leniency." His words sounded as forced as the smile on his face. (The bobcat beside him only nodded sullenly.) It didn't bother Nick one bit, and why should it? Never mind the chill, this was just the news he'd been hoping for; maybe now he wouldn't have to take the witness stand against the young coyote's father.

"Hey, great!" he almost whooped.

"Yep, darn good news." Mac Cannon said, sounding almost pleased…almost. "We'll see what happens when his father gets the news. With a little luck, maybe that'll get him to change that Not Guilty plea." Left unsaid was the fact that the coyote's showboat lawyer would spare no effort in trying to get him to stay the course.

"Amen to that," the red fox answered, offering him a high four. Mac stared at the paw for a long second, and then finally returned it. When he did, Judy saw her partner wince and grit his teeth. So did Detective Root, who flashed a look at his watch and then spoke quickly.

"Lissen Officers, I really wish we could stay and chat, but we need to head back our hotel and get some shut-eye. It's been a long day, and Sheriff Sauer told us to head on back to the Burrow, first thing in the morning."

"Yep," Mac Cannon concurred, speaking with even greater rapidity. "He wants us to give Jerry Guilford the news that his son's flipped; more impact that way he says." The bobcat seemed to have traded in his aggressive manner for an air of hazy uncertainty.

"If we want to adjust that crazy coyote's attitude, we need to make him believe it when we tell him Craig's been turned," Wally Root put in—a completely unnecessary coda. Judy knew that already, and so did Nick; it was almost painfully obvious. Jerry Guilford had been living in a fantasy world ever since his arrest. Getting him to accept that his son had turned state's evidence was going to be about as easy as getting a hippo through the entrance-gate into Little Rodentia. Why the heck had the old hog felt the need to…?

"Gotta go, we'll talk to you later." Root waved to the fox and bunny cop, and then started for the exit, trying not to rush.

"Later," said Mac, and then hurried to catch up with his partner.

Judy stared after them with a twitching nose, and then turned to say something to Nick—whom she noticed was massaging his paw with the other one.

"What's the matter?"

The red fox grimaced and then nodded in the direction of the exit.

"When Mac gave me that four just now, he had his claws extended."
Judy's ears shot up and her mouth fell open.

"WHAT?"

"Yep," the red fox answered, momentarily lost in thought as he studied the scratches on his pawpads. Finally, he looked at her. "I-I don't think he did it on purpose, Carrots. You know how a feline's claws can sometimes unsheath themselves, without them even noticing? That's what I think happened with Mac just now."

Judy nodded, but uncomfortably; yes she was aware of that fact…and she also knew that foxes too had retractable claws and that the same thing had happened to Nick on one or two occasions. And she was also aware of something else, in both of those instances, he'd been in highly agitated state of mind. What could possibly have happened to get Mac cCannon that worked up? (And also Wally Root, don't forget him.)

Deep down, in her heart of hearts, Judy already knew the answer. She knew—she just couldn't bring herself to say it, even to herself.

…that is, not until Nick gave her an opening; "But why Mac lost control of his claws like that, I have no idea."

Judy took a short breath and then jumped in with both feet.

"I think we both know why that happened, Nick…and it's the same reason him and Wally Root were giving us the cold shoulder just now; the surveillance tape, you know which one, someone must have told them about it."

The fox's ears fell sideways and his mouth pulled into taut bowline.

"You think? I-I- don't know, Carrots. That seemed like kind of an extreme reaction to me; even Francine Trunkbaby wasn't that bothered about…it. And she was right there when it happened."

Judy shot him a penetrating look.

"When we kissed, Nick not when 'it' happened, let's not tiptoe around what started it. She didn't like having to forcefully correct the fox, but in this case it couldn't be helped; they needed to face the facts here. She went on, "and Bunnyburrow isn't Zootopia; attitudes there are a lot more... mmm, what's the word I'm looking for? Oh yeah, attitudes back in the Burrow are a lot more old fashioned than here in the city, at least among the older animals. Remember how set in my ways I was, when I first moved here?"

"Little Miss Bunny-Scout," Nick grinned in spite of himself. In fact, Judy had never completely lost that part of her fursona—and she didn't want to lose it; the common sense and self-reliance that came with being raised on a farm had served her well over the past couple of years.

But then an unpleasant thought bloomed in her head, and a crawling sensation went rippling down her spine. When Wally and Mac hit the Burrow again, it wouldn't take long for the news of what they'd heard here to start making the rounds; a police precinct has nothing on a farming community when it comes to spreading gossip. Ohhh, how was she ever going to explain this to her parents?

She forced herself to shake it off; Nick was speaking again. "Okay Carrots, maybe you have a point, but if that's the case, how the heck did they even find out about...about us kissing?"

This time Judy had a ready answer for him. "Seriously, fox? Why wouldn't Mac and Wally have heard about it? Everyone in the Precinct and their uncle knows about us kissing in the middle of
that jewelry sting. Heck, even Duke Weaselton knew about it! The only thing that surprises ME is that they didn't find out about it sooner."

"Right, right," Nick was speaking to the floor and not to her; he knew she was right—but that Egyptian river had just looked so inviting…

"Come on," Judy tugged on his shirt sleeve, pulling him in the direction of the concourse ramp, "We better not keep the Chief waiting."

As things turned out they didn't even come close to having that problem; when Nick rang the Chief's door buzzer a moment later, the answer came not from within, but from behind

"Right, I'm coming, I'm coming."

The fox and bunny-cop both relaxed a little; at least they weren't late.

But when they turned around and saw him, their anxiety returned and with interest. Bogo was dressed in rumpled shirtsleeves instead of his usual police-uniform, and the shirt-buttons weren't even done up correctly. He had obviously come here in great haste, what the…?

Well, they'd find out quick enough, Judy reasoned.

'Quick enough' turned out to almost immediately; no sooner had the fox and bunny-cop taken their seats, than Bogo broke it to them, not even bothering to sit down himself before delivering the news.

"Hopps…Wilde, there's no way to sugar-coat this, so I won't even try. Someone's gone and posted the video of you two kissing on Fuzztube."

Judy gasped and her partner fox-screamed.

"What!"

"NO!"

"Yes, I'm afraid so," Bogo leaned back against his desk, and folded his arms, sighing heavily, "and that brings up a question, I've got to ask even though I don't want to." He looked from Judy to Nick and then back again. "Did either one of you have anything to do with it?"

A shaft of outrage hit Judy Hopps dead center, but then passed right through her without leaving a mark. Bogo had only asked them that because he was required to; it was standard procedure in a case like this, he harbored no suspicions of his own.

"No, Chief." She told him firmly.

Nick Wilde's answer was almost a snarl, "Absolutely not."

Bogo pushed himself up off the desk again.

"Right, didn't think so, and so we'll say no more about it."

That was good for a nod from Judy, but when she happened to look sideways, she saw that her partner had his ears laid back and his lower lip was trembling. He clearly had a lot more to say on the subject…or maybe he didn't; maybe was he just that angry at the animal who'd posted the video, whoever they were. She hoped for his sake that the latter instance was the correct one, otherwise the fox might find himself writing parking tickets for the rest of the week.
She needn't have worried, however angry Nick Wilde was at the unknown video-troll, his fury paled in comparison to that of his Chief…as the Cape buffalo now proceeded to demonstrate.

"I want you both to know that if the leaker turns out to have been someone in this department, I'll be having their head for a game of bowls."

"...IF it's someone in this department?" Nick was staring as if Bogo had just sprouted dragon's wings.

"He's thinking of the Attorney General's office," Judy spoke up quickly, and the fox's ire just as quickly damped down. Right again, the ZPD wasn't the only agency with access to that video file.

And as long as they were on that subject of the Attorney General…"Sir, does Mr. Gamsbart know about this?" Judy asked him.

"Yes, and I can tell you, he's at least as upset about this as I am." Bogo snorted, and flapped his ears in disgust. "He says if the culprit turns out to be anyone in his office, he won't just have them fired, he'll have them prosecuted."

"Right sir," Judy nodded. She wasn't at all certain if the chamois had that kind of authority, but now was not the time to say so. What did need to be brought up now was this: Whoever had posted that video to Fuzztube might very well have handed the Rafaj Brothers a 'Get Out Of Jail Free' card. Before she could say anything, Nick Wilde beat her to the punch.

"Chief, speaking of Mr. Gamsbart, what's this going to mean for the case against Rafaj Brother's Jewelers? I can only imagine what their attorney will do with this when he finds out."

Bogo let out a soft, rumbling breath, surprising both of his officers; it meant he was calming down a little.

"That's one small thing in our favour, Wilde. Whoever it was, posted that surveillance video to Fuzztube, they redacted it first."

Judy's ears went up and so did Nick's.

"Redacted sir?"

"How do you mean?"

The Chief blew a quick snort of air and waved a hoof at his desktop monitor.

"Easier to show you than to tell you…Errrr, are you able to watch it again?"

Judy felt mildly insulted, but kept it to herself.

"I can handle it, Chief."

"Me too," said the fox sitting next to her…but with a touch of bravura that suggested he wasn't quite as up for the challenge as she was.

"Right, then," Bogo went behind his desk, not bothering to sit down, and booted up his computer. He typed a few short instructions, moved the mouse and clicked, and then turned the display around so that she and Nick could see.

On the monitor screen a Fuzztube page was showing with an image frozen in the playback window. Judy recognized it at once; her and Nick, the second before he'd opened the box
containing the wedding ring—the one set with an illegal, lavender diamond, (sweet cheez, it seemed like ages ago.) The caption read simply, "Fox-Cop Kisses Bunny-Cop." No further information was provided.

"Now watch," Bogo said, and clicked to start the playback.

At once Judy realized what he'd meant by 'redacted'; the only faces visible on the screen were hers and Nick's. All of the others had been reduced to indistinguishable building-blocks through the process known as pixilation. One other thing was also plain to see, the background in this video was much more sharp and clear than it had been in the original footage. Whoever had posted this file had also cleaned it up first.

On the monitor screen she saw Nick put the ring on her finger and then clasp her paw. Unlike her partner, Judy Hopps was no lip reader, but then she didn't need that skill to know what she and the fox were saying to each other; the words were embedded in her memory like an insect trapped in amber.

"Oh Nick, look at it…it's a perfect fit."

"A perfect fit for a perfect lady."

She saw him stroking her cheek with the back of a finger—and then he took her in his arms and kissed her.

A hot color rose in Judy's cheeks and she almost looked away. It wasn't the sight of the fox kissing her that did it, it was her own reaction. My God, had she really…?

"Son of a…!" Nick's fox scream tore through her thoughts like a chain-saw through a screen door, and then he was pointing at the monitor with quivering finger, "I didn't kiss her for that long, this thing's been deliberately slowed down!"

Judy forced herself to peer closely, and realized that the fox was right; the video was playing at a slower speed than a moment ago.

Chief Bogo snorted again.

"Yes, I know," he answered, nodding grimly. On the screen, Ahmed al-Rafaj was aiming his finger at the fox and bunny couple like a Taser-gun. Though his face was still obscured, his body language more than made up for it; no one watching this could have any doubts as to the golden jackal's state of mind—full-blown outrage.

That was where the video ended, (mercifully for Judy and Nick.) Bogo reached out to turn the monitor back around, but stopped when the bunny-cop raised a paw.

"Uh, just one second, Chief?" she said, and studied the screen closely. After a short moment, she sat back in her chair again, puffing out her cheeks, and heaving a sigh of relief. "Well, at least it hasn't gone viral, less than couple of hundred views."

"So far!" a cynical voice sneered from beside her, and Judy swiftly decided to keep the rest of what she'd seen to herself—at least twenty 'thumbs-down' and not a single 'thumbs-up'. (And that wasn't even mentioning the comments; let's not go there, okay?)

Instead she said, "Well, at least we know one thing. If I hadn't seen the original video, I'd never have known that this one was playing at the wrong speed. That tells me whoever posted it has some serious editing skills."
"Or they know someone else who does," Nick amended Judy's words again—and this time it made her nose start to twitch and her ears want to stand up straight.

"Oh Sweet Cheez n' crackers Slick, you've already made up your mind, haven't you? You KNOW who did this—or you think you do. And I'll bet I know who you have in mind, too."

She could only hope that he'd be smart enough to keep these thoughts to himself, at least for the time being. Otherwise HE'D be the one going bowling with Bogo; the Chief was known to have very little tolerance for backbiters. Before they left to go home for the even, she was going to need to take this fox aside for a little talk.

Luckily, Nick wasn't THAT close to the boiling point; he immediately changed the subject. "Have you notified ZPD Cybercrimes?" He was rewarded with a sour look on the Chief's face, (but not directed at him, thank goodness.)

"Yes, I've left them several messages; so far Lieutenant Tufts hasn't seen fit to respond. However, even without his insight, I think we can safely conjecture that whoever it was made that post, they didn't do it from this location."

Judy could only nod; a move like that would have been either incredibly brazen or incredibly stupid; more likely the latter and the animal who'd posted that video had already demonstrated a serious measure of intelligence by way of their computer skills. This didn't mean the guilty party wasn't a ZPD officer, only that if they were, they hadn't posted that video to Fuzztube by way of a Precinct-1 workstation.

"Has anyone contacted Fuzztube about getting that thing taken down?" Nick asked the question in a lame monotone; he already knew the answer.

Bogo made another rumbling sound, deeper this time.

"Yes, but I don't hold out much hope we'll get any compliance; they're an anarchist lot at Fuzztube, 'down with authority, power to the mammals!' that sort of nonsense." His face turned sour again. "And we daren't try to push them on it; if we do, they won't just stonewall, they'll start promoting that video, 'The Tape The Cops Don't WANT You To See.' They've done similar at least once that I'm aware of."

Nick let out a growl and Judy would have joined him if her species was capable of it. Wonderful, simply wonderful…and another sign that the animal who'd posted that video had known exactly what they were doing. ZooTube would have taken it down already—and without any prompting by the ZPD.

"Now," Bogo slapped his hooves together, "Tomorrow mornin' I'll be issuing orders for ZPD Internal Affairs to make a full scale enquiry into this incident; you'll both be having to make statements, but as I've already said, I'm satisfied that neither one of you had anything to do with it. HOWEVER..." He lifted a brow and lowered the other, "if either one of you's got an idea of your own as to who might be responsible, you'd do well to keep it dark, especially around your fellow officers." He was supposedly speaking to both of them, but looking mostly at Nick,

"This is a bad enough situation already without anyone makin' it worse," he said, and then leaned over his desk again, "Are we clear on that, Officers?"

"Yes sir," Judy answered him.

"Perfectly sir," Nick Wilde said…but with a slightly forced quality to his voice.
"Good, then," Bogo nodded and sat down finally, laying his elbows on the desktop. Either he hadn't caught the fox's inflection or, much more likely, he didn't care. "Now, as long as you're here, I've received your text message about the location of The Phantom's dead drop. How certain are you about this?"

Judy let Nick answer the question; he'd found it after all.

"About ninety-nine, point four percent sure Chief," the red fox responded smartly. "If I ever wanted to make an illegal exchange—which of course I never have—that's exactly the kind of location I'd look for." He appeared to have forgotten his anger, at least for the moment. Still, Judy knew she was going to have to speak with him later.

"Course not, Wilde…you'd NEVER do such a thing." Bogo was chortling with wry amusement. Judy was smiling too; it was amazing how quickly her partner's spirits lifted when you put him back in his element.

She said, "I agree with Officer Wilde sir, that's an almost perfect spot for a dead-drop. It's indoors and out of sight, but at the same time, it's in a public location. Come Saturday, there'll be plenty of animals coming and going from that place—and with the Meerkat Market happening, nobody will think twice if they see someone dropping off a package in one of the lockers and somebody else picking it up."

"All right then," the Chief seemed satisfied with what he'd heard so far, "We'll reconvene here tomorrow, directly after the morning briefing. But right now, I want you two to pack it up and go get y'selves a good night's rest. You'll have busy day ahead of you tomorrow." He waved a hoof at the office door, "Dismissed, off y'go."

Judy waited until they were on the precinct's front steps before bringing it up…and even then she raised her ears for a minute, listening closely to their surroundings. Nope, nobody was within earshot, at least not that she could hear.

She lowered her ears again and turned to her partner.

"Nick, I didn't want to say this in front of the Chief…but you think it was Francine Trunkaby who posted that video, don't you?"

The response she got was a raised eyebrow and Nick going into 'press conference' mode.

"Do I think she did it? Yes. Do I KNOW she did it? She's my number one suspect, but no, I don't know that for certain. Am I going to start making accusations?" his ears pulled halfway backwards, "How about giving ME a little credit, huh Fluff? Of course not, you know me better than that."

Even before he finished speaking, Judy had her paws up. Nick Wilde might occasionally jump to conclusions, but he had never been in the habit of broadcasting them. Why had she even mentioned it in the first place?

"Because it needed to be said," Her inner voice reminded her, and to Nick she said, "Sorry, had to ask it; I haven't seen you this upset in a long time."

He leaned in close, wide eyed and tight lipped.

"Oh, really?"

Judy said nothing to this, but her face must have given her away because in the next instant the fox had turned wholly contrite.
"Wait, Wait, I'm sorry," He closed his eyes and waved his paws, head bobbing between his shoulders, "It's just that...that..." He turned and kicked at an invisible stone, and then finally met her gaze again. "It's my fault Carrots, all my fault; Remember what you said a while ago about let's not dance around it? Well, WE didn't kiss, I kissed you."

Ohhhh, so that was it; forget Francine Trunkaby, Nick was blaming himself for that video being posted, (and for all the other heat they'd suffered, most likely.) She reached up and took hold of his arm. "Hey don't you go beating yourself up on me NOW, Nicholas P. Wilde, you're going to get enough of that from the other officers in the next few weeks." It was meant as a lighthearted remark, but it had a good effect; a wry grin unzipped along the fox's muzzle.

"You think?" he said...and then he said, "I don't know who it was posted that video to Fuzztube Carrots, but I'm pretty sure of one thing; it had to be someone in the ZPD, not the Attorney General's office or anyplace else."

Judy blinked, and felt her nose begin to twitch. This was Nick in his 'wise fox' mode.

"Huh, why's that?" she asked.

The red fox started to answer, but then stopped abruptly, waving a discreet paw in the direction of the precinct entrance; three more officers had just emerged and were coming down the steps in their direction, a lion and a pair of elk. As the three of them passed where she and Nick were standing, Judy saw their eyes shift, watching them from out of the corners. She waited until she was sure they were gone and then motioned for her partner to continue.

"Because Carrots, it has to be someone who knows us." He said, "Look at all the trouble they went to before they posted that video, cleaning it up, blurring the faces, and fiddling with the playback speed; even for a mammal with decent computer skills, that's not a five-minute job. And can you see anyone getting that upset over a generic video of a fox kissing a bunny? I sure can—and that's why I think the culprit has to be someone who knows us...and also who doesn't like us." He held up for a second, regarding the ceiling and working his mouth, as if trying to locate an errant food particle. Judy braced herself, she knew what this meant; he had something unpleasant to tell her.

He lowered his eyes and found hers again.

"Look, we both know there's been more than a little resentment around the precinct over you and me being fast-tracked for the detective squad—over a bunch of other officers with more seniority."

Judy blinked again and then stared. Darn this fox, why did he always have to make perfect sense at the worst possible moments? His only mistake was that it wasn't exactly a bunch of other officers that had been bypassed in their favor, two or three at most.

But even so, "You think that's what this is all about, Nick? Someone's trying to sabotage our chances at making detective?"

He responded by tapping the side of his muzzle—meaning no, that wasn't what he thought, it was what his instincts were telling him. That was good news in a way; it meant that now she could be sure that he would exercise some discretion.

"And so will I," Judy promised herself, mentally crossing her heart," So will I."

But just to make sure..."Nick," she said, "I think it's best if we make a promise not to speak about this again...at least not for a while."

"Not at least until Big Chief Buffalo Nickel brings it up at tomorrow's briefing," the red fox
agreed, with a sardonic smile, "and you know he will, Carrots."

It didn't happen right away, but every officer in the bullpen knew something was up from the moment the big Cape buffalo entered the room. Normally, upon his arrival, he would greet his officers with a bellowed, "Shut it!" "Quiet!' or "Everybody sit!' And then the banter would cease, but the smiles on the faces would remain.

Not this time; Bogo only said, "Right, that's enough," in a quiet, steely voice. Everyone in the precinct knew what that signified, and the room fell instantly into a skittish, pin-drop silence.

Even then the Big Chief didn't broach the subject of the surveillance tape immediately; he had something else to say first.

"As many of you know, one of our officers was injured in the line of duty during a raid on a jewelry store in Sahara Square last Friday …and I'm happy to report that he's here with us again this mornin'. Officer Howell…welcome back."

At once the bullpen erupted in a frenzy of whoops, roars, and fists pounding on tables. Tad Howell's two fellow lupines Grizzoli and Wolford each lifted their muzzles in a howl of solidarity, while several other officers reached over to offer the red-wolf either a high four or fist-bump—including Judy Hopps. In her case however, Howell hesitated before returning it. Was that because of the surveillance-camera tape…or because of what she thought she'd seen in the alleyway behind the jeweler's shop, after the raid? She never found out because this was where Bogo got down to brass tacks.

"Now," he said sweeping his gaze over the gathering of officers with a jutting chin, as if daring anyone to challenge him, "There was another incident that took place during that investigation…and you all know which one I'm talking about; it's been on everyone's lips for that past two days. Even the prisoners in the city jail are talkin' about it…you think that's funny, Andersen?"

"N-No sir," the polar bear answered, hurriedly stifling himself; Bogo held him in his gaze for another two seconds and then moved on.

"I've kept quiet about it up until the present, but now I find that may have been a serious mistake—because now someone's gone and posted a clip of that incident on Fuzztube…and I won't have it!"

With that, his big, black hoof came thundering down on the lectern. Everyone jumped, even Nick and Judy. When she looked around the room, the bunny-cop saw shocked expressions on most of the other officers. This was plainly the first time they'd heard about it; Bogo's determination to keep the lid on until he made the announcement had somehow paid off, (a rare thing in a police precinct.)

But then she caught sight of the small knot of officers seated around Francine Trunkaby; these animals appeared neither startled nor surprised by the Chief's revelation. The cow-elephant herself was wearing an expression that could only be described as righteous satisfaction. Hmmm, maybe Nick was right, maybe she was the culprit; if so, she was certainly making no effort to conceal her guilt.

"Or maybe she has nothing to feel guilty about," Judy's inner voice responded, playing the devil's advocate.

Bogo, meanwhile was clearing his throat, a sound not unlike a revving motorcycle.

"Now listen to me; I'm going to speak softly and clearly. This film clip was not archival footage; it
was part of an ongoing police investigation. That makes posting it to Fuzztube a double violation of police procedure, understood? So when I find out who did this—and rest assured; I WILL find out—if the guilty party turns out to have been anyone in this department, that animal will be gone! Not parking duty, not sewer patrol…gone! And I don't mean only from the ZPD; that individual will never work in law-enforcement again. Oh, and they'll also find themselves facing an obstruction charge—I've already spoken to the ZAG office and they're determined to prosecute—UNLESS…!" His finger shot upwards like a bottle-rocket, "unless I have the guilty party's resignation on my desk by the end of watch today. In that case, they won't be indicted and might someday even find employment with another police department…someday!"

He paused for effect, the final word hanging over the gathering like the proverbial other hoof.

But then Judy Hopps noticed something; Bogo wasn't once more sweeping his gaze over the bullpen, the way she would have expected, he was watching the door by which he had entered. His pause just now had not been of the dramatic bent, he was waiting for someone else to enter the room.

A question began to form in the bunny-cop's mind, but did not have time to fully congeal before the Cape buffalo belled a single word. "Clawhauser!"

The door eased open and Benjamin Clawhauser half-trundled, half-staggered into the room, pushing a mobile flat-panel display ahead of him like Sisyphus rolling his boulder uphill for all eternity. At once, several officers got up to assist the plus-sized cheetah, a testament to his popularity.

"Now," Bogo went on as Clawhauser plugged in the display and attached a pair of USB cords, "I think it's high time we settle this nonsense, once and for all; I'm going to show you all what really happened in that jewelry store between officers Hopps and Wilde. And afterwards, I expect to hear no more nattering about it; I'm lookin' at you, Officer Trunkaby."

Judy turned and looked over her shoulder; the cow elephant couldn't have appeared more innocent if there'd been a halo levitating above her head; ditto for the officers seated around her, all of whom were wearing equally innocuous expressions…until officer Krumpansky happened to notice the bunny-cop watching him. At once the rhino's face became a study in open contempt.

Turning quickly back around, Judy caught an expression on Nick Wilde's face that was only marginally less unpleasant; he didn't seem to appreciate the direction in which Bogo was taking this discussion…and honestly, she wasn't that happy with it either.

"Someone get the lights," the Cape buffalo said, at the same time accepting a tablet from Benjamin Clawhauser.

The bullpen dimmed and the flat-panel display screen flashed twice and then came to life.

What Judy saw made her ears stand rapidly to attention. For some reason, Bogo had chosen to start the playback from well before she and Nick had entered the jewelry shop. There was Ahmed al-Rafaj, up on the screen along with the hippo Rashid…but no one else was present.

Then the image froze and a pair of flashing yellow brackets appeared around golden jackal.

"Now look there," the Chief was saying, "D'you see him reaching under the counter there? Right, now watch what happens next."

He tapped the tablet and resumed playback. At once, a wall of steel shutters came crashing down
over the door and every window, transforming the shop into a gloomy, ironclad cavern. There was no sound, but several officers started in surprise and Kii Catano even jumped in her seat.

"Right," Bogo stopped the replay again, and entered more instructions into the tablet. It was a bit small for such a large-hooved mammal and he had to take his time. After perhaps 30 more seconds, the image on the screen vanished and was replaced by another one, Nick and Judy alone in the store, with only Rashid to keep them company. The Chief snorted in mixture of confusion and frustration, where in blazes had Ahmed al-Rafaj disappeared to?

It was Nick Wilde who gave him the answer.

"That's when he had us wait out front while he went in the back to look for the lavender diamond," the red fox explained, "About five more minutes should do it." He seemed to have worked out for himself what the Chief was up to.

The big Cape buffalo grunted and fiddled with the tablet again; when the image reappeared, it showed Ahmed offering the ring box to Nick. There was another grunt from the Chief, this time one of satisfaction and he resumed the playback once more.

At first nothing on the display screen appeared to be out of the ordinary. Nick took the ring and offered it to Judy, who looked as if she was trying not to cry. She said something; he said something back…and without warning, the playback stopped again. More yellow brackets appeared, flanking both Ahmed al-Rafaj and his brother Ismael. Putting a pair of fingers to the tablet Bogo pinched them together, zooming in on the pair of golden jackals.

"All right then, now keep your eye on those two," he rumbled, resuming the playback at half speed. As everyone watched, the brothers exchanged a pair of hard looks, and then Ismael turned and signaled with two fingers, presumably to Rashid. At the same time, Ahmed turned and moved discreetly behind the counter. Bogo stopped the replay again and zoomed in even closer on the first jackal.

"Look, look there. D'you see what he's doing?" he was pointing at the monitor with a rigid finger.

"He's…He's reaching under the counter again, just like he did before the shutters dropped." It was Officer Wolford.

"Right and now look at what else is happening." Bogo stopped and rewound the video, and then zoomed in again, this time on Rashid. When the playback resumed, they saw the massive hippo planting himself in front of the door, arms folded like a sumo wrestler.

Bogo halted the replay once more and pulled the image back again, grunting twice and then snorting.

"As you can see for y'selves, the Rafaj brothers had become suspicious all of a sudden. I don't know why…and frankly I don't care; what matters to me is that Officers Hopps and Wilde also saw it. They saw it saw it, and they took swift action…watch."

He hit the 'play' icon once more.

On the screen, Nick Took Judy in his arms again and kissed her…and this time their embrace was mercifully short. (The animal who'd posted that video to Fuzztube had toggled the playback speed even more than Judy thought.)

The reaction from the Rafaj brothers (and their security mammal) was almost blindingly swift. Ahmed came hurrying out from behind the counter, while Rashid moved just as quickly away from
the door. Even on a somewhat fuzzy video feed it was obvious that both of them were visibly angry. What followed next was a rapid-fire exchange between Nick and the Rafaj brothers, punctuated by finger-pointing and furious paw-gestures. No narration was necessary here; a blind mole rat could have seen what was happening. Officers Wilde and Hopps were being summarily ordered to leave the premises; so outraged were the jackals and their security hippo that they'd completely forgotten their earlier suspicions.

Bogo let the footage run until Nick and Judy were passing through the store's front entrance and then killed the feed and shut down the monitor.

"Get the lights, Clawhauser." He waited until they came back on and then resumed speaking, shifting his gaze at random from one officer to another.

"So NOW I hope you all understand, Officer Wilde did not kiss Officer Hopps out of any sort of romantic impulse; he and his partner were in a sticky situation and he did what he had to do in order to get them out of it." He lifted his brows in a gesture of irony.

"And by the way, it worked," he said, rapping the podium with his knuckles. "Our officers made it safely out of there, WITH the evidence in their possession. And when we went back in a short while later, those two jackals had no idea that a bust was about to come down. Hopps…Wilde, stand up.

Hesitantly, very hesitantly Judy stood up on her chair seat, and saw Nick Wilde do the same, moving even move slowly than her. Chief Bogo held his hooves above them, as if offering benediction, and then raised his voice, speaking to the group as whole.

"A good cop isn't afraid to act in a manner that's distasteful in order to get him or herself out of a tight spot. And make no mistake; Hopps and Wilde were in a bad place back there. The hippo you saw in that video later sent one of our officers to the infirmary and put another one in hospital." He said this while looking at Officers Simmers and Howell, both of whom responded with firm nods, (although, for some reason, the red wolf found it hard to meet the Chief's eyes.)

"I know that there are plenty of officers in this room who've had to take similar action in order to protect themselves, and/or their partner," the Cape buffalo went on, "I know I have…and for those of you who haven't, better brace y'selves, because it's coming."

A ripple of nervous laughter went fluttering around the bullpen; the Chief gave it a few seconds to die down and then went into his peroration.

"So let this be the end of it," he declared, rapping the lectern again, "Hopps and Wilde are first and foremost your fellow officers, animals who won't hesitate to come to your aid if you call on them for help; everything else comes second, including their species. And that's all I've got to say on the subject."

He motioned for Nick and Judy to sit down again. As she took her seat once more, a strange mix of emotions welled up within the grey-furred bunny. She should have been relieved, elated even at the Chief's explanation for her and Nick's actions. Instead she felt a strange, aching sadness. Why was that? The Chief hadn't said anything she didn't already know. Nick Wilde had told her pretty much the same thing, right after they'd exited the jewelry store.

So, where the heck had that big, empty spot in her heart come from?

"Pull it together, Jude-the dude!" her inner voice barked…and she tried, she really tried; but then Nick happened to turn in her direction, and she found herself looking hurriedly away from the fox.
Thinking fast, she covered herself by making a quick study of the other officers, gauging their reaction to the Chief’s presentation, pretending it had been her purpose all along.

Most of the faces she saw were wearing thoughtful expressions, as if mulling over what the Cape buffalo had told them; here and there she observed looks of satisfaction, animals who'd heard all they needed to know and were ready to give it a rest. In one or two cases the expressions she saw were shamefaced, officers experiencing pangs of guilt for having harbored such negative thoughts about two of their fellow cops.

Judy almost smiled—but then her gaze fell once more on the cluster of officers sitting close to Francine Trunkaby. Here there were no changes of expression; the eyes remained flinty, the mouths hard and flat; Chief Bogo's speech had moved these animals not so much as a nanometer.

And oh look, there she was, in the center of it all, arms folded and trunk lifted into a rigid button-hook, her royal highness, Princess Francine, eyes aglow with an almost evangelical fervor.

Judy knew then that the cow elephant was never going to let go of this, not under any circumstances; she had planted her flag on Sanctimony Hill and was prepared to defend that position at all costs.

And with that realization the bunny-cop felt her own features beginning to darken; if that was how Officer Trunkaby wanted things…well then, so be it.

Officer Judith Laverne Hopps didn't know when to quit either.
"All right, then…are we all in agreement?"

No one spoke, but everyone nodded. After looking them over for what seemed like half a century, Chief Bogo nodded back; there could be no mistaking anyone's opinion here. "Very well then, I'm giving the order; the operation is…yes, what is it Wilde?"

Nick lowered his paw and took a deep breath—slowly, so that the others wouldn't notice his apprehension—and then stood up. He hadn't changed his mind, but 'yes' wasn't necessarily an unqualified yes. Looking around the room, he felt like a fly under a magnifying glass; every eye was watching him closely, (especially those belonging to a certain bunny cop. She was looking at him as if he'd just let out a belch in the midst of a moment of silence.)

Welllll, let her stare at him that way if it suited her; what he had to say right now was much too important to put aside for later—never mind if it spoiled a dramatic moment.

"Chief, before we go any further, I want to return to something I talked about last time we were here; whoever it is that picks up the money from the dead-drop, it won't be The Phantom. The courier probably won't be even know who they're really working for, much less his real name, or how to find him."

"And…" Chief Bogo prompted, one eyebrow higher than the other.

Nick sucked at his lower lip for a second. The Big Chief wasn't going to like this, none of them would; but sorry Jack, facts is facts, (as he used to say to Finnick back in the day.)

He took another breath and plunged ahead.

"And…that means even if we nail that courier red-pawed, it'll probably be just another dead end—or worse. The minute that mule gets busted, the Phantom's going to know we're on to him; don't
think for a minute he won't be watching or that he isn't prepared for just such an emergency. We've all seen how thorough he is—and how good he is at covering his tracks."

A chorus of groans and grumbles followed and then a chittering voice sneered upwards from the top of Bogo's desk. "So, what do you want us to do fox, just let him walk?"

Nick ignored the dig; Lieutenant Albert Tufts had been out of sorts ever since his arrival here; probably as a result of the tongue lashing Bogo had given him for not answering his pages the previous evening. (Not exactly a big secret, every cop in the precinct had heard him …all the way down to the officers working the records room, in the basement, by the boiler.)

Choosing his words carefully, the red fox pressed onward.

"So, what I'm proposing is this, instead of busting the Phantom's courier, we tail him to his next drop—like I said. I'm sure he has one—and then we grab whoever makes THAT pick-up; there's the animal that might be able to lead us to the Phantom, with a little luck, it might even be The Phantom himself."

He said this while looking directly at Albert Tufts, who flapped his tail and said nothing.

Chief Bogo, on the other paw, had plenty to say on the subject.

"Chancy proposition that, Wilde. As you y'self just pointed out, The Phantom will certainly be keeping a close eye on his courier, and he's nothing if not thoroughgoing. What that says to me is that if he even suspects for a moment someone's following his go-between, he'll abort the second drop straight away. Not only that, he'll certainly have some way to signal the courier that he's being shadowed…and then if he gives us the slip, we'll be right back where we started."

"Even worse than where we started," Albert Tufts interjected, seizing on Nick's own words, "If that happens, The Phantom'll probably change his entire modus operandi and we'll have to begin again from scratch."

Nick refused to be put off.

"So what? He probably does that anyway every once in a while. If I were him, I'd have different animals for delivering the loans and picking up the payments and I'd never use the same drop twice."

The Kaibab Squirrel only stared moodily, but Chief Bogo made a small rumbling noise and swiveled his chair in the direction of the chamois seated on the far left side of the room.

"Thoughts, Mr. Gamsbart?"

The deputy prosecutor had plenty of them.

"I'm with Officer Wilde on this one, Chief. Some big fish are just too well insulated to get to by way of their small fish. Look at Mister Big; we've been trying take him down by busting his soldiers for what, almost six years now…and how has THAT worked out? The little jerk's still out on the street, scarfing cannoli and thumbing his nose at us. The way I see it, it's the same thing with The Phantom; the only way we'll put an end to his racket is with a shot right to the head. So I say, let's take the risk."

"Do I need to remind you that we'd be risking EVERYTHING?" Albert Tufts wasn't about to give it up either. Nick started to respond but felt Judy grab his arm.

"Shhh, let Gamsbart handle him."
It was sound advice. "Yes, and we also stand to GAIN everything," the chamois countered, "And if we go the other way and just take down the courier, then what? Even if we win, we lose, just like Officer Wilde told us. I'll take long odds on the whole enchilada over a sure thing on a Pyrrhic victory any day of the week.

Nick stifled a snicker, talk about mixing your metaphors! Glancing sideways, he saw Judy trying not to do the same. Good; at the mention of Mr. Big's name a moment ago, she'd looked as if another yellowjacket had tagged her.

"Whoa, I just hope he never talks like that in court," he murmured, keeping it under his breath. "The judge'd cite him for contempt, just on principal."

Before Judy could answer him, Chief Bogo's gaze fell in her direction.

"Hopps, what's your opinion?"

Nick worried for a second that that his partner might be caught off guard, but it took her all of half an instant to answer the Chief's query.

"I say we go for the second drop, sir. Duke Weaselton finding out about that first one was just pure, dumb luck, the kind of break that only comes once in a blue moon; if this is the only chance we're going to get at busting the Phantom, then I think we should take it all the way."

"Right, I concur," Bogo rapped his desk with his knuckles, "When the Phantom's courier shows up to collect the money, we follow him to his next stop and then we make our move."

Nick sat back in his chair, bathed in equal parts relief and satisfaction. A split second later, he was bolt upright; Chief Bogo had just dropped a nuclear bombshell.

"Hopps…Wilde? You've been in on this from the start, so I'm putting you charge of this operation; any objections?" The question was meant for Gamsbart and Tufts, not for them.

"None here," the chamois said, nodding his approval at the fox and bunny.

"Well I object to the whole thing." Albert Tufts' tail was curled up like fist, "We should bust that courier, not try to ail him…but if this is how you wan to play it Chief, then yeah, Hopps and Wilde are okay by me to run it."

Nick turned towards the squirrel, poker faced; even thoroughly bemused, he couldn't resist such a juicy opening.

"You ever thought about a second career as a motivational speaker, Lieutenant?"

"Shut your mouth, Wilde!" Bogo's bellow was loud enough to rattle the door frame—but everyone in the office could see that he was trying not to laugh. Finally, he cleared his throat. "Right, who d'you want on your team, then?"

Taken by surprise, Nick had no answer; he and Judy had participated in many a police operation, but never before had they been put in charge of one. It was like a pair of common sea-mammals being promoted to command of a battleship—or that was how it felt to him; he had no idea where to go with the Chief's question.

Luckily for him, his partner did.

"I'd like to have Officer Swinton on the surveillance cameras, Chief. She did a great job on the
"Rafaj Brothers blood-diamond sting."

"And she also didn't have a problem with me kissing you," Nick thought but did not say.

"You're got her Hopps," the Chief said, jotting down the name. "Who else?"

The question seemed to snap Nick out of his confusion, and he spoke up quickly. "I'd like to have Grizzoli, Wolford, and Howell on the team, sir."

"Yes, good thought." Bogo jotted their names down as well. In a crowded environment like the Meerkat Market, it might become necessary to track their quarry by scent rather sight…and there was always the possibility that the courier might himself be an animal with a keen sense of smell; a wolf would know instinctively to keep downwind from such an individual.

"Sir," Judy spoke up again, "We need to plan for all contingencies; in the event that the courier spots us and tries to make a run for it, I'd like to have Officer Catano along." It was an excellent suggestion, and the Chief Bogo agreed to it at once. The cheetah-cop was not only the fastest runner on the force, but she'd worked the Meerkat Market several times before, busting purse-snatchers and grab-and-run thieves. That gave Nick another idea.

"Yeah, and we'd better bring along a heavyweight with us, just in case the courier decides to fight it out instead of giving it up or trying to bolt." He looked directly at Bogo," I don't think that's going to happen Chief, but like Officer Hopps said, we better not take any chances," Not wanting to upstage his partner, he quickly deferred to her, "Any ideas, Carrots?"

"How about Officer Fangmeier?" she said. It was a good choice, but Bogo quickly vetoed it.

"Sorry, Fangmeier's on another assignment this Saturday. But you're thinking big cat, Hopps?"

Judy nodded at once, "Yes sir, big cats are powerful but they can also play it stealthy when the situation calls for it."

Bogo nodded back and checked his desk computer.

"Right then, let's see who...you can have either Johnson or Delgato."

"We'll take Delgato sir," Judy answered immediately. (It was no contest; Officer Johnson was a charter member of the Francine Trunkaby clique.)

Her next request was directed at Lieutenant Tufts, "And I'd like to have someone on board from ZPD Cybercrimes, too...someone who, errr...speaks the Phantom's language, if you know what I mean."

"Okay," the Kaibab squirrel said simply, but Chief Bogo raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Huh, what d'you need a computer expert for, then? You're monitoring a dead-drop, not a website."

"Honestly Chief, I don't know, " Judy admitted, "except I've got a hunch we're going to run up against a few things we didn't plan for on this op. We've only got a few days to put it together, after all."

"Concur," Albert Tufts said, flipping his tail a couple of times "If there's one thing we've learned about dealing with The Phantom down in Cybercrimes, it's to expect the unexpected. That animal's got more curveballs than a platoon of major league pitchers."
Bogo's head bobbed once, but only once; he still wasn't completely convinced.

"Fine, but how's a hacker s'posed to involve himself in a dead-drop pick-up? Meself, I can't imagine anything more low-tech."

Judy nodded the question over to Albert Tufts, who responded by showing his incisors in a wicked, toothy grin. "Only in about a hundred ways, Chief; for sure he'll use the City Traffic Cams to track his courier's progress; that system's so vulnerable, a middle-school kid could hack it." He fired a sharp look at Nick and Judy, "And that's why we can't use the traffic cams to follow the Phantom's courier; if we do, it'll take him all of two seconds to spot us and then it's goodnight kiddies, the arcade's closed!"

Nick Wilde felt his head tilting sideways. Tufts had said 'We', not 'You'. He might not care for the idea of tracking the Phantom's mule instead of busting him…but that didn't mean he wasn't going to try and help out in any way he could. Nick found himself starting to respect the Lieutenant, (even if he still didn't like the bushytailed, little cyber-snob.)

Then Bogo spoke up once more.

"In that case, Hopps, you and Wilde will want Sergeant Larry Bock along as part of your team."

Nick blinked and tilted his head even further to the right; when he did, he saw that Judy's nose was twitching.

"Who's that sir?" she asked, "I'm not familiar with the name."

It was Rudy Gamsbart who answered her.

"He's a drone jockey out of the Tundratown Precinct—best on the force, the AG's office has worked with him a few times before." He turned a sardonic grin on Bogo. "He's going to throw a wall-eyed fit when he finds out you're sending him to Sahara Square, Chief."

The Cape buffalo only snorted indifferently.

"Bock knew the job was dangerous when he took it."

"And the Chief's right, we're going to need a good drone pilot if we can't use the traffic cams," Judy Hopps pointed out—unnecessarily, Nick Wilde thought; no one was disputing Bogo's order.

"Right then, who else?" he asked, pen hovering over his notepad.

Nick raised three fingers in Judy's direction, a signal for her to let him take this one.

"Chief there's always a decent sized police presence anyway at the Saturday Meerkat Market, I'd sooner just alert them that their assistance might be needed in tracking a suspect rather than bring in any more officers."

"You're worried that too many extra cops around might tip off the courier?" Rudy Gamsbart was leaning forward on an elbow.

"More like the Phantom himself," the red fox answered. "Forgive me if I keep repeating myself, but everything I've heard about this animal tells me that he'll bail if he senses anything out of the ordinary." He swiveled his gaze in Albert Tufts' direction. "And if he can use the Jam Cams to track his money Lieutenant, it's a slam dunk that he'll be using them to keep an eye on the Market, too."
"True enough," the Kaibab squirrel shrugged and turned his pawlns upwards, "In fact, he'd be a fool not to."

"Right, I'll alert the Sahara Square precinct," Bogo scribbled quick note but then stopped and looked up with his mouth creased into a sardonic smirk, "But not quite yet, let's not give them too much time to talk about it amongst themselves, eh? If I were The Phantom, I shouldn't just keep my eyes open, I'd keep an ear to the ground as well. So let's keep it dark for as long as possible."

"Yes sir!" Nick and Judy responded with gusto. If this operation went belly-up by way of some idle gossip it wouldn't be the first time.

It took another hour and a half to details hammered out…and even then they didn't come close to getting everything covered. (Nick would have liked another hour at least, but Chief Bogo had a meeting with the police board that he couldn't put off.)

"Okay," Judy said as she stood up. "I think our first order of business to get Officer Swinton down to Sahara Square for a look-see at that locker room."

"Can you handle that on your own Carrots?" Nick asked, surprising both her and the Chief, "I have something else I want to take care of. I want head on up to Tundratown and see if I can get a scent-mark on Mr. Shortal."

"On who?" Albert Tufts' tail was flapping again.

"The Phantom's customer; the one who's paying him the money," Judy spoke to him with exaggerated patience, and a caustic smirk. You would think that such a grand genius as Lieutenant Albert Tufts, cyber-cop extraordinaire, would already be aware of that fact, but nooooooo…. The squirrel only shrugged, "Oh, right."

"Bring Howell along with you, then." Chief Bogo said to Nick "he's rather fond of that candy shop, as I understand it; might even be able to point that stoat out for you."

"Does he have Shortal's scent memorized?" the red fox queried, canting his head sideways again; if that was the case, it would save them all some time, a rather precious commodity in the present circumstances.

Bogo frowned and regarded the wall for a second. "Mmmm…you'd have to ask him, but whether he does or he doesn't, I want at least one other member of your team to have that weasel's scent locked in."

"Gotcha," Nick cocked a finger at the Chief. Yes, it would be good to have second nose familiar with Scottish weasel's scent on board; they'd want to watch Mr. Ian Shortal very closely—from the moment he arrived at the Meerkat Market until the moment when he dropped off the 'package'. Only then would the ZPD would have probable cause to move on him. As Bob Woodchuck would have put it, the only way they were going to take down The Phantom would be to, 'follow the money.' Unless and until his courier had the actual cash in his possession, they'd have no justification to arrest him, much less the elusive hacker-cum-shylock himself.

"And The Phantom has to know that, too," the red fox said to himself as he stood up and turned to follow Judy out the door.

_Sahara Square:_
Judy filled in Officer Swinton on the op while they drove to the Beach Promenade. When the pig-cop learned of their destination, she was every bit as unhappy about it as Nick Wilde had been the day before—albeit for an entirely different reason.

"It's not the heat, it's the sun," she explained. "When your species has pink skin and almost no body hair, it's not just your nose that gets sunburned...and I mean seriously sunburned. That's why I never left the command truck the whole time we were running that sting on the Rafaj Brothers."

Judy took the hint and pulled into a convenience store. A few moments later they were back on the road again, equipped with a tube of industrial-strength sunblock. (even though they'd probably be spending the next hour or so indoors and out of the sunlight.) As soon they were back in the cruiser, she resumed the impromptu briefing, telling Officer Swinton what she and Nick had found in the locker room and what they had planned for that coming Saturday. When she finished explaining, the sow had several questions for her.

"What kind of lighting do they have in that locker room, do you know?"

Judy looked at her with a raised ear.

"What kind of...lighting...?"

"Yes, you know," the pig cop prompted, "Florescent, LED, incandescent—it'll make a difference in what kind of camera to use."

"I-I honestly don't know," Judy admitted, and then quickly covered herself. "Once we found where LB6 was, we didn't want to hang around any longer than necessary."

"Right, right..." Swinton pursed her lips and nodded dryly. She understood; wouldn't it have been just their luck to have run into The Phantom or his courier right then?

"Well, we'll find out when we get there," she said, "but do you have any ideas about when the Phantom...excuse me, when his courier is likely to be making that pick-up?"

THAT one, Judy had an answer for...

"We figure he'll probably go for it sometime between 10 and 12, when the Meerkat Market starts to empty out before the afternoon heat comes on. That way he can blend in with the rest of the crowd as they're leaving.

"Don't think he'll wait until evening?" Swinton was glancing sideways with a skeptical expression. "That's the Meerkat Market's busiest time, and he'll have the cover of darkness too."

Judy shook her head, frowning slightly.

"Noooo...I mean, it's possible but we doubt it, he'll want it crowded, but not too crowded. And also, don't forget, evening is the favorite time for pickpockets and purse snatchers....which means not only the risk of having the money stolen, but also that there'll be a lot more cops on duty. We're not completely discounting the idea of an evening pick up, we just think morning's a lot more likely. " Sensing something, she looked at Swinton in the rear-view mirror. Did the pig-cop really think an evening pick up was more likely...or was that what she was hoping for, that things wouldn't start moving after the sun went down?

Judy said to her, "anyway, since the only thing we know for certain about the pick up is that it's set for this Saturday, we're going to have to get on it bright and early."
"Okay," Swinton responded making a mental note. "But I have to say Hopps, there's one thing I still don't understand. If some tourist or whoever snags that locker before Mr. Shortal can get to it, then what? What does the Phantom do then?"

Judy felt her throat tighten, and countered it by releasing a ragged breath. Trust Swinton to ask the Final Jeopardy question—the one for which no one had an answer, not her, not Nick, not Bogo not anybody.

"Honestly, I don't know," she conceded, "no one's been able to figure that one out…except that the Phantom is nobody's fool; no way did he not think of it either."

The pig-cop let out a small grunt.

"Everybody seems to be assuming that this character is some kind of genius." She folded her arms, gazing fixedly through the windshield, "but let me tell you something, Hopps. I saw more than my share of cyber-crooks, back when I was working in corrections; they might have been wizards with a lap-top, but when it came to living in the real world, these geeks couldn't buy a ten-cent clue for a million dollars."

"That may be true," Judy changed lanes and touched up on the accelerator, "But it's better to assume the Phantom is smart and be wrong about it, than to go the other way and be wrong."

"Just be careful you don't outsmart yourself," Swinton's eyes were dark with caution. "A Lieutenant of mine made that mistake once a few years ago…and the result was him getting taken hostage and nearly killed."

Judy felt her ears pulling backwards. Much as she respected Officer Swinton's experience and knowledge of surveillance, that didn't mean she was going to put up with a lecture from her.

Except…what if she was right? What if they were overthinking this? Albert Tufts, another supposed computer wizard, hadn't even recognized Ian Shortal's name when he'd heard it. Might The Phantom have a gap or two like that in his thought process? Well. she could worry about that later, because here was the parking lot and the half-sunken cluster of locker and changing rooms—including the one housing locker LB-6.

Just to play it safe, Judy had Swinton wait in the cruiser while she went downstairs to reconnoiter the premises. It turned out to be an unnecessary precaution; she encountered only one other animal, an impala who was just leaving anyway.

When the pig cop finally got a look at the place, it took her less than half a minute to reach a verdict.

"Not too bad," she said, studying the passageway with her hooves on her hips, "Could be better, but it could be worse, a lot worse."

"For us, or for The Phantom?" Judy asked her; she wasn't making a joke, she honestly didn't know. Swinton's non-committal assessment would have done a politician proud,

"All of the above," the pig cop answered, pointing one way and then the other. "There's good lighting in here and plenty of open space, too. I can get cameras on that locker from three different angles; left, right, and directly behind." The corners of her mouth dipped earthward and she swabbed at the air with a hoof, as if wiping away the condensation from an invisible windshield.

"The bad news is that except for the lockers, there's nothing else in here except bare floors, bare walls, and a bare ceiling—and the lighting fixtures are all recessed; it's going be harder than heck,
finding a place to put the cameras where they won't be seen—by the Phantom's messenger-boy or anyone else."

Judy stopped in her tracks, feeling the stuttering sensation that came with a twitching nose. She hadn't thought of that; they'd need to keep the surveillance cameras hidden not only from the Phantom's mule, but from everyone who came in here. Otherwise, animals would talk, the word would get around…and then the courier wouldn't come within a hundred miles of this place.

If only they had more time to set things up…two days just wasn't enough. A thought occurred to the bunny-cop then. Duke Weaselton had been busted up in Tundratown the previous Saturday…but only yesterday had he come forward with what he knew about that dead-drop. Had he possibly done that on purpose, in the hope of sabotaging the investigation?

Noooo, she quickly decided, The Duke of Bootleg might be that devious, but he could never be that subtle.

"This may seem like a silly question, but have we got a warrant?" Swinton's query instantly roused Judy from her reverie.

"Not yet, but we'll have one by Saturday," she said. Yes, it was a silly question—but also a necessary one, they had better NOT put cameras in here without first obtaining a surveillance warrant. Fortunately, they had an inside track on that necessity. "Rudy Gamsbart, our liaison with the Attorney General's office is taking care of it,"

"Okay, good," the pig cop looked satisfied. "All right, now give me little space here." She pulled out a flashlight and commenced to stroll slowly along the corridor, playing the beam over the walls and ceiling like an archeologist, searching for hieroglyphics.

Then abruptly the circle of light froze in place. "Bingo!"

Judy hurried over, "What? What is it?"

"Well, I hope you'll pardon the pun, but…" Swinton's words trailed off into an odd expression, a half sheepish and half sardonic grin.

When Judy looked past her to where the beam was focused, she immediately understood why. Pinned in the light, right at the juncture where the wall and ceiling met was roundish splatter of dirty grey cobwebs…

…a dust bunny.

"I'm just glad Nick isn't here," Judy groaned, mostly to herself; he'd dine out on this for a week. But then she noticed something else. "I don't see too many more of those…things in here."

"No problem, I can make more," the pig cop assured her, snapping off the flashlight, "I've got some plastic spray-foam, back at the precinct, makes great dust bunnies…and that one looks like it's been here for weeks. No one's going to notice a few more." Her mouth angled downwards once again. "Just the same, we shouldn't install the cameras until late Friday night, as close to zero hour as we can get; the longer they're in place, the better the chances are that they'll be spotted before the money-drop goes down."

"We can't place them anyway until we have our warrant," Judy reminded her, and the scratched thoughtfully at her chin. "Hmmm, what about putting a camera inside of locker LB6?"
Swinton frowned again, even more deeply than before.

"I-I-I can do that if you want, but I'd recommend against it. We don't know what size animal this courier is, and if he opens the door and the camera is looking straight at him, well...." She let her voice trail off again, allowing Judy to figure it out for herself, and then she added, "And it won't show us anything more than the other cameras anyway. We..."

"Okay, scratch that idea," Judy answered, quickly. She was a little bit annoyed by the pig cop's assumption that she'd need to be talked out of the idea. But then she scratched that notion as well, Swinton couldn't really help it Swinton couldn't really help it; according to the Precinct-1 grapevine, her last boss in Zootopia Corrections had been one of those 'my-way-or-the-highway' types, the kind of animal who thinks independence is synonymous with insubordination. That reminded Judy of something else. "Oh, and before I forget, are you familiar with an officer named Sergeant Larry Bock? He's going to be handling the drone cams."

"I only met him once," Swinton rubbed at the back of her head, "though I've heard about him here and there; a little whiny for my taste, but I think we can get along."

"Good," said Judy, "I'd like you and him to get together sometime between now and Saturday to compare notes."

The corners of Swinton's mouth went in two different directions.

"Do yourself a favor Hopps, and ask the Chief to set it up; Bock'll complain a lot less if the order comes from above."

Judy's ears went up.

"Why would he complain about...?"

"Oh, he complains about everything—or so I've heard," Swinton told her, "No problem if sees you as an equal or a subordinate, but if you're his boss, then it's bleat, bleat, and more bleat, all the livelong day."

"Duly noted," Judy answered, trying not to bite her lip. Oh, this ibex sounded like he was going to be just a barrel of fun to work with. She sniffed and swore quietly to herself. "He'd just BETTER be as good as Gamsbart says he is;"

"Mmmm," was the pig cop's only response. She went over and stood in front of the locker LB6, facing back the way they'd come and taking out her cell-phone camera. Turning slowly to the left, like a wind up ballerina, she stopped every couple of seconds, snapping off a shot of where the opposite wall met the ceiling. It took her perhaps 30 seconds to complete the full turn of 180 degree, (although to Judy it seemed to take much longer. )

"All righty, I think I've got what I need," Swinton put the camera away and looked at Judy. "Anything else, or can we head on back to the precinct?" The needful tone in the sow's voice was not lost on her partner—and she didn't disagree with it. Today wasn't quite as hot as yesterday but it was still no picnic in paradise.

"Nope, I think we're good to go." she answered, nodding towards the stairs.

"Want me to drive?" Swinton asked her as they ascended back up and into the daylight.

Judy felt her mouth crinkling into a rueful jagged line
"Yeah, but be sure and wet down that steering wheel first."

**Sweetie's Scottish Confectionary Shop-Tundratown**

"Yip! Whoa, I want to live here!"

The amalgam of delectable aromas hit Nick Wilde square in the nasal passages as soon as he stepped through the door; it was like walking into a wall of bliss; he smelled mint, vanilla, caramel, cherry, coconut, sugar, toffee, strawberry, cinnamon, butterscotch, chocolate…and blueberries, don't forget the blueberries.

When he'd caught up with Officer Tad Howell in the Precinct-1 parking lot, Nick had discovered that the red wolf had never actually visited Sweetie's Scots Confectionary Shop. "Someone sent me a box of their fudge as a get well present when I was in the hospital," he'd said…or more properly, drooled at the memory. Initially amused by his fellow officer's lip-smacking reminiscence the red fox now was ready to completely revise that opinion. If this place didn't smell like heaven, it was because heaven was running a distant second.

In retrospect, Nick should have seen it coming. When he and Howell had first arrived here, they'd found a line out the door, stretching halfway to the corner. It meant at least one of the things Duke Weaselton had said about his place was true, it really was that popular…and now the fox finally understood why.

He also understood that he had come here to do a job, not ogle the merchandise, And so, shaking off his desire, (along with the dusting of snow on his jacket,) he made quick survey of the premises.

Except for the chequered floor, Sweetie's was done up in typical candy-shop white, glossy but not gleaming, with a huge St. Andrew's banner posted proudly on the wall behind the front counter Most of the confections in the display cases were familiar items, toffee, liquorice. caramels, fudge —there was huge selection of fudge—and various types of chocolates. But also, just as Duke Weaselton had said, many of the sweets carried names that were obscure and in one or two instances, downright bizarre; butter tabs, sugar mice, Bearwick cockles…and what the heck were soor plooms? The candy known as Edinburrow Rock looked like pieces of colored school-chalk.

And there, behind the counter, in the center of it all, were a pair of weasels, both of them dressed in immaculate white, with matching, dark-red aprons. The hob was a burley fellow, especially for a mustelid, nearly unrecognizable as a member of his species. Unsurprisingly, his stoat-brown fur was streaked here and there with slashes of ermine white; Tundratown was the district of perpetual winter after all. The jill weasel beside him was much smaller in size and also somewhat plumpish, but there was no mistaking the facial resemblance; this was Grace Shortal, (nee Weaselton,) the Dukester's semi-estranged sister.

"There," Nick tugged on Howell's sleeve. "Those two over there, see 'em?"

"Yeah, I see them," the red wolf whispered out the side of his mouth, "I'll need to get closer to get their scent though, what with all these other aromas. Uhhh, you sure that's him?" He was aiming his muzzle in the direction of the hob.

"Yep, that's him." the red fox answered softly. Actually, he wasn't 100% certain, but who else could it be? How many other barrel-chested weasels were working in here? It was a small gamble but it quickly paid off; by the time it was his and Howell's turn at the counter, they had heard the couple addressing each other as 'Ian' and 'Grace' not once but several times.
"So, what will you have, sir?" the jill weasel asked Nick brightly as he stepped up to the counter. He would have preferred to have her husband waiting on him, although it really didn't matter; being mustelids the Shortals had strong scent markers and he picked them up at once.

"I'll have a tin of blueberry fudge and half tin of carrot-cake fudge," the fox told her. (He had to buy something while they were in here, needed to make it look authentic so as not to arouse any suspicion and all that. Besides, how could he leave without getting anything for Judy? Yeahhhh, THAT was the ticket!)  

"Very good sir; and will there be anything else?" Grace's pen remained poised over her order pad; Nick noted that she seemed to have picked up a trace of her husband's burr over the course of their marriage.

She had also picked up on the fact that he hadn't quite yet finished ordering.

Nick knew he shouldn't; he'd be setting himself up like a bowling pin. It was no use; the foxy side of him just wouldn't let it lie. "Yes, a dozen sugar mice please," That was good for a snicker from the wolf standing behind him. Back in the pre-evolutionary days, mice had been a favorite fox-nosh.

Not that Howell would get a chance to razz him about it; when HIS turn came, he practically bought out the store, an order so big, Nick was unable to keep track of it all. Seriously, he wondered how they were going to fit everything the wolf had just purchased in the back of the police cruiser.

It dawned on the red fox then that this was the first time he'd paired up with an officer other than Judy Hopps—and he wasn't quite sure how he felt about it. Oh Howell was good cop and all that, friendly, able, and willing; (and he apparently couldn't have cared less about that kiss,) but it just wasn't the same. And for the life of him, Nick couldn't fathom why.

"You're going to end up in a sugar coma," he teased as they trudged their way back to the car, Howell tottering every step of the way beneath his soaring load. (No, he wasnt going to help the poor wolf carry that weight.)

"It's not all for me," Howell protested, stepping clumsily around a patch of hard slush. Nick didn't believe him, but he wasn't about to argue such a trivial point. (That…and he didn't want to give him an excuse to tell Judy about the sugar mice; he'd never hear the end of it. 'What, aren't you going to pounce on it first?')

"Did you get a good scent on those weasels?" he asked.

"Uh, yeah… can you hold on for second?" They had reached the police cruisier. Nick set down his purchases on top of the cab and then popped the trunk. It was only after (by some minor miracle) they got everything stashed, that Howell picked up where he'd left off.

"Yeah, I got markers on both of them. You really think that hob, what's his name…you really think he'll make the delivery fursonally?"

This time, Nick was completely certain of his answer.

"Ian," he said, "his name's Ian…and yes I'm sure; there's no way that he can trust a third party with an important delivery like that one—I sure wouldn't—so that leaves either him or his wife."

"Or his kits," the red wolf pointed out, and then immediately seemed to realized what he'd said, adding hastily, "But who'd bring a cub into something like this? I don't think so."
"Exactly," Nick agreed, letting the gaffe pass. There, that was the difference between Howell and Judy he decided; she would have known that Ian was going to make the drop himself without needing to ask about it.

He opened the door and hefted himself inside the cruiser; Tad Howell quickly joined him.

"I have to tell you Wilde," he said, rubbing his paw-pads together to warm them, "I am NOT looking forward to having to work undercover in Sahara Square again; if that courier turns out to be another hippo, I quit!"

Nick doubted that would be the case, but laughed just the same.

"I wouldn't think so, Howell. A hippo picking up a package dropped by a stoat is going to look a little strange to anyone who sees it; and attracting attention is the last thing The Phantom wants. If I had to make book on his courier, I'd bet on some kind of hot weather species of approximately the same size as a stoat, and also an animal that can move quickly if they need to, a mongoose, or maybe a desert jackrabbit."

"Maybe a fennec-fox?" the wolf suggested, drawing a jaundiced look from Nick. It passed quickly when he realized that Howell wasn't trying to needle him, and slowly shook his head.

"No, a fennec couldn't reach the door latch on that locker…not without help anyway; too small." He stroked his chin, thinking aloud. "A steppe fox though, that'd work. Rough guess, I'd say an animal somewhere in between a swift-fox and a lynx is what we're looking for."

"Well, we'll find out, come Saturday," the red wolf fell back in his seat, also looking thoughtful. His assessment, though cautious on the surface had been spoken in a voice chock-full of confidence. He was all but certain that the upcoming operation was going to lead them straight to The Phantom.

"I wish I was that sure of success," Nick glanced at Howell sideways for just the barest of seconds. There were only about a hundred ways that the plan to take down the Phantom—HIS plan—could go sideways. Look at the Rafaj Brothers sting, the ZPD had had months to put that operation together…and even then the bust had come within a hairsbreadth of failure, all because of one careless word; a word that had led Nick Wilde to an act of desperation—with repercussions that were only just now starting to become apparent.

And here he was, about enter upon an operation at least as complicated…except with only two days to get it up and running, and good, bad, or ugly, it was all on him and Judy. Only now was Nick Wilde starting to realize what they'd gotten themselves into…a place way over their heads.

Ohhhh, where was Carrots when he needed her?
...There's Mirrors (and Fire) (Pt. 1)

Chapter Summary

This is the one we've been building up to for a long, lonnnnng time

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 9 …There's Mirrors—(And Fire) (Pt. 1)

Meerkat Market, Sahara Square Beach Promenade, Saturday, 07:51 ZST

"...and am I right in assuming you get the Glazed Carrot Macchiato, Hopps?" Officer Kii Catano's face crinkled mischievously as she asked the question; typical feline.

Judy accepted the cup without comment, remembering to sip carefully. Depending upon the vendor, Sahara Square coffee could be 'strong enough to run a triathlon,' as Nick Wilde liked to say.

That actually was fine with Judy, she could use a little boost right now; it had been well after midnight when they'd planted the surveillance cameras in the large-mammals locker room. Behind her, Catano took a short pull from her own cup, gazing over the bunny's shoulder at the trio of monitor screens. Looking downward for a second Judy noted that the tip of the cheetah-cop's tail was clocking back and forth across the floor; as with most open-air dwellers, she found close quarters to be confining and even claustrophobic.

Being a denning species and burrowing species a respectively, Nick and Judy didn't have that problem; as far as they were concerned the interior of the ZPD ComServ (Command and Surveillance) vehicle was not at all oppressive; to them it seemed almost cozy.

It was a considerably smaller ride than the produce truck the ZPD had employed for the Rafaj Brothers blood-diamond sting, a hi-cube van done up in the blue and white livery of the Zootopia Department of Water and Power, (a not uncommon sight in perpetually thirsty Sahara Square.)

Even so, the fox and bunny-cop couldn't help feeling a wee bit uncomfortable.

It had nothing to do with the size of the vehicle—or even the heat outside; in fact it was ten degrees cooler today than when he and Judy had located the Phantom's dead-drop, (and anyway, the van was fully air-conditioned.) This vehicle could have been as big as a balloon shed and it
would still have felt prickly in here…and the explanation was psychological rather than a physical
in nature.

One of the ‘perks’ of being in put command, (and one the fox and bunny hadn't considered before,) was that you had to stay out of sight and let someone else do the footwork…at least until the bust went down. It was an unhappy position for Nick and Judy both; they had always been paws-on types of officers, ever wanting to be out there in the thick of things.

Or that was how Judy felt; Nick seemed to be carrying far less than his usual zeal for getting his paws dirty. In fact, although the fox was keeping it safely hidden, his enthusiasm for today's shindig had cooled to lukewarm at best—and this, while also psychological in origin, was completely unrelated to the fact of him and Judy being forced to remain inside the ComSurv van.

No, Nick Wilde's case of creeping melancholia stemmed from a deeper source, a fundamental character difference between himself and his bunny-cop partner.

Though somewhat jaded by her experiences of the past two years, Judy Hopps was still an optimist at heart. In being given command of the operation to track the Phantom's mule, she had seen before her 'multitudinous opportunities'—both for herself and for Nick. This was the case that could make their careers; if they pulled this off, getting their detective shields would be a foregone conclusion.

(And, of course, they would be helping to make the world a better place, as the bunny-cop reminded herself for the nth time.)

Nick Wilde, a cynic from the age of nine, saw things quite differently. Why the heck had Chief Bogo tapped two officers of such a lowly rank to head up the team tasked with taking down the one and only Phantom? There was only one reason that he could think of, a rule of thumb he'd first heard nearly fifteen years before—when handing out an assignment with a high probability of failure, always give it to someone as far down the chain of command as possible. That way, if everything goes south, you'll be insulated from the inevitable recriminations. (This was how Mr. Big had always operated—and a major reason why the diminutive Tundratown Mob boss had never spent more than six months in jail.)

Nick would never say any of this to Judy of course, but still he had his doubts; there were just too many factors they hadn't considered when planning this operation, too many things they hadn't had time to consider.

Being the perverse little creatures they were, Nick's reservations had naturally declined to reveal themselves until AFTER he'd signed on to help ramrod this fox and bunny show.

His misgivings had first begun to sprout two days previously, while he'd been waiting in line outside of Sweeties Confectionary Shop, but they had really come into bloom shortly before 1:00 AM, when he, Judy and Swinton had arrived to place the surveillance cameras inside the large mammals' locker room. Coming down the steps, they'd found the solution to that ever-nagging question; how did the Phantom intended to keep someone else from grabbing locker LB6 before Ian Shortal could get to it?

The answer had come in the form of a cheap, rotary-dial lock securing the locker in question, one of those grade-school, three-number-combo models; the kind that wouldn't last two seconds against a determined thief.

Not that it mattered; there was nothing in locker LB6 worth stealing, not yet anyway; the Phantom would never allow his payment to be secured with something so easily broken—everyone had agree on that point—but it would be more than sufficient to keep any other possible users away.
And yet…

Nobody had said it, but they'd all been thinking the same thing: What if, when they'd come down here, they had chanced upon the Phantom's courier in the act of securing that locker? It was more than a slight possibility; the mysterious loanshark's mule would certainly have wanted to set that lock in place while the building was deserted, which meant either late into the night or in the wee hours of the morning; for all the three ZPD officers knew, they might have missed him by mere moments.

And…supposing they hadn't missed him? Not one, but three cops, showing up here, at this hour—equipped with surveillance cameras? One look and the Phantom's courier would have realized in a nanosecond that his cover was blown.

And Nick, Judy, and Swinton would have been powerless to act; there's no law says you can't reserve a beach locker, even at one o'clock in the morning. They'd have had no choice but to let the courier walk away Scot-free…and within minutes of his departure, The Phantom would have known that the ZPD was onto him.

It was a possibility that should have been considered back during the planning stages. Before anyone else had set foot in this building, Howell or one of the other wolves should have been tasked with making sure the coast was clear; one quick sniff at each entrance would have easily done the trick.

But nooooo, no one had thought about it until after they'd found the padlock…which meant the only reason they hadn't walked in on the courier had been sheer, dumb luck.

"And nobody gets that lucky every time," the red fox had reminded himself. Another such mistake and the entire operation could blow up right in their faces.

The lock itself had yielded no clues…except for a certainty that it was the courier who'd placed it there. Sniffing it over, (and being careful not to touch it,) Nick had detected only the faint aroma of latex and a possible hint of biological deodorizer. The swipe of a UV light across the padlock had yielded no prints whatsoever, not even smudges. Whoever had secured locker LB6 had taken some serious steps to remain anonymous…and that, ironically enough, had pointed to only one possible culprit.

"Okay, I'm going to head back outside," Kii Catano took a final sip of her coffee and then reached for the door handle, nodding at Swinton and waiting for the all clear.

The pig-cop keyed her laptop and spoke into her headset. "Wolford, this is Swinton, is Officer Catano clear to exit ComSurv-1? Over…"

The reply was somewhat fuzzy but still easily understood.

"Uh, that's an affirmative ComSurv, she's good to go, over..."

The female cheetah nodded and ducked quickly out the door. The clearance ritual had been annoying but necessary. Kii Catano was clad this morning in jogging pants and a sports bra, (the same outfit she'd worn while targeting purse snatchers.) Seeing an animal dressed like that, exiting from a Zootopia DWP van might well have raised a few eyebrows…and also a few suspicions.

Judy's headset hissed and a voice spoke, "Overhead one toComSurv-1, any sign of our weasel yet, over?"

Before answering him, the bunny-cop shared pained look with her partner. The Meerkat Market
wasn't due to open for business for at least another hour… and this was the sixth time Larry Bock had made that inquiry; Claire Swinton had been right, this animal was a griper *par-excellence*.

The only good thing about his attitude was that he'd refused point blank to serve his watch from inside the command-vehicle, instead insisting upon a location where he could have line-of-sight visuals on his drones. Nick and Judy had agreed at once; not only would it get the perpetually-complaining ibex at least partway off their backs, it also made good tactical sense. Accordingly, he was parked under an awning on a nearby rooftop.

"Overhead-1, that's a negative; no sign of him," Judy answered in the weary sing-song of a mother telling her child, 'No dear, we're not there yet.' "And please keep this channel clear; ComSurv out."

"What the heck does he need to know *that* for?" Nick Wilde asked, not a little irked himself, "We're not going to use drones to track Shortal, only the courier."

"He probably figures the sooner the money gets here, the sooner the Phantom's mule will get here…and the sooner HE can get back to the Tundratown Precinct," Swinton's eyes remained glued to her monitor as she spoke, "Anyway, don't say I didn't warn you."

"Don't look at us; it was The Chief's idea." Judy threw up her paws in a helpless gesture, grinning crookedly.

Nick Wilde was in no mood for any further discussion of Larry Bock and so he asked, "What's the wind doing out there?" When they'd arrived an hour earlier a breeze had had been blowing in off Zootopia Sound—steady, but not stiff. At the moment, it wasn't a problem, but if it kicked up to a serious blow, it could play havoc with any attempts to track the courier by way of his scent.

Judy scrolled and clicked on her police-issue laptop. "Still holding steady at 5." she said, and then look at Nick inquiringly. "How high does it have to get before you start having trouble tracking someone?" Being a species that depended more on sound than on odor for pinpointing someone she couldn't see, Judy Hopps knew little of the intricacies of following a scent trail.

"Right now, I'm good," the red fox told her, "anything over 10 miles an hour, that's when I start having trouble." He frowned slightly, as if remembering something. "That's the limit for a fox; I don't know what it is for a wolf." He keyed his headset, "Howell, this is Wilde, what's your species' wind velocity threshold for tracking a perp by scent? Over…"

The red wolf's answer came back as a text rather than a voice message.

Hwl: "15 mph…tho I wouldn't wnt to try it mre than 12."

Tad Howell was stationed at the east end of the locker room containing LB6, the leeward side where he could catch the breeze blowing through corridor. (That was one of the few good things about the wind; a single officer could cover the entire building.)

Street-bums being unwelcome on the Beach Promenade, he had exchanged his derelict's disguise from two weeks ago for something more suitable to the Meerkat Market…the ubiquitous tourist-with-a-laptop that seemed to be everywhere in Sahara Square on weekends; hence his response by text-message rather than voice. (Also, that way he couldn't be overheard by any passersby.)

It was no small source of amusement to Judy that the red wolf's ensemble was remarkably similar to the outfit Nick had worn, back when she'd first met him, chino-pants, aviator shades, and a gaudy Hawaiian shirt, (worn outside his pants,) topped off with a tie that reached almost to his knees. The only differences were the addition of a short-brimmed bucket hat, (and of course, that
"Nick, you think the wind might really get that strong?" Judy asked the question with her nose twitching.

"I won't lie Carrots, it could," he admitted, but then hastily qualified his statement. "It usually doesn't pick up around here until late in the afternoon though. With a little luck our suspect will have grabbed up the money and am-scraied long before then."

"We're not looking at a sandstorm are we? Over…" Larry Bock's voice cut in on the line again. Nick almost answered in the affirmative—he wanted to teach this whiny idiot a lesson—and he would have too, if Judy hadn't looked at him and mouthed 'Don't you dare!' He mouthed back, 'Killjoy!' and responded to the ibex, all business.

"Nope, it's when the wind starts blowing out of the Canyonlands that you have to start worrying about a haboob. Anyway, it's the wrong time of year for…"

"Break! Break! Stoat approaching at 5 o'clock; might be our guy."

It was Officer Grizzoli, and the effect on the trio of animals inside the ComSurv van was like a double-jolt of caffeine. Nick, Judy, and Claire Swinton all stiffened for a second and then swung into action.

"Howell, this is Hopps did you copy that? Over…"

"That's an affirmative, Hopps. I can just barely see him, can't quite catch his scent yet, but it sure as heck looks like him, over…"

"10-4, notify command as soon as you get confirmation, Hopps out."

"Grizzoli, what is the subject's location, over…"

"Wilde, he's just now passing by the fishing pier entrance, headed eastbound, about ten feet away from a lemonade cart with an orange and yellow umbrella. He should reach it within five, over…"

"Overhead-1, I copy that, I'm launching now, over…"

Judy groaned and shook her head. "Dangit, I didn't give him the order to launch."

"Well he did, so we might as well take advantage," Claire Swinton pressed a button on her console, and the image on Nick's screen vanished, replaced by an overhead view of the beach promenade. For several seconds, it pitched up, down and sideways, making him feel slightly sea-sick. Then all at once, it steadied itself and zoomed in on a small, burly figure ambling along the sidewalk with a faux-canvas shopping bag swinging from his paw.

Nick Wilde had to marvel; at the end of the day Sergeant Larry Bock really WAS that good with a drone. Less than 30 seconds after getting it airborne, he'd spotted the target and tagged him. Hmmm, maybe his decision to launch on his own initiative had been the right one after all… because Nick recognized the animal on the drone-cam almost immediately.

He hurriedly keyed his mike, "Wilde to all units, Wilde to all units. I have visual confirmation on the approaching subject; I say again, I have visual confirmation. This is our weasel, over."

Before anyone would acknowledge, an excited voice broke it on the transmission.
"Command, this is Howell. I have the approaching subject's scent and I concur with Officer Wilde's observation. It's Mr. Shortal; all right. I can not only smell his musk, he's got the aroma of that candy-shop all over him, too. Command, do you copy that? Over…"

"Howell, this is Hopps, that's a Roger, good job. Can you confirm that the subject is on course for the large-mammal's locker facility? Over…"

"Uhmmm…Hopps, I'd say that's about 75% affirmative. I'll know for sure in another minute, over…"

"All right, let us know as soon as you're certain. Bock; keep your eyes on that stoat until he enters the locker facility and then pull back; I want everyone else except for Howell to pull back right now. It's not Mr. Shortal we want; it's whoever shows up to collect the package he's delivering. All units please acknowledge, over."

From there, it all went so much like clockwork that what followed was practically an anticlimax… that is, until they saw Mr. Shortal reach for the lock securing LB6. Now they knew for certain that he was there to deliver the Phantom's money.

"Looks pretty happy for a guy in hock to a loan-shark," Claire Swinton observed as they watched him spinning the padlock dial back and forth. Indeed, the Scottish weasel appeared almost giddy with jubilation.

"That's because after today, he won't be," Judy Hopps informed her, remembering what Duke Weaselton had said; today's installment would be his brother-in-law's final payment to The Phantom. Once it was made, Sweeties would be his, free and clear.

Everything that happened next happened in less than ten seconds, and looked like nothing out of the ordinary. Shortal popped the lock attached to LB6, put a quarter in the coin slot to dislodge the key, and opened it. Next, he set down the shopping bag and took out a fat, black case, the size of a small sheet-cake.

"Zoom in and get a picture on that, Swinton" Judy told her. "It might be important later on."

"Got it," the pig-cop said, and the case enlarged and froze on her screen for half a second.

Judy started to say something else, but then her ears went up and turned sideways. "What is it, Nick?" The fox was growling under his breath.

"I…I don't know Carrots, " he said, squinting at the screen as if looking for hidden messages, "But there's something kind of familiar about that case." He looked closer, blinked and then sat back again, "but I'm hanged if I can figure out what it is."

On the screen, Ian Shortal was slipping the case onto a shelf inside the locker. And then, without any sort of ceremony, he stepped back and shut the door, returning the key to its slot and replacing the lock, (but not with the one he'd found on the locker when he arrived.) Then he turned and simply walked away, never once looking back. Almost immediately, they heard Wolford's voice on the radio. "ComSurv-1, he's coming out. Do you want me to follow? Over…"

Judy quickly keyed her headset.

"Wolford, this is Hopps, that's a negative, let him go. Do you copy? Let him go, over?"

"Let him go, I copy, Wolford out."
Wasting no time, Judy toggled the microphone controls to switch frequencies and spoke again.

"Attention all units, the package has been delivered. I say again, the package has been delivered. Everyone take your positions and stay alert. The next animal who opens that locker will be our suspect. All units please acknowledge, over."

While the others responded, Nick Wilde pulled out his cell-phone

"Okay, I'm notifying the Sahara Square precinct that the money's been dropped."

"10-4" Judy answered, and then started slightly when Swinton let out a low whistle.

"Whoa-ho, check out that new lock, why don't you."

Nick and Judy both looked and saw a padlock with a jet-black body and a glowing blue disc in the center. For some reason it reminded the bunny-cop of SAL, the rogue computer from the movie 2001.

"Smart padlock," the pig-cop explained, "it operates on a bluefang interface; you open it by keying in the code on your smartphone. It figures The Phantom would use something like this."

" Doesn't figure like that to me; those things are right fair easy to hack, over…" a new and perplexed voice had cut in on the frequency. It was Sarah Backabee, the pretty-faced wallaby on loan from ZPD Cybercrimes.

"Not this one, I bet," Claire Swinton disagreed, "It's probably been encrypted from here to Timbucktoo and back again. Oops, over…"

"Mmmm yeah, probably," the wallaby conceded after short pause, "I mean, that's the Phantom's style in' it? Summat that looks plain ordinary on the outside, but on the inside it's cutting edge. Over…"

"I-I-I don't suppose there's any way you can monitor when the courier keys in that code. Over..?" Judy asked the question only half-heartedly.

"Not without that Phantom bloke spotting us, I can't." Sarah Backabee answered with a slightly mournful note in her voice.

"Didn't think so, but I had to ask." Judy told her, "ComSurv out."

And with that everyone settled down to wait.

From there, time seemed to flow like molasses in February; no one moved, hardly anyone spoke. At one point Judy said to Nick, "You know something? I think I'm beginning to understand how it feels to be your buddy, Flash."

He didn't laugh.

9:00 passed; opening time…and then 9:30. It seemed to take a week. By now, even though the command car's A/C unit was blowing like sixty, everyone was pulling at their collars and mopping their faces; for creating a touchy atmosphere, heat has nothing on tension.

9:45…10:00…they had entered the time frame when the courier was expected to make his move. By now a steady stream of animals was passing though the large-mammals' locker room, occasionally blocking the view of one or more of the cameras…and just as Nick had conjectured,
not all of them were larger species; Judy saw raccoons, woodchucks, a beaver, a mongoose, several bunnies, even another weasel among the visitors. And also as the fox had predicted, many of them were using the lockers as storage space for their purchases from the Meerkat Market; one or two were even using them as changing rooms.

"Those lockers are easy-peasy simple to open from the inside," Nick Wilde explained, wagging a finger, "and you shouldn't be surprised; if anyone ever does manage to get themselves locked inside of one of those things, how much you want to bet that the first thing they do when they get out is sue the city?"

"Save your money, I'm not taking that wager," Claire Swinton responded with a cynical smirk.

10:15…10:30…and then at 10:42. a small gathering of Wildebeest passed in front of locker LB6. It was nothing the three ZPD officers hadn't seen before, but this time, after the herd had gone…. 

"Hey, Heyyyyy, looks like we've got a bite." Claire Swinton was halfway out of her seat. On all three cameras, a smallish figure was standing in front of locker LB6, leaning against a bicycle. For what seemed like a perpetual moment he just stood there…while Nick yipped softly and Judy murmured furtively under her breath.

The figure looked left…and then right, and then pulled out a cell-phone and keyed in a number.

And then he reached for a padlock and snapped it open.

Judy's paws went flying up to her mouth. "Oh no, please no!" her voice was nearly a wrenching sob.

Nick Wilde let out an anguished fox-scream and pounded his fist into the side of the command car, not caring if anyone on the outside heard him.

"Wha-what's wrong?" Clare Swinton was staring from the fox to the bunny-cop in complete, utter confusion.

"We know that kid," Judy sniffled, pointing a shaky finger towards her monitor screen…and the young silver fox just now opening the door to locker LB6. "His name is Conor, Conor Lewis…"

Flock Street, Savanna Central, Saturday, 08:53 ZST

The van drove in a pattern known to the underworld as a 'rectangle'—four right turns in quick succession to ensure that nobody was following. Almost certainly nobody was—this was to be the very first action; no reason for anyone to anticipate trouble—but given who they were dealing with, their controller had wanted to take no chances.

Likewise, they didn't want to arouse the suspicions of any law enforcement types who might be cruising nearby…and so the driver maintained a steady speed as he circled the block, slowing only slightly as he passed by the front of Tux-On Tuxedo shop. Despite the fact that June was their second busiest time of year, (the busiest was prom season,) the establishment was dark and shuttered; the doors weren't scheduled to open for another hour yet, (and in fact, after today, they would never open again.)

Satisfied with what he'd seen, the leader flashed a quick paw-signal, and the driver dutifully eased the van into the alleyway behind the tuxedo shop.

No logo adorned the side of the vehicle; its bright, yellow color would be more than enough to
give it an aura of legitimacy, (although anyone looking closely might wave wondered at the armored door-locks.) For several moments, nothing happened…or that was how it would have appeared to anyone watching the van from the outside. In actual fact, the interior was a flurry of activity, the trio of occupants methodically checking and rechecking their gear. Satisfied at last, the leader gave another signal and then he and his operatives donned latex rubber masks, lifelike and very distinctive, and then slipped on pairs of equally authentic (and singular) pairs of latex gloves. The remainder of their disguise was provided by the padding beneath their off-white coveralls.

Then the leader spoke into his headset, a high tech model that was almost invisible against his face mask. "Control, do you copy? We are in position at the target's rear door."

The answer came back as clearly as if the other animal was right there in the van with him.

"Team one; that is an affirmative, you are clear to move in."

All three animals exited the van, moving smoothly and silently.

No one spoke; all of them knew their assigned tasks. While the number three operative kept watch on the alleyway entrance, the other two quickly unloaded the van. There wasn't really all that much to unpack; three small backpacks and a sextet of five gallon PVC buckets, of the type favored by food and janitorial services, which they stacked on a pair of dollies. The logo on the sides read 'Spark-L-Lion All Purpose Cleanser.'

An interloper observing the scene might have wondered what a mid-size tuxedo shop would want with THAT much cleaner—but there was nobody else within a hundred yards; the operatives had the alleyway completely to themselves. Meanwhile, the team leader was extracting a rectangular plastic card from his upper-right side pocket, and examining it closely… memorizing the four digit code printed in the lower left corner. He read it three times and then gave another signal; the others quickly acknowledged, and they all began moving quietly towards the rear door of Tux-On.

Nestled beside the entrance, under a weathered, Plexiglas hood, was a small plastic square, about the side of a CD case—a card-reader. Flipping the covering upwards, the leader swiped his card across the dull-gray surface. There was a buzz, a click, and then the led light above the reader shifted to from red to green.

The leader opened the door and all three operatives ducked swiftly through the opening, bringing the buckets and packs with them. They were greeted at once by a repetitive, high-pitched peeping sound. Ignoring it, the leader turned to a small console beside the door where an LCD display was flashing the word 'system' over and over. Moving quickly, he pressed the button marked 'arm/disarm', entered the four-digit code, and punched 'enter'. The peeping ceased at once and the display changed to 'system disarmed'. A chirring noise a second later confirmed that the alarm was indeed deactivated.

"That's what you get for employing a second-rate security outfit." The leader smiled, noting the embossed letters 'ZEU' printed on the console.

Then his mind retuned swiftly to the task at paw.

"Did you get the security cameras?" he asked, speaking to his number two. The animal only nodded, and then pointed to the camera aimed at the door. The light beneath the lens was a dull, brown dot; it was turned off. To an outsider, it might have seemed unbelievably careless of the trio not to have deactivated the security cams before entering the premises.

Not quite; that, in fact, had been part of the plan.
The leader nodded back and then all three operatives donned their packs and moved quickly into the front of the store.

As with Rafaj Brothers Jewelers, the front windows of Tux-On were secured by a row of heavy, steel shutters. Seeing them, the leader had to smile again. A passerby on the street outside would have no idea as to what was going on in here; in trying to protect his business, the owner had instead rendered it that much more vulnerable to what was about to happen.

Reaching for the light-switch beside the front counter, (he knew exactly where it was,) the lead animal snapped it on and waited exactly fifteen seconds for his and his operatives' eyes to adjust to the change.

As the team leader's vision began to crystallize, his first impression was one of wood, blond oak paneling on the walls, rich black walnut for the shelves, and a virtual kaleidoscope of different woods making up the parquet flooring. Even the phalanx of tailor's dummies facing outward from each wall was hewn from dark ebony wood, large mammals on the right, medium and smaller mammals on the left. (There was no section for rodents; any mice, rats, hamsters, etc. wanting a tux from Tux-On were obliged to take their business to the Little Rodentia branch.)

The second impression was of soft, amber light, courtesy of a constellation of track-mounted LED lamps. The air inside the shop smelled faintly of rich cloth and dry-cleaning fluid; the only noises to be heard were the squeak of the intruders' feet against the floor.

One thing was clear to all of them; this was not an establishment aimed at the regular folks. Tux-On was obviously way above the pay grade of say, a dentist's kid, renting a tux for his first prom. No, this was where the upper-crust of Zootopia came to shop for their male's formal-wear. (Mayor Lionheart had been a semi-regular patron here before he went to jail.)

"All right, let's move," the leader said, tapping a gloved finger against his watch, "we have exactly five minutes."

Working swiftly, he removed a nail gun from his backpack, while the other two operatives popped the lids on the PVC buckets. Inside each was a coil of thick, cotton rope of the type used for stage decorations, all of them suspended in a liquid the color and consistency of raspberry syrup, smelling faintly of paraffin-wax. Donning a second pair of rubber gloves, the number two animal removed one of the ropes, hauling it out of the bucket like a snake from a basket and pressing it into the molding where the wall met the ceiling. Immediately, the leader stepped up from behind him and secured the rope in place with the nail gun.

For the next few minutes, they repeated this process until nearly the entire front of the store was covered. At the same time, the third animal in the group was pasting a lattice-work of duck-tape over the tuxedo shop's three smoke detectors, making sure that all of them were sealed airtight.

When the process was complete, it appeared as if the intruders had once more made a grievous error; all six of the ropes were far too long for their own good, the ends dangling all the way to the floor.

This too was by design.

With the smoke detectors handled, and the last coil of rope in place, the trio proceeded to empty the remains of the first three buckets over the tuxedo shop's merchandise, splashing the liquid over the shelves, dumping it over the display mannequins, and paying particular attention to the counter and the cash-register. (Not one of them thought for a minute about pilfering the contents.)
The remaining three buckets were dumped on the floor behind the trio as they retreated to the store's rear-entrance. At the threshold, the leader once again pressed the arm/disarm button on the console and entered the code. While this was happening, his second removed a lighter and a tin the size of a tuna can from his pack. Protruding through the lid was something resembling a stiff candle wick.

He looked at his leader, waiting.

"On three," the lead animal told him, and then began to recite, "One…"

On the final count, two things happened at once, the leader pressed the alarm-console's 'enter' button, initiating the re-arming process. At the same time, his number two touched the lighter's flame to the 'candle-wick'…which immediately commenced to sputter, hiss, and sparkle. Rearing back slightly, he pitched the can in a fast, hard underpaw, whipping it down the passageway and into the front of the store. A split second later, all three team members were back in the alleyway again. A couple of seconds after that, they were inside the van and once more on their way. Three more seconds and the van was back on Flock Street and moving away from the scene, the driver making certain to stick to the speed-limit. Only then did the team-leader dare to venture a look at his watch. 4 minutes and 38 seconds—they had pulled it off with time to spare.

Behind them, there was no explosion when the fuse burned down to the 'tuna-can'. Tux-On's doors did not blow out, the store's foundation did not shake; the steel shutters did not rattle. In fact, there was hardly any sound at all from within the shop, only a muffled 'whoomf', a noise not unlike a mattress being dropped on the floor—inaudible to anyone but a fennec or a rabbit more than 10 feet away from the shutters. (At that moment, there was nobody within fifty yards of the tuxedo shop.)

For the next twenty minutes, no one passing the front of the store, heard, saw, or smelled anything out of the ordinary. Even when the first few wisps of smoke began to seep around the edges of the shutters, none of the passersby took notice. It was only when smoke began pouring up and out through the second story windows and roofing vents that somebody finally called 9-1-1. By then, it was already far too late.

Meerkat Market, Sahara Square, Beach Promenade, 10:43 ZST

Nick Wilde stared dumbly at the monitor screen, his jaw hanging halfway to the floor; he could almost have been a primitive fox, transported here from the stone-age, trying to make sense of the strange object before him.

This wasn't happening, it couldn't be. Any second now, the buzzing of the bedside alarm would jar him out of his sleep, and he'd find himself laying on his mattress with the covers on the floor and barely enough time to get ready for work, (and for once, he'd be grateful.)

"What the heck's that kid doing?" Claire Swinton was staring curiously at her display screen. Conor Lewis wasn't even LOOKING at the shelf where Ian Shortal had stashed the money; it was as if he had no idea it was even there.

A quick second later, the question answered itself when the young silver fox wheeled his bike inside the locker and closed the door behind him.

Swinton and Judy were instantly talking at once.

"Wha…What the heck?"
"What'd he do that for?"

"I have no idea."

"Maybe he…"

"This is nuts."

"Oh no, I think…"

The last speaker was Nick Wilde; the cacophony seemed to have roused him from his trance-state…but only temporarily because right then the door to the locker opened and Conor re-emerged into the corridor. He had shed his street clothes for swim trunks and a red tank-top emblazoned with the visage of Che Capybara. A pair of mirrored Gargoyles sunglasses dangled from a neoprene lanyard around his neck.

"What is it, Nick?" Judy asked him, but he only sighed and waved a paw. The younger fox’s reappearance seemed to have taken the wind out of his sails all over again.

"Nothing Carrots." He answered lamely.

"What, is he going swimming?" Claire Swinton was squinting at the screen again.

"Nope," Judy pointed, "Look, see? No towel…and you can't wear sunglasses in the water."

"Well whatever he's up to, he's one brazen little so-and-so," The pig cop noted, annotating her words with a baffled head-shake. She had a few more things to say on the subject, but cut herself short when Judy hurriedly keyed her headset.

"All units…all units; the courier is on site. I say again the courier is on site, but he has not yet collected the money; I repeat, he does NOT yet have the money. He's a silver fox kit, approximately 14 years old, wearing mirrored sunglasses, dark blue Hawaiian swim trunks and a red Che Capybara tank top." She debated for a moment whether or not to give them his name, and then quickly decided against it. That information wouldn't help them keep track of the kid…but it would prompt a lot of questions that she didn't have time to answer, not yet anyway. "All units please respond…over."

All of them did, and predictably, even without hearing Conor's name, Larry Bock had a question…a snarky one.

"If he didn't take the money, how do you know it's him? Over…" His voice was half haughty and half peevish...and something about his tone snapped Nick Wilde out of his funk, once and for all.

"Because we just saw him go inside of locker LB6, got that Overhead-One? Now get that drone on him ASAP, do you copy? ASAP! Over..."

"All right, all right I'm on it." The ibex sounded like an unhappy teen that had just been ordered to clean his room. Attitude or not, it took less him than ten seconds to find and zero in on the young silver fox. "There, is that him? Over..."

"That's an affirmative, Overhead-One, keep on him." Judy answered while offering her partner an approving thumbs-up. For moment there, she hadn't been certain if he was ever going to return to the land of the living. "All other units…try to get a visual on the suspect if possible, but keep down wind and keep your distance. Like we figured, he's a species with a keen sense of smell." She thought for a second and then added, "Be advised, he left his backpack in the locker, so he'll have
to go back and grab it before he leaves. That's when he'll probably go for the money." That last sentence was mostly for Bock's benefit.

For the next few minutes they watched as Conor made his way towards the beach, with the occasional officer coming on the air to make a comment.

"Control One, this is Grizzoli. Be advised, I have a positive mark on the suspect's scent, over..." A moment later, Wolford came on to tell them the same thing. (Howell, positioned outside the locker-room entrance had gotten line on the young fox's scent as soon as he'd entered the enclosure.)

"Looks like he's heading for the volleyball courts." Kii Catano offered. A moment later, Bock's drone-cam confirmed the cheetah-cop's speculation.

For another few seconds, no one spoke...and then Judy touched her finger to the display screen, tracing a rough outline of their suspect's path so far.

Their suspect...

Conor Lewis, a felony suspect; the thought made her bile want to rise. She forced it back down again and tapped the monitor screen.

"Look there," she said, "That's no random route he's taking, it's almost like a beeline; this kid knows exactly where he's going."

A short moment later she was proven right when the young fox arrived at his destination, one of the small-mammal volleyball courts, where a gaggle of other young animals was waiting for him. Judy recognized two of them at once, the coyote-girl and the sand-cat from the evening when she and Nick had located locker LB6. (Sweet cheez n' crackers, there was another bullet they'd dodged; Conor had been practically within spitting distance of the large mammals' locker-facility the whole time they'd been in there.)

Down by the volleyball court, the young fox was eagerly exchanging high-fives and fist-bumps with the others. Yep, they'd been expecting him all right.

"Well anyway, that explains why he didn't just take the money and run." Judy pointed at the screen again. "Those other kids would have wondered where he was if he hadn't shown up just now."

At this, Claire Swinton pursed her lips and nodded, but Nick Wilde's wavering ears showed that he wasn't quite buying it.

And to be perfectly honest, Judy wasn't buying it either, not completely; it was one of those explanations that sounded just a little bit too neat for its own good.

Claire Swinton meanwhile was also pointing at her monitor, moving her finger in a random, staccato pattern, as it making a call on an invisible pay-phone. Then Judy heard the pig-cop muttering under her breath.

"...5...6...7...Hmmmm yeah, I thought so, they're still short a player."

"Here comes someone now...I think," Kii Catano had been monitoring the exchange, "Ringtail-cat kid, do you see him Command? Errrr, over..."

"Yep," Swinton nodded at the screen as she answered, "Looks like he's joining the game all right. Thanks Catano, Command out."
On the screen, the kids divided themselves into two groups of four, one on either side of the net. A few seconds later, the ball was put in play and the game was on.

It was a lively contest to say the least…and while Conor was by no means the best player out there, no one could fault him for his enthusiasm. Every time the ball came his way, he went after it as though the future of civilization depended on his efforts. One time, he got a face-full of sand while diving unsuccessfully for a save, (much to the delight of the opposing players.)

He immediately jumped to his feet, ready to go again.

It was then that Nick Wilde saw something; perhaps he'd noticed it before—likely he had—but it hadn't really registered until now. Conor Lewis was one very fit young fox; for all the effort he was making out there, he wasn't even breathing hard. And now that Nick was seeing him in shorts and a tank top—well, you couldn't call the kid buffed, (not like say that young water buffalo on the opposite side of the net,) but still, this youngster had the build of a budding UFC fighter...and he moved like one too. Come to think of it, hadn't he and Judy caught up with Conor in the midst of a workout with a makeshift punching bag, sometime during the Carrot-Days Festival?

The Carrot Days Festival…

"How could he DO it?" Nick felt his ears wilt, and then lay back in anger; he knew Judy was looking at him, but right now, he couldn't have cared less. "You stupid, stupid fox-kid; you had everything going for you!"

There was no way Judy could have missed her partner's abrupt change of expression…not that it surprised her. Of course Nick felt hurt and angry, Conor Lewis was a member of his species after all, different color phase perhaps, but a red fox all the same. She was just about to say something when she felt a buzzing at her hip.

Judy almost put the call on hold when she saw the name on the caller ID display, but then her curiosity got the better of her. What the heck was HE calling for?

"This is Hopps," she answered in a clipped, formal tone. Somehow she sensed that this call was not going to be a good one.

Her instincts were swiftly proven correct; the caller responded by putting two extra tablespoons of emphasis on his rank.

"Hopps, this is Lieutenant Tufts. What's this I'm hearing, that you and Officer Wilde know the Phantom's courier?"

Judy should have been bewildered that he'd found out so quickly—or at all. No one had mentioned that fact on the air. So how had…? Whoa, wait a minute…Officer Backabee, their liaison for ZPD Cybercrimes. No one had said anything about that smart padlock on the radio either…and yet she'd known all about it without being told.

It was enough to make the bunny-cop want kicked herself clear back to the Burrow; why hadn't she noticed it at the time? The pretty-face wallaby had probably been listening in on the command truck ever since their arrival at the Beach Promenade, most likely at her (sneaking little) boss's instigation. Okay, now Judy wasn't flummoxed, she was furious.

Biting her lip, she forced herself to respond in a civil tone.

"Yes, that's right Lieutenant," she said, and went on to tell the story of how she and Nick had met
the young silver fox. She knew that Tufts wouldn't much care for the part about how Conor Lewis had helped her sister get back into the Carrot Days talent show…but tough hazelnuts, things were what they were.

As Judy continued to recount the tale, she noticed Claire Swinton off to the side, listening intently, (even though her eyes never left her monitor screen.) Come to think of it, the pig-cop hadn't been given the full story either, and now the more she heard, the more sympathetic her expression became.

Not so, Albert Tufts.

"So The Phantom's mule, Connor…Lewis is it? So he knows you and Officer Wilde by sight and by scent?"

"Yes, he does," Judy answered with an inward wince. She had just realized where the ZPD Cybercrimes chief was going with this; now she and Nick didn't dare set foot outside the command-car. If they did and Conor got a whiff of them…no way would he chock it up as a mere coincidence, not after their encounter in this very place only couple of nights before. Their having to hang back was going to put a crimp in the operation, no getting around that fact, but it wasn't anything they couldn't handle. None of the other team members were known to the young silver fox, not by sight, scent, or otherwise. This little bushytailed jerk from Cybercrimes wasn't being fair with them; how were she and Nick supposed to have known that Conor Lewis, of all mammals, was the Phantom's go-between? The Lieutenant seemed to think that they should have, as evidenced by his next question.

"And you never suspected anything, the first time you met him?"

Judy felt her ears lay back. What the heck…? On her far left, Nick Wilde was listening with an unsurprised expression on his face. Though she had no way of knowing it, the head of ZPD Cybercrimes was rapidly confirming his earlier suspicions—namely that he and his partner had been given command of this operation in order to shield their superiors from any responsibility, in case it all went south. After all, hadn't Tufts been dead set against tracking the Phantom's courier instead of busting him, right from the get go? In Nick Wilde's mind there was no doubt whatsoever; the real purpose of this phone call was the squirrel trying to cover his tail.

Judy Hopps seemed to have picked up on it as well.

"No Lieutenant," her answer was a crisp as a pawful of dead leaves, "Why would we have suspected anything? I'd never even heard of The Phantom until the day before yesterday."

Her answer was correct, but it only seemed to stoke the Kaibab squirrel's boiler even further.

"Listen very carefully Hopps…and you too, Wilde. That kid had better NOT get away from you—or else heads are going to roll, and I think you can guess whose heads. Do I make myself clear?"

He rang off without waiting for an answer.
Chapter 9 – Fire And Mirrors
(Continued…Pt. 2)

Had Albert Tufts been able to observe the reaction to his phone-call, he would have rung off feeling even more irked than when he'd started. Judy Hopps was muttering unpleasantly about squirrels in general; Nick Wilde was rolling his eyes, and Claire Swinton's face was as unreadable as a dead language. The only thing held in common by their faces was the conspicuous absence of one, singular emotion—fear. Just who did that puffed-up little so-and-so think he was kidding?

"If you MUST make an enemy, make sure it's someone without any friends." Nick repeated his homemade aphorism for Swinton's benefit. (Judy had already heard it at least a dozen times.)

And nobody fit that description better than Lieutenant Albert Tufts, head of ZPD Cybercrimes, an animal about as popular with his fellow officers as a tax-audit. No one was going to get fired on HIS say-so; Chief Bogo would probably laugh the Kaibab squirrel right out of his office if he tried it.

Still, Judy knew, if this operation came a cropper, it would nonetheless end up as a black mark on both her and Nick's records…Tufts or no Tufts.

Well then, the bunny-cop resolved, she would just have to do her damnest to make sure the operation didn't fail…even if her heart wasn't really into it. Arresting Conor Lewis was going to be the hardest thing she'd had to do since joining the ZPD.

Yes, it was the Phantom they wanted, not him, and yes, they were only going to follow the young silver fox to his next drop and then wait there for whoever came next to pick up the package…but that didn't mean the kid was going to get off with a warning, much less avoid being arrested altogether; the Attorney General's office would never stand for that, (neither would that arrogant
Ohhh, why did it have to be HIM? Judy's mind began to race over the history of her relationship with Conor Lewis; she couldn't help it, she was like that thug from a Clockwork Oryx, being forced to watch a movie with his eyes pegged open. Here was Conor…sitting out front of Finnick's van, playing his guitar. There he was, conning her sister Erin into selling him her bass for a pittance…but only to stop her from trashing it. And then he'd not only sold it back to her at cost, he'd somehow managed to get it fixed…and then he'd offered her his spot at the Carrot Days talent show, and together they'd just crushed it.

Erin…

"Poor little sis, this is going to break her heart." Judy's eyes squeezed shut at the thought. Would Erin end up hating her for this…or would her wrath be directed at the silver-fox kid out there on the volleyball court? Neither option was a good one.

But then again, 'Haven't we said it several times already? Conor probably has no idea who he's working for; for sure he doesn't know what's inside of that package he's picking up.'

It was not unknown for Judy Hopps to say things aloud without realizing it. This time however she caught herself in midsentence and decided to go ahead anyway. "That'd sure as heck explain why he went off to play volleyball first."

"He knows he's up to something that isn't legitimate." Nick's voice was as bitter as a poisoned well. He growled low and pointed a finger at his monitor screen, "Even at that age, if someone had asked ME to make a pick-up from a dead drop, no questions asked, I'd have known it wasn't on the up and up."

Taken aback, Judy fell into a momentary silence; she had expected something like this from Nick but he should have been more depressed than angry. Well, she supposed, he had his reasons.

He did, but not from anything she could have surmised. Her partner's anger was borne more out of frustration than from any disappointment with his fellow fox—because he knew something that the bunny-cop didn't.

Conor Lewis's pluck had gone far beyond the beau geste he'd made to Judy's sister Erin; without his help, Nick would never have been able to put a stop to Jerry Guilford's attempt to spray-bomb the Carrot Days festival with defoliant. The younger fox had been right there with him when he'd chanced upon the rogue coyote's son, scouting out the big dance from the hillside overlooking the Carrot Days Festival. He'd helped Nick find the clues that had led him to realize what the Guilford brothers were planning, and then he'd helped identify the agent they intended to use in the attack—and that had been just for starters. He'd also gotten the lights doused, successfully delaying the assault, and then he'd helped con the two coyotes into making their approach over the fireworks display, (the one Nick had set up as an ad-hoc anti-aircraft battery.) Yes, it had all been done at the older fox's behest, but the kid had gotten it done—and because of that, because of him, the attendees at the Festival's Big Dance had all gone home rather than to the ER…with their fur still intact.

And (aaggghhh, grrrrr,) Nick couldn't say one word about it to Judy…or to anyone else, not a whisper, not hint, not a peep; the blankety-blank little snot-nose had made him swear not to reveal the part he'd played in stopping the attack, and a pledge from one fox to another was a trust that went beyond sacred. Until and unless Conor released him from that promise, Nick could never reveal even the slightest detail of what the kid had done to help him, period.
That was at least part of the reason why he was so angry at the moment…and WHY the fox had Conor extracted that pledge from him in the first place?

And that wasn't all, not by a long shot; Conor Lewis was street, he was smart, he knew computers, and whoa, did this kid know a thing or two about running a hustle, (how about that guitar-sting!) When you thought about, he was nearly the perfect choice for the Phantom to employ as his mule.

Except…

Except that Conor was also a good kid, Nick had seen that for himself, and this boy wasn't just street-smart either; you didn't get into the Zootopia Academy for the Performing Arts on a C-level grade-point-average.

Everything here was making less and less sense by the minute.

Unless…!

Unless, Nick suddenly realized, unless The Phantom was forcing the younger fox to do his bidding! Okay, that made sense; blackmail was the hacker's sugar and blueberries.

Except…

Except why go to all the trouble of making Conor act as his courier, when there were only about a zillion other kids out there, ready and willing to do the job and questions? We don't need no stinking questions!

Agghhh, grrrr…it was enough to make you want to go out and bite somebody!

"Heads up, looks like the game's over out there." Claire Swinton was wagging a finger at her screen.

Roused from their respective musings, Nick and Judy quickly processed the scene they'd been observing, (if not fully registering,) for the past few minutes. They saw immediately that Conor and the others had moved off the volleyball court and were exchanging another round of high-fives and fist bumps.

"Who won?" Nick asked. Judy didn't fault him; she hadn't been keeping score either.

"Final score was 11 to 5," Swinton grinned wryly. "Sorry to say it, but your fox kid's team got their tails shellacked."

"He's not our kid!" Nick almost snapped at her, and Judy quickly moved to change the subject.

"He's not our kid!" Nick almost snapped at her, and Judy quickly moved to change the subject.

"Doesn't seem too bothered by it," she noted.

"He shouldn't be, he gave it his best." the pig cop responded, with a dismissive shrug. She either hadn't caught the pique in Nick's rejoinder or else she was pretending that she hadn't.

For moment, it looked as if a rematch was in the offing, but then another group of young mammals arrived to take their turn on the courts and that was that.

"All units, heads up, the suspect is on the move again," Judy said into her headset as she watched Conor waving good-bye to his friends.

He didn't head from there straight back to the locker room, (much to her frustration and even more to that of Nick.) Instead he stopped off at one of the outdoor shower-stations for a quick rinse. As
the water washed down over the young silver fox, his tank-top shirt became plastered to his fur, turning translucent and almost transparent.

"What is that, is that a scar on his back?" Judy was staring at the young fox with her nose twitching. Nick Wilde stared as well, peering close. Yes, there it was, just barely visible underneath the fabric, a long, crescent-shaped line, stretching from just below the right shoulder blade to the third rib on the left.

Nick blinked and then sat back again.

"That doesn't look like a scar to me, Carrots; I think it's just a crease in the shirt."

Any further debate was curtailed when the young fox turned the other way.

From there he went to a vendor's cart, and purchased a shaved-ice for himself, cherry, lime, and blackberry, by the look of it. (Dang, but that ibex Larry Bock knew how to run a drone-cam.)

Now at last Conor turned and headed for the locker-room, taking time to savor his treat, (and driving Nick Wilde nearly to distraction.)

What they saw when he reached locker LB-6 was more or less what anyone would have predicted; the young fox pulled out his phone and entered the access-code again, except…something was different, something that Judy couldn't quite grasp. Anyway, she didn't have time to figure it out; he slipped quickly through the door and closed it behind him, invisible to the cameras once more.

It took him longer to reappear than it had the first time, and when Conor exited the locker again, he was once more dressed in his street clothes, same old, same old, same as before.

Except…!

Except for the object tucked underneath his arm, which immediately drew the bulk of the three ZPD officers' attention—a hefty, black case, which the young silver fox unceremoniously slipped into his backpack as soon as he exited the locker.

Or that is…he tried to; it refused to go in all the way. Growling unpleasantly to himself, (that was how it looked,) Conor closed the locker door and secured it with the digital lock, setting his bike aside and furtively rearranging the contents of his pack, trying to make more space for the new addition.

"Too bad we're only supposed to track him instead of bust him," Claire Swinton remarked, off- hoofedly, "This would have been the perfect time for a take-down."

No one disagreed with her, but...

Yes, they could easily bust the kid right now…only what good would that do? They needed the Phantom, not his go-between, (now more than ever; that lowlife was going to pay for corrupting a good kid like Conor.)

On the third try, the young silver fox finally got the case to fit inside the pack. Zipping it closed, he hefted it over his shoulder and began wheeling his bike in the direction of the stairs.

"Command this is Wolford; he's coming out. Over…” He sounded almost embarrassed, and why not? As IF the animals in the ComSurv van didn't already know that...

Judy didn't blame him; procedure could be a pain sometimes. She said, "That's a Roger, Wolford.
All units, all units…the suspect has the package. I say again, our suspect has the package. Keep on him and keep downwind; this is the most critical part of the operation; Command out."

For the first few blocks it was piece of cake; Conor was walking directly into the breeze, making it child's play for the trio of ZPD wolves to follow him from a safe distance; even Kii Catano was able to keep track of the kid by way of his scent.

Judy felt her nose begin to twitch.

"Why doesn't he get on his bike?" she wondered aloud.

"Can't," Nick's ears turned forward for maybe half a second, "On Meerkat Market days, you're required to walk your bike on the Beach Promenade; otherwise there's up to a $100 smacker fine."

"Oh," Judy felt herself wanting to curl up into a ball; dangit, she should have remembered that for herself.

"Head's up, he's coming up on Qattara Avenue."

Everyone tensed; they all knew what that meant, if the kid turned here…

He did, mounting his bike in a swift, fluid motion and pedaling away from the Beach Promenade. At once, tailing him became infinitely more complicated; Wolford, Grizzoli, and Howell would now have to follow the kid more closely and make certain to keep on his downwind (right) side. Officer Catano could only track him visually, and Larry Bock would have to operate his drone in a cross wind. And now that he was able to ride his bike, Conor would be able to move a lot more quickly than before.

None of that mattered however—because the young fox's destination was as obvious as if he'd been carrying it plastered on a picket sign.

"Catano, this is Hopps; looks like our suspect is headed for the Beach Promenade Metro Station. Can you get there ahead of him without being spotted? Over…"

"Command, no sweat, I'm on it, over…"

"Roger that, let us know when you're in position, Hopps out."

"Command…Command, this is Delgato; I'm also in a position to get to the train station ahead of the suspect, over."

"Roger that, do it," Nick answered immediately. Even if Conor had somehow managed to get wind of Kii Catano and the three wolves, the ZPD lion's scent would be completely unknown to him.

He keyed his headset again "Grizzoli, you and the others stay with the suspect; even if he gets to the station ahead of you, it won't do him any good if his train hasn't arrived yet. Over…"

"That's a 10-4 Command, we'll stick with him, over…"

"Roger that; Wilde out."

"Command, what are my instructions? Over…" It was Larry Bock.

"Stay with the suspect until he enters the station," Judy instructed him, "and then hold position until he boards, after that you can bring it on home, over…"
"Roger that!" Bock was as gleeful as a winning game-show contestant. If Conor was taking the ZTA Metro to his next stop, there'd be no such thing as tracking him by drone-cam; the trains ran mostly underground. Once they were certain that this was the kid's plan, the ZPD ibex's work would be done and he'd be able to pack it up and head on back to Tundratown, (or at least back to Precinct-1.)

Nick and Judy exchanged amused glances before she responded, "10-4 Bock, Command out."

"Well anyway, our kid just made his first mistake." Claire Swinton was entering instruction on her laptop, "or his boss did, take your pick." She went on to explain that since the ZPD monitored the Metro Stations 24/7 anyway, "these cameras I can access without The Phantom noticing."

As if in response to her comment, a pair of overhead views of the Beach Promenade station platform appeared on Judy's monitor screen, each one from a different angle.

The platform itself was shaped something like an elongated pancake griddle, with the stairs and escalators forming the handle, and a set of tracks on either side, eastbound and westbound. The walls were decorated with mosaics of various desert scenes, and a row of widely spaced, art-deco metallic palm trees neatly bisected the platform into two different halves. Unsurprisingly, the place was packed; the famous Sahara Square noonday heat was on the rise, and the Meerkat Market shoppers were on their way home for the rest of the day, (or at least until the evening cool came on.)

"Do you suppose that maybe Conor planned it this way?" Judy mused to Nick, propping her chin on a fist. "I mean…waiting for a while to snag the money, playing volleyball first. If he didn't want to be spotted boarding a metro train, he couldn't have picked better time than right now. " Trying to pick out one, single, silver fox kid out of THIS crowd with a surveillance cam would be like trying to play 'Where's Walrus?' through the wrong end of a telescope.

"No idea, Carrots," her partner admitted with a shrug.

Judy's ears shot up so fast they nearly banged the roof of the ComSurv van.

"All right, who are you and what'd you do with Nick?"

His ears went up as well.

"Wha…? What the heck are you talking about, Carr…?"

"Don't give me that, Mr. Imposter," Judy stared at him tight-lipped, "The real Nick Wilde knows everybody and everything in Zootopia…especially when it comes to…"

"Oh har-hardy-har; don't quit your day job, Fluff. No, I take that back, quit your day job right now, so I won't have to put up with any more…"

"If you two don't mind, we're trying to track a suspect here." Claire Swinton's voice cut through the air like an axe through a cantaloupe…but Judy could see her suppressing a smile.

Sometimes, you just had to let your fur down a little, even in the most unlikely situations—and you could do it and still keep focused, as Judy proceeded to demonstrate by keying her headset again.

"All units, update on the suspect's location. Over…"

It was Howell who answered first.
"Command, he's about ten yards from the station entrance. Looks like that's definitely where he's headed. Over…"

"10-4… Catano, Delgato, what's your 20? Over…"

The cheetah cop's response was slightly scratchy, indicating that she was transmitting from somewhere below ground.

"Command, we are inside the station at the present time, I'm standing beside the third palm-tree on the left, looking out on the east-bound platform; I can see Officer Delgato over by the map-board on the west-bound side. Over…"

"10-4, let us know as soon as you see the suspect, Command out."

"Have you got them Swinton?" It was Nick.

"Yep, there they are," the pig-cop answered sounding almost surprised that she'd been able to spot the two officers so quickly in the midst of such a throng, "I….hold on, we've got a train pulling in on the westbound side." She grinned slightly, "Hmmm, points for us, maybe."

Judy understood immediately what she meant; so did Nick. If Conor was planning to head west from here, he was much too far away from the station entrance to make it to the platform before the train pulled out again…and the next one going westbound wouldn't be along for at least another ten minutes; Wolford, Howell, and Grizzoli would have more than enough time to catch up with the fox kid before he departed.

Less than half a minute later an eastbound train arrived…and again departed before Conor was able to reach the station entrance.

That made up Judy's mind for her, "All units, here's how we'll do it. Howell, I want you and Catano on the same car as the suspect; Wolford, you're on the next one either back or forward; (she figured a grey wolf wouldn't stand out as much as a white one.) "All units please acknowledge, over…"

They all did, and then Delgato came back in a wheedling voice, "Hey, what about me? Over…"

"Sorry, big guy," Nick told him, "Maybe next time, but we're not going to need a lion to take down a fox-kid, no matter how hard he fights back—and he probably won't, over…" (No, not Conor, he would never go that route…would he?)

"Yeah, yeah," the big cat answered glumly. Nick could hardly blame him; nobody likes to be a fifth wheel, (a place where the red fox had found himself many times during his rookie year on the force.)

He decided to cut Delgato a break.

"Stand by though; we may need you later, when we find that second drop." It was a sop of course; wherever the second exchange point was, it had to be nowhere near the first one; the big cat would never be able to get there in time to help. Just the same, he bought it.

"Roger that Command, standing by. Delgato out."

"Command, Command, this is Catano. I see our suspect coming down the escalator, over…."

"10-4 Catano, let's have all responses in text from here on out. Howell? Wolford? That goes for you too."
Their responses appeared on the screen in front of her.

"10-4"

"Roger"

"10-4"

"And there he is," Claire Swinton spoke up out of nowhere. Judy adjusted her gaze upwards slightly, just in time to see the kid stepping off the escalator.

"And there he goes," she observed wryly as the young silver fox melted into the crowd; even with those two trains departing a few moments ago, there were still plenty of animals milling about the platform. Almost immediately a text came in from Catano saying she had eyes on him. About a minute later one came in from Howell saying he and Wolford had just entered the station and had spotted the suspect as well.

"Spect is hding 4 W-bnd plfrm."

"That's a Roger," Judy responded verbally, (even if they couldn't respond in kind, the trio of officers could still listen without being overheard.)

She settled back in her chair; nothing to do now but wait; it lasted for exactly 6 minutes and 33 seconds, when another westbound train pulled into the station.

Most of the animals on the platform were waiting to go the other way; perhaps a dozen others besides Conor got on the train with him…including a ZPD cheetah and a pair of wolves, all of them in plainclothes.

"Betcha nickel he's making for Savanna Central," Nick Wilde said. He was referring to the station, not the district; Conor would be able switch to any one of three other train lines from there.

"Unless his final stop is also on the red line," Judy reminded him, and the fox quickly shook his head.

"Noooo, if I were the Phantom, I'd want the kid to change trains at least twice before makes the drop." It was an unarguable point and Judy didn't try. As things turned out she would have been 5 cents richer has she chosen to take her partner's offer. Only a few minutes after the train left the Delta Road Station they received a slightly confused text from Kii Catano.

"Suspect up, standing at door; looks like getting off next stop."

Judy was about to ask which stop that was when Claire Swinton gave her the answer.

"That's Baobab Station."

"Baobob," Nick rolled the word around on his tongue like a blueberry, as if he were assessing the flavor, "Bao…bob."

Judy looked at him, "What is it, Nick?"

He pointed at the map on his display screen.
"Well…either that's his final stop, which it can't be, or else he's planning to switch over to a Blue Line train from there."

"All right…so?" Judy prompted with her nose twitching, "Get to the point Nick."

"So," he said, indicating the map again, "If that's his plan, he could do it just as easily two stops later—and that's Savanna Central, where it's a heckuva lot easier to lose yourself in the crowd than at Baobab." He sat back in chair, tapping his paw-pads together, "I don't know Carrots, I just don't know. Something's not right here."

Things became a lot less right when Conor reached Baobab Station; he switched to the Blue Line Train all right, but…

"What do you mean he's on the eastbound train?" Judy was clutching the side of her headset as though it was malfunctioning.

"Dunno, don't ask ME." You could almost hear the frustrated growl in Kii Catano's text.
Judy would digest this news in a minute; right now she had other concerns. "Still with him, Catano? Howell, Wolford, you still with him?"

All three officers answered in the affirmative, and Judy sat back in her chair and let out a breath. If doubling back like that had been an attempt to throw off pursuit on the young fox's part, it hadn't worked.

The only question was…had he done it because he'd known he was being followed…or had it simply been part of a pre-arranged strategy?

Nick Wilde knew exactly where he stood on the subject.

"Dangit, he's onto us."

Judy Hopps was a lot less certain.

"We don't know that for sure Nick. Don't forget, it's The Phantom who's behind all this. If you were him, wouldn't you have your courier double back like that, just to play it safe?"

Judy thought her point was incontestable, but the red fox simply pretended not to have heard her.

"I'm telling you Carrots, he KNOWS," he said, waving a paw at his monitor screen, "Getting onto the 'wrong' train, that's the exact same trick Craig Guilford pulled."

"By mistake," Judy reminded him.

"Yeah, well it worked, didn't it?" the fox retorted, "The Burrow County Sheriff’s Deputies missed him completely…and Conor knows they did."

"Well, yes… but it didn't work for HIM did it?" Claire Swinton interjected, still watching her own monitor, "He didn't manage to lose even one of our guys. Anyway, you two had better decide on your next move pronto; that train'll be back in Sahara Square in less than ten minutes."

That put an end to THAT argument in a hurry. Nick and Judy both swung into action.

Calling up a map of the ZTA Metro on her screen, the bunny cop studied it quickly and then spoke into her headset.

"Howell, which train are you on?" There were three possible destinations, Glacier Falls, Peak Street, and (highly unlikely,) Dead End.

"Pk St." was the red wolf's immediate response, and it brought Nick Wilde's ears to full attention. "Peak Street…not Glacier Falls?" he said, (wisely, not over the air.)

Judy fully understood, she was not a little surprised herself; Glacier Falls was the largest Metro station in Tundratown and the second largest one in Zootopia, only Savanna Central was bigger; if he'd been going there, Conor would have had his choice of not only three other train lines, he could also have grabbed a skytram directly to downtown.

But Peak Street? In the heart of Zootopia's downtown financial district, it was one of the most heavily patrolled of all the city's metro stations. Only two other lines connected there, the violet line, the shortest one of all, and the red line again. It made absolutely no sense—as Claire Swinton was quick to point out.

"If that's where he wanted to go, he could have taken a red-line train the other way and gone there
directly."

"Maybe he just got on the first Blue Line train that came along," Judy offered, half-heartedly, "and
he's planning to change again later."

"...which he'd only do if he thought he was being followed," Nick was willing to let the subject lie,
but he wasn't willing to let it go.

"Okay," Judy pointed at the map again; she hadn't fully accepted the fox's notion but she couldn't
discount it either. "If that's the case, he'll have to change trains again at least one more time,
where's the next...? Okay here, Agave Station." She tapped the monitor screen.

Claire Swinton peered at her own display screen, and then reeled back slightly with a frown on her
face.

"Wha...? The only line he can change to there is the Oasis Loop."

"...which would take him directly to the Oasis Hotel Station," Nick Wilde had grasped it
immediately, "and from there he can switch back to the Red Line or even the Bunnyburrow line."

"And that station's always jam-packed during the tourist season." The pig cop had finally caught
on, "Perfect place to lose a tail."

"Darn right it is," Judy declared, and then she was up and out of her seat and bounding past the
startled fox and pig.

"Buckle up guys, we're rolling," she said, strapping herself into the driver's seat and reaching for
the ignition.

Chapter End Notes

There will be another update later this week
Chapter Summary

The best laid plans of foxes and bunnies....

(I like to think that this one ends on a bit of a shocker.)

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 9 –Fire And Mirrors
(Continued…Pt. 3)

Judy's two companions didn't need to ask where they were going; the Agave Avenue Metro station was only a short drive from the Beach Promenade, whereas the eastbound Blue Line train would have to get there by way of a meandering course with several other stops along the way—and they still had a small head-start on the kid.

All during the drive, Nick and Swinton remained busy, dispatching Delgato to the Oasis Hotel Station, sending Grizzoli back to the Beach Promenade to keep an eye on the locker-room (and transferring the camera-feed to the Sahara Square Precinct,) and, most importantly, alerting the three officers on the train that the suspect might have made them, and to be ready to move in case he tried to bolt.

Nick made that last call through gritted teeth, knowing full well that it wouldn't be long before that chittering cyber-jerk Lieutenant Tufts got wind of it. For once, he hoped he was wrong. In fact there was something about the Peak-Street spur, something he knew but couldn't quite wrap his head around.

He was still mulling the problem when Judy pulled up to the curb outside of the Agave Avenue Metro Station, (well ahead of Conor and the three officers on the train with him.)

Peak Street…Peak Street…

Nick studied the map again. The Peak Street spur ran almost entirely through downtown…except for one short section where it passed through the Rainforest District, making a single stop at the Fruit Valley Station.

"Fruit Valley…there's something there…Come on Slick, you're the fox who's supposed to know
"Swinton, let me see that laptop for a minute?"

She passed it over without comment; Nick called up Zoogle maps and entered Fruit Valley Metro Station. The location quickly appeared, but nothing registered at first; nothing familiar, except… what was that thin, straight line, heading away towards the southwest? He zoomed in more closely…and saw it; not what he was looking for, but something else, the thing he'd been trying to remember. Holy…

But that line, what was that diagonal line? He clicked on the 'Satellite' icon…and there it was at last.

"Ohhh, yes!" Nick could feel his tail beginning to move in an S-pattern. He forced it to stop. There was still one thing…one piece that still didn't fit. Why had Conor taken the Blue Line train instead of…?

He switched back to the 'Map' view and typed in another location.

This time he saw it as soon as he pressed 'enter.' Dangit, how could he have forgotten something so basic? Now, finally, everything made sense.

Nick spun around in his chair, facing forward.

"Carrots, Swinton…listen to me; Conor's not getting off here. I think I know where he's going and why he's taking the Blue Line train.

He immediately had the full attention of both of his companions.

"Go on," Judy prompted, "and…?"

"And," the red fox had to force himself to say it, "I was wrong, ladies. The kid doesn't know we're on to him, I made a mistake."

That was an even bigger admission than the one he'd made earlier and it should have been good for another razzing…except this time he was speaking with a note of urgency in his voice.

"All right Nick," Judy asked him, half skeptical and half intrigued, "where's he going?"

The red fox pointed at the laptop screen.

"Fruit Valley Metro Station, he'll get off there."

Judy's ears went back against her scalp.

"Nick, would you please not talk in riddles…!"

"The Peace Rock Guitar Co-Op!" he interrupted, "Remember what Conor told us? He works there as an apprentice…and it's less than two blocks away from the Fruit Valley Metro Station."

"Then why is he taking the Blue-Line train instead of the Red Line?" It was Claire Swinton—and Nick could have kissed her for asking.

"Because guess what's practically right next door to the Baobab Station, the one where he switched trains? The Zootopia Academy for the Performing Arts."
Swinton's ears and eyebrows both shot upwards.

"Huh, what the heck has that got to do with…?"

"That's where Conor goes to school," Judy explained quickly...although she still wasn't satisfied with her partner's conjecture. "Fine Nick, but how does explain why he's using the Blue Line train to get to the Guitar Co-op."

"Because that's the route he knows, Carrots," Nick's voice was as solemn as a closing sermon, "He's probably taken the Metro from ZAPA to the Peace Rock Guitar Co-Op a thousand times by now," He looked straight into her eyes, "That's what we foxes do, Carrots, we always stick to the familiar pathways," he flashed a small grimace, "that is, unless we think we're being pursued; that's how I know I was wrong earlier. If Conor thought he was being followed, he'd NEVER take this route."

Judy was just about convinced...but only just about.

"Fine Nick, but you're forgetting something; the Phantom...what about him? There's no way he'd have his courier make that second drop in a place where he's KNOWN."

"He isn't," he partner responded immediately, "Think Judy...what else is right near the Fruit Valley Metro Station. Come on Carrots, you know this, you've been there—think!"

She began to bristle again, "I don't..." and then face-pawmed herself. "Of COURSE, the Rainforest District Skytram Station; that's his next stop."

"And there's only about a million places in that district to set up another dead-drop." Nick's tail was swishing again, "the kid could even use the skytram for the exchange point. There's no way to board a car once it leaves a station...and it's the easiest thing in the world to make sure no one else gets on with you when you board; those tram-cars stop barely for a second at each station before they start moving again. Conor gets on with the case at Fruit Valley, and gets off again at the next stop, leaving it behind in the car—and then someone else grabs it at the stop after that."

"Or he could simply pitch it over the side at a prearranged location," Judy swiftly caught the thread, "That would explain why the Phantom's insisting on using an armored case to carry the money." (The thing they'd seen the young fox slipping into his backpack had looked like it could stop a 20mm cannon shell.)

"But not until after dark, I bet." Claire Swinton offered, she too had been persuaded.

"Well, whatever he's planning, I know what we have to do next." Judy fired up the ignition once again, and once more they were on their way.

Ten frenzied minutes followed as new orders and alerts were issued, followed by ten more minutes fraught with tension...if they were wrong, if Conor changed trains at the Agave or Olive Street stations, Chief Bogo would have their heads and Albert Tufts would have field day.

It didn't happen; the young fox stayed right where he was through both stops, only then did the three animals in the ComSurv van breathe a collective sigh of relief.

That relief was good for about another seven and a half minutes. Judy had just turned northbound onto Trip Street when Wolford's frantic voice came over the radio.

"Command, Command...do you copy? We have a situation, over..."

Nick wanted to answer him but let Swinton handle it instead. "We copy Wolford, why aren't you
using text, over?” It was a superfluous question and the wolf ignored it. (He was in the other car where the kid couldn't hear him.)

"Command, they just made an announcement over the PA, something about a fire up ahead and smoke in the tunnel; they're taking all the passengers off the train at Flock Street Station. Did you copy that? All passengers have to exit the train at Flock Street Station…"

Even as the grey wolf spoke, a pair of texts confirming his message appeared on the ZPD laptop screen. Nick almost pounded the wall of the van again but then stopped himself.

"Judy, did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"They're stopping the train at Flock Street Station—structure fire; all passengers have to exit."

Judy slammed her fist on the steering wheel.

"Dangit! Swinton, hit the lights and siren; hold tight everyone, I'm turning this tub around."

The van whooped and flashed into life and spun a hard-U, nearly rising up on two wheels as it wheeled around, racing back in the direction it had come.

Judy swallowed hard knowing she had just blown their cover. Any moron could see now that this was actually a police vehicle.

But there'd been no choice...somehow they HAD to get to Flock Street before Conor left the station. Not only would there be the crowd from the train to contend with but a fire meant throngs of looky-loos in the street; the kid could lose the officers trailing him without even knowing they were there.

'The hardest suspect to tail is someone who doesn't know where he's going.' Judy remembered the old axiom from her Police Academy days, particularly apt right now.

Lights and sirens notwithstanding, she didn't think they'd make it. Twice, they got stopped at a police barricade, (the downside of driving a vehicle masquerading as Department of Water and Power van.)

The first time, Judy wasn't waved through until she showed her badge. At the second checkpoint, fortunately, the officer on duty recognized her at once.

UN-fortunately, it was Francine Trunkaby.

"Where you going, lover-girl? Aren't you supposed to be tailing a…?"

Judy leaned out through the window and pointed at the station up ahead, barely visible in the haze and distance.

"He's on that train!"

"Oops, go ahead." The cow elephant hurriedly waved them through. She seemed to think it made everything all right, but Judy Hopps thought otherwise; she'd be having a few words with this self-important pachyderm later.

'Lover girl'...even after the Chief's lecture…
When they finally made it to Flock Street Station, things weren't as bad as Judy had feared; they were worse…a lot worse. They weren't able to get within 20 yards of the river of animals pouring out of the entrance, thanks to the milling crowds, and the officers trying to keep them under control. Sweet cheez n' crackers didn't any of these folks have JOBS?

"It's Saturday remember, dumb bunny?" Judy's inner voice reminded her, making her want to plant her pawlm in the middle of her face.

"Looks just like a migration, doesn't it?" Claire Swinton observed wryly, in a poor attempt at lightening the mood. As if anything could accomplish THAT; how the heck were they supposed to recognize their suspect in this sea of mammals? It made the Beach Promenade Station look like an abandoned roller-rink.

That was when Howell came on the air with some even more cheery news.

"What, how could you lose the scent?" Judy was almost shouting into her headset—death, taxes, and yes things CAN get worse.

"Don't blame me, it's all this ding-dang smoke in the air," the red-wolf came back defensively.

"Easy Carrots, it's not his fault," Nick's nose was tilted slightly upwards, "Smell's like a thousand piles of burning rags out there."

"'Fraid so," Claire Swinton concurred, ruefully, (pigs also had a keen sense of smell.) "That kid could be hitching a ride on our bumper and I wouldn't know he's there."

"Wonderful!" Judy threw up her paws. Conor couldn't have come up with a better scenario for ditching his pursuers if he'd planned this.

There was one last barricade to cross and then hallelujah, a space just ahead marked 'Police Vehicles Only', miraculously unoccupied. Judy eased the van into it and killed the engine, hurriedly slapping a 'Police Vehicle –ZPD' placard onto the dashboard.

"Swinton, notify Precinct-1 of our situation; Nick and I are going in."

The pig-cop turned and stared at her.

"What? But the suspect knows you guys."

"If we can't smell him, he can't smell us." Nick Wilde pointed out as he stood up, "That's one small thing in our favor."

"But he knows you by sight, too." Swinton remind the fox. "If he sees you first…"

"…he'll just think we're here to do crowd control, like all the other cops." Judy countered with a sardonic note in her voice. That was point number two in their favor. "He may duck us, but he won't try to run, (I hope!)"

She opened the door of the van and slid out…and was immediately greeted by an angry squeak from below.

"Hey, watch here you're putting that flatfoot, bunny-cop," A pair of indignant gerbils had their car parked less than an inch away from where she was standing.

Judy was in no mood; she laid her paws on her hips. "Sir, do you have authorization to be on this
side of the police barricades?"

The two rodents answered her by clearing out, fast.

And that was when point number three came along, straight out of nowhere like bolt from the blue. "Hey kid, what do you think you're doing? You can't go through... Hey you, come back here!"

Judy grabbed Nick by the arm.

"That's McHorn; come on."

She turned and bolted in the direction of the sound, not bothering to check to see if the fox was with her; she knew he'd be there—because HE what had happened, just as surely as she did.

Snatching up her paw-held, Judy spoke breathlessly as she ran, "This is Hopps all units converge on my 20, I'm..." She looked over her shoulder at Nick.

"Drove Street, Southside," The red fox shouted through a cupped paw, "between Lek and Rift."

"Drove between Lek and Rift, south side, you get that? Command out."

They found the ZPD rhino standing in front of a wooden barrier, peering down an alleyway while speaking into his radio. "...told him to stop, but I don't think he heard me, already out of my sight, over... I know, right?... shoulda had someone posted here like twenty minutes ago..."

"McHorn!"

He spun around, wide-eyed. "What the...? Hopps? Wilde? What are you doing...?"

Judy pointed up the alleyway.

"The animal that just went past here; silver fox kid, about 14 years old...backpack and bicycle?"

"Yeah, that's him." McHorn reeled back slightly, "But what are you doing here? Ain't you s'posed to be tracking a...?" All at once, he realized and aimed a finger down the alleyway as well, "Wait a minute; that was HIM?"

"Yep," Judy answered, thumping her foot, and glancing sideways at her partner, "Looks like you were right the first time, Nick."

She didn't say what he was right about, not in front of McHorn...and anyway, she didn't need to; there could be only one possible reason for Conor Lewis to have taken such a reckless gamble.

That was why when the other members of the team arrived she had no choice but to clue them in.

"I don't know how or when the suspect made us, but that's the only reason he'd have for trying to sneak through a fire-zone," she said.

She nodded at Nick, and the fox took over.

"I know this neighborhood and it's almost like a maze back there," he said, waving a paw at alley the entrance, "Soon as we hit the first junction we'll need to split up and have each group take a different direction." He swallowed hard. "If you spot the suspect forget about trying to follow him, that's over; take him down."
"And I only hope it's not ME who catches him," the red fox added strictly for his own benefit, "because if it is, I don't know if I can control myself. Aaaaah, grrrrrr how could he have done it?"

For the first time in many years, Nick was beginning to understand how Robyn must have felt, when she'd found out he'd been lying to her.

And that made him angrier than ever.

"Back up's on the way." The voice of Swinton sounded in his earpiece, breaking the spell, at least for the moment.

"Shouldn't we have respirators?" Kii Catano's tail was clocking on the ground again.

"No time," Judy informed her, "and anyway, that kid doesn't have one either. Okay everyone, let's hit it."

She hopped over the barrier, beckoning for the others to follow.

One thing became apparent almost immediately; when Nick Wilde had given them the lay of the land, he'd been understating the situation. This place wasn't a maze it was a stinking labyrinth. Every ten yards or so the alley either made a sharp turn to the left or right, or else it split into two separate branches.

"How the heck does the Zootopia Department of Sanitation ever manage to make trash pick-ups back here?" Officer Catano asked rhetorically. Nobody seemed to know.

At each new branch, one or another of the officers was forced to detach themselves from the main group in order to check it out. First Howell departed, then Catano, and then Wolford until ultimately, Nick and Judy found themselves alone in the tangle of alleyways.

"No doubt about it now Nick, the kid's onto us, all right." Judy paused for a moment to check her phone's GPS. Dang this place, it was almost tailor made for losing a tail. "How the heck did he…?"

"I don't think it was him, I think it was the Phantom," Nick's reply came as a soft, pensive growl. "We can worry about that later, Carrots." He paused for a second and then added, "But I wonder about something; just how is that McHorn and Francine Trunkaby knew what we were up to when we bumped into them?"

Judy wondered about that too but like her partner had just said, now was not the time. She holstered the phone and pointed in the two o'clock direction. "Okay, the fire's over that way about 300 yards, we're safe enough…for now."

That was the good news; the bad news was two minutes later they walked right into another junction.

"You want the left side or the right?" Nick asked her; it was a toss-up; neither one went in the direction of the fire.

"I'll take the left," Judy answered him, and headed off that direction with no further comment.

It was decision she quickly came to question if not regret; the smoke was thicker here, hanging above the alleyway like a bad mood, turning the windows of the surrounding buildings invisible, and reducing the fire escapes to black, spidery skeletons. It was almost like walking through a fogbound forest—except fog didn't make your eyes itch and your sinuses want to shut down. That
was what really made her think she shouldn't have offered to go left. If this smoke was a pain for her, it would be that much worse for Conor, with his foxy sense of smell, (and also Nick, but never mind about him right now.)

With every step she took, Judy became that much more certain that the young fox couldn't have come this way. Nonetheless, she kept her ears up and on full alert; if she got within thirty yards of the kid the advantage would be hers. This smoke might nullify a fox or a wolf's sense of smell, but it would do nothing to dull a rabbit’s sense of hearing.

Twice she had to stop when calls came in on her radio. The first was from Kii Catano, saying she thought she'd spotted the suspect; (she hadn't, false alarm.) The second was from Clawhauser, informing her that the backup she'd requested had arrived and that more officers would be joining her and Nick shortly.

"We're also trying to cordon off all the alleyway exits in that block; so far we've got about half of them covered."

Judy should have been elated; good old Bogo, he'd come through in the pinch.

But only half the exits; that wasn't nearly enough, and even then there were only about a zillion other ways out of here. One store with an unlocked rear door and some inattentive employees; that'd be all the young silver fox would need...or else he could climb up one of the fire escapes slip in through a window, and then scoot down the stairs and out the other side.

She acknowledged the plus-sized cheetah's message and pressed onwards.

About ten yards further on, Judy became aware of the sound of running water.

Running water? She felt her nose twitching, and not from the smoke

"Must be runoff from the fire-hoses, I'm closer than I thought."

She moved forward cautiously. Coming around the next bend, she found herself facing a small courtyard, with more alleyways branching off in four different directions.

"NOW which way?" she wondered…and then dropped hastily into a crouch, "Whoa!"

Barely visible through the veil of smoke was the outline of a bicycle and a figure standing beside it, almost completely obscured…

…except for those two, sharply pointed ears; there was no mistaking them—or to which species they belonged.

Judy reached for her radio, and then thought better of it; she'd get one chance and one chance only. If she missed, Conor would have his choice of a smorgasbord of possible escape routes.

She could not risk having him hear her and so she switched to her cell phone, thumbing out a rapid message to Nick.

'Think I C spect. Use GPA 2 lcat my n 20 ntfy others Jdy.'

There was no answer, and then she saw the words flashing on the screen, 'No Service…No Service…No Service.' She would have to try and take the kid alone.

She stowed the cell and began to move cautiously. Conor appeared to be almost frozen in place; it
was hard to tell in all this drifting smoke. He seemed to be either trying to make up his mind or get his bearings. One thing Judy could see was that he appeared to be facing north, and so she began to make her approach from an oblique angle, trying to get behind him on the south side, mentally willing the young silver fox to take no notice of her.

"That's it kid, just look the other way...and keep those ears facing away from me."

If they turned in her direction, Judy knew she would have to move now. Closer, just a liiiittle bit closer...just...a...little...

Her next step landed with a splash; not a particularly loud one, but in the quiet of the courtyard, it sounded as if someone had dropped a depth-charge. She grimaced and tried not to groan. The water; she'd forgotten all about that blankety-blank runoff water!

She tensed and prepared to bolt forward...

Only...Conor made no move to get away from her—or any move at all; even his ears remained exactly where they were.

Judy stood up and allowed herself a groan. Oh sweet cheez n' crackers, how could she have...?

"DUMB bunny!"

Sloshing her way in the direction of the figure, it took her only three steps to confirm what she already knew; she'd been stalking an advertisement standee! Yes, a bicycle was part of it, but the fox-ears she thought she'd seen had actually been the points of a star.

And with her luck, Nick or one of the other officers would show up at any second...oh, peachy!

Slapping her paw over her face; Judy felt as if she could face-pawlm herself to death...

_Flock Street, outside of Tux-On Tuxedo Shop, 13:03 ZST_

The pronghorn antelope held his mike in a near-crushing grip, voice booming over the speakers on the fire-truck behind him.

"All units, all units...pull back, we're losing the roof. All units PULL BACK!"

At once, the crowd of firefighters began to move away from the burning building, the animals on the hoses struggling to keep them trained on the blaze.

Captain George Grassley, ZFD lowered the mike and shook his head. By the time he and his crews had arrived here, there'd been no chance of saving Tux-On Tuxedo Shop, but they'd still had a shot at preserving some of the neighboring establishments.

No such luck now; when that roof went, it would take everything else along with it.

It didn't happen all at once; the first section of rooftop to give way created a hole no bigger than a pie-plate. But then as the flames shot up through the opening, they drew a rush of superhot air in their wake.

And the hole began to widen, first to the size of trash-can lid, then a throw-rug, and then a hot-tub.

And then the roof of the building gave way altogether.
Freed at last from the confines of the enclosure, the superheated air burst upwards in a roiling incandescent cloud, shooting skywards to a height of over 300 feet…and creating an instant vacuum in the weakened structure below.

Nature always abhors a vacuum, and so new air rushed in to fill the space—at hurricane velocity. At once the row of storefronts imploded, leaving insufficient support for the floors above, which immediately (and conversely) collapsed outwards.

As the far right corner of the building fell, it took down a power-pole, which toppled sideways into the street, creating an odd, reverse-domino effect; the wires and cables attached to the crosspiece pulled taut against the next pole, the one just inside the alley adjoining the building. For half a moment, the second pole seemed to hold, and then with a splintering crack, it too gave way; not few seconds later, the process was repeated with a third pole, further up the alley.

The fourth pole in the series was made of stronger stuff. It held fast when the wires pulled tight; they were unable bring it down, and so instead they popped free from their mountings. There was a blinding arc, a shower of sparks—and then the wires were drifting earthward in a lazy crescent—straight towards the bunny cop standing ankle-deep in a stream of running water just below.

If Judy had been facing the other way, if she hadn't had her paw slapped over her face, if her ears hadn't been momentarily distracted by the crashing sounds somewhere off to the left, she might have been able to move before it was too late. Instead by the time she turned around, by the time she saw the wires, by the time her brain managed to process what was happening, the cables and all they were carrying were less than two feet above the water. She would never make it now; she could only hope…

Something slammed into her like freight train from out of left field, lifting her up and sideways. For perhaps two seconds Judy felt nothing beneath her feet, and then she came down hard in a rolling, chaotic tumble, turning over and over and over again, hot air rushing out of her lungs, an explosion of starlight inside her head as it banged against the pavement.

The last thing she remembered before she lost consciousness was a sun-bright flash and a sound like the world's largest paper bag popping.

And then all was still and darkness.

"Judy? Judy!"

Judy heard before she saw; someone was calling her name from far away. No, wait, it was close, very close. She needed to open her eyes…wait, they were already open…no, no they weren't. Come on rabbit, get it together.

"Judy, come on." the voice was pleading now.

She shook her head and blinked…and the world began to stitch itself back into reality.

The first thing she saw was the water, about five, maybe ten feet away, topped off by a cloud of hissing steam. She saw the lights in the windows around her had all gone dark. Had they been like that before, or…?

"Dangit, focus, bunny…FOCUS. There's somebody on top of you…"

Judy rolled hallway over and looked upwards—and found that she was gazing upwards into the eyes of a fox, not green but burning amber.
It was Conor; she'd caught up with him after all.

"Oh thank goodness, you okay?" he asked…and then before she could answer, he was hauled roughly up and backwards, and she heard another fox's angry snarl.

"Get off her, you little…!"

Judy sat up quickly…

…just in time to hear Conor let out a terrified fox-scream and watch him sink his teeth into Nick Wilde's forearm.

Nick screamed too, and dropped the younger fox. Judy leaped up and prepared to grab the kid before…

But Conor didn't even try to make a run for it; he only stood there, staring upwards at the older fox, shaking all over with a horrified look on his face.

"Oh Jeez Nick…I-I didn't…I…"

Before he could say any more a new voice spoke, it sounded like belonged to either Wolford or Grizzoli, No, wait, Grizzoli wasn't here; it was Wolford, but what was he shouting 'Trees!' for?

And then she heard another voice; this one she recognized immediately, it was Kii Catano.

"Dispatch, dispatch…we have an injured officer…Code 10-91e."

Judy blinked again and saw that the grey wolf and cheetah weren't the only other officers present. Howell was there too, and so was Swinton; both with trank-dart guns trained on the suspect. And now she could hear more footsteps, approaching rapidly.

Conor apparently heard them too. Without being told, he dropped to his knees letting himself fall face-first to the pavement as if preparing to perform a set of push-ups. He held like that for perhaps three seconds and then let himself fall the rest of the way, putting paws behind his back.

At once Officer Catano was there, administering the cuffs and reciting the standard litany.

"Conor Lewis, you're under arrest, for accessory to usury and assaulting a police officer. You have the right to remain silent…"

The young fox did just that, laying completely still and making no noise whatsoever. When the cheetah cop asked him if he understood his rights he only nodded and said, "Yes."

"He's been here before," Judy realized with a start, "this isn't the first time he's been arrested." She was waking up rapidly now.

She turned away, unable to look, and found herself looking at Nick.

He was in the midst of being assisted by two other animals, Howell and a mule deer in a paramedic's uniform. Judy could see him grimacing and clutching his arm; something dark was oozing between his fingers.

That snapped her out of it the rest of the way and she hurried to be with her partner.

Behind her, Catano was on the radio again.
"Dispatch, be advised…the suspect is in custody…"
Judy Hopps was sitting by herself, alone at one of the tables in the Precinct-1 Commissary, running her finger in an endless circle around the rim of her coffee cup.

She had insisted upon riding with Nick to the ER…and Chief Bogo had given her permission. He'd needed little or no persuading—but there'd been a catch; Officer Hopps could accompany her partner to the hospital only if she allowed herself to be checked out as well. (Sly one, that Cape buffalo…)

As things turned out, Judy hadn't had her bell rung quite as loudly as she'd imagined; the scans had shown no sign of concussion. Her dizziness and the disorientation she'd experienced upon regaining consciousness had owed as much to smoke inhalation as to any meeting of head against pavement.

Nick's injuries hadn't been as bad as they'd looked either. Although in the beginning he'd bled fairly profusely from where Conor had bitten him, the wound hadn't even required any stitches, just shave the fur from the affected area, clean it up, disinfect it, apply a fresh bandage and voila, all is done! Afterwards, the red fox had refused to let Bogo send him home…and once again, the Chief had complied without argument. (It was a common occurrence among officers injured in the line of duty; they invariably wanted to return to work right now.)

Judy watched as her finger went around and around and around…

Upon arriving back at Precinct-1, she'd made beeline for the showers, turning up the heat to a nearly scalding temperature as soon as she stepped beneath the shower-head.

Not all of the water running down her face had come out of the pipes; at least some of it had
originated in her eyes. Judy had been unable to help herself and hadn't wanted to; it was then and there that the full impact of what had nearly happened finally hit her—water…she had almost DIED while standing in water. If it hadn't been for Conor and that flying tackle…

That thought had only made her want to cry even harder. Oh it was all so wrong… Just! So! Wrong!

After her shower, (which had left her feeling about as clean as Lady MacBats,) Judy had gone to her locker and changed into a fresh uniform. From there, she had headed for the interrogation rooms, in order to attend the questioning of Conor Lewis. Passing by the commissary, she'd made a quick detour to grab a cup of coffee.

She had been here ever since—tracing her finger around and around and around and around and around…

There'd been a few other officers here when she'd arrived, seated on the far side of the room …but whoa, when had they left? Now Judy had the commissary entirely to herself…except for a phalanx of vending machines, watching her like silent, dark sentinels, all of them too tall for a bunny-cop to operate any without the aid of a foot-stool.

Around...and around…and around…and…

Conor had given Kii Catano and the other officers no trouble following his arrest. Tad Howell had wanted to put a muzzle on the kid—SOP in the case of a suspect biting an officer—but in the end he'd been dissuaded by a furious protest from Nick Wilde; the thought of a fox-kit having a muzzle applied to his face, even now, even one who had bitten him, had been more than he could take.

Around and around and around and…

"Hopps? Hopps!"

Startled out of her reverie, Judy looked up to see Chief Bogo standing in the doorway…hooves propped against the frame as if he were preparing to bring down the building, like Ramson toppling the temple of Baaa-al.

"Hopps, what the devil are you doing here?" the Cape buffalo demanded, taking two big steps into the room, "You're supposed to be…"

"He saved my life, Chief!"

Judy tried to put a paw up to block the words, but they were out before she could even begin to move her arm; nothing for it now but to brace up prepare for the inevitable, angry tirade.

It never came.

Instead, Bogo said quietly, "Right, who was it then, Hopps? D'you mean your suspect, that boy, Conor Lewis?" He had obviously heard at least part of the story already.

Judy nodded, tight-lipped, only barely able to keep the tears from returning.

"'Never let them see that they get to you'. I'm trying, Nick!"

Bogo nodded and went to the coffee-maker, poured himself a cup and then pulled up a chair across the table from Judy, his expression much softer than when he'd arrived.

"Right…tell me what happened."
Judy did, going back much further than she'd intended. She opened with the tale of how Conor had helped her sister Erin at the Carrot-Days Festival and wrapped things up by recalling the young fox's Hail-Mary tackle in the alleyway behind Tux-On.

"You'd be notifying my parents right now if hadn't been for him," she said, unable to keep herself from sniffling.

Bogo regarded her for a second, and nodded knowingly.

And then, to Judy's utter amazement, he offered a hoof.

"Well Hopps…congratulations; you are now officially a real police officer."

She felt an eyebrow rising and her nose beginning to twitch.

"Sir?"

A rare smile creased the Cape buffalo's face.

"Something my first partner, Markus Veldt once told me, 'You've only become a real cop after you've had your first crisis of conscience.'" He raised a brow of his own, "Frankly Hopps, I'm surprised that it took you so long."

Judy blinked…and then took hold of the Chief's hoof—cautiously, tentatively, as if he might be pawling a joy buzzer.

He shook it once and then sat back again, taking a small sip of his coffee.

"It happens to every officer sooner or later, when you've got to take in a suspect you had rather let go….or worse, when you've got to let someone go that you KNOW is guilty."

Judy chewed on one side of her mouth for a second.

"Actually, Chief…that I could handle; I mean, I always knew, even when I was a kid, that when I became a police officer, I'd eventually have to let a guilty perp walk." Her expression became half-bitter, half-sardonic, "or that the courts would turn him loose. But having to bring in someone who saved my life, who risked his own life to save mine, I never could have expected anything like that."

"I've yet to meet the officer who expects a suspect to help them," Bogo told her, taking another short sip of coffee, "But it does happen. I remember one time during my second year on the force. I'd pulled over a pair of hyenas for making an illegal ewe-turn…and spotted a load of burglars' tools in the back seat of their car, together with a bagful of jewelry. When he realized I'd made him, the driver tried to go for me with a crowbar…but his partner stopped him. 'No homes, you can't hurt no cop.'"

"What happened?" Judy asked, fascinated. She couldn't imagine any suspect being fool enough to go after Chief Bogo—with any kind of weapon.

He let out a small snort and waved a dismissive hoof.

"The hyena with the crowbar had one prior, so he got 10 years; 5 plus an extra 5, for the attempted assault of a police officer. His partner, the one who stopped him had a clean sheet; he pleaded guilty to the burglary charge, got 2 years and was out after 90 days…partly thanks to my having put in a good word with the parole board." He smiled again, "And the courts will remember Conor
Lewis's action on your behalf as well, Hopps," He raised a thick finger, "and there's one more thing you might want to consider…"

"What's that, sir?" Judy's nose was twitching again.

Before answering her, Bogo folded his massive arms across his chest, his voice becoming as formal as a Victorian schoolmaster's.

"Young Mr. Lewis shouldn't have needed to save your life if he hadn't tried to get away from you by cutting through a fire zone…would he then?"

Judy felt her eyes widening, and then her back began to straighten.

"Whoa, I never thought of it that way. You're right, Chief…thanks."

Bogo raised his hooves, pretending to be stern, but with a grin peeking out of one corner of his face..

"Just don't hug me, O-kay?"

Judy placed a paw over her heart.

"Promise."

They both got up from the table.

"Right," the Chief rumbled, tossing his cup into the commissary sink, "now let's go and see what our young fox has to say."

Judy followed her boss with a lively step…but her anxiety hadn't evaporated completely. Things were better but they still weren't right.

When they got to the interrogation rooms, the first thing she saw was Nick, standing with his arms folded, staring fixedly through the two-way mirror of Room Number 2, his eyes resembling pieces of jade flint. Like her, he had changed into a fresh uniform but owing to the bandage on his arm, he had yet to hit the showers.

Seated in front of the table beside him was the hippo, Officer Higgins, listening intently to the proceedings on the other side of the glass through a pair of headphones.

The expression on Nick's face was more than a little disconcerting—and disheartening; when Conor had attempted to take that bite out of him he had also managed to take away of the older fox's anger …or that was how it had seemed at the time. Right now though, Judy's partner resembled nothing so much as a kettle on the verge of boiling over.

But then she realized something; if Nick was out here, then who the heck was inside with…?

The question must have been shown on her face, because Higgins immediately answered it.

"Mr. Gamsbart and Lieutenant Tufts are in there with him now," he said.

"WHAT?" Judy's ears went back so fast and hard it felt as if someone had just slapped her on the back. Gamsbart's presence she could understand, but Tufts? After all the trash-talk that arrogant, little jerk had laid on her and Nick, he had about as much right to participate in the questioning of Conor Lewis as an elephant has to take a shortcut through Little Rodentia.
"Easy Hopps," a deep voice rumbled beside her, "Let me deal with him." It was clear that Chief Bogo wasn't any happier with this development than she was.

Or Nick; Judy understood now that the fox's smoldering fury wasn't directed at Conor, but at the squirrel sitting on the tabletop, facing him.

"So has our young chap said anything yet?" Bogo spoke to Higgins while nodding at the animals on the other side of the two-way mirror.

The hippo's expression became asymmetrical, "Yes…and no; by that I mean, he's been talking plenty, but he hasn't said anything," and in response to the Chief's arcing eyebrow, he added hastily, "Listen for yourself."

He flipped a switch on the console in front of him, and Albert Tufts' voice became audible through the speaker beside the door.

"We're going to find that money kid...make no mistake about that; how it works out for you depends on whether or not you decide to help us find it. So, one more time; where's the case that the stoat left for you?"

Conor only regarded him, deadpan. As with all new arrivals at the City Jail's Juvenile Wing, they had switched him into orange-juvie coveralls and cleaned him up. That alteration rendered some kids all but unrecognizable from before their arrest...and not just in appearance but in attitude; one minute a tough-talking bone-thug, and then presto-chango—in the next instant, a cowering penitent.

Not Conor Lewis...

"I want a lawyer," was his only reply, delivered with all the passion of a concrete slab—a flat voice and an even flatter expression.

"That's been his answer for everything they say to him," Nick Wilde was drumming his fingers in the crook of his arm. He seemed almost amused by the whole thing. "Either that, or he demands his phone call." Judy wondered for a second how her partner could have known that with the sound turned off...and then remembered that he was a lip reader.

Tufts, meanwhile, was trying a different approach.

"Look kid, we've got you dead to rights for assaulting police officer, three witnesses and footage from both Officer Wilde and Officer Hopp's body-cams."

At this just a hint of smirk seemed to cross Conor's face and Judy thought she knew; if the cams had seen that, they'd also caught the young fox saving her life.

Tufts either missed it or didn't catch the significance, continuing along the same line.

"Whatever else you think, you're not going to walk on that charge...and maybe you don't know this, but the City of Zootopia takes a really dim view of animals who assault a peace officer, regardless of their age."

He stood up and walked halfway across the table, staring up at the young silver fox with his paws on his hips.

"And you didn't just assault a police officer kid, you bit him. You know what that means? It means we can stick a muzzle on your face and leave it there until your trial date; you'll get it taken off
only at mealtimes. Is that what you want?"

Conor looked at him and shrugged, "Then that's what's gonna happen…and I want a lawyer."

"Well at least they got him to change his tune a little," Judy snickered and looked at Nick…and immediately felt her blood turn to ice-water.

The red fox was standing with his fists balled into hammers, grimacing in outrage; teeth bared and tightly clenched.

Ohhh sweet cheez n' crackers how could she have forgotten already what a sore point muzzles were with him?

On the other side of the glass, Gamsbart had stepped forward and was motioning Tufts backwards. At first, the Kaibab squirrel only glared at him defiantly, but then reluctantly retreated to a far corner of the table.

The chamois watched him take his seat and then sat down himself, laying an elbow on the tabletop as he did.

"It's not that important, but I am curious about one thing, Conor. That cellphone you were carrying was a disposable model. Why didn't you break it when you had the chance?"

It was the old ploy of trying to get a suspect talking by pretending to be cordial—he'd said 'Conor', not 'kid'—and by asking an apparently harmless question; Judy recognized the tactic at once, she'd employed it herself a few times

"I want a lawyer." Conor told the chamois.

Gamsbart threw up his hooves and rolled his eyes. From the far side of the table, Albert Tufts butted in again.

"Is that ALL you're going to say kid, what, are you a parrot or something?"

Conor looked at him.

"I want my phone-call." There was just the slightest edge of sarcasm to his voice,

"I'M talking to him now, Lieutenant." Rudy Gamsbart was aiming a finger in the squirrel's direction…while Judy Hopps tried not to groan; one of the first rules of playing good cop/bad cop was not to be too obvious about it, and these two were being about as subtle as a rhino-charge.

"Just because he's a kid …" Nick Wilde muttered, shaking his head. Yes, that was probably true, Judy decided; if Conor Lewis had been an adult fox, you had BETTER believe Tufts and Gamsbart wouldn't be employing such crude tactics to get him to open up.

"Let's forget about The Phantom for right now, Conor." The deputy prosecutor was leaning across the table, "Bottom line son, we have you cold on the charge of assaulting a police officer. Like Lieutenant Tufts said, when you bit Officer Wilde, it was caught by not one but two body cameras and seen by at least one other officer besides him and Officer Hopps."

Judy felt her nose began to twitch. Wait a minute, her body cam, had it been turned on, or…? She couldn't remember. Were Tufts and Gamsbart bluffing, or did they really have the kid dead to rights on video?
"We took a saliva sample from Officer Wilde's arm wound too, son," the chamois was saying, "if it matches the cheek swab we took from you—and we both know that it will—then you're really cooked."

"I want a lawyer."

Judy's ears went up; it was the same statement as he'd made at least fifty times already, but in this instance…had the young fox sounded just a little bit whiny?

Yes…but he'd also sounded as if he was trying to give that impression.

"Hang on Conor, I'm getting to that," Gamsbart was waving a dismissive hoof, "If want an attorney, we'll get you one," he stood abruptly, with both hooves on the tabletop, "But let me tell you something as an attorney myself, that's the worst possible mistake you can make right now."

Judy felt her ears shoot upwards and saw Nick Wilde's do the same; even Chief Bogo was staring, wide-eyed and dumfounded. Had they really just heard a Zootopia City Prosecutor tell their suspect he'd be better off without any sort of legal representation?

"What the devil d'you think you're doing, Gamsbart?" Bogo grumbled under his breath.

"Aaah, he does this all the time with juvies," Higgins offered from his position at the console.

"And that makes it right I suppose?" The Chief queried rhetorically…and sarcastically. Higgins wisely chose not to say anything further.

On the other side of the glass, Gamsbart continued to speak.

"A lawyer's only going to delay the inevitable Conor…and I happen to know the judge you'll be facing; he likes to keep his courtroom running smoothly and has a habit of coming down hard on juvenile defendants who insist on gumming up the works. You show up in front of HIM with an attorney, and you'll not only be convicted—the best lawyer in Zootopia couldn't bring in an acquittal on this one—he'll also throw the book at you for wasting the court's time. The only way you're going to get any leniency from that rodent is to forget about a lawyer and plead guilty right away. That being said let me tell you the REAL reason you need to quit stonewalling and start co-operating."

He got up and sat down again, this time on the edge of the table.

"That laptop computer we found in your backpack, very sophisticated and almost bombproof. Lieutenant Tufts there tell me that it's..." he turned and looked over his shoulder, "what was it you said again?"

"At least two grades above mil-spec," the squirrel responded testily.

"Right," Gamsbart turned his attention back to Conor, "And when we opened it we found the database was locked and encrypted to a level even the ZSA couldn't crack; heckuva computer for a fourteen-year-old kid to have," he leaned across the table a second time, "...if that's your actual age, which I have reason to doubt. You see, we also ran a background check on you, and you know what else we found? Nothing! Nearly every detail of your life up until the last three years turned out to be fake, the schools you supposedly went to back in Zoo York, the hospital where you had your face fixed after your accident, even the clinic where you went for dental work...they've all got computer records for you, but absolutely nothing on paper...and nobody that we talked to remembers you—out of more than thirty animals. One or two instances I can see, but THAT many? I don't think so."
Judy let out a silent breath of air; this WAS a bluff; there was no way Gamsbart could have obtained all that information in such a short space of time.

No, she decided, not a bluff, the chamois was playing a hunch; he was finally beginning to get the measure of Conor Lewis.

Or...had he? Even now, she wasn't so sure.

"I have to say kid," Albert Tufts chittered, jumping back into the conversation, (and this time Gamsbart didn't try to stop him,) "I've never seen a better job of creating a fake identity—almost Druid-level work; and it doesn't end at three years either, not completely. We also checked your home address; belongs to a nice, retired pair of badgers over in the Otterdam neighborhood—who never heard of you. My guess is that you don't have any parents...No, don't say it; we heard you the first time...yeah, you want a lawyer."

On the other side of the two-way mirror, Chief Bogo was pinching the bridge of his muzzle and muttering to no one in particular. "Oh please, not The Druid...again."

Judy looked at him curiously but the Cape Buffalo only waved her off as if to say 'not now'. His concerns were superfluous anyway; Rudy Gamsbart had taken over the interrogation once more.

"The point is Conor, there's no way a kid your age could have done all those things on his own. Someone had to have helped you, someone with a high degree of computer skills," he paused for effect and lowered his voice, "someone like...the Phantom." He turned and nodded at Tufts, who happily picked up the cue.

"When we first starting tracking you kid, we assumed that you were just some shill who didn't know who he was working for." He grinned, showing all four of his incisors, "Not any more. For you to own laptop like that and have that level of fake ID, you'd have to have met The Phantom, or at least have had semi-regular contact with him."

"And that's actually the good news, son," Rudy Gamsbart was almost beaming, "because the ZPD and the Zootopia Attorney General's Office have wanted to put that animal out of business for a long time...and very, very badly." He studied his hoof for a second, "bad enough to be willing to let a lot of other things pass, perhaps even, say, a charge of assaulting a police officer."

He stopped looking at his hoof and looked directly at Conor, "But not if you're going to force the issue of a lawyer. So, what's it going to be? Do you want to help us help you...or are you prepared to go to juvie with a 'violent offender' stamp on your jacket?"

Conor stared and then sagged in his chair; he looked to Judy like pool-toy with its air valve popped.

Finally his eyes met Gamsbart's again.

And then he shook his head, speaking in mournful, almost fatalistic tone.

"Where's your head, Mr. Prosecutor? You think you can catch The Phantom—or whatever you want to call him? You think a guy like that comes this close to getting caught and sticks his head out? He knows where I am right now; if he comes up for anything, it will be to get rid of me. After that... my guess is you'll never hear from him again.

"That's where you're wrong, son." The chamois was folding his arms again, "The ZPD can protect you...but only if you tell us what you know about The Phantom."

On the other side of the two way mirror Judy Hopps was nodding in agreement—with the first part
of Gamsbart's statement if not the second; (they'd protect the kid regardless of whether or not he chose to cooperate.) But at the same time, she could feel her nose twitching again and a puzzled expression creasing her face; it seemed to her as if Conor had broken just a little too easily.

And there was something about those words of his…

"Oh, gee, thanks, Gamsbart, bang-up job so far." The young fox had his arms raised in a hallelujah gesture. "Who's the Phantom? All I know is what I heard; he's supposed to be feline, some say his father's a lion. Nobody I ever talked to believed he was real. Nobody ever saw him or knew anybody that ever worked directly for him, but any one of THEM could have been working for The Phantom. You never know; that's his power. The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist. And then just like that, poof. He's gone." Conor blew across his pawlm, as if to emphasize his final point.

THAT was what tore it, that—and those last two lines; now Judy recognized the words, and so did everybody else within earshot. Except for a few minor changes it had been an almost verbatim recital of Gerbil Kit's monologue from the film the Usual Suspects, the one in which he'd described the elusive criminal mastermind, Tyger Soze.

Gamsbart and Tufts had just been played for chumps…and they were none too happy about it. The Kaibab squirrel leaped up out of his chair baring his incisor at the young silver fox.

"Oh, you think you're really smart, huh kid?"

Conor gave him a withering look.

"Nah, I just think you're a moron."

"Now you listen to ME, you snotty little…"

"Back off Tufts," Gamsbart hastily laid a hoof on the table in front of him. "Right now, you hear me?"

The squirrel retreated to his corner again, but this time casting a baleful glance at Conor every step of the way. Gamsbart waited until he had taken his seat again before returning his attention to the young fox on the other side of the table.

"Actually son…"

That was as far as he got.

"Stop calling me son, okay? My mom never went for guys like you…and you're the wrong species anyway." The young fox's arms were folded defiantly across his chest.

"Fine, Conor," the chamois went on smoothly, "But what I was about to say was, that was a really stupid mistake you made just now." he tapped himself on the chest, "Me, I'm willing to let a stunt like that pass—not because I'm nice guy but because I want the Phantom just hat badly." He leaned in close, lowering his voice to a near whisper. "But not the Lieutenant there; he can be a real jerk, even when…"

"As far as I'm concerned, you're both jerks," Conor interrupted him once again.

Gamsbart remained unfazed.

"That's right, keep digging yourself in deeper, I don't care. I'll walk out of here with a clear
conscience…and maybe have the Phantom nailed with or without your help."

As if to demonstrate his meaning, he pulled out his cell-phone and punched in a number, propping it against his cheek.

"McHill, this is Gamsbart; any progress over there?"

The corners of his mouth turned downwards in a pensive frown and then bounced back up again.

"Good…very good. Have you got it on tape? Excellent! No, not yet, I'll see you later."

He rang off and slipped the phone into his pocket; at the same time his eyes narrowed and his face creased, transforming the smile on his face into a wicked, nearly demonic grin.

"Know who that was Conor? That was my assistant Dan McHill." He pointed in the direction of the outside corridor. "And guess what? He's got your 'customer', Ian Shortal in the room three doors down from here… and that weasel's telling us everything he knows."

The young fox only leaned back and shrugged

"I got no idea who you have in that room, but if he told you he committed a crime, why don't you book him?"

At this Tufts nearly came across the table again, but was once again held back by Rudy Gamsbart…who remained completely unruffled by the rejoinder. 'So you saw through my ploy, so what?' he seemed to be saying.

"Okay kid, you had your fun; I hope you think it was worth it."

He laid his hoof on the tabletop for Lieutenant Tufts to use. The Kaibab squirrel climbed up into it and then the two of them turned to leave. Higgins was just opening the door when Conor suddenly stood up from his chair.

"Mr. Gamsbart?"

"Yes?" the chamois turned halfway around—and the young fox's voice rose instantly to a ragged scream.

"I WANT A LAWYER, YOU HEAR ME? AND I WANT MY STINKIN' PHONE CALL—NOW!"

Outside in the corridor, Judy felt Nick nudging her shoulder.

"Dang, he's good; notice how he waited until the door was open before screaming for a lawyer?"

Judy looked up at her partner, blinking in surprise. What the…? He sounded almost proud of the younger fox.

"Okay, but why?" she whispered.

Nick nodded in the direction of the doorway. "To make sure that you, me, the Chief, and Higgins all heard it too."

But if Conor was good, so was Rudy Gamsbart; he only regarded the young fox indifferently.

"You'll get them, Conor…you'll get them. Only don't expect a lawyer right now; in case you've
forgotten, today is Saturday and the Public Defender's Office is closed for the weekend. We'll have
to start calling mammals at home, see if anyone's willing to come in on their day off." his face
assumed that wicked expression once again. "And even if someone from the PD's office does agree
to come down and represent you, don't expect them to be any too happy about it; so long, son."

He swept out the door with Tufts in his hoof, and Higgins closed it behind them.

Judy had a question for the chamois, but she never got to ask it; no sooner had he and Lieutenant
Tufts returned to the corridor than the Kaibab squirrel proceeded to lay into her and Nick both…
especially Nick.

"Welllll you two…are you happy now, huh?" He stabbed a finger at the two-way mirror, bushy tail
snapping like a ringmaster's whip. "I told you we should have busted the Phantom's courier instead
of trying to track him but nooo, YOU didn't want to listen."

"Excuse me, but we did bust him." Nick Wilde growled taking a step in the squirrel's direction;
he'd had just about his fill of this little bag of snarks.

"You got him, but not the money!" Tufts countered, jumping out of Gamsbart's hoof and down to
the floor again, not caring that he had landed within easy reach of the red fox's foot; he might be
arrogant, but he was nobody's coward.

"Well, duh!" Nick wasn't about to yield any ground either, never mind if this tree rat had
Lieutenant's bars on his uniform, "Of course he ditched the money, anyone could have seen that
coming the minute he made us."

Tufts responded with a toothy sneer.

"Except he wouldn't have made you—or had time to get rid of the cash—if you'd taken him down
as soon as he came out of that locker, instead of following him all the way to Flock Street!"

Judy felt her ears trying to stand up; at first she'd thought the squirrel was only trying to cover his
own tail but no, he really was that upset.

As for Nick, for once her partner was left without a comeback. Like it or not, the Lieutenant was
right.

Tufts could probably have won the argument right then and there—except some animals just don't
know enough to quit while they're ahead…

"And maybe if you two had been paying attention to your job instead of each other..."

"That's ENOUGH!" Bogo stamped his foot so hard that the Kaibab squirrel nearly fell over
backwards, while on the other side of the two-way, Conor Lewis performed a hasty duck and
cover.

Getting quickly to his feet again, Tufts looked hastily upwards at Rudy Gamsbart, who only
shrugged and shook his head.

"Nuh-uh Lieutenant, don't go looking to me for any support; that was WAY out of line."

"Too right it was," Chief Bogo flared, and then pointed with an angry finger, "I'll see you in my
office Tufts—right now…and don't threaten to resign again, because I swear this time I'll accept it.  "
That was what finally silenced the squirrel—and also every other officer in the corridor; Bogo wasn't kidding and they all knew it.

He snorted and then looked over at Gamsbart. "I'd like you there as well," he said…in a voice that clearly stated he'd have made it an order if he could. Fortunately, the chamois only nodded agreeably.

"Yes, certainly,"

"Right then," the Chief nodded back and then shifted his attention to Nick and Judy. "Hopps…Wilde," He angled his nose in the direction of the two-way mirror, "See you can get anything out of our young miscreant…besides more demands for an attorney. If he tells you anything useful, notify me at once."

It was clear from the Cape buffalo's tone that he didn't think they would…but what did they have to lose by trying?

When the Chief and the others had gone, Nick wanted to confront the younger fox immediately, but Judy held him back for a moment.

"Just a minute, let's at least figure out some kind of plan first."

"Okay," the fox agreed reluctantly, "What are your ideas, Carrots?"

Judy thoughtfully stroked her chin.

"Well…that little 'Usual Suspects' stunt Conor pulled; I-I-I don't think that was spontaneous Nick, something triggered it."

"Yesss, I thought so too." The red fox's mouth had compressed to almost a pucker; he was already coming to see things her way. "Okay, what was the last thing Gamsbart said before the kid started getting smart-mouthed?"

"He said…" Judy closed her eyes, thinking for a second, "…and I can't believe he said it; he was telling Conor that he'd be better off without a lawyer. Is that what did it, you think?"

"Don't know," Nick admitted with a shrug, "But it was sure as heck an insult to MY intelligence; I'll give you that without asking for a receipt." He chewed his lip for second, "But…that's now, not back when I was fourteen. To tell you the truth…I-I really don't know."

"Mmmm," Judy's nose was twitching again, "But tell me something else Nick; when you were Conor's age, had you ever been busted before?"

She saw his mouth pull sideways for a moment.

"Mmmm, nooo; I'd been roused a few times and once or twice I got put in the back of a police cruiser…but no, I'd never been cuffed and read my rights if that's what you mean, why?"

"Because I think HE has," Judy nodded at the silver-fox on the other side of the two-way mirror, "Did you notice how quickly he assumed the position after he bit you…without being told?"

Nick blinked, and then his eyes widened.

"Dang Carrots, you're right; why didn't I notice that?"

"Well for one thing, you were bleeding at the time," Judy reminded her partner with a tilted smile.
"But whatever the case is, the kid in that interrogation room isn't any little babe-in-the-woods."

"I couldn't agree more," Nick shaded his eye with a paw, peering narrowly through the glass for a second and then turned to her, "So, you said we shouldn't go talk to him without a plan; any thoughts about that, Carrots?"

"Well..." Judy tapped at her cheek with her finger, "I can tell you what we shouldn't do; no games, no gimmicks, no 'good cop/bad cop': that's only going to make him start repeating his demands for a lawyer." She compressed her lips for second. "Beyond that, the only thing I can think of is we should forget about trying to get him to admit to anything."

"Then, what...?" Nick started to say.

"First thing's first; let's try to see if we can at least get through to the kid."

When they entered the interrogation room a moment later, their suspect immediately began to getting to his feet, but then checked himself at the last instant.

"Hello Conor," Judy said taking the seat opposite the young silver fox. For once, it was a bit small for her species. (She guessed it had been brought in for Lieutenant Tufts, who as usual had insisted on seating himself on the table-top, using whatever materials were handy to construct a makeshift chair.)

Conor looked warily at each of them before speaking.

"Hello Judy...Nick, or do I have to call you Officers Hopps and Wilde?"

"No, Nick and Judy are fine," the bunny-cop assured him. He didn't look reassured...or like anything at all. His face had once again become a featureless mask.

And Judy felt that coldness in her veins again—and also a quivering sensation in her spine; this was the same completely unemotional visage Craig Guilford had affected after HE'D been arrested...but with a difference. The young coyote's lack of expression had stemmed from a deeply suppressed anger...while Conor's stony countenance was strictly cold and calculating. He was studying her and Nick as if they were specimens under a microscope.

"Who ARE you kid?" she wondered silently.

Then the young fox spoke again, breaking the spell.

"How's the arm, Nick?" There was only barest hint of sympathy in his voice.

Nick studied his bandage for a second before answering.

"Not too bad," he finally said, "Bled a lot, but not as deep as it looked; the docs say there probably want be any scarring."

Judy forced her nose not to twitch; the actual verdict had been that there would definitely not be any scarring. Nick was sounding out Conor even as the younger fox was sounding him out.

"That's good, I'm glad to hear it." The young silver fox nodded slowly, and then he said, "I'm so sorry about that Nick...really, I mean it."

Now Judy was no longer able to stop her nose from twitching. Conor had spoken his words with genuine remorse—but at the same time he'd said 'Sorry about that', not 'Sorry I bit you.' However
sincere he might have been in his apology, he had admitted to absolutely nothing.

"Even though he knows we have him cold on that count," she had to marvel.

She opened her mouth to speak but Nick Wilde beat her to the draw.

"Conor, before we go any further, there's one thing I need to know…"

"What…!" Judy's ears shot backwards and her brow flat-lined. Dangit, what part of 'no games' had this DUMB fox not understood? (And she couldn't reproach him for it, not in front of the kid.)

"Please just tell me this," Nick went on, "Please tell me at least that Finnick had nothing to do with any of this."

Judy rolled her eyes. "Here it comes again, 'I want a lawyer…'"

Conor leveled his gaze with Nick's and raised a paw.

"In all the time I've known him, Finnick has never been involved in anything illegal…or even questionable; not one single time, I swear."

It was another neat answer…once again the young silver fox had offered no admission of guilt. Judy hardly noticed however; what caught her eyes was the incredible look of relief on her partner's face.

Whoa, now she understood…about a lot of things.

Nick hadn't been playing a game just now; he'd truly wanted to know whether Finnick too was involved with The Phantom. And even though the red fox probably didn't realize it that was what most likely lay at the root of all his anger at Conor Lewis. 'You want to mess up your OWN life kid? Fine but don't go bringing my friends into it!"

And he hadn't; Judy had to give the young fox that much if nothing else.

As a matter of fact there was a lot MORE she had to give him—as he pointedly reminded her with the next words he spoke.

"How about you Judy, are you okay?"

"Dangit!"

"I'm fine, a few scrapes and bruises but otherwise I'm okay." She met his eyes with her own, a part of her wondering why it was so hard to hold this kid's gaze. "Thank you Conor, thank you for saving my life."

To her utter amazement, now HE looked away, voice dropping to a confused near mumble.

"'S all right. I-I had to do it; couldn't just stand there and do nothing."

Judy blinked and leaned in closer, watching Nick Wilde do the same. The young fox hadn't said it, but it was right there in front of all of them, 'I couldn't just stand there and do nothing—AGAIN!' that was his real meaning.

But what had happened that first time?

They were never going to find out; right then, just as quickly as the door had cracked open, it
swung shut again; Conor's face became once more the mask of a foxy sphinx.

"All right..." Judy decided, and to the young fox sitting across the table from her she said, "Conor, we're not going to ask you any more questions, we know you're not going to say anything without a lawyer present; we get that." She nodded at the older fox seated beside her, "Nick and I just want you to hear us out, okay?"

He responded with a gesture that could have indicated anything, but probably meant, 'Go ahead, I don't have a choice anyway.'

Judy chose to ignore that possibility.

"Conor, you're a good kid. Nobody knows that betters than me, but what I also know is that even the best kids can do bad things once in a while...and make no mistake, you've come to the dark side here. I don't' know how much you know about the individual you're working for but he's a loan-shark...and believe me he's not lending that money out of the goodness of his heart." She tapped herself in the chest, "I've seen what his kind does to animals that can't make their payments on time —and trust me, it's not pretty."

"What Judy said," Nick nodded taking over for a moment, "When I was lot younger than I am now, I did some things that I'm not proud of...things I still regret." He leaned across the table tapping it with his finger. "When I finally came clean, that was the best decision I ever made; my only regret was that I didn't do it a lot sooner." He sat back again, "No details kid, every fox has secrets that they can't reveal." He paused for just a second and then pinned his gaze on the boy, "even if they wish they could."

At once Conor's ears pricked up…and then fell slowly back into position.

"I understand," he finally said, "and it's okay Nick, you don't have to hold back for my sake."

"Thanks kid," Nick nodded, but then flicked his eyes in the direction of the two-way mirror, "but I think I'll keep mum for now, okay?"

"Yeah, right." the young fox nodded, saying no more…and leaving Judy to puzzle over what the heck THAT was all about, (and why did Nick look like a dental patient whose X-Rays had just come back showing no cavities?) Wellll… she could ask him about it later, after they were finished in here.

He knew of course; without actually saying so, Conor had just released him from his promise. At last he could reveal what he knew about the role the younger fox had played in stopping the Guilford brothers' attack on the Carrot Days festival.

Only…not yet; not with Higgins listening and the tapes rolling; he'd have to wait until he and Judy were alone before telling her. After that…Nick had no idea where to go with it.

"So, can I have my phone call now?" Conor asked him without warning—and just like that, the spell was broken.

"One last thing, okay…and then we'll see about it." Nick glanced in Judy's direction, and she responded with a barely perceptible nod. Conor's reaction was once again the different shrug of an animal who knows he has no choice in the matter.

"It's never too late to do the right thing, kid." Nick sat up in his chair as he spoke, "No, don't say anything; just think about it for a while, can you do that?"
"Okay," the young fox nodded quietly, his expression wholly sincere. Whether it was genuine or another calculated response; Judy had no idea.

She knew she was going to regret what she had to say next—but it had to be said, so let's get it over with and try to make it as much of a soft landing as possible.

"I'm going to have to tell Erin about this, Conor; it's better if she hears it from me. Is there a message you'd like me to pass on?

The young fox sighed and regarded the table top for second, and then slowly shook his head before looking up again.

"Sorry Judy…but I'm can't tell you anything more without a lawyer, not even that."

"Okay," she answered, nodding sadly and trying to ignore the taste of bile in her mouth, "Now let's see about getting you that phone call."

As if to demonstrate her meaning, she saw Nick pull out his own smartphone and key in a number, "Clawhauser, this is Nick Wilde. Our suspect wants his phone-call, can you see if that's okay with…?" He stopped rolling his eyes, "Yes, I know what day it is and what time it is; so does the suspect." He said this while looking at Conor, who nodded while mouthing the word 'yeah.'

"Yes, I'll wait," Nick said into the phone. A moment of silence followed and then, "Right, got it. Thanks Clawhauser."

He stowed the phone and looked at Conor.

"Chief says okay; you got your call."

"I need to use my cell phone, "the young fox told him, dispensing with any 'thank you'. "The number I wanna call is on speed-dial; I don't have it memorized." It caused Nick's face to harden a little.

"You can use your own cell-phone if you want kid, but you'll have to give us the number so we can monitor the call." He leaned closer, showing only the barest tip of his left fang. "And fair warning junior, you try to break that phone when you're done and you'll be looking at an obstruction charge on top of everything else. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you," Conor answered as if he'd expected no less for the older fox.

It took about ten minutes for the phone to arrive and another ten to set up the tap. Then, finally, Judy gave the nod for Conor to go ahead and make his call, carefully watching the young silver fox as he pulled up the speed-dial menu and pressed a number.

They heard three purring rings, (the tap was hooked into the interrogation room's intercom speaker.) and then a droning female voice.

"If you know your party's extension, please dial it now, otherwise…"

Conor entered four more numbers; after a short pause, another canned voice spoke.

"Hello…our office is currently closed. Please leave your name, number, and a brief message at the tone, and we'll get back to you as soon as possible."

Nick frowned as he listened and saw Judy do the same; whoever Conor was talking to, their
message had offered not even a clue as to their identity; the kid could be ordering delivery from Mondo Pizza for all they knew. For a moment he considered reaching over and summarily ending the call, but then decided against it. Anyway it was too late; the beep had sounded and Conor was delivering his message.

"Hello my name is Conor Lewis, I've been arrested and I need some help. They're holding me in ZPD Precinct-1. My case number is…" He looked expectantly at Judy, snapping his fingers. She hastily consulted her own cell.

While she did this, Conor's thumb moved swiftly and discreetly to *his* cell phone's 'home' button. At once the phone-call display shrank to a blue bar on top of the screen. In a quick, smooth, practiced move, the young fox found the 'messages' icon and tapped it, tapped again, and then tapped 'send', repeating the process a second time and then pressing the home button once again and then blue bar a the top of the screen, bringing back the call-display.

The entire process took him less than three seconds, during which the young fox never so much as glanced at his phone, instead rolling his paw at Judy in a gesture of, 'Will you hurry up already?' (...much to the annoyance of both his 'companions'; just where the heck did this kid get off, trying to give them orders?)

"It's case number 3042016." Judy repeated the number a second time and the young fox recited it into his cell phone…and then, as if unable to resist, he said, "The prosecutor told me not to bother calling a lawyer; I think you can guess what I think of THAT load." He repeated his name and the case number and then rung off and returned the phone to Nick.

While her partner put the cell away, Judy went to the door and knocked. Higgins opened it almost immediately.

"Okay, we're done in here." She told the hippo, and then nodded backwards at the young, silver fox still seated at the table. "Can you get someone to take our suspect upstairs? (Upstairs,' meaning the City Jail's Juvenile Offender wing.)

"On it," Higgins said,

When Nick came through the door a moment later with Conor beside him, he stopped and put his paw on the younger fox's shoulder for a second. At once Higgin's ears stood up and his eyes widened in alarm. Did this idiot want to get bitten a second time?

Nothing happened; Conor only halted in in his tracks, waiting.

"If I leave instructions not to muzzle you, can I count on you behave?" Nick asked him, and once again the young fox seemed to find the floor interesting."

"I-I won't do anything stupid," he said, speaking in that same low murmur, "promise."

"Okay," Nick let the young fox go and looked at Higgins, "All right, you heard me; no muzzle. If there's a problem, I take full…"

Before he could say any more, his cell-phone began to buzz.

"This is Wilde," he said, and then abruptly stiffened, "Yes Chief…okay. Can you tell us what this is…? Yes sir, yes…we'll be right there; yes sir."

"What the heck does Bogo want *us* for, all of a sudden?" Judy asked him. She didn't need to have heard it to know that the Cape buffalo's summons had been an urgent one.
Nick responded by motioning her down the hallway and around the corner…out of earshot of both Higgins and Conor.

"No idea, Carrots," he told her, when they were finally alone, and then a hiss of air escaped from between his teeth, "but whatever it is, it's nothing good."
"You have GOT to be kidding!"

Nick and Judy stared numbly at the display screen atop Chief Bogo's desk, trying hard to make sense what they had just seen. Nooo...this wasn't possible, was it?

"Again, Swinton," the Cape buffalo intoned grimly, and the image froze for a split second...not that it was easy to tell; there had been no movement for the last few seconds anyway. In fact, the only thing visible in the frame was the door to locker LB6.

Then the image blinked and a tiny change became noticeable; there was now a padlock attached to the door—a hi-tech model with a glowing, blue eye.

Nick and Judy had been surprised to find Claire Swinton here when they'd arrived, and then it had been hard to decide which was more unsettling, the doleful look on her face or the expression worn by Lieutenant Albert Tufts; HE had looked like a kid who'd just caught his elder brother sneaking in after midnight...on a cell-phone cam!

That had been troubling enough, but it hadn't even begun to prepare them for what they'd just witnessed on the pig-cop's laptop computer-screen.

Nick had recognized the material immediately; the surveillance-cam footage from the locker room—taken after Ian Shortal had dropped the money, but before Conor Lewis had arrived to retrieve it.

Or that was what the red-fox had thought he was seeing...until he heard Judy gasp, "Oh, sweet cheez n' crackers!"

"What?" he'd asked, and in response, she had pointed at the laptop's monitor display.

"Look at the time-stamp, Nick!"
He'd looked… and seen that it was 12:28:08, approximately the same time they'd met up with Officer McHorn in front of the alley where Conor had disappeared—in other words, long after he'd picked up the cash.

"Wha…? Why'd the kid lock it up again?" Nick had asked himself aloud—drawing an even haughtier look from Lieutenant Tufts.

The answer to his query had come only a few seconds later—like a sucker-punch to the gut. Nick had felt himself nearly doubling over and if rabbits were capable of puking, Judy Hopps would have lost it all over the floor.

And now, here was that dark moment all over again. From the left side of the screen, Ian Shortal entered the frame, opened the locker and removed the case from the shelf where he'd left it earlier.

Then he closed the door, dropped the padlock into a pocket and walked out of the picture.

For a long moment, nobody spoke…but everyone understood. They'd been played; the show Conor Lewis had made of trying to get the 'money case' to fit into his backpack? That had actually been his laptop computer; the whole thing had been an elaborate charade, a ruse designed to deflect ZPD surveillance team from the fact that the real money-case was still inside the locker, (and to keep anyone from noticing that he'd locked it up again.)

And it had worked! Agghhh, grrrr, Nick could have fox-screamed his head off. Misdirection, the old stage-magician's ploy was something every good street hustler knew. And nobody knew it better than this red fox; he'd discovered he had a knack for the technique while still in grade school. A friend had invited him to her birthday party and when the scheduled magician had failed to materialize, young Master Wilde had put a sack over his head and proceeded to wow the party-goers with his sleight-of-paw. Ohhh, how could he have missed what Conor was up to so easily?

It was another rhetorical question and he wouldn't have had time to answer it anyway—because just then, Albert Tufts broke the silence, speaking neither to him nor to Judy, but instead to Claire Swinton.

"And no one even TRIED to detain that weasel?" he demanded.

"For what?" the pig-cop shot back, throwing her hooves in the air. "Last time I looked, there's no law says you can't store your own money in a beach locker!"

"Or even borrow money from a loan-shark," Judy pointed out flippantly …and she was right, the laws against usury applied only to lenders; borrowers were the victims. Nick Wilde was both surprised and pleased by her rejoinder. Who would have thought this prim little bunny-scout had it in her?

Predictably, her observation prompted Tufts shift his attention to her and Nick.

"First of all, you don't talk to me that way, Officer Hopps!" he chittered, pulling rank as if he was drawing a gun. And then he blew across his pawlm in a fair imitation of Conor Lewis's earlier gesture.

"Second…you see that? That's your case…poof, gone! That kid wasn't just onto you; he was onto you from the beginning, he never even LOOKED at that money." He stood up and spread his arms, addressing the group as a whole. "Welcome to our worst-case nightmare ladies and gentlemammals, zero steps forward and ten steps back."

"Are we…really?" Rudy Gamsbart queried, raising an eyebrow. He heaved himself out of his
chair, approaching the Chief's desk as if it were the bench. He hadn't spoken word until now, and only now did Nick Wilde grasp that the chamois had been biding his time.

"May I ask you something Lieutenant?" he said, speaking to the ZPD Cybercrimes Chief, "WHY was it so important for us to apprehend the Phantom's courier in possession of the money?"

Tufts regarded him as if he were a transient, begging for spare nuts, "Because without that money, we have nothing to charge him...with."

The Kaibab squirrel had just realized his error—too late, and Gamsbart pounced immediately.

"Nothing except assaulting a police officer...I beg your pardon, Officer Wilde, but would you oblige?" He nodded at Nick's bandaged arm, and the red fox dutifully raised it for all to see. It occurred to him then that this was THIS was probably the Zootopia Deputy prosecutor's real courtroom fursona.

"You tell me," the chamois continued, speaking to Albert Tufts again, "which crime carries the heavier penalty—biting a cop or transporting money on behalf of a loan-shark?"

It was an oratorical question, and the squirrel wisely chose not to answer it; a rookie cop, straight out of the academy would have known the correct response.

Gamsbart gave everyone a short moment and then moved on, waving his hoof in the air as if trying hail a taxicab.

"And why did we need the goods to charge the Lewis boy in the first place... anyone?"

Predictable Judy was the first to raise her paw...but Chief Bogo was the first to speak. "Leverage...so's to be able to get him to co-operate."

"Yes, except for one thing," Gamsbart leaned back against the Cape buffalo's desk with both hooves on the rim, "and that brings me to my next point; why did we decide to track the Phantom's courier to his next drop, instead of taking him down as soon as he had the money? No, don't bother; I'll answer this one myself. Because we all assumed—myself included, I admit that—we all assumed that the courier probably had no idea who he was working for." He raised another finger, "Except that isn't true either. Thanks to that laptop we found on him and his having such a well-constructed fake identity, we can be fairly certain that the Lewis kid has at least a working relationship with the Phantom." He looked over at Tufts again. This time, the squirrel had to make an effort to meet his gaze. "We're not in as good a shape as we would be if we'd been able to follow him to his next drop; I grant you that, Lieutenant...but we're in a far better position than if we'd tried to bust him as soon as he exited that locker. In that case, we really would have had nothing on Mr. Lewis...assuming he didn't take the money of course." He hastily qualified his statement, and then asked "But NOW what do we have?"

Again there was no response; it was another question with a self-evident answer.

"I won't call this operation a smashing success," the chamois told them, by way of wrapping his presentation, "but I'll still call it a success."

"Remind me to buy you a case of your favorite cider when we're done here." Nick silently told the chamois...and then Albert Tufts made one last stab at conjuring up a rainstorm over the Deputy prosecutor's parade.

"Oh puh-leeze, it was only through sheer, dumb luck that Hopps and Wilde managed to get anything on the kid."
It was another gaffe and Bogo promptly gave the squirrel a look that could have melted Tundratown. As for Nick, well…who was he to turn down such a juicy opening?

"Didn't feel like a whole lot of luck to me," he said, raising his arm again while managing to look suitably hurt.

"No kidding Lieutenant, I almost died out there," Judy Hopps flared…while biting the corner of her mouth to keep from grinning.

The Kaibab squirrel stood up to respond, but was pre-empted by Chief Bogo's derisive snort.

"Honestly, Tufts…if I had a nickel for every time this department's closed a case on nothing more than good fortune, I could retire from police work right now, couldn't I?"

Everyone snickered except for the squirrel, and then the Chief was back to business as usual.

"Right, Hopps…Wilde, who'd our suspect make his call to then?"

"We don't know sir." Judy admitted, "He got voice mail and the other party didn't identify themselves."

"Most animals don't," the Chief shrugged indifferently, "Did we get a trace on it?"

Nick saw Judy looking at him, and felt a slow heat rising up in his cheeks. Ohhh great, she was going to give HIM the tough one to answer; thanks a heap, Judas Hopps.

He cleared his throat. "Honestly sir, we didn't have time; your call came in right after the kid made his." It wasn't Bogo he was concerned about; it was yep…there was that expression on Albert Tufts' face again.

"Right, let's see about it then," Bogo pressed a button on his desk intercom. "Clawhauser, need you to check with communications and see if they've got a trace on the call made by the suspect Conor Lewis on his cell-phone a short while ago. They'll know who you're talking about."

"Right-o Chief," the plus-size cheetah responded, as eager to please as ever.

Bogo disconnected and folded his hooves on the desktop

"All right then; what's our next move?"

It was Gamsbart who answered him, "Well, there's one thing the kid said during his little Usual Suspects stunt that's absolutely true; by now the Phantom knows where he is…and he's not just going to sit on that information. That tells me we need to move quickly if we hope to get anything useful out of young Mister Lewis. Accordingly, we're putting his case on the fast track; I've already cleared it with the Attorney General. Conor Lewis's arraignment will be the first case on the docket when the Zootopia Juvenile Court opens up again on Monday."

"Have you got a Public Defender lined up yet?" Judy Hopps asked. After all the times the young silver fox had demanded a lawyer, (and after all the animals that had heard him making that demand,) the AG's office didn't dare bring him into court without one; their case would get tossed like a pawpsicle stick.

"Not yet, but we hope to have someone available by tomorrow morning," the chamois told her, adding quickly, "If worst comes to worst, I've got some favors I can call in."
He didn't sound particularly apprehensive about the prospect and Nick Wilde thought he understood why. Saddling Conor Lewis with a PD who didn't want the job could only help the Deputy Prosecutor in his efforts to flip the young silver fox...and Nick wasn't sure how he felt about that.

Gamsbart had more to say on the subject, but just then, Chief Bogo's intercom buzzed.

"Chief, it's Clawhauser...they got a trace on that number the Lewis boy called; it's an answering service over in The Marshlands District, Discretionary Services."

"What, an answering service?" Nick felt his ears standing upright. "Who uses those anymore?"

"Mammals who don't want their identities known," Claire Swinton answered him, snuffling in disgust. She looked as if she'd just bitten into an unripe persimmon. "I know that outfit; back when I was in Corrections we used to have inmates calling there all the time; it just about drove us bonkers. If there's one company in Zootopia with an honest name, it's Discretionary Services. They absolutely won't reveal the names of any of their clients...not to anyone; not without a court order, and even then they'll stonewall you for as long as possible."

"So in essence what you're saying is, we can forget about figuring out who Conor was trying to get ahold of?" Judy asked the question with her ears drooping; she already knew the answer.

"That's about the size of it," the pig cop told her morosely.

Then Rudy Gamsbart cleared his throat, a rough, grating noise.

"If I may...as I was saying, we want to get that kid into court as quickly as possible; the sooner he meets the judge he'll be facing at his trial, the sooner he'll realize that his only way out is to come in with us."

He sounded supremely confident...a little too confident for a certain red fox's taste. Exactly who was this tough-as-nails judge the chamois was referring to? He had yet to mention the animal by name. Nick would have loved to ask him about it, but Judy already had her paw up.

"Mr. Gamsbart sir, I hope I'm not getting out of line by asking this, but I'm curious about something. Why did you spin Conor Lewis that line about having his 'customer' in the next room? Anyone could have seen through that one—they never even so much as talked on the phone, much less met face to face. If you HAD brought Mr. Shortal in for questioning, he couldn't have told you a thing."

"Yes I know," the Deputy Prosecutor responded coolly, "But that was the general idea, Hopps." He pointed a finger upwards, in the direction of the City Jail. "That little wisenheimer fox thinks he's smarter than me? Good, let him; Conor Lewis isn't the first juvenile offender I ever met who's taken that attitude...and he won't be the first one to regret it either."

At that moment, the young fox in question already had plenty of regrets, not the least of which was having bitten Nick Wilde—and not only because of all the trouble he was in; he really did feel bad about having done it.

He was standing in the elevator, on his way up to the Zootopia City Jail's juvenile wing, accompanied by an unsmiling polar bear, who so far had said nothing beyond 'stand here' and 'get moving'. Though for the moment the young fox's face remained without a muzzle, he could see one dangling from the big bear's belt, a silent reminder that if he even so much as thought about stepping out of line...
Dangit, he hadn't meant to bite Nick, hadn't even realized he'd done it until after the fact, but oh foxtrot, could he possibly have made a worse move? Of all the officers on the force he could have bitten, it had to be Nick Wilde. How he wished he could have told the older fox he was sorry, said he was sorry for real...but of course, he couldn't, not without admitting his guilt.

"If you ever get pinched, kid," Danny Tipperin had told him, often and repeatedly, "the only thing you say to the cops is that you want a lawyer. No matter what they tell you, no matter what kind of dumb questions they ask, even if they only wanna know how you're feeling, all that comes outta your mouth is 'I want a lawyer'...and make sure as many cops hear you say it as possible."

He had already broken that rule once, when he'd pulled that Usual Suspects troll on 'Tuff-Guy' Tufts and that chamois...what was his name again? Oh yeah, Whatever-his-first-name-is Gamsbart.

Conor knew was going to pay dearly for that little lark, no question about it...but what was done was done. It was a little too late to take everything back right now.

Actually, when you thought about it, he had broken that rule two more times—when he'd (sort of) apologized to Nick and when he'd informed the older fox that as far as he knew, Finnick had never been involved in anything illegal since the two of them first met. Danny would have forgiven him those trespasses however; he had given the cops exactly nothing and besides...Finnick really hadn't had anything to do with his activities down in Sahara Square earlier today. The way the young fox figured it, offering Nick some peace of mind was the least he could do after having bitten him.

Bitten him...

The thought made Conor's eyes screw shut, and brought his teeth together so tightly, it was a wonder the enamel didn't crack. Out of all mistakes he had made so far that one was numero uno, the big kahuna, the mother of all mess-ups. He could have gone after the older fox with claws only, but nooooo, he'd had to up and use his chompers. Yes, he'd done it without realizing it but hey, guess what? Biting a police officer, knowingly or otherwise, means a mandatory cheek-swab.

And now that they knew his identity was fake, it was only matter of time before some bright soul in the ZPD, (he thought probably Judy Hopps,) would begin to connect the dots.

"Heyyy, since we've already got a cheek swab from the kid, why not get forensics to run a DNA search while we're at it?"

When they found out who he really was...when AKER discovered Conor Lewis's real identity, he wouldn't just be toast, he'd be burnt...

"Okay quite beating yourself up and get focused," the young fox admonished himself with a mental slap, "They don't have you yet, and even if they DO order a DNA match, you'll still have some time to work things out. So get it together, babe!"

Most animals assume that a DNA test takes about as long as a blood workup; it doesn't, the results can take anywhere from several weeks to two months to come back, especially in the case of an Unsub (unknown subject,) such as Conor Lewis. Matching his DNA against that of every other fox in the national database would be like searching for the proverbial needle in a haystack—a haystack the size of a circus tent. On top of that, the Mammals of Zootopia didn't need to know Conor's true identity in order to convict him, (much less apprehend him.) His case-file would NOT be put at the top of the ZPD crime-lab's 'to-do' list.
Fine, except…

Except his DNA data was already on file…in the Aker Security Management database and that system wasn't just sitting there, twiddling its digital thumbs. Among the other things contained in the ASM computer files was an AI search program known as GenVi…or so the young fox assumed; he couldn't be sure. He did know however that GenVi existed—and that Aker's computer systems had never been anything less than cutting edge; Kieran had taught him that. If Aker didn't have the GenVi app it was only because they had something even better, though it was hard to imagine what could possibly be; the instant the ZPD's DNA search-inquiry hit the web, the GenVi bot would spot it…and when the algorithm registered the keywords 'young' and 'silver-fox,' it would home in like a heat-seeking missile—and blow his remaining cover from here to Funbuck Egypt.

How much time did he have? Aggggh, grrrr, just his luck for this mess to happen on a weekend…

Conor already had his countermeasures in place; he'd had them in place even before he'd stepped out of that locker. (Ha…Tufts, what a moron!) He had set it up as a 'fail-safe program.' If the animal with the screen name Guildenkranz99+X#4 didn't hear back from him by 15:00 Zootopia time, he was to assume the animal he knew as Eyefelzogogud=+220^ had been arrested—and was to take appropriate action, (although he would never know for certain the purpose of that action.)

And even with his watch and cell-phone confiscated, Conor knew that it was well after 3:00 PM.

Of course, when he'd made those arrangements, he'd had no way of knowing that he'd end up getting busted for biting a cop… but the first of the two texts he'd sent while making his phone call had taken care of that…or it would once Guild got a look at his case-file.

There'd been a price to pay in that message, he'd had to give Guild his real name…but without it, his fellow member of The Circle would have no idea which case-file to look for, (and Conor's name was listed right at the top of it anyway.) It was a risk, but Guild would need that file in order to carry out the next step.

The second text had been directed not to any mammal but to a machine, specifically The Beast, which should now be hard at work, activating a long dormant website that the young fox and his online cohort had prepared for just such an occasion as this. It remained only for Guild to enter the appropriate information and click 'send.'

And that was the rub; Guild didn't have all the information yet—and he wouldn't be able to obtain it until the Mammals of Zootopia assigned a public defender to The Fox Known As Conor Lewis and then arraigned him. Aggghhhh, grrr and for the hundredth time; why'd he have to go and get himself arrested on a Saturday, when all the courts were closed? It would be Monday at the earliest before…

The elevator stopped and the doors slid open.

All thoughts vanished from the young fox's head, replaced by a keen awareness of his surroundings. He was about to set foot in familiar territory.

First there'd be the administration desk, where they'd process him, read him the riot act, and assign him his cell…after which they'd take him there. Since this was only a city jail, there would be no separate wings for larger and small mammals, only separate rows of cells. That meant it would be impossible for him to avoid making contact with any of the large-mammal kids.

How much contact there 'd be depended on something else; would the kids here be confined to their cells at the moment—or would right now be one the periods when they were permitted to
mingle? Conor hoped for the former; he didn't want anyone challenging him, not this soon.

Eventually, he knew, someone would challenge him; he was newbie, a fresh fish in old-school jailhouse slang...or that was what the kids in here would think was the case; the truth was something altogether different. Conor Lewis might be new to the Zootopia Juvenile Justice System, but to the system as whole he was a hardened veteran. If someone offered to fight him, he wouldn't accept the challenge; he'd go straight for the other kid without even another word. That was how you did it in the Granite Point Youth Reformatory; it was the only way you survived in that place. If someone even looked at you crossways in The Point, you had two choices; you could either fight him...or spend the rest of your stay there as a doormat.

At the Admin and Processing desk, the young fox offered only minimal answers to the questions he was asked, and nodded yes to every rule the leopard in charge laid down....although he wasn't really paying attention, he already knew the litany by heart, or at least the gist of it. Answer promptly when asked a question, no fighting, keep your cell clean, no fighting, blah, blah, blah... and NO fighting!

Conor listened, but he didn't really care. The really important rules on the inside were always the UN-written ones; never look away when an officer talks to you, but don't look defiant either, or like you're carrying a chip on your shoulder. Listen, or at least pretend to listen when an officer speaks to you, and above all show no fear, Always refer to the guards by name, but never by their first name; it's Mr. this and Ms. That. Never call them sir or ma'am unless you're ordered to.

Processing took about twenty minutes, after which another guard took charge of the young sliver fox, this one a water buffalo, who escorted him down a lionoleum tiled corridor and onto the ground floor of a three tiered rotunda.

Agggh, grrrr, no such luck about the prisoners being confined to their cells; it was mealtime and the commons was busy, with most of the tables occupied. As the buffalo marched him past the other kids Conor found he was under the scrutiny of what seemed like a zillion pairs of eyes. Most were merely appraising, but one or two were menacing; he made a mental note of those kid's faces and scents as best he could.

The important thing here was how he carried himself: don't, for heaven's sake walk hunched over and cowed, but at the same time don't even think about swaggering. Either one of those postures was practically begging for trouble. The thing you needed to do was put on your stone face and look straight ahead. Don't smile, don't frown…and whatever you do, don't glare at anyone. And keep your mouth shut; if another kid says something to you, just kind of roll your eyes at the hack escorting you...like you're saying, 'What are you trying to do, get me sent to the hole?' (Here, they probably didn't have a hole, but the message would get across and he'd be left alone. Nobody in Juvie wants to be pegged as the dude who gets other kids in trouble with the officers)

The water-buf escorted him brusquely past the commons area and in the direction of a stairway leading up to the second and third floor. Conor was neither surprised nor disappointed; duh, he wouldn't get to eat until after his cell assignment; that was SOP in any juvie jail.

As they approached the stairs however, something else caught his eye...something of so much interest that the young fox gave it only the merest glance before once again looking straight ahead. There, beneath the stairwell was a mop and bucket.

A metal bucket...

A metal bucker with a wringer handle...frakin'-A, you'd never see one of those things in any Zoo York City jail...much less a place like Granite Point; might as well pass out shivs to the kids while...
you were at it. Either the animals that ran this place were incredibly stupid, or else they really did have that little trouble. Conor suspected it was scenario number two; in fact, he was hoping that was the case. It would make for a complacent attitude among the administration here, something very much in accordance with his plans.

The water buffalo brought him to a cell about midway down the second tier, steering him inside, and unlocking his cuffs. The whole time he kept regarding the young silver fox with narrowed eyes, as if daring his charge to try and take a bite out of HIM.

"Like I'd EVER be that stupid," Conor thought disdainfully, massaging his wrists while the water buffalo slipped the cuffs into a belt holster.

There was pile of linens, a towel, and a blanket lying folded on the cell's single bunk-bed, (thank God, he at least had a place to himself.)

"Those are yours," the officer said, and went away, leaving the young fox to figure out for himself what to do with them.

Actually, Conor didn't need to figure out anything, he already knew the procedure; towels in the rack, sheets on the bead, then the blanket, and no you don't get a pillow. The whole time he worked, the young silver fox made certain to keep facing towards the front of his cell. Several times, he saw other kids passing by, giving him what looked like cursory glances, (but he knew better.)

All in all he was pleased by this development; the word would quickly make the rounds. 'That silver fox kid they just brought in? He ain't no greenhorn homies; knows better than to turn his back on the door to his cell while its standing open.'

Finishing up quickly, Conor left his cubicle, and headed back down the way he had come; he still had time to make the chow line, and whatever they were serving downstairs didn't smell half bad as jailhouse grub went, (not like Granite Point, where the kids used to chew ice and daub their noses with Vix before eating.)

Coming down the stairs, the young fox allowed his gaze to sweep over the gathering, at the same time sniffing deeply, searching for a familiar face or scent. While this was his first experience with the Zootopia juvenile justice system he knew a few young mammals from the hood whose stories were quite different…and there's nothing to ease the transition from street to jail like having someone to vouch for you.

Conor was about five feet away from the end of the chow line when it happened; the old saying, 'Be careful what you wish for, you may get it' slammed into him like an express train. Yes there was a familiar scent in the air…but it wasn't a welcome one.

"Craig Guilford…dangit I forgot all about him! Agggghhh, grrrr, I should NEVER have let Nick out of his promise to me. If that psycho-yote finds out that I helped get his dad busted…Aw nuts, where the heck is he anyway?"

He let his gaze wander feverishly over the commons area, finally spotting the young coyote at a table about five yards away. He was sitting with the seats on either side of him unoccupied…even though by now the commons was packed like a subway car. Not good…

Conor quickly made his eyes move on…but apparently not quickly enough.

"Hey you…fox!"
"Aw, heck!"

"Hey, shifty, I'm talking to you. What do you think you're lookin' at, you little snot?"

Craig was on his feet with his fangs showing, the smaller species around him moving quickly away. (The larger ones all seemed thoroughly entertained)

"Cripes I barely glanced at this guy." Conor groaned inwardly, wanting to face pawlm himself clear across the room and back again.

He knew what he had to say of course. In this place there was only one right answer to that question. He spun on his heel and bared his own fangs, at the same time unsheathing his claws.

"Okay punk, let's go to the showers right now and throw down!" (In just about any jail you can think of, the shower-room is a good place to settle differences the hard way.)

Luckily, before either one of the young antagonists could make a move, another kid, a black bear got quickly in between them.

"Hey dudes, what you think you're doing huh? You already got violent tags on you; cool it before you both get muzzled."

"Then that's what's gonna happen," Conor snarled, never taking his eyes off the coyote.

"Go ahead, I don't care." Craig Guilford's voice was equally flat…and the young fox was instantly taken aback for second.

"All right, what's going on over there?" One of the officers, an elk, was moving rapidly in their direction. At about ten feet away he stopped, pointing in turn at Conor and then at Craig.

"All right YOU…get back in line, and YOU…get back to your seat right now, and then I better see the two of you keeping your distance from each other…or else." (To show what he meant by 'or else', he patted the muzzle attached to his belt.)

Craig growled and turned away from Conor, but not before shooting him a look that spoke volumes. The young fox gave it right back to him and then returned to the chow line, noting that he was immediately given back his place. Well at least he'd manage to establish himself; the other kids now knew that if pushed, this silver fox kid WOULD fight back…even against a species that much bigger and stronger than his own.

But thank goodness he hadn't needed to; he could have kissed that bear-kid for stopping it. The reality though was that he couldn't even say thanks; in juvie you disn't give even the appearance of wanting to walk away from a fight.

And also…

One thing Conor had learned a long time ago was that the most powerful weapon in a fight is attitude…and that the most dangerous attitude isn't a willingness to win at all costs, it's not caring if you lose; not caring WHAT the heck the other guy may do to you.

Conor Lewis had that attitude; he'd had it for a long time. When he'd said to the bear-kid, "then that's what's gonna happen," he'd meant every syllable. It was a creed that had helped him prevail—or at least survive—against several other opponents bigger and stronger than himself.

Unfortunately for him, Craig Guilford had that attitude as well. His declaration of "Go ahead!" had
been equally sincere. If they ever did come down to tooth and claw, the young silver fox would be deprived of his single, biggest advantage.

*I've GOT to find a way to keep that 'yote up off of me...at least until after my arraignment, but how?" He racked his brain for moment, finding no solution, and then gave it up. It was his turn at the steam tables next.

After a completely unmemorable meal, he returned to his cell. There was nothing to read and he needed to let the food settle before attempting any push-ups or sit ups, so he lay down on his bunk with his head propped against the wall, keeping his eyes on the door to his cell while mentally reviewing the chord progressions for Fork In The Road by Richard Tomcat, a song he'd recently been trying to learn.

Conor was about midway through the second verse when someone appeared in the doorway of his cell, and this time their scent was welcome news.

"You Conah Lewis, right?" the spotted hyena asked him.

"Yeah, that's me," he answered, swinging off the bed and onto his feet, "And you're Shem…Treo's cousin?"

"His half brotha, but yeah, that's close enough," the hyena answered, showing all his teeth in a pearly grin. He continued to stand in the doorway, refusing to cross the threshold without being invited. Conor appreciated that and immediately beckoned both Shem and the striped hyena standing beside him into the cell. The smaller animal was vaguely familiar, although the young fox couldn't quite place him.

"So, I hear you in here coz you bit yourself a cop?" Shem asked him, leaning back against the wall and scratching his muzzle.

Conor shrugged, "What can I say, he grabbed me from behind and I flashbacked; didn't even know he was a cop until afterwards. Heck, I didn't even realize that I'd bitten him until I saw him bleeding."

It was a wholly inadequate explanation but the two hyenas seemed to find it satisfactory, then Shem's companion spoke up.

'You don't know me fox, but I was there at de gazebo in Sa'ra Square the otha night, when you made dat fossa give back your mate's guitar. Whoa, dat was some jam afta' fox."

"Yeah, what a great night, huh?" the young silver fox offered, reaching out to clasp paws with the striped hyena. Inwardly though, he was sighing wistfully. Would he ever know a time like that again?

And then it was Shem's turn to speak again.

"Listen mammal, you want us help get that coyote out your fur?"

Conor was sorely tempted to say yes but there'd be too high a price to pay later on. He immediately shook his head.

"Noooo, I can fight my own fights, guys," he said and then gestured towards the front of his cell, "But if that stupid punk does decide to make a move on me, I'd appreciate some warning if you follow what I'm bringing out."
"You got it, fox." Both hyenas said in unison, and the three of them exchanged another fist-bump. Then Shem nodded curtly at his companion, "Anotha thing, Conah… Miles gettin' out on Monday, city's not filin' chahges on him after all."

"Yeah, ain't it typical?" Conor pantomimed spitting in the corner, "They always pull that drop-the-charges stuff on Fridays, after the courts are closed…so's you're stuck in jail for the whole stinkin' weekend." He could not have been more pleased at the opportunity to make the observation. If THIS wouldn't give him cred as a mammal who'd been here, done this, nothing would.

"You got dat right!" the striped hyena said, looking equally contemptuous, and then he waved a dismissive paw. "Anyway fox, you got someone you want me take a message for you."

Conor felt his head tilting sideways as he pondered the question.

Finally, he said, "Mmmm I can't think of anyone right off the top of my head…but then I just got here. Can you check back with me later, say sometime tomorrow evening? I may have a better idea about it then."

"No problem, mammal." Miles and Shem both grinned.

Several miles away, on a mountainside overlooking the Tundratown district, Jack La Peigne was grinning too—except his expression was more sardonic than sociable.

He was perched at the top of a ski-run, peering downwards at the slope below, a sheer expanse of white that seemed to fall away at an insane angle. Three feet to his right a sign had been posted, consisting of two, simple, gloss-black diamonds, the lower of which some wag had emblazoned with a caricature of a death's head, (some kind of big cat, by the look of it.)

Small wonder it was then, that the Snow Devil ski-run was more often referred to by its unofficial nickname, the Quad Maker. Only the best and/or the most foolhardy of Zootopia's ski community dared to try it—even in winter, much less during the summer, when snowpack was much thinner.

Jack La Peigne fit neatly into both categories; he'd been an expert skier for almost ten years now and—considering all he stood to lose if he snuffed it on a ski slope NOW—could be labeled certifiably nuts for even thinking about attempting this run.

But…this was probably the last opportunity he'd get to try The Quad-Maker for a while. Tomorrow morning, as per his orders, he was going under the knife; Dr. Honeybadger was fitting him out with the latest infusion module. There would be no ski slopes for this big bunny afterwards, not for a while at least.

If Jack was crazy, at least he wasn't alone in his insanity. He had two companions preparing to make the run along with him. On his left was Rob Liger, a lynx, CEO of perhaps the most powerful media/entertainment conglomerate on the planet. Over on his other side was a marmot with deep-set eyes, Sam "Sandy' Camelson, heir to a nearly global casino empire.

On paper, Jack was the least of the trio. The corporation run by Liger was at least three times the size of the Aker group, and the Camelson family's cash reserves easily eclipsed his own.

Ah, but there were devilish details to consider. Liger had been elected CEO of his company in the wake of a brutal corporate war, a conflict between the last scion of the family that had founded it and a clique led by the firm's then Chief Executive Officer. The old money had won that fight, but it had been a pyrrhic victory and had paved the way for Liger's ascension to Chief Executive Officer. Even then, he'd been a compromise candidate—nobody's first choice, but
nobody's last choice either. He could be removed from power at any time, and his board of directors never let him forget it.

As for Sandy Camelson, well…

For starters, he was the youngest of the trio by at least ten years, largely untried and mostly untested; he had yet to face his first real crisis. On top of that, it was only by way of his family 'gonnegtions' that Sandy had risen so high up in his company, a casino empire built by his father, not by him. And old Meyer Camelson wasn't as powerful as he appeared to be either; at least half his gaming houses were based in countries that could nationalize them out of his paws with a snap of their fingers. (And lately, he'd been cozying up to a number of politicians that the biggest of their number didn't like very much.)

No… of the three animals preparing to descend the Quad-Maker that afternoon, only he, Jack LaPeigne, could lay claim to being his own mammal. (And if…no, when The Fire Triangle project finally bore fruit, he'd be able to claim a whole lot more.)

"Shall we make it a sporting proposition, gents?" Sandy Camelson asked, in that annoying faux-English accent he sometimes affected, "Last one down buys dinner." He spoke with the sure-footed confidence of someone who knows that HE won't be picking up the tab.

"I'm game," Rob Liger agreed laconically. (One more fancy dinner on HIS expense account would be less than a drop in the bucket.)

"Well, far be it from me to be the party-pooper," Jack La Peigne agreed, hiding his irritation. What, did these two fools think he'd just crawled out of the carrot patch five minutes ago? If there was any animal that knew a conspiracy when he saw one, it was this not-so-stupid rabbit. His two companions were up to something, he could feel it in the tips of his ears…and it didn't take a whole lot of imagination on his part to guess what that something was.

Rob and Sandy were meanwhile adjusting their ski goggles. Jack watched them for a moment and then slipped his own goggles down over his eyes, rocking them back and forth for a second to ensure a snug fit, and then the three of them edged their way to the lip of the ski-run.

"On three?" Sandy suggested, and both Jack and Robb nodded—although the big bunny did it while forcing himself not smirk. "If this junior woodchuck is going to try and put one over on me, he should at least refrain from insulting my intelligence."

"Okay," the marmot said, and waited for a second while the others positioned their ski-poles. And then at a nod from Jack, and Rob, he started the countdown

"Ready? One…THREE!"

He pushed off fast with Liger right beside him; the Lynx had either seen it coming or—much more likely—he was in on it. Jack La Peigne could only shake his head as he watched the pair moving rapidly away from him. Good God, so obvious; these two funny-boys really DID think he was just a dumb bunny.

Instead of pushing off immediately in hot pursuit, Jack gave the pair a few seconds more, and then he eased off onto the slope and began his own descent.

About 30 yards ahead, he could see his two companions, schussing their way downhill…hips and ski-poles swinging left and right as they danced and twisted their way through a thicket of moguls.

In terms of species, both of them had the advantage over the big bunny, marmots are an alpine
mammal and lynxes are built for snow-country. If Jack was going to catch up with them, much less overtake them, he would have to ski smarter, not merely faster than these two.

Either that or he'd have to be willing to take a risk that they wouldn't touch with a ten-foot ski-pole.

Luckily for him, they had already made their first mistake, heading downwards through mogul country. With every turn and rooster-tail, they lost a little more time and a little more distance on their pursuer, especially Sandy who had already been overtaken by his own youthful arrogance. He seemed to think he'd won the bet from the moment he'd hit the ski-slope and was now intent upon impressing any females that might be watching.

Aiming for the straightest, smoothest part of the run, Jack tucked himself downward, and flattened out his body, trying to create as little wind resistance as possible. It was plain, unflavored gelatin compared to the parfait Sandy Camelson was whipping up…but the big bunny was rapidly beginning to gain ground on both him and Rob Liger.

Had they been aware of what was coming up fast behind them, the pair might have knocked off the hijinks and tried to put on some speed of their own—but they were completely unaware of what was transpiring in their wake.

That had been their second mistake, forgetting that on the Quad-Maker you never looked backwards, not even for half a second…not unless you wanted to leave this mountain strapped to a gurney and comatose.

At about ten yards behind Liger and Camelson (and fifteen more to their left,) Jack eased himself up just a bit, no longer trying to overtake them, but merely keeping pace. He could afford to do this because now he was nearly within striking distance.

And there below him was his target, a jutting, nimbus-grey rock formation known because of its shape as the Praying Paws, (but thought of by the locals as the Preying Paws.) As the official name implied, there was a gap through the center of the outcropping—but you had to approach it just so; angle in from the left and then shift hard to the right at the last instant. But even if you made it, you weren't done yet…the pathway through the rock formation was both narrow and slick…slick as black ice. And then if you were lucky enough to get all the way through, that was when the real fun began.

Jack cut to the left in a wide, sweeping crescent. The rocks were coming on hellishly fast now. Closer, closer…you need to wait until they're almost in your face, until the only way to avoid ending up as a paint-ball splatter is to make that last-second turn. Almost….alllllmosst, and…. NOW!

The big bunny twisted hard on his skis, at the same time slamming down on his left ski-pole and executing a fast half-pirouette. For a heartstopping instant, he wasn't sure if he'd timed it right…and then he shot through the entrance like a crossbow bolt. Down and down the chute he went, moving at what felt like terminal velocity, barely able to keep his skis from flying out from under him, the tip of his right pole clicking against the rocks like a seismograph stylus.

And then he saw the exit, an almost perfect triangle of blue sky. No time to think about that; get ready….and…

Jack burst out of the tunnel as if hurled from a catapult…and was instantly airborne, the mountainside falling rapidly away beneath him at a nearly vertical angle. Most of the face was rock; it was a long way down to the snowpack again. (Even in Tundratown, summer is still summer.)
Soaring though the air, high above the Quad-Maker, Jack La Peigne became aware of everything around him, his senses honing to a razor-keen sharpness. The figures at the bottom of the run looked no bigger than a troop of ants, yet even at this distance the big bunny could tell that some of them were pressing their paws to their faces and gasping. He heard the rush of the wind in his ears, felt the sting of every individual snowflake and ice-crystal against his face; somewhere far below, an alder-wood fire was burning, he could smell it. The taste of adrenalin in his mouth was like fine, single-crop carrot-juice.

These were the moments Jack La Peigne lived for…but now, if he intended to keep on living…

He straightened and stiffened his body, the ski poles held out stiffly behind him, keeping his skis at a steep angle. He could see the ground coming up beneath him, slowly at first…rock, rock, and more rock. And then his rate of descent seemed to increase exponentially, faster and faster, the slope beneath him still sheathed in stone.

No wait, there was the snow again…but the slope was steep, incredibly sheer. If he could just… keep his skis…at the correct angle…drop them just a little bit more…a tiny bit more…

Jack La Peigne touched down on the snow as delicately as a butterfly alighting on a flower. And then he was tearing downhill at an insane speed, his skis throwing up tails of snow and ice-crystals as he hurtled towards the end of the run.

He noticed immediately that Liger and Camelson were no longer in front of him; he had no idea how far behind him they had fallen; what mattered was that they were behind him. They were never going to catch him now, not at this speed, not now.

There was a jump right before the end of the run, and on an impulse, the big bunny went for it; up the slope and airborne again, the world tumbling crazily beneath him as he performed a midair somersault. Coming down on the other side, he felt his left ski trying to wobble, but quickly corrected it. And then there was the finish; he could see the animals gathered around applauding, a few were cheering, and one or two of the younger ones were even whooping. Among their number were trio of doe-bunnies, watching him with clasped paws and adoring faces. Wait a second, that girl on the left; could it possibly be…? No, it wasn't her.

Jack hit the finish on a sideways drift-turn, throwing up a veil of snow and then shaking himself and raising his pole in triumph. At once the acclimations rose to a fever-pitch, more whoops, more cheers, and a thousand declarations of 'Awesome!'

The big bunny ignored it all, instead turning and lifting his ski-goggles, at last able to check on the progress of his companions.

Rob Liger was still about ten yards away from the finish. As for Sandy Camelson, there he was, performing a triple somersault over the jump. Jack allowed himself a caustic smirk. Last was still last…and all the fancy moves under heaven couldn't conceal the fact that Sandy owed both him and Rob a dinner. (And besides that, a dozen cartwheels over that jump couldn't match the big bunny's leap from the Praying Paws.) He was especially pleased that it was Sandy who was bringing up the rear. That 'One…THREE!' business had been the marmot's idea and also, being as the money he'd be spending belonged to his dad, he was always a much more lavish host than Liger, (who had to explain all of his fursonal expenses to his board of directors.)

Now, watching the two of them pole their way in his direction, Jack folded his arms and smiled, ready to sample the heady nectar of victory.

It was not to be. At that moment, a helicopter came wheeling in low over the foot of the ski-run,
causing most of the crowd to duck. Jack La Peigne was not among their number; he'd been expecting the chopper's arrival. He ought to, he was the one who'd sent for it...or more correctly, for the animal who had better be on board of that machine.

Bu even so..."Sweet cheez n' crackers, couldn't you have waited a FEW more minutes?"

He watched as the helicopter settled down on a nearby landing pad, (life-flights from this location were not exactly an unknown occurrence.) After a short moment, the blades began to slow and the door opened, disgorging the big bunny's head of field operations, Seth Whitepaugh, and two of his underlings.

Jack turned to his companions, who were looking at him with a mixture of wariness and confusion.

"I'm afraid I'll have to take leave of you for just a moment," he said, "Some rather important business, it won't take but a few minutes."

Without waiting for a reply, he turned and began to pole his way in the direction of the three wolverines—but then stopped, seeming to remember something, and turned to look over a shoulder.

"Don't forget Samuel, you owe Rob and me dinner tonight."

"I'll remember," the marmot replied, gritting his teeth like a kit informing his teacher, 'Yes, I'll remember to clean the erasers!' (He absolutely hated to be called Samuel...especially in public, as Jack well knew.)

As usual, when he caught up with Seth Whitepaugh the big bunny skipped the greetings; in fact, he didn't even speak first to the senior of the three wolverines.

"Some help with my ski-boots here?" he said, addressing the other two.

It was not a request, and they treated it as such, swiftly dropping swiftly to their haunches and undoing the fastenings and bindings.

Stepping out of his ski-boots, the big bunny stamped his feet to get the circulation going, and at last spoke to his senior operative.

"I'll see you privately in that hut over there Whitepaugh," he said, pointing with a ski-pole, and then to the others he added, "You two, make sure we're not disturbed."

As soon as they entered the hut, Jack got straight down to brass tacks.

"Whitepaugh...while I was on my way up here, I received a rather disturbing piece of news, regarding the operation earlier today."

The wolverine merely raised an eyebrow, unruffled and even less surprised

"You are referring, I take it sir, to the incident in in the alleyway behind the target?" He made no mention of Judy Hopps.

Jack clapped his paws against his elbows and then settled down on a nearby stool.

"Yes, that's correct," he said, and then raised a finger in the wolverine's direction. "Let's not beat around the bush Whitepaugh. Yes, I have feelings for Judy Hopps—but they don't matter here. If it had been any ZPD officer who nearly bought it in that alleyway I still would have summoned you
here." He folded his arms, looking very grim "This early on in the Fire Triangle operation, a dead police officer—even an injured one—is a luxury we can't afford; later on perhaps, but not at present. The last thing we need right now is for the City to take sides—and that's precisely what would have happened if Judy Hopps had been killed when that power pole collapsed."

"Yes sir, I'm aware of that." The wolverine answered, nodding gravely. Whatever his employer's motivations were, he was right and they both knew it.

"Therefore," Jack unlaced his arms and pointed with a ski-pole, "I want you to take fursonal charge of our next operation; we need to make absolutely certain that this time there will be NO chance of collateral damage, not even a near miss."

"Consider it done sir," Whitepaugh nodded as if he'd been expecting this all along, (he probably had.)

"Very good," the big bunny answered, "When is it scheduled for?"

"The balloon goes up at 02:00, Monday morning." The wolverine told him. "We want it to be as close to their opening for business as possible, to insure the maximum effect—but at the same time we need to make certain that our operatives will have sufficient opportunity to escape."

"Very good," Jack nodded approvingly, "and the one after that?"

"Same time, Tuesday morning," Whitepaugh told him

The big bunny's ears shot upwards like antennae.

"Isn't that rather soon?"

A sardonic smile unzipped along the wolverine's muzzle.

"Yes it is sir…but you have to consider the character of Mark #2, temperamental, impulsive; prone to lash out violently first and ask questions never. Striking back immediately is exactly what he'd do."

"Ah yes, that's true, isn't it?" Jack rubbed at the back of his neck…and if anything, the leer spreading slowly across his features was even nastier than the smirk on Seth Whitepaugh's face.
Chapter Summary

Wrench in the works

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

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Part One:

Fuel

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**Chapter 9 – Fire And Mirrors**
(Continued…Pt. 6)

"Owww…Car-ROTS!" Nick Wilde shot up out of his chair like a jumping-jackal, dancing in place and yelping. Grabbing a napkin from basket in the center of the table, he dabbed frenziedly at the spots where Judy had spilled her coffee on him.

She appeared to take no notice.

"Sweet cheez n' crackers, I can't believe this, Nick. What on earth were you THINKING?"

"I had no choice, Fluff!" the fox retorted, waving his arms as if to ward off an apparition, (or maybe it was just the hot coffee) "Swearing to keep it a secret was the only way I could talk Conor into helping me—and like I already told you, I couldn't have done it without him."

They were seated in the back booth of a tiny coffee and pastry shop, nestled deep in a side street, just off Savanna Central's main plaza. Known simply as Le Nook, it was one of those blink-and-you-miss-it types of establishments. (Judy had chased Duke Weaselton right past it, when he'd snatched those Nighthowler bulbs.) There was just enough room in here for her, Nick, and perhaps three other patrons, (or just one if an elephant, hippo, or rhino came through the door.) It was the only place in the district where you could get gen-u-wine French-press coffee.

Unlike the Raccoon Lodge, Le Nook was nobody's cop-shop, (which was the whole point of their being here.) Nick had known about it for years, or that was what he'd told Judy. The owner/proprietor was an old dun goat with what the red fox liked to call 'selective hearing'. She could tune out a boom box cranked up to earthquake level if the spirit moved her…and she was always so moved if a customer asked for some 'privacy,' (and if they slipped a little something extra into the tip jar.)
"You have to understand something Carrots," Nick was saying as he took his seat again. "When a fox gives his word to another fox, it's something like a sacred vow. No other species will trust us—please don't say it, I know—so we have to be able to trust each other. Like Finnick used to say, 'we're all we got.'"

Judy bit her lip for a second; there was more to this than he was telling her. The biggest regret of her partner's life was the time when he HAD broken his word to another fox, to the vixen he'd loved and then lost because of it. Could she honestly blame him for not wanting to repeat that mistake?

No, she decided, looking away towards the shop's front window...no, she couldn't.

"Hm, only a few animals out there," she noted. Wel-l-l, that was only par for the course, Sunday mornings were always the quiet time here in Savanna Central.

She turned her attention back to her partner.

"Oh-kay Nick, I think I understand. I'm still none too happy with this...but I understand." She shook her head, "but still..."

"What?"

Judy laid her paws on the table and flexed them. Nothing annoyed her more than having someone answer a question with another question, but there was no getting around it; she had to know...and so she allowed herself the minor hypocrisy.

"Nick, who else knows about this besides you, me, and Conor?"

His eyes turned upwards at the ceiling for a moment.

"Uhhh, you might want to swallow that coffee first, Carrots. Okay, your sister Erin; she knows."

"WHAT?!" Whoa, it was good thing Nick had warned her; she would have gotten him right in the face this time. As it was, her next words came out as an unintelligible sputter.

Nick meanwhile was raising his paws defensively. "Don't look at me bunny-lady, it was Conor who brought her into it; he said he needed her help to get the lights doused."

Judy coughed, tried to speak, and then coughed again.

"All right Nick, okay," she finally said. She didn't know why that information made the situation any more acceptable...but somehow it did, and she wasn't about to be choosy at a time like this. Besides, this was Erin he was talking about...and the more she thought about it...

Nick apparently thought otherwise.

"You think she might tell anyone?" he asked her, sounding not a little hopeful. Since when were girls at 'that age' adept at keeping secrets?

"Nooo, not my little sis," the grey-furred bunny-cop answered, a wry smile spreading across her face, "If Erin was going to spill the beans, I'd already know about Conor helping you; she'd have told me night, when I called." (Judy had insisted upon fursonally breaking the news about the young fox's arrest to her younger sister.) "Besides, if I know her, she won't want anyone knowing the part she played in stopping that attack either...afraid the Guilfords might find out."
"But they're all in jail!" The red fox protested, and now it was his partner's turn to throw up her paws in frustration.

"I know, I know; tell Erin, not me…and honestly, can you blame her? Remember all those things Craig said when we brought him into the precinct? 'When I get out of here, I'm gonna bite your ears off, cottontail—you AND your dumb bunny sister'…uh, what?"

Nick had stiffened in his chair and his tail was frizzing.

"Craig…oh foxtrot, how could I have …? He's upstairs in City Juvie right now…with Conor! If he's crazy enough to want some payback on your sister…"

"That's why I asked you who knows what happened, besides him and us," Judy interrupted, "because we can't tell anyone else about it—and Craig Guilford isn't the only reason we can't."

Nick tail dropped downward and his tail fur smoothed out again. Judy saw his head tilt sideways and wondered why he always looked so cute whenever he did that.

"Okay, I'll bite; what's the other reason?" he asked her.

Judy felt her ears pull backwards, laying tight against the nape of her neck.

"Jerry Guilford! If his lawyer finds out you held something back when you made your report to the Burrow County Sheriff's Department, what do you think HE'LL do?"

It might or might not have been rhetorical question, but the red fox answered her anyway.

"Probably move for a dismissal of charges, on the grounds of a false police report," he said…and then let out a snort that would have made Chief Bogo turn green with envy. "Come on, Fluff; how does that change anything? Burrow County has more than enough evidence to convict the Guilford brothers, Conor or no Conor. The courts won't buy that line of defense and you know it."

"No, but Jerry Guilford might." Judy countered, aiming a finger to underline the point, "and then, Craig or no Craig, he might decide to stick with that Not Guilty plea after all …and then you'll have to testify against him."

Nick's response to this could not have been more surprising if he'd jumped up on the table and started performing a break-dance.

"Well then, as Conor would say, 'that's what's going to happen.' He leaned towards her, tapping the table as he spoke, his face a mask of resolve. "You asked me a minute ago what the heck I was thinking when I made that promise to him? Well, I'll tell you, Carrots; I was thinking that someone very special to me—that a whole bunch of bunnies very special to me were in danger…and that I had to move NOW if I was going to help protect them, never mind however much it might cost me later on."

Judy fell back in her chair, stunned, unable to find a reply. Even for him this was being incredibly forthright. "Nick you could have…" she started to say, but he already had his paw up.

"No I couldn't, Carrots; I know what you're going to say, and no, it wouldn't have worked. This was right after that mess I caused with the fire hose, remember? Not a lot of animals were ready to listen to me right then."

The rest of Judy's words died instantly in her throat; no they hadn't been, and she'd completely forgotten about that fire hose business. Then she felt something and realized that Nick had taken
hold of her paws. She tried to pull away, but her arms refusing all orders from her brain.

"If I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't change a thing, Carrots." he said meeting her gaze with his own. "Because we did it, we kept the animals at the Big Dance safe…and that's the only thing that matters."

Once again, Judy felt her words failing her…and why had she never noticed before how deep her partner's eyes were… 

And then her hip began to buzz and the spell was broken. 

Hastily, perhaps a little too hastily, she and Nick let go of each other. 

Reaching for her phone, Judy found herself trying hard not to look at the fox on the other side of the table, (who seemed to have taken a sudden interest in his fingers.) Meanwhile her phone continued with its purring summons. 

When she picked up, it was Chief Bogo on the other end. 

"Hopps, where are you? The public defender that young Mister Lewis's been demanding is here at the precinct. They're bringing the boy down to meet him now. Is Wilde there with you?"

"Yes he's here, Chief," she answered, barely glancing at Nick, "And we're right across Central Plaza from you; we can be there in five, ten minutes tops."

"Right-o, I'll see you shortly," the Cape buffalo said and rang off, 

"So they got a Public Defender for Conor?" Nick asked her, as she put the phone away. (He had heard enough to piece together what the Chief had been saying.)

"Yep, let's go," she said, pushing back her chair from the table—reluctantly; neither one of them was much looking forward to this.

For the next few moments, they walked in an uneasy silence, one that Judy knew was not going to last; Nick would break it, he always did. They were just mounting the precinct's front steps when her prediction at last came true. 

"Say Carrots, I almost forgot to ask; how did Erin take it when you told her about what happened with Conor?"

The corners of Judy's mouth went in two different directions, and then she rubbed her chin with a finger, pretending to look thoughtful.

"Let's see...she hates me, she doesn't ever want to speak to me again, and I am now officially the Worst! Sister! EVER!" She once more regarded him with that skewed expression, "Other than that, she took it just fine."

Nick sighed and she saw him suppressing a smirk. And then he said, "For what it's worth Carrots, none of that is anything she can't take back later."

Judy heaved a sigh of her own, "Yes, I know; that's only the first stage…and it won't last. Heck, Erin's probably moved on to denial already, maybe even bargaining. Girls that age, you know how it goes."

"Right," her partner nodded, the expression on his face indicating that when it came to bunny-girls
at the age of 13, he knew nu-thing, nu-thing, nu-thing.

Just then, a car came lumbering around the corner behind them, on course for the Precinct-1
visitor's lot, a mist-green, vintage, fully restored, Meercury Super 8, complete with windshield
visor. Neither of them noticed it…but that was hardly surprising; the vehicle was only about the
size of a wolf's lunchbox.

Arriving at Interview Room #2, Nick and Judy quickly discovered the action had been moved next
doors to Room #1, the cell normally reserved for large-mammal suspects. It was easy to see why,
what with all the bodies in here. In addition to Rudy Gamsbart and Lieutenant Tufts, Chief Bogo
was present, along with Claire Swinton and Officer Joe Pennington, the elephant standing behind
the chair where Conor Lewis was sitting.

They had put him in a booster seat, which had the effect of giving the young silver fox something
of the appearance of a toddler in a high chair, (much to the amusement of Albert Tufts.) There was
also an animal present that Judy didn't recognize, a wildebeest in a natty suit and a bow-tie, no
doubt the young fox's court-appointed attorney.

(Oh yes, that's who he was all right; he couldn't have looked more unhappy to be here if Chief
Bogo had been holding him in a wrist-lock.)

"Good, you're here, we can get started," Gamsbart nodded a greeting to the fox and bunny and then
turned to usher the wildebeest in Conor's direction.

"All right Mister Lewis, you wanted a lawyer, you've got one. This is Mr. Bradley Hickenbocker of
the Zootopia Public Defender's Office; he's been assigned to represent you in your case.

The wildebeest glanced uneasily at Gamsbart for a second before speaking—and Judy noticed for
the first time how young he was; fresh out of law school by the look of him, maybe only just
passed the bar a month ago. Seriously, this animal looked so wet behind the ears she could almost
see the excess moisture, running down the side of his neck.

"Well that's what Conor gets for pushing the issue of a lawyer on a weekend," Judy told herself,
qualifying the thought with a half-hearted, "I suppose."

Hickenbocker, meanwhile, was reaching out to offer a hoof to this new client.

"Hello Conor," he said, and Judy felt her teeth begin to grind against each other. The wildebeest
had a voice like someone rubbing finger on a balloon; how was that likely to go over with a judge?

"Well, like Mr. Gamsbart said, I'll be representing you," he started to say…before another voice
from down near the floor level interrupted him.

"Ahhh, that won't be necessary, Mr. Hickenbocker."

Every head in the room turned, their faces undergoing a bewildering change of emotions, first
surprise, then confusion, then horror, and ultimately loathing.

Standing in the doorway of the interrogation cell was a grey rat in an off-white linen suit and
a kippah cap. In one paw, he held a briefcase; in the other, a rodent-size folding quad chair.

"I'll be handling Mr. Lewis's case from here on out," he said to the wildebeest…in a tone
reminiscent of W.C. Fieldmouse informing a pesky child, 'Go away boy, ya bother me.'

In response, the public defender looked over at Rudy Gamsbart…who looked like HE was about
ready to come right out of his hide.

It would have been no small task to find an animal more despised by Zootopia's law enforcement community than Vernon J. Rodenberg, Attorney at Law; he was the mob lawyer's mob lawyer. While he might not be the *only* reason Mr. Big and his Sahara Square counterparts were currently walking the streets instead of The Yard, he had certainly been a factor.

What the heck was he *doing* here? No one said it, but that's what everyone was thinking. As the old mob chestnut went, Vern Rodenberg didn't come cheap—and if he didn't get what he asked for, he didn't come at all. When Gamsbart queried him about it, he only shrugged, "I got a phone call," and nodded upwards in Conor's direction.

Judy felt her ears shooting skywards. So THAT'S who the kid had called yesterday. Only...why did he look as surprised as everyone else at the grey rat's presence? Weirder and weirder...

"And you're only just NOW responding?" Rudy Gamsbart demanded, incredulous.

In response, Rodenberg spread his arms, speaking in the indulgent tone of an uncle chiding an errant nephew.

"COUN-selorr, you know I never conduct business on a Saturday." To illustrate what he meant, he patted the skullcap affixed to his head.

And that was the *last* show of bonhomie Gamsbart was going to get from him. Setting his load down, the grey rat slapped his paws on hips and fixed the chamois in a flinty gaze.

"All right Mr. Prosecutor, you know the drill," he pointed at the doorway, and then at the two-way mirror, "everyone outta the pool, kill the recorders, and draw the curtains. I want to speak with my client in private."

"Just a minute, Counselor..." Rudy Gamsbart started to say, but was cut off by an interjection from Conor.

"Yes, I want Mr. Rodenberg to represent me," he said, the words practically flying out of his mouth; even he could see where the chamois had been going with this.

"Very well," the deputy prosecutor stood up, unruffled as always, and nodded at Brad Hickenbocker, "All right, you can go."

The wildebeest nodded and all but bolted through the doorway, followed by Gamsbart and the others, who exited in a more stately fashion. As they passed by Vern Rodenberg, several of them took the opportunity to offer him a withering glare. (Chief Bogo looked as if he was ready to stomp the little grey so-and-so straight through the floor.)

The one exception was Nick Wilde; when he filed past the rat, he made a point of looking elsewhere, his expression one of confusion rather than hostility. Many moons previously, in another, all-but-forgotten life, Vern Rodenberg had represented HIM in a case, (and thank goodness he had.) Thus it was that the red-fox's feelings about the rat were much more mixed that those of his compatriots. Not to put too fine a point on it, he didn't know *what* to think.

"You done with that coffee cup?" Rodenberg said to Claire Swinton as the pig-cop prepared to make her exit. He held out his paws. "Give it here, I need something to use as a desk."

"Sure," Swinton nodded and gave it to him...after crushing it into an ersatz golf-ball.
"Nice one, Officer." he said, staring up at her with quivering whiskers.

"Someone get him another one," Rudy Gamsbart called from outside the room, and a moment later Joe Penningon returned with another empty coffee-cup in his trunk…which he set on the table so gingerly, it could not possibly have been anything but a gesture of sarcasm.

When the door finally closed, Rodenberg looked up and for the first time spoke directly to Conor.

"Gimme a boost up the tabletop, kid…and don't pick me up…"

"Yeah, I know; one of my best buds from school is a rat," the young fox answered him, and then slid partway down the side of the chair, bending nearly all the way over and laying the flat of his pawlm on the floor. He lifted Rodenberg up onto the table and then twisted upright in his seat again. By that time, the rodent was already spreading the quad chair open. Plopping himself into it, he ignored his briefcase for the moment and made no effort to pull himself up to the inverted coffee cup, instead pointing a finger at his client.

"Okay kid, before we get down to cases, coupla things you're not gonna like, but they need to be said anyway. First of all," he turned his finger inwards pointing it at himself, "If you think you're going to walk before lunchtime, just coz you got me for an attorney, you can lose that idea right now. You ain't gettin' out of here anytime soon; I don't deliver miracles. Second," he leaned forward in his chair gripping the armrests tightly, "That was a really stupid thing you did, pulling that Usual Suspects shtick on Rudy Gamsbart. You may have thought you were being oh-so-cool-and-clever at the time…but watch what happens when the judge hears about it."

He got halfway out of his seat and pointed again, this time aiming his finger right between the young fox's burning-amber eyes.

"Get this through your head, Junior; life's not some bad cartoon movie, where the adults are all morons, the kids are all geniuses, and they make chumps out of the grownups at every turn. I need a client with that kind of attitude like Mars needs Moms."

The reaction from Conor made the grey rat's whiskers quiver in surprise. No argument, no protest, nothing even close to 'copping a 'tude', as the kids of today liked to put it. Instead the young fox only nodded glumly. "Yeah, I know. What can I say, I was torqued; that hornheaded jerk kept trying to make me waive my right to counsel. I know that's no excuse," he added hastily, "but I want you to know I wasn't just being a smartmouth back there."

Had he known his attorney a little better, the young fox would have been stymied by what transpired next. Vern Rodenberg…left speechless? That was something you saw about as often as a total eclipse of the sun. The last thing the grey rat had expected from this kid—or from any kid, let's be honest here—was a terse admission of error. And this kinder knew the lingua franca too; 'waive my right to counsel' he'd said, not 'forget about a lawyer.' That was the kind of language hardened wiseguys used, not a fourteen-year-old first-timer.

Conor, meanwhile, had misinterpreted his silence for something else.

"Mr. Rodenberg," he said, "When I left you that voice-mail yesterday, I honestly didn't expect you to return my call. Heck, I didn't even know if the number I had was still any good; I never dreamed that you'd actually show up here." Now he leaned forward. "But you did show up and so…look, I know you're not going to get me out of here any time soon, maybe not at all, but you're still the best chance I got at making a decent outcome here. And I'm not gonna ruin it by doing any more stupid stuff, you follow what I'm bringing out?"
"I get your drift, kid." The grey rat answered, nodding soberly, "And for what it's worth, you did
everything else perfect. You may have ticked Gamsbart off a little, but you gave him zippity-do-
dah that he can use against you; ditto for the cops." He showed his incisors in toothy grin, "I
especially like the way you told Nick Wilde you were sorry without ever actually owning up to
biting him. THAT was using your head, Booby."

He was about to say more when he noticed the young fox's ears were canted in his direction. It was
on the tip of his tongue to explain that Booby, a corruption of the Yiddish word bubeleh was
actually a term of camaraderie. But then the real reason for the fox kid's sudden attentiveness
struck him.

"Riiiiiiight…"

"Yeah, I know Nick," he said, "I had him for a client once, a long time ago." His whisker stiffened
abruptly. "And that's all I'm gonna say about it, so don't ask."

"Right, I gotcha." The young fox nodded. Rodenberg nodded back and then reached for his
briefcase. "Conor, I got a whole lot of questions that I want to ask, but what I don't have—what WE
don't have—is a whole lot of time. Right now, I just want to get the essentials. By that, I mean I
want you to stick to answering my questions and that's all, okay?"

"Okay," the young fox answered, tensing like a runner on the block. There was a brief delay while
Rodenberg reached inside his briefcase, extracting a scaled down copy of the police report and a
notepad, together with a pen that looked like a prop from an old-school gangster flick. (it was hard
to tell, being as it was rat-sized.) He spent the next few seconds flipping through the pad until he
found a blank page and then sat back, ready to begin.

"What do you want from me, Carrots? I'm a lip reader, not a MIND-reader."

They were back in the precinct commissary, nibbling muffins and sipping coffee. Or, that was what
they would have been doing if Judy had been willing to take, 'I don't know' for an answer. When
she'd asked Nick why a high-powered attorney like Vern Rodenberg would be willing to represent a
small-fry like Conor Lewis, the red fox had helplessly thrown up his paws, 'beats me, Carrots.'

That, of course, had not been good enough for her. What did he mean, 'beats me,' hadn't Vern
Rodenberg once represented HIM?

"Yes, he was my lawyer once…once," Nick told her, raising a finger for emphasis, "but I've barely
talked to him since then. If we've said hello on the street more than twice in the last five years,
that's a lot. Honestly, why don't you go pick on Rudy Gamsbart? It's pretty darn obvious he and
Rodenberg know a lot about each other—even if they can't stand one another."

"Sorry, sorry!' Judy raised her paws defensively, "For crying out loud Nick, I was only asking."

"Yes you did—three times," the red fox observed with a sardonic grin, "and I'll say it again, I have
no idea why he's offering to represent Conor."

"Well," a familiar basso-profundo rumbled from off to the left, "the way I see it, there are two
possible answers to that question."

Nick and Judy both straightened in their seats. Wha…? Where the heck had Chief Bogo come
from? They hadn't seen, heard, (or smelled) a thing.

He came lumbering over to their table, taking a sip of his own coffee. His ire at Rodenberg's
unexpected appearance seemed by now to have cooled considerably.

"The first possibility is that the Phantom's the one footing the bill; it's not inconceivable that a big-time loanshark would have the resources to retain Mr. Rodenberg's services."

He took another sip and Nick felt the corners his mouth stretching backwards in a fox-grimace. Yes, that was the obvious answer—a little too obvious.

"I don't know Chief," he finally said, "spending THAT kind of money just to protect a courier? Mr. Big never would have; I may not remember too much about Vern Rodenberg, but HIM I can't forget."

"Well maybe that just goes to prove something—that our suspect's a lot more to The Phantom than just a courier," Judy Hopps was playing the Devil's advocate, but even so, she made a good point.

But not good enough as far as Nick was concerned.

"Look, I know it's not a fair comparison," he said, "but our suspect would have needed to be at least a capo for Mr. Big to have hired Vern Rodenberg to defend him." He pointed downwards, in the direction of the interview rooms. "And The Phantom would have had to be an idiot to promote a kid to a position like that, even one as smart as Conor …and as we all know, this animal is no idiot."

"Then maybe this is a 'Great Expectation's type of situation," Judy thought but did not say, recalling her high-school English class "Maybe the Phantom feels he owes this to Conor."

She had wisely chosen not to say it in front of the Chief, but the look on her face said it all to her partner; that was how HE had come to be the grey rat's client those many long years ago. Mr. Big had felt indebted to Nick, after the fox had refused to implicate him in the destruction of Wild Times Amusement Park. Sending Vern Rodenberg to represent him had been the Tundratown boss's way of returning the favor.

While that was certainly true, Nick Wilde saw things a little differently; he was all too aware that this had taken place back when the grey rat was just getting started in his law practice. In fact, the more the fox thought about it, the more convinced he was that sending Rodenberg to defend him had been a test on Mr. Big's part, "Let us see how he handles the Wilde case before we hire him to represent anyone higher up the ladder."

"And…the second possibility?" Judy Hopps was looking at Bogo again. She seemed eager to steer the conversation away from Mr. Big, (as always, whenever the Chief was within earshot.)

He snorted and sipped more coffee.

"That's…a bit more complicated."

Vern Rodenberg had gotten his start in practicing law while serving a 25 years-to-life as an accessory to murder…a crime for which he always insisted he'd been wrongfully convicted. In his quest to have that guilty verdict overturned, he had earned not one but two law degrees via correspondence courses he'd taken while behind bars.

Eventually his guilty verdict had been negated, and he'd been acquitted on retrial. "By way of proven innocence, NOT on any technicality!" he had boasted to the press after exiting the courtroom.

Following his release from prison, the grey rat had enrolled in the University of Zootopia Law
School, earning yet a third degree. ('So's nobody can say I ain't a real lawyer.')

After that, he had sailed through his bar exam and found no shortage of clients ready and willing to hire him. Prior to his own release from jail, Rodenberg had represented literally dozens of other inmates who had lacked either the funds or the knowledge to hire a decent attorney. In the process, he had made new law, quashed several convictions...and destroyed the career of at least one prosecuting attorney. (That action had left the grey rat completely unmoved, 'Nobody made the jerk destroy evidence,' he'd said.)

The case that had cemented Vernon J. Rodenberg's reputation as a mob attorney, (his notoriety, if you were in law enforcement,) had occurred when he'd journeyed to Zoo York City to represent the dreaded east coast crime-lord, James 'The Mister' McCrodon on a charge of arms smuggling and conspiracy. It had seemed like an open and shut case at the time; the buyers had actually been undercover firearms agents, and they'd had both McCrodon and his weapons expert Danny, 'The Danaconda' Tipperin cold on both tape and audio. With that in mind, McCrodon's Zoo York lawyers had all but begged him to let them plea-bargain the case. Instead the sea-mink had reached out all the way to the city of Zootopia and the up-and-coming hot-shot attorney Vernon J. Rodenberg. Upon his arrival in Zoo York, the grey rat had gone after the government's case hammer and tongs. Claiming entrapment, he had shown in court that several of The State's surveillance tapes had been edited, 'doctored' in his words. The trial had ended in a hung jury, and so had the retrial—which for all practical purposes was an acquittal, since the state declined to prosecute The Mister a third time. It might not have been a spectacular victory, but it was still one for the win column.

What had mostly done in the prosecution's case, however, had been the grey rat's skills at confronting hostile witnesses.

"You've heard what they say about Mr. Rodenberg's cross-examination style then?" Chief Bogo was asking, as he added more sugar to his coffee.

Nick Wilde had heard it as matter of fact, but shook his head no anyway; let the boss have his joke.

"He treats hostile witnesses as if he's making hash-brown potatoes," Bogo grinned sourly. "Do y'know how to make hash-browns? First you take a potato, then you skin it, then you shred it, then you fry it on a griddle ...and then you eat it. That's what Rodenberg did to those firearms agents; one of them was practically been in tears by the time he left the witness stand." He emitted a small snort. "And that's why the prosecution never went for another trial; their witnesses refused, point blank, to face Rodenberg from the witness stand again. One of them even resigned because of it."

Over on his left, Nick Wilde was grimacing and clutching his midsection. Bogo had just reminded him of something he didn't want to think about; in the not-too-distant future, HE was going to have to face Vern Rodenberg as a hostile witness; thanks a lot, Chief Buffalo Butt!

Meanwhile Judy's ears were standing up and her nose had begun to twitch.

"Sir, that's all very interesting, but what does it have do with…"

"Keep your fur on Hopps, I'm getting to that." Bogo looked into his cup for a second, like a fortune teller reading tea-leaves, and then went on to explain.

"It's no big secret that skilled as he is at representing underworld figures Mr. Rodenberg cares very little for that part of his job. I heard him say it meself once. His voice turned high and flat in a poor rendition of the diminutive attorney's nasal tone. "These guys may be bums, but they're bums who pay their legal fees...and a rat's gotta eat, y'know."
No, the work that Vernon J. Rodenberg genuinely enjoyed was the pro-bono side of his practice, representing indigent clients that he considered to have been ill-served by the Justice System, the bicycle thief, looking at a twenty year sentence because this would be his third strike—never mind that his last conviction had happened more than a decade earlier, the badger, about to go away for felonious assault after he'd mistaken a repo-mammal for a car thief and sent him to the ER, (The repo animal had gone to the wrong address and, incredibly, hadn't even bothered to check the license-plate number of the car he was about to tow.) Then there was the hedgehog, looking at a $75,000 fine after her estranged husband bought a junker car, registered it in her name and dumped it in a restricted-parking area at the airport.

"Those are the sorts of cases that make Mr. Rodenberg's day." Bogo told them, "and that's the other possible reason why he's offered to represent Conor Lewis."

This time, Judy was the skeptical one.

"I-I-I don't know Chief. Much as I hate to say it, since when is Conor Lewis a victim here? This isn't some circumstantial case that we're only pursuing because of his species...uh, no offense Nick. Sweet cheez n' crackers, he bit a cop, another fox for heaven's sake; we have it on video from two different angles. With all due respect sir, your suggestion makes even less sense than The Phantom having hired Mr. Rodenberg to represent his go-fer."

Bogo looked at her for a second, and then grunted, snorted, and got up from the table to get himself a refresher. That told Nick that while the Cape buffalo didn't much care for her assessment, he couldn't disagree with it either.

And what WAS Vern Rodenberg doing here?

Chapter End Notes

Any similarity between the rats in this story and any actual rats, living, dead, or recently referenced politically is purely coincidental
"Okay kid, first thing's first." Vernon J. Rodenberg, Attorney at Law, looked up at Conor Lewis, pen hovering expectantly over his note-pad, "The cops followed you into that alley because they thought you were transporting a payoff on behalf of The Phantom. Were you?"

The answer was not immediately forthcoming; for a long moment, his client just sat there, almost completely motionless, chewing his lower lip as if contemplating his response.

"Any time this year, kid," the grey rat prompted; he was there to defend his clients, not be their friend.

Conor took a short breath and then looked straight at him,

"Okay, yeah…I went into that locker to pick up a cash payment from Ian Shortal. But no, I wasn't working for The Phantom."

"All right," Rodenerg made a quick notation, "so you didn't know if you were making a pick up for that guy?"

The answer to this was an emphatic head-shake from the young silver fox, together with a slightly pained expression, "No…I mean I know it wasn't the Phantom; there IS no Phantom."
Rodenberg felt his whiskers bobbing again.

"Then how...?"

"Because I've been doing this for almost two years now," Conor told him, tight-lipped and steely-eyed, "since long before anyone ever even heard of that guy. Yeah there's someone I work with, but he's more of a partner than a boss. As for The Phantom, that's a name somebody in 'Tuffguy' Tufts' crew came up with. I have no idea why, but the next thing I knew, it wasn't just a name it was a stinkin' urban legend. And you know how urban legends go; pretty soon anytime somebody pulled off a computer hack in Zootopia... boom, the big, bad, Phantom's, back in town! Remember last year, when the all the traffic signals in Savanna Central went off line? Turned out to be a blown server, but everyone was sooo sure it was the Phantom who did it; they blame that dude for every stupid thing."

Rodenberg blinked, and jotted a few notes. Yes, he remembered that incident, how could forget? He'd missed a court date because of those traffic lights—and the Red Pig had nearly gone away on a five-to-ten year stretch.

"And I nearly took a one-way trip to the bottom of Zootopia Sound," the grey rat reminded himself with a shudder.

Could it be true? Was The Phantom...a phantom? There was certainly precedent for it. No one in Zoo York City had ever heard of 'The Westies' either...not until a ZYPD police detective mentioned it during an interview. It was only afterwards that the members of the gang started calling themselves by that name. John Catti hadn't invented HIS nickname, 'The Dapper Don' either.

(Conor's insistence also meshed with Albert Tufts' character in Rodenberg's opinion; just the sort to conjure up a bogey-mammal, in order to explain away his failures.)

It brought up a zillion new questions—but none of particular importance; as a matter of fact, there was only one question that mattered right now.

"I know you didn't touch the money." Rodenberg said, leaving the subject of The Phantom for the moment. He flipped the pad to another page. "According to the police report, you never even looked at it...that anyone saw. But what about while you were inside that locker with the door closed? Did you touch it then?"

Conor's answer to this was exactly what he was hoping for, the young fox's mouth stretched into a long flat line and he raised a paw in a ranger-scout salute. "Never went near it, I swear. If the cops got to that case before Mr. Shortal did, I didn't want them finding my scent on it."

"Ohhh-kay," Rodenberg made another notation, "So when did you first realize the ZPD had you under surveillance?"

"When I went back to the locker again, after that volleyball game," Conor answered him, pantomiming a serve to illustrate.

The grey rat's pen froze in mid-air.

"Hold on kid, you didn't look at the money the first time you went inside that locker. Why'd you do that if you didn't know the cops were onto you yet?"

"Oh, I never look anyway," the young fox responded, waving dismissive paw "just in case. And besides I knew it was there; Mr. Shortal's a weasel y'know; I could smell his musk all over that
thing before even I popped the lock."

"Riiight," Rodenberg smirked wryly as he made another note, and then he asked, "Any idea how
the ZPD made you, kid?" He asked this as if expecting a negative response; the young fox didn't
disappoint him.

"No idea."

"All right," Rodenberg skipped the notes this time, and leaned forward on his elbows. Here came
the 64K question.

"And how'd you manage to figure out the ZPD was onto you?"

The next thing he said was "All right, mind letting me in on the joke?"

When the young fox told him, Rodenberg started laughing too—so hard, he nearly went tumbling
out of his chair. When he finally recovered, he was shaking his head in disbelief.

"Oy, oy, oy…I knew that guy was a schmoe, but…does anybody else know about this besides…uh,
what'd you call him again?

"Guildenkranz, I call him Guild for short, and the answer is no, I wouldn't blow something this
wicked-good."

"Ehhh-xcellent," Rodenberg answered in his best Mr. Bearns, "and I take it Guildenkranz is not
your online chum's real name?"

Conor fanned a pawlm, "Nah, that's just his screen name—though he probably changed it by now;
I would for sure." He grew serious again, "And that's all I know about him, Mr. Rodenberg. If you
want to know what city he lives in, what state, what country, his species, his age; don't ask me, I'm
Cap'n Clueless here. Heck, I don't even know if Guild's a guy or a girl."

"But you think of him more as a guy," the rat noted, "and of course he knows which city YOU live
in; what else does he know about you?"

"That's it, that's all," the young fox told him, "There was no way he could've helped me without
that information. But I never told him my species, age, or anything else either." He flashed an
ironic grin. "If Guild knew I was only fourteen, he'd prolly have bailed on me a long time ago. Uh,
can I ask why you wanna know all this?"

Vern Rodenberg nodded, once again surprised and pleased. Any other kid would be demanding
to know why he needed that information; not this one; he was asking almost politely.

And so…

"Right now kid, the ZPD isn't charging you with accessory to usury…uh, you know what that
means, right? Okay, but that doesn't mean they won't later, if they manage to nail down some more
evidence…like if they're able to lay their paws on your Guild guy, you get me?"

"I follow what you're bringing out," the young fox nodded gravely. "And honestly, I dunno WHAT
Guild would do if the cops busted him; like I said, the only thing I know about him is his screen
name. I can tell you this though; if I wanted to track him down, I couldn't do it—and I know he
exists at least."

"Okay," Rodenberg jotted another note, nodding in satisfaction. It wasn't a perfect answer, but
since when was there was any such thing in the legal profession anyway? And at least his client was being honest with him.

"Again, like no other kid I ever met," the grey rat marveled to himself, "not that I've had all that many as clients—and that's WHY I haven't. Oy, that one boy, The Mister's Nephew, Wesley-Something; what a meshuggeneh little shmendrik HE was."

He shook off the memory and moved on.

"Okay, let's get into some of your background, Conor. I know you're running on a fake ID, but right now that's not important. What do you do when you're not making drops and pickups down in Sahara Square?"

"You're trying to establish my character?" the young fox asked him.

Rodenberg felt his whiskers quivering; for the first time since his arrival at the precinct, his client was starting to irritate him.

He pointed with his pen
"I'll ask the questions, okay kid? What about it, what are your grades like, and where do you go to school?"

The answer he got nearly blew him off the table, briefcase, chair, and all.

"YOU go to ZAPA?" Rodenberg asked, staring goggle-eyed at his client. This street-wise silver-fox kid looked like he belonged in the Zootopia Academy of the Performing Arts about as much as that fat cheetah working the ZPD reception desk belonged in a spandex body-suit.

"Bring me a guitar and I'll prove it," the young fox told him, unable to resist a sly smile, "Oh and my GPA is 4.0. You can check for yourself."

"Believe me, I intend to," Rodenberg answered, writing it down. When he raised his eyes again, he saw an expression on his client's face that was all too familiar, the look of an animal just itching to tell him something. Normally, he ignored that look; 90% of the time it turned out to be something tangential at best and completely irrelevant at worst.

Not now, this was part of that other 10%, Rodenberg could feel it in his bones.

"What is it, kid?"

Conor chewed his lip for a second before answering.

"I'm pretty sure you weren't gonna ask me this, but it's something I think you'll want to hear. I know Nick and Judy—Officers Hopps and Wilde—from before they tailed me into that alleyway."

Rodenberg laid the pen aside and let out a rough-cut sigh; he'd been wrong, this was part of the 90% after all.

"Yeah yeah…I know all about that, kid. You bumped into 'em in Sahara Square, three nights before the drop went down."

Conor's paws shot up as if his lawyer had pulled a gun.

"NO…I know them from before that too. From the Carrot Days Festival, when I helped out Judy's sister. Talking about ZAPA's what made me think of it."
Rodenberg snatched up the pen and rolled it in the air, "Whoa, okay…NOW we're getting into some virgin territory. Enlighten me Booby, spill…all the juicy details."

His client did just that—except for one juicy detail that he studiously omitted, the activities of a certain clan of rogue coyotes on the last night of the festival and everything he'd done to help thwart them. It hardly mattered; the rat was more than pleased with everything else he heard.

"So….when you made that little move in the alleyway that was the second time you did Officer Hopps a good turn? And Nick…ahhh, Officer Wilde, you got along okay with him, too?"

"Heck yeah," Conor told him, nodding earnestly, "I liked that guy even before I met him. The fennec-fox I told you about, Finnick? He was Nick's partner back in the day before we hooked up—told me all about how the big guy turned his life around; I always admired him for that."

"Yeah, I know," the grey rat told him with a short respectful nod, "about Finnick and Nick, I mean; they go WAY back." He flipped his note-pad to another page. "Okay, now let's move on to the important stuff. Starting with when you left home to go pick up the money, I want you to tell me everything that happened that day…and try not to include too many details. I'll stop you if I want to hear more."

"Okay…"

For the first part of the narrative, Rodenberg only listened; it wasn't until Conor got to where he boarded the Metro Train that the rat began to ask questions.

"So your idea was to lure the cops away from that locker and keep them watching you until Shortal came and picked up the money again. That right?"

Conor flashed him a thumbs up.

"Yeah; once he snagged it back, I knew I'd be safe; the ZPD wouldn't have had diddly on me."

"All right and why did Nick…Ahhh, Officer Wilde thought you were heading for the Fruit Valley Metro Station, that so?"

Conor nodded immediately

"Yeah, that's right. Fruit Valley's right by the Peace Rock Guitar Co-Operative, I work there as an apprentice, part-time. If I'd shown up at Peace Rock on a Saturday afternoon, even with no warning nobody would've thought twice about it."

Rodenberg set down his pen again, "Ahhhh I get it, you were trying not to look suspicious, sticking to your normal routine."

"Right," Conor nodded again, this time vigorously, "that's exactly what I would have been doing if I HADN'T had a pick-up scheduled for that day."

"So, can I assume you weren't trying to double back, that those were the trains you'd have taken to get to that guitar co-op anyway?" Vernon J. Rodenberg was not unfamiliar with the habits of his client's species.

"Pretty much…yep."

The grey rat jotted another note, and then looked up at Conor once more
"Uh-huh, but then it didn't quite work out the way you planned," he said, choosing his words carefully. The reaction was more than he bargained for. The young fox slammed his paw down on the tabletop, sending him flying over backwards in a sprawl of spilled papers.

Before Rodenberg could even try to get his bearings someone knocked on the door and an apprehensive voice came over the intercom speaker.

"Is everything all right in there?" It sounded like that pig cop, Swinton.

"Fine, we're fine!" he assured her, getting hastily to his feet and gathering up the documents from the tabletop, "And turn off those mikes, right now!"

"All right, all riight," the voice answered tetchily and then the speaker abruptly fell silent.

The grey rat gave it a minute, just to be sure and turned to his client again. "Jeez, kid…" He stopped, when he saw that Conor was hugging himself and shivering.

"What it is, Booby?" he asked gingerly. It was nothing he hadn't seen before—when a client finally realized just how much trouble they were in.

That wasn't the case this time.

"I blew it, Counselor," the young fox groaned, looking away for a second with an agonized expression on his face, "I messed up sooo stinkin' bad.

"No worries kid, I'm all right," the rat assured him, spreading his arms to demonstrate. Conor screwed his eyes shut and waved as to ward off a curse.

"Noooo, I mean back at Flock Street; I never should have tried to duck through that alleyway." He raised his paw to pound the table again, but this time mercifully checked the move. "If I'd just kept moving with the crowd, I'd have probably made it out of there okay, but noooo, I had to… dumb, dumb, DUMB fox!"

Rodenberg got back in his chair again, "Okay kid, you wanna tell me why?" his voice was neither compassionate, nor insensitive. This was breaking more new ground; the police report had said nothing in regards to his client's reasons for taking that shortcut though the alley—beyond the simple conjecture that he'd been trying to lose his followers.

In response, Conor threw up his paws and fell back in his chair, for the first time in two days looking defeated.

"I panicked, that's what. I went fight-or-flight…without the fight. When I got off that train, there was no cell-phone service, no voice, no text, or anything…and no wi-fi either; I couldn't get hold of Guild to save my life. That meant no access to the traffic-cams, the police-band, or anything; I was flying blind and it scared the livin' snot out of me. I couldn't smell anything either, thanks to all that smoke in the air; I had no idea if that wolf who'd been tailing me…"

"Hold up, so you made the scent of the cops following you?" It was a bad time to interrupt, but Rodenberg felt he had no choice; this hadn't been in the police report either.

"Only one, this red-wolf guy" the young fox answered, nodding, "though I'm pretty sure there had to be at least one more."

"Yep, you're right, there was," The grey rat told him, "that cheetah cop who ended up cuffing you. Okay, what else?"
It was a vague prompt at best, but it did the job.

"When I came outta that station, there were cops everywhere." The young fox explained, "I knew they were there coz of that fire and not me, but one word about me on the police band and I'd have been fox-toast; no way could I have gotten away from that many officers." He let out a small, disgusted yip. "And then oh joy, here was this alley with nobody watching it…and…and that's when I blew it."

Rodenberg debated with himself for a moment, trying to decide where to go next. The kid was badly shaken, surprisingly so, considering how well he'd held up so far.

"Ahhhh, the heck with it…"

"According to the police report, an officer saw you ducking into that alley and ordered you to stop." He deliberately omitted the fact that McHorn had later said didn't think the kid had heard him. Had he?

He hadn't…

"Maybe there was but I sure as heck didn't see him," Conor answered, "and for sure I couldn't have heard him, I had my earbuds in."

Rodenberg nearly dropped the pen again, "You were listening to music…?"

"Not music; my cell-phone," the young fox hastily explained, "I wanted to keep monitoring in case I got the service back."

"Oop, okay," the grey rat stopped in mid tirade. All right, that made sense…and now so did something else. "Ahhh, so THAT'S why you didn't break that phone," More and more pieces of the puzzle were falling into place.

"Yeah," Conor told him, "and as soon as I got around the corner, I got on my bike and took off, fast."

Rodenberg made a short note and then spoke carefully again.

"Okay, one more thing, did you pick that particular alleyway only because it was unguarded—or was there some other reason?"

"Little bit of both," the young fox admitted, "I thought I remembered a bus stop on the street at the other end. I wasn't sure and I didn't know which route or anything, but with no one watching that alley, I just went for it."

"And I'm guessing you didn't care where that bus went: you just wanted to get your tail as far away from Flock Street as possible?"

His client's look became mortified once again.

"Yeah, that's it—except that I was dead, stinkin' wrong about where that alley went; it was like was like one of those MC Fisher drawings back there, goin' every which way and back again. Even without all the smoke and stuff, I prolly would have gotten lost."

He went on to explain how he'd spent the next half hour wandering aimlessly through the tangle of alleyways…until he'd come around a corner and found himself a stone's throw away from Judy Hopps.
"If she had been looking at where I was instead of at this store display, she'd have had me for a snack," he said. "I was walking my bike right then; there was all kinds of junk and stuff in that part of the alley. No way could I have gotten back on and gotten any speed up before she grabbed me. She had her ears up too—which meant if I even so much as shuffled my feet a little, she'd have heard me. The only thing I could do was hunker down and hope she'd go away. Then I heard a splash and saw that she was like almost ankle deep in water. I wondered 'where the heck did that come from?' Yeah, I know from the firehoses, figured that out later. Anyway, then I heard this kind of big, popping noise, and saw a power pole up the alley starting to fall over; I could see it, but Judy couldn't. I can't explain what happened next, but everything seemed to go into slo-mo right then. Don't ask me how, but somehow I knew those wires weren't gonna hold…and Judy was standing in all that water, just about right under 'em. So, I ran and made a flying tackle, and…and…well, you already know what happened next."

"Yes, but I still want to hear you tell it," Rodenberg said, flipping the note pad to another page.

"How come you use that thing instead of a recorder?" Conor asked him, pointing with a pair of fingers.

"I don't," the grey rat answered, opening his suit jacket to reveal a digital voice recorder. Letting it fall shut again, he held up the notepad like a trophy. "This is where I put down my thoughts. And I'm the one asking the questions, remember, Booby? So quit trying to stall me. I know you don't want to think about this part of what happened, but I need to know how it went down from P.O.V. So c'mon, let's have it."

"Okay," the young fox said, and went on to tell Rodenberg how when they'd hit the pavement, Judy had been knocked cold. "That scared me more than anything; I thought maybe she was hurt after all. Heh, dumb fox kid and a HALF"

Rodenberg brushed his muzzle with the back of his paw and rolled his incisors for a moment. Should he hit the kid hard with the next one, or bring him in for a soft landing?

He decided to split the difference.

"Okay, now brace yourself kid, because the next one's another toughie…and I need a straight answer. Why'd you do it, why'd you throw away your one shot at getting away from the cops—and risk getting fried yourself—to go and help Officer Hopps?"

"Wha…?" Conor was staring at him as if he'd suddenly started drooling and spouting gibberish. "What the heck else was I supposed to do? Stand there and let her get turned into bunny fritters? She wouldn't have been in that alley in the first place if it hadn't been for me…"

The rest of his words were cut off instantaneously as the grey rat placed two fingers in his mouth and let out a piercing whistle. Uh-huh, just as he'd suspected…a guilt trip.

"Okay kid, now you listen to me, and listen good." He pointed with his pen again, this time as if it were a wizard's wand. "That's the LAST time you're going to say that—to me, to anyone else, even to yourself; I don't want you even thinking it. Because if Rudy Gamsbart ever gets wind of what you just told me, there's your tail, all nice and gift-wrapped, and presented to him on a silver platter, you understand?"

Conor only nodded and swallowed hard.

The next topic should by rights have been the hardest one of all for him to discuss…the source of all his current troubles, the bite he'd given Nick.
In fact, the young fox needed barely any prompting at all...which was an especially good thing, because here was where Rodenberg really started probing, making him tell the story over and over and over again, repeatedly hitting the pause button while he verified certain details. "Are you sure that's the order in which it happened?" "Where exactly did he grab you?" What about this? What about that? Etc. Three times in succession, he attempted to trip up Conor's claim that he didn't remember biting the older fox and hadn't known he'd done it until afterwards. And in all three instances, the young silver fox held fast to his story. When the grey rat asked him to explain why he'd bitten the older fox, this time he got an immediate answer complete with a little graphic evidence to back it up.

Another surprise awaited Vern Rodenberg when they finished. Most kids Conor Lewis's age would have assumed that they were done by now. Not this one; he took in stride having to recall everything else that had followed, from the moment of his arrest until the rat-attorney's arrival at the interrogation room. The majority of it, they just breezed through. (The ZPD had handled the young fox's arrest properly and by the book.) It wasn't until they got to the Q-and-A with Gamsbart and Tufts that Rodenberg began asking questions again, most of them centering around one, single topic.

"Okay, when did Mr. Gamsbart first make the suggestion that you'd be better off without a lawyer? All right, and at any point did he ever put forth the idea that you were not entitled to counsel? Didn't think so, but how many times did he say it, can you recall? And what, exactly, did he say would be the consequences if you retained an attorney against his advice?"

All through their exchange, much to the grey rat's surprise (again!), his client's ears remained upright and turned forward. Or maybe it wasn't so surprising; Gamsbart's suggestion that Conor waive his right to counsel had been the thing that prompted his Usual Suspects troll. Rodenberg was sorely tempted to tell the young silver fox just how right he was...but not to the point of actually telling him.

What Conor had to say next made the grey rat have to step on his own tail to keep from laughing; ('As far as I'm concerned, you're both jerks,' Bahahahaha!)

What he said after that brought a swift change of expression to Vern Rodenberg's face; all right, no more Mr. Nice Guy.

"Okay, now listen to this, Conor—and listen close. That whole thing about having Mr. Shortal in the next room was a head-fake. Gamsbart knew all along that shtick wasn't going to fool you...and that's exactly what he wanted, for you to think he's dumber than he looks. I've seen him pull that routine more than once on a suspect, give 'em enough rope and then yank it tight when they least expect it. He especially likes to run that hustle on juvenile offenders."

"Right I gotcha," Conor nodded, but the grey rat wasn't quite sure that he had. He decided he'd better drive the point home, just to make certain.

"Listen kid, I mean it. Do NOT underestimate that guy. I've faced him in court plenty of times, and I lost at least as many cases as I won."

"How many of those cases did you lose coz your client refused to listen to you?" the young fox queried, folding his arms, "Because I won't; I already promised you, what you say goes, period, story over."

Rodenberg laughed and pointed with the pen again; he had gotten through to this fox-kid after all. "Okay Conor, now let's talk about what happened when Officers Wilde and Hopps came in to talk to you; what'd they have say?"
Listening to the story, Rodenberg almost had to feel sorry for the fox and bunny-cop. Dangit they had meant so well.

"Anyway, they didn't ask any more questions" the young fox was saying, "just kind of laid a sermon on me. 'You're a good kid, Conor; even good kids can make bad mistakes…"

Rodenberg only nodded…and sighed. Deep down he agreed with Nick and Judy's assessment of his client; he was a good kid. So how the heck had he gotten himself into THIS? Okay, it was time for one more inconvenient truth.

"Alllll right Booby, I think I've heard enough…for now." He flipped the notebook shut and nodded in the direction of the door, "But before we face the inquisitors, there's one more thing you need know. Gamsbart wasn't bluffing with his threat about a tough judge. I know exactly who he was talking about; this guy's a real piece of work."

Conor screwed his eyes shut for a second and grimaced. "Agghhh, grrrr…don't tell me, lemme guess; Judge Predd, right?"

"Yes, that's right, the honorable George Schatten himself," the grey rat flashed a grin that exposed nearly the full length of his incisors, "and I use the term 'honorable' VERY loosely." A moment ago, it would have surprised the heck out of him to learn that his client knew not only the woodchuck magistrate's reputation, but also his nickname. But that was a moment ago, and this was now.

"Is it true he hates foxes?" Conor asked, his voice indicating that he expected a response in the affirmative.

"Don't know," Rodenberg admitted fanning a paw, "But he sure as heck doesn't care much for MY species, I can give you that much without asking for change. I have yet to face that groundhog where he didn't at least threaten me with a contempt citation. I remember one time I said to him, 'Your Honor, speaking as one rodent to another…' and oy, I thought he was going to throw his gavel at me. How DARE I make such a suggestion, that our species were even distantly related… yadda, yadda, yadda."

"And what did you say?" Conor asked him; he was eager to hear but at the same time, trying not to show it.

Rodenberg sat back in his chair and folded his paws, his face devoid of any expression.

"What I said was "My apologies Your Honor I intended no offense "; what I WANTED to say was, 'Then I guess this means I can't marry your daughter?'"

Now it was Conor's turn to nearly fall from his chair laughing. Vern Rodenberg didn't join him, he only watched from the sidelines with that same implacable expression, waiting for the mirth to subside.

And then he said. "That was what I wanted to tell him at the time, kid, but it's not what I WISH I'd said. Right now, I'm glad I kept that to myself." He pointed again, this time with a single finger, "And when we go into court tomorrow, you're gonna have to curb your enthusiasm, too. Think you can do that?"

The young fox raised his paw in scout-salute again. "Like I said before, no more stupid stuff, what you say, goes."

"And I'm gonna keep reminding you of that, so get used to it," Rodenberg nodded and got up from
his chair.

"All right, think you're ready to face the music?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," Conor told him, his long, bushy tail shivering a little.

"All righty then,' the rat said, pointing to his client's right paw "Then give me boost up to your shoulder and I'll show you how this is gonna work/"

Conor laid his paw on the table and the grey rat climbed on board. When he climbed off onto the young fox's shoulder, the first thing he did was press down with his foot.

"There, d'ja feel that?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Right, until you feel it again, you let me do that talking…and I'm gonna do most of it to start off with. After that, if you feel me pressing down with my foot, it's your turn to speak, and if you feel it again you stop. And if you feel me pressing down twice, that means you shut it right NOW. Got that?"

"Five by five, and loud and clear," the young fox answered, flipping a mock salute. He wasn't copping an attitude; he just wanted to get this show on the road.

"Okay," Rodenberg told him, getting out his cell phone. He punched in a number and then placed it up against his cheek, "Awright Gamsbart, we're ready in here."

Chapter End Notes

Not that it matters, but the character of Vern Rodenberg is a composite of a number of real-life individuals, including Bruce Cutler, John Gotti's one-time attorney, Larry Hocheiser, who once represented The Westies' much feared enforce Mickey Featherstone, and in particular, Jerry 'The Jew' Rosenberg, the most famous (or infamous) jailhouse lawyer of all time.
Chapter 9 – Fire And Mirrors
(Continued…Pt. 8)

If there was one thing you had to give Vernon J. Rodenberg, Attorney at Law, it was that this rodent was not one for wasting time. The door to Interrogation Room #1 door wasn't even halfway open before he leapt to the attack.

"Well Mr. Prosecutor, I lost 'The Bet' with myself…again." He glowered upwards at Rudy Gamsbart, paws placed indignantly on his hips, "you really CAN sink lower than last time."

"May I at least be permitted to sit down before the circus starts?" the chamois asked him, refusing to take the bait; Rodenberg countered by pretending not to hear.

"You're sooo quick to charge this boy with assaulting a police officer—but let him save the life of another cop, and that's not even worth an official thank-you."

"I thanked him!" Judy Hopps protested, crowding hurriedly past Nick. The grey-furred rodent's last words had been an out-and-out lie and she wasn't going to let him get away with it.

He only gave her a pitying look, "I meant an official show of gratitude, Officer Hopps…from the ZPD, like the official charges you were so eager to file against my client. He spoke the word 'official' in such a way that it exposed the full length of his incisors.

"Seriously, then?" the deep voice of Chief Bogo rumbled from the doorway, where he had just entered, "Officer Hopps shouldn't have needed savin' in the first place, if your client hadn't led her into that particular alley."

What happened next, made Conor Lewis's ears stand up and point at each other. What the…? From the top of his right shoulder he heard a tiny grating noise, Vern Rodenberg's front teeth honing against one another. He knew that sound; it was the same thing his rat-buddy Mike Daehan did, when he spotted a particularly succulent morsel of food. Wha…? Wasn't this the subject his
attorney had told him to avoid like the plague mere moments ago. And what about that look on that yakweed Rudy Gamsbart's face? He couldn't have been saying 'I'm surrounded by idiots!' more clearly if he'd been shouting it at the top of his lungs.

What the heck was going on here? Agghh, grrrr, no use in asking...he wouldn't find out for a week at least, if then.

In actual fact, it took all of three seconds for the young silver fox to start getting his answers.

"Well, since you brought it up, Chief." Vern Rodenberg said, in an almost genial tone of voice, "Why was Officer Hopps attempting to track my client through that alley in the first place?"

Judy started to answer, but a voice from the tabletop beat her to it.

"Quit trying to muddy the waters, Rodenberg," Albert Tufts chittered, sneering upwards at the rat perched on Conor Lewis's shoulder, "You know perfectly well why. Your client was transporting cash for an illegal lender."

"MISTER Rodenberg to you, Lieutenant," the grey rat sneered right back, "or Counselor, I don't care which. And if my client was working as mule for a loan-shark, then show me the mon-eyyyy! Where is it, where's your proof? All you've got is a video-feed of a case that could have contained samples of fur-tonic for all you know; a case that, allow me to remind you, that my client never even looked at." He shook his head. "Honestly, where the heck did you even get the idea that this boy was mixed up with The Phantom?"

The Kaibab squirrel immediately threw up his paws, "The Phantom? I never said anything about The Phantom!"

The grey rat gave him a withering look.

"No, but the police report does," he said, "and NOW who's trying to muddy the waters?"

That brought Claire Swinton into the fray.

"All right, we didn't know that, but we DID know that the locker we had under surveillance was being used as a dead-drop by The Phantom. We had no idea that Mr. Lewis was involved, not until he showed up and..."

"Fine, but where did you get the idea that it was The Phantom who set up that drop?" Rodenberg was beginning to sound exasperated, (deliberately Judy thought.)

"Exactly what is the point of all this, Counselor?" Rudy Gamsbart cut in, raising an insouciant eyebrow. He was leaning back in his chair with a knee crossed over the other and his hooves clasped behind his head. He might almost have been lazing away a warm afternoon on his back-porch, "You know as well as I do that your client is being charged with assaulting a police officer, not with accessory to usury...so how, exactly, is any of this germane to the situation?"

"Gee, I don't know Mr. Prosecutor." Rodenberg's words were oozing with sarcasm, "Maybe it has something to do with the fact that—as Chief Bogo himself just pointed out—Officer Hopps wouldn't have been in that alley in the first place if she hadn't thought my client was working for the Phantom; which means neither would Officer Wilde; which means your so-called assault wouldn't have happened either. So One! More! Time! WHERE did you get the idea that The Phantom was using that locker for a dead-drop?"

No one answered him, but Conor saw Rudy Gamsbart looking up at Chief Bogo with narrowed
eyes and a taut expression. 'You opened this can of worms, you answer him,' he seemed to be saying.

Bogo let out a harsh, burbling sound, "from one of our CI's," he said.

"And which Confidential Informant would that be?" Rodenberg asked him, in that same faux-amiable voice again.

Before the Chief could answer him, Albert Tufts piped up in a scornful chitter

"Hell-o-o-ooo? That's why they're called Confidential Informants, Counselor."

Judy felt Nick nudging her shoulder and heard him whispering under his breath. "Holy…how the heck did this idiot ever make Lieutenant?"

"Shhhh."

Rodenberg, meanwhile, was directing a pained expression at Rudy Gamsbart.

"Counselor…don't make me invoke the Right of Challenge. Now, who was it?"

"Tell him Lieutenant," the chamois said wearily—and Judy had the distinct impression he was once more passing the buck.

But then again, why shouldn't he? That little, bushytailed jerk had been sooo quick to open his mouth, let him stick his foot into it.

"It was um…uhhhh," Tuft's collar seemed to have shrunk two sizes, "Um, Dooo Kuh Weeeeee…."

"WHO, Lieutenant?"

"Duke Weaselton!" the Kaibab squirrel all but blurted it out.

"Here it comes," Judy heard Nick murmur out the side of his mouth…and this time she didn't try to shush him.

"Duke Weaselton…Du-u-uke Weaselton," Rodenberg rolled the name around in his mouth, as if it were a morsel of cheese whose variety he couldn't quite identify. And then all at once he burst out in a stream of high-pitched laughter; for a second, it looked as if he was about to go tumbling backwards off Conor Lewis's shoulder.

It took him nearly a full minute to recover, and when finally did he was like a kid who'd just opened a birthday card and found a $100 bill inside, "The Duke of Bootleg! HE'S your informant?" He rubbed his paws in anticipation, "Oooo, I can't wait to get that two-faced schlemiel on the witness stand."

"We're not calling him as a witness." Gamsbart informed him coldly.

"Then we will!" Rodenberg hissed, his humor gone in a flash. "Because biting Nick Wilde isn't the REASON you have Conor Lewis in here Mr. Gamsbart, it's only the excuse. You know that and I know that; if you didn't think my client can help you take down the Phantom, you'd have already let him go."

Before the chamois could respond to this, he turned on Albert Tufts.

"Only, what if that's something my client can't give you, Lieutenant…even if he wants to? What if
there is no Phantom? For crying out loud, YOU invented that name...or someone in your office did."

"The Phantom exists!" the Kaibab Squirrel insisted stubbornly, "Okay, maybe we came up with that name, and maybe he—or she—doesn't use it, but there's still somebody out there hacking into the banks' databases, looking for individuals who've been turned down for loans, and then lending them the money himself. That's an established fact, Mr. Rodenberg. I'll admit a lot of the evidence we have as to who's behind it is circumstantial, but that's how it is when you're trying to catch a cybercrook, a felon who can cover his tracks with the touch of an 'enter' key. And by the way, what we do have is some of the strongest circumstantial evidence I've ever seen."

"Fine, but how do you know my client had anything to do with your cybercrook?" Rodenerg shot back. "Let's go over it again, shall we? On the word of an unreliable informant, you staked out a locker in the Beach Promenade area of Sahara Square. You saw the alleged customer of that loan-shark leave a case in that locker, the contents of which you never determined, and that—I'll say it again—that my client never even looked at. He knows zippity-diddly about your cyber-shylock, The Phantom or whoever he is."

He folded his arms and said nothing further. Conor thought he was done, but then felt the grey rat pressing down with his foot. Okay kid, you're up, don't blow it.

"I never worked for your Phantom-guy in my life," the young fox insisted, trying to sound plaintive, "or any stinkin' loan-shark. Heck, I don't work for anybody, unless you want to count my apprenticeship at the Peace-Rock Guitar Co-op. Yeah, I've heard of the Phantom, who hasn't for fox's sake? His name's all over the street...but ask around and you'll find that half the folks in this town think he's an urban legend—and I'm one of 'em; the dude doesn't exist...under that name or any other. And even if he's real, I got nothing to do with him. I'm not anybody's Artful Dodger and nobody's my Fagin, you follow what I'm bringing out?"

Conor would have said more, but just then Rudy Gamsbart jumped into the discussion.

"Really? Then how did you happen to be using the exact same locker as Mr. Shortal, kid? And how did you happen to have the combination to the lock HE placed on it?"

In response to this, Vern Rodenberge pressed down quickly with his foot...too late, his client had already started to answer.

"Lots of folks share lockers at the Promenade on Market days," he said, shrugging his left shoulder, "especially the bigger ones. And since I know you're gonna ask me this, I know Mr. Shortal from being a customer at his shop; I also helped him find the guy who designed his website. Call him, he'll tell you."

"We will," the chamois said, frowning deeply...while from the young fox's other shoulder a sound like someone trying to whistle through a drinking-straw could be heard, Vern Rodenberg's sigh of relief.

As things turned out, his respite was premature. The chamois immediately changed tack.

"Then suppose you explain couple of other things to me, Mr. Lewis," he said, reaching forward to tap the table with his hoof. "Number one, that laptop we found in your possession, a custom built job two grades above Mil-Spec. Oh, and that Con Echidna Logo on the back...it's fake, we checked. And it's also been encrypted to beyond ransomware level." He sat back again, "In other words, it's exactly the kind of rig a world-class hacker would use...or give to his subordinate to use. Where on earth did a kid like YOU ever get a computer like that?"
Rodenberg almost pressed down with his foot again—this time twice, but then he stopped himself, electing to take the risk. His client had handled the last question well enough…and he had no doubt that a call to Sweetie's Confectionary Shop would confirm everything the young silver fox had just said.

Conor waved a paw in a gesture that could have meant anything

"Bought it on ZBay a couple of years ago," Another shrug, "I thought it was a used Con Echidna laptop too; that's what the seller said anyway."

"Then how do you explain the encryption?" Gamsbart demanded, leaning forward and tapping the table again.

"Oh, I always turn that on when I take my laptop to the beach or whatever," the young fox answered breezily, "helps keep the rip-offs away."

"No, I mean the level of encryption!" The chamois' irritation clicked upwards by a notch; a gibbering moron could have seen that his suspect was only pretending to misinterpret the question.

Conor threw up his paws in a helpless gesture.

"Hey I'm just a fourteen-year-old fox-kid, Mr. Gamsbart, what do I know? Encryption's encryption; I had no idea it was that good until you just now said so."

The chamois' nostrils flared and a grumbling noise came from somewhere deep inside of him as his pique went up another notch…but then just as quickly his self-control took over.

"All right Conor, we'll leave that for now…but what about that fake identity of yours? Lieutenant Tufts called it…" he snapped a finger at the squirrel, "what was it you said again?"

"Almost Druid-level work," Tufts answered him while staring daggers at Conor. Before the young fox could answer, he felt Rodenberg's foot pressing down again; okay, time to zip it.

"Oh, for crying out loud," the grey rat said, regarding his fellow rodent with a mocking smirk, "now you're REALLY getting into urban-legend territory Lieutenant; even I know The Druid is bupkes." He swiveled his gaze on Rudy Gamsbart. "And what, exactly, is the point of all this?"

"The point, Counselor," the chamois responded smoothly, "is that your client has most certainly been in contact with someone possessing a high degree of computer-hacking skills….exactly the kind of skills needed to have penetrated the databases of more than ten different banks."

"More than FIFTEEN different banks," Albert Tufts corrected, and then focused a hard stare on the grey-furred defense attorney "Creating that fake I.D. your client's been using required the penetration of literally dozens of different databases. A lot of the agencies we contacted didn't even know they'd been hacked until we told them." His head snapped suddenly upwards and to the left.

"Why do you even have that fake I.D., kid?"

Conor coughed into his paw, at the same time whispering out the side of his mouth to his attorney, "Lemme, I got this."

For second or two there was no reaction, and then finally Rodenberg pressed down with his foot…in a way that was barely noticeable; he was not so sure that letting his client answer the Kaibab squirrel was good idea.

"You already know why, Lieutenant," the young fox said, in a voice much too world-weary for a
boy his age, "I'm all alone, I got no family. I lost my mom when I was three and I never met my
dad. I'm an orphan…and you know what that means." His expression abruptly hardened, locking in
on the red fox on the other side of the bale, "Tell 'em Nick, tell 'em what happens to a member of
our species when they get put in foster-care."

Caught off guard by the younger fox's unexpected inquiry Nick was unable to speak for a moment.
Then he cleared his throat.

"You go in…but you don't come out," he said, momentarily incapable of meeting anyone's eyes,
"not until you're legally an adult, and then they just basically kick you out into the world." He
looked up again…and saw Judy gazing back at him with a twitching nose and look of alarm on her
face. "It's true Carrots. The only species that will adopt an orphaned fox-cub is another fox; no
other animal will touch us. The conventional wisdom says that if you take a fox into your home,
you'll wake up one morning to find the silverware gone and him with it. I know, I know," he added
hastily, anticipating her reaction, "and you're right, it stinks—but that's still the way most animals
think. Believe me I know what I'm talking about; right before my father died, he and my mother
were thinking of adopting another fox-cub. I used to hear them talk about it all the time."

"And that's a CUB," Conor Lewis pointed out, taking swift advantage of the opening the elder fox
had given him, "Once you get past the age of 12, it's harder than heck to find anyone to adopt you,
no matter what your species!"

He turned his attention back to Lieutenant Tufts, "If I'd had to go into foster care, I'd never have
done as good as I have. My records may be fake from more than three years ago, but except for
where I live, everything after that is totally true. The grades and the admission-test scores that got
me accepted into the Zootopia Academy of the Performing Arts? All that stuff's the real deal, no
hacking or cheating, and nothing made up…and there's no way I could have faked my audition,
even if I'd wanted to. Oh, and that's how I won the Gazelle Scholarship, by the way. Yeah, you
didn't know that, did you Judy? I never told Erin that part…but it's true. And I've been acing all my
classes at ZAPA ever since I started there. Call 'em, they'll confirm it."

He stood up on his chair as if it were a soapbox, so quickly that he nearly forgot about the grey rat
perched on his shoulder.

"Hey, watch it Booby!" Vern Rodenberg squeaked, making a fast grab for the young fox's neck fur
and holding on tight. Oy, he should have pushed down with his foot when he had the chance; his
client was on a roll now and there was no stopping this freight-train.

"I'd never have been able to make that happen if I didn't have the freedom to make at least a few of
my own decisions," he went on, "and that's something you better believe a fox doesn't get in foster
care; you do what you're told, when you're told, how you're told; they decide what foods you can
eat, they decide what classes you take, they decide what clothes you're gonna wear, what TV shows
you get to watch, even the books you're allowed to read. Wanna use the computer? Take a number
and get in line—but don't hold your breath, you might get half an hour tomorrow, if you're lucky…and
even then, it'll be filtered. You can't leave the facility without written permission, you can't go
to the movies without a chaperone, you can't own a skateboard, coz they're afraid you might take it
to store window. And you can't buy anything for yourself, even if you've got the money. You have
to go to the office and fill out a request slip, and then they do the shopping—if you get approved,
which most of the time you don't. Oh, and did I mention that if you're a fox in foster-care, you're
not allowed to hang with another member of your species? Nope, if two foxes are talking in private,
it means they're up to something. That's another piece of—what'd you call it again Nick? Oh yeah,
conventional wisdom," He looked down at the tabletop again, "Tell me something Lieutenant,
would you have wanted to grow up like that?" He swept his gaze around the room, "Would ANY
of you have wanted to grow up like that?"

If Conor was expecting his query to be greeted by an awkward silence, he was to be swiftly disappointed. Rudy Gamsbart stood up at once and applauded him…with his arms spread all the way open, in the manner of a mechanical wind-up toy, playing the cymbals.

"Cry me a river, son. I must have prosecuted a zillion felons who had it much harder than that when they were kids…and guess what? A tough childhood is no excuse for breaking the law," he leaned in close with his paw on the table, eyes like bits of obsidian, "especially not if you're guilty of assaulting a police officer."

Before Conor could respond to this, he felt his lawyer pressing down with his foot. That was fine with him; he'd said his piece.

"Yes, let's get to that, Counselor. You keep telling my client, over and over, that you have him on video biting Officer Wilde…and from two different angles, no less. But you have yet to show him any of that footage. So, how about it, Mr. Prosecutor, might we see those body-cam vids now?"

It was a challenge the chamois couldn't refuse; Conor had every right to view the evidence against him and everyone in here knew it.

Rudy Gamsbart not only knew it, he was ready for it.

"Officer Swinton, if you'd be so kind?" he said, signaling to the pig-cop with a pair of crooked fingers. She responded by setting a standard-issue ZPD laptop on the table…a much thinner model than the one they'd taken off of Conor. Flipping it open, she booted up quickly and then turned it to face the young silver fox and his attorney.

The playback started with the footage from Judy Hopps's body-cam, beginning from right after the flying tackle that saved her life. It was something that both annoyed and puzzled Conor Lewis; annoying because the pig-cop chosen to omit his leap for life in the first place—and puzzling because Vern Rodenberg was raising no objection. Just the same, he held his tongue; he'd made a promise to the rat and he intended to keep it.

What they saw next on the screen could almost have passed for an FX reel. First, a blurred, slightly grainy close up of the young fox's face, trying to say something. And then, without warning, he shot upwards and backwards as if propelled by an invisible force.

"Hold it, stop!" Rodenberg called, forming a T with his paws. Swinton dutifully froze the image and the grey rat peered closer with his paw shading his eyes.

"Where the heck's Officer Wilde? I can't see hide nor hair of him on this thing."

"He's there, he's just obscured by all the smoke and haze," Albert Tufts told him, "You'll see him in a few seconds though."

"Well, sorry Lieutenant but I want to see him right now," the grey rat responded caustically, "I need to confirm something Mr. Lewis told me." And then to Swinton he said, "Is there any way you can clean that up so we can see what's going on behind my client?"

Instead of answering, the pig-cop looked at Rudy Gamsbart, who tiredly nodded his consent. He seemed think that everything happening here was a complete waste of time; Conor Lewis was guilty of assaulting a police officer and nothing Vern Rodenberg could say or do was going to change that fact.
"Stand by," the pig-cop said, moving her fingers over the keys. Rodenberg meanwhile was pressing down with his feet again—not to signal Conor that it was his turn to speak, but for another reason.

"Gimme a paw, will you kid?" he said, pointing at the laptop, "I need to take a closer look at what's on that screen there."

Conor laid a pawlm against his shoulder and the grey-rat climbed on board. By now the image on the laptop display had begun to crystallize and a dark shape was visible just behind the young silver fox.

"There, that good enough?" Swinton asked him, beginning to sound peevish.

"Bring me close will you, kid?" Rodenberg said, speaking to Conor rather than her. He squinted for moment and then shook his head, "Can you fix that just a little better?"

Swinton snorted angrily but then complied. The image sharpened a tiny bit more and she sat back from the computer screen, waving a hoof and folding her arms.

"There, Highness, that's the best I can give you." Her voice was like a gauntlet being thrown to the floor.

"Ahh, it'll do," Rodenberg said, looking at the screen, rather than her. The animal behind Conor Lewis was still not recognizable as Officer Nick Wilde…but it was definitely recognizable as a fox, and how many other foxes had there been in that alleyway right then?

Nonetheless, the grey rat was still not completely satisfied, motioning for Conor to set him down on the tabletop. Climbing up onto the laptop's keyboard, he studied the screen with his paws on his hips.

While this was going on an expression of mild alarm was splaying across the faces of Nick, Judy, and Conor Lewis. Swinton's musings as she watched the grey rat straddle the laptop keys could not have been clearer. "Wouldn't this thing make a GREAT rat-trap?"

(They needn't have worried, Chief Bogo's thoughts at that moment were every bit as plain to see as hers. "Don't even THINK about it!")

Then Rodenberg turned to Nick Wilde. "It appears here that you were directly above and behind my client when you pulled him off of Officer Hopps. Is that correct?"

"Mmmm, yes, I-I seem to remember." The red fox answered, as cautiously as if he were delousing a land-mine. Having once been the grey rat's client himself he knew that this was NOT an innocuous inquiry.

"Can we get on with this now?" Albert Tufts demanded impatiently. He seemed to think that his fellow rodent was only stalling. Rudy Gamsbart, who knew the grey rat better, knew otherwise.

"Take as much time as you need, Counselor," he said

"Nooo, I think we're good to go," the rat responded, nodding at Conor to lift him back up to his shoulder again.

As soon as he was once more settled in, the playback resumed. A split second after Conor was hauled up and away from Judy, the image swirled in a dizzying blur as she sat up again. The next thing that everyone saw was Conor's mouth stretching open in a fox scream—right before he buried his fangs in Nick Wilde's forearm. Instantly Rodenberg felt his client stiffen and start to
shiver; this was painful for him to watch.

("It was right then I knew the kid had been telling me the truth," he would later say to his law partner, "he really didn't mean to do it. Up until that moment, I'd been about eighty percent sure of that fact; now I was up to a hundred percent.")

Then Gamsbart broke in, "Well Mr. Lewis, do you deny having assaulted Officer Wilde?" Before the young fox could answer, Vern Rodenberg pressed down twice with his foot—fast. It probably wasn't necessary but he couldn't take the chance. Pretending to ignore the chamois' question, he said, "Is there any sound to go with this?"

"Not on this tape, the microphone was damaged when Officer Hopps took that fall." Chief Bogo was pointing at the laptop.

"When my client saved her life, not when she 'FELL',' Rodenberg corrected him tartly, and now it was Chief who seemed to think that the only good defense lawyer was a dead one.

"There's sound on the Wilde-cam footage," Swinton interjected, visibly wanting to move things along.

"All right, let's see it." The grey rat told her, only a wee bit more amenable than a second ago.

When the footage began to roll, it started somewhat further back than the earlier recording. The first thing everyone saw was the bouncy image of an alleyway, seen from the POV of Nick Wilde's body cam. The air was hazy and the view ahead sketchy at best, the surrounding structures appeared as little more than ghostly outlines in the smoke. An occasional cough from the red fox reminded everyone that this time the sound was working.

As they all watched, the footage seemed to advance at a snail's pace; Nick was moving cautiously, small wonder given the limited visibility and the heat and smoke permeating his lungs and throat. Just the same, Rodenberg was tempted to ask Swinton to speed things up. He needn't have bothered, in another short second things began to move rapidly on their own. From somewhere around a bend up ahead came the sound of loud bang, coupled with what looked like a flash of sheet-lightning—only from what appeared to be street-level. At once the camera view became a low-angle shot, and then a stuttering blur, as the red fox dropped to all fours and went rushing in the direction of the explosion, (or whatever it was.) As he came around the corner, the view shot upright again…and there was Judy Hopps, lying on the ground with a figure on top of her. What happened next seemed to occur in mere seconds. Nick bolted forward and his paw shot into the frame, seizing the figure atop his partner—now plainly recognizable as Conor Lewis—grabbing him by the scruff of the neck and yanking him up and off of her. They heard Nick's rasping growl, 'Get OFF her!' followed by a scream from the younger fox like a thousand claws on a thousand blackboards. And then he twisted in his captor's grip and bit down on his arm; it happened so fast that anyone blinking would have missed it.

"Keep going," Rodenberg ordered. Swinton snorted as if to say she wasn't planning to stop here anyway—and who died and left YOU in charge?

They heard Nick's yelp of pain, and saw him drop his quarry …out of frame, where the younger fox couldn't be seen. Conor's words were easily discernable however…if you could call those words. "Oh Jeez Nick…I-I didn't…I…”

And then the red fox's body cam swirled around, just in time see to Conor flattening himself against the ground with his arms spread out in front of him.
"All right, I've seen enough," Vern Rodenberg said, and screen went quickly blank.

Almost immediately Albert Tufts spoke up

"If you're thinking about trying to claim that any of what you just saw was edited….excuse me 'doctored', you can save yourself the trouble, Counselor. It's raw footage and we can prove it." He was clearly aware of the grey rat's adventures in Zoo York. Rodenberg only waved him off.

"So," Rudy Gamsbart was looking at Conor again, "Let me ask you once again Mr. Lewis, do you deny having assaulted Officer Wilde?"

"My client will answer that question in a moment, Mr. Prosecutor," the grey rat said, (he had already given Conor the signal to keep quiet,) "but first there's a matter of grave importance that needs to be addressed—something I saw on the surveillance tape just now, something that everyone else here seems to have forgotten." His tone was both cool and deliberate…and Nick and Rudy Gamsbart were both on high alert. They knew that voice—all too well. This was the manner Vern Rodenberg assumed when he was preparing to spring a trap. It did little for Nick Wilde's peace of mind when, without warning, the grey rat zeroed in on him.

"Officer Wilde?" He said, still speaking in that same precise manner, "On the tape just now, the only thing I heard you say to my client was 'Get off her.'" His right eyebrow went higher than the other and his voice suddenly hardened by three degrees, "Am I to understand that when you grabbed hold of Conor Lewis you did NOT properly identify yourself as an officer of the law?"

SNAP! There it was; the room went into an almost deathly silence. This was it, this was the moment Vern Rodenberg had been leading up to from the moment of his arrival at the precinct; everything else had been merely a curtain-raiser. He'd known all along that Nick had never identified himself to the younger fox as member of the ZPD.

But instead of pointing that fact out immediately, (as an amateur like Brad Hickenbocker might have down,) he had first set up the prosecution's case like a gaggle of bowling pins. He'd made sure that biting Nick was the ONLY thing the Mammals of Zootopia had on his client, he'd repeatedly reminded everyone that prior to biting Nick, his client had saved Judy Hopps's life he had even managed cast doubt on the idea that there was something to be gained, vis-à-vis The Phantom by prosecuting the young silver fox. Yesterday, Nick Wilde had been able to recall precious little of the grey rat who had once served as his defense attorney. Now, it was all coming back to him.

Before he could answer, Rudy Gamsbart jumped in ahead of him.

"Oh, give me a break Counselor! Mr. Lewis and Officer Wilde are known to each from well before that incident; your client was perfectly aware of Nicholas Wilde's status as a police-mammal when he turned around and bit him."

Rodenberg was ready for that one.

"Well, yes…except if you recall, Officer Wilde grabbed my client from directly behind, where the boy couldn't see him. Look at the second video; when Officer Wilde took hold of him, Conor Lewis's eyes weren't visible to the camera."

Gamsbart's lip curled upwards for a second; he seemed to be debating with himself; was the grey rat bluffing? He quickly decided no…and that it didn't matter anyway. He too had an ace in the hole.
"All well and good Mr. Rodenberg, but now you're forgetting something; Nick Wilde and Conor Lewis are both foxes, a species that can identify each other by scent alone."

"Under normal circumstances, yes," Rodenberg countered, "but these circumstances were anything but normal. According to the police report, Officers Hopps and Wilde found it necessary to track my client visually because, and I quote, 'due to all the smoke in the air, the suspect's scent had become impossible to detect.' He turned his gaze on Nick again, "If you couldn't smell him Officer Wilde, how was he supposed to smell YOU?"

Once again, Gamsbart got there first.

"Oh-Puh-LEEZE! That entry in the police report referred to tracking your client from a distance, not trying to catch his scent from close enough to TOUCH."

Rodenberg's manner turned breezy again.

"Well then let's just find out about that. Officer Wi…?"

"Don't answer him, Wilde!" Gamsbart snapped, pointing at Nick with an admonishing finger. And then to Rodenberg he said, "This isn't a courtroom Counselor; if you want to cross-examine Officer Wilde, you'll have your chance when he takes the witness stand."

"Oh I will Mr. Prosecutor, I will." The grey rat nodded eagerly, "you can count on that."

Hearing this, Nick felt as if a runaway elevator had gotten loose in his throat and gone plummeting into his stomach. Agggghh, grrrrr!

Meanwhile Gamsbart had another card to play.

"Even if your client wasn't able to see Officer Wilde, he was certainly able to see Officer Hopps…"

"He ought to, after saving her life…"

"…and he's perfectly aware that the two of them are partners," the chamois ignored the interruption, "if she was there, your client had to know that Officer Wilde was also somewhere close by."

"Strictly conjecture Mr. Gamsbart," the grey rat sniffed, "As for what Conor Lewis 'had to know', as you so crudely put it, I remind you that he'd just made a flying tackle through some loose high-tension wires…and was deathly afraid that Officer Hopps was hurt. That kind of thing will play hob with your senses…"

"Oh, come on; you're nor seriously going to try…?" Now it was Gamsbart interrupting.

"…the fight-or-flight instinct defense?" Rodenberg neatly fielded the question. "Wouldn't dream of it, Counselor; no, there's one more thing you didn't know. You see…ahhh, I'll let my client tell it."

He pressed down with his foot again…and the effect was like jamming down on the gas-pedal of a street-rod. Conor spoke so rapidly, it was hard to keep up with what he was saying.

"Nick, I swear…I didn't mean to bite you, honest I didn't. You're the LAST guy I'd ever wanna do that to." His words slowed and his voice became choked and confused. "If I'd know it was you…well I dunno, I don't remember, but I'm sorry for biting you, swear on my mom's grave, I am. I didn't mean to do it; I didn't even know that I'd bit you 'til I saw you bleeding."
"Then why did you bite him?" Rudy Gamsbart demanded with his arms folded, refusing to be drawn in by the young fox's plea. It was no surprise to Vern Rodenberg, both he and the chamois must have heard this mea culpa routine at least a hundred times from a hundred different defendants.

But if Gamsbart thought the young fox wouldn't be able to answer his question, he was to be quickly disabused of that notion.

"Because the last time someone grabbed me like that I got my face broken," Conor's voice was beginning to sound shaky…even to him, and no wonder. This was the last place he wanted to go right now, but like it or not, it was the only place to go if he wanted to win this thing.

From his shoulder he heard, "Show 'em, kid."

For a long moment, the young for only sat there…and then he hooked two fingers in the corner of his mouth and spreading them and pulling backwards, exposing his teeth and gums. Three of the molars were in gold, two uppers and one lower; his jaw-bone was dissected by a trio of jagged scars.

Gamsbart leaned in close, followed by Judy, the Chief and Swinton, (Albert Tufts declined to look.) When Nick's turn came, he yipped and almost reeled back in horror. "Holy Fox…!"

Someone nudged him in the side and he heard Judy whispering, "Nick, what is it?"

"Not now Carrots, later," he whispered back, angling his nose just ever so slightly in the direction of the rat perched on Conor Lewis's shoulder.

"Okay," she answered, taking the hint— right, not in front of that animal!

Just then, 'that animal' spoke up again.

"And I believe you all heard my client's reaction when Officer Wilde grabbed him," he said, "That wasn't a scream of anger; he was terrified." He looked once more at Rudy Gamsbart. "No Mr. Prosecutor, I do NOT intend to invoke the flight-or-fight instinct as defense. Instead…well let's go over it a bit more fully this time, shall we? On the word of a known perjurer, you staked out a locker in the Sahara Square Beach Promenade, believing it to be a money drop set up by the sometime loan-shark and cyber-criminal dubbed The Phantom by ZPD Cybercrimes—an individual many animals don't believe even exists. After a short wait, the alleged borrower left a package in that locker, a package whose contents you never determined, and which my client never even looked at when he entered the locker…for what could have been a perfectly ordinary reason. You then followed him to Flock Street Station and into a maze of smoke filled alleys where he risked his own life to save Officer Hopps there from…"

"Cor, you're never going to let that go, are you?" Chief Bogo interrupted with a derisive snort.

The grey rat only smiled at him.

"Unlike you…no."

"Why, you little…!" Bogo took a step forward and then hastily checked himself. As for the others, if looks could kill, Vern Rodenberg would have dropped to the tabletop right then and there, a piece of dead meat. Even Nick was regarding him venomously; the grey rat's dig at the Chief had been a particularly low blow; his deep concern for the officers who served under him was a matter of unquestionable record.
"When my client landed on the pavement, along with Officer Hopps, he was in a highly agitated state. And then, without warning, someone—he didn't know who—grabbed him from behind, and in so doing triggered a flashback."

"So the kid claims." Albert Tufts interjected.

"So we'll PROVE," Rodenberg shot right back, "and so you'd have seen for yourself Lieutenant, if you could have been bothered to look just now."

Chittering angrily, the Kaibab squirrel bared his incisors at Rodenberg, who immediately bared his right back. 'Bring it punk, your species I can handle,' he seemed to be saying, his old prison fursona coming briefly to the fore…and then he said "And let me remind you, one more time, Nick Wilde never properly identified himself to my client as a police officer."

"Well, didn't your client at least recognize his voice?" This time it was Claire Swinton.

The grey rat gave her an almost pitying look.

"Well, that depends, Officer…uh, Swinton. You heard Officer Wilde on that tape just now; sounded to me as if he had a throat full of dried bark. Was that his real voice, made raw by all the smoke…or did you make a mistake in the recording?"

"Hey!" the pig cop started to bristle, but Rodenberg had already moved on.

"In any event, Officer Wilde didn't say anything to my client until AFTER he grabbed him, by which time Mr. Lewis was already triggered…yes triggered; you all heard that scream. And if you still doubt it, consider what happened after the bite. My client offered no further resistance whatsoever and even 'assumed the position' without being told. So yes, my client bit Nick Wilde….but he did not, repeat NOT bite a ZPD Police Officer, knowingly and with malice aforethought."

He turned to face Rudy Gamsbart, "THAT'S my proposed line of defense, Counselor. So now I ask you, do you intend to go forward with this case?"

The chamois' answer was like a rhino charge.

"Absolutely, the Mammals intend to press this case, Mr. Rodenberg…and we intend to secure a guilty verdict as well." He gave no further details, only offered a slight smirk, an unspoken reference to the OTHER ace up his sleeve, the jurist known unofficially as Judge Predd.

Rodenberg kept his cool as he responded.

"Very well Mr. Prosecutor, but you should know something; you can't win this." Before the chamois could interrupt, the grey rat jabbed a finger at him, "Even if you DO manage to bring in a guilty verdict against my client—which you won't—you're not going get what you really want, namely the Phantom. " He folded his arms, "And that's something you're never going to get from my client, because he has no Phantom to give you. Think that over before you decide to press forward on your little goose-chase."

"Tell you what Counselor," the chamois also folded his arms, "I'll consider that if you'll consider this; there are a lot of things about your client that you don't know, that frankly nobody knows." He bored in with his eyes on the young silver fox, sitting across the table from him, "Heck we don't even know your real name, do we Conor-So-Called-Lewis?" Without waiting for an answer, he turned
his attention back to Vern Rodenberg. "The Mammals may be chasing a wild goose, Counselor… but YOU'RE playing with a surprise package, and when you open it up and find a bomb inside, don't come crying to me."

He focused his gaze on Conor again, "Care to tell me your real name kid, who you really are? You can answer that question now or when we get to court."

Rodenberg stamped down twice and spoke quickly.

"Don't let him bluff you kid; if he asks you that question in court, I'll object and he'll have to withdraw it."

Gamsbart sniffed derisively

"Like heck I will. If you try to raise that objection, Judge…the judge will overrule you so fast you need to have it read back to you," He laced his fingers together, an oily smile spreading across his features, "Or maybe I won't need to ask him again, remember that cheek swab we took from your client? They're not just for rabies anymore; we're going to forward a sample of his DNA to the Zootopia Health Sciences University genetics lab, and trust me, they don't come any better than that place. We WILL find out who Conor Lewis is…one way or another."

In response to this a tremor passed through the young silver-fox, barely noticeable to anyone watching, but Vern Rodenberg came so close to losing his balance, he nearly made a grab for his client's neck-fur. Luckily for both of them, the moment passed as quickly as it had come, and all the young fox said was, "Then that's what's gonna happen."

"Amen," Vern Rodenberg concurred. He wasn't 100% in agreement with his client on this, but close enough, "Really, Mr. Prosecutor, you're not telling me anything I didn't know when I decided to take this case."

"Yes, why DID you agree to take this case?" Nick Wilde was unable to hold back any longer… event though he already knew what the grey rat's answer would be.

Rodenberg fixed him in a chilly stare.

"THAT is something I don't have to tell you, Officer Wilde…or Mr. Gamsbart, or the judge, or anyone else. I don't even have to tell my client why I agreed to represent him," He showed his incisors again, "if I'm willing to risk getting fired, that is. And that goes double for whether or not I'm representing Mr. Lewis pro-bono, so don't even think about asking!"

Nick fell back in his seat, ears going in several different directions at once. Dang…his former attorney seemed to be going out of his way to antagonize everybody right now. And if he knew Vern Rodenberg, none of it was random; there was method in the grey rat's maddening demeanor.

"Very well," Rudy Gamsbart had put on his most highly starched tone of voice, "Your client's arraignment is set for 09:30 AM, tomorrow morning," He smirked slightly, "Unless you have an objection, Counselor." To Judy, he sounded like a kit daring another kid to step across a line. Though she would never be able to say why exactly, she would later recall this as the moment when her feelings about the chamois started to change.

"I don't have a problem with that," the grey rat responded with an easy shrug, but then he amended, "if my client doesn't that is."

Almost immediately Conor Lewis put in his two cents, "What my attorney said, Monday morning, 9:30 is okay with me."
Gamsbart pushed back his chair and stood up. "All right, Mr. Gamsbart, Mr. Lewis…I'll see the both of you in court; bright and early tomorrow morning."

He did not offer to shake with either one of them.
Judy Hopps thumped her foot impatiently, scrutinizing her partner with a narrow, jaundiced eye. "Okay Nick, now are you ready to talk about it?"

After she and the fox had left Interrogation Room #1, Judy had waited until they were alone before asking him why Conor Lewis's scars had upset him so much. He'd immediately stonewalled her, insisting that she wait until they were outside Precinct-1 before talking about it.

And then he'd wanted to hold off until they were out of earshot of Precinct-1.

And then he'd wanted to wait until they were able to find someplace 'private' for their discussion.

That meandering pathway had eventually led them to a table in front of the Savanna Central Pizzeria Pianeta. And even then the fox had refused to answer her questions until the waitress delivered their slices and left them alone.

When she'd finally departed, that was when Judy had (literally) put her foot down. Whatever was bothering Nick, it was a lot more serious—and there was a lot more going on here—than she'd initially surmised.

"Come on, Slick…out with it!"

He sucked at his lower lip for a second, as if trying to think up an excuse for dropping the subject altogether.

Finally, he said, "I think…I can't swear to this, Carrots, but I think Conor was wearing a muzzle when he got those injuries to his face."
"Ohhh-kay, what makes you say that Nick?" Judy tore open a packet of sugar and let it drizzle into her glass of iced-tea, watching him carefully. If a muzzle was part of the equation, it went a long way towards explaining her partner's reticence to talk about it.

By way of response, the fox laid a finger against one corner of his mouth. "Here's where those scars were, right? And it's exactly where the edge of a muzzle would go—or the juncture if it's a full-face model. That's the thing about muzzles a lot of animals don't realize; they leave your face more susceptible to injury than if you weren't wearing one. Keep in mind Carrots, muzzles aren't like face masks; nobody wears one for their own protection, they're put on to protect someone else from you."

"Mmmm," Judy sipped her tea, tasted it, and added another pinch of sugar. At the same time she felt her eyes drifting downward, towards the slices of Giardino Primo pizza laying on the table in front her. She was ravenously hungry, both of them were, but it would be several minutes at least before their lunch would be cool enough to enjoy.

On the face of it, Pizzeria Pianeta was not the best place for them to have this conversation, (which was why Judy thought Nick had chosen it; he was still trying to stall her—and oh NO, you don't!) The reason for this was simple; P-P was another favorite stopover for the officers of Precinct-1.

But...that was only after they had clocked out for the day, NEVER while they were still on duty. Although Chief Bogo hadn't specifically forbidden his officers to eat here, any Precinct-1 cop seen on these premises during working hours was likely to spend the next day writing parking tickets—or worse. (This all had to do with the persistent rumor that the real owner of the Pianeta Pizzerias was someone of whom the Chief was not particularly fond.) Nick and Judy had no such worries, they weren't on duty right now; Bogo had given them the afternoon off and all day tomorrow as well. "With your suspect safely in custody, I see no reason why you two shouldn't have some time to y'selves," he'd said, offering a small caveat before seeing them off, "barring any further developments, of course."

And so, this being right in the middle of the ZPD's day-shift, the fox and bunny had the place to themselves; not another cop in sight.

By now, the cool of the morning had given was to a sunny afternoon, warm, but not scorching, pleasant enough if you were able to find some shade, which Nick and Judy had managed with no difficulty, finding a table topped by a huge Bullegrino umbrella.

Judy set down her glass and looked at her partner. There was another reason why he'd been stalling her; she had seen him like this too many times not to know. He had something he desperately needed to tell her—but that he also didn't WANT to tell. And he would never volunteer the information right up front; she'd have to wait until he'd wound himself down a little. One thing she did know was this; Conor being muzzled when he'd gotten his face broken wasn't it; there was another, even more uncomfortable subject lurking in the shadows somewhere.

But since Conor's face was the current topic of discussion, Judy had something of her own to relate.

"I don't know if you noticed Nick, but did you see how much straighter that third scar was than the other two? And it also looked a lot more recent, to me anyway. That says the doctors didn't set that break correctly the first time; there had to be some corrective surgery later."

Nick made a tentative nip at his pizza and hurriedly set it down again; still too hot to eat.

"Which means...?" he prompted, raising an ear.
"Which means," Judy answered lifting both of hers, "Chief Bogo's first idea, that the Phantom's the one paying Mr. Rodenberg's fees, just got moved to the top of the list. That kind of doctoring doesn't come cheap." She took a short pull from her drink. "I should know; there isn't a family in Bunnyburrow that hasn't seen a broken bone in the past few years...it's the chance you take, working around heavy farm equipment."

"Hmmm," Nick was stroking his chin and looking thoughtful, "Nooo, corrective surgery doesn't come cheap, does it? And it would sure as heck explain why Conor was working as a loan-shark's runner." He raised a finger as if making a point. "You know, that's something we never considered Carrots; maybe HE'S the one who feels he owes a debt, not the other way around. In any case, I think it's very possible that he might be working for...ah, I'm just going to keep on calling him The Phantom; that the kid might be working for him un-willingly."

"So...you DO think that's what he was up to, back at the Beach Promenade?" Judy asked the question as cautiously as if she were handling a jar of nitroglycerine. It turned out to be a wise move, because after regarding her for few seconds, Nick flung his napkin on the table-top and looked hurriedly away, finding the passing automobile traffic to be of sudden and keen interest.

When he turned to face her again, Judy saw that one of his fangs was partially exposed.

"Yes," he breathed, sounding disgusted with himself, "Much as I hate to say it, I think Conor knows a lot more than he told us during that Q-and-A session. He may not know exactly who's been hacking into those banks' computer files and using the information to set up illegal loans, but he at least has some idea. Tufts and Gamsbart were dead right about that." He looked away again, sucking air between his teeth, "and that puts me in a bind, Carrots... a place where I really don't want to be."

Judy nodded slowly. Okay this was it; her partner had finally come around to the thing he'd wanted to tell her ever since they'd left the interrogation room, (but hadn't been able to.)

She told him gently, "Nick, I think I know what you're talking about, but I need to hear it from you."

He turned a weary face in her direction.

"It's just a good thing Gamsbart cut Vern Rodenberg off at the pass when he did—because honestly, I don't remember if I was able to catch Conor's scent when I pulled him off you; I was using my eyes, not my nose. And no...I don't think HE smelled me either; otherwise he'd have known I was there before I grabbed him. Heck, he didn't even hear me coming...and I wasn't exactly being stealthy about it; I didn't care about moving quietly, I just wanted to get that kid off of you right NOW"

"Do you...really think he would have hurt me, Nick?" Judy asked the question as delicately as she could.

He made a sound that fell somewhere between a growl and clearing his throat.

"That's how looked to me at the time, Carrots. Heck, you saw the footage from my body-cam; didn't it look that way to you? I know, I knowwww!" He threw up his paws, as if having anticipated her reaction to this, (and, in fact he had.) "This is Conor Lewis we're talking about, the same kid who helped your sister make the talent-show and then helped ME put a stop to the Guilford brothers' spray-bomb attack." His ears suddenly wilted and he looked around furtively; dumb fox, saying it right out in the open, where anyone could hear him. (Luckily, there was nobody else within hearing range.) Looking more than a little embarrassed, he turned to face Judy
again, "But if you'd suggested to me, the day before yesterday, that this kid was capable of working for a Shylock I'd have told you to go find somewhere to sleep it off. By the time I caught up with you and him in that alleyway, I had no idea how far he might be willing to go to avoid capture… and I'll tell you something else."

He leaned towards her; tapping the table in a gesture remarkably similar to the one Rudy Gamsbart had made earlier.

"Don't ask me where I'm getting this Carrots, but I know—I just know that when Conor had his face broken, he gave as good as he got. That kid has some serious guts; he almost reminds me of D."

"The fox who ran the inmate crew when you were in Lemmingworth?" Judy cocked an ear, eyeing him closely.

"'Prisoners', not 'inmates'," the red fox corrected and then he said, "But yes, and you've heard what Conor keeps saying, Judy. 'Then that's what's going to happen.' And he means it, I can tell; he really doesn't care what happens to him. And last but not least," His face broke into a ragged smile as he held up his bandaged arm, "I don't know if he would have tried to hurt you Carrots, but he was sure as heck capable of hurting ME—even if he didn't mean to do it."

"But how does that put you in a bind, Nick?" she asked him, feeling her nose beginning to twitch. Yet again, she had already guessed his answer, but needed to hear him say it.

He made that grating, half-growling noise again.

"Because whether or not Conor ends up giving us anything useful about the Phantom, depends on whether or not he knew who I was when he bit me…or at least whether he knew that I was police officer. He looked straight at her, "And truth be told, Carrots, I think…heck, I'm almost SURE the kid didn't recognize me when I grabbed him. And if there's one attorney in this town who can get me to admit that on the witness stand it's Vernon J. Rodenberg. And what do you think Mr. Gamsbart will do if that happens? Who do you think he's going to blame if Conor strolls? Not him and certainly not his lawyer…so who does that leave? That's the bind I'm in, now do you understand?"

"Yes Nick, I do." Judy's nod was slow and sympathetic. Poor fox, he wasn't just caught between a rock and a hard place; try a hammer and an anvil. "So, how are you planning to handle this?" she asked him.

"I have no idea, Carrots," Nick slapped his paws against his knees, "I don't think I'm going to have too much to say about it anyway. From now on, Rudy Gamsbart's going to be calling the shots, and I can either dance when he pulls the strings or get chopped into firewood."

For the third time since taking her seat, Judy felt her nose starting to twitch again. After two years as Nick Wilde's partner, she had learned to tell when his words held a hidden meaning. Any time this fox started mixing his metaphors, that was the giveaway right there.

But…seriously now; Rudy Gamsbart might be a bit of hard-case and a little obsessive when it came to bringing down the animal known as The Phantom…but would he really go so far as to pressure Nick into tailoring his testimony—tell it our way or else?

No, of course not…and yet, like the grain of sand that eventually becomes a pearl, a tiny sliver of doubt had crept into the back of Judy's mind—and like that irritating little piece of grit, it refused to go away. All she could do was try to put it aside for the moment; that, and attempt to lighten the
"Do you want your award for Best Drama Queen now or later?" she said, raising a sardonic eyebrow.

Nick's response to this was not what she expected.

"Oh, you think I'm exaggerating? Take a look at this."

His paw appeared from under the table, holding his cell-phone. Laying it on the tabletop, he slid it in Judy's direction. When she picked it up she saw a text from Chief Bogo on the screen, short and to the point.

"Gamsbart wants you in court tomorrow for CL's arraignment. 09:30, BE there!"

Judy stared at him with her nose twitching, much faster than before... and now her ears were standing up as well.

"What now? What the heck is THAT all about, Nick? You won't be called on to testify, you won't have anything to do but sit and watch. It's an arraignment for crying out loud; nothing major's going to happen."

That same crooked smile went scrolling across his muzzle.

"With Vernon J. Rodenberg for the defense, I wouldn't be so sure about that if I were you... but you're missing the point, Carrots." He reached over and tapped the cell-phone screen. "Did YOU get a message like that from Big Chief Buffalo Nickel? Bet you didn't."

Judy knew that she hadn't, but she also knew that her partner wouldn't leave it alone until she checked to make sure. She pulled out her own cell, tapped an icon, and scrolled for a minute; nope, nothing.

"All right Nick, I didn't," she said, "but what's your point here?"

His ears pulled halfway to the side and he leaned forward again, this time with an elbow on the table.

"The point is, can you see Bogo sending me a text like that on his own? Nope, he sent that message at Gamsbart's request. Heck, he even said so—and I also think that chamois doesn't want YOU anywhere near the Conor Lewis trial, Carrots. " He snatched the cell phone off the tabletop and put it away. "My guess is, he'll probably do everything he can to keep you off the witness stand— because he knows that if you testify, Vern Rodenberg's going to be all over you about how Conor saved your life. You watch; when the prosecution plays back your body-cam vid for the court, they'll start from the same place we just saw... after he made that flying tackle."

Judy tried to raise a protest, she really did; she gave it her very best effort. It was no use, the words just wouldn't come. Deep down, in her heart of hearts, she knew that he was right.

But even so...

"Fine... but then what's to stop Mr. Rodenberg from calling me as a witness? And can't he insist that the prosecution play back my body cam video in its entirety?"

"Points for the clever bunny," Nick told her, raising a finger "Sure he can... and he will. And when
he does, you can bet the farm that the Zootopia Attorney General's Office will fight him every step of the way. That's why Gamsbart doesn't want you at the arraignment—because even without testifying, you're a visible reminder that the kid in the docket saved your life."

Judy felt her brows going rigid and her ears falling backwards, her spine becoming as rigid as a truss-tower. All right, now he was going too far.

"Got paranoia, Nick? Sweet cheez n' crackers, just because I wasn't invited to attend Conor's arraignment, that doesn't mean they want me to stay away. Otherwise, why didn't Mr. Gamsbart have Bogo send me a text, ordering me not to come?"

"For the same reason I wouldn't have sent you one," Nick's voice was a sharp as his expression, "it would have aroused your suspicions. I'm telling you Carrots, Gamsbart doesn't want you there."

Judy's ears went back even further and her nose began to crinkle. What, now? It sounded very much like he was talking down to her, something he hadn't done since all the way back when she'd caught him running that pawpsicle hustle.

"Oh really, Slick?" she said, jutting her chin and feeling her ears pull tight against the back of her neck, "Then how about putting your money where your mouth is?" She slapped a bill on the tabletop. "There! Twenty smackers says that if I show up at Conor's arraignment, nobody even notices me."

Nick shied away from the money as if it were booby-trapped.

"No bet…and please don't come to Conor's arraignment tomorrow." He couldn't have looked more pitiful if he'd been down on his knees with his paws clasped.

Instead of answering him, Judy reached for her slice of pizza and took a big bite, tearing it off in a sideways motion.

It was still a little too hot to eat, but she barely noticed.

Okay, so he hadn't been running the old reverse-psychology hustle just now; his horrified reaction had said that much if nothing else—but it also brought up a new and unsettling question. There'd been nothing cynical in her partner's diatribe, he'd believed every word that he said; so…could he possibly be right about Rudy Gamsbart? Would the chamois really try to keep her out of the loop?

Judy didn't think so, and yet…there was only one way she was going to find out.

"Okay, I think you've got it, kid."

Vern Rodenberg was talking privately with Conor Lewis again. This time they were holed up in one of the smaller interrogation rooms, where the two of them had spent the last couple of hours going over their plans for tomorrow.

Ironically enough, Conor's 'Usual Suspects' troll—which had so infuriated his lawyer the first time he'd heard about it—now fit in nicely with the grey rat's strategy.

In simple terms, what Rodenberg intended was a gambit, a sacrifice play—losing his initial clash with Rudy Gamsbart in order to secure a bigger victory later. His only worry had been that his client might object to this tactic, but once again, the kid had proven to be a trouper, agreeing at once to everything he proposed.
"It's gonna be none too easy on you kid," he cautioned, "but it gives us a much better shot at coming out on top when we get to the main event."

"I get it," Conor answered simply. Rodenberg nodded back and pulled a new sheaf of papers from his briefcase,

"All right, now the next thing we need to deal with is the fact that you're under-age—something that's both good news and bad news. The good news is that The Mammals can't come down as hard on you for assaulting a police officer as they could if you were an adult. The bad news is that you have far less rights than an adult in a situation like this...especially considering your family history—or lack thereof, if you know what I mean. In the case of most juvenile offenders, those rights revert to a parent or legal guardian. But since you don't have either one that means you've been automatically remanded to the custody of the Attorney General's Office, in loco parentis."

Conor shot up out of his chair as if he'd accidentally sat on a joy-buzzer.

"Whoa, wait...Full! Stinkin'! Stop! Are you telling me that the animals trying to throw my tail in jail have legal custody of me?"

"Welcome to Wide World of Legalese, kid." Rodenberg fell back in his quad-chair, spreading his arms open, "the show where up is down, night is day, and everything you know is wrong. Yep, that's about the size of it...and now you know how Gamsbart was able to shove your case to the front of the docket tomorrow. If you were an adult, or if at least you had an adult guardian, he'd never have been able to pull that off. Either you could have objected, or your folks would have...and that would have been the end of it. Even Judge Schatten would have had no choice but to hold off on your arraignment."

"Except we don't care that Gamsbart moved up my arraignment, coz that'll give us some leverage later on." Conor repeated back what his lawyer had told him earlier. "Okay, I get that, but what is it you have in mind here?" (He thought he knew but wasn't completely sure.)

"It's this," the grey rat told him "What we need to do is get someone assigned to you as a temporary guardian." (Yep, just as he'd had thought.) "That'll put you out of Rudy Gamsbarts reach and he won't be able to pull another stunt like that. I'll file the petition by e-mail, soon as we're done here...but I need you to okay it first."

"Won't Judge Predd only toss your petition?" Conor asked him, ever the cynical young predator.

"Fair question," Rodenberg nodded, "But the answer is no, petitions to assign parental custody go through the Zootopia Department of Health and Mammalian Services, not through the court system, and especially not through the criminal courts."

"Okay," the young fox nodded again and then tilted his head sideways. "Who do you have in mind to be my guardian, or whatever? Not you I'm guessing, right?"

"Nope," the grey rat told him, shaking his head. "I couldn't if I wanted to, conflict of interest. No, I got someone else warming up in the bullpen. Ton Ruiter's his name."

Conor's head tilted even further to the right.

"'Kay, who's he?"
Rodenberg leaned back slightly in his chair.

"He's a P.I. that I work with sometimes, yellow mongoose. Really smart and knows his way around the streets like that." he snapped his fingers for emphasis.

Conor felt his ears starting to twist back and forth, "Ummm, okayyyy, but how's he gonna feel about this? I mean it's cool with ME, but…"

"He won't care as long as he doesn't have to take actual custody of you, kid," the grey rat answered with a laugh, "and there's a bonus over here; if Ton's your legal guardian, it means that Gamsbart can't deny him access to you...and he's going to need it, believe me."

"Works for me then," the young fox answered. He was still a mite skeptical and it must have shown on his face, because Rodenberg immediately waved a dismissive paw.

"Don't worry-y-y Booby, I'll check with Ton first before I file, I won't just drop this on him. I can't see him having problem with it though; we've done something similar several times before.'

"Hey, I said okay," Conor told him, beginning to sound peevish. Dangit how many times did he have to tell this rat 'you're the boss?' Rodenberg meanwhile had pulled out a small voice recorder.

"Okay, state your name for the record….and then I need a statement to the effect that you agree to accept Ton Ruiter as your legal Guardian."

Conor sat up in his chair and leaned in closer.

"My name is Conor Severus Lewis. On the advice of my attorney, I hereby agree to accept Mr. Ton Ruiter as my temporary legal guardian. I make this agreement with full knowledge of the obligations and responsibilities expected of me." (He had already made several similar statements to this one.)

Looking at Rodenberg he mouthed, "Anything else?"

"Nope, that's perfect,' the grey rat said, putting the recorder away, and then he leaned forward in his chair, clapping his paws on his knees. "All right before I get on outta here, how are you doing upstairs, kid? Holding up all right, any problems, anything you need?"

Conor almost told him that everything was fine, but then he remembered—Vernon J. Rodenberg might be an attorney in a three-piece now...but he'd spent almost 15 years of his life wearing an orange jumpsuit; you'd better believe that HE would understand if the young fox told him about Craig.

He hunkered down in his seat, bringing his eyes were level with his attorney's, and at the same time lowering his voice.

"There is one thing; I got this other kid's been laying for me ever since I landed upstairs." He went on to give a brief account of his encounter with Craig Guilford. When he finished, Rodenberg's head was disappointedly yawing back and forth.

"Awww kid, NEVER stare at another prisoner like that."

"I wasn't staring!" the young fox protested, "I know better than that, Mr. Rodenberg…and that's not the real reason he's on my case anyway. I heard this morning that his girlfriend snitched him to the cops to save herself—and she's a fox, you follow what I'm bringing out?"
"Oh, whoa...say no more, I get it, kid" The grey rat was making stopping motions with his paws, "He's really mad at HER—but she's out of his reach, so he decided to take it out on the first other fox that came along."

"Yeah!" Conor nodded enthusiastically, pleased that his attorney had gotten it without any further explanation. And why not, this rodent probably witnessed the same scenario a hundred times while serving his own sentence. That's what the slam did to some guys, made 'em want to vent on whoever was handy. Conor had seen for himself in The Point—a lot more times than he cared to think about.

But then he noticed Rodenberg was forming a steeple with his fingers.

"Hmmm, but his girlfriend sold him out did you say...and she's a fox? Ah, you wouldn't be talking Craig Guilford would you, Booby?" (Conor hadn't mentioned the rogue coyote by name.)

"Yep, that's him," he answered, looking pained, "And I'm in a real bind with this guy. If he straight-up challenges me, I'm gonna have to fight him; you know how things work on the inside." He turned and spat in the corner. "But if I DO fight him, that's a gift wrapped present for Mr. Gamsbart." He got up from the table, gesturing at an invisible judge's bench and speaking in a reasonable facsimile of the chamois prosecutor's voicer, "See, Your Honor, didn't I TELL you that this fox kid was incorrigible? He wants to attack everybody!"

"Whoa you got that right kid," Vern Rodenberg was nearly applauding—but at the same time, he was wary. Yesterday had NOT been this fox-kid's first check-in at the graybar hotel, he was sure of that now—and when you thought about it, it made a lot of other things fall into place.

But never mind; right now, his client needed his help...and the best he could offer at the moment was some sage advice.

"Okay, you hooked up with anyone yet?"

"I got some friends," Conor answered, knowing exactly what the rodent had meant by that question—but then he added a qualifier, "Cept I already told 'em that if that crazy coyote makes a move on me, I've gotta handle him myself."

Anyone else at this point might have informed the young fox that he was crazy, or at least asked him if he thought he COULD handle Craig Guilford by himself. Not Vern Rodenberg; he knew how it was in the slam, a place where you either stood up for yourself or got walked on by everybody else. In jail, the wisest course of action wasn't always an option.

"Yeah, but CRAIG doesn't know that, kid," the grey rat said, "If you can make it look like those other guys have your back, he'll probably leave you alone. Remember, he's a half-crazy country boy from way out in the boonies; no one's going to have his back in a fight. Stay as close to those other guys as much as you can...and try to get the word out that if any of them need help YOU'LL be right there. From what I've heard of that Guilford kid, he's none too bright with it, but even he oughta know how to add two and two."

"Right, thanks," Conor nodded briskly. He'd been so right to confide in his attorney about Craig; this was some seriously useful advice.

"No charge, Booby," Rodenberg said, and then got up from his quad chair, "All right, I think we're done for now, unless you have something else?"

Conor scratched at an ear with a hind-leg; dang this place and its stinking fleas.
"Ahhhh, this is prolly a long shot Mr. Rodenberg, but this Judge Schatten dude, he's a woodchuck, right?"

"Yes, that right," the grey rat answered, clasping his paws and sniffing, whiskers twitching like antennae; his species' equivalent of tilting his head sideways. "Why?" he asked.

"I think I may have met him once," the young fox told him, "On the plane that brought me to Zootopia." He went on to describe the groundhog that had refused to sit next to him after he boarded.

Rodenberg laughed but then shook his head.

"Yeah, that sounds like him all right…but unless we can back it up, it's nothing we can use in court." He shrugged, "Too bad really, if we could prove it, I could file a petition with the Zootopia Supreme Court, demanding that they recuse Judge Schatten on the grounds of judicial bias." His eyebrows arched unexpectedly and he gave Conor a penetrating look. Uh, ohhhhh… something was coming that he wasn’t going to like.

"So you're originally from out of town, huh kid? And since you flew in instead of taking the train, I'm guessing that it's not from anywhere close to Zootopia."

Conor could have bitten his own tongue off. Dangit, now there'd be some questions that he really didn't want to answer. "What the foxtrot made me tell him THAT?" he raged inwardly.

But Rodenberg only cocked a finger.

"And that's why you need to keep your mouth shut when we get to court tomorrow, Booby. If I can figure that out, so can Rudy Gamsbart. Sorry, but I can't say it too many times; do NOT underestimate this guy."

"I won't," the young fox promised, secretly relieved that his attorney wasn't going to press this any further. Or…would he? Heck yes, he would; by now Conor had taken enough measure of the rat to know that a follow-up inquiry was coming.

And sure enough…”There is one thing I'd like to know kid. How the heck did you ever find me? That number for my answering service is not exactly common knowledge."

Conor thought hard for a second, and then decided on a gambit of his own. What was it his attorney had said to Nick Wilde earlier?

"I'll tell you that, if you'll tell me something, Counselor. Why the HECK did you agree to represent me, a kid you know practically nothing about? Especially since most of what you think you know is bogus, Heck, you don't even my birth name…but you still showed up and agreed to take my case; why?"

Rodenberg let out a slow, hissing breath.

"Touché, kid…but sooner or later you're going to have to come clean with me about your background…and skip the 'later', I need to find that out before Rudy Gamsbart does. Otherwise, you might as well have stuck with a Public Defender, because unless I get there ahead of that chamois, my chances of mounting an effective defense are somewhere between 'forget it' and 'I don't THINK so.'"

"I'll tell you soon enough," Conor answered, instantly hating himself. 'Never lie to your attorney'—that was another little homily Danny Tipperin had drilled into his head…and he had just told Vern
Rodenberg a stinking whopper! It was a shame really, but the way the young fox looked at it, he really had no choice. The Zootopia Attorney General's Office WAS going to run a DNA match on him...and when they got back the results, a whole stinkin' army of Vernon J. Rodenbergs wouldn't be enough to save him.

"This won't be the errr, standard arrangement Your Honor. We won't be sending the kid straight off to Hornburg following his arraignment; he has information that we want—very badly. For that same reason, we don't want to rush him straight to trial following his arraignment; let him stew for a bit first."

Rudy Gamsbart was strolling about his office, talking on the phone via Alpaxa. He had always been at his most articulate while moving about. The standard joke around the Zootopia Attorney General's office was that he could walk off ten pounds while summing up a case. Gamsbart didn't care; they might have a laugh on HIM every now and then...but nobody laughed at his conviction rate.

"Hmmm yes, but what about after he talks?" the voice on the other end was both sullen and impatient; the Honorable Judge George L. Schatten simply loathed being bothered on a Sunday. "It would seem to me this boy's a prime candidate for the program; no parents, no family to speak of...and he's a fox. Even I know how valuable they are."

Gamsbart felt his ears go back. He knew, of course, what the woodchuck was actually driving at.

"Greedy little so-and-so... Gad, I wish they'd dump him and find someone else. Okay, Okay, be diplomatic."

"I wish we could be certain of that, Your Honor," he said, "but I must remind you that this kid has been living under a false identity for nearly three years now...and nobody had a clue about it until he bit a police officer. For all we know he could be some uber-rich runaway from a family with plenty of cash—and influence." He made a fist and coughed into it. Considering Conor Lewis's species, that was highly unlikely; he hurriedly qualified his statement. "Probably the kid doesn't have any folks, but until either fesses up or we get those DNA test results back, we dare not make any assumptions. If it does turn out that he's on his own though, I'm sure our friends will be more than happy to work something out."

"So you say, Mr. Gamsbart," the Judge responded archly, "but you should know that they've been getting more and more dictatorial in their demands of late. Last week I got memo from them ordering me...ORDERING me to avoid all contact with Zootopia City Councilmember Sven Kristofferson until further notice. No explanation given and no compensation offered, just shut up and do it."

Gamsbart felt his ears pull back and made a whistling noise through his nostrils; all right, this was something he could agree with...at least partially. Their 'friends' really HAD been getting more and more peremptory in their demands of late. Something big was in the works, the chamois could feel it...but then again, he also knew when not to ask any questions—and now was definitely one of those times. He said, "The point is Your Honor, we want this Conor Lewis kid held for trial under the harshest possible measures and also for as long as possible. After that," he felt a wicked grin crease his face, "Well, I may have promised to recommend leniency if he co-operates...but that doesn't mean YOU have to take my advice."

A small noise that was half a bark and half a chitter came bubbling over the connection, the sound of a woodchuck laughing. But then, just as quickly, His Honor became peeved all over again.
"All right, fine…but why are you even asking me to do this? I would have put that kid in restrictive lockdown anyway; violent offender, assaulted a police officer, and then there's that little Usual Suspects prank he pulled. Honestly, why did you feel the need to bother me about this NOW?"

Gamsbart crossed his fingers and took in long, slow breath, inhaling through both his mouth and his nostrils. Okay, here we go.

"Because something new has been added to the mix Your Honor; guess who walked in out of the blue this morning and offered to represent the kid? Everyone's favorite criminal defense attorney, Vernon J. Rodenberg."

"Vermin Rodenberg!" the woodchuck spat, using the nickname for the rat that was never spoken in public, "What the heck is that little jerk doing, representing a juvenile offender? It's like sending Derek Cheetah to pinch-hit in a T-ball game!"

"I know, right?" Gamsbart sighed, "But it is what it is, Your Honor. And let's not avoid the larger issue here; if Rodenberg's involved in this, then we have to assume that yes, that nosey, little sneak IS beginning to get suspicious."

"Oh come on, Gamsbart," The judge's protest came over the line as a fuzzy burst of static. "He could have involved himself for any one of a dozen different reasons; who know what that cheese-eating troublemaker is thinking?"

"No one," the chamois conceded…but then he said, "However, during the Conor Lewis Q-and-A, he seemed particularly intrigued by the fact that during the previous session, I had advised, not once but several times, to waive his right to counsel." He paused to let the woodchuck digest this and then delivered the clincher. "Look at it this way Your Honor, which is worse? If we proceed under the notion that Rodenberg is beginning to suspect what's happening…and he isn't, or if we ignore that possibility and it turns out that he IS trying to get a lead on Kits for Cash?"

"Eeeep! Don't use that name over the phone!" the woodchuck squealed, arrogant to paranoid in 2.5 seconds. "All right Counselor, I see your point, but what do you want me to do about it?"

Gamsbart smiled; the mention of Kits for Cash had done the trick—just as he'd known it would; the thought of that 'program' being exposed to public scrutiny never failed to turn Judge George Schatten into a quivering bowl of mush

He told the groundhog, "First, keep the theatrics to a minimum, no lectures, no pontificating, and PLEASE don't threaten to cite Vern Rodenberg for contempt over some silly issue…again! When you throw the book at the kid, throw it gently…more in sorrow than in anger, 'I hate to have to do this son, but given the nature of your offense and your cavalier attitude…' I think you understand what I mean. The thing that we especially don't want is for it to look as if you're allowing either of their species to influence your decisions."

"Right, I get it," the woodchuck responded, beginning to sound moody again, "You want me to walk hard on the kid…but not talk hard. Okay, I can do that…" There was silence in the air for few seconds. "But what if Vermin Rodenberg really IS beginning to get suspicious, what then?"

"Then that brings our friends into it," Gamsbart responded grimly, unconsciously clenching and unclenching his hooves, "and just between you and me Judge, I almost hope that's what happens."

Conor had wanted to heed this attorney's advice, he really and truly did…but he simply didn't have time. No sooner had the atlas bear that brought him back to his cell gone away, than a familiar and
unpleasant aroma began to infiltrate his nostrils; Craig Guilford was somewhere right outside the door. Aggggh, grrrr, for a supposedly none-too-bright animal, this 'yote sure knew how to pick his moments; the young fox was completely alone, with no one to guard his back.

He looked hastily around the cell, seeing nothing he could use as a weapon; he could wrap the towel around his forearm to protect himself from bites, but…too late, Craig was already standing in the doorway.

"Hey fox."

Conor rose up on the balls of his feet, at the same time letting his arms drop to his sides the way Kieran had taught him. "Ye want to be ready, but not LOOK like yer ready, boy."

"You know what I heard?" Craig asked rhetorically, taking a step in his direction. The young fox said nothing only, focused on his opponent's midsection. If he stepped across the threshold and into the cell that would be it; never mind the consequences, Conor would go after him.

But then, to his utter astonishment, the young coyote stopped, smiled, and stuck out a paw.

"I heard you're in here for biting that jerk, Nick Wilde...the same dude who got my dad busted. Whoa, I only wish that could have been me, fox."

Conor reached for the offered paw but carefully, at the same time slipping his other paw behind his back and unsheathing his claws. He knew the trick, every kid who'd ever done time in juvie did. Offer to shake with someone, and when they take your paw, you pull them in close and let them have it. (Back in Granite Point, a variation on that ploy had been a favorite tactic of Crazy Wez.)

No need for caution as it turned out; when Craig took hold of his paw, he only shook it once and then offered a fist-bump, which Conor quickly returned. Quietly sizing things up, he decided to further defuse the situation and tilted his head a few degrees to the right.

"He busted your dad?" (Not quite accurate Conor knew, but that was how you made your words seem genuine.) "So you're that Craig, huh? The one from Bunnyburrow…? Dang, I knew I'd seen your face on the net somewhere." He stepped back, motioning for the coyote to come and step inside his cell.

"Ohhh, so that's why you were checkin' me out back there in the mess hall," Craig took the cue and stepped over the threshold. He sounded almost apologetic…almost. That gave Conor the idea that now might be a most excellent time to run a verbal diagnostic on his 'guest'. He plopped himself down on the edge his bunk, gazing upwards with deliberately widened eyes.

"Did you really try to steal an airplane, dude? Whoa, that was some sick stuff." (He actually thought the coyote's plan had been brain-dead stupid.)

"I would of got away with it too, except for that dumb bunny, Judy Hopps." Craig snarled and showed his fangs…and then sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, "if I could of dumped her off the wing and gotten airborne, the ZPD would NEVER have caught me."

"Like heck they wouldn't," the young fox thought, remembering Crazy Wez's ill-fated, airborne escape from the Zoo Jersey State Police. The delinquent sea-mink had been as good as caught from the moment he'd lifted off the runway, even HE had admitted it, later on.

That, Conor reflected, was the difference between his former crew-chief in The Point and Craig Guilford. Wez might have more than lived up to his nickname of Crazy, but stupid he was NOT. Craig, on the other paw, was a little of the former and whole lot of the latter.
Needless to say, the young fox wasn't telling him that. "Awesome!" he said, reaching up to offer his guest a high-five. Privately, his red flags were going up; this coyote kid seemed just a mite TOO eager to talk about his crimes...especially with someone he didn't even know. That made the young fox's nose begin to wrinkle; was it his imagination, or had someone left a dead fish in here?

As it turned out, Conor's mental sense of smell had not betrayed him. The next thing Craig said was, "What about you...uhhh Conner, right? Were you really working for that Phantom guy?"

Conor continued to smile...while mentally picturing Craig Guilford being pitched tail-over-teakettle off the top tier of the jail, (the stock method of dealing with snitches in Granite Point.) He wondered for a second who was the bigger dimwit, this coyote or Rudy Gamsbart.

But then again, nooo...on reflection, the Zootopia Deputy Prosecutor probably hadn't put Craig up to this; he was most likely free-lancing on his own, hoping to dig up something he could offer in trade when HIS trial-date came up.

Whatever the case...as IF a yokel from the sticks would have any interest in an urban loan-shark, (outside of what was in it for him, if he could help bust the guy.)

Fortunately Conor had a ready-made answer for his guest's inquiry, the same one he'd given to Rudy Gamsbart, (with one or two minor embellishments.)

"The Phantom? The Phantom!" the young fox yipped and then laughed, "Awwww, c'mon dude...that guy's fake news. Yeah, I know...the cops think he's real; just goes to show how dumb they are. Heck I didn't even know HE was the reason they'd been tailing me...not until after I got busted."

Craig's ears began turning in several different directions and then his head tilted sideways.

"But...if you weren't working The Phantom, what'd you go and bite that other fox for?"

Conor was barely able to keep his eyes from rolling. Holy snap, Craig Guilford really wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed; he seemed completely unable to wrap his head around the idea that an innocent animal would assault a police officer. Either that or he was fishing for more tidbits again...and that made Conor decide to put the brakes on this jerk, right here and right NOW.

"Tell me about it." He sighed, looking depressed and pretending to misinterpret the coyote's question. "They got me on camera from two different angles, biting him. Not so easy to get out of that kinda stuff."

He looked away and pretended to spit, but inwardly he was smiling. With a little luck, that revelation would put nice, fat curb on Mister Nosey-Coyote's curiosity. If the ZPD already had Conor for biting Nick Wilde, then what did they need Craig's help for? It was Danny Tipperin who'd said it best, (although he'd been speaking to someone else at the time.) 'How you gonna sell a guy out to the cops when they already got him for NOTHIN', stupid?'

The young fox would never know for certain if his ploy had worked, because at that moment, two new voices spoke up.

"Yo, fox."

"Heyyy, what you doin' in here, eh coyote?"

Conor looked and saw that the two hyenas Miles and Shem were standing in the doorway of his cell, the latter regarding Craig Guilford with bared fangs and a baleful eye.
He quickly raised his paws. "Hey, no problema guys, he's here to make peace."

"I-I was just leaving anyway," Craig said, "Later, dude." He ducked hurriedly past the two hyenas and was gone. Shem followed him with his gaze for moment and turned back to Conor.

"You don't trust dat yob, I hope."

"About as far as I can throw five elephants," the you silver fox assured him, motioning for the two hyenas come and join him inside the cell. And then he grinned, "But there's no reason HE needs to know that, right?"

His two visitors grinned back and then Miles asked, "How'd it go with the prosecutah then?"

"Went okay," Conor telling them, know they would accept this answer. Unlike Craig Guilford these two animals understood, (and respected,) jailhouse protocol.

Or…that was what he thought until Shem said, "Conah, hope you don't mind my askin'…but everybody been wonderin'. You really got Vern Rodenberg representin' you?"

"The gangstah lawyah?" Miles added, trying not to stare in disbelief.

Conor sighed and then growled in his throat. You'd think by now he'd know how quickly gossip spreads in the joint, but nooooo…!

"Yeah," he admitted, throwing up his paws in a bewildered shrug, "I dunno why he made that offer or where the heck he came from…and I'm not asking either. I'm just glad I got him in my corner, know what I mean?"

"I heard that!" Shem answered, not a little bit wistfully. It made the young fox wondered what he had done to end up here. The spotted hyena had never said, and Conor would never ask him. That was another unspoken rule of The Joint, if someone doesn't want to talk about their case, you let it slide.

"Anyway, Conah," Miles leaned back against the wall and folded his arms, "You given any thought maybe, 'bout a message you'd like me to delivah when I go?"

"Yeah," the young fox answered, nodding, "And thanks for bringing that up. First things first, tho'. What time you getting out?" From experience he knew that Miles might be released at almost any time, from when the courts first opened the next morning until midnight, when it officially became the next day.

"Mornin' first t'ing" the striped hyena said…and Conor almost whooped. Yes, perfect! He'd been racking his brain ever since he'd left the interrogation room, trying to figure out how he was going to get word to Guild…and then whaddaya know? The solution had walked right into his cell, all by itself.

"Great," he said, "can I get you to send an e-mail for me?"

"Sure, no problem," Miles said, offering him a high-five

"Okay," the young fox answered accepting it, and then he asked, "Okay, got anything to write with? The addy's kind of complicated?"

Miles didn't, but Shem had the sub of a grease pencil on him, which he used to transcribe the e-mail address Conor gave him onto a sheet of toilet paper. It was a painstaking process; the address
contained no letters, only numerals, (which, unknown to the two hyenas, meant that it was a dark web addy.)

As for the text that followed, it was banal to the point of being nearly anticlimactic.

"For the subject line, just put in, 'Re: that thing we discussed earlier.'" Conor told him, "and then just say that my lawyer got me assigned a temporary guardian. His name's Ton Ruiter—that's Ton with an 'N', and the last name spelled like 'fruit'—he's a yellow mongoose who works part time as Mr. Rodenberg's Private Eye. That means he should be listed somewhere online, or that's what I'm guessing anyway. And finally say, 'try and see what you can do with this before tonight…and thanks again.'" He sat back and slapped his paws together, "annnd, that aughta do it."

At this point, both hyenas were practically bursting with curiosity…but at the same time Conor knew that neither one of them would ask what that e-mail was all about. It was a good thing too, because Miles and Shem were shortly going to need some deniability…even though the both of them were completely unaware of it at the moment.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:
In the course of writing this episode, I had what I call a 'Pygmalion Moment'.

Pizzeria Pianeta, (Translate it!) the place where Nick and Judy are having their lunch is based on a real pizza joint in the town where I live, Flying Pie Pizzeria. Writing about it gave me such a Jones for one of their slices, I just had to go and get some.
Fire and Mirrors (Continued...Pt.10)

Chapter Summary

Some unforeseen encounters and a big unwanted exposure

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 9 –Fire And Mirrors
(Continued…Pt. 10)

"Long time, no see, Booby,"

The small, affable voice spoke up from about a foot to the left of Nick Wilde's elbow…and the fox jumped nearly four feet in the air. Wha…? Where the heck had HE come from?

Nick had been standing at a sink in the Pizzeria Pianeta Male's Room, rinsing soap-suds from his paws. (It had long been his contention that pizza wasn't pizza if it didn't leave your fingers at least a little bit greasy,) and then all of a sudden—bang, out of nowhere!

Looking down and to the left…yep, there he was, the red fox's former attorney, parked on the edge of the rodent-size sink-basin next to his. He was buffing his paws over his face and head, the way rats will do when cleaning themselves.

Finishing up, Vern Rodenberg angled a twinkling eye upwards at Nick.

"Well? Say something, already…even if it's only, 'Get Your Pawpsicles!"

Nick tried not to laugh, he really did give it his best effort…but it was no use; the best he could manage was to choke his laughter down to a snigger, bracing his paws against the sink counter, and hissing through clenched teeth.

"Honestly Nick," the grey rat was shaking his head; he'd had his fun and now it was time to get serious, "What the heck made you ask me why I took on that silver-fox kid as a client? You, of all mammals, should have known you weren't going to get an answer."

"Yes, I knew that," Nick felt suddenly as if this day was taking forever, "but I had to try; I'm going
to have to face you from the witness stand, now."

"Yeah-h-h, about that," Rodenberg studied his incisors in the mirror for a second; Nick wasn't fooled, the grey rat was trying to hide his embarrassment. Then he turned and looked up again. "Nick, I wish to God it had been any other cop on the force besides you that got bitten by my client—because when it's my turn to start asking questions, I'm going to pound you."

Nick must have looked horrified at this, because Rodenberg immediately raised his paws. "Nothing fursonal Booby, I always liked you…and nobody's happier than I am at how you turned your life around." He stopped and raised a finger above his head, in the gesture his former client knew oh-so-well. "But my first duty is, was, and always will be to the client I'm representing right now—and if hammering on you is what I have to do to bring in an acquittal for Conor Lewis, make no mistake, I'll do it."

At this revelation, Nick's ears shot upwards in confusion, but not for any reason that the grey rat might have surmised.

"What, you're…happy that I joined the ZPD?" He was staring incredulously at the grey-furred rodent. "I'm surprised you didn't throw something and call me 'traitor' when you saw me just now." Vernon J. Rodenberg's attitude towards law enforcement officials was a matter of public record.

"Nick, I'm past that now," the rat answered quietly, and then patted the kippah cap affixed to his head, "You see, I found something. And when I did, I also found that I don't need to hate anymore."

"Yes, I noticed," the red fox told him, "Could have knocked me over with hummingbird feather when I saw you wearing that thing."

Rodenberg's whiskers began to vibrate. "Every seen 'The Day The Earth Stood Still', Booby? There's a line from that movie: 'We don't claim to have achieved perfection, but we have a system…and it works.'" He patted the yarmulke again. "That's what this does for me Nicky; it wasn't the end of all my problems, but I'm in a lot better place than I was a few years ago."

He winked and his dark eyes sparkled again, "and don't let it fool you; I'm not that observant."

It was too much for a sly fox to resist.

"Yeah, I saw that too," he noted somberly, "here it is Sunday and you're having pizza instead of Chinese."

Now it was Rodenberg's turn to suppress a laugh, clapping his paws to his muzzle and snickering through his fingers.

"Ahhhh…same, old Nick; you're really gonna make this hard on me, aren't you?" A crooked smile went scrawling across his face, "For what it's worth, at least you won't have to face me twice."

Nick's head tilted sideways.

"Hrm? What you mean?"

By way of response, the grey rat pointed over his shoulder, in roughly the direction of Bunnyburrow.

"Did you know that meshugenneh coyote, Jerry Guilford, tried to hire me as HIS attorney? Yeah, that's right; I told him to go take a hike."
"I'm not surprised," Nick folded his arms, "Not your kind of client, Counselor…and that whole business with Guilfords started when the bank foreclosed on their property," (Not much money to be had from someone in that position, the red fox reasoned.)

Rodenberg let out a derisive squeak and then made another, equally disagreeable noise.

"Pah! I wouldn't go to bat for that bum if he owned a zillion oil-wells and a platinum mine. Tries to hurt all those innocent mammals, and then acts like HE'S the stinkin' victim! I'm telling you Booby, him and that two-bit snake-oil peddler, Dave Kaprinos, deserve each other." He stopped in his tracks, looking suddenly rueful, "Ahh, but that means you're gonna have to face HIM in court, too."

Falling into a short, brooding silence, the grey rat pulled thoughtfully at a whisker; when he spoke again, he appeared to be talking mostly to himself. "Unless-s-s Mr. Guilford decides to change his plea to guilty—only you better believe that if he does, that dirt-bag-goat representing him is gonna fight it every step of the way."

"I'm still hopeful that's what will happen," Nick said, and though he didn't say anything more, Rodenberg's ears shot up and his whiskers started to quiver again, as if someone had just given him a jolt of electricity—or as if something had just occurred to him. That made the fox's ears rise up as well. Could his former attorney possibly be aware that Craig Guilford had agreed to testify against his father, (in exchange for a recommendation of leniency from the Burrow County Prosecutor's office?) Noooo, ever since the young coyote had flipped, the ZPD had been keeping the lid on that deal screwed down tight.

Except…well, this WAS Vernon J. Rodenberg after all…and Craig Guilford wasn't exactly the soul of discretion either.

Ordinarily, Judy Hopps might have wondered, what the heck was the hold-up; how long did it take for Nick to wash his danged paws?

This, however, was not your standard situation; at the moment Judy was having an unexpected encounter of her own.

She had just exited the female's restroom, when she'd spotted him, a blacktail deer buck sitting alone at one of the window tables, dividing his time between a manila file-folder, a tablet computer, and the slice of pizza in front of him.

At first, Judy wasn't quite sure it was him; the two of them had never actually met…and the antlers sprouting from the deer's forehead were still in the velvet stage. He could have been a completely different buck from the one whose picture she'd seen in the ZPD registry. (Buck… doe; Judy had always wondered why deer had borrowed the bunny term for males and female to describe their own species.)

No…it probably wasn't him; and even if it was, today was Sunday, for crying out loud. He wouldn't want to…noooo, she should wait and call him tomorrow, during business…"

"Shut up and get over there!"

Judy winced and meekly obeyed her inner voice.

"Uhm, excuse me?" she called, waving cautiously as she approached the table, "I…hope I'm not intruding, but uhm, would be you Doctor Hind…Doctor Robert Hind?"
"Yes, that's me," the ZPD's consulting psychologist said, turning halfway in his seat to face her; he seemed to be bothered not at all by the interruption. Narrowing his eyes just ever so slightly, he cocked a finger in her direction, "and you would beeeee...Officer Judy Hopps, is that right?

"Uhhhm, yes that right," the bunny-cop answered, trying not to wring her paws, like a schoolbunny called before the vice-principal.

The deer-buck turned completely to face her, smiling pleasantly.

"Uh-huh, thought so...soooo, what can a do for you Officer Hopps?"

For perhaps half a second, Judy was at a loss for words…and then it all came rushing out of her, as if someone had opened a floodgate.

"Well, I had a problem last week, where I was pursuing a suspect and acted kind of impulsively and could've hurt myself, and so I decided to...look, I know this is a bad time, being Sunday and all, so if you'd rather I call you later, I understand but I'm afraid if I don't do this now..."

"Hold on, hold on, let me take a look at something," Dr. Hind was consulting his tablet. He scrolled with his thumbs for a second, muttering to himself, "let me see; was that for tomorrow or...?" and then looked up and nodded. "Well, it's kind of short notice, Officer Hopps but if you're interested, I had a cancellation for tomorrow."

Judy almost said 'yes' right away, (do it quickly before you have time to think up an excuse,) but then she remembered something—and this wasn't an excuse. "Uhhmmm, what time, doctor? I have to be in court tomorrow morning." (Not exactly 100% true, but close enough,)

"It's at 1:00 in the afternoon," the blacktail buck informed her…and now Judy did jump in with both feet.

"Oh yes, that'd be perfect," she said.

Dr. Hind made a quick notation on his FDA and then stowed it. "Okay, we're all set; you'll want to get there about 15-20 minutes early to fill out some paperwork. Oh, and do you know where my office is? It's not inside the precinct; it's across the plaza on Pampas Street, between the train station and the Museum of Natural History."

Judy rummaged in her pockets. "Whoa, I'd better find a pen." While she normally had a good head for locations, she understood that in her current state of mind, she just might up and forget this one, 'accidentally-on-purpose.'

"No need, let me give you one of my cards," the deer-buck said, extracting one from the folder in front of him. He jotted a quick notation on the back and gave it to her. It was little large for a bunny; closer to the size to a greeting card than a business card, but nothing she couldn't manage. On the front was the name, Dr. Robert M. Hinds followed by his office address and a suite number. When she turned the card over, Judy saw her appointment-time written there. Clearly she wasn't the first of the deer-buck's patients to get a case of the first-time jitters. In fact, now that she thought of it, he'd known she'd wanted to make an appointment without her having said so. Somehow, that took a lot of the edge off.

But then she heard him clear his throat.

"Listen, I don't mean to be standoffish Officer Hopps, but I'm errrr, waiting for someone..."

"Oh no problem, I think we're good," Judy told him quickly. She heard familiar footsteps coming
up behind her, and cocked a thumb over her shoulder, "I need to get going anyway; here comes my partner now."

Dr. Hind looked over the top of her head…and smiled.

"Hello Nick."

"Hi, Doc," the red fox waved as he approached, "What up?"

Judy felt her nose begin to twitch. Hmmmm, so Nick HAD once consulted with Dr. Hind—just as he'd said earlier. But then she noticed the fox was looking at her.

"So did you…?" he started to ask, and she knew what he meant at once.

"Yep, and I got lucky Nick," she said, "Dr. Hind has an opening, tomorrow at One."

Oops, that hadn't come out quite the way she'd wanted; admitting to Nick that she'd only just now made the appointment. Not to worry; he simply nodded approvingly. (He didn't care when she'd made the appointment; the important thing was that she'd done it on her own, no prompting or pestering required.)

"Listen Nick, I'd love to chat," the deer-buck told him, repeating his line to Judy almost verbatim. "But right now, I'm waiting for someone." To give further emphasis to his meaning, he angled his eyes in the direction of the door.

"Oh yeah, sure, we understand," Nick told him, nodding, "We need to get going anyway. Come on Carrots, we're out of here."

They were halfway down the block when another, familiar voice hailed them from across the street.

"Hey Hopps, Wilde…hold up a sec."

They turned and saw Kii Catano sprinting towards them. She was smack in the middle of the street when the light changed, and the traffic came barreling towards her. No need for concern; the cheetah-cop put the hammer down and made it to the opposite curb with 5 good yards to spare.

"Careful Catano," Nick Wilde teased, "If we were on duty, we'd have to cite you for jaywalking."

"Yes, probably," the big cat admitted, paws on hips and pursing her lips; her expression was entirely serious, "But there's something I just have to know. Is it true that our suspect has Vern Rodenberg representing him?"

Before answering, Nick looked furtively around to see if the grey rat was anywhere within earshot; (he had not yet informed Judy of their encounter in the washroom.)

Nope, no sign of him anywhere…

Judy, meanwhile, had already beaten him to the draw.

"Yep, I'm afraid so," she said, understanding the cheetah's concern; Kii Catano had been the officer closest to Nick when Conor had bitten him, and had later been the one who'd put the cuffs on the kid. There was a very good chance she'd be called on to testify at his trial, if not by the prosecution, then probably by the defense.

"Dangit!" Catano kicked at the sidewalk, snarling in frustration, "I do NOT need that again!"
"Again?" Judy asked, feeling her nose once more starting to twitch, "you've been cross-examined by him before?"

"Yep," the cheetah-cop nodded, looked more frustrated than ever, "in that extortion and conspiracy case, the one the Attorney General's Office tried to bring against the Red Pig last year." She raised an eyebrow, "Not one of my favorite memories, guys. It would have been worth it if Peccari had been convicted, but of course the jury let him walk, the lame-brained idiots; I had to call in sick for work the next day, I was so upset."

"Mmm, right," Nick and Judy both nodded sympathetically. Was there anything more frustrating than watching the courts turn loose a suspect that you knew was guilty?

Taking their leave of Kii Catano, (who seemed to be in a hurry herself,) Nick and Judy made their way towards the Baobab Blvd Metro Station. Normally they parted company at the Savanna Central Station, but Baobab was a lot closer to Pizzeria Pianeta—and both the Red and Blue line trains stopped there.

Nick was about a third of the way down the steps when he realized that Judy was no longer with him. Turning around he saw her standing at the top of the stairs gazing off into the middle-distance.

"Carrots?" he asked her, tilting his head to the side. There was no answer and so he made a quick about-face, sprinting back up the small-mammal staircase, two steps at a time.

When he exited the station, Nick understood immediately what was happening; almost directly across the street was the stone-and-brick façade of the Zootopia Academy for the Performing Arts…and now he could see that Judy's arms were folded and her ears were trembling.

"What a waste Nick," she sniffed, her voice cracking into shards, "Even if Rodenberg does somehow manage to get him off, they'll probably take away his scholarship and kick him out of there; you know how tough their standards are." She did not say who 'him' was, nor was it necessary; Nick understood immediately exactly which young silver fox she was talking about.

Judy's arms moved upward and she hugged herself, and then she was looking at him with big, wet eyes.

"I-I know he bit you Nick, and…and I know who he was working for, but…h-he saved my life… and he helped save all those animals at the Carrot Days Dance." She thumped her foot in frustration; harder than Nick had ever seen, "Doesn't that count for anything?" Her voice was almost a sob.

Nick took a step towards her, but she waved him back…or that is, she tried to. Ignoring her attempt to put him off, he wrapped her in his arms and held on tight.

Judy pressed her face into him, unable to hold it back any longer.

"Oh God, Nick…I-I never thought I'd hear myself saying this…but right now, I hate being a police officer." She pounded a fist against his chest. Nick grunted but took it in stride. "I HATE it!"

"Shhh Carrots, take it easy," the red-fox crooned, rocking her gently back and forth, "C'mon…deep breaths."

He was completely unaware—and so was she—that they were directly within the line-of-sight of a ZTA security camera.
By the time she and Nick finally boarded their separate trains, Judy felt a lot better, although not completely. Darnit, she'd thought that session with Chief Bogo had put an end to her guilt tripping. "Guess not," she thought, gazing out the window at the passing scenery.

Well, she decided, straightening up in her seat, she couldn't let it hold her back; she had a couple of errands to run before heading for home, and some cleaning to do when she got there, (and keeping busy was a darn good way to deal with the blues.)

She began at CatsCo, stopping off to pick up some ammonia and white-vinegar, the basic ingredients for making what she jokingly called her 'private blend' of tile-and-glass cleaner. "Work's way better than anything you get in the stores," she'd once told Nick, "and it's a whole lot cheaper, too."

From there, she moved on to the Savanna Central Farmers Market, hoping to pick up something nice for dinner.

Wandering among the booths and stalls, it occurred to Judy that this place almost perfectly exemplified the way her skills and those of her partner so perfectly complimented each other. Nick was the one who'd told her about this place, and he'd known which vendors were which almost instinctively. But it had been Judy Hopps, farm-girl extraordinaire, who had taught [i]him[/i] the finer points of picking out the best and freshest produce from amongst the many offerings. (In terms of bargaining skills, the two of them had been about evenly matched.)

It was still a little bit early in the season for blueberries, at least here in Zootopia, but the strawberries were in like Flynn. Judy purchased two baskets of them, along with some alfalfa sprouts, zucchini squash, and an eggplant that was almost too gorgeous to eat. She would though, along with the carrots she had brought back with her from Bunnyburrow; (she had yet to find a carrot in the city that was anywhere near as good as the family product.)

On her way back to the Metro Station, Judy paused to gaze longingly through the window of an auto dealership. Even with such an exceptional Public Transit System, Zootopia could never be called fully accessible to someone without a car; she had found that out for herself, soon after settling here.

Cupping her paws to the sides of her face, in order to get a better view of the models on display, Judy wondered for a moment what had happened with the Carrot-Days car-raffle. In the wake of the Guilford Brothers thwarted assault on the Big Dance, the drawing had been cancelled, at least temporarily. Had they finally held it? And if so, who had been the winner? (Not her, Judy knew, or she'd have already heard by now; ditto for Nick and also for the rest of her family.)

By the time she got back to The Crying Pangolin Arms, Judy was even more acutely aware of the lack of a vehicle in her life; her arms were beginning to feel almost numb from the load she was carrying, and she literally had to weave her way up the stairs to her flat.

And then, just as she was pushing the door open…

Article 387, paragraph 217 of Murphy's Law specifically states, 'Your phone always rings when…

A. You're too far away to reach it in time, or…

B. You have your paws full.'

In this case, Judy Hopps' paws were not only fully occupied; she was trying to edge her way past a sticky door without managing to drop anything.
By now, well acquainted with this situation, the doe-bunny made no attempt to get to her phone before it stopped ringing; she knew she'd only end up with most of her purchases on the floor—and then she'd *still* miss her call. Oh well, tough luck for whoever was on the other end; they'd just have to hold up and be patient.

Sure enough, after the third rendition of the refrain from Try Everything, the phone went abruptly silent.

Kicking the door shut behind her, Judy refused to check the caller ID until she'd at least gotten the perishable items stowed. When she finally looked at her phone, the corners of her mouth turned downwards in surprise.

"*What the...? Erin? What the heck would she be calling me for?*

Judy had known, ever since their last conversation, that her kid sister's fury over Conor's arrest wasn't going to last. Of course technically, *she* hadn't busted the young silver fox, but never mind; no way should Erin be ready to apologize for her earlier behavior *this* soon afterwards...or this suddenly; it should have been more of a gradual process. "*Unless mom's been leaning on her,"* the doe-bunny realized, a wry smile scrawling across her muzzle.

Yes, that would do it; she pressed the 'call back' button, and waited. The phone had barely begun to ring when Erin's face appeared, looking all out of breath as if she'd run the length of a football field in order to reach her phone in time.

She immediately dispensed with any greeting.

"Jude, are you watching TV right now?"

Judy's ears went up and her nose began to quiver like a seismograph needle. What the fresh heck was THIS?

"No Erin, I just got home, now would you mind telling me...?"

"Turn on The Brightbat Channel!"

Judy pulled the phone away from her face, staring as if she couldn't understand how the heck it had gotten into her paw. The Brightbat channel, what the heck was on the Brightbat channel? She *never* watched that THAT thing.

"Judy, *please!*" Erin's voice sounded almost like a cry for help. Annoyed, but at the same time apprehensive, Judy snatched up the remote from her bedside table and hit the power button.

It took her several clicks and some scrolling before she was able to find the Brightbat Channel... but when she did, both the cellphone and the remote nearly went tumbling out of her paws. "*Ohhhh, sweet cheese n' CRAAAACKERS!*"

"Judy, are you seeing this? It sounded like Erin was speaking from somewhere far away.

"Yeah sis, I see it," she answered—in a voice half choked with anguish and half with rage.

There was no sound—the mute function was on—but none was necessary; the image on the screen said it all.

There, seated behind a circular desk was Rock Hardesty, easily recognizable from his billboard images. At the moment he appeared to be delivering a soliloquy with a smug, self-righteous look
on his face. Judy barely noticed him, it was the image on the screen behind the hyrax that was drawing the bulk of her attention, a high-definition, freeze-frame image of her and Nick, kissing inside of Rafaj Brothers Jewelers. Emblazoned across the picture in bright, red, spray-paint font was the caption, 'Police Behaving Badly'.

Judy pressed the button to increase the volume; nothing happened, the image remained a silent pantomime.Oops, that was her cell-phone, not the remote. She tried again, and was rewarded with the sound of Rock Hardesty's voice, speaking in high dudgeon.

"Now I know some of you do-gooders out there are going to say, 'It's not anyone else's business.'" He sat back in his chair, haughtily folding his arms, a king about to pass judgement on a knave. "Wel-l-l, aside from the hypocrisy of YOU telling anyone else to mind their own business, I would RE-mind you folks that police officers are PUBLIC servants. Let's pause to let that sink in for moment… That's right; police officers' salaries come out of our taxes…so are we not entitled to…?"

The TV went silent as Judy hit the mute button once again; she'd heard enough. Oooo, that dirty, little so-and-so, Hardesty! Chief Bogo was going to…wait a minute, did he even know about this? She set down the remote and spoke into her cell.

"Sis, I need to let you go for a minute and call my Chief about this. I'll get back to you as soon as I'm done, okay?"

"Kay," the younger bunny nodded, and then offered a suggestion. "Why don't we talk on Slyphe when you're finished?"

"Good idea sis," Judy told her, "Oh, and Erin?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

"No problem, Jude."

Judy disconnected and thumbed quickly through her contacts list, found the number for Precinct-1 Dispatch and pressed it. Under different circumstances Erin's phone-call might have been good for a laugh or two. Less than 24 hours previously the younger bunny had sworn that the two of them would never speak again…and now here she was, calling to deliver a heads-up; she really was at 'that' age…Oops, someone was picking up on the other end.

Dispensing with any formalities, Judy got right down to the point.

"Dispatch, this is Officer Judy Hopps; I need to speak to Chief Bogo right away; I know he's probably at home right now, but this is urgent."

There was silence on the line for moment and then she heard ringing, a click and the big Cape buffalo's familiar, rolling basso-profundo.

"What is it, then, Hopps?" he demanded tersely, and Judy decided that she'd better cut straight to the chase.

"Rock Hardesty made that surveillance tape from Rafaj Jewelers the subject of his show tonight. I just saw it on the Brightbat Channel." She could not bring herself to say, 'the one of Nick and me kissing,' and hopefully, it wouldn't be necessary; the Chief would know which tape she meant without needing to hear any more.
For a long moment, Judy wasn't sure if he'd even heard her at all; there was silence on the line, except for a deep, wheezing noise, like the sound of forge-bells. It took a few seconds for Judy to recognize it, and then oooo…Chief Bogo was really mad.

Well, why the heck not? So was she!

"I see," the Cape buffalo finally said, in voice so heavy with portent, it felt like the roof might come crashing down around her at any second, and then his voice adjusted to a sudden, clipped formality, "Officer Hopps, I thank you for bringing this matter to my attention. But now, if you'll excuse me, I've got calls of my own to make."

"Yes sir, of course," Judy answered, perfectly happy to have this conversation nipped in the bud. Disconnecting, she went to her desk and booted up her laptop. When she logged on to Slyfe, she found that Erin was already waiting for her.

"Hey, little sis."

"Hey, Judy…how did it go with your boss?"

"Hard to say, Erin," she shrugged, "he hung up right after I told him. Can't blame him, really; he's got a whole bunch of other mammals to notify about this."

"I'll bet," her kid sister nodded, taking a short sip from a glass of lemonade, and then she said, "You okay, Jude?"

"I'm…still processing," the older bunny answered, not sure how she felt at the moment. Except…there was a question that she absolutely didn't want to ask, but knew that she was going to HAVE to ask. "Sis…have mom and dad seen that…seen what Hardesty had on his show?"

Erin let out a sigh that seemed to halfway deflate her—and Judy knew the answer without being told; DANG that so-and-so hyrax!

"Yeah Judy." The younger bunny was telling her, "In fact, that's how I found out. I was on my way back to my hutch after taking a shower, when I heard this big commotion in the den, lots of yelling and stuff. When I peeked around the corner, there was mom, holding dad while he did that 'waterworks thing'. Junior wasn't any too happy either, he looked so mad I thought he was going to put his foot through the TV screen.” She blew a puff of air against her nose, "Anyway, that's it, pretty much; when I saw what they were watching, I got out of there fast and then called you."

"Probably the smartest thing you could have done, Erin," Judy acknowledged, making the 'O.K' sign with her fingers. Given her younger sister's own close friendship with a fox—one who'd just been arrested for assaulting a police officer no less—the Hopps TV den would not have been the best place for her at that particular moment.

And that brought up another question that Judy didn't want to ask, but knew she'd have to.

"Erin…I'm not quite sure how to put this, but …how do you feel about…er, that video of Nick and me?" This was the girl who'd laid one upside of Conor Lewis's face for even joking about kissing her.

The young, white-furred bunny looked over her shoulder at the door to her hutch, as if to make certain it was bolted. When she looked back into her webcam again, Judy could tell that her fingers were crossed, even though she couldn't see them.
"There's...a reason why you did that...right?" Erin's voice was possibly the most hopeful Judy had ever heard. Fortunately, it was a question she could answer without hedging.

"Yeah, sis... we were on an undercover assignment and our suspects were beginning to get suspicious. Nick kissed me in order to throw them off."

Judy felt her throat begin to tighten and why, for heaven's sake? It was the truth, wasn't it? So, how come it didn't feel like the truth?

"Ohhh, I get it," Erin's voice broke in brightly, "The idea was to make them so mad they'd forget to be suspicious, right?"

"Yes—exactly that." Judy couldn't help but marvel at how sharp her kid sister could be sometimes. If it wasn't for all her musical talent, she'd make a pretty decent cop herself. "It worked too," she told the younger bunny, "our suspects practically threw us out of there...WITH the evidence in our possession."

"Yay!" Erin threw up her paws as if she'd just scored a winning goal. It had been hardly a full explanation of the incident, but it was all that Judy's sister apparently needed to hear. Good thing, too, because—assuming the case against the Rafaj Brothers hadn't already been blown right out of the water—there was nothing more Judy could have told her without stepping over the line.

She could, however, tell what Erin was thinking right now; (her sister wasn't the only clever bunny in the Hopps family,) and she also knew that she'd better move quickly to pre-empt it.

"No Erin, don't...I should be the one to tell Mom and Dad what happened. And anyway, you probably ought to try and steer clear of them as best you can for a while. You're friends with a fox yourself, y'know...and they won't be any too happy about it."

At the mention of Conor Lewis, Erin's gaze shifted sideways, and she rubbed her nose with a finger.

"Uhhh yeah...Conor." She looked into the webcam again, "Judy...I'm sorry I went off on you back there; it wasn't your fault, what happened. How were you s'posed to know it was HIM going to show up at that locker?" It sounded to Judy as if her sister was repeating back something that their mother had told her earlier. But that okay, because Erin clearly meant what she was saying.

"Honestly sis," Judy told her, "if I'd know it was going to be Conor, I would have declined that assignment." It was only when the words were out of her mouth, that she realized she'd spoken the truth.

"Would the ZPD have let you walk away?" Erin's nose was twitching dubiously.

Judy leaned back in her chair.

"Heck Erin, if that was the case; the ZPD probably would have insisted that Nick and I recuse ourselves. The last officer you want tailing a suspect without their knowing it is someone that they'll recognize right away, by both sight and scent." This was only about 75% accurate, but Erin seemed to accept it wholeheartedly.

She then proceeded to demonstrate that she was still just as angry as before, only now her outrage had shifted to a different target.

"That STUPID silver-fox!" Erin spat the words like cobra-venom, "He had everything going for him, and he threw it all away just...just..."
She grabbed her ears and screamed in frustration…and then her eyes misted over and her voice began to crack. Judy wondered for a second if that was how she had looked, back at the Baobab Boulevard Metro station

"Dangit Jude, Conor's a good kid; I know he is, how could he do a thing like that?"

Judy let out a long, deep sigh. Yep, Erin was at 'that age' all right. She wondered for a moment if she dared tell her sister about…? Yes, she should, it was better if the younger bunny heard if from her.

"Erin…I didn't have time to tell you this the last time we talked, but there's something I want you to know. Before he bit Nick, Conor saved my life."

"Did WHAT?" Erin was staring so closely at the laptop-screen her face was only a fuzzy blur.

Judy quickly related the story of what had happened; the building fire, the high-voltage wires, the standing water, and the flying tackle that had carried her to safety.

Erin's paw went flying up to her mouth. "Oh-me-Gaw…! Judy, are you all right, y-you weren't hurt at all?

"Calm down Erin, I'm fine," the doe-bunny assured her younger sister. "They checked me out at the ER and let me go. Only," she felt her mouth pull sideways, and leaned in closer to her web-cam, "do me a favor and keep this to yourself, okay, sis? Mom and Dad worry about me too much as it is."

Erin sniggered and raised a paw in a bunny-scout salute, at the same time pantomiming the act of zipping her mouth shut.

"Won't say a word, swear to God,"

Judy snickered back and raised a thumb, "Thanks, Erin." The levity notwithstanding, she knew the younger bunny would keep her word.

And on that subject…

"Oh, and that reminds me Erin, I know about Conor helping to stop the Guilfords; Nick told me," Seeing the younger bunny's alarmed expression, she added quickly, "It's okay; he gave Nick permission to tell me." She raised an ear and an eyebrow, "He also told me you helped out, too."

Erin's face flushed so deeply, it was visible even though the whiteness of her facial fur. Judy saw her turn sideways, biting her lip. "You won't say anything about THIS to mom and dad, right?"

Judy clapped her paws together, "Ho! After want I just saw on TV? No way, little sis; you're already going to be walking on eggshells for at least the next two weeks."

"Yeahhh," The younger bunny's deep-blue eyes rolled upwards and sideways, "Tell me about it, Jude." And the two of them shared an uneasy laugh.

But then Judy got serious.

"I have to say Erin, that was one heck of a leap of faith, helping Conor cut that lock and get the power off, just because he asked you to," she smiled, "Especially when you were about ready to clobber him for taking off on you like that."
"I…I still don't what made me do that, Judy. Conor told me that a lot of animals were going to get hurt if he couldn't get the lights off—and I believed him; don't ask me why, but I did." She scratched at her nose for a second, frowning thoughtfully. "There's something about that silver fox kid, like…like he just can't leave it alone when he thinks someone's in trouble—and I think a little bit of it rubbed off on me that night" She sucked at a corner of her mouth for a second, "Does…Am I making any sense, big sis?"

"Yes Erin, you are," Judy nodded…and in an odd way, she was. The older bunny had more than a little bit of that in herself.

And yet, and yet…

Exactly how did that fit in with Conor running cash for a Shylock? It seemed totally at odds with the part of his character that Erin had just described—if it even existed, and at this point Judy wasn't so sure.

The younger bunny seemed to sense it as well.

"I just don't understand him, Judy. Is Conor allowed to have visitors? I'd like to…"

"Whoa-hoh, don't even think about it, little sis!" Judy was staring horrified at her laptop screen, "Mom'll have you pulling weeds until school starts if she hears you talking like that—especially now."

"Oooo, yeah, right," Erin winced as if she'd only just realized what it was she'd said, "Sorry Jude. Ummm, so what happens next?"

It was about as subtle as shifting from the granny-gear into overdrive— without using the clutch. Judy didn't care; as long as Erin wasn't going to argue about coming to the city to see Conor, a change of subject was fine by her. (If there was one thing the two of them had in common, it was refusing to back down in the face of a challenge.)

"Well, tomorrow morning, he's being arraigned," she said, "You know what that means, right?"

"Mmm, yeah, that's where you enter a plea of guilty or not guilty, right?" Erin sounded as if she was mostly, but not entirely sure.

"Yes, that's right," Judy told her. "In juvenile court, they often combine an arraignment with a bail hearing…although not this time, since Conor's being charged with a felony instead of a misdemeanor."

"Ahhh, he prolly wouldn't make bail anyway," Erin flipped a paw dismissively, "He bit a COP, after all."

"Exactly," Judy nodded, although there was a lot more to it than that. The young silver fox was also far too valuable to set free on bail; he was the ZPD's only link to an elusive cyber-criminal and loanshark—The Phantom, or whatever you wanted to call him.

And yet somehow she suspected that none of this was going to stop the young silver fox's attorney from attempting to seek bail for him anyway; by all accounts, Vern Rodenberg was another mammal who didn't know when to quit.

Ah yes, Mr. Rodenberg…
"Oh, and there's something else I didn't mention, sis. Somehow—and don't ask, cause I don't know either—but somehow Conor managed to get a big-time mob lawyer to represent him, a rat named Vern Rodenberg."

Erin's face screwed up and her nose started twitching.

"Wha…? Why would a mob lawyer….?" She cut herself off and raised a paw, "I know I know, you already said you have no idea…"

Someone knocked on Erin's door and Judy heard their mother's voice speaking.

"Erin? Dinner…!"

The young white-furred bunny turned and called over her shoulder, "In a minute mom, I just need to get dressed real quick." And then turning back to the laptop screen, she lowered her voice to a near-whisper, "Gotta go Jude. I'll call you tomorrow with an update."

Judy thought for a second and then lowered her voice as well.

"Thanks, sis…Uhm, can you try to make it later on in the afternoon, like about three or so? I'll be busy kind of busy until then."

"No sweat." The younger bunny answered, nodding, and then, "Okay Judy I'm going….but, erm, before I take off, can I ask you something?"

The expression on her face raised several red flags, and Judy was sorely tempted to tell her sister, 'Not now, maybe later,' ('later', of course meaning 'never').

"Ummm….yeah, okay," she said.

Erin looked around her hutch again, and then leaned in even closer to the screen, lowering her voice to the point where Judy could barely hear her.

"What was it like, kissing…Nick?"

The sudden surprise of her kid sister's inquiry blew Judy clear through the opposite wall of her apartment—or that was how it felt. Wha…? How the heck was she supposed to answer THAT question? (Especially since it sounded as if Erin had come within an eyelash of asking her what was it like, 'kissing a fox' instead of what was it like, 'kissing Nick'.)

Judy wanted to tell the younger bunny that it was none of her business—except she knew that this would be like trying to get rid of a sugar-ant infestation by painting the baseboards with maple syrup.

"To tell the truth, I don't what it felt like, Erin," She said, "it happened so fast. Right then, all I cared about was how were we going to get out of that place?" (Okay, that was a lie; she hadn't known the Rafaj brothers were becoming suspicious until Nick had told her afterwards.) "I'll tell you this though, first thing I did after we got out of there was go find a drinking fountain and wash out my mouth." (Better…except that had been about Nick's breath, and not his species.)

Erin's face screwed up in an expression of distaste…and was that also disappointment Judy saw?

Someone knocked on her door again, their dad this time.

"Erin sweetie, didn't you hear your mother? Dinner time…"
Judy felt something twist in her throat, her dad still sounded a little bit 'sniffly'.

"Be right there," Erin called, and to Judy she said, "Okay, now I really have to go. Take care, big sis, I love you."

"Love you too, Erin, bye." Judy said, and the Slyphe window on her laptop screen went blank, and then turned blue.

Folding the computer shut, Judy sighed as she became aware of a silent presence, on the table just to her right. She tried not to look, but her cell-phone refused to be put off.

"Well," it seemed to be saying, "What are you waiting for? You know you can't get away from this...he HAS to be told, and right now!"

Judy groaned, grumbled, and then snatched up her cell from the tabletop, scrolling through her contacts list and looking for Nick Wilde.

This was going to be about as enjoyable as delivering a big block of ice to the North Pole.

She found his name and was preparing to tap on it, when her finger abruptly froze in mid-air.

What HAD it been like, when he'd kissed her...what had it really been like?

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:
A Few Words About Vern Rodenberg:

Vernon J. Rodenberg, Attorney at Law, is one of my favorite OCs that I came up with for this story. He's based, in part, on three real-life mob lawyers, Bruce Cutler, Lawrence, 'Larry' Hocheiser, and especially Jerry 'The Jew' Rosenberg,

Bruce Cutler was John Gotti's attorney. 'Pounding' a witness was a favorite expression of his. Larry Hocheiser made a name for himself defending the notorious Westies enforcer Mickey Featherstone, securing acquittals in at least two trials that everyone else had thought unwinnable. 'Booby' was the favored term of address by his mentor.

And then there's Jerry Rosenberg.

Possibly the most famous (or infamous) jailhouse lawyer of all time, he, like Vern Rodenberg earned two law degrees from correspondence courses he'd taken while serving time for murder—a crime for which he always insisted he'd been falsely convicted. Like Vern Rodenberg, Jerry The Jew (he reveled in his nickname,) represented literally dozens of other inmates in criminal cases, including several prominent mobsters, making new law and instituting many prison reforms that still stand today. UN-like the grey rat, he was never able to secure a new trial in his own case. He died in 2009 at the Wende Correctional Facility in upstate New York, the longest serving inmate in the history of that state.
Chapter Summary

The second attack....and a surprise reveal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 9 –Fire And Mirrors
(Continued…Pt. 11)

Zootopia Canal District, 03:30, Monday:

It was quiet along the Quarentena Canal; the only sounds to be heard were the sonorous clanging of a bell buoy, and the occasional splash of a small fish. It was dark, too; a drizzly fog had settled over the canal, wiping the stars from the sky and reducing the dock lights to sickly, greenish-yellow fuzzballs; in other words, just another, very-early morning in the district.

The Quarentena was a wide but relatively short expanse of water, located near the center of Logwood Island, just south of Banana Street. The waterway took its name from the 'mercy' barges moored here more than more than two centuries previously, in a vain effort to curb the Great Distemper by keeping the victims isolated. The canal had been both shallower and more constricted then—and also much more remote.

These days, the waterway served as part of the Canal District's industrial hub. Here you would find a dredging company, a towboat company, and a business that specialized in the service and repair of construction barges. Here too was the local branch of Interspecies Recycling Systems; (the initials were a private joke on the part of the company's owner and founder...an animal whose tax issues made Nick Wilde's debt to the government look like a minor oversight.)

Like every other business on the Quaratena, IR Systems was ensconced on its own private, concrete pier. There was nothing aesthetically pleasing about the place, (nor was that necessary, given the location; none of the firms on this block had been intended as tourist attractions.) The facility consisted of two simple, slab-sided, cinderblock constructions, each with vault-thick walls and an insulated steel roof; (recycling is a noisy business.) The smaller structure, the one that fronted on the canal, was fitted with rows of roll-up, steel dock-doors facing the water on three
sides, all of them painted in dull red with the company logo in the center. The building itself was done up in an eggshell white that had long since faded to a dull, pasty grey.

If Interspecies Recycling's façade wasn't pleasing to the eye, no one could deny that it was a secure facility. (Theft of recyclables is a much bigger business than many mammals might realize.) Rock solid and equipped with a state of the art alarm system—including both motion and scent detectors—the building was all but impenetrable after the last employee clocked out for the day. (The plant manager liked to boast, 'a fly couldn't get in here without us knowing.')

That, however, only applied to the parts of the structure located above the water-line…but down below, the place was equally secure, hemmed in by a cage of steel rails and cyclone mesh. As for gaining access by slipping in under the dock doors, good luck with that! They all closed tightly against the barrier-cage…and at a depth well below the surface. The owner of IR Systems would brook no outside intruders in any of his facilities—for reasons that some said went well beyond the need to deter any would-be thieves. (The two giant shredding machines inside the recycling plant were rumored to be employed, on occasion, for the disposal of 'other things' besides unwanted plastic.) That made the place even more protected; no one wanted to run afoul of an animal capable of something monstrous.

And yet…there were those for whom all of this was not a deterrent but an encouragement—such as the four large animals gliding silently towards the recycling plant on this fogbound Monday morning (Actually, it was the individual employing them who'd found the information useful)

It was an uncomfortable environment for the team, although it wasn't the water they minded; all four of them were members of a semi-aquatic species, (although you might not know it to look at them, with their bulky, rounded physiques.)

No, the problem had to do more with the fact that their particular species was much more accustomed to a frigid environment than to the bathtub-warm waters of the Canal District. Without exception, they wanted to get this business over with and get home to where it was cold.

Nonetheless, they did not rush. The animal who had recently taken charge of the operation had made it abundantly clear that they were not to push themselves. "Take your time and be methodical," he'd said.

And so they would be; they knew better than to get on the bad side of that individual. Even though he was perhaps a third the size of any single one of them, he could take any two of them single pawed—and in any case, he had practically an army of backup at his beck and call.

No bubbles trailed in the wake of the four as they approached the perimeter of IR Systems' Canal District facility; they'd been outfitted with the latest and best in rebreathing equipment. Likewise, they felt no need to paddle or otherwise exert themselves. Two of the team members were pulling themselves along by way of undersea scooters, while the other two, (one of whom was the lead animal,) were seated astride a submarine jet-bike. Behind this was towed a motley array of gear and supplies. First came a 300-gallon, ovular, plastic tank…which was actually quite easy to move; the contents being slightly less dense than water. Next came what looked like an elongated scuba tank. Much heavier than the first container, this piece needed a pair of attached air floats to keep it buoyed. Last, but not least was a tightly bound bundle of pipes and hoses…and of all things, a pool noodle.

They were perhaps 10 yards away from their target when the leader raised a fist to call a halt. All three vehicles slowed, but did come immediately to a full stop, (a nearly impossible feat while underwater.) Nonetheless it was a perfectly timed move; the trio of water-sleds edged to a halt exactly two feet shy of Interspecies Recycling's underwater barrier-cage.
Dismounting from the submarine bike, the leader finned his way up to the fence-wall, attempting to peer through a gap in the barrier and determine what lay beyond. It was no use; even with the aid of night-vision scuba-goggles, there was nothing visible through the partition except a swirling, green curtain of flotsam and jetsam. Eee-yech, didn't they ever clean up around here? He couldn't wait to get out of this filthy place. Reaching over with his right paw, he tapped an LED screen affixed to his other arm. At once a graphic display appeared, showing the interior layout of Interspecies Recycling's Canal District branch. Good, he and his team were right where they were supposed to be.

In actuality, this was the smallest of IR Systems' several recycling plants, (and the only one that employed boats rather than trucks for the purpose collecting material.) The reason for its comparatively small stature was actually quite simple; IR Systems' mainstay was the collection and repurposing of used automobile tires—and in a district where nearly all of the thoroughfares were waterways, these were a singularly scarce commodity. Nonetheless, every year the facility managed to turn a decent profit, with good prospects for the future.

"Not anymore," the team-leader thought as he angled his eyes upwards. Almost directly above the space in front of him was a floating dock with slips for eight diesel-powered vessels, all of which resembled vintage landing-craft, with an odd piece of equipment attached to their aft superstructure, a contraption resembling a cross between a crane and a robotic arm. Behind and to the left of the dock, inside of the main building, were the administrative offices, and on the opposite side of these was the recycling facility, with its pair of giant shredding machines, (now lying dormant in the darkness.)

The leader reached out and stroked the underwater security fence, delicately, almost lovingly; this was the single biggest chink in the recycling-plant's armor. While there were plenty of security cameras on the other side of the barrier-cage, none were set at more than five feet below the surface—and there were none at all covering the facility's underwater exterior. This was because…A, the dirty-green soup filling the canal was murky enough to deter the range and effectiveness of any CCTV surveillance system…and B, who needs cameras when you got the Bearlin wall?

"It'd take a guy with an acetylene torch HOURS to cut through that security fence," the branch manager had once sneered to a doubting employee, "if they was lucky! And even if it'd only take 'em a few minutes, that'd still set off the alarm sooo stinkin' fast." What he hadn't bothered to mention was that the barrier alarm was not particularly sensitive; it would take at LEAST a cutting torch or a carbide-saw to set it off…and the quartet of polar bears parked outside had no intentions of trying to breach it in any case; their purpose here was not robbery but something else. All they needed for their purpose was a gap in the cage-wall the circumference of a pine-cone—and the barrier-fence had plenty of those.

Now the foursome moved quickly, attaching a pair of hoses to the top of the big, ovular tank, and attaching these to a pair of ten foot PVC pipes. The pipes were then pushed through two of the openings in the barrier-cage, nearly to their full length. As soon as this was done, valves were opened, a switch was thrown, and a battery-powered pump began to churn.

And the team of polar-bears settled down to wait.

The only sign that anything was happening was a pair of nearly invisible rainbow-plumes curing upwards towards the surface from the end of each pipe, both of them suffused with what looked like tiny sparkles of glitter, a mixture of powdered magnesium and aluminum oxide. Even in broad daylight, they wouldn't have been especially noticeable; in the stygian darkness of predawn, they were completely imperceptible. Oh, the scent detectors might have noted that something was amiss, once the fumes began to spread—except they were calibrated for animal pheromones, rather
than chemical odors.

As the kerosene emptied from the top of the tank, it was replaced by water coming in from below, so as not to upset the vessel's buoyancy. The whole process seemed to take forever, (it actually took 20 minutes.) When the last of the accelerant had been pumped from the tank, the pipes and hoses were stowed, and the vessel was moved away from the barrier, to be replaced by the smaller, metallic tank. Once again, a hose and pipe were attached...although this particular pipe was of a somewhat different breed than the two that had preceded it. Perforated along its length, it resembled nothing so much as a gigantic flute, and being somewhat narrower than its predecessors, it fit through the barrier even more easily than they had.

Here, no pump was necessary; when the team-leader opened the valve, the contents of the cylinder hissed out on its own, rising quickly to the surface in a curtain of tiny bubbles.

The original plan had been to use propane gas, but the animal recently put in charge of the operation had vetoed that idea in favor of something else. It was a change with which the team leader had no quarrel; the new cylinder's contents were both colorless and odorless—and they wouldn't kill you if you inhaled them.

It took far less time for the smaller tank to empty than the first one, and now the quartet of bears brought up the pool noodle, pushing it through another gap in the security cage and letting it float up towards the surface on its own. This was another alteration from the initial plan; the original device had been a bar of sodium, wrapped in a casing designed to slowly dissolve in water. The new animal in charge had nixed that idea in favor of an electronically activated incendiary charge.

"That first infernal was much too imprecise," he'd said, and while the lead polar bear had wholeheartedly agreed, he had also been slightly miffed; HE had been saying the same thing since day one—and nobody'd wanted to listen, not to him.

Working with a brisk efficiency, the quartet gathered their gear and performed a quick check of the perimeter. Once they were certain they'd left nothing behind, they mounted their scooters and scuba-bike, and motored silently away from the recycling plant, headed outwards and into the main channel of Zootopia Sound.

Once free of the canal, the water began to clear rapidly. Nonetheless, it was still dark up above, and they continued to rely on their GPS displays for navigation. They were about 1200 yards off shore when the leader raised a fist to call a halt and pointed upwards, signaling for them to surface. The boat should be almost directly over their heads right about now.

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It was; in fact, the GPS system had worked just a little too well, one of the bears nearly banged his head on the hull trying to reach the surface. No time to think; the instant their heads bobbed free of the water all four of them were grabbed and hauled quickly aboard the craft, along with their scooters and gear, (on the side facing AWAY from the shoreline.)

The only piece of equipment that couldn't be brought on board was the big, plastic fuel tank. This was weighted and allowed to sink to the bottom. While it might be found later by the ZPD, the chances were minimal; they were over the part of The Sound jocularly referred to as 'the boneyard', the final resting place for several decades' worth of unwanted junk and machinery from a century gone by. (That was also about how long the city had been promising to get it cleaned up.)

The pick-up boat was a thing of rakish beauty, with a hull and superstructure constructed of brushed steel and polished aluminum, ringed all around with midnight blue air-chambers, that gave it the appearance the world's most aggressive Zodiak launch. It was a vessel built for serious speed, with emphasis on the serious; fitted with a pair of outboards the size of refrigerators, and
with a light-bar, siren, and radar array mounted atop of the main cabin. The sides of the vessel were adorned with three simple letters 'ASM.'

Hitting the deck, the team leader found himself gazing into the eyes of the animal recently put in charge of the op, a wolverine with a single, dirty-white paw. The big bear nearly looked away; the top of the other animal's only came up to the center of his chest…but both of them knew that the wolverine could tear him apart without blinking if the spirit moved him; he too had been fitted with 'the device', and HIS implant didn't need to be armed remotely.

"Any friction?" Seth Whitepaugh asked him, deadpan.

"Nope, it all went like clockwork," the team leader answered, stripping off his neoprene hood; he wanted nothing more right now than to get home and take an ice-cold shower.

"Good," the wolverine answered, whirling a paw in the air to signal they were getting under way. A moment later the engines revved and the boat began to move…at cruising speed. While Whitepaugh was as eager as any of the others to be away from here, he understood the necessity of not attracting undue attention. No one would think twice if they saw an Aker Security Management patrol boat traversing The Sound in the wee hours of the morning; the firm had numerous clients along the waterfront. An ASM boat moving flat out, however…THAT was a different story, especially at this early hour.

After ten long minutes, the craft came abreast of Muddy Swamp Island, the demarcation line between the Canal District and Savanna Central. From here, the channel widened rapidly; they could kick up the speed to a higher notch with no difficulty.

But first thing's first; Whitepaugh pulled out a radio and spoke into a headset.

"Red-Fire One to all posts; what is your situation? Over…"

The first answer came back almost immediately.

"Post number two reporting, all quiet; no possible collateral targets."

The updates from observation posts one and three were almost identical to the first. Satisfied, Whitepaugh stowed the radio, exchanging it for a cell-phone—a disposable model. He dialed a number, and was about to press 'send' when he once more took notice of the lead polar-bear.

"Do you want to do the honors?" he asked, offering him the cellphone. The bear politely waved him off, "Nope, doesn't matter to me who pulls the pin," he said, earning himself a measure of respect from the wolverine; that was the attitude of a strict professional.

"Very well," Whitepaugh nodded, and hit the 'send' button.

Two miles ait...

A fire requires three separate elements to start burning. The first two were already well in place within the confines of IR Systems' Canal District facility—fuel, in the form of the kerosene pumped in from the first tank, and oxidizer, in this case 130lbs of welder's oxygen released into facility from the smaller cylinder. All that was needed now to complete the Fire Triangle was the third element—heat. It came in the form of the thermal charge, detonating inside the pool noodle. A loud bang and a bright flash followed…and then a thick 'whoompf' as the kerosene slick caught fire.

This was no ordinary kerosene; infused with thermite powder, it had been transformed into a crude
form of rocket fuel. At once a bright-yellow lake of fire whooshed out along the surface of the water. A microsecond later it made contact with the oxygen-enriched air above, the flames changing instantly from yellow to white hot, burning so brightly, it would have been nearly impossible to observe the blaze, except through a pair of welder's goggles.

Not that this would have made much difference, anyone that close enough to see the fire would probably be dead already; in less than ten seconds the ambient temperature inside the recycling plant had risen to an astonishing 1800 degrees Fahrenheit; hotter than the interior of a lime-kiln or a crematorium.

A split second later, the flames caught up with the first of the recycling-vessels' fuel-tanks.

Under normal circumstances, diesel fuel is not an especially volatile substance; compared to gasoline, it's downright passive. Heat it to quadruple digits however, and you better stand back… way, way back!. The boats went up like a string of ginormous firecrackers, adding even more fuel to the conflagration.

Thanks to the facility's thick, cinderblock walls, the ambient heat had nowhere to go, no way to escape…and so it took out its rage on whatever it could find within the structure. Bursting through the office wall, it turned chairs, desks, and other furniture to piles of ash in practically the blink of an eye. Over on the industrial side, a soda machine exploded in a cloud of superhot steam, while all throughout the work area, wiring and electrical cables sizzled, sputtered, and melted into gobs of weirdly colored metal. Moments later, the gears of the two giant shredding machines warped, buckled, and fused together, transforming them into a pair of useless junk-heaps. (The destruction of the shredders had not been part of the original plan, but when Seth Whitepaugh learned of it, he was delighted rather than dismayed. "Even better than we'd hoped," he would say in his final report.)

So swiftly did the fire engulf the IRS facility, that every single one of the building's smoke detectors was incinerated before it had time to sense anything, much less sound the alarm; by the time the first ZFD fire boat was revving up its engine, IR Systems' Canal District Plant was already a write-off.

Three miles away, Seth Whitepaugh crushed the disposable cell-phone in his oversized paws, and flung the pieces into the water. Slapping them against each other, in a 'that's that' gesture, he became aware of an angry exchange, over on his left.

He turned, and saw the lead polar bear, now clad in grey coveralls, snatching a baseball cap off the head of one of his team members. "Just what the heck do you think you're doing, wearing that thing?"

At first, the wolverine didn't understand…until he looked closer and saw that the cap was emblazoned with the letters, 'ZPD'.

"You can-not be seen, with THAT on your head," the lead bear snarled, and whipped it over the side.

Immediately the other polar bear was on his feet. (He was at least a foot taller than the lead animal.) "You moron; who the heck would've seen me, anyway?"

Seth Whitepaugh thought that called for an intervention, and got quickly between them, speaking first to the polar-bear that had lost his head-gear.

"Supposing the ZFD calls Aker for assistance in keeping the crowds back from that fire, hrm?"
They know we have a boat out here," he folded his arms beneath cold, flinty eyes, nodding over his shoulder at the red glow pulsing in their wake. "In that case, we'd have no choice but assist them." This was a highly unlikely scenario, the wolverine knew, but not outside the realm of possibility. In response, the bear who'd been wearing the police-cap snuffled an apology and quickly slunk away. Whitepaugh watched him go and then turned his attention to the lead bear.

"Well done," he said. Oh yes, they had been exactly right in accepting this animal for the 'infusion corps.'

Four miles behind him, the interior of IR Systems continued to burn brightly. And then, almost as quickly as it had started, the blaze snuffed itself out, its fuel supply exhausted. ("The flame that burns twice as bright, burns half as long,' as the line in the movie says.)

When the ZFD fireboats arrived on the scene, there was nothing for them to do but turn their hoses on the smoldering structure, attempting to cool it down enough for them to enter. Surveying the damage, the fire-captain in charge, a water deer named Devi Parubjah could only gape in awe at the precision of the blaze. While Interspecies Recycling's facility was a blackened husk, the businesses on either side of it had barely been scorched. She felt her tail begin to clock back and forth like a metronome; this was all just a little bit TOO exact for her blood.

She turned to the hippo standing next to her.

"Herus, alert the ZPD. Tell them to have someone from the Arson Squad over here, A.S.A.P."

She immediately wondered if that was such a good idea; it would be hours before the structure would cool enough to enter. In fact, the first investigator was not able to set foot inside the facility until almost 9:07 AM—about the same time the Zootopia Juvenile Court was opening for business.

Juvie Court, as the kids called it was housed in an annex to the main courthouse, a squat, ugly edifice the looked like nothing so much as a brick-by-brick replica of a DMV Office, (specifically the one where Nick had introduced Judy to Flash.)

"Hmmm, what the heck is that sloth up to these days?" The red fox caught himself wondering; he had lost track of his old high-school bud after he and Judy had tagged him for street-racing.

He heard a clicking sound and looked up to see that the doors had been unlocked and the line was starting to move. "Almost on time for once," the red fox noted, checking his watch; there was nothing he wanted more than to get this farce over with and get out of this place. Did Gamsbart really need for him to be here?

The first hint of trouble came while Nick was going through security. Normally, showing his badge to the officer in charge was all it took for him to be waved through, with only a cursory inspection at best.

Not this time...the Bighorn sheep in charge of the metal detector, (Who worked for Aker Security, not the city.) made him turned out all his pockets and remove his belt, and then wanded him over twice—all the while glaring at the fox as if HE were here on trial, and for a particularly vile offense.

And judging by the groans and grumbles of the animals waiting in line behind him, Nick surmised that this was NOT any sort of standard procedure. One or two of the others were also giving him dirty looks and someone else, a porcupine, was even pointing...and try as he might, Nick couldn't shake the feeling that this had nothing to do with the line being held up.
When he finally made to 'Juvie Court', the inside décor turned out to be no great shakes on the building's exterior. The place looked like a hastily refurbished storeroom, fitted out with props and set-pieces left over from a high-school production of Twelve Angry Mammals. Everything had a fake appearance to it, from the cheesy wall-paneling, to the 'yard sale' prosecutor's and the defense tables, to the paw-me-down seats in the gallery. Even the judge's bench sported a thrown-together quality, covered in veneer that could not possibly have been real wood. The carpeting on the floor looked like something an airport would have turned down, and to top it all off, the lighting wasn't quite right, either—projecting what looked like a purplish tinge onto Nick's red fur. There was no jury box; young offenders accused of serious crimes were taken elsewhere to be tried.

That was probably what would happen to Conor Lewis, unless he decided to co-operate with the Attorney General's office and give up The Phantom. (At this point, Nick thought the odds of that happening were about on a par with the chances of sneaking an elephant through Little Rodentia without anybody noticing—in broad daylight.)

Already, half the seats on the right side of the gallery were occupied, (the section reserved for defendants, their parents, attorneys, etc.) Nearly all of the chairs on the left of the aisle were empty however, and Nick quickly found a seat in the small-mammal section up in front.

Glancing across to the other side, he saw that many of the seats were held by what looked like one or more family members of the kids awaiting their turn before the judge. He frowned slightly; there was perhaps one young mammal over there accompanied by an attorney—and it wasn't Conor Lewis.

"Where the heck IS that kid, anyway?" the red fox wondered silently. They'd better not have postponed Conor's arraignment without telling him. (It would be the first time.)

At that moment, as if in answer to his inquiry, the courtroom door swung open and the young silver fox came in, followed closely by a wolf in a correctional officer's uniform. There seemed to be no sign of Vern Rodenberg—no, wait, there he was, perched once again on his client's shoulder. Conor had shed his orange coveralls for something more presentable, a pair of Duicker pants and a dark blue polo shirt. He had also washed his fur, Nick could smell it from where he was sitting; the younger fox even appeared to have been freshly barbered. In fact, he looked almost exactly like a postcard version of an honor student, (which he was, Nick had to remind himself. Vern Rodenberg would no doubt remind the court of that fact if he got the chance.)

As he passed within eyesight of where Nick was sitting, Conor glanced at him briefly, but offered no nod or any other sort of acknowledgement of the older fox's presence. Nick didn't blame him; he would have done exactly the same, had it been him appearing before the judge today. 'So where's the guy I'm supposed to have bitten?' the young fox to be telling the world.

Oh yes, Nick understood this kid all right. Thinking about it, he was actually grateful to Rudy Gamsbart for…well, speak of the devil again; here HE was too, entering the courtroom at a brisk stride with a nerdy-looking female kangaroo hopping in his wake; probably his law clerk.

"Hello, " Nick stood up and waved, although without much enthusiasm; the Deputy Prosecutor had ordered him to be here, so he figured he'd better make it known that he'd followed his instructions like a good, little fox.

Seeing him, the chamois waved back, equally indifferent….no, scratch that; was it Nick's imagination or had the temperature in here suddenly cooled thirty degrees? The look on Gamsbart's face was borderline hostile, in fact nearly identical to the one he'd gotten from the bighorn sheep at the security checkpoint. What the heck was going on here? Wait, hang on a second…this couldn't
possibly have anything to do with that business Judy had called him about last ni…?

Ohhhh, NO! Speak of the devil again! Here SHE was, moving smartly down the aisle in beige slacks and a chambray shirt. Agggh, grrr…dumb fox! He should have known better than to tell her to stay away. (To this bunny, the words, 'you can't' were one step removed from an engraved invitation.) At least she wasn't in uniform, the red fox told himself, hunkering down in his seat and trying to look invisible.

"Hi Nick!' the doe-bunny waved as she approached. (Oh great, she'd spotted him anyway.)

Instead of answering, the red fox let his eyes flicker nervously in the direction of the prosecutor's table. Whoa, thank goodness Gamsbart's back was turned; he hadn't seen or heard her yet.

He turned his gaze back in Judy's direction, growling under his breath.

"Carrots, what the heck are you doing here? I thought I said…"

"Yes, and I said I thought you were wrong," she responded curtly, sliding in beside him. And then her right ear lifted higher than the left. "Honestly Nick, what do think, the judge is going to let Conor walk, just because I came?"

"Uh, no," the red fox had to admit; trust her to make such a devastating point. At the end of the day, Judy Hopps's presence here could have no effect on the outcome of Conor's arraignment; this kid wasn't going anywhere, no matter how many cops' lives he'd saved. Really, the only problem Nick had with his partner being here was that Rudy Gamsbart had a problem with it…and even that was only conjecture. And as Judy herself had pointed out yesterday, no one had ordered her not to be here.

All very nice, except…what about the treatment Nick had gotten from Gamsbart and the bighorn sheep? If that had been about what he'd thought it was about…

"Looks like a busy day in the neighborhood." Judy waved a paw at the packed gallery on the other side of the aisle.

Nick sucked at his lower lip. What the heck, it couldn't hurt to make small talk.

"It's that anti-vandalism crackdown, I bet; the one the Chief mentioned last week. You watch; once the message sinks in that we're serious about this, I bet we'll see a lot fewer kids in here."

"If it sinks in," Judy cautioned him. She was about to say more when the door to the judge's chambers opened and a bison in a bailiff's uniform entered the courtroom, raising a hoof as if preparing to recite an oath.

"All rise; quiet in the court, please."

He waited until everyone had stood up and then recited the familiar litany.

"Oyez! Oyez! Oyez! All mammals having business before this court are now admonished to draw near and give their attention. The Juvenile Justice Court for the City of Zootopia is now in session; the honorable Judge George L. Schatten presiding…"

That was all Nick heard; the thundering of his heart drowned out the rest. George Schatten…Georgie Schatten; he was a JUDGE now? Oh no, it couldn't be him; it had to be some other mammal.
The door to the judge's chambers swung open again and a diminutive figure entered. Nick could only see the top of his head, but he was definitely the right size for a woodchuck.

But no, it couldn't be him...

And then Judge Schatten took his place at the bench—and he was a woodchuck. Still, Nick told himself, that didn't mean anything for certain; no, it COULDN'T be him.

A faint ripple of scent teased the insides of the nostrils, and just like that, denial was only a river in Egypt. The odor was barely perceptible, but Nick recognized it immediately; he could never forget THAT scent—no matter how hard he tried.

It was him!

He heard Judy saying something, it sounded like, "Ni...? Ni-wa-rong?" Or...something like that; he couldn't be sure. All of his attention was focused on the woodchuck presiding from the judge's bench...only he wasn't wearing robes anymore; instead he was clad in the uniform of a Junior Ranger-Scout. And he wasn't seated; he was standing over Nick in the darkened basement of a community center, an arrogant sneer plastered across his face. "You think we'd trust a fox without a muzzle? You're even dumber than you look!"

Nick heard the words as clearly as if he was just now hearing them for the very first time.

It WAS him!

On the other side of the aisle-way, another fox had also recognized the woodchuck, a fact which did not escape the notice of the grey rat seated on his shoulder.

"That him, Booby; the groundhog from the airplane?"

"Yep, same dude." Conor answered with a small nod. He was far more sanguine about the state of things than Nick...but then again, refusing to sit next to a fox on an airline flight was hardly in the same category as forcing a muzzle onto his face.

At that moment, Judge Schatten spotted Conor as well, subjecting him to a short, intense scrutiny. It came as no surprise to the young silver fox, but it did wonders to strengthen his resolve.

He was just glad that Mr. Rodenberg's position made it impossible for the grey rat to see his face.

George Schatten could see it though. Humph, so this was the little miscreant who had given the ZPD so much trouble. Of course the REAL troublemaker was the piece of vermin seated on his shoulder; oh yes, the woodchuck had spotted him too.

He sat back in his chair, steepling his fingers and reviewing what Gamsbart had told him earlier; no fireworks, keep it low key...until it's time to lower the boom and then come down on the kid like a crate full of anvils.

That was actually going to be a lot easier than it might have been. Normally a kid brought into his court for assaulting a police officer was enough to send the woodchuck's righteous indignation clear into the O-zone.

Not so much this time; yes, Conor Lewis had bitten a cop, but he had also bitten another fox. If he hadn't been a fox himself, His Honor might even have felt inclined to cut him some slack—especially since his victim had been none other than that arrogant jerk, Nicholas P. Wilde. Humph, now there was someone who'd never learned his lesson; you would think, after what had happened
when he tried to join the Junior Ranger Scouts, that this idiot would understand his place in the world, but nooooo…the shifty so-and-so had up and joined the ZPD! And then just when the woodchuck had thought that Wilde couldn't push it any further beyond the pale…Ohhhh, he was going to need a gallon of brain-bleach to erase the memory of what he'd seen on cable last night; he should have taken the kids to Lityak's when he'd had the chance.

Wel-l-l, never mind about that for now; where WAS Nick Wilde anyway? Deputy Prosecutor Rudy Gamsbart, (another animal getting too big for his britches,) had left specific instructions for him to be here this morning. Hmmm, now where…? Wait, yes…this was only an arraignment, Wilde wouldn't be testifying, so he'd be over on the other side of the…WHAT THE FRESH HECK?!

Feeling his jaw about to drop clear through the judge's bench, the woodchuck hurriedly clasped his chin, the only way to stop the deadfall. There was Wilde all right…sitting together with Judy Hopps, with that bunny, the one from the video he'd seen on the Rock Hardesty show last night. The two of them were leaning towards one another, foreheads touching, obviously in the midst of an intimate conversation…in his courtroom; carrying on their inappropriate behavior in HIS courtroom.

His paw began to tighten around the stem of his gavel. Foxes! And was that a cracking noise?

At that instant, Rudy Gamsbart looked up from his notes with a startled expression. What the…? He could have sworn he'd heard a flapping noise just now.

He had; it was the sound of all his instructions to Judge Schatten flying straight out the window. The only thing on the woodchuck's mind was Nick Wilde—and the bunny he'd brought here with him. Oooo, if that bushy-tailed jerk thought he could get away with that sort of thing in here, he was in for a VERY rude awakening.

"Because I know your weak spot…fox!" he thought staring hard enough to bore holes through reinforced concrete.

15 feet away, Nick Wilde was unaware of the woodchuck's attentions; at the moment he was focused on the text message showing on Judy's smart-phone, the two of them huddling over it in order to be able to see the display-screen, (dang that lousy light in here!)

It was a confirmation of Judy's appointment with Dr. Hind that afternoon.

"See Nick, I had to be here anyway." She said, speaking in hushed tones. The red fox was having none of it.

"Come on Carrots, 1:30? That's not for another four hours. And Dr. Hind's office is all the way over…"

It was as far their conversation went before the bang of the judge's gavel cut it off.

"All right, order in the court; bailiff, call the first case."

Chapter End Notes
Another update will be coming this Wednesday or Thursday.
Chapter Summary

Proxy war in the court.

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 9 –Fire And Mirrors
(Continued…Pt. 12)

Vern Rodenberg felt his whiskers quivering; guy-wires in a thunderstorm. Uh-Ohhhh…His Honor was in a bad mood this morning; he usually ASKED his bailiff to 'please call the first case.'

Only…was Schatten's foul temper necessarily such a bad thing on this particular morning? No…it wasn't, the grey rat decided. In fact, if he played his cards right, it might turn out to be just what the doctor ordered.

The Bison performing the bailiff duties was meanwhile adjusting his glasses and consulting a clipboard; he too had caught the absence of warmth in His Honor's instructions; (so had Rudy Gamsbart, who scowled deeply.)

Raising the clipboard an inch or two higher, he sonorously intoned, "The Mammals of Zootopia versus the Mammal Known as Conor Severus Lewis. This is an arraignment hearing…" A minute or two of legal boilerplate followed, after which Conor was escorted to the defendant's table by the wolf that had brought him here. Judge Schatten gave him a moment to get seated, and then leaned forward with an apparently benign expression on his face.

"Mr. Lewis, are you represented by counsel here today?"

The answer came from the young fox's shoulder.

"Yes Your Honor, I'll be representing Mr. Lewis this morning, Vernon J. Rodenberg, attorney at law." He tapped Conor lightly on the neck, and the young fox reached up and set him down on the table.

"Ahhh, Mr. Rodenberg," Judge Schatten's expression was almost pleasant—which made the grey rat doubly apprehensive. "Juvenile Court, eh? Isn't that a bit out of the ordinary for you?"

"I go where I feel I'm needed, Your Honor," the diminutive attorney answered, wondering what in
the name of Dear Jurisprudence had gotten into His Honor today? He never engaged in this kind of banter with defense counsel.

On the other side of the courtroom, Rudy Gamsbart's right eyebrow was arcing upwards; he was beginning to wonder the same thing.

"Bailiff, would you please read the charges?" Judge Schatten had at last reverted to his normal mode of speaking. Judy relaxed and so did Nick, (but to a much lesser degree than her.) Vern Rodenberg and Rudy Gamsbart did not; they had seen His Honor deploy this smokescreen all too many times before.

But why was he doing this?

The court fell silent as the bison adjusted his spectacles and began to read aloud.

Conor was charged with one count of attempting to evade, one count of illegally entering a fire zone, one count of disorderly conduct, one count of resisting arrest, and finally the big Kahuna, Felonious Assault of a Peace Officer. Except for the final charge, all of these complaints were superfluous, bargaining chips to be put in play in the event the young silver fox decided to ask for a plea-deal, (as IF!)

As the final charge was spelled out, Judge Schatten leaned forward over the bench, once again focusing on Vern Rodenberg, the pleasant smile on his face morphing quickly to a flint-eyed sneer. In the gallery behind the defendant's table, Nick Wilde's tail stiffened like a bottle-brush. This was the exact same change of expression he'd seen when the woodchuck had asked him, 'Even though…you're a FOX?'

"Counselor," he said, "Am I to understand that you do not intend to immediately plead your client guilty to this crime?"

Rodenberg reeled back, stunned. What the heck? A statement like that in an arraignment hearing was one step away from judicial malfeasance. Judy Hopps nearly gasped and Nick Wilde did gasp.

But no one in that courtroom was more staggered than Deputy Prosecutor Rudolph Gamsbart. What the holy heck He had specifically instructed Judge Schatten to lay off the theatrics for once; it was as if His Honor had accidentally slipped the wrong disc into his DVD player…and why did his gaze keep shifting to the seats behind the defendant's table?

The chamois looked…and immediately had his answer. Of all the…the…

"You DUMB bunny, get your fluffy, little booty out of here!" He could have screamed his lungs out—but even if Judy high-tailed it out of the courtroom right now, too late, the damage was already done. Judge Schatten had climbed into his high dudgeon and slammed the door behind him. There was nothing for Rudy Gamsbart to do but ride it out and hope the woodchuck wouldn't go TOO far over the edge.

Ohhhh, but when they were done here, he was going to have a few choice words with a certain bunny-cop—and especially with her partner. Dangit, Judge Schatten was an even bigger fan of the Rock Hardesty show than HE was.

Meanwhile, over at the defendant's table, Vern Rodenberg had already recovered his composure—and then some; his whiskers were bobbing and his incisors were once more honing against each other. He had no idea where the opportunity just presented to him had come from, but 'don't look a gift Swiss-cheese in the holes,' as he always liked to say.
Only…what was the best way to handle this? The ol' humble shtick, yeah that was the way to go. He put on his most meek and penitent expression, clasping his paws like an errant son, begging his father's indulgence.

"No, Your Honor…we do not," he said, "We intend to plead not guilty on all charges." He quickened the pace of his speech, wanting to get as much said as possible before the woodchuck's gavel banged him into silence.

"Your Honor this is a tragedy not a crime; my client never meant to bite a police officer; and he absolutely wouldn't have done it had he known it was Nick Wilde who grabbed him. I remind the court the court that they're both fox…"

That was as far as he got before gavel came down, but Rodenberg figured he just had time to get it in.

"Have you yourself not several times remarked on the fact that their species always sticks toge…"

"Objection!" Rudy Gamsbart was on his feet and throwing a hoof in the air. "This is an arraignment Your Honor; defense can save their arguments for the trial." He was glaring across the room at his opponent, who responded with only a mild shrug.

"The bench asked me a question, and I felt obliged to answer, Mr. Prosecutor."

"Never mind, sustained!" Judge Schatten all but growled, banging his gavel again. It didn't matter to Rodenberg, his ploy had accomplished its purpose. The woodchuck had indeed offered that opinion, and on more than several different occasions. And there was nothing...nuh-THING guaranteed to get the Honorable George Schatten wound up like throwing his own words back at him—and the grey rat had done it without even the slightest show of hostility, appearing almost deferential in his remarks. Rudy Gamsbart knew it, and he'd also realized what his opponent was up to; he simply hadn't figured it out in time to put a stop to it.

Or…had he? Would the judge bite, or wouldn't he?

Rodenberg got his answer when the woodchuck's features darkened and he raised his gavel again…this time as if to hurl it, not to bang it.

"Oy, the things I DO for my clients," the rat-attorney thought to himself…and then battened down the hatches, preparing to weather the coming storm.

It turned out be a Cat-4 Hurricane.

"Don't you ever presume to quote ME out of context, Counselor!" Judge Schatten was halfway out of his seat, aiming the gavel at him as though it were the Hammer of the Gods. "I'm perfectly aware of what I said, and yes foxes do tend shore each other up in the face of authority…but that doesn't mean they're incapable of turning on each other in an 'it's you or me' situation." He drew himself up to his full height, (such as it was.) "Their reputation speaks for itself, I think."

Rodenberg would have loved to ask him to elaborate on that last statement, but he'd already pushed it as far as he dared...or that he needed to. Rudy Gamsbart looked like he wanted to crawl out of the courtroom, rather than endure any more of the groundhog's jingoism.

"My apologies if I stepped out of line, Your Honor," Rodenberg bowed his head slightly…and then figuring he could push it just a tiny bit further, he added, "But you did ask."

"Your Honor, might we move things along, here?" It was Gamsbart again, this time pointing at his
"Very well," he said, speaking to Vern Rodenberg, "In regards to the first charge, attempting to evade, how does the defense plead?"

"Not guilty, Your Honor," the grey rat responded, hiding his disappointment. Dangit, he'd just about had 'Judge Predd' right where he'd wanted him and then that blankety-blank chamois had gone and yanked the rug out. Wel-l-ll, he had warned his client not to underestimate Rudy Gamsbart. Oops, His Honor had moved on to the second charge, illegal entry of a fire-zone.

"Not guilty, Your Honor," he answered quickly.

The rest of it went pretty much the same, Rodenberg pleading his client Not Guilty on all the charges. For his part, the Judge read the list in an almost desultory fashion; like everyone else in the courtroom, he understood that all but one of the charges were largely meaningless. It was only when he came to the big one that the woodchuck's interest seemed to sharpen.

"On the charge of Felonious Assault of a Peace Officer, how done the defense plead?"

"Not Guilty, Your Honor," Rodenberg answered, earning withering looks from both the bench and the prosecutor's table. That told the grey rat he'd better move fast; he still had one more card to play.

"Your Honor, before the clerk formally enters my client's plea in the court record, he has a brief statement that he wishes to make." He nodded over at Conor, and at the same time, Rudy Gamsbart crossed his fingers under the table, chanting a silent mantra, "Let him speak....Let hit...Let him...Let him..." If Schatten denied the young fox the right to make a statement, he'd be playing straight into the defense table's paws. The Deputy prosecutor's prayers were answered when the Judge rolled his paw in the air, his stock method of indicating, 'get on with it.'

"Very well Mr. Lewis, but make sure you keep it brief." He said, casting a stern eye towards the defendant.

What happened next was an almost textbook example of the chain-reaction known as The Butterfly Effect. (A butterfly flaps its wings in Afurica—and three weeks later a tornado wipes out a town in Minnestoata.) As Conor got up out of his chair, he happened to glance over his shoulder at the seats behind him…where he saw Nick Wilde, looking perfectly miserable. At this point the young fox had no knowledge of the video of him and Judy kissing…much less was he aware of it having aired on cable the previous evening. (The ZPD youth jail TV carried exactly three channels, and Brightbat wasn't one of them.) Nor could he have known about Nick's history with the woodchuck seated at the Judge's bench. Thus it was that he had no idea as to why the older fox was looking so down in the mouth; and yet he couldn't help but feel some sympathy…and not a little guilt. Intentionally or otherwise, he HAD sunk his fangs into the older fox's arm. And so, hardly even thinking about it, he offered up a gesture that was half a wave and half a salute, fox-speak for 'hang in there.'

Nick didn't notice him, but Judy did, and immediately returned the young fox's salutation.

Her partner didn't see that either.

…but Judge Schatten did, and from his angle, (and to his eyes,) it looked as if that smartmouth fox-kid was offering his approval, even an endorsement of the older fox and Bunny-cop's inexcusable
behavior.

Once again he felt his grip tightening around his gavel. "You are SO going to regret that, you little snot. Gamsbart wanted me to come down hard on you...and now I'm going to drop on you like the wrath of all perdition...and even then it'll only be a sideshow."

All this happened in less than three seconds; when Conor stood up to address the court, his words meant nothing to Judge Schatten; the woodchuck's mind was already firmly made up.

Slipping the chair back under the table, the young fox stood up behind it and squared his shoulders, the way his lawyer had told him to.

"I'll be quick, Your Honor," he promised, and then he said, "I only wanna make it clear to the court, that I am entering into this Not Guilty plea voluntarily and entirely of my own volition; no undue influence was exerted on me in order to bring me to this decision; it is entirely my own choice."

Judy Hopps felt one ear lifting high than the other. Her first thought was that Rodenberg must have coached the kid; almost certainly he had. And yet—the words just seemed to come so naturally to the young silver fox; yes it had been HIS decision to plead 'Not Guilty.'

"Very well, so noted," the Judge replied solemnly, and then shot a quick glance at Nick and Judy—and not a pleasant one.

Then he turned his attention back to the defendant.

"Mr. Lewis, I appreciate the fact that you think you're smart enough to make that kind of decision." He pretended to consult a document, "In fact everything I've seen and heard about you tells me you're a VERY smart little fox."

On the other side of the courtroom, Rudy Gamsbart was stifling a grimace.

"Mammal', you idiot, not 'FOX'!"

"...accepted to the Performing Arts Academy, high score on all intelligence tests, etc." the judge went on, looking duly impressed with what was on the papers before him—before he slapped them down hard on the bench, his tone shifting instantly from congenial warmth to pure ice water.

"Unfortunately Mr. Lewis, you also seem to have a mouth that's every bit as smart as your head. I am aware of that little game you pulled when you were questioned the other day—the Usual Suspects, was it? And this court is NOT amused."

Conor said nothing only swallowed and nodded slightly; he couldn't say that Mr. Rodenberg hadn't warned him.

The reaction elsewhere was somewhat more positive.

"Ohhh-kay, now THIS is more like it," Rudy Gamsbart thought, laying an elbow on the table in front of him.

His complacency was destined to be very short-lived. Now Judge Schatten thrust an accusing finger at Conor; no more Mr. Nice Groundhog.

"Don't think for a moment that you're the first clever young fox to come before me, Mr. Lewis, the type of animal that also thinks they're smart enough to put one over on this court." He leaned as far
over the bench as was possible for someone of his species; in other circumstances, it would have looked almost comical, "Well, guess what? That's not happening…and I'm not going to go easy on you."

He sat back in his chair again, looking suddenly weary. Like the blaze that had destroyed the IR Systems recycling facility, his anger seemed to have already spent itself. "As a matter of fact I couldn't, if I wanted to. You are accused of committing a violent offense, Mr. Lewis, not some petty misdemeanor, like shoplifting a pack of gum or spraying graffiti on a bus-bench. And you're not just up for any violent offense but the felonious assault of a police officer." He paused to take a sip of water and then went on. "The law is quite clear on this, young mammal. However much you may profess that what you did was unintentional, the fact remains that I cannot take the chance that it won't happen again; therefore, with deepest regrets…"

15 feet to Conor's right, Rudy Gamsbart wanted to relax but knew better by now. After making yet another prejudicial remark about foxes Judge Schatten had seemed to catch himself and gone hurriedly back on script; all well and good…except the chamois couldn't shake the feeling that this was yet another of his charades.

Gamsbart's caution turned out to be well founded; the next thing Judge Schatten said was, "I am therefore ordering that you be held forthwith in V-3 restraint, pending trial."

Not everyone gasped, (not everyone knew what the term meant,) but those who did were beyond horrified; Vern Rodenberg shrieked, Nick Wilde fox-screamed, and Judy Hopps's cry of alarm was almost a match for it. The noise made by Rudy Gamsbart sounded something like a cross between a foghorn and a factory whistle.

"Wha…What are you DOING?"

V-3 was a method of restraint normally reserved for only the most violent of the violent, serial offenders and hard-core lunatics. Certainly, it had never been intended for a first-time offender in his early teens. In fact, as far any anyone in the courtroom was aware, V-3 restraint had never been applied to ANY juvenile defendant, not even one on the cusp of adulthood.

What it meant was that Conor would be held in what was known as No Mammalian Contact status for the duration of his pre-trial incarceration, solitary confinement, with no other kid allowed to speak to him, on pain of getting tossed in the hole themselves. Even the guards would not be permitted to talk to him, except to issue instructions. Whenever he left his cell, he'd be wearing both manacles and shackles. He would also be required to wear a muzzle while outside his cell—and not just any muzzle, but one of those full face jobs that covered your entire head. Last but not least, the cuffs would be fixed to a pair of Kevlar mittens, whose purpose was to keep him from using his claws.

As before, it was Vern Rodenberg who recovered first, storming to the front of the defense table with his tail shivering in outrage. Oy-VEY! He had been hoping to provoke Judge Schatten into overreacting but this was going too far even for him.

"Your Honor, this is worse than disgraceful; you've had kids before this bench accused of far more violent offenses than my client…and you never treated any of them so harshly. May I remind you of Shay Tigrani? You never ordered him to be put in that kind of restraint."

"Yes," the woodchuck coolly admitted, "and given what happened after I sentenced him, I wish now that I had,"

Rodenberg could have bitten his own tongue off; he didn't make many mistakes in court, but that
one had been a beaut. Shay Tigrani, a hot-headed young Sumatran tiger, had been sentenced to two years in Juvie, and then back to court when he came of age, for trial as an adult. It was one of the few times Judge Schatten had been criticized for going too easy on a defendant. Tigrani, (who by then already had a rap-sheet as long as a bunting streamer,) had brutally attacked two elderly mountain goats in a fit of road-rage.

The instant he'd been returned to jail, he'd gone on another rampage, one that sent two inmates and a correctional office to the ER; (the guard had barely survived, and quit Zootopia Corrections upon his recovery.) Had the crazed young tiger been put V-3 restraint before they'd returned him to custody, none of that would have happened.

But even so…

"Your Honor, you can't equate my client with a habitual offender like Shay Tigrani; on what grounds do you justify holding him in such harsh confinement?"

The woodchuck leaned forward again, attempting without much success to maintain a poker-face.

"On the grounds that your client is a cipher, Counselor—living under a false identity; we don't know anything about him going back further than three years, not even his real name." He shifted his gaze to Conor. "We could find out, except that Mr. Lewis—or whoever he is—has consistently, and stubbornly, refused to co-operate with authorities. We have no idea how much of a real danger he is, either to himself or to others. For all anyone knows, your client could be a budding Ted Bunny."

He said this while looking at Judy, whose ears shot backwards and eyes narrowed, as if she'd just walked into a sandstorm. Judge Schatten saw this and allowed himself a tiny smirk. Then he returned his attention to the defense table.

"Therefore, it falls upon me, however painful my duty, to ensure, absolutely, that there will be no repeat of the incident that took place between the defendant and Officer Wilde."

Rodenberg only stared with his whiskers twitching. That was not a bad argument, except…when he happened to glance over at Rudy Gamsbart, why did the chamois look every bit as aghast as HE felt?

It was because while the Judge's assessment of the potential threat posed by Conor Lewis had been nearly pitch-perfect, his solution to the conundrum had been anything but. Even if the young silver fox had been ten times more violent by nature than Shay Tigrani, he was still only a fox. While V-3 restraint might be called for to keep a nearly full-grown apex predator in check, for a third-tier pred just hitting his early teens, it was overkill on overdrive; there were numerous, far less stringent methods of restraint that would be more than enough to keep a fox-kid Conor's age from harming himself or anyone else…and practically everyone in the courtroom knew it.

Gamsbart had to force himself to keep silent; dangit, he had told Schatten to play hardball with the kid—but this was edging into cruel and unusual territory. And there, across the courtroom, was Vernon J. Rodenberg, no doubt already calculating how he could best turn this ruling to his client's advantage.

Not only that; while the Deputy Prosecutor indeed instructed Judge Schatten to come down hard on the defendant, he had also insisted that the woodchuck appear to do so reluctantly. No such luck now; His Honor's expressions of regret weren't fooling anybody, a gibbering idiot could see that he was RELISHING this.
And you had better believe that the Opposing Counsel was seeing it as well. Gamsbart didn't know who he most wanted to throttle—Hopps, Wilde, Vern Rodenberg, or that black-robed pinhead, presiding from the bench.

"Your Honor, this is completely unnecessary," Rodenberg continued to protest, "My client is only…"

Schatten cut him off with bang of the gavel. "The decision is made Counselor. If you have a problem with it, feel free to file a motion with the SCCZ," (the Supreme Court of the City of Zootopia)

"Oh I will, Your Honor, I will," Rodenberg instantly shot back, "I'll be filing so many motions, you just might catch cold from the breeze."

The woodchuck banged the gavel again, harder.

"You are that close to a contempt citation, Mr. Rodenberg," he snapped, once more ignoring his earlier instructions from Rudy Gamsbart.

"For what, may I ask, Your Honor?" the grey rat demanded, putting his paws on hips.

Judge Schatten responded by changing the subject.

"Did you just bare your fangs at me, Counselor?"

It took a lot to get Vernon J. Rodenberg to throw caution to the winds, but this was more than enough for that purpose. He spread his arms in a gesture of bewilderment.

"Fangs? Fangs! How could I do that anyway? Us rodents don't have fangs, we have incisor…"

BANG! "That's it Counselor, you're in contempt, $500.00 fine!"

Rodenberg stopped, and stepped backwards, looking properly contrite. But inside, he was almost smiling…almost. "The things I do for my clients…!"

A brief silence fell over the courtroom as the bailiff brought the shackles and cuffs and attached them to Conor's ankles and wrists. After that there was a brief delay. No claw-mittens, or full-face muzzles were readily available here, even the main courthouse building didn't have them, at least not in the proper size; His Honor was obliged to send someone over to the adult jail to fetch them. He did so without even the slightest show of embarrassment.

The mittens arrived first, and when the bailiff affixed them to Conor's paw-cuffs, Nick Wilde found the sight so disturbing that Judy was obliged to hold him close to keep him steady.

(Her gesture did not escape the attention of the Judge's bench—or the prosecution table.)

Judy Hopps remained completely unaware of their attentions; her only thoughts were, if this was how Nick reacted upon seeing the younger fox's claws being sheathed, what the heck was going to happen when they put a full-face MUZZLE on the kid?

When another officer, a panda-bear, brought it into the courtroom, her partner at first seemed to be okay with the idea. The muzzle was constructed of carbon fiber rather than metal, and to tell the truth, if you didn't know better, you might almost have mistaken it for a motocross helmet. The snout was a little long for a fox; Judy guessed it was a model dedicated to an adult member of the weasel family, one of the bigger species. (Mustelids were known to lose it completely when
cornered.)

Nick's perception of the muzzle changed instantly when the panda produced a key and unlocked it; flipping the back upwards on a hinge just aft of the forehead before passing it over to the bailiff. At once the device transformed from a cool piece of head-gear into a positively evil-looking thing, (at least in the fox's mind.)

It was all too much for Nick, and he shot up out of his chair, pleading pitifully with the bison holding the muzzle.

"No, come on, don't put that thing on him; please, he's not going to hurt anyone!"

"You there; sit DOWN and be QUIET!" It was coming from the judge's bench. At the same time, Judy began tugging at his elbow.

"Nick…please."

He ignored them both, turning his attention from the bailiff to the woodchuck behind the judge's bench.

"Come on Your Honor, you can't put that thing on him; he's just a kid."

Perhaps it was the red fox's words, perhaps it was his anguished tone of voice, possibly it was the expression on his face, but whatever the case, it was more than the Honorable Judge George Schatten could ever even hope to resist. He felt that oily sneer suffusing his features again…and this time he didn't try to fight it.

Leaning forward once more, he lowered his voice to a menacing purr, "Did that ever stop me before?"

Nick's paws fell down to his sides; at the same time his mouth fell open and his eyes went wide; Judy had only seen that look on his face one time before—when Mr. Big had kissed her on both cheeks after nearly having both of them iced. That time, her partner's facial expression had looked almost funny; now she hurriedly grabbed his arm, trying to hold him back.

"No Nick, DON'T!"

The red fox hardly felt her presence; now he understood—everything! This wasn't about Conor; the kid was nothing more than a stage-prop here. Nick didn't know why, he didn't care why, but Schatten was doing this to get to him…HIM!

He shrugged Judy off of him, completely unaware of what he was doing. All he knew was the look on that black-robed, little jerk's face. And hey, what do you know? Now that they were adults, he was bigger than the woodchuck. Why hadn't he noticed it before?

'Never let them see that they get to you' Nick Wilde liked to say.

'Oh yeah, guess what, I'M seeing?' George Schatten's mocking expression seemed to say right back.

Nick felt the hairs on the nape of his neck, beginning to stand on end…

"Nick, it's okay!"

Conor Lewis's voice cut through the tension like a diamond-blade through cheesecloth.

"It's okay, big guy," he said again, raising his paws as best as he could, "It's okay, don't worry
about me, I can handle it."

Nick froze in place, but didn't sit down again either.

"I can HANDLE it," the young fox insisted, and Nick fell back in his chair, looking as if he didn't know how he had gotten there. (Judge Schatten looked thoroughly disappointed; Rudy Gamsbart looked as if he'd just watched a pipe-bomb being successfully disarmed. "Whoa-ho-ho, I never thought I'd be glad to hear THAT kid open his mouth.")

But no one was more relieved than Conor Lewis—because nobody understands a fox's body language like another fox. Holy Croke, had Nick really been about to…and what was his problem with Judge Predd anyway? The young fox didn't know, but if what he'd thought was about to happen, had happened…well, it better not have.

When he'd said he could handle it, he'd been telling the truth, but ironically enough, it was the very brutality of the muzzle about to be applied to his face that had made it possible; this thing looked nothing like the one that had been forced on his face right before he'd gotten it broken.

"Lift your nose," the bailiff ordered, sounding none-too-comfortable with his task. Conor dutifully tilted his face skywards, instinctively closing his eyes as the bison slipped the muzzle over his features.

It was surprisingly light; a featherweight compared to the face-casts he'd had to endure, following his injury and later, after the surgery to correct it. It was also well-padded, there would be no chafing. Whatever the judge's intentions might have been, in ordering him to wear this thing, it was clearly meant as an object of restraint, not punishment.

Equally fortunate was the fact that it locked from the side rather than in back; the bailiff was not obliged to step behind him in order to secure it. Conor felt and heard the buzz of a ratchet as the muzzle was adjusted to fit his neck, followed by the click of a lock. All the while, Vern Rodenberg, kept offering him encouragement.

"Don't worry, kid…I'll get you outta those things; the judge can't get away with this, you'll see."

Conor was touched; this was the first time the grey rat had shown any genuine concern for him. He really did care after all…and that made what the young silver fox knew was coming all the more difficult to stomach.

But then again, what other choice did he have?

Judge Schatten chose that moment to speak up again, in solemn mode once more.

"Very well," he said, consulting a tablet on the bench beside him, "I'm setting a tentative trial date for Tuesday, the 5th of November." He was about to say more, but was instead required to abruptly bang his gavel, "Order in the court!"

A few of the kids awaiting their turn had begun to recite something under their breath…while the others tried not to snigger. You didn't have to be a grade-a genius to know what it was they were chanting…

"Remember, remember….the 5th of November…"

Judy stifled a smile, and so did Nick, (although it was whole lot easier for him to keep from smiling than it was for her.) Vern Rodenberg was trying not to grin as well. Rudy Gamsbart was shooting a look at the bench that fairly screamed, 'What did you expect, stupid?"
The central figure of Powder-Plot Day had been named for his species…and one guess as to which species that had been.

Judge Schatten pretended not to notice, speaking to the chamois and Vern Rodenberg collectively.

"Is that date acceptable to counsel?"


"Acceptable," Vern Rodenberge echoed, in an almost cheery voice. (Actually, it wasn't acceptable, but he'd have plenty of opportunity to try and get the date changed later. And besides, Judge Schatten had stuck his OWN foot in his mouth just now; let him be the one to pry it loose.)

"Officer," the judge said, speaking to a snow-leopard in a correctional officer's uniform, standing beside door to his left, "Would you please escort the defendant to the holding area?" Conor would remain there to await the arrival of a police cruiser to take him back to the city youth jail. (As an animal held in V-3 status, he could not be transported in company with another defendant.)

The big cat came over, but when she arrived at the defendant's table, her manner was almost solicitous, (something that seemed to irk the judge to no end.)

"Can you stand on your own, son?" she asked.

"I…can manage it," the young silver fox answered, getting slowly to his feet, "just don't ask me to move too fast, 'kay?"

"Right," the snow-leopardess answered, and helped him to his feet anyway. Then Vern Rodenberg spoke up again.

"Give me a boost up to my client's shoulder, Officer?" he asked. "I don't think he can manage it with those things on his paws."

"Sorry Counselor," The voice from the judge's bench was almost sorrowful…and about as sincere as a late-night infomercial for a miracle dietary supplement. "V-3 status specifically forbids extended physical contact between the defendant and another individual, and I'm afraid that includes legal counsel."

The grey rat's paws went straight to his hips. If he was cited for contempt again, it would be jail and not just a fine, but right now he didn't care

"With all due respect Your Honor..."

"Boucher, would you give Mr. Rodenberg some assistance please?"

It was Gamsbart, speaking to his law clerk. She came hopping around the prosecutor's table and over to other side of the courtroom, laying a paw on the defense table and waiting for the grey rat to climb on board. Rodenberg felt his whiskers stiffen; he had hitched a ride on a kangaroo only once before…and once had been enough. (He'd later described the experience to Mr. Big as 'Speed-Bump Hell;' the arctic shrew had thought that was uproariously funny.) Still, he could hardly refuse…and as he gathered his papers and tablet into his briefcase, he couldn't help wondering if Gamsbart had planned it this way. If there was one thing he'd learned in all his years of practicing law, it was that it didn't take much to turn a courtroom into a middle-school flamewar; anyone who thought otherwise need only be reminded of Judge Schatten's little exchange with Nick Wilde a moment
ago, (and what the heck had that woodchuck meant by 'did that ever stop me before?)

He pulled himself up onto the ‘roo’s paw and the two of them were off.

It was easier going than Rodenberg might have expected, for the simple reason that his client was obliged to move at a slow shuffle, and this meant the kangaroo also had to keep the pace to a minimum.

As the young fox shambled along, Rodenberg heard him starting to whistle; he recognized the tune and couldn't help smiling.

Nick Wilde recognized it as well, and hurriedly turned away. So did Judy, who wanted that big lump out of her throat right NOW.

At least one of the kids in the gallery, a young axis deer-buck, also recognized it…and immediately stood up and started clapping. Judge Schatten just as quickly banged his gavel, but the finger was out of the dike. A young coati girl immediately joined in with the deer-buck, and then young red squirrel and a Pallas' Cat…and then it seemed like every kid in the courtroom was on their feet, banging their paws together…while the judge banged his gavel in impotent fury, vainly attempting to restore order….

(…while Rudy Gamsbart's hoof remained firmly plastered to the center of his own face.)

"Schatten, you… moron!"

The chaos lasted until Conor and his lawyer were gone from the courtroom, leaving behind them only the earworm of the tune the young fox had been whistling.

"I fought the law…and the law won,
I fought the law…and the law won."
Judy Hopps leaned back against the wall and folded her arms, her weary face suffused with a pained expression.

She was inside the Zootopia Superior Court Annex building, parked next to the door to the Male's Restroom. At times like this, her oversize ears could be a major inconvenience; there was no way for her NOT to hear the noises Nick was making. (What she was actually doing was keeping watch until he was done.)

She didn't blame him one bit; if rabbits were capable of puking, she'd probably be saying 'adios' to her breakfast right now as well. In her two years with the ZPD, Judy had been privy to some fairly sickening spectacles—and while the scene inside of George Schatten's courtroom might not have been the goriest thing she'd witnessed in that time, she couldn't remember experiencing anything quite so gut-wrenching, (or heart-wrenching.)

No…that wasn't exactly true, was it? The truly disgusting part had come after she'd left the courtroom, when Nick had revealed to her the full identity of the woodchuck presiding from the judge's bench. That information had not only turned the doe-bunny's stomach; it had also made her blood boil. To think that such a bigoted jerk was passing judgment on the city's juvenile defendants.

And putting Conor Lewis in V-3 restraint, just to bait Nick? If Judy hadn't heard it for herself, ('did that ever stop me before?') she would never have believed it.

She looked towards the door of the restroom, feeling her heart go out to the fox on the other side. Even now, more than two decades after the fact, he still carried the pain of what had happened in
that community center basement—and that smirking creep behind the judge's bench had recognized it instantly. But why...why had he chosen to exploit it after all this time, and for no apparent reason? It didn't make any sense.

It hadn't been the muzzle that had so traumatized her partner; Judy understood that much, if nothing else. No, it was everything else that had come with it. All Nick had wanted was to belong, to be accepted, to be part of something. As an only cub, he'd yearned for the fraternity he didn't have at home.

And George Schatten had not only crushed that dream; he'd ground it to dust beneath his heel. The thought of it conjured up a line in Judy's head, a fragment of spoken monologue from a song her Uncle Terry liked to play.

"I'll tell ya one thing Judge, ol' buddy, ol' pal...if you wasn't wearin' that black robe...I'd take ya'll out back of this court house...and I'd try a little bit of your honor on."

...or...something like that; whatever the actual line was, it was how she felt about Judge George L. Schatten at this particular moment.

The thought also reminded her of her own childhood encounter with a bully. Unlike Nick, she carried no lingering trauma from her dust-up with Gideon Grey at the Carrot Days Festival. Why was that?

Judy knew the answer almost as soon as she asked herself the question. Gideon had eventually changed his ways; George Schatten most definitely had not. Furthermore she had managed to extract a measure of victory from her clash with the burly, young fox; when Gideon had walked away, he had done so without the tickets he had stolen from the young doe-bunny's friends...and then they'd been right there to support her.

Not Nick; he'd had to face his demons alone. No, worse than that, Judy realized, the other kids had sided with his tormentor. And with that realization, there came a small epiphany; her confrontation with Gideon Grey hadn't left her completely unscathed. One small remnant of that encounter had stayed with her, even to this day. When she saw Dr. Hind later on ... The door to the restroom opened and Nick Wilde came out, eyes puffed and streaked with red, as if he'd been crying; (perhaps he had.)

"You okay?" she asked him.

"I...yeah, I think so," he said, wiping the side of his face with the back of his paw.

Judy took his paw and squeezed it, letting her eyes find his.

"He'll be all right, Nick; he's a tough, little silver-fox."

"I know that Carrots," he answered her, wanting to look away, but refusing to give in to the impulse, "I just wish I had some of his courage."

Judy smiled, and took hold of his other paw.

"You have no idea, Nick...just how brave..."

"You there...and you!"

The angry voice cut through the moment like a scalpel through tissue paper. When Judy turned, she
saw Rudy Gamsbart coming in their direction. Right away, she knew that it was trouble; the chamois looked like an Alpha who'd just caught a lesser male trespassing on his turf.

"I'd like a word with the two of you, if you don't mind," he said, pointing at a door across the hall.

It was obviously not a request, but Nick and Judy were too wrung out to argue…and so they followed him through the door and into a small conference room, one with furnishings every bit as tacky as the courtroom décor.

"Close the door, please." Gamsbart said, another order disguised as a request. The knob was bit high for Judy to reach, but she insisted on doing the honors. As soon as the latch clicked, the Zootopia Deputy Prosecutor lit into her and Nick both.

"Just what the heck did you think you were DOING, Hopps…showing up here the day after that video of you and Wilde…mmm, kissing aired on the Rock Hardesty show; were you trying to set Judge Schatten off?"

Judy had no answer; she was too bewildered. *That's* what this was about—not Conor having saved her life? And THIS was why that no-good woodchuck had tried to send her partner into flashback-land…because he'd had the nerve to plant a kiss on a prey-species? Before she could collect her thoughts, Nick Wilde had already spoken up.

"The Rock Hardesty show? Come on, she never…"

"Stop right there, Wilde!" Gamsbart was aiming a finger as though preparing to shoot a lightning bolt, "I happen to know she called Chief Bogo about it fursonally last night…and I find it very difficult to believe that she would have told him and not you. So *don't* try to pretend you're unaware of what I'm talking about."

Nick shut it and turned his attention to the floor, properly chastised…not because of the chamois' tongue-lashing, but because of the look he was getting from Judy. 'Nice one, DUMB fox!' she seemed to be saying.

What she said next to the chamois was even more reckless than her partner's gambit. "Mr. Prosecutor, don't blame *us* because that judge is a speciest jerk."

Gamsbart's eyes widened to the size of billiard balls, and he even took a step backwards.

"Wh-What did you say? How dare you…?"

"You heard me, Mr. Gamsbart," Judy went on, oblivious to the chamois' outrage—and his rank. If that was the case, then she had done nothing wrong by showing up in court today…and she was hanged if this self-important so-and-so was going to use HER for a whipping bunny. "If Judge Schatten has a problem with that video, then as far as I'm concerned, it's his problem." The chamois raised an angry finger, but she wasn't quite done yet. "And you know as well as I do that Nick only kissed me to put the Rafaj Brothers off the scent when they got suspicious during that blood-diamond sting. Why didn't you or anyone else explain that to the Judge? You could have asked to approach the bench or had your clerk pass him a note."

"Don't you EVEN…" Gamsbart started to say, before Nick Wilde's voice interrupted.

"And since when is he justified in taking out his anger over that video on a defendant?" Judy's show of bravado had re-kindled some of the fox's own fire.

Gamsbart stared at him, open-mouthed, as much in disbelief as in outrage.
"What, are you crazy, Wilde? What the heck do you think you're talking about?"

Nick was so ready for that one.

"Oh come on, Mr. Prosecutor. You think you were the only animal in that courtroom that saw the looks he was giving to Officer Hopps and me…right before and after he ordered the Lewis boy to be put in V-3 restraint? I never made the connection between that and the Rock Hardesty show until just now—that's the truth—but if you think his anger over that video had nothing to do with what he did to that kid, then I have some desert property up in Tundratown that might interest you."

Judy nodded and put an arm on her partner's shoulder. If Gamsbart wanted to threaten them with their jobs, maybe even try to make good on that threat, as far as she was concerned he could go ahead; what she and Nick had told him was only the truth.

The Zootopia Deputy Prosecutor stared for a second, and then drew in a long, slow breath; it seemed to inflate him by an extra third.

"Now…listen to me," he said, speaking in a soft and very even tone of voice, pointing first at Judy, and then at Nick "I'm going to say this…slowly. As of right now, Officer Hopps, you're to have nothing further to do with the Conor Lewis case; he's no longer your concern, stay away from him. The next time that kid comes up before the bench, I don't want you anywhere within a hundred blocks of the courtroom. Do I make myself clear?"

"What if Rodenberg hits her with a subpoena?" Nick demanded, glaring defiantly up at the chamois. "What's she supposed to do…?"

"Nick, I can handle my own arguments, thank you," Judy interrupted, and then turned to Gamsbart with her paws on her hips, "What if Rodenberg hits me with a subpoena; what am I supposed to then, trank-dart the process server?"

"We will cross that bridge if, and when we come to it," the chamois informed her coolly, and then shifted his attention to Nick. "As for you Officer Wilde, the same thing applies; the only time you're to be anywhere near Conor Lewis is when you're on the witness stand. Other than that, for you, this case is closed…and I mean both of you; if I get word of you or Hopps trying to make contact with either that fox-kid or his attorney, I'll have your badges so fast, you won't know they're gone until you see them in my hoof. Now, if you'll excuse me…"

He spun on his heel and stalked to the door, throwing it open as if preparing to discard it like an unwanted playing card.

Then he turned and pointed at Nick again.

"And just make sure that your testimony is accurate, Officer Wilde…unless you want to become just, plain Mister Wilde."

He went out the door and slammed it behind him.

"I wonder just what he means by 'accurate'," Judy sniffed derisively, but when she looked at Nick, she saw that same, forlorn look on his face again.

"Tell me the truth Carrots; did I just go and say the stupidest things ever to that chamois?"

A thin smile creased Judy Hopps's face, and she put her paw on his shoulder again.

"What do you mean 'I,' fox? The last time I looked, we were in it together." She shook her head,
slowly and somberly. And then she sighed, "at least we didn't tell him about Judge Schatten putting that muzzle on you."

Nick was unable to keep from smiling himself, if a little bit ruefully, "If you only knew, Carrots…how tempted I was. I think if you hadn't been there I just might have said something about it."

"And then you really **would** have gotten yourself fired," Judy told him, a note of reproach in her voice. And then more cautiously, she said, "that is, unless you have some proof of what happened between you and that woodchuck."

The smile on the fox's face remained, only now it shifted from pallid to wry.

"You know I don't Carrots…and don't worry, I'm not going to tell anyone else; I know it's his word against mine." He turned and looked her square in the eye, "But it DID happen, Judy. Even if I never breathe another word about it, outside of this room, I'll always know what George Schatten and his buddies did to me."

Judy reached for his arm again, this time giving it a little squeeze.

"For what it's worth Nick, it's not you that needs to worry about; he's got a much bigger problem right now."

Nick's ears shot up and pointed at each other.

"Really…what?"

"Not what, **WHO.**" the doe bunny answered, eyes narrowing just a little, "Don't forget Nick, we were sitting right behind the defense table when Judge Schatten asked you, 'Did that ever stop me before?' If we heard him, it's a slam-dunk that Vern Rodenberg heard him too…and what do you think he's going to do with it?"

Nick's cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk's and he let out a long, low whistle.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa… I hadn't thought about that, Carrots. Oh, you are SO right; I wouldn't be surprised if he has his investigator looking into it already." He quickly raised a paw. "No, I'm especially not going to tell **him**—not unless he either serves me with a subpoena or questions me about it on the witness stand."

"Right," Judy nodded slowly, understanding the meaning behind the fox's words. He wouldn't **volunteer** the information, but if Vern Rodenberg found out about the muzzle incident on his own—and then questioned him about it **under oath**—Nick would have no choice but to give his version of what had happened between him and George Schatten, all those years ago.

And there was at least a remote chance that the grey rat might dig up the down-and-dirty details **without** any help from Nick. There'd been at least three other kids in that basement that night. True, they'd all been firmly in George Schatten's corner, but that was then; how did they feel about it **now?** Attitudes—and relationships—can go through some fairly radical changes in 20, or even 15 years' time; just ask Gideon Grey.

"I just wonder what Mr. Gamsbart will do if that happens," Nick was looking towards the door, speaking mostly to himself. Then he looked at Judy again, with an almost helpless expression on his face. "How's this for a Cats-22, Carrots? If I breath so much as word to Rudy Gamsbart about that woodchuck putting a muzzle on me, he'll order me to shut up right **now**—or else, and then pretend that he never heard me. But if I'm forced to spill it under oath, five will get you twenty that chamois gets all over me for NOT having said anything earlier."
Judy laid a paw on his back. "Nick, even if Mr. Rodenberg does find out about the muzzle incident, he won't dare question you about it on the witness stand. If he does, Mr. Gamsbart will simply raise an objection and His Honor will sustain it, and that'll be the end of it."

She looked towards the door and thumped her foot. "No, if he wants to attack the case that way, Rodenberg's going to have to bring it to a higher court—and even then he'll need either a second witness or some other corroborating evidence; your word alone won't be enough."

Nick turned to look over his shoulder at her, small, tired eyes, and a long mouth, curving unhappily downwards.

"And...if that happens?" he asked.

"Then," Judy patted his shoulder, "Then, like Mr. Gamsbart himself said, we'll cross that bridge if and when we come to it." She started to put her arms around him, but then hesitated. What if someone walked in the door right now? What if Mr. Gamsbart came back into the room right now?"

"Let him!" the doe-bunny finally decided, and hugged her partner anyway.

"So, uh...did I do okay?"

Vern Rodenberg studied his client for a moment, and then broke into a beaming smile.

"Did okay? Did okay! Booby, if they gave out an Oscar for 'Best Performance by a Juvenile Defendant' you'd need to start working on your acceptance speech. That bit where you told Nick, 'Cool it, I can handle this;' I couldn't have scripted that any better." His expression turned abruptly serious. "How are you handling it, kid?"

He would have loved to be able offer the young fox a reassuring paw, but then the snow leopardess watching them through the window would probably intervene. Rodenberg couldn't fault her; she was probably bending the rules by even allowing him to be IN here.

The grey rat was seated next to Conor on the bench of the holding cell, trying hard not to sneeze. It was dusty in here; this room didn't get much use. "No surprise there," the grey rat sniffed; the vast majority of juvenile offenders brought before Judge Schatten were up for strictly non-violent offenses.

"But you wouldn't know that from the sentences that wood-shmuck keeps handing down," Rodenberg grumbled bitterly to himself, "Three months in juvie for trespassing, first time offense and no hard evidence, just the store-owner's word against the kid's. And then how about that six month sentence he laid on that puma-girl...for what, publishing an article on her blog, making fun of her high-school principal? Cyberbullying my scaly TAIL! And oy-VEY, now he puts my client, a fox-kid not even old enough for learner's permit, in V-3 restraint? I can't believe he DID that. Yeesh, I always knew George Schatten was a shmendrick, but this is a new low even for THAT..."

Oops, his client was answering him.

"I'm okay for now," the young fox said, raising his 'mittened' paws, "Only how much longer am I gonna have to wear this stuff, Mr. Rodenberg? I can't deal with it forever." He was beginning to sound a little anxious.

The grey rat offered him a 'hang in there' salute. "Don't worry Booby, it won't be for too much..."
"They're not gonna strip me naked and throw me in a cell with no mattress and the lights on all the time, are they?" Now he sounded *genuinely* worried.

"No," the grey rat answered, wondering where the heck his client had gotten *that* idea. Wait a sec; hadn't he heard something once…about a juvenile facility someplace back east, where kids were treated that way? Never mind, he had more important things to discuss.

So did Conor Lewis, (or maybe he wanted to back away from the subject he'd just inadvertently broached.) "Listen, did you hear what the Judge said to Nick, right before they put this thing on me," he tapped the muzzle with a mittened paw, "'Did that ever stop me before?' What the heck was *that* all about?"

"I don't know," Rodenberg admitted, nodding gravely, "But I hope to find out. I already left a message with my PI, Ton Ruiter, asking him to look into it. If there *IS* any kind of a history there, it could be something very useful to us."

"Yeah, about that," Conor shifted in his seat, "I just remembered something else—about when I met Judge Predd on that flight from Zoo York, and he didn't wanna sit next to me; there was witness, a guy who saw the whole thing. I forget his name, but he was a caracal cat…outta somewhere in Afurica."

Rodenberg frowned, but then pulled out his notepad and clicked his voice-recorder. It was probably nothing, but he couldn't take the chance.

"Ahhh, okay, got any more details, kid?"

Conor couldn't tell if the grey rat was sincere or only humoring him; he decided to hedge his bets.

"I know it's a long shot, Mr. Rodenberg, but I'd rather give you something that's useless than keep it to myself and find out later that it was righteous info. Anyway, yeah, I remember a lot about that flight. It was on Furgin Airways, right after Easter, three years ago. We were s'posed to take off in the afternoon, but thanks to some mechanical stuff, we didn't get off the ground 'til after midnight."

"Okay," Rodenberg answered, swiftly jotting the information; all right, *now* his interest was piqued. "Which airport did you depart from, La Furdia or Idlewilde?"

"IDW," the young fox answered, referring to the airport by its three letter code.

"Okay, good." The grey rat nodded, "and that caracal; was he another passenger, or…?"

"Whoops, flight attendant," the young fox said, wondering how he could have missed such a crucial detail; it would be lot easier to run down the identity of a flight attendant than a…wait, hold it.

"Tshonga!"

"What?" Rodenberg was staring at him quizzically.

"Tshonga, that was his name, I remember now," the young fox told him, "I didn't get a last name, but that was definitely this first name."

"Okay," said the grey rat, preparing to jotting it down…and then frowning, "Ahhh, you wouldn't
"happen know how to spell that, would you kid?"

"Sorry," Conor shrugged as best he could, "But that helps, right?"

"Oh heck yeah, it does." Rodedberg answered, slapping the pad shut again, "However it's spelled, there can't have been too many caracals with a name like that one working your flight…and if a plane is delayed for a mechanical problem, the airline is required by law to file a report with the ZAA. Between those two little factoids, we just might get lucky on this."

"Good," the young fox answered, sounding more resigned than hopeful. Once again, Vern Rodedberg felt the need to reassure his client. (He might not have, had he known the real reason for Conor's glum tone of voice.)

"I know you feel like you're in a bad place right now, kid. But trust me on this; everything that happened in court today is going to work to our advantage in the long run. The judge let his feelings about foxes slip, and THEN lowered the boom on you; to everyone watching, that had to look as if he made the call based at least partially on your species. Seriously, did you see the look on Rudy Gamsbart's face while that groundhog was scolding you? I never had to try so hard not to laugh." He flashed his client a toothy grin, "But do you wanna know the absolute stupidest thing he did?"

"Putting me in V3…whatever?" Conor asked him. The grey rat instantly waved a paw.

"Nahh, that's only part of it. No, his single biggest mistake was having those V-3 restraints put on you right in front of Nick Wilde…a fox that I happen to know has a serious problem with muzzles."

Conor looked at him curiously with his head tilted sideways. Even more curious, there was no reaction from his attorney. But then the young fox realized, the muzzle; his face was all but invisible inside this thing. "Really, how come?" he asked.

A look of disappointment crossed the rat-attorney's face.

"Think about it, kid. Nick Wilde is the prosecution's single, most important witness; he's the only one who can say for certain whether or not you gave him that bite on purpose…and so what does Judge Predd do? Something that can only make him feel sorry for you…get it?"

"Agggh, grrrr!" Conor would have face-pawlmed himself if it weren't for those cuffs and that muzzle. Yes, he got it…and why hadn't he gotten it on his own? Yes, of course; without Nick's testimony, the Mammals of Zootopia had nothing on the young silver fox.

"Riiight," Rodenberg offered him another toothy grin, "Like my old Uncle Moishe used to say, 'When your tail's caught in the wringer, you DON'T wanna mess with the guy holding the crank.'"

Conor laughed so hard he fell halfway off the bench.

"Wise, old rat your Uncle," he said when he recovered. Vern Rodenberg flipped a paw back and forth.

"Ahhhh, not really Booby, he was a degenerate gambler who died flat-broke; he did have a way with the words, though."

"Yeah," the young fox acknowledge, awkwardly forcing himself back up into a sitting position. Whoa it was harder to get up again while wearing this stuff than he would have thought; good thing Judge Predd couldn't see him now, that jerkface groundhog'd probably be loving on it. He said, "Tell me something, do you have any idea why Nick Wilde has such a problem with
muzzles?"

The grey rat's voice turned quickly to ice-water, "No…and I wouldn't tell you if I did."

Conor sensed at once that he was straying into forbidden territory; he hastily backtracked.

"Well there's one good thing about being in this V-3 thing," he said, "at least I won't have to worry about that punk coyote coming after me."

"You might wanna hold that thought, Booby," Rodenberg told him, aiming a wink and a finger, "I'm GOING to get you out of V3 status…like I promised. And when I do, I think you were exactly right; that Guilford kid IS gonna come after you. Ahhh, you remember what I told you about him?"

"Yep, got it," Conor answered with as much of a nod as he could manage through his restraints. When the grey rat had met him at the Youth Jail, he had brought along a piece of intel about Craig Guilford that the young fox had found highly intriguing—and that he might find highly useful, if push came to shove, (although he still hoped it wouldn't come to that.)

The floor shuddered slightly, and the low growl of a diesel engine thrummed from somewhere outside of the exit-door.

"Sounds like my ride's here," Conor said to his attorney. Rodenberg didn't answer him; speaking instead to the snow leopardess minding them both.

"Oy, what'd you do," he demanded, giving her a jaundiced look, "send a TANK to pick up my client?" The big cat only shrugged helplessly; it wasn't her call. Rodenberg knew that, but he also knew something else. When either the judge or the opposing council makes a mistake, you \textit{never} stop hammering on it.

George Schatten's pen froze in mid-signature. Someone was knocking on the door to his chambers. "\textit{Dangit, Marjorie, I thought I told you…!}"

"I SAID I didn't want to be disturbed!" he bawled, coming as close to a snarl as was possible for a woodchuck.

The door opened anyway and an impeccably dressed Siberian ibex came into the room, ducking slightly as he passed under the door-frame to allow for the curvature of his horns.

And Judge Schatten fell back hard in his chair, releasing a sharp exhalation. He had known it was coming from the minute he'd shed his robes; he just hadn't expected it to arrive quite so soon…or by way of one of the city's big guns.

"Mr. Attorney General; well, this is surprise." The woodchuck said, "To what do I owe the honor?" (Oooo, Gamsbart…it had to be Gamsbart; if he EVER got his paws on that backstabbing chamois…)

"Mind if I sit down George?" his visitor asked, indicating one of only two large-mammal chairs in the room.

"Not at all, Igor," the woodchuck responded, relieved that at least the AG was addressing him on a first-name basis.

Zootopia Attorney General Igor Mikhailovich Sayanov had been known in his younger days as Igor Sayonara …because that was what you said to your freedom if he ever prosecuted you. His
record for most the guilty verdicts brought in by a Zootopia Deputy Prosecutor still stood, (although his protégé, Rudy Gamsbart, was coming up fast on the outside.) He was currently serving his second term as Zootopia's AG, and was regarded as a shoo-in for another four years if he chose to run again—as he probably would, having recently declined to stand for a seat on the Zootopia Supreme Court. "I've been prosecuting cases for FAR too long to act impartially now," he'd said, typical of the self-deprecating humor that had endeared him to the city's voters.

George Schatten, however, knew that there was another side to the ibex; beneath his air of diffidence lurked the instincts of a bull shark. He could turn on you without warning and without mercy. And was that about to happen now, the woodchuck wondered?

Sayanov, meanwhile, had plopped himself in the chair and was stretching his arms. "So, how's your golf game, George, same handicap?" A second generation Zootopian, he spoke with only the merest trace of an accent.

"Same old, same old," Schatten answered, wishing his visitor would get to the point. That was another thing about Igor Sayanov; there was nobody better at using small talk to make you sweat.

"Good to hear," his visitor answered, nodding, "It's just too bad we're such different size species. Otherwise, I wouldn't mind playing a round with you myself sometime. Did you hear I got a hole-in-one the week before last? Only my second ace, ever."

"No kidding, really?" Schatten leaned across his desk, suddenly interested, and just as suddenly realizing his mistake…when Sayanov chose that moment to apply the screws.

"But never mind that for now. Tell me George; did you REALLY put a 14-year-old kid in V-3 restraint?"

Schatten nearly bit through his own tongue; sucker-punched again! All he could do now was go for an excuse and hope he didn't fumble.

He decided to stick to his guns. Sayanov had always liked him best whenever he assumed his tough-judge fursona.

"Yes, and I won't apologize for it," he said. "Better that than the Lewis boy—or whoever he is—up and hurts somebody ELSE when he gets back to jail. I'm telling you Igor, that silver fox kid is a lot more dangerous than he looks."

"And you know this, how?" Sayanov was regarding him with a raised eyebrow and steepled fingers.

"All right, I don't know it." Schatten threw up his paws in exasperation, "but I sure as heck felt it in that courtroom; there's a reason why that kid is living under a fake identity—and my gut keeps telling me, it's for a much more serious reason than any of us realize."

It was only when the words were out of his mouth that the woodchuck realized he'd spoken the truth. It might not have been the actual reason he'd ordered Conor Lewis put in V-3 restraint, (that was all on Nick Wilde and his bunny,) but there really was something disturbing about the kid, something Schatten could never put into words, but that he felt to the core of his bones.

It was the sincerity of his statement that hit home with Igor Sayanov. The Siberian Ibex nodded, slowly and gravely.

"All right George, I get that," he said—and then spread his hooves in exasperation. "But, for crying out loud, how the HECK did you manage to forget who he has for a defense attorney? This is
Vernon J. Rodenberg, not some overworked public defender. My God, he wasn't gone from here two minutes, before he was over at the Supremes, (the offices of the Zootopia Supreme Court,) filing a stack of motions this thick." He held up a thumb and forefinger, spread nearly an inch apart.

"As if he wouldn't have done that anyway," Schatten tried to scoff, but the rejoinder sounded lame, even to him.

Sayanov only shook his head. "So would a lot of other attorneys I could name, and usually it's the old wet-tissue-paper ploy, throw enough of it, and maybe something will stick." He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "Not this time George, and not Vern Rodenberg; he's playing this one to win. I have it on good authority that the SCCZ is going to take at least a few of his motions under advisement," his gaze became penetrating, "The motion to have the kid removed from V-3 status—he'll probably win that one—the motion for a jury trial, the motion for a bail hearing…and of course, a motion to have you recused from the case. They're even considering his motion for a dismissal of all charges."

"Oh come on they'll never…" Schatten started to say, but Sayanov was already holding up a hoof.

"Of course not, but by rights they should have thrown it out already. I'm just trying to impress upon you how serious this is; dangit George, don't you get it? There was a whole gallery full of witnesses in that courtroom and the word is starting to spread…and most of the mammals think you went way overboard with that fox-kid."

The woodchuck bobbed his head and sniffed.

"Since when have I ever let public opinion sway my decisions?" he said, and this time he wasn't bluffing. Early on in his judicial career, George Schatten had been much criticized for what some referred to as his 'heavy-pawed' style. That all had changed when an epidemic of car-window breakings had swept the city, perpetrated by kids on bikes and skateboards wielding ball-peen hammers. (The practice had become so widespread that 'ball-peen' had become a verb as well as an adjective, E.g. 'Somebody ball-peened my ride last night.')

Enter The Honorable Judge George L Schatten, who promptly gave out the maximum sentence to the first ball-peen vandal brought before him, summarily announcing that the same fate awaited any other kids caught smashing car windows with hammers. When he'd turned out to be as good as his word, the practice had all but ceased overnight…and the woodchuck had become the instant darling of Zootopia's 'Law and Order' crowd.

But that had been more than two years ago…and by now the sheen had long since faded.

Igor Sayanov let out long, rumbling breath.

"George….George….George…how many times do a I have to remind you? Some of us weren't appointed to our positions; some of us have to run for office every few years." He tapped himself in the chest, "and that doesn't mean only me, it also applies to the Zootopia Supreme Court Justices. YOU may not need for the populace to be happy campers, but they sure do…and that goes double when you're talking about the mammals that make campaign donations—for example, the Zootopia Bankers Association." He leaned forward, with his elbows on his knees, "and believe me; they're taking a very keen interest in this case."

Schatten's face pinched up in confusion.

"Wha….? Why would they care about some fox-kid biting a cop?"
He was even more bewildered when Sayanov clapped his hooves together with a frustrated look on his face, as if the woodchuck shouldn't have to be told what was coming next.

"That's why I'm here George, and why you need to see the bigger picture. They don't care about Conor Lewis, but they DO care about his partner, the Phantom—and right now that fox-kid is the only link the AG's office has to him."

The woodchuck looked at him for a second and then spoke very slowly.

"Igor, forgive me for sounding dense, but then why would the Zootopia Bankers Association care about some small-time loan-shark? The amount of money he lends out is peanuts compared to a few other Shylocks I could mention. The Red Pig moves more cash in a month than this animal’s moved in his entire career."

"Because George," Sayanov was drumming his fingers on his kneecap, "the Phantom may be a small time lender, but he's not a small time hacker. He's been inside the database of at least five major banking operations that we know of, probably more, and ZPD Cybercrimes has never even come close to tracing his identity." He waved a hoof. "Yes, I know; all he's done so far is look for possible customers, but that could change in a…" A thought seemed to strike the ibex, and he leaned back slightly in his chair.

"Perhaps this can best explain it. Some years ago, back when I had Rudy Gamsbart's job, there was a college student, a chipmunk who managed to hack into the database of Mola Health, the insurance provider. No malicious intent, she just did it to see if she could pull it off without getting spotted. She never tampered with any files, never stole any data; just in and out, and no harm done, right?"

"I get the feeling you're about to tell me 'wrong!'", the woodchuck responded sardonically. In spite of the situation, he was fascinated.

"And you would be correct," Sayanov answered with a grim nod, "Because six months later, someone hacked into HER computer and found the back door she’d created into Mola Health. And then they used it commit what was up until then the worst case of identity theft this city had ever suffered. Mammals had their credit cards maxed, their bank accounts emptied; some folks even had mortgages taken out on their homes without them realizing it…and all because some bored, young rodent decided to test her, 'mad computer skills.' THAT'S why the Bankers Association is so up in arms about the Phantom—and why they're watching the Conor Lewis case so closely. If he wanted to, Mr. Lewis's partner could cause ten times the amount of damage as those identity thieves—and even if HE doesn't, someone else might. Now, do you understand?"

Schatten opened his mouth to speak, but the ibex waved him back.

"And the only way we get The Phantom is if the Lewis boy decides to play ball with us—and the only leverage we have on him is that felonious assault of police officer charge." He paused for effect and then straightened himself up. "And whether or not that charge sticks depends entirely on the testimony of Officer Nicholas Wilde…and now George, I'd like to know just what the heck your problem is with the prosecution's star witness!"

The woodchuck blinked…and then stared. Attorney General Sayanov had finally come to the point—and that's what this was all about? Oh-kayyy, this time he had a good answer.

"Igor, didn't you see the Rock Hardesty show last night? Wilde brought his…his bunny-squeeze right into my courtroom. And you should have seen…"
His words came to a screeching halt as Attorney General Sayanov raised a hoof.

"I'm already aware of that, Judge," (no longer 'George' the woodchuck noted.) "And Deputy Prosecutor Gamsbart has already read them the riot act. Wilde's been instructed to keep away from the Lewis case until he's called on to testify, and Hopps was ordered to stay away, period."

"What if…?"

"…barring the possibility Rodenberg subpoenas her, of course," the ibex added having anticipated the objection, and then stood up, laying his hooves on his hips. "But what I think YOU'RE not aware of is something Mr. Hardesty either didn't know or didn't bother to mention during his program,. Do you know WHY Officer Wilde kissed Officer Hopps like that? No? Well, I'll tell you, George; it was to throw off a suspect who was becoming suspicious, not out of any romantic inclinations."

"What now?" Judge Schatten felt his jaw drop open, and this time he wasn't quick enough to stop it.

"That's right," Sayanov told him. "They were on an undercover assignment, down in Sahara Square…the Rafaj Brothers blood-diamond sting…."

As the ibex related the full narrative, Schatten seemed to shrink down into his chair…but he wasn't down for the count or even close to it; as soon as his visitor finished, he was halfway out of his seat again.

"All right, I didn't know that, but how was I supposed to know? The Rafaj Brothers case doesn't involve me." Even to him it sounded whiny, and he decided to quit while he was behind. He folded his paws and looked up plaintively. "All right Igor, do you want me to recuse myself? Just say the word and I'm out."

To his surprise, the Attorney General shook his head.

"No, George…at least not yet; if the Supreme Court agrees with Vern Rodenberg's motion for recusal, you'll have to step down, but otherwise, no." For the first time since entering Schatten's chambers, Sayanov smiled openly. "That poor choice of date notwithstanding, you made at least one right move…setting the trial date all the way into November. That's a lot of time for animals to forget…and for us to do damage control." The smile abruptly left his face, "More to the point, if you recuse yourself this early, that's blood in the water for Vernon J. Rodenberg. So for now at least, you stay."

"With conditions, I assume?" the woodchuck asked, barely able to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"Only one, George," the ibex said, reverting once more to a first name basis, "That you focus on Conor Lewis and forget about Wilde and Hopps…and Rock Hardesty; I'd order you not to watch or listen to his programs any more if it was within my power to do so. From now on, you're to treat that Lewis boy the same as you would any other young offender accused of assaulting a police officer. If he really didn't bite Officer Wilde on purpose…and if he gets off because it, I can live with that." His eyes flared and rapped an angry hoof on the desktop, "But I won't see him walk because of some petty squabble between you and our lead witness. Am I well understood, Judge Schatten?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Attorney General," the woodchuck answered, in a small, quiet voice—but inside, he was seething.
He managed to keep his anger under wraps just long enough for his visitor to depart. But then the instant the Sayanov was gone, he jumped up onto his desktop, kicking papers and documents like Autumn leaves, and scattering them all over the floor. Wilde…Hopps! This was their fault! He stared at the door for a moment with his incisors clicking.

"Throwing off suspicion, my stubby TAIL, Igor… you didn't see the way those two were carrying on in my courtroom only a…short…while…hmmmm?"

That same oily expression Nick had observed crept over the woodchuck's face again, and this time there was no need to resist; he was all by himself in his chambers. He looked quickly at his wall-clock; a little before 11:30, just enough time. Only…his smirk morphed into a quick, dark frown.

Only, he dared not make the call himself, not after the rocket he'd just received from no less a fursonage than the Attorney General for the City of Zootopia. However, what was it that the ibex had said to him, something about a whole roomful of witnesses? He hopped back into his chair, tapping his fingertips together, and gazing upwards at the ceiling. Yes-s-sss, now who did he know that…A. owed him a favor, and B. could be counted on to remain discreet?

Captain Devi Parubjah, wanted to go home. There was nothing more the Zootopia Fire Department could do here. Interspecies Recycling Systems' Canal District branch was toast—literally; according to Burke Simms, the ZFD's lead arson investigator, the facility had been a write-off even before the first alarm had sounded.

"Place went up like a dang-fool Roman candle," the swamp bear had informed her in his down home accent.

Of course, when you thought about it, Devi had only herself to blame for her still being here; she was the one that had first raised the possibility that the blaze had been set on purpose, and now she and her mammals were obliged to help keep the location secure while the ZFD and ZPD Arson Investigation Teams did their work.

In many cities, having two separate arson teams working the same fire-scene was a recipe for chaos, the classic case of too many cooks; suspicion, rivalry and toes being stepped on.

That wasn't the situation here—and for that you could thank Zootopia Police Chief Bogo, and his opposite number in the Zootopia Fire Department, Chief Roy Packer. Over drinks in the Raccoon Lodge one night, the Cape buffalo and Afurican elephant had hammered out an agreement regarding fire investigations. During the first phase—when they were trying to determine whether or not the cause of the blaze WAS arson—the ZFD would take the lead. Then, if it turned out the fire had been intentionally set, the ZPD arson squad would take over the helm.

"You determine the 'if' and 'how', and we'll determine the 'who', and 'why'" Chief Bogo had summed up succinctly.

"Sounds like a plan," Chief Packer had said, agreeing at once to the proposal. So far, the system had performed like fine, Swiss clockwork.

Someone nudged the water-deer's arm; she turned to see Lieutenant Rick Bridges standing at her hip.

"Mr. Schell is back," the raccoon informed her, with an unhappy expression on his face.

Devi forced herself not to groan. Delbert Schell, a sea otter was the owner and proprietor of
Quarantena Construction Maintenance, the business that adjoined Interspecies Recycling. He had spent most of that morning loudly demanding that he be permitted access to his property right NOW. "My place wasn't even touched!" he'd said, to anyone who would listen…and no amount of reasonable argument had been sufficient to calm him down. When he'd finally stormed off in a huff, Captain Parubjah had hoped they'd seen the last of him, at least for today. Now, she thought, she should have known better.

"Tell him we're working as fast as we can," she said, waving a dismissive hoof. The Lieutenant trilled and said morosely, "He brought Council-mammal Lemmon along with him."

Devi wanted to fling her fire-hat into the water. Just what she need right now; Art Lemmon, a thick-tailed opossum was the deputy City Council member for the Canal District—and had long had an eye on his boss's job. He was, by turns, toady to the local populace and sneering with any city official he deemed to be of lesser rank than himself…for example, a lowly fire-captain.

"Where are they?" the water-deer doe asked, letting out a long, weary sigh between her tusks.

"Over there, by that police-van," the raccoon pointed, "You see them?"

Captain Parubjah looked, and recognized the otter and opossum immediately. Strange, neither one of them was returning her gaze. In fact they seemed completely unaware of her attention, both of them staring out into the waters of Zootopia Sound.

And…wait a minute, so was everyone else on the dock; and several of them were pointing. What the…?

Devi turned around…and felt cold fingertips brushing across her heart. Here was another thing she should have anticipated.

Out on the water, moored just beyond the line of police boats, was a long, hard-chinned motor-yacht with an elegant, raked prow. She was an aggressive looking beast to say the least, dark blue trim and tinted windows; she seemed ready to run down any pleasure boats that dared to get in her way. Someone, Devi couldn't remember who, had once likened her to 'a fist, clutching a dagger,' a particularly apt expression, the water deer thought, given the nature of her owner. Forgetting about Schell and Lemmon for the moment, she found her pocket binoculars and trained them on the distant vessel.

There was no name on the prow…and there wouldn't be one on the stern either if that yacht belonged to who she thought it belonged to; HE never put his name on anything.

Wait a minute; someone was up on the flying bridge. Devi adjusted her gaze, and bingo, there he was, a squat, burly figure, dressed in pajamas and a robe that was at least one size too small and one step removed from threadbare status. His chin bristles were all untrimmed, and a gold medal dangled carelessly from a chain around his neck. He would have looked perfectly at home, sitting on the stoop of a decrepit brownstone, waiting for his benefits check to arrive. Hard to believe that he was one of the most feared mammals in all of Zootopia, certainly in Sahara Square.

200 yards distant, the figure motioned to the animal standing closest to him, snapping his fingers and holding out an open hoof. He was rewarded with a pair of high tech, high powered—and high priced—binoculars of his own. In his case, it was a necessity rather than a luxury; coming as he did from a species NOT noted for its keen eyesight.

Training the lenses on the ruins of IR Recycling, he swept them slowly back and forth over the wreckage, occasionally rolling the focus-knob and muttering to himself. Meanwhile the animals in
his immediate vicinity all braced themselves; at any second, those binoculars might come hurtling in any one of their directions.

That didn't happen, but the invective hurled by the figure when he lowered them almost made up for it.

"What the stink is this stuff...huh? HUH! What'd that stuck-up little snob do, drop a DAISY-CUTTER on my place?"

He spun on the animal closest to him waving his arms as if consumed by holy fire, the binoculars swaying on their neck-strap like a pendulum in an earthquake.

"Don't worry' you said, 'a FLY couldn't get in there without us knowing,' you said. "It'd take HOURS to cut through those bars' you said."

He got right in his plant-manager's face, his voice rising to a scream that sounded like a hundred automobile tires, all burning rubber at once. "ANYTHING ELSE YOU WANNA PUT IN YA MOUTH WHILE IT'S OPEN, MORON? IF THERE WASN'T A ZILLION COPS WATCHING, I'D TROW YOUR WORTHLESS TAIL OVER THE SIDE AND LET YOU SWIM BACK TO SAHARA SQUARE! GET OUTTA MY SIGHT, RIGHT NOW!"

The hapless pig squealed and ran for the stairs. Midway down, he tripped and fell; a moment of silence followed, and then they heard him get up and limp away

That seemed to have calming effect on the lead animal, and he turned to one of the other pigs sharing the flying bridge.

"Awright Joey-boy, I seen enough," he said, tossing the binoculars to his capo. "Take us back to The Square, pronto. And have someone get hold of the rat, Rodenberg; I want him to talk to the insurance company, let those three-piece goombahs know right up front, we ain't playin' around on this."

A moment later, the yacht's dripping anchor emerged from the water. And then the engines revved, and she peeled away from the line of ZFD and ZPD picket-boats, heading back out into the main channel.

Chapter End Notes

The spoken lyrics Judy recalls are taken from the song, 'When You're Hot, You're Hot",

Music and Lyrics Jerry Reed, performed by Jerry Reed, 1971
When a Fox Goes Rabbit (Continued...Pt 2.)

Chapter Summary

Judy pays a visit to the ZPD consulting ..an experience unlike anything she might have expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 10 –When A Fox Goes Rabbit
(Continued…Pt. 2)

"Wha…? Why is Erin calling me now? I thought we agreed on later this afternoon."

Judy frowned as she read the name on her cell-phone screen. Finally, reluctantly, she pressed the 'answer' button.

When the call had come in, it had caught her sitting in Dr. Hind's waiting room, a place that was light years away from what she'd thought a psychologist's office was supposed to look like. Judy had walked in expecting bare walls, minimalist furniture, and antiseptic lighting, the same as nearly every other doctor's office she'd ever visited.

The reality could not have been more different; she might have just as easily have found herself in the reading room of an 'old money' historical society. The carpeting was both thick and spongy, the air smelled faintly of oranges, the walls were paneled in deep, old walnut, and decorated with vintage photographs of the city of Zootopia, many of them dating back more than a century. (Whoa, the Climate Wall had once been coal-fired?) And speaking of walls, the one directly opposite of where the doe-bunny was sitting was given over entirely to bookshelves, stacked with a mixture of classic literature, popular fiction, and popular non-fiction. The lighting was soft, yet bright enough for reading, the chairs were solid, yet comfortably cushioned, and the slowly turning ceiling fans were fitted with blades hewn from real wood and, tipped with real brass. Even the magazines were up to date—which was the biggest surprise of all. (The last time Judy had picked up a magazine in a doctor's office, the cover had been graced with a picture of President Roosevelt…)

…Teddy!)
Now she placed the phone against her cheek, and checked her watch. 12:45…okay, that would work; her appointment was at 1:00. She could talk for a little while at least.

"Erin?" she said, "Erin, why are you calling me so early? We were supposed to hook up later in the day; you're just lucky you caught me when I've got a few minutes."

In response the younger bunny sighed wearily, filling the earpiece of Judy's cell with a wash of fuzzy static.

"Sorry, Jude…really, but I thought you needed to hear this right away. Rock Hardesty's at it again…on his radio show, I mean. He says that there's another video of you and Nick. Oh, and someone called him up a few back and said that you guys were…uh, 'carrying on' in the middle of some courtroom thing earlier today."

Judy heard the second part first…and would have screamed if she'd been by herself. Schatten, that no-good, smirking, speciest jerk, it could only have been him. Oooo, just wait until she told Chief…

"No, wait, no," Judy hurriedly put the brakes on that train of thought. George Schatten was a lot of things, but stupid wasn't one of them, (at least not THAT stupid.) No way would he have made that call himself; he'd have gotten someone else to do it for him. Whooo, good thing Nick had opted not to come with her for her appointment; this was the last thing he'd have needed to hear right now.

"Judy, are you still there?"

Oops, she'd forgotten about Erin.

"Yeah, I'm still here, sis…I'm just a little shaken is all. Ahh, can you give me a second? I'm not really in a place where I can talk." (A conversation like this was not meant for public consumption.)

"Sure, Jude."

Putting the younger bunny on hold for the moment, Judy told the llama receptionist, "Sorry, I need to take this call in private, but I'll be right outside if you need me."

When she stepped out into the hallway, there was no one else within earshot; whoops, make that nobody her size or bigger. She quickly checked the floor and nope, no rodents around either.

She took Erin off hold and spoke to her.

"Okay, back…Uh, sis, do you have any idea what other video Hardesty was talking about? I don't remember kissing Nick again."

"Oh he never said you guys were kissing, Jude," The younger bunny informed her, "Only that you werrrrre, ummm…what'd he say again? Oh yeah, 'behaving badly', whatever the heck that means."

Judy's nose began to twitch.

"Okay, did he say anything else about it?"

She heard Erin sigh again, this time in frustration.

"Nope, nothing; only that you can find it on his website. I know, right?"

"Dangit, Erin!" Judy couldn't help laughing; yes, she had been right in the middle of an eyeroll—
and wasn't that just textbook cyber-hucksterism? 'This video is shocking…shocking I tell you. And what's so shocking about it, you may ask? Go to my website and see for yourself!'

It was almost funny…except that it was also one of the most effective forms of clickbait known to mammalkind.

And that reminded the doe-bunny, "Have you seen it yet, sis?" She asked, assuming the answer was no, (otherwise Erin would have already described it.)

"Nah, I'm not near my computer right now," the younger bunny said, "but I can check when I get home, if you want."

"Thanks, but I'd rather take a look for myself," Judy told her, but then, hey wait a minute… "You're not home right now, where are you?"

Erin's face shifted slightly to the left. "At the Cloverleaf Mall claw salon; my toe-claws were starting to get majorly grungy." She brought her face close to the screen lowering her voice to an almost conspiratorial murmur. "They take like forever to get to you here, you know? But they do such an awesome job, it's worth it."

Judy might have agreed with her younger sister, but at the moment her ears were pointing upwards at the ceiling.

"Then how'd you manage to hear the Hardesty show?" she asked, nose twitching in bewilderment. (She could hardly imagine a program like that playing in a claw salon.)

Erin's face pinched up and she made a small noise.

"Some older bunny in the chair next to mine was streaming it on her cell. Had it cranked up pretty loud too," She rolled her eyes and grimaced. "Sweet cheez n' crackers; haven't some animals ever heard of earbuds?"

"I know, right?" Judy answered; she ran into those kinds of mammals all the time in the city. "I take it she's gone now."

Erin nodded once, "Yeah, no worries, I waited 'til she left before I called."

Now, Judy hesitated, biting her lip and dreading the question she both had to ask and knew she couldn't avoid. "Sis, what's the latest on Mom and Dad, are they still upset over that video?"

Erin's face pinched up again, this time uncomfortably and she averted her eyes for a second.

"I-I-I don't know, sis. They seemed to be getting better with it this morning, but after that new video-thing Hardesty was talking about, I…I just don't know."

Judy felt a grumble rising in her throat. Yes, that made sense, the question was, how much did her parents know about that new video—and was it really as bad as Hardesty had made it out to be? It wouldn't be the first time that hyrax had indulged in some serious over-hype.

"Did they hear his program today, do you think?"

"Maybe, I-I don't know," the younger bunny sucked on her lower lip for a second, "But Stu Junior would have heard it for sure; he never misses that show."
Judy wanted to face-palm herself—except not in front of Erin. Great! Even if her folks hadn't heard today's Hardesty show, they'd soon be hearing ABOUT it; Junior Hopps was nothing if not gabby—just great!

Only…what other dang-fool video had that hyrax been talking about? As far as she knew, there wasn't any—was there?

"What about the rest of the Burrows, Erin?" She asked, "Does anybody else you talked to have a problem with that video, the first one, I mean?"

She saw her sister's mouth move sideways, "Ummm, I can't really say for sure, Jude. Most of the kids I hang with either don't know about it or think it's no big deal. It's mostly the adult animals that seem to be getting torqued over it, especially the older ones, and especially the bunnies—or that's the feeling I get anyway."

Her face and mouth crinkled in sudden, spontaneous mischief.

"What?" Judy asked her. Now, what the heck was this all about?

Erin giggled and said, "Oh, I just remembered something…Uncle Terry came by the warren this morning, and whoa, he's REALLY hacked off about that video. I heard him telling mom that he's going to cut you out of his will."

Judy's paws tucked in and her head reeled backwards and upwards; the textbook portrait of a surprised rabbit. That lasted for about three seconds, and then her mouth zipped open in a wide, sardonic grin, "Cut me out of his will; what the heck was HE planning to leave me, a big stack of unpaid bills?"

This time they said it together, "I know, right?" and shared a quick moment of cathartic, sisterly laughter.

And then Judy got serious again.

"Listen sis, I need to ask you something else…and please tell me the truth, okay? Are you getting any heat from mom and dad, over that video?" There was more than one doe-bunny in the Hopps family who called a fox her friend—and Nick at least was an honest mammal, not so, Erin's comrade-in-music-and-otherwise, Conor Lewis.

But the younger bunny only laughed again.

"Are you like kidding me, Jude? Remember when I put one upside Conor's face, for making that crack about us kissing? Well, now mom says she's proud of me for it; can you believe that stuff?"

Yes, Judy could believe it, but it wasn't easy; at the time, Erin had come that close to pulling weeds for a week over what she'd done. She frowned and thumped her foot a couple of times; her parents' change of attitude concerning that remark might be good news for her sister, but it wasn't so good for the doe bunny herself.

Then Erin asked her, "Listen, speaking of Conor…anymore news about him?"

Judy knew without being able to see that her sister's fingers were crossed. Hrm, speaking of attitude adjustments…yesterday the younger bunny had been about ready to write a certain young silver-fox out of her life for good. No question about it, she was 'that age' all right. The thought made Judy feel amused and sympathetic all at the same time; she had been there, done that herself after all.
In any case, she knew that there was no way she was going to tell Erin about Conor being put in V-3 restraint, (much less about Nick Wilde's exchange with Judge Schatten over it.)

She said, "Well, he had his arraignment this morning and pleaded not guilty on all charges."

"Huh?" her sister's nose was twitching rapidly, "I thought you said the ZPD has him dead-to-rights on body-cam."

"We do, but Conor claims he didn't do it on purpose, and says he didn't realize it was a police officer he'd bitten until afterwards." Judy said this, and then felt her own nose twitching. Body-cam…body-cam; now, why was that word pricking at her psyche?

"Did he?" Erin asked her, instantly breaking the spell.

Judy sighed and gave her younger sister the stripped-down, unvarnished version.

"I honestly can't say sis; I was still pretty dazed when it happened, what with hitting my head and the smoke and all."

"But you saw that body-cam video, right?" Erin asked her. This time, the hopeful note in the younger bunny's voice was unmistakable.

"Yes and it doesn't really show that part," Judy said this with a half-grimace, "Really the only one who can say for certain is Nick. And he hasn't said anything about it yet, one way or the other… not even to me."

Not exactly true, but anything closer to the truth would probably get her in Dutch with Rudy Gamsbart again. And by the way, she was absolutely not going to bring up THAT self-important idiot with her sister.

And then she remembered something else; yes, this ought to steer the conversation into safe territory.

"Oh before I forget, guess what day the judge set for Conor's trial? November, the 5th."

Erin grinned, and began to recite. "'Remember, remember…the 5th of November; the gunpowder treason and plot…' Hey maybe I'll try to attend."

Judy wanted to face-pawlm herself again, this time right into the wall. What was that about safe territory?

"Sis, come on…what did I tell you yesterday about…?"

"Jude, I'll be in the city by then, remember?" the younger bunny interrupted, and then crossed her fingers, this time holding them up where her sister could see. "If I make it into the Performing Arts Academy, that is," she said, hurriedly qualifying her statement, and then she asked. "You're coming to my audition, right?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world, little sis," the doe-bunny answered, holding up her paw in a Ranger-Scout pledge. Both she and Erin knew of course, that being a police-officer, Judy might find that promise all but impossible to keep. But they also knew that it wouldn't be for any lack of trying; Judy Hopps would go full-court press to be there for her sister's big day.

And that was enough for both of them.
Then the young, white-furred bunny blew a puff of air against her nose—and Judy felt the corners of her mouth stretching into a grimace. Whenever Erin did that, (or whenever she did,) it always meant bad news was on the way; it was a habit the two Hopps sisters had picked up from their mother.

"Might as well tell you Jude; I took a look at that Fuzztube page before I left for the mall, and that kissing vid's gone like super-viral. More than 400K hits since last night, and the comments section was smoking." He eyes turned downwards for a second, "Uhm, you prolly don't want to ask me about what those comments were saying."

"I wasn't going to!" Judy answered abruptly; she could guess for herself, and wasn't it just peachy? Thanks AGAIN, Mr. Hardesty!

"Fine, Rock Hardesty's a jerk, but don't take it out on Erin," the doe-bunny's inner voice admonished her, "Oops, sorry sis, didn't mean to snap at you like that."

Erin only flipped pawlm. "S'okay, Judy. If it were me on that…Oh, looks like they're about ready for me; gotta go."

Judy checked her watch, almost 1:00. "Yeah, I better get going too. I'll talk to you later, Erin. Thanks for the heads up."

"No charge," the younger bunny grinned, and then almost impulsively, she added, "I love you, Judy."

"I love you too, Erin." The older doe-bunny answered, with just the tiniest crack in her voice.

And then another, wee voice spoke up, coming from somewhere down near the floor, next to Erin, "Hi, I'm Umbria…I'll be doing your toes today."

And that was the end of the phone-call.

"Now Judge…Judge…good, kind Judge… Send me the 'lectric chair.

Oh Judge…Judge…hear me Judge… SEND ME TO THE 'LEHHHHHCTRIC CHAIR!"

Someone banged on the door to Conor's cell.

"Knock it off in there, kid!"

The young fox turned in the direction of the noise; the door had only a tiny slit-window, and all he could see was a pair of angry eyes; big cat's eyes, by the look of them.

He called out through a cupped paw. "What's the matter dude, ain't you got no aesthetic sense, no ear for musical appreciation?"

The only answer he got was another bang on the door—and the young fox knew that he had pushed it as far as he dared. He immediately clammed up, and waited for the eyes to go away. When they finally did, he crossed his arms and muttered grumpily to himself.

"Could've at least said, 'Yeah, and that's why I want you to shut up!' Ahhh, correctional officers—NO stinkin' sense of humor.""
He was confined in what the ZPD City Youth-Jail Administration liked to refer to as a Total Separation cell, (although the kids always referred to them by their initials.) The furnishings could best be described as ultra-minimalist, a steel bunk, washbasin, and toilet, all of which seemed to have grown out of the walls. The floor was bare concrete, and the ceiling, a flat sheet of some unidentifiable material.

On the other paw, the bed was equipped with a blanket and mattress and the recessed lighting was neither searchlight-glaring, nor bat-cave dim. That made this place a virtual paradise compared to some of the other isolation cells where Conor had once been confined. Best of all, the space was actually a wee bit large for a fox. (Craig Guilford would have felt right at home in here.) And if he had to boost himself up little to reach the sink or sit down on the bed, the lessened sensation of confinement more than made up for it. In Granite Point, they'd made habit of putting unruly kids in cells one size too small for them—and anyone caught belting out a tune the way HE had just now would probably have gotten the hose for his efforts.

Still…a gilded prison is still a prison—and The Hole by any other name is still The Hole.

Conor pushed himself off the bunk and began to pace.

Like many another veteran of solitary confinement, the young silver-fox had developed a strategy for dealing with the constant sense of isolation and boredom. Back in Granite Point, everyone'd had their own way of handling it; some kids meditated all day; others created imaginary worlds, while still others simply slept for 19 hours, (a particular favorite among the nocturnal species.) For Conor Lewis, the favored coping method was the time-honored tradition of holding long conversations with himself. (And here, unlike The Point, he could talk out loud, no need to keep the dialogue to himself.)

"That's a heckuva tune, isn't it? Yeah, would you believe my attorney taught it to me? No, really; he learned it back when HE was in the slam. Yeah, and did you know he missed getting the death penalty by one lousy jury vote?"

Turn, pace…

"Yep, and that's how come 'Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair' became kind of his anthem—while he was on the inside, I mean. He said it's a real oldie; goes all the way back to the 20's but…" Here, his voice became a slightly deeper approximation of the grey rat's nasal delivery, "$\text{nobody ever did it better than my landsmammal, David Bruinberg.}"

Turn, pace…

"If I get off, I'm gonna have to learn how to play that bad boy. Heh, maybe I'll play Mr. Rodenberg my anthem too. Don't worry, I'm not gonna sing it now."

That last was for the benefit of any guard that might be listening.

"How about that ovation I got from those other kids, huh?" He asked himself, changing the subject. "Was that was surprise, or what? 'Course I'm not dumb, I know most of it wasn't for me."

Turn, pace…

"Maybe that deer kid and one or two of the others were clapping for me, but most of 'em were just trying to tweak Judge Predd's nose. Not that I mind; if there's anyone who deserves to get trolled, it's that flat-faced jerk. Anyway, did you notice how much louder the clapping got, after he started banging his gavel? What a dimbulb, you'd think a Juvie Court Judge would know enough to see
that coming!

Conor stopped his pacing and dropped to the floor, performing a hundred push-ups, 25 regular, 25 using his knuckles, 25 with his fingertips, and 25 more with a clap. It was a shorter course than he was used to, but this wasn't meant for building strength or stamina, only to help keep the young fox limber; something he might need later on.

He got up and resumed his pacing, falling silent as he did so; what he had to say next was for nobody's ears but his own.

If everything worked out, it would happen around 5 PM, either right before or right after the shift change. Aggggh, grrrr, it was maddening not to know. All he could do was wait and hope—with emphasis on the hope.

He found himself thinking of Erin Hopps; would she ever understand, would she ever forgive him? Whoa, now there was going to be a serious challenge in the unlikely event that they ever met face to face again; in Conor's mind there was nothing he needed to be forgiven for.

"That Erin KNOWS about," his inner voice reminded him. "Don't forget that other thing: you knew what was really going on, but you never said word about it—not to anyone. What do you think that rabbit-girl would say, if she knew about…?"

Conor stopped his pacing and grimaced, nearly doubling over beneath the weight of his guilt.

Then he lay down on the floor and did 50 sit-up and 50 crunches.

When he got up again and resumed his pacing, he refused to torture himself with any further thoughts about the young, white-furred bunny, instead concentrating on what lay ahead for the evening yet to come.

"Hurry sundown…" he thought to himself.

"Come in."

The voice was light, airy, and cheerful; the kind of greeting you receive when paying a call on an old friend.

Judy pushed open the door to Dr. Hind's office and, and stepped inside. The first thing she noticed was, "What, no couch?"

The black-tailed deer laughed and came out from behind his desk.

"I'm a psychologist. Officer Hopps, not a psychoanalyst." He indicated a circular table with chairs on either side. Seating himself in the larger of the two, he nodded at the smaller one across the table. Judy had to climb up a little in order to sit down, but then immediately found herself at nearly eye level with ZPD's consulting psychologist—and without the annoying sensation of sitting in a high-chair, (something that always seemed to come with such seating arrangements.) The chair was comfortable too; not quite plush but nicely padded. Sweet cheez n' crackers, this session was rapidly becoming less and less of what she'd been expecting.

The reality fell even further short of her expectations when Doctor Hind said. "Just so you know, we use the term 'client' here rather than 'patient'."

Judy nodded her understanding, tentatively at first, but then more vigorously as the full realization
dawned on her. Everything in this office was geared towards creating non-threatening environment. However, the deer-buck wasn't quite prepared to jettison all semblance of formality.

"Before we begin, Officer Hopps," he said, flipping open a note pad, "May I address you as Judy during our sessions?"

"Sessions…" the doe bunny thought to herself, "He's expecting me to come back for more."

"Yeah, that's fine," she said, and then lifted an ear "and uhhhh…"

"I-I-I'd prefer you either address me as either Dr. Hind or Doctor," he said.

"Okay," Judy nodded, "Um, is 'Doc' okay.?"

"Yes," the blacktailed deer answered, "just please don't ask me, 'what's up?'" He readied his pan and then looked at her. "All right then; what brings you here today, Judy?"

She looked away for a second, biting her lip and groping for words.

"Well, I, ummmmm…had a little problem while pursuing a suspect last week…a-and Chief Bogo wanted me to come in and see you."

Dr. Hind made a note and said, "Okay, and what brings you here today, Judy?"

A flush rose into the doe-bunny's cheeks and ears. She cleared her throat and tried again.

"Welll, I was pursuing a suspect last week, and I made kind of an impulsive move; my partner Nick was pretty upset about it, and so he thought I should come here and talk to you."

""All right," The deer psychologist nodded again, "and what brings you here today, Judy?"

A lump rose and fell in her throat…and was it getting warm in here?

"Well, there's problem I kind of have…" she started to say—and that was when the floodgates swung open.

"Ohhhh, I did something that could have got me killed last week, and I still don't know why I did it. I jumped off a hangar's roof onto an airplane; if I'd gone even half a second earlier I'd have hit the propeller." She shook her head as if trying to clear her vison and then looked at the deer-psychologist with big, plaintive eyes. "I've always been the kind of bunny to, 'lead with my head', that's how Nick always puts it, but I've never done anything that out-and-out reckless. And it scares me, doctor…a lot."

"All right," Dr. Hind said, jotting a quick note, "Now, you say you've 'always' been this way, Judy; how long is always?"

The doe-bunny smiled, but thinly; this was exactly the questioned she'd been hoping he would ask her—except she hadn't realized it until just this second.

"Funny you should bring that up Doctor…I was thinking about that earlier today…and I think I know exactly where it started, and why."

"Then by all means, please tell me," Dr. Hind said to her. There was nothing patronizing in his tone, nothing condescending; he sounded genuinely interested.
"Well," Judy looked down for a second before answering, but this time when she looked up again, there was no hemming and hawing.

"It happened when I was nine, when my parents took me to the Carrot Days Festival…"

She went on to describe the events of that day, beginning with her performance at the talent show, and concluding with the Gideon Grey 'tickets' incident, pausing several times to allow the deer-psychologist to ask her a question. He never did, and she continued the tale uninterrupted, concluding with the burly, young fox's departure, after laying his claws across her cheek.

Then she backtracked to the heart of the matter.

"When I kicked Gideon in the face and he went for me with his claws, he didn't do it right away…he took his time, even made a little speech first. I should have been able to dodge him easily—you know the expression, quick, like a bunny? Yeah, except I didn't." She hugged herself, shivering at the memory; when she spoke again, her voice had developed a hairline fracture. "I-I just lay there, I panicked, I froze up…I just let Gideon claw me across the face."

She took a short breath and braced herself. "And afterwards, I swore I'd never let myself freeze up like that again. Not consciously; I mean I never raised a paw and swore an oath or anything like that. But afterwards, every time I'd feel that same sense of panic starting to set in, I'd make myself move and move NOW."

"And is that what happened with Craig Guilford?" the black-tailed deer asked her.

"Yes!" the word burst out of Judy as if she'd popped a paper bag. She was not in the least bit surprised that Dr. Hind already knew the details of the Craig Guilford take-down; of course he'd have done his homework. "When I saw that hangar door coming up and heard that engine revving, I didn't know what to do, so I just went with the first idea that came into my head."

Dr. Hind jotted a note and then looked at her. "But now I get the impression that in hindsight at least, you don't think that was such a good move. Am I correct?"

"Yes, that's right," Judy answered, forcing herself to meet his gaze, "We could have run and grabbed our police cruiser and driven it out onto the runway instead; it would have stopped that coyote-kid cold. Or Nick could have run the car out while I kept him busy. And it would have worked too; when the Meadowlands Precinct cops pulled their cruisers out onto the runway that was all she wrote for Craig Guilford; when he saw that he had no room to take off, he finally gave it up."

Judy felt herself hesitating, felt a quick frown crease her face. Something was pricking at the back of her mind again; something she couldn't quite grasp, something about the Meadowlands cops…

If Dr. Hind took any notice of her change of expression, he gave no indication; instead, he chose to backtrack a little.

"All right Judy, we'll talk some more about that in just a second. Now, I think you may be right about your headstrong tendencies being somewhat rooted in your confrontation with, errr…Gideon Grey when you were a kit. However I do have to disagree with you on one point; I don't think you froze up, not at all."

"What?" Judy's foot began thumping before she could stop it—making no sound at all; there was nothing beneath it but empty air. "Are you serious, doctor?" She couldn't imagine how the way she had acted, (or NOT acted,) back then could be called anything but mental paralysis.
"Perfectly serious Judy," the deer-buck psychologist assured her. "Think back for a second; when you confronted Gideon Grey, what was the first thing you said to him?"

The doe-bunny didn't need to think. "I said, 'Kindly return my friends' tickets.'"

"Mmm-hm," Dr. Hind nodded sagely, "And if he had returned them, would that have been the end of it?"

"Yes-s-s," Judy answered him, puzzled; exactly what was the point of all this? "Yes, that's all I wanted," she said.

"Exactly," the deer-buck pointed briefly with his pen, "and then you ultimately succeeded in getting those tickets back, am I right?"

"Y-Yes, that's right," Judy could feel her eyes widening…and her nose twitching. Yes, it was true. Gideon might have left a mark on her face, but at the end of the day, she'd succeeded in what she had set out to accomplish.

All well and good, but it still didn't explain how Dr. Hind could think that she hadn't frozen up out there.

"Right, but now supposing you had moved and dodged his claws, the way you thought you should," he said, "supposing you HAD gotten out of his way. Would you have managed to retrieve your friends' tickets then?"

"No!" this time the word came out of Judy as almost a gasp. No, she wouldn't have, and why hadn't she ever seen it this way before? However subconsciously, staying where she was while Gideon unsheathed his claws had been a calculated move, a gambit, a sacrifice play. Dr. Hind was right; she hadn't frozen up.

He also wasn't finished however.

"And while you were confronting him Judy, did you ever get the feeling that you had bitten off more than you could chew?"

"Oh yes," the doe bunny nodded immediately, "When I planted my feet in his face, he hardly seemed to feel it. That's when I knew I was in way over my head."

"And how did that make you feel, Judy?" the velvet antlered deer-buck asked her, "I know you were scared, who wouldn't be? But did you also feel perhaps just a little bit guilty, that you'd let your friends down in the end?"

"Yes," Judy breathed the word as yet another realization dawned on her, "Yes, that's exactly right." Dang, but this animal was good; she was beginning to feel glad that she'd come to see him.

"Mmm-hm," Dr. Hind nodded unsurprised, as if he'd been expecting this all along, "and that's why I think you were right about this being where your tendency to 'lead with your head,' as you put it, comes from. Tell me Judy, have you ever heard of something called the Hercules Syndrome?"

No," Judy's nose was twitching again, "What's that?"

The black-tailed deer buck smiled.

Forget the cartoons and the movies Judy. The actual Hercules of myth had a habit of flying off the handle without thinking and causing all sorts of collateral damage. Then afterwards, when he saw
what he'd done, he'd be overwhelmed by guilt and want desperately to atone for his misdeeds; that's how he ended up performing those twelve labors, to make up for having slain his wife and daughter in a fit of madness."

"I see," Judy said. She almost did, but there was something else, something hovering just barely outside of her grasp.

"But whenever Hercules felt the need to make amends for his sins," Dr. Hind went on, "it always had to be a punishing ordeal, a trial where he would suffer in the process. And he always had to act alone, he never accepted help from anyone else—it was HIS sin, and so he and he alone had to make up for it."

He stopped talking and looked at her, waiting.

Judy felt her nose begin to twitch again. What the heck was she supposed to say? She had never…

"Oh yes you have!"

Her inner voice spoke like a thunderbolt from Olympus…and she knew right away that it also spoke with a Delphic truth; in the wake of her disastrous press conference, when she'd quit the ZPD, what was it she'd said to Chief Bogo and Mayor Bellwether?

"I wanted to make the world a better place…but I think I broke it."

And then later on, after she'd figured out that Nighthowlers were the cause of Zootopia's predators turning savage, had she taken the news to her former Chief? Nope, she'd gone straight to Nick Wilde…and what was it she'd said to him?

"I know you'll never forgive me; I wouldn't forgive me either. I was ignorant, and irresponsible, and small-minded. But predators shouldn't suffer for my mistakes. I have to fix this…"

Before that, after her nearly calamitous pursuit of Duke Weaselton through Little Rodentia…what was it she'd said to Mrs. Otterton?

"I will find your husband."

Right again…Dr. Hind was right again. She really did try to take the world on her shoulders, every time she made a mistake.

"Here," He was holding something out to her. What was that, a tissue? What the heck did she need a tissue for? It was only then that she felt the stinging moisture, leaking from her eyes. She took the tissue and turned away, daubing at her burning cheeks.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of Judy," she heard Dr. Hind telling her, "That kind of thing is actually very common in police-stress cases. You'd be surprised at some of the officers I've had in here, crying like babies."

Judy bet that she would, but also knew that there was no point in asking; he'd never mention any of them by name. She turned to face him once again.

"Before we continue," he asked her, "I'd like to know what finally happened between you and Gideon Grey. Did he try to steal those tickets back, after you returned them to your friends?"

"Uh, no, he didn't." Judy suspected that Dr. Hind was only trying to put her at ease before moving on to the crux of the matter. Just the same, she answered him. "I never saw Gideon again that day;
I don’t know why. But uh, there's something else you should know, Doctor. Gideon later turned his life around. He's partners with my parents in a bakery, back home in Bunnyburrow. I saw him at the Carrot Days Festival just past, and we're friends now; he even helped Nick and me take down a couple of thieves."

"Wow, that's wonderful news, Judy!" the deer-buck raised his hooves and applauded, "I couldn't have asked for things to work out better between you two. Bravo!"

"Yeah Doc, but well…” Judy sucked at a corner of her mouth, "How does that fit in with me jumping off of that roof, and onto that airplane. I didn't make any major mistakes, right before then."

Dr. Hind flipped hoof in a throwaway gesture. "Yes Judy, I know that…but you see, in psychology, things don't always fit neatly into place. For example there's something else that doesn't quite fit the pattern. Remember what I said about Hercules always wanting to act alone? When you came back to Zootopia after you quit the force, did you try to fix your mistake all by yourself…or did you ask someone for help?"

"I went to Nick for help," she said, this time meeting his gaze head-on. "I had to; after the way I'd hurt him, I had to—and like I told him at the time, I couldn't have done it without him."

"And yet, you tried to take Craig Guilford down without his help," the deer-buck reminded her, "why do you think you did that?"

Judy threw up her paws as if he'd just pulled a weapon. "I don't KNOW!" she cried, "I don't know why I did that; that's the reason I came to see you." Her voice was becoming shaky again.

"Well, then, let's see if we can figure that out together." The deer-buck said to her. "Now as I understand it, Craig Guilford is the son of Jerry Guilford, the coyote who tried to dump a load defoliant on the Carrot Days Festival. Am I right about that?"

"Yes, that right." Judy told him, "He was supposed to give his dad the word when Jack La Peigne showed up at the Big Dance. Jack was the one who'd served Jerry Guilford with a foreclosure notice; he was the main target."

"Right, and Mr. Guilford's plan might have succeeded, if it hadn't been for Nick Wilde, is that also correct?"

"Yes, that's ri—" Judy started to say, and then stopped, feeling her foot trying to thump again. She could see where Dr. Hind was going with this, and this time, he had it wrong.

"I'm not jealous of Nick, Doctor!" she said, and immediately recalled a line she'd read somewhere, 'Methinks the lady doth protest too much.' She was overreacting, and by more than just a little.

"I didn't say you were," the deer-buck told her, raising his hooves, "and I don't think you are. But tell me something else Judy, where were you at time that Nick Wilde stumbled onto that plot. From what I heard., he literally stumbled onto it."

"Pretty much," Judy smiled skittishly, "but right then I was down at the Big…Dance…"

Now her foot DID begin to thump, waving the air once more. Dang this deer, he had pulled back the curtain yet again!
"Ohhhh! I was…I was dancing with Jack La Peigne."

"I see," Dr. Hind said, making a note, but Judy immediately shook her head.

"No Doctor, you don't; there's a lot more to it than that. I had been trying to get Nick to dance with me all evening—but I couldn't get him out onto the floor to save my life; he just didn't want to dance, period. So, finally I got all huffy and asked Jack La Peigne to dance with me instead…wait, there's more. On the train back to Zootopia, Nick finally told me *why* he doesn't like to dance; it brings up a very painful memory for him. Ummm, sorry, but I can't give out any details." She wondered if she'd said too much already.

"Of course not Judy…and I wouldn't want you to," Dr. Hind assured her. "But how did that make you feel?"

Judy blinked and felt her eyes beginning to moisten again.

"Like I should have been more understanding; I had acted without thinking and kicked him to the curb. It was the press-conference all over again. I should have stuck by Nick; I should have been WITH him. Uhhh. Could I have another of those tissues? Thanks."

Dr. Hind let her blow her nose…and then he asked her, "Annnnd, how do you think that relates to your actions when you took down Craig Guilford?"

Judy didn't even hesitate, even though none of the things she was about to say had occurred to her until just this moment. "I thought Nick had done enough; he'd had to take on Craig Guilford all by himself, up on that hillside, and he'd had to figure out how to stop what his father, Jerry, was trying to do—so now it was my turn. This was my way of atoning for the way I'd acted at the dance."

"Mmm, hmm," Dr. Hind nodded knowingly, "But tell me this Judy, supposing you hadn't, *errr*, kicked him to the curb. Would Nick have discovered The Guilford plan in time to stop it then; would anyone?"

"N-No." Judy sat up straight in her chair, realization dawning once again, "No, he wouldn't have…and I probably wouldn't have any fur right now." She wanted to thump her foot again; might have done it too, except this time she remembered that it was hanging in the air above the floor. But why hadn't she realized this before? It wasn't the first time she'd failed to see the bigger picture. When Chief Bogo had caught up with her in the Precinct-1 Commissary, he'd reminded her of something else she hadn't considered; that if Conor Lewis hadn't been trying to evade her by going through a fire zone, he wouldn't have needed to save her life. That was her other problem, she realized.

Dang, this deer was good.

"It's called being mindful, Judy," he said, "and I can help you with that. But in the meantime I want to get back to what happened with Craig Guilford. At what point did you finally realize that you'd made a mistake in trying to take him down the way you did?"

"It was right after the Meadowlads cops put him and his girlfriend in their police cruisers," she said, "as soon as they were safely in custody that was when it hit me. We could have pulled *our* cruiser out onto the runway, too. I had risked my life needlessly."

"And how did you react when you realized your mistake?" Dr. Hind asked her.

Judy felt her mouth tilting sideways. "My legs gave out and I almost collapsed—right in front of all those cops from the Meadowlands Precinct. It's just a good thing Nick was there to catch me, or otherwise—Oh, sweet cheese n' crackers, THAT'S IT!"
"What now?" Dr. Hind had almost dropped his pen.

"It's…something else, Doctor." Judy waved a paw, finding it hard meet his eyes again, "Something I just remembered; it's not related to…I don't want to change the subject on you, just let it go for now."

"No Judy, I don't think so," The deer-psychologist's voice was unexpectedly firm, "if that thought you just had was enough to elicit such a strong reaction, then it's something I want to hear about—and that I think you need to talk about. Please…go ahead."

Judy took a deep breath and readied herself. She felt as if she were eight again, preparing to take the plunge from High-Falutin' Rock into the Alsetz River for the very first time. Where the heck was she supposed to begin? Well, that all depended on how much Dr. Hind already knew, and so she started off with a cautious inquiry.

"Doctor, are you aware of what's been going on with that surveillance tape of Office Wilde and me, the one from the Rafaj Brothers blood-diamond sting?"

"Yes, I am," he answered, looking mildly disgusted, "Someone posted it on Fuzztube. Chief Bogo was asking me just this morning if I had any insight as to who might be the guilty party."

"Okay," Judy nodded and took another baby step towards the cliff overlooking the swimming hole. "And are you also aware that Rock Hardesty played it on his TV show last night?"

The black tailed deer looked even more repulsed.

"Yes, I didn't see that broadcast myself, but I heard about it. Why, has there been some new development?"

"Dang, HE should be trying out for the detective squad." Judy marveled silently to herself, and then she said, "Yes, I got a phone call from my sister Erin just now, while I was in your waiting room. She told she heard Hardesty on his radio show today, saying there's a new video of Office Wilde and me…ummm, 'behaving badly.' I couldn't for the life of me figure out where it could have come from, but now I think I know; it has to be some body-cam footage of the thing I just told you about, Nick Wilde catching me when I almost fell."

"Mmmm, I can see why that would upset you." Dr. Hind was forming a pyramid with his hooves, "But may I ask how you came to this conclusion, Judy?"

She felt her eyes harden slightly.

"Well, first of all…right after Nick let go of me, we noticed that some of the Meadowlands Officers were giving us very unpleasant looks. At first we had no idea why, but then later on, we overheard some of them talking about it; they were throwing around words like 'inappropriate', 'inexcusable', 'unwarranted', I-I think you get the idea, Doctor."

"I do," he nodded, "but what make you think that's what Hardesty was talking about, IS there a body-cam video of that incident?"

"I haven't seen one," Judy admitted, "but I'd be really surprised if there isn't. There's body-cam footage of just about everything else that happened after the Meadowlands Precinct officers showed up—and that footage I HAVE seen."

"Right, that stands to reason." The deer buck answered. With a hostile suspect like Craig Guilford, it made sense to keep everything documented; his kind of perp was also wont to cry 'police
'brutality' if an officer so much as looked at him crossways.

"There's more actually," Judy told him. Now that she'd started this, she figured she might as well see it all the way through. "When Nick and I were in court this morning…"

She was midway through the story when Dr. Hind blew note of alarm.

"Hold on, he put a 14-year-old kid in V-3 restraint?"

"Yep, even the prosecution was shocked," Judy told him.

"All right, but then how do you know that it was actually about you and Officer Wilde?"

Judy froze in place for a second. She had already made up her mind not to tell Dr. Hind about Judge Schatten's exchange with Nick, (and she certainly wasn't going to reveal their history,) but if she didn't tell him, how could she possibly convince him that…? Wait, there was another way.

"Because that's what Rudy Gamsbart said when he caught up with Officer wild and me after the arraignment; he asked me point blank if I'd been trying to set Judge Schatten off…and he specifically mentioned the Hardesty show." She went on to recount the rest of their confrontation with the chamois in the Courthouse Annex conference room. Dr. Hind listened and then tapped his antlers with his pen.

"For what it's worth Judy, Gamsbart's no speciest; what he is, is incredibly ambitious. He's determined to be most successful prosecutor in the history of Zootopia, and Lord help anyone who gets in his way." He slapped the pen down on the table, "But George Schatten? Oooh, I always knew there was something wrong with that groundhog, but I never thought he could go this far beyond the pale. That being said, while I mostly agree with what you and Officer Wilde said to Rudy Gamsbart, I think you could have been a wee bit more diplomatic about it. When it comes to never forgetting a slight, an elephant has nothing on him."

"Yes, I know," Judy sighed, "But you have to understand Doctor, he caught us at a bad moment; we were both already pretty upset over what we'd seen in that courtroom, especially Nick."

"Yes, of course," Dr. Hind nodded as if he understood completely, and that made Judy wonder if perhaps he didn't already know about the ranger-scout muzzle-incident. Nick had earlier confided to her that he too had once consulted Dr. Hind, (although he'd never mentioned any details.)

"Was Judge Schatten aware of the reason for that kiss at the time he made that ruling?" the deer-buck asked her. "Did he know that Nick only did it to put the Rafaj brothers off their stride? Ahhh, that was a brilliant move on his part, by the way."

"No…I-I don't think so," Judy said, "not at the time, but I'm pretty sure he knows it now."

Maybe…but that hadn't stopped him from placing that proxy-call to the Rock Hardesty radio show. Judy remembered it with a small start—and knew right away that this was something else she couldn't discuss with Dr. Hind; she had no proof that the woodchuck had been the mammal behind that call, only a gut feeling.

That was when something else hit her in the gut—like the proverbial freight-train. Oh God, no, she couldn't tell him that…and yet she knew she was going to. She was as helpless to resist as if she were trussed to pole, and being swept towards the precipice of a waterfall; nothing to do but bring it on.

She took another deep breath, felt her paws beginning to wring against each other
"Um, ah…about that Doctor. That IS why Nick kissed me….and oh my God, his breath! I don't know what he’d had for breakfast that morning, but ewwww! The first thing I did when we got outside was go find a drinking fountain and wash out my mouth. Ohhhh, it was horrible…"

Her voice faltered and slowed to halt, a mechanical toy winding down. She looked at her paws again. When she looked up, she spoke as if she were traversing a high-wire stretched over a magma pit.

"S-So, when Nick kissed me, why…why did I kind of like it, and—and why did I sort of kiss him back?"

Chapter End Notes

**Author's Note:**

The character of Dr. Robert Hind is based on my own, real-life brother, Dr. Robert _, who retired from practicing psychology last year. On a recent visit, I learned that he had once served as a consulting psychologist to the Kansas City PD, and had numerous counseling sessions with officers similar to the one I described with Judy, although it pretty much goes without saying that he never named names, or discussed any of them in detail.

I first heard the tune Conor performs in his cell, *Send Me To The 'Lectric Chair* when I saw David Bromberg (Bruinberg) playing it live at a concert in Phoenix Arizona. You can find the full version here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVSDnAoRfQE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVSDnAoRfQE)

('Course Conor doesn't quite get the lyrics right.)

And finally, this latest installment comes loaded with a whole bunch of Easter Eggs.
When a Fox Goes Rabbit (Continued...Pt 3.)

Chapter Summary

Freedom doesn't come cheap...and meanwhile, in the Rainforest District.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 10 –When A Fox Goes Rabbit
(Continued…Pt. 3)

"Dangit, what TIME is it? They must have hit the shift-change by now!"

Conor Lewis was lying on his bunk in Total-Sep, apparently resting…and in the physical sense, he was; but at the same time, his brain seemed to be trying for a new land-speed record, running full tilt, with no way to down-shift. If foxes were capable of sweating, he'd be soaked like a car-wash sponge right now.

Did he still have time…or had the window already closed?

He began to push himself out of bed and onto the floor—and then pulled up short; what was the point? On his feet or on his back, it made no difference; he had no more distractions left in the bag. Since being put in Total Separation, he'd had three long conversations with himself, mentally reviewed the lyrics of every song he knew, and done all the push-ups and sit-ups that he'd dared. (Any more of either and he'd be running the risk of muscle cramps later on.) All the jacks had been jumped, all the knees deeply bent; he had pounded down his dinner without even knowing what it was, even though he hadn't been particularly hungry. (That one meal might have to sustain him for an extended period of time.)

Nothing for him to do now, but…nothing; just wait here, stretched out on his bunk while the seconds dragged by like winter molasses. How long ago had they brought him his dinner? They always did that about a half hour before the shift change, but dangit, how long ago had that been… minutes…hours…yesterday? No point in asking his stomach for an update; in the young fox's current state of mind, his dinner wouldn't settle until sometime next week. Aaggg, grrr…with every passing moment, he became more and more convinced that he'd missed the bus. So, now what the heck was he supposed to…?
Without warning, something clicked and the door to his cell slid open, revealing a pair of guards, a caribou and...was that leopard or a jaguar? Conor couldn't tell, but then he wasn't really looking; what caught his attention was the look of disgust on both their faces—YES!

Forcing himself not to whoop; the young fox had to work even harder to appear genuinely puzzled at their appearance...especially since the caribou was holding a document in his paw—half crushed; double yes! He wouldn't be doing that, if it were only an order to move the silver-fox kid in Total Sep back into general population.

"Um...what?" he asked blinking nervously at the pair of officers.

"Alright Lewis, let's go, bag and baggage." The caribou spoke as if trying not to spit.

Conor tilted his head sideways, "Bag and what" he said. (He was actually quite familiar with the term.)

"You bein' released muchacho," the jaguar snarled, (yep, jaguar) "so snap it up, huh?"

Now, Conor did allow himself a whoop; heaving himself off the bunk and throwing a fist in the air, "Whoo-hoo, made BAIL, Eee-yes!"

But the two officers only looked even more disgruntled.

"No kid, you didn't make bail," the caribou said, giving Conor the look that, back in Granite Point, had been the prelude to what the guards there liked to refer to as 'thump therapy'. "You're taking a walk," he went on, holding up the document and reading from it, paraphrasing as he went.

"By order of the Supreme Court of the City of Zootopia, the following charges against the defendant Conor Severus Lewis are hereby dismissed, due to lack of sufficient evidence; felony assault of a police officer, failure to obey...etc." He stopped reading and let out a short growl. "You don't need to hear the rest; it's all of 'em."

"They dropped all the charges?" Conor was staring wide-eyed at the two correctional officers...and this time his surprise wasn't feigned. Holy foxtrot, how the heck had he DONE it?

"Yeah that's right," his companion snorted, nodding to the jaguar, who flipped over the top page of the document, revealing a second sheet of a slightly different color, attached to the first by a pair of staples. The caribou studied it for a second and then looked at Conor.

"Seems your fellow fox, Nick Wilde filed a deposition with the Supremes this afternoon." (He spewed out the word 'fox' like bitters.) "Says he can't say for certain that you bit him on purpose. Put it together with that lawyer of yours, and that moron judge deciding to put a kid in V-3 restraint, and it was all over but the..."

"...and saving the life of Officer Judy Hopps," the young silver fox interjected bitterly. Up until now, he'd kept the subject to himself, but foxin'-A! If the ZPD wasn't going to thank him for what he'd done, they could at least remember it. (He was willing to bet that it was mentioned on the document the jaguar was holding.)

The two officers regarded each other for a second, and then the caribou cleared his throat and went on as if there had been no interruption.

"Orders are, you're to be released immediately, pending processing."

Now it was Conor who looked disgusted. 'Processing' always took as much time as the
hacks felt like taking...and since he wasn't about to win any popularity contests with the Zootopia Youth Jail correctional officers, it was pretty much a slam dunk that he wouldn't be getting out of here anytime in the next five minutes.

"But hey, what the heck, I AM getting out," the young fox reminded himself...and his angst evaporated instantly. Dropping to his knees he raised a fist...eyes closed and voice trembling.

"Thank you Mr. Rodenberg!" (The guards wouldn't like this but the heck with 'em!)

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," the jaguar growled impatiently, "Now get up an' get moving, kid."

Conor was sorely tempted to respond with something flippant, but wisely kept his thoughts to himself; he could push these two only just so far.

That decision lasted until they brought him to the first stop on the itinerary, the changing room outside the showers, where they gave him a towel, and spun him in the direction of the entrance. "Okay, go get clean, and make it quick." Conor balked at the order immediately; this was a complete waste of time.

"Aw come on already, I'm clean enough; I practically hadda have a makeover before I went to court this morning."

True it was, but the guards were having none of it..

"Rules are rules, kid." The jaguar informed him, tartly, "Nobody gets outta here until they get showered first."

"Unless you want to go back to your cell and think about it," the caribou said with a taunting sneer.

"Okay, Oh-kayyyy!" Conor turned towards the shower room entrance—and as he did, he caught sight of name-tag stitched to the caribou's uniform-shirt, 'Hermann.' Ahhh, sorry and all that, but this was just too much to for a snarky, young, silver fox to resist. He stopped suddenly, raised an eyebrow at him, and poked a thumb in the direction of the doorway.

"Yeah, riieeeight—showers; that's really the way to the gas chamber, isn't it, Herr Goreing?"

"Get in there, smartmouth!" the jaguar snarled, getting quickly between him and the other officer.

Conor quickly found that he had the shower room to himself. That was good, and he gave himself an extra-long lathering. (While he hadn't lied about that makeover, his agitation just now had managed to undo most of it.) Even so, he wasn't lingering only to treat himself; a double-cleansing was the only way to get clean in this place; the foamy stuff that passed for soap in here was the lamest joke, ever.

When he finished up and left the shower room, Conor found his street clothes—most of them, anyway—waiting on the bench in the changing room, not folded or stacked but thrown in a haphazard pile. He was genuinely surprised; as much as the guards seemed to dislike him, this brand of casual harassment wasn't their style.

So, why...? Yeah, riieeit.

Conor went to the pile, extracted his pants and flapped them out, at the same time inhaling deeply. At once, the young fox's nose told him everything he needed to know.

He began to get dressed, standing with his back to the wall and facing the door as he did so. He
noticed at once that his belt had not yet been returned. While that was probably only SOP, it was also very much not good; if words failed him, he might very well need a weapon in the next few minutes.

The last item of clothing he grabbed was his shirt…and just his luck; it was a pullover, not a button-down. Rolling it up halfway, the young fox slipped his paws through the sleeve-holes and pulled it over his head.

…and then quickly shucked it off again, letting it fall onto the floor behind him.

Craig Guilford was standing in the doorway—and his expression was anything but congenial.

Conor dropped his paws to his sides and turned partially sideways, the way Kieran had taught him, eyeing the young coyote warily—and addressing him insouciantly.

"Real smart move there, super-genius, going through my stuff; I smelled your grubby paws all over 'em the minute I came in here." He allowed himself a derisive smirk, "So, what's the skinny, Vinny? Did the hacks look the other way for ya, or did you manage to give 'em the slip somehow?"

Caught off guard, Craig had no immediate answer. When he did, he pretended not to have heard a thing that the young silver fox had said.

"Hey, you know what else I heard, shifty?" he snarled, tapping himself in the chest for emphasis, "I heard that before you bit Nick Wilde, you saved the life of that bunny-cop Hopps, the same little snotface who busted ME!"

He began to move in Conor's direction. The young fox stifled a groan and if he could, he would have fox-screamed. The guards were treating him as if that beau geste had never happened, but THIS jerk remembered it just fine! Awww, grrrr, he aughta LET Craig kick his tail!

Taking a short breath, Conor mustered up the fullness of his contempt for the young coyote and defiantly folded his arms.

"Oh yeah?" he shot back, "well you know what I heard, babe? I heard they REALLY like to hurt snitches in here."

Craig stopped in mid-stride.

And Conor charged swiftly into the gap.

"Especially a guy that'd—ah, I dunno—sell out his own dad to save himself."

Now the young coyote's foot began to move in the opposite direction…and Conor moved in for the clincher, narrowing his eyes and allowing one of his fangs to show.

"Boy howdy, I wouldn't wanna be in that guy's pelt if the word got around, would you?"

The effect wasn't quite what he had anticipated; Craig stopped abruptly and drew himself up to his full height, revealing BOTH of his fangs.

"No-good fox-jerk, if you say one word…to anyone…"

Conor waved a breezy paw.

"Who, me? Nah, I wouldn't do a thing like that," he said, the picture of vulpine innocence—one that morphed instantly into a study etched in revulsion. "But someone else might, if anything bad
were to happen to me." He leaned forward with his paws on his hips, putting all of his teeth on display, "I hadda hear it from somebody….and that somebody doesn't like you much anyway, you follow what I'm bringing out?"

Craig began to tremble all over, whether from fear or anger, the young fox couldn't tell.

"You dirty, sneaking little…"

Conor cut him off again.

"You got ten seconds to get outta my face, fool—and you already used up half of 'em. 5…4…3…"

Craig was gone by the count of 2. Conor picked his shirt from the floor, but only held it in his paws for a minute—waiting until he was certain that the young coyote hadn't doubled back on him. Only then did he pull it back on, and allow himself a sigh of relief.

It had all been a colossal bluff; there'd been no one else to spread the word if the rogue coyote had taken Conor out. The knowledge that Craig Guilford had flipped began and ended with him, (and Mr. Rodenberg, bless that grey rat's scaly, pink tail.)

His original plan had been to write a note to Shem, instructing the young hyena not to open it unless Craig Guilford made a move on him. Good thought, except that Conor had found himself put in V-3 restraint; how the heck was he supposed to get a message to anybody when no one except a correctional officer was allowed within a hundred feet of his cell?

No, the young fox's only hope had been that his nemesis wouldn't be smart enough to figure that out—or that at least decide it wasn't worth the risk. Craig Guilford might be a newcomer to the Precinct-1 Youth Jail, but he was no stranger to juvie; according to Mr. Rodenberg, he'd served at least two stretches in the Burrow County Juvenile pen …and Conor's homily about 'hurting snitches' applied every bit as much there as it did here. In all jails, everywhere, the attitude towards informers is the same; the only good one is a dead one. Even a dimbulb like Craig had to know that much.

And speaking of yote-boy, just then, Conor heard one of the guards raising his voice, the jaguar, to be precise. "Hey you, where'd you come from, huh? Was you in the shower-room jus' now? GET OVER HERE!"

Well…that answered that question, anyway; the officers hadn't been in on it. Still, it didn't say much for their competency if the likes of Craig Guilford had been able to escape their notice.

Craig…

Ohhh, Conor had SO wanted to throw it right back in that yahoo coyote's face.

"Hey guess what, babe? Remember that call to your dad, the one that sent him and your uncle into the Carrot Days Dance right over that fireworks show? That was ME on the phone, hotshot…pretending to be you, and your dumb-yote pop fell for it like a load of…"

Yes, he'd been tempted….and he would have been more than justified if he'd given in to the impulse. Trying to sabotage another prisoner's release wasn't quite as bad as informing on him—but it was still an offense that demanded retribution.

Unfortunately, there could be no such thing as trying to lay payback on that backstabbing coyote. If Conor even so much as looked crossways Craig Guilford, the Mammal's star witness against Jerry Guilford, he'd find himself back in Total Sep so fast he wouldn't know how he got
there. Oh, he could let the word out that the coyote was a snitch—except what would happen to him next would be a fate the young silver fox wouldn't wish on anybody, not even the lowlife who'd just tried to wreck his release. He had seen what they did to snitches in juvie, more times than he cared to think about; (Crazy Wez had held a special loathing for informers and had dealt with them in singularly ruthless fashion.)

And besides that, if Craig was taken out, it would blow a hole the size of a meteor crater in the case against his dad; the dirt bag who'd tried to spray-bomb the Carrot Days Festival with defoliant. Conor Lewis was the LAST fox who wanted to see that happen, (or next to last anyway; Nick Wilde.)

And besides THAT, the young fox reminded himself yet again, he was getting out of here; at the end of the day that was the only thing that mattered; who cared about Craig What'sisname anyway?

When Conor exited the changing room, he found that the caribou had been replaced by a different officer, this one a hippo, sporting sergeant's stripes on his sleeve.

"Come on, let's go," the big mammal said, only slightly less miffed than his predecessor—a fact that was beginning to grate on the young fox's nerves. Kee-ripes, these hacks were all beginning to sound like a guy who'd just reeled in a lunker trout, and then been told by a game warden that he'd have to throw it back.

"Yeah? Well, tough tail guys; get your trophy somewhere else," he snarled inwardly.

What followed next was an excursion into the bureaucratic jungle by way of the Lieutenant's office; paperwork, paperwork, and MORE paperwork, endless affidavits and documents to review and to sign—all of which the correctional officers insisted on explaining to Conor in detail before they would allow him to put pen to paper. Although highly irritated by all this rigmarole, the young fox didn't hold it against the guards; this wasn't harassment, they were only trying to cover their backsides, a necessary evil when you were dealing with someone represented by Mr. Vernon J. Rodenberg . It would be just like that grey rat to file a gazillion dollar lawsuit against the city for putting his client, (only 14,) in V-3 restraint—or so the city jail admins reasoned—and they wanted to make it crystal clear that it hadn't been THEIR idea.

And so Conor was obliged to sign his name, again, and again, and again. Occasionally, he was also required to surrender a thumb-pad print.

The first document read, 'I hereby acknowledge that while held in this facility I was not subject to abuse of either a verbal or physical nature.'

Conor signed his name readily. Though the guards in here might be acting a bit short with him at the moment, compared to the hacks at Granite Point, these guys were sweet angels of mercy.

More documents swiftly followed

'I acknowledge by this signature that the medical facilities in the Zootopia City Jail were adequate to my needs.'

"Needs, what needs?" the young fox frowned, "I never had to see the dang jail-doc."

Once again, however Conor promptly affixed his name. He'd once served time in a facility where the standard of medical care had been ten degrees below SUB-standard, (and he had the scars to prove it.)
Some of the documents he was asked to sign required him to answer a question.

'Do you feel you are suffering any lingering trauma from your time in Total Separation?'

[] Yes
[] No

"What, are you kidding me?" Conor wanted to laugh. "I was in there for less than a stinkin' day."

He checked 'no' and signed his name.

The next question wasn't so easy.

"Do you feel you were provided with adequate security during you incarceration?"

[] Yes
[] No

Conor wanted to answer that one with a honkin', huge 'HECK, no!' The officers minding him earlier had somehow managed to let Craig Guilford slip past them; how secure was that?

He checked 'yes' anyway and signed, once again reminding himself that the important thing here was that he was being released—and if that was what he wanted, then he'd better stay out of his own way.

The next stop was Processing…or rather the holding cell attached to it. Conor would have to get there by way of the Commons area and he was none too thrilled with the idea. Admin had still not seen fit to return his belt, and the prospect of being paraded in front of the other kids while having to hold up his trousers with his paw was not a pleasant one. He expected to be razzed from one end of the commons to the other.

It didn't happen; instead when the officers led the young fox through the area, a hush fell over everything; all conversation ceased and a few of the kids who'd been sitting got up and stood silently at attention. Now, what the fox was this stuff?

The answer came when Conor caught sight of a familiar face, the same young deer buck who'd applauded him in court—and now he understood; the word was out about what had happened there and how the young silver-fox had handled it.

Nodding briefly to the deer, Conor pantomimed clapping his paws, and shook his head. The young buck nodded back and made a sideways brushing motion with his hoof. He had gotten the message; 'don't clap now, you'll get The Hole.' It was just a shame, the young fox reflected, that they couldn't have met before they'd both been sent here, he'd have liked to get to know this dude.

Conor would always think of the next part of the release process as the worst. The guards unceremoniously dumped him on a bench in the holding cell next to Processing, and left him there with the hippo posted outside the door. Until they were done with whatever they were doing, (more paperwork, the young fox presumed,) he'd have nothing to do but suck it up and wait. The only good thing was, at least he finally knew the time; there was a wall clock in Processing, visible through the holding-cell window. Almost 7:30…so he'd been right; they had come for him later than he'd expected; why was that?

"Well, better late than never," the young fox chided himself. He pulled his cap down over his eyes and leaned back against the wall, letting his paws fall into his lap. Now that it was finally happening, he could afford to relax a little.
Actually…more than a little; the next thing he was aware of was a loud click and a rush of air, followed by a familiar voice, "Awright kid, les' go." It was the jaguar again, but Conor barely noticed. When he sat up and pushed back his cap again, he found himself looking once more at the clock in the next room.

It now showed nearly 8:45. Crikey, he'd been in here that long?

Wellll, it wasn't as if he'd had anything better to do than snag some Z's.

"I'll be taking you downstairs to the property room next," the big cat said, "where your watch, cellphone and other fursonal effects will be returned to you," He sounded as if he was reciting the words off a chalkboard.

As with every other police department, the ZPD kept its property room open 24/7. (Evidence doesn't only come in during working hours.)

It was pretty much your standard-issue set-up, a wire-mesh barrier backed by a titanium screen, (to discourage any rodents who might have pilferage, on their minds.) plus three bank-teller windows of varying size, and an electrically operated door of the same basket-weave construction as the walls. Everything was painted in midnight green.

Had Nick and/or Judy been here, they would have been surprised to see who was running the show—or maybe they wouldn't have; Benjamin Clawhauser never could say no when asked to fill in for another officer on sick-call.

"Weh, heffo fere…" he said, and then took a quick slug of pop to wash down the cupcake he'd been eating. "Oops, sorry; hi there kid, what's going on with you tonight?' He might have been a teacher, addressing a favorite pupil.

It was the jaguar who answered him…in a voice like chilled vinegar.

"Suspect Conor Severus Lewis," he said, passing a folder to the plus size cheetah, "he's being released, all charges dropped. Here's his list of fursonal effects."

"Oh, congratulations!" Clawhauser offered Conor a thumbs-up. (That got him an even nastier look from the jaguar; he didn't seem to notice.)

Conor found the obese cheetah's attitude amusing, (mostly because it seemed to bug the heck out of the guard escorting him.) Whoa, give this fat-cat some helium and he'd be a drop-dead perfect Curly Howler.

It was then that Benjamin Clawhauser proceeded to demonstrate why the ZPD could always count on him in pinch. He might not have known how to talk to an (obviously guilty) prisoner about to be put back on the street…but he seemed to know the property room like the back of his paw, even though it wasn't his regular turf. It took him all of five minutes to retrieve the file-box containing Conor's belongings, (no small task in an enclosure roughly the size of an auto-parts distribution warehouse.)

Leaving the box on the counter next to the largest of the three windows, he disappeared again for a moment, and returned shortly with the young fox's bicycle.

It was only then that Conor began to appreciate the advantage of his situation. Had he been getting out on bail or riding a writ of habeas corpus, he wouldn't be getting his bike back—OR his laptop or cellphone. But nope…he was getting out on a dismissal of all charges, and no charges, no need to retain any evidence.
Setting Conor's bike against a support column for the moment, Clawhauser returned to the 'teller's window and plopped his ample behind onto a stool behind it.

"Now," he said, flipping the lid off the file box containing Conor's other belongings, "let's see what we have here." He attached the file the jaguar had given him to a clipboard, consulted it briefly, and then wriggled his fingers as though preparing to tuck into a particularly succulent doughnut. Only then did he reach inside the file-box.

The first item he drew out was….

"One Catsio G-Shock wristwatch, in working condition," he said, checking the item off his list.

He passed it through the window to Conor who wrapped it around his wrist and gave it a quick look.

At once, his ears shot upwards. What the heck, it was almost TEN now? At this rate he wouldn't be getting out of here until after sunrise.

Clawhauser, meanwhile had already moved on to the next item.

"One sunglass case, containing…" he extracted the contents and gave them a quick inspection, "One pair of Meowi Jim wraparound sunglasses with mirrored lenses."

At this, the jaguar gave Conor a sharp look, and the young silver-fox knew why almost immediately; Meaowi Jims didn't come cheap…a little too 'not cheap" for a 14-year-old kid to be wearing.

He just took them and said nothing, slipping them quietly into one of his pants' cargo-pockets. (What the heck *else* was he going to do with them? It was NIGHT outside.)

The next item on the agenda was "One prepaid Motoroara smart phone." Clawhauser took it from the file box but didn't check it against the list, not right away at least; instead, he turned it over in his paws with a curious look on his face. A quick, sidelong glance at the jaguar showed that he too was eyeing the cell-phone inquisitively.

Once again, Conor didn't have to be a mind reader to discern their thoughts. It was a disposable cell-phone, so why hadn't this supposedly street-smart kid destroyed it when he'd had the chance?

After a short, pungent moment, the obese cheetah checked the phone off his list and passed it through the window.

When Clawhauser came to the next item in the file-box, Conor felt himself tense up slightly, crossing his fingers in his pocket and hoping the plus sized cheetah—and especially the jaguar—wouldn't catch it.

"One ballpoint pen," Clawhauser checked it off the list and pushed it through the window. Conor reached for it quickly and put it into his pocket… making sure to stand so that the jaguar couldn't see. The pen, which looked like an ordinary writing instrument, would have been quite familiar to both officers without its latex-rubber coating—a Gerbiler Impromptu Tactical Pen with a hardened titanium barrel. A favorite of law-enforcement officers, it was equally suitable for writing citations or punching through a car windshield. In the right paws, it was also an effective self-defense tool… and Conor had learned how to use one from a master of close combat, Danny 'The Danaconda' Tipperin.

Conor's belt came next, (finally!) and then the rest of his belongings followed in desultory fashion.
He showed barely any interest until Clawhauser came to the next-to-the-last item on the list.

"One military grade, laptop computer, of unknown make and model;" When Clawhauser slid it through the window, Conor had to force himself not to snatch at it like a drowning fox going for a life-ring. (In a sense, that was exactly what he was doing.)

The last item to be returned was his bike.

"One Bolt Bicycles Dodger," Clawhauser wheeled it through a side door and presented it with a flourish worthy of a game-show host. Conor thanked him, trying not to sound irritated; by now the plus-size cheetah's bubbly manner was beginning to ruffle his fur as well. When the big cat offered him the clipboard and told him to 'sign here, and print here,' the young fox was so eager to get moving that he almost went for his tactical pen; (he caught himself at the last second.)

"Okay les' go," the jaguar told him again, and then pointed at the young fox's ride. "And no getting on that bike zorillo, you walk it out of here, okay?"

Conor rolled his eyes in a 'Well, DUH' gesture. As if he'd be such an idiot.

"Okay, where we headed next?" he said.

"Front reception, and then you're free to go." the big cat answered, not looking at him.

Conor should have been elated—yes, almost out of here!—but instead his flags were going up; the guard had said that while trying not to look smug, there was something he was keeping to himself, something that he knew his young charge wasn't going to like, a snag this wise-mouth fox-kid hadn't foreseen.

And there was nothing that fox-kid could do but keep walking and wait for the other paw to drop.

At the front reception desk, he was obliged to sign his name again and also provide another thumb-pad print. He would have dearly liked to ask if they wanted a blood-sample too, but wisely elected to keep his fox-trap shut. And then three magic words from the Asiatic wild ass behind the reception counter brought him swiftly back to reality.

"Okay, you're done." He said, nodding in the direction of the Precinct's front door. Conor hesitated, this was much too easy; now he was all but certain that the jag was holding out on him; the ZPD had one more card up its sleeve…and there was only one way to know for certain.

"Right, see you guys." Conor hefted his backpack over his shoulders and took hold of his bike's handlebars, wheeling his ride in the direction of the front entrance. He had managed about five steps, when the jaguar's roar halted him in his tracks.

"I knew it!" the young fox snarled inwardly, and then turned back around, trying his best to appear naïve, rather than cynical. "Uh, okay…what?"

The big cat folded his arms and regarded him with a toothy smirk, "Jus' where you think you going, Junior?"

"Outta here," Conor poked a thumb over his shoulder, in the direction of the exit, "Charges dropped, so I'm free to go, right?"

An even bigger smile creased the jaguar's muzzle, and he slowly shook his head.

"Not quite, kid; you are un-der-AGE," he said, enunciating every syllable of the last two words,

"One military grade, laptop computer, of unknown make and model;" When Clawhauser slid it through the window, Conor had to force himself not to snatch at it like a drowning fox going for a life-ring. (In a sense, that was exactly what he was doing.)

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An even bigger smile creased the jaguar's muzzle, and he slowly shook his head.

"Not quite, kid; you are un-der-AGE," he said, enunciating every syllable of the last two words,
just to make certain that the young fox got the message. "That means you can only be released into the custody of a parent or legal guardian. Soon as they show up, THEN you can go."

Conor wanted to fox-scream his head off. Blankety-blank overgrown ocelot! He'd known all along that the kid in his charge didn't HAVE any parents…and probably so did every other correctional officer in the Zootopia City Youth Jail. Aggggh, grrrr…they'd been playing him from the moment he'd been taken from his cell.

But hang on…he did have a legal guardian, that yellow mongoose, Tom Rooter, or whatever his name was…maybe! Mr. Rodenberg had filed a petition for legal guardianship in his PI's name, but had Zootopia Social Services, or whoever, accepted it? And even if they had, what good would it do?

"All right, calm the heck down." He told himself, and then unslung his backpack again. "Okay, lemme call my lawyer," he said, hoping like heck that for once he would get voice mail. He did, but hit the disconnect button before speaking, "Mr. Rodenberg, this is Conor Lewis; I'm in the Precinct One lobby. They're ready to cut me loose, but I can't leave unless a parent or legal guardian comes to collect me. Can you call Mr. Ruiter (Ruiter, that was it,) and let him know the situation? I don't have his number. Thanks."

He disconnected and nodded towards one of the benches parked along the wall.

"Mind if I sit down while I wait?" he said. He knew he had bought himself a short reprieve at best, but in his experience, two or three minutes could be the difference between sweet success and epic fail.

"Excuse me," a voice interrupted, cutting off his train of thought. It was the donkey behind the reception counter, "Ruiter, did you say; Ton Ruiter?"

"Yeah, that's right," Conor told him, (Okay it was Ton, not Tom.) "what up?"

The donkey began to rummage through the papers on his desk, muttering to no one in particular. "Mmm, where is that thing? I know I didn't…I could have sworn I printed it…Oh, here we are."

He held up a document at arm's length and squinted, as if trying to locate a hidden treasure-map.

The jaguar let out a quick, frustrated snarl, "Dangit Sparks, when you going to accept it, huh? Those contacts just don't work no more; you needa get some bifocals, burro."

"I'm still good," the wild ass answered in a flat, nasal tone, "Anyway it says here that Mr. Ruiter has already been notified of Mr. Lewis' pending release by the clerk of the Zootopia Supreme Court." He squinted again, this time looking slightly embarrassed. "Oh, and uhhhh, it also says we're supposed to notify Mr. Ruiter as soon as his ward Conor Lewis completes his processing and is ready to…"

He was interrupted by another snarl from the big cat, this one for the benefit of the fox kid standing next to him.

"There, you see what I mean, zorillo?" he said, waving a paw at the reception desk. "He wouldn't a' missed that part a' the memo if he'd had some bifocals on."

"I said I'm okay," Sparks brayed back, ears laid tightly against his neck.

That was it as far as Conor Lewis was concerned
"Willya make the stinkin' call already, Eeyore!"

Not the most tactful way to put it, but by now the young fox was so exasperated, he didn't care what kind of trouble that might buy him. Crike, it was open-mike night at The Comedy Bar in here!

The wild ass immediately turned on him.

"Hey, you little…"

"Make the call, Sparks," the jaguar cut him off with a weary groan…and was it Conor's imagination or was he actually smiling just a little.

Sparks gave each of them another unpleasant look, but then did as he was told.

For a moment it looked as if the call had gone to voice mail. It took forever for the donkey to begin speaking, and when he did, his voice was a flat recitation.

"Good evening sir, this is the ZPD calling for Mr. Ton Ruiter…" But then he stopped and listened for a few seconds. When he spoke again, it was obvious that there was someone else on the other end of the call. "Sir you'll have to speak up; I can barely…No, I'm afraid…can you hear me all right? All right, Mr. Ruiter, I'm calling to inform you that Conor Lewis has finished processing and is ready to be released into your custody. What's that…? I can't hear….yes, you can text me." He fell silent, studying the display screen on his desk for a moment, and then let out a snuffling breath.

"Yes sir, I know it's late…these things take time, sir."

He looked at the screen again.

"He'll be waiting for you in the front lobby of ZPD Precinct One. Do you know where that is, sir? All right, check in at the front desk when you arrive." Another glance at the screen; "Yes sir, about half an hour. Yes sir, good-bye."

He disconnected and looked at Conor with dull disinterest. He'd apparently forgotten all about that 'Eeyore' crack already. "He says he'll be here in about half an hour."

"Thanks, I heard," the young fox answered cordially—backing off while the backing was good.

Conor spent the next few minutes seated on one of the benches with his paws in his lap and his mind whirling. The events of the last half hour were something he could never have anticipated, much less planned for. Mmmm no, not quite, he had to admit; the part about how he could only be released into the custody of a parent or legal guardian; he should have seen that one coming, (dumb fox!)

But what about the rest of it; what the heck was going on here? Conor finally decided, (once again,) that there was no point in dwelling on it; he'd find out anyway, in about another half-hour.

Not quite; 30 minutes later, he was still cooling his heels….and beginning to feel antsy.

Another 10 minutes passed…and then another 10; he wanted to jump up and pace the floor, but knew the jaguar would only make him sit down again.

And then, 5 minutes later, a diminutive figure pushed his way through the front door of Precinct 1. Conor Lewis was instantly alert. The newcomer had sand-yellow fur and the long, slender torso of
a weasel…or a mongoose. Then something teased at the inside of his sinuses. He sniffed, and his face became the mask of a sphinx.

He was finally beginning to understand what was happening here.

"Here he is," the jaguar called, speaking to the wild ass behind the desk. Sparks put away his magazine and leaned over the counter.

"Allo," the mongoose told him in a thick cheery accent. "Ruiter for Conor Lewis?"

"Yes sir, can I see some ID first?" Sparks asked him.

"Mais oui, but of course." the little mongoose responded. He pulled out his cell phone and offered it to the donkey. Sparks took it with his ears laid back, muttering something under his breath. Conor could easily imagine what it was, something on the order of 'Whatever happened to good, old hard-copy ID? (That…and he was trying to read the display screen of a mongoose-size smart phone with a pair of failing eyes.)

Sparks studied the cell closely for moment and then returned it to the mongoose. "He's over there," he said, nodding in Conor's direction. The mongoose thanked him and then headed straight over to where the young fox was sitting, dispensing with any greetings upon his arrival and shedding his jovial manner like a worn-out overcoat

"You are ready? We need to go right now."

"Yep, good to go," Conor slipped off the bench, and started putting on his backpack…but then he remembered—his bike. Would there be room for it inside whatever vehicle the mongoose had brought with him?

"Uhhh, what about my…?"

"I have a roof rack; come on, let's go." the mongoose told him testily. "This is much later than I expected, eh?"

"Okay…okay," the young fox raised his paws as if in surrender and followed the meerkat out through the front door of Precinct-1's and disappeared into the night.

Zootopia, Rainforest District, 02:47, Tuesday

The attack on Interspecies Recycling Systems had been carried out with the utmost stealth and precision; this one was about as subtle as a swarm of ticked off hornets—and every bit as devastating.

They came crashing through the front gate in two 'boilers'—gangland slang for a hot car. The first vehicle, a tanker truck loaded with liquid asphalt, literally brushed aside the front gate as it came crashing through, taking down the sign over the entrance as well. Three seconds later, it plowed through the facility's big front, roll-up door punching through it as easily as if it were a layer of tinfoil. Behind the tanker came a second vehicle, a transport van glommed from an airport parking service. It slewed to a halt just outside the destroyed entranceway, and at once the doors flew open, disgorging a flood of compact, muscular figures. While the others stood at the ready, the team leader and one other mammal charged headlong through the front door with weapons drawn. Directly inside, the lead animal dropped down to one knee and took aim. A red dot appeared just above the lens of a CCTV security camera, and a split second later it was reduced to shards of glass and metal, to the accompaniment of a noise like an overclocked typewriter.. Within the next two
and-a-half-minutes, every other security camera in the building had been given the same treatment.

When the last camera was gone, the mammal in charge thumbed a portable air-horn and the rest of the crew came charging through the ruined doorway. He checked his smartwatch and raised his muzzle, together with his voice.

"We have ten minutes before the ZFD can get here, twelve minutes until the ZPD shows; I want us finished up in seven—MOVE!"

The others fanned out in teams of three, one carrying a crowbar, and the other two hauling PVC buckets of gasoline cut with Styrofoam peanuts, (what's known in the anarchist's trade as 'poor-mammals napalm.')

As with many structures in the rainforest district, this one was built with a humpbacked roof, roughly analogous to an enormous turtle-shell. Inside the structure, backed up against the perimeter wall, were fourteen vehicles of varying sizes, but roughly the same profile, long, low, and stretched out, with passenger compartments nearly the size of a roller-rink.

These were the team's primary target and they moved in with brutal efficiency, smashing windows, windshields, and moonroofs, ripping open hoods and cargo compartments, and dousing everything with the contents of the buckets, paying particular attention to each vehicle's engine block.

All the while the mammal in charge kept a close eye on his watch; at the same time listening intently to his headset, waiting for word that either the ZPD or the ZFD was on the move.

In mere moments the interior of the garage had become redolent with the smell of gasoline. None of the team members were bothered by this; they had come equipped with goggles for their eyes, and filter masks for their mouths and noses.

And then the leader abruptly clasped a dirty-white paw to his headset. He listened intently for a couple of seconds and then blew the air-horn again.

At once, all activity ceased, and the leader addressed them in a ringing, stentorian voice

"ZFD is rolling, headed our location; ETA, 6 minutes. What's our status?"

"One left," a voice called out in a slightly Teutonic accent.

"Get it done!" the leader barked, and was answered by the sound of breaking glass and rending metal. Then he spoke again, this time to the animal driving the tanker-truck, saying only a single work, "Go!"

And then to the others he said, "Everyone else out, move!"

"We have three extra," another voice piped up, indicating some leftover buckets of accelerant, "Leave them as is, or dump them?"

"Dump them and then get out of here," the leader answered, and then to the truck-driver, "Wait for my signal before you open the valves."

"Yes sir," the driver replied. He punched the starter button and the asphalt truck groaned and rumbled into life.

The team leader gave it a few more seconds to make sure everyone was clear and then barked another order, "Open 'em up!"
He received no verbal response, but three seconds later, a fan of thick, black liquid began spraying from the rear of the truck. By then the driver was already out of the cab and sprinting for the exit, with the lead mammal hot on his heels. As soon as they cleared the door, the pair pulled off the overshoes they'd been wearing and pitched them back into the garage. Or rather the driver did. One of the leader's shoes impacted against the door frame and bounced off, landing midway between him and the entrance.

He made no move to retrieve it; instead, he and the driver turned and ran briskly for the stolen airport van, which stood waiting for them with open doors. When they got there, the driver jumped quickly inside, but the leader stopped and turned on his heel facing back towards the garage again and holding out a paw behind him. At once, someone greased it with a long, inch-thick cylinder, attached to a stick—a skyrocket. In a quick, fluid motion, the leader pulled out a lighter, thumbed it into life, touched it to the fuse and then flung the rocket like an old-fashioned 'potato-masher' grenade. It was about a third of the way through its arc when the powder caught, and it shot off in a smoky corkscrew, straight through the wrecked front-door of the garage. There was a brief explosion of blue and purple sparks, and then another, bigger, burst of fire—much, much louder and brighter than the first one.

By then, the van had already squealed out of the parking lot and was racing away from the scene.

When ZFD arrived, less than five minutes later, they pulled up just as the asphalt truck's tank blew…and once again there was no possibility of saving anything. (Their only compensation was that at least there were no other structures close enough to be in any danger.)

Unlike the Interspecies Recycling iore, this time there was no question about whether or not to alert the ZPD; a half-blind idiot could see that this one was a torch-job.

Most of the firefighters on the scene agreed that it had been a slapdash operation—an attack hastily thrown together on the spur of the moment.

And yet…and yet…

The arsonists had come in knowing the exact location of every security camera in the garage, and had taken them out with clockwork precision. They had known enough to carry filter-masks and eye-goggles—and had also worn overshoes to disguise their footprints, (and to keep the gasoline-mixture from getting on their feet.) They'd had someone monitoring the Police and Fire Department radio frequencies, and they'd had the ZFD's response time clocked down to the last second. Last but not least, all the traffic cams in the area had mysteriously gone off line, right before the garage was hit—and stayed that way until the arsonists were long gone.

None of this would become known to the Zootopia PD's Arson Squad for some time to come…and until then, the destruction of the garage would be seen as an impulsive act. Certainly that was the opinion of most of the firefighters working the blaze.

And then one of them, a puma, nodded quickly at the ground beside him, where the sign that had formerly graced the entrance-gate now lay.

"That's a weird name for an outfit in this part of town," He observed, speaking to the okapi who was next in line on the fire those.

The okapi looked, sniffed, and then shrugged.

"Probably a franchise," he said,
Ironically enough, had it not been for the arson-attack in the Rainforest District, Chief Bogo might still have been en-route to the Precinct when the call came—in which case he would have sent it straight to voicemail. As a young officer, he'd investigated many a car-crash caused by cell-phone distraction. Because of that, he never talked on the phone himself while driving, (except by way of a bluefang.)

Not this time; when his cell-phone buzzed he'd already been at his desk for nearly an hour—and with good reason; two fire-bombings in less than 24 hours, and the third one in less than a week. That was more than enough to raise the specter of a serial arsonist, a breed of criminal particularly despised by law enforcement. (And also especially hard to catch; arson fires have a way of destroying evidence.) But now, studying the reports laid out before him, the big Cape buffalo felt a knot of dread tightening in his gut; the ZPD might be lucky if it was only a serial arsonist.

That was when his cell-phone rang, and he picked it up without looking at the Caller ID display.

"This is Bogo," he said, expecting it to be someone from the arson squad.

The next thing he said was, "Wha…? Who…? Swinton? What the devil are you calling me about? And aren't you supposed to be off…"

His eyes went wide and he shot up out of his chair,

"He did WHAT?"

Zootopia Attorney General Igor Sayarov was halfway out the door of his home when he heard his wife calling.

"Iggy, wait, hold up."

He turned and saw her hurrying towards him with a cell phone in her hoof. He let out a silent groan; he'd almost forgotten it—again. "Second time this week, I'm getting senile," the ibex grumbled to himself.

But that wasn't the only reason Bella had been calling him.

"It's Chief Bogo," she said, holding out the cell in his direction, "he says it's important."

Sayarov lifted an eyebrow as he took the phone; Chief Bogo…at this time of the morning? He placed the phone against his cheek, slightly irritated at the hold-up.

"Good morning, Chief," he said, "May I assume this matter is more than just a little important?"

And then his face nearly crash-dived through the floor.

"He did WHAT?"

Sayarov's protégé, Deputy Prosecutor Rudolph Gamsbart was also in his office, in the midst of reviewing a brief he intended to file later in the day,

And then his desktop intercom crackled.

"Mr. Gamsbart, Attorney General Sayarov on line three."
"Thanks Tom," the chamois answered, frowning, and took the call on speaker-phone. What in the heck could Igor be wanting this early?

"Yes…Mr. Attorney General…?" he said, and a split second later, he was sitting bolt upright with his fists clenched.

"He did WHAT?"

Vernon J. Rodenberg, attorney at law, was in his office too, pouring himself a cup of coffee and not looking forward to the day ahead; more futzing with those insurance jerks on behalf of the Red Pig. Had Rocco Peccari not been a regular client, the grey rat would have begged off on this job; he was a criminal attorney, not an insurance lawyer. Even so, he had to admit, Peccari had been absolutely right to get ahold of him; those shmendriks from The Harfurred were just itching to deny the claim on the Interspecies Recycling fire.

Rodenberg had already told them just exactly what he thought of that idea.

"Yeah, yeah…where was all your talk about my client’s 'unsavory reputation' when you agreed to underwrite his business…or when you were collecting all those nice, fat premiums? Get this through your bean-counting heads—you even try to stonewall my client on his perfectly reasonable claim and it’ll be peanuts compared to what it's going to cost you in litigation…and then you'll STILL have to pay up, got that?"

His phone buzzed and his eyebrow lifted when he saw the name on the Caller ID display. Now what the heck? Rudy Gamsbart never called him directly; he always went through one of his clerks. Well, only one way to find out.

"Counselor? Yes, this is Rodenberg, why…?"

His coffee cup went tumbling to the floor where it broke into a dozen pieces.

"He did WHAT?"

The Honorable Judge George L. Schattten had just finished dropping off his youngest at day-care and was turning left onto Walnut when the radio suddenly muted and a feminine, electronic voice began to solemnly recite, "Incoming Call…Incoming Call…Incoming…"

The woodchuck let out an oath under his breath. Right in the middle of his favorite Ted Nutria solo, wouldn't you know it? And then he looked at the center console screen…and his brows shot upwards and came down hard.

"Answer call," he grumbled, and then he said. "Rodenberg! What the heck do YOU want?"

Judge Schatten’s Lepus SUV screeched to a sudden halt as his foot jammed down on the brake pedal, a chorus of angry car-horns blaring in its wake.

The woodchuck didn't hear any of it.

"He did WHAT?"

Lieutenant Albert Tufts, ZPD Cybercrimes was studying his laptop screen, reading the morning news, when a popup window appeared in the upper-right corner

Ofcr. Lrdnr, ZPD CyCr;

"Bos, U there? MSGs frm AGs ofc & chf Bgo - C-rus prob."
Tufts let out a small chitter and typed.

ZPD CyCr:
"Ys. M Hr. Btr B Gd,"

His next words weren't typed but spoken out loud...very loudly, and to no one in particular.

"He did WHAT?"

Nick Wilde had just finished his breakfast and put the dishes in the sink, (no mean feat, considering it was already stacked halfway to the ceiling,) He was just getting ready to call his mother when his cell-phone beat him to the punch and started buzzing in his paw. Grateful for any excuse to put off the thing he'd been dreading since last night, he answered without even looking to see who it was.

It turned out to be…

"Lieutenant Tufts?" he said, ears standing upright. What the...? Wasn't that Kaibab squirrel supposed to loathe him? Then, what the heck was he calling Nick at home for? "Sir, why are you...?"

His question ended in a fox scream.

"He did WHAT?"

Judy Hopps was in the middle of brushing her teeth when her cell-phone rang, and so she was unable to get to it in time. When she finally did, she saw that she had missed a call from her partner...and that he had also left her a text. 'Call me back, ASAP!'

The grey-furred bunny-doe frowned; it wasn't especially unusual for Nick to call her at this time of the morning ...only what the heck was so dang urgent?

She pressed the call-back button and waited. When he picked up, Nick dispensed with any greeting and gave her the news straight away.

Judy nearly pitched over backwards.

"He did WHAT?"

Erin Hopps was a lucky young rabbit, if she hadn't forgotten her sun-hat and gone back to her room to get it, Judy's call would have caught her in the presence of her mother and two of her siblings. (It was her turn to help out at the produce stand today.) She had just grabbed it when Bunny Raitt's voice warbled from her smart-phone, "Let's give 'em something to talk about..."

Erin pulled it out and saw Judy's name on the ID display. Oh, sweet cheeze n' crackers, NOW what...another video?

She thumbed the 'accept' button.

"Hey Jude, I can only talk for a few min..."

That was as far as the young doe-bunny got, before she was screaming even louder than Nick.

"He did WHAT?"

"He escaped, sis," Judy repeated, sounding almost as if she couldn't believe it herself, "Conor
Lewis escaped from custody last night. I'm on my way to the precinct right now to meet with Nick
and Chief Bogo."

Chapter End Notes

**Author's note:**

Okay, I admit it; I played rather shamelessly with the timeline of how a real prison release works in this one, but if I'd 'told it like it is', this episode would be 150 pages long, and probably the most boring thing I've ever written.

A 'Rabbit' – Prison slang for a habitual escape artist.

To 'Go Rabbit' – Prison slang for making an escape.
Judy Hopps cracked open the door to Chief Bogo's office—and immediately squelched a groan. What was that she’d said to Erin on the phone a few minutes ago…something about a meeting between her, Nick, and the Chief?

Ehhh, wrong!

"Sweet cheez n' crackers, it's packed like a clown car in here," Judy marveled as Nick followed her through the door. Right away she saw Rudy Gamsbart, Attorney General Sayarov and George Schatten, (the latter banished to a chair at the back of the room.) Also in attendance was Jorge Reyes, the jaguar who'd brought Conor down to the precinct lobby, leaning against a wall with his arms crossed. Bob Sparks, the donkey who'd been on the reception desk the previous evening, was here as well …fidgeting constantly and looking at his watch. Claire Swinton was also present—no surprise there, since she'd been the one who'd uncovered Conor's escape—and Albert Tufts was once again perched on a makeshift seat atop Chief Bogo's desk.

There was exactly one unoccupied chair left in the office but, fortunately for Nick and Judy, it was large-mammal size—big enough to share. Otherwise, one of them would likely have been left standing.

"Probably me," Judy thought to herself, a sardonic smile etching its way across her features. (Casual chivalry had never been a certain red fox's long suit.)

Several nods greeted them as they entered, with maybe a grunt or two thrown in. And then Chief Bogo picked up from where he'd left off when the door opened.

"I simply can't believe this," he said, pressing his half-moon glasses against his face; scrutinizing
the document in his hooves as though the writing was barely legible, "If I didn't know better, I'd swear this was the genuine article. Look at the details, every date and time stamp is right on the mark. Even the seal for the Clerk of the Zootopia Supreme Court is correct; how the devil did the Phantom DO it?"

"Even for him it was a fairly involved process," Albert Tufts chittered, pointing at the papers, "He went to a *lot* of trouble to create that forgery."

The head of the ZPD Cybercrimes Unit looked particularly haggard this morning—but also equally determined; Conor Lewis and his mentor might have won this round, but they weren't going to win the match, not if he had anything to say about it.

"First," the Kaibab squirrel explained, "the Phantom registered a fake website, an exact duplicate of the Zootopia Supreme Court web-page, but with a slightly different web address."

"You can DO that?" Judy Hopps asked, incredulous. Tufts responded to her question with a look that had 'dumb bunny' written all over it.

"It's actually a pretty common web-scam," he said, "There's even a name for it, typosquatting. Anyway, in the next step, the Phantom used his duplicate website to forward that bogus document the chief is holding to the city jail office. I think you all know what happened next."

Bogo slapped the paper down on his desk, "I still can't credit it," he grumbled, to no one in particular. If Lieutenant Tufts looked drawn this morning, the Chief looked positively bedraggled, (but then he knew something the others didn't; Conor Lewis's escape from custody might be the *least* of their worries right now.)

"It's been done before, actually," Claire Swinton put in, raising a pair of fingers, "at least twice that I know of; I heard about it from my Lieutenant, back when I was working corrections, First one happened over in the UK. A bank hustler named Neil Moose somehow managed to get his hooves on a smartphone while he was behind bars. And then using that phone he was able to build a duplicate website for the Southpaw County Court. And *then*—see if this sounds familiar—he used it to send an e-mail to the Fawndsworth Prison Administrators, saying he'd been granted bail. They let him out, and the scam wasn't discovered until three days later when some lawyers showed up to interview him."

Everyone regarded each other for a second; a smartphone… it was *that* easy? Chief Bogo was staring at the pig-cop as if she'd dropped dead right in front of him and then come back as a ghost.

"You said it's been done at least twice before; what was the other time?" It was Rudy Gamsbart.

Swinton's face hardened and her features darkened, "That time was a lot more serious, a couple of felons serving time in the Furrida State Pen, Joe Lekins and Charles Pawlker; they managed to get out on a fake release-order, too." She began to unconsciously massage her knuckles. "Unlike Neil Moose though, they had some help. One of the other inmates taught them how to create fake documents on the prison's time-share computer, and they had someone on the outside to deliver it to the prison office." She let out small snort. "In Pawlker and Lekins's case, though, it wasn't just a release on bail; they were let go free and clear. The cops finally caught up with them in a motel room about month after their escape…before they could hurt anyone else, thank God." She looked directly at Bogo. "These were two very bad individuals Chief. Forget Neil Moose, he was only a bank-scammer; those Furrida jerks were both doing life for Murder-1."

A chorus of horrified gasps filled the office—none louder than from Chief Bogo himself. A pair of **convicted killers** had managed a prison break by way of a forged release order? If
someone *that* dangerous could get away with it…suddenly Conor Lewis's escape from custody seemed a great deal less implausible.

And yet…

"And the prison authorities just accepted the order without question?" Bogo was even more incredulous.

Claire Swinton's expression turned lopsided.

"With all due respect sir, corrections is a whole 'nother ballgame from police work. If you're correctional officer and you get a written order from that high up the chain of command, your only answer is, 'Yes, sir, yes sir, done and done, sir'…unless you want to take quick trip to the superintendent's office.' She looked over at the jaguar, parked against the wall, "Am I right, Reyes?"

"What she said, Jefe." the jaguar answered, nodding in the Chief's direction.

"Well, thank God we've got you on our team," Rudy Gamsbart said, offering Swinton a thumbs-up, "or we might not have caught THIS escape until later."

Claire Swinton had arrived back the precinct at about 6:00 that morning, having spent the night on a stakeout up in Old Growth City. (Someone had called in a tip that a gang of burglars was planning to hit a coin exchange…a washout, the thieves never showed.)

Crossing the Precinct-1 lobby, on the way to the locker-room, the pig-cop had been surprised to see Benjamin Clawhauser, heading in the opposite direction. What, now? Wasn't this the time when that plus-size cheetah usually arrived for work?

"Hey, Clawhauser, where you going?" she'd called out to him.

"Home," the big cat yawned, nodding over his shoulder at the hippo behind the reception desk, "Higgins is covering for me today."

"Really, how come?" Swinton had asked. Benjamin Clawhauser usually missed work about as often as the Palm Hotel lagoon froze over.

He yawned again, wider this time.

"I had to pull a double shift last night. Grevy called in sick with laminitis and the Chief asked me to fill in for him down in the property room."

"Ouch, dullsville," the pig-cop had winced; she'd been assigned to the property room once and found it about as interesting as counting marbles in a jar.

"Oh, I don't know, I kind of enjoyed it," the oversized cheetah had said, "and it wasn't all just paperwork and inventory. Did you know they let the kid who bit Nick Wilde out of jail last night?"

"They did *WHAT*?" Swinton had squealed, drawing stares from several of the other animals in the lobby. She hadn't cared; she had worked the Lewis case, she had been there when they'd taken him in…and now they'd up and let the kid walk, for what possible reason?

"They let him go—*why*?" she'd demanded. Caught off-guard by the vehemence of her response, Clawhauser hadn't answered for a few seconds. When he did, he'd sounded as if he were trying to excuse his own behavior in returning the young fox's belongings.
"There was an e-mail from the clerk of the Supreme Court…" he'd said, and that was all it had taken to arouse Claire Swinton's former-correctional-officer's instincts. She'd immediately gone upstairs to the youth jail and asked to see the release-order. Luckily for her, the Lieutenant in charge had been an old friend from back in the day, and had happily printed out a copy for her.

At first, everything had seemed to be hunky-dory, the e-mail had looked completely genuine, with many pointed references to the details of the case, including one or two that Swinton hadn't known before. (Judge Schatten had ordered the Lewis kid put in V-3 restraint? Sheesh…she'd only seen that done to a prisoner once in her entire career…and that individual had sent two other officers to the ER, and a third one to the morgue.)

Even so, the document had seemed to be in perfect order…and yet there was something wrong with it, some tiny, itching detail the pig-cop couldn't quite nail down.

She'd been just about to give up when she'd spotted it…the URL at the top of the page, http://ztp/clerk/

Waaiiiit a minute; shouldn't that have been city.gov?" Borrowing a computer terminal she had entered the web-address, and immediately gotten a '404 Error' message. That was when the memory of Neil Moose and the two Furrida inmates came flooding back into her head…and she'd known at once what had happened.

The Lieutenant's phone had had a direct line to Chief Bogo's office, and this time Swinton didn't bother asking; she had called the Chief immediately and given him the news point blank; Conor Lewis had escaped from jail, using a fake release order. Making that declaration on such scant evidence had been a bold, perhaps even reckless move on her part—but when you had a fugitive on the run, every second counted.

And in the end, her gamble had paid off; the clerk of the Zootopia Supreme Court had since confirmed that no such release order had been forwarded from his office. Yes, yes…a motion to dismiss had been filed, but the court had ruled against it.

"Fine," George Schatten's exasperated voice burst from the far corner of the room, "but those other three fugitives were all adults, the Lewis boy is just a kid."

Albert Tufts gave the woodchuck an almost pitying look.

"Well, yes…but then Mr. Moose didn't have outside help and the Furrida boys had only very limited computer access." He lifted an eyebrow at the woodchuck "Don't tell me you've already forgotten who the Lewis kid was working for when we nabbed him."

He had assumed his most patronizing manner—and for once almost no one had a problem with it. They were all of one mind where the Honorable Judge George Schatten was concerned, 'If YOU hadn't put that kid in V-3 restraint…!"

"All right, fine, but a dismissal of all charges?" The woodchuck refused to back down, "I can see the Lewis boy getting out on bail or a writ of habeas corpus, but conning the city jail mammals into thinking the charges had been dropped? I'm sorry, that's completely unacceptable." He said this while looking at Jorge Reyes, the only correctional officer present.

Or…not quite; there was also a former correctional officer in here—and she didn't much like what she'd just heard.

"Lekins and Pawlker pulled it off," Claire Swinton reminded him sharply, "as a matter of fact, they
got out on a something even crazier than a Motion to Dismiss, a Motion to Correct An Illegal Sentence."

That finally did it; George Schatten took his seat again—and Rudy Gamsbart took the floor.

"Even if the Phantom is behind that fake release order…all right, that explains why it looks like the real deal, but it still doesn't tell us how he knew so much." (In the wake of Conor Lewis's escape, everyone had taken to calling the young fox's mentor by his old, original name.)

He held out a hoof in Bogo's direction, motioning for the document the Cape buffalo was holding. When he had it, he held it aloft like exhibit 'A'.

"I mean…have you read this thing; The Phantom knew almost every single detail of the case. Heck, he even…” he stopped and looked around the room. "Were any of you aware that when the Lewis kid first came to Zootopia, he arrived here by plane…and that he claims to have had an encounter with Judge Schatten during that flight? No? Neither was I until now—but the Phantom knew, and where in all creation did he get that from? Where did he get any of it?"

It was a rhetorical question and it was greeted by an appropriate silence, finally broken by Attorney General Sayarov.

"Well, it's fairly obvious isn't it?" the ibex said, throwing up his hooves in frustration, "He hacked into the ZPD database, most likely my office's database too….and the Supreme Court's database, while we're at it."

Chief Bogo immediately shook his head.

"But there're items in that document he could only have learnt by accessing the secure database." He waved a hoof at the document Gamsbart was holding, "For example, Officer McHorn's admission the Lewis boy likely didn't hear his order to stop. How did The Phantom manage to get hold of that information? The ZPD's secure database isn't connected to the internet. Err, what was that word you had for it again, Lieutenant?"

He was looking at Albert Tufts, who avoided his gaze for a second, and then cleared his throat.

"Uh, the word you're looking for is 'airgapped' Chief…but, um, as far as how the Phantom got into the secure database, I-I'm afraid my department has to take responsibility for that one."

All eyes turned to the Kaibab squirrel. Judy nudged Nick in the ribs, giving him a quizzical look. Albert Tufts….accepting responsibility? That was like Benjamin Clawhauser turning down a fresh box of doughnuts.

He only glanced at her and mouthed the word, 'Later'

Tufts, meanwhile, was wringing his paws like a schoolkit who hadn't done his homework and was about to be called on by the teacher.

Finally, he said, "Remember that disposable cellphone the Lewis kid had with him? We could never figure out why he didn't break it as soon as he knew we were onto to him. Our best guess was it was his only link to The Phantom, only…that didn't quite wash because he also had that laptop with him."

He sat back and shut his eyes tightly for about three seconds…and then opened them again, looking at nobody.
"Well-I-Il, now we know why he didn't destroy it; it seems that cellphone was infected with malware—and when we monitored the Lewis kid's phone-call to his lawyer, it jumped onto our system, and…"

He had more to say, but was cut off by a chorus of groans, growls and bugles. Nick Wilde fox-screamed and Claire Swinton's squeal was like a tire burning rubber.

"Of all the…!" Chief Bogo seemed to have inflated to half again his normal size, "You didn't scan that phone for worms before you let the boy use it?"

"Uh, 'virus' Chief, not 'worm'," Tufts corrected nervously, "Worms are spread via the internet, not though physical…"

"Worm, virus, I don't care!" Bogo slammed his hoof down on the desktop. "How the deuce could you possibly make such a basic mistake?" He was looming over the hapless squirrel like a thundercloud, (much to Nick Wilde's delight, Judy couldn't help but notice.)

"How the heck were we supposed to know?" Tufts had already recovered some of his composure. "No one's ever pulled a stunt like that before."

"You knew you were dealing with The Phantom's go-fer," the big Cape Buffalo was having none of it, "and you knew how clever he was. Why didn't you…?"

"Excuse me…Chief?" Rudy Gamsbart was on his feet again, "With all due respect sir, playing the blame-game will get us nowhere."

"Hear, hear," the ibex seated next to him concurred, "Let's worry about recapturing our suspect first, before we start pointing fingers."

Bogo gave them each a simmering look, but yielded with a reluctant nod. For once, he wasn't the ranking mammal in here; Attorney General Sayarov held that distinction, (and besides that, he was right.).

"Well, okay, that's how he got into the ZPD computer, but how did he get into the secure database?" Nick Wilde spoke up for the first time. Was he serious Judy wondered, or was he only trying to tighten the screws on Lieutenant Tufts? She finally decided it was little bit of both.

"Well…” if the Kaibab squirrel had been wearing a collared shirt, he'd have been tugging at it with a finger, "that's where we keep the records of all monitored phone calls, so…"

"Right," Chief Bogo snorted "Give us the details then, Lieutenant, the bare bones if you please. After that virus got loose in our database, what happened next?"

"Well, I have to admit it was one cleverly constructed piece of malware," Tufts sounded almost envious of his phantom opponent. "What it did was search for any files containing the keywords 'Conor' and 'Lewis', not just in our database but the AG's office as well. As you know sir, the two systems are interconnected. Anyway, it ordered the computer to make the backup copies of all these files, and then tagged them for easy recovery." He glanced over at Igor Sayarov. "That's the one weakness in our secure database, Mr. Attorney General; it uses cloud storage for all backup files. All the malware had to do was put a tag on each file as it was uploaded, which it did, and the Phantom was able to retrieve them from the cloud with no difficulty."

Another round of groans swept the office, and then Gamsbart had a question for the squirrel.

"May I assume that the secure database wasn't the only one The Phantom was able to penetrate?"
There was no sarcasm in his inquiry, no acid, but Albert Tufts grimaced as the chamois had just stepped on his tail.

"Yes sir, it infiltrated both the ZPD and the AG's office mainframes." There were more groans but not as loud this time; by now the Kaibab squirrel's revelations were no longer coming as a surprise.

"And…the Office of the Clerk of the Zootopia Supreme Court?" Igor Sayarov prompted.

"Yes, but that was hacked separately," Tufts responded...very quickly. "We believe the Phantom got into that database through the use of a phishing e-mail. In any event, it had nothing to do with us."

That may have been true, but the ibex was far from satisfied.

"All right, but where did he get the information Rudy Gamsbart was referring to just now...about the Lewis boy claiming to have met Judge Schatten on an airline flight?" He glanced briefly in Chief Bogo's direction and then looked back at the squirrel, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but that wasn't in any of our databases, am I right?"

Tufts began to fidget again.

"No, uh…it wasn't; that was probably something The Phantom made up." It was a half-hearted conjecture at best, and Nick Wilde was all over it in an eyeblink.

"Actually, I don't think so, Lieutenant." He raised a paw and then stood up, "I think that info's for real. And I'll bet I know where it came from too—from Vernon J. Rodenberg's computer."

Once again, everyone was looking at each other, but this time half in contrition. Of course; that fake order to let Conor Lewis go had supposedly come in response to a motion filed by his attorney. Why wouldn't The Phantom have targeted the grey rat's computer—because they were supposed to be on the same side? Get real!

"Mmmmmm," Chief Bogo was frowning deeply, "Ah, yes…Mr. Rodenberg. D'you think he might have had anything to do with this?"

It was a question directed at Nick Wilde, (the diminutive defense attorney's former client,) but it was Rudy Gamsbart who answered it.

"He says he didn't and I believe him," the Zootopia Deputy Prosecutor said, drawing curious looks from several of the others.

It did not escape the chamois' notice, and he stood up and spread his arms.

"Look, there's probably nobody in this office who despises that rat as much as I do, but even I have to admit...that isn't the way he rolls. When I told him his client had gone rabbit on us—I beg your pardon, Officer Hopps—he was absolutely floored by the news. He's convinced he could have beaten the case if the Lewis kid had stayed put." His hooves went into his pockets and his mouth twisted sideways, "And truth be told, I'm not so sure he was wrong about that."

He said this while looking at Nick—and that brought Jorge Reyes into the discussion.

"Lissen zorro, I don't think you did this, but there something I gotta know." He leveled his gaze at the fox and lowered his voice slightly. "That deposition you're s'posed to have filed with the Supremes, saying you dunno for sure if the kid bit you on purpose. Thass fake too, right?"
"Yep, that's right I had nothing to do with it," Nick answered him, taking no offense. (Judy even thought he looked a little bit relieved, grateful to finally have it out in the open.)

"Kay, that's all I wanna know." The jaguar said. raising a paw, "No hard feelings, amigo?"

"No hard feelings," the red fox answered, happy to let it drop.

"What I still can't understand is this," Chief Bogo was trying to put the discussion back on track. He motioned for Rudy Gamsbart to return the documents, studied them for a second, and then slapped them with the back of his fingertips, "How in blazes did he get the signatures right? I should have sworn that every single one of these is the real thing."

"That's because they are," Albert Tufts piped up, wisely eschewing his air of superiority for once. "They're real sigs, copied and pasted from other documents; we see it all the time in online fraud cases." There were nods of understanding from several of the others, and a rare look of discomfiture on Chief Bogo's face; he should have figured that out for himself.

"So…the kid gets the release order," Attorney General Sayarov had taken over, "They clean him up and bring him down to the property room, where he gets everything back, including that laptop of his. Err, did you have any luck in cracking the encryption code by the way?" He was looking at Albert Tufts, who shook his head and chittered.

"No and we were never going to; the Lewis kid probably hit the kill switch as soon as he realized we were tailing him…and that laptop was so heavily encrypted the ZSA couldn't have broken it open."

"I see," The ibex answered him, "While we're on the subject, have we made any progress in figuring out how the Lewis boy came to realize we were on to him?"

"We're still looking into it, Mr. Attorney General," Tufts informed him blandly.

"In other words, 'no.'" Nick whispered in an aside to Judy.

For once, the doe-bunny didn't shush him. Something was going on here that she didn't quite like—but she was hanged if she could put her finger on it.

She could feel her nose twitching…

"All right," Sayarov was saying, "so next they bring him down to the lobby, but he can't leave until his legal guardian comes to collect him. The dispatcher makes a call to inform the animal…errr, what was his name again?"

It was an open question and Rudy Gamsbart answered it.

"Ruiter sir, Ton Ruiter…he's a PI, does work for Vern Rodenberg now and again—and for the record he wasn't involved in this either; he even has an alibi."

"Then who the devil was dispatch talking to?" It was Chief Bogo, speaking to Albert Tufts

"We don't know," the Kaibab squirrel admitted, "But whoever it was, he'd tinkered with his phone so that Officer Sparks could barely hear him and had to take most of it as a text message."

"So that Sparks wouldn't be able to tell the difference between his voice and whoever showed up to claim the kid," Claire Swinton grunted and folded her arms, "Clever."
That was Rudy Gamsbart’s cue to ask the $64 k question.

"All right, so if it wasn't Ton Ruiter who came to pick up the Lewis boy, then who the heck was it?"

Once again, the answer came from the Kaibab squirrel seated atop Chief Bogo's desk.

"Zuber driver named ehhh, Dominique Boischatte…or however it's pronounced. He's a meerkat, emigrated to Zootopia from Praiti a little over year ago."

That was good for an angry bugle from the Chief.

"What the...he wasn't even the same *species* as Ruiter?"

"No sir," Lieutenant Tufts answered, patiently, "but he was close enough for nobody to notice; the only difference in appearance between a meerkat and a yellow mongoose is that a meerkat has stripes on its back...and with a shirt on, they're not visible."

"But they still can't *smell* the same." Bogo was becoming exasperated. "Reyes, where's Reyes? Blast it, how could you have missed something like that?"

"Chief, please," the jaguar responded in a meek, wheedling voice, "I never even *seen* a yellow mongoose before; how'm I supposed to know what they smell like?"

"He's got a point, neither have I." Nick muttered in another aside to Judy. That was one the few drawbacks of living in a city as large and diverse as Zootopia; you could go through half a lifetime without knowing certain species even existed....even though you might pass within three feet of one on a daily basis.

"So what's the story with Mr....Boy-Chat, or whatever his name is?" Igor Sayarov had taken over again. "Am I right to assume he was an unwitting participant in this business?"

"Yes you are, sir." Tufts nodded deferentially "He got a message from Zuber dispatch, at approximately 15:30 yesterday afternoon, requesting a pick-up here at approximately 21:00 that evening and to expect a phone call about that time, telling him it was a go. It was a priority run, pre-paid deposit, and with a nice tip promised afterwards if he could manage it. He agreed and I think you can guess the rest; Zuber dispatch says they never sent any such message."

"I see, but how'd we catch up with Mr...er, Boischatte so quickly?" Sayarov had an ear cocked as he asked it.

Tufts' tail flipped up and down a couple of times.

"Even the Phantom doesn't get everything right Mr. Attorney General; he hacked into Boischatte's cell-phone and switched the info on his phone ID for Ton Ruiter's vital stats. That's why Officer Sparks there accepted it without question."

"That an' his eyes are goin'," Jorge Reyes interjected, "I must have told him twenny times, he needs to get himself some bifocals," He stopped, seemed to realize something and then looked mournfully in the wild ass's direction, "Sorry amigo, but it's for your own good, you know?"

"I understand," Sparks answered, looking anything *but* understanding, the only words he'd spoken since entering the office.

For her part, Judy Hopps almost wanted to scream. The officer on the reception desk when Conor
was let go just HAPPENED to have eye problems? Sweet cheez n' firecrackers, it was as if all the gods of misfortune had conspired to help that fox-kid make his escape.

That was when it hit her, the source of her uneasy feeling. She and Nick Wilde had been central to this investigation from day one…but since their arrival in the Chief's office, neither one of them had been asked even a single question; it had all been Tufts, Tufts, Tufts.

"Nick and I are nothing but spectators here," Judy realized with a sudden, fierce clarity. And the most likely reason was something the doe bunny didn't want to think about, but that she knew she couldn't avoid…

Thanks to Conor's escape from custody, the Attorney General's Office had more than enough to lock him up, with or without Nick Wilde's testimony. They didn't need the red fox anymore.

"Or me," Judy swallowed hard at the thought. The memory of her and Nick's exchange with Rudy Gamsbart in the courthouse annex now felt like a giant albatross around her neck. "Ohhh, why couldn't we have been more tactful?" she fumed at herself—but then she remembered her session with Dr. Hind.

Nope, not again; when the time came, she would make the case for her and Nick not to be frozen out of this—but at the same time she wouldn't make an issue out of it.

She would NOT rush in to try and fix this.

In the meantime, Lieutenant Tufts was explaining the Phantom's mistake; he'd forgotten to restore the original stats on Mr. Boischatte's phone after the meerkat left the precinct. When the Zuber driver had noticed the alteration, he'd returned at once to the ZPD to report the hack. (He had walked in right when Claire Swinton had been on the phone to the Chief.)

"What took him so long?" George Schatten demanded grumpily. That earned him another condescending look from the Kaibab squirrel.

"Who looks at their ID when they pull it out anyway?" Tufts asked him with a rhetorical shrug. "The only reason Boischatte even caught it is that when he tried to use his cell phone account to pay for a coffee at a Snarlbucks, the register kept rejecting it."

"What else did he have to say?" Igor Sayarov asked, after a quick scowl in Judge Schatten's direction.

Tufts brushed at his muzzle for a second.

"He says he dropped the Lewis boy off at the Palm Hotel Metro station at exactly 23:16 hours." He shifted uncomfortably in his chair, "and...that's where we lost him; no sign of the kid since."

Chief Bogo stared incredulous. "Not ONE of the station security cameras caught him?"

"Well we're still reviewing sir, but so far, nothing," Tufts was speaking in that 'mea culpa' voice again. "You have to remember that the Palm Hotel station is the third busiest metro-stop in the city...especially at that time of night, with the casino action starting to heat up. It would have been easy for a mammal of the Lewis boy's size to lose himself in the crowd. After that he could have boarded either a yellow or red-line train—or taken the Oasis Loop to the Agave Avenue station and snagged a blue-line train from there."

Judy Hopps immediately raised her paw.
"Lieutenant, I think I should point out that the Palm Hotel Station is the last stop the Bunnyburrow Express makes before it leaves Zootopia—and there would have been one running about that time."

"You think our little runaway might be trying to make for Bunnyburrow?" Nick Wilde asked from beside her.

Judy half shrugged, half shook her head,

"I doubt it, but it's a possibility we can't ignore," she said. "We know that he has …friends there."

She had deliberately avoided mentioning Erin's name; the last thing she wanted was for kid her sister to be dragged into this mess. As things stood anyway, Judy was going to have to call home to the Burrow and give the younger bunny a heads-up—just in case Conor did try to make contact with her. It was not a task she was looking forward to.

Then Nick stood up, "After the driver dropped him off, my guess is that the Lewis kid took the most direct route available to wherever he was he was going, and that he changed trains as few times as possible, if at all."

He was answered by a caustic look from Lieutenant Tufts, but Chief Bogo seemed intrigued.

"Why do you say that, Wilde?"

"The security cameras," the red fox answered him, "It's fairly easy to dodge the ones on the train-cars, but the ones on the station platforms, not so much. They're a lot tougher to spot—especially since the City started camouflaging them."

"Then our boy probably didn't take a blue-train," Claire Swinton offered, "He'd have had to change stations, just to get to it."

"Still possible that he did, but I think you're right," Rudy Gamsbart nodded approvingly…while completely ignoring Nick Wilde. He seemed wholly unaware that Swinton was only expanding on the fox's suggestion.

Chief Bogo, however, was willing to give credit where credit was due. "Right, I want the Burrow County Sheriff's office alerted immediately; I don't think our young miscreant is headed there either, but as Officer Hopps just said, we can't ignore the possibility. Also, I want a full review of all Metro Station security camera footage from last night, starting at 23:00 hours. Red and yellow lines first, and then the blue line if nothing turns up; yes, Lieutenant?"

Albert Tufts had his paw up.

"Sir, we can shorten that search considerably by using Impalto…but I'll need your authorization first." Like many another police department, the ZPD kept a tight rein on its facial recognition software; the potential for abuse was simply too great for anything else. (Some cities, such as Boarlando, had even quit using face-recognition tech altogether.)

Chief Bogo spent a short, sulfurous moment, considering the squirrel's request, and then reluctantly nodded his assent.

"Right then, I'll agree…but only for this one application. And I'll still want a manual search of that security footage."

"Yes sir," Tufts agreed, obviously unhappy with the big Cape buffalo's compromise decision. "On
the subject of searches, I also think we should get hold of the Zootopia Health Sciences University genetics lab and instruct them to put the Conor Lewis DNA match on the fast-track."

Rudy Gamsbart blew an incredulous note.

"You haven't done that already?"

"We would have," the Kaibab squirrel responded with an insouciant shrug, "but ZHSU charges an arm and a tail for that service. Authorize the funding and it's a done deal, but until the city…"

"Authorized!" Igor Sayarov practically shouted, coming halfway out of his seat, "Find out who that kid really is…I want to know yesterday!"

"Done and done," the Lieutenant nodded, pleased…while Nick and Judy regarded each other with looks of consternation. More and more, it was beginning to appear as if they were being shut out of the loop.

Still, even Judy had to admit that the DNA match offered the best chance of finding and apprehending the young silver-fox.

"In the meantime, we'll be interviewing all of Mr. Lewis's known associates," Tufts was saying. And then turning in his chair, he fastened his gaze on a thoroughly nonplused Nick and Judy, "starting with you Officer Hopps…and you, Officer Wilde."

Judy swallowed hard…not for herself, but did those 'known associates' include her younger sister Erin? She prayed to God that the answer was no.

Even worse, now she knew for certain; the Conor Lewis investigation would henceforth be handled by ZPD Cybercrimes. She and her partner had been officially relegated to the sidelines.

Tufts, meanwhile, had already moved on.

"We've also contacted our consulting psychologist, , and asked him to work up a psych-profile on the kid," he said, speaking to the Attorney General. "I don't know how much he'll be able come up with, given the limited amount of information we have, but it's worth a try."

At this, even Judy had to nod her agreement, all too often in police work it was the longshot that crossed the finish line first. She looked sideways at Nick for a second; the fox's face was a waxwork mask, but his tail had turned into bottle-brush. He didn't like this any more than she did, but like her, he knew enough to save it for when they could see Chief Bogo privately.

The rest of the briefing went more or less by the numbers; instructions were issued to alert the other precincts, and Conor Lewis's picture was to be posted on the ZPD video kiosks, located throughout the city. Chief Bogo then issued an order that from now on, detainees housed in the city jail would no longer be permitted to make calls, using their own cell-phones.

"The ZCLU'S gonna LOVE that." Jorge Reyes observed with an acerbic growl.

"They can cry me a river," Bogo snapped, "The order stands."

"Are we going to go to the press with this?" Rudy Gamsbart asked, drawing an immediate scowl from the Cape buffalo. Like most police brass, Chief Bogo trusted the media about as much as he did an email from a Ligerian bank president. The fourth estate might agree to help out…or they might decide to give themselves a ratings boost at the ZPD's expense. 'Clever Young Fox Makes Chumps Out Of Cops,' he could just imagine the headlines.
Igor Sayarov, being a politician as well as a prosecutor, was somewhat less wary of the media—but only somewhat.

"Yes, but let's not give them all the down and dirty details." He said, "Send them the kid's picture, tell them he escaped using forged documents, and after that no comment. We want this to make the news, but not headlines."

"Well," Bogo's frown deepened, "I still don't like it, but honestly, I can't see how we're going to bring this boy—or his mentor—to justice without getting the public involved. So, all right, then."

"What about the Zootopia Banker's Association," George Schatten queried from over in his corner, "How do they feel about this?"

Judy Hopps felt her nose beginning to twitch again. As much as she despised this woodchuck, he had just raised a good point. The ZBA had been the driving force behind this investigation almost since day one; they were going to have some thoughts on the matter.

"They haven't been notified yet," Chief Bogo answered tersely, and Igor Sayarov nodded unsurprised.

"Better let me handle them then, Chief; I know how to talk to those mammals." His expression abruptly soured, "and they'll probably want to offer a reward for any—yes, I know!" he interrupted himself, noting the horrified faces, spread out, all around the room. "The last thing we need is a thousand-and-one crank phone calls coming in. That's why I should be the one to notify the Bankers Association."

"They're all yours, then." Chief Bogo told him, grateful to be relieved of the burden.

That was when Claire Swinton raised her hoof...addressing the possibility that had been hanging over the conference like a vulture ever since it convened.

"Someone has to bring this up, and it might as well be me," she said. "We all know the Phantom is the animal behind Conor Lewis's escape. And—forgive for saying this—there's only one sure way for him to be certain that the Lewis kid will never give him up."

A sickly silence filled the office. Judy was staring aghast at the pig-cop and Nick Wilde looked as if HE wanted to bite somebody. A flood tide of rebuttals came swirling into the doe-bunny's mind, but she was unable to give voice to any of them. Like it or not, Swinton was right.

"If that's the case," Rudy Gamsbart finally said, looking very grim, "Then we're probably too late already. If the Phantom's plan was to silence Mr. Lewis after helping him to escape, then once the boy was out of here, there was absolutely no reason for him to hesitate; in fact, the sooner, the better."

Judy stepped on her foot to keep it from thumping and bit her lip to keep from screaming; this was yet another unavoidable truth.

It was also the last point to be raised...and any doubts she might have had as to who had been in charge here were instantly dispelled when Igor Sayarov stood up to give the summary.

"I don't know why the Lewis boy chose to make a run for it, when he had a fair chance at beating this case. I don't know, and frankly, I don't care."

Judy stepped on her foot again; who was the Attorney General kidding? He knew why Conor had bolted—or at least he must have had an idea; everyone in this office was likely harboring the same
thought.

That DNA test; when the results came back what would it tell them?

"What I do know," Sayarov went on, "is that this was not an opportunistic, spur-of-the-moment escape. It was planned in advance—well in advance. Even before the Lewis boy was taken into custody, the Phantom had the mechanism in place to set him free."

The corners of his mouth stretched backwards into a thin, flat line, and then turned downwards.

"And there is no way…no…way that Mr. Lewis was not an active participant in his escape from custody. He knew exactly what was happening when he walked out of here. When we get him back—and we will, make no mistake—the kiddie gloves are coming off. He'll get a plea deal if he gives us The Phantom, but he can forget about taking a walk. THAT possibility is off the table… and that is all I have to say at the present time."

When the meeting broke up, Judy lingered at the door, along with Nick, hoping to get a chance to buttonhole the Chief.

As things turned out, he beat them to the draw.

"Hopp, Wilde? Need you to stay behind for a moment," he said, when most of the others had gone.

As soon as he closed the door, they saw Bogo hunch his shoulders and his head lolling downwards; Atlas, failing in his effort to hold up the world on his shoulders.

"I know what you're going to say," the big Cape buffalo sighed, turning a weary face in their direction, "and I tried, I argued until I was blue in the mouth. It was no use, the Attorney General wouldn't budge; he wants ZPD Cybercrimes to handle this, and he's got City Hall backing him."

Judy winced as though stung. Technically at least, Albert Tufts had every right to demand that the Conor Lewis investigation be given to his department. The kid had escaped from custody by way of a forged e-mail and a computer virus—and that put his case squarely within ZPD Cybercrimes' field of operation.

But still—what about that malware his guys had found on Conor's cell-phone….after it had already infected several crucial databases? Lieutenant Tufts hadn't merely shot himself in the foot with that one, he'd just about blown it clean off.

And nobody knew that better than Nick Wilde.

"He wants Cybercrimes on this case or us OFF of it?" he growled, bitterly.

Judy stared at him, horror-struck. Oh boy, now they were going to get it.

Or…not; for once, Chief Bogo took no umbrage, responding to the fox's inquiry with an exasperated question of his own.

"Great buffalo chips, what the devil did you two say to Rudy Gamsbart anyway?"

"Nothing that wasn't the truth," Judy told him, defiantly jutting her chin. On this issue, she stood shoulder to shoulder with her partner.

But that, however, brought an even touchier subject to the fore, one that would require some serious tact.
"Chief?" she ventured cautiously, "You've always been straight with Officer Wilde and me, so please be straight with us now. Did that video...the one from Sahara Square have anything to do with this?"

She saw Bogo's head sag once again, and knew at once that she'd hit the mark...that video of her and Nick had had a great deal to do with why they were no longer part of the Conor Lewis case—except as witnesses.

'Attorney General Sayaraov never came right out and said it," he told them, looking from her to Nick and back again, "But yes, I should think it did; he's rather enamored of Mr. Hardesty's radio and television programmes isn't he?"

"So he's not even going to object to that hyrax running a police surveillance video on his show...without authorization?" Nick seemed to be barely keeping his fangs in check.

Bogo turned a slow face in his direction.

"As a matter of fact Wilde, the Attorney General's office was the first to demand that Fuzztube take down that video—so you can imagine how Mr. Sayarov felt about seeing it broadcast on cable." The Chief's voice was patient but his brow was flatlining; Nick was starting to push him towards the edge. "But that doesn't mean he's not been affected by what he's seen and heard...and it's not only about that video any more, you know."

"No Chief, it isn't," Judy Hopps admitted, intervening quickly before Nick had the both of them on parking duty—or worse. Just to make sure, she shot him a harsh look. He gave it right back, but at least kept his mouth shut.

"So, what should we do?" she asked, speaking to Chief Bogo again.

He nodded towards the door.

"Go make y' statements to Lieutenant Tufts—and this time, at least try to be a little diplomatic with it." He said this while staring hard at Nick, and then repeated, "Go make your statements...and then go home. You've been at it nonstop for more than a week haven't you? So go home and get some rest. I'll see you at morning briefing, day after tomorrow."

Nick started to raise a finger, but then checked himself, (much to Judy Hopps' relief.) He seemed, at last, to have realized that he was treading on thin ice.

"Right, off you go, then." Bogo opened the door, holding out a hoof in the direction of the space beyond. He watched Nick and Judy trudge resignedly past him, and then closed it and returned to his desk, heaving another sigh as he heaved himself into his chair.

Cops didn't come a lot more jaded than Chief Bogo; in his years with the ZPD, he'd seen things that could make cynics out of visionaries. Nonetheless, it had never been in his nature to hold out on the officers who worked under him.

'You've always been straight with us, sir.' Judy Hopps had said. Yes, but he hadn't been quite so forthcoming just now, had he? No, not completely, not entirely. The truth of the matter was, he hadn't argued for Hopps and Wilde's inclusion in the Conor Lewis investigation even half so strenuously as he'd intimated.

Not because of Rock Hardesty or that surveillance video—not even because of their confrontation with Rudy Gamsbart. No, it was because, very shortly, he might need their assistance with something far more serious than Conor Lewis.
He glanced at the pile of folders, stacked up on the left side his desk.

FAR more serious…

Chapter End Notes

**Author's Note:**
Neil Moore's (Neil Moose's) escape from Wandsworth (Fawndsworth) Prison through the use of a smartphone actually happened. Joe Jenkin's (Lekins) and Charles Walker's (Pawker's) escape from the Franklin Correctional Institute in Florida was also an 'actual event', (as they say in the movies.) These were also fairly recent occurrences, taking place in 2014 and 2013 respectively. I have attempted to describe them here as accurately as possible.

You can find more information by going to…


(Pages 7 and 9.)
Chapter Summary

Conor launches a preemptive strike, while Judy Hopps does damage control

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 10 – When A Fox Goes Rabbit
(Continued…Pt. 5)

Zootopia, 02:07 Hours—An Undisclosed Location

Conor Lewis stumbled out of the elevator and into his loft, propping himself up on his bike, like a feeble, old fox with his walker. He had run out of adrenaline more than an hour ago and the crash had hit him hard. His limbs felt like overloaded sash-weights and his joints cried out for mercy with every little movement that he made. When he blinked, his eyes kept trying to stay shut.

He had never wanted sleep so badly.

Looking back on the past few hours, the young silver-fox might have felt elated; he had done it, he had pulled off a successful jailbreak and made it safely home.

On the other paw, even if the ZPD somehow never caught up with him, (an unlikely scenario, even he had to admit,) the life he had known was effectively over. He'd be expelled from the Performing Arts Academy, his apprenticeship at the guitar co-op was done, his partnership with Finnick was finished, and the next time he saw Nick Wilde and/or Judy Hopps, he had better see them first, unless he wanted to go back to jail.

And on a related subject, he would probably never see Erin Hopps again—except from a distance, and without her knowing he was there. Instead of euphoria, he might have felt deeply depressed.

In fact, Conor was experiencing neither emotion, only an all-consuming desire to crawl into bed and bury himself under the covers for the next ten thousand years.

At the moment however, sleep was a luxury he couldn't afford. He had tasks to perform and quickly—before the ZPD discovered his release order had been a forgery.

Closing the entrance-gate behind him, Conor shambled into the kitchen area, leaving his bike propped up against the wall of the Furaday cage he called home. (He could stash his ride in the
After a yawn that felt like it would go on forever, he took off his backpack and extracted his laptop computer, laying it on the kitchen table, and flipping it open. Entering the decryption code, he typed in a set of instructions, activating the loft’s voice command system and clicking on the button marked MVO, (My Voice Only.)

Then he spoke aloud.

"Mother, lockdown the loft; digital-fortress mode. Winnie, Tangled, Foxtrot—Seven, Three, Six."

A series of audible clicks followed and then the LED lights beside the Furaday cage door and the elevator controls shifted from green to red.

Conor's living space, always secure to begin with, was now doubly protected against all possible intrusions, electronic or otherwise. Any incoming phone calls and texts would be blocked, anyone trying to email him would get a 'mailer daemon' reply, and loft's database was now ringed by a firewall so impenetrable, it could have served as the Tenth Circle of Hell. On the floors below and also on the exterior, the CCTV cameras had come fully awake, along with the motion and scent detectors placed discreetly throughout the structure. If the team that torched the Interspecies Recycling plant were to show up here right now, the alarms would trip before they could even begin to find a way inside. (Not a huge surprise; the animal who'd set up and outfitted this place had been an engineering genius.)

Getting up from the table, Conor went to the trash bins beside the sink and fumbled in his pockets for a moment. After several seconds, he brought out the crushed remains of the phone he'd used to plant a bot in the ZPD computer.

He had smashed it shortly after the Zuber driver had left him at the Palm Hotel metro station. (Not immediately; he'd needed to find a spot with no other animals or cc cameras watching.) Normally, he would have dumped the broken pieces right then and there, but not while he was on the run. If he'd done that—and if the police had somehow recovered them—it would have given them a clue as to the whereabouts of their young fugitive; 'Conor Lewis was here!' (To say nothing of what the remnants themselves might yield, if ZPD Cybercrimes ever got their mitts on them.)

Because of this, it went without saying that Conor didn't want anyone recovering those cell-phone remnants in the vicinity of his loft—which was why he dumped them in the refuse bin reserved for the incinerator.

After turning out his pockets to make sure nothing was left, he strolled over to the refrigerator and grabbed two FoxStar energy drinks, slamming them in quick succession. The name notwithstanding FoxStar was not a regular Conor Lewis pick-me-up; he might down one of these nasty-sweet bad boys in a blue moon, if that. ('Energy' drink—hah! Try caffeine rush drink.)

Today, however, was anything but regular. There were things the young fugitive fox had to get done and, in order to accomplish them, he needed to stay alert; dang the torpedoes, full speed ahead, and all that.

After tossing the energy drink cans in the other trash-bin, Conor's next stop was the Furrison Hotel, the igloo-shaped, woven-copper-cable, Furaday-cage-within-a-Furaday-cage that dominated the center of the loft. Placing his paw against the access panel, he recited the password phonetically and waited for the click before entering. Inside the Furrison, the Beast was already booted up and waiting for him. (It was programmed to do that when the loft went into digital fortress mode… although it would require the flick of a manual switch to allow it to connect with the internet.)
Settling himself into Furrison's zero-gravity chair, Conor tilted back into a comfortable position and then slipped on a headset and a pair of high-end VR goggles and wireless control gloves.

Then he flipped the web connection into the on position and spoke into the headset's microphone, "Access ZPD database; door number three."

The computer obeyed at once, locating the infamous port 445—the hacker's favorite—in the ZPD computer. Working smoothly, it soon found the back door Conor had been referring to. This was not the same access point that the malware in his cellphone had created; it was a different door, one that Kieran McCrodon had planted in the ZPD computer more than three years previously. Anyone watching would have no doubt wondered; why bother to make a new back door, when you already had one in place? There were actually several good answers to that question.

First of all, the new back-door had been created for Guild's use, not his. Conor couldn't have made use of it any more than his online cohort could take advantage of the door he was using now. The idea was simple; based on the old saw of not keeping all of your eggs in one basket. If the ZPD somehow managed to track one of Conor or Guild's entry points to its source, it would only lead them to one hacker, not both.

More importantly, there was no way the ZPD was NOT going to realize they'd been hacked. When they found out that Conor's release order was bogus—and sooner or later, they had to—it'd take them all of two seconds to realize their database had been breached. And then it would take them only a little while longer to find the door used to hack their database, and shut it down.

BUT…if they found they'd been hacked by way of a new breach, they would look no further than the access point used to pull it off Once again, why would anyone plant a back door in a computer they'd already hacked? The answer was, the new door was the digital equivalent of a sacrifice fly; you might get thrown out but the runner on base would still make it home.

Even so, Conor knew he was taking a risk, even by going online. In digital fortress mode the loft was completely impenetrable to any electronic intrusion…but only as long as he stayed off the net and didn't make any phone-calls. Unfortunately, given his current situation, the former was not an option, (which was why The Beast booted up automatically in situations like this.) If the young silver fox wanted to remain free, he was going to HAVE to keep tabs on the ZPD's efforts to recapture him.

And that meant going back into their database, NOT the safest place for him to be right now. With or without having learned of his escape, ZPD Cybercrimes would still be on a heightened state of alert. They had busted an associate of The Phantom—they thought—and THAT animal wasn't going to just sit still and let justice take its course.

Even so, Conor felt he had no choice but to go once more unto the data-breach…and in any case he considered it a risk worth taking. Suppose his intrusion into the ZPD database was detected? They might kick him out easily enough, but then they'd have a jolly old time, trying run down their uninvited guest. Spotting a hacker and getting rid of him was one thing; tracing him to his lair, something altogether different, especially in this case Every single one of the loft's DSL lines was heavily shielded and the nearest Wi-Fi router was stashed in a basement nearly a mile away from here.

And just to get to those lines and routers, you had to go jump through a hundred procedural hoops and navigate your way past several all-but-impenetrable layers of security. At best, if they became aware of the hack, the ZPD Cybercrimes unit might be able to trace it to the young fox's web-hosting service—but after that, good luck, they were going to need it. This particular outfit was based in Croaratia and did a tremendous amount of business with less-than-savory individuals and
organizations. Suffice it to say they were not noted for being cooperative with law enforcement.

And by the time the cops got even that close, (which wasn't close at all,) Conor would be long gone with all of his digital footprints wiped away. This was NOT because he was some kind of computer genius; it was simply because it was just that easy…even for a kid his age. In the never-ending battle between hackers and law enforcement, 90% of the time, it's the hacker who holds the high ground.

Furthermore, if Conor Lewis wasn't anyone's cyber-wizard, he wasn't exactly a novice either. He had learned his skills at the feet of a living legend in the hacker community, Kieran McCrodon, aka The Druid In fact, today was not the first time he had been inside the ZPD computer. For the last three years, he'd been checking in on an irregular basis, searching for references to his name—both his real name and the one he used now, (and also the name of Dylan Yeats, the nom de guerre thrust upon him during his time of indentured servitude with The Company.)

Up until this morning, he'd found nothing in the ZPD database to raise an alarm bell…but now, well, now things were different. When he entered Conor Lewis in the ZPD's data-search window, a whole slew of documents appeared, floating in the digital ether like so many spectral souls. When he added the keyword 'escape' however, the herd thinned out considerably.

Scanning the documents quickly, (but not too quickly,) the young silver fox was soon exhaling a sigh of relief. There were numerous references to his status as an escape risk, (low to begin with, nonexistent after he was put in V-3 restraint,) but nothing to the effect that he had already escaped.

Do, re, me, so far, so good; but just to be on the safe side, Conor spoke into the headset once again. "Access, ZPD police scanner," and immediately fragments of chalky, staccato chatter filled his headset. He listened for perhaps ten minutes and, hearing no reference to himself, he switched off the police band and deactivated the VR Goggles, leaving the headset in place for the moment, so that he could deliver more verbal instructions.

First, however, he reached for the computer console and flicked the switch marked 'webcam' (like the outside DSL and Wi-Fi router lines, it could only be connected manually.)

Then he spoke again.

"Access webcam, no internet connection; one snapshot in ten seconds, another snapshot in fifteen seconds; single ping on each shot. Enter."

Conor took off the headset and waited, looking directly into the webcam lens with no expression on his face. After a short wait, he heard sound like a single piano key and turned his head sideways, showing his profile to the webcam. There was another ping and he put the headset on again and reattached the VR googles.

Then he took four long, slow breaths.

"Okay," he said to himself on the final exhalation, "Let's see if I can do this."

He flicked the switch to shut down the webcam, and called up the screenshots he had just taken, decided they were adequate, and reached out with a finger, moving each of them off to the side for the moment. At the same time, he spoke into his headset again, "Locate police file, Conor Severus Lewis."

At once a pdf file appeared, seeming to hover in the air before him.

If Nick Wilde or Judy Hopps could have been here to see this, they would have been shocked at the
ease with which the young fox had been able to locate and retrieve his case file.

They shouldn't have been; as Albert Tufts could have told them, the most difficult part of any hack is penetrating the computer system. Once you're inside however, finding and saving what you're looking for is almost ridiculously easy. Edward Snowbear, the whistleblower who hacked a ZSA database was a near-perfect example. To steal the secrets he later leaked to the media he'd used a piddling, little, hundred-dollar tool called Webcrawler.

Conor double-tapped on the file to open it, then flicked upwards with a finger, scrolling through the document. He didn't have to go far to find what he was looking for; there they were, on the second page, the mugshots photographs, taken shortly after he'd been booked into the ZPD youth jail.

There was no emotion on the face of the fox in either of those photos, no anger, no fear, no defiance, no nothing. (This was something Danny Tipperin had taught him, when the police take your picture, don't show any kind of expression.)

After studying the pictures for a second, Conor spoke into the headset again.

"Open PhotoHop."

While the program loaded, the young fox double tapped the full face picture of himself and said, "Copy Image."

And then he went to back to PhotoHop, setting it for edit mode, and said, "Paste as new image."

The document appeared in the PhotoHop window.

Conor studied it again for a second and then repeated the process with the ZPD profile pic.

The next part was a little more tricky; he copied and reposted the front and side view pictures of himself as new images, and set them aside for the moment. Next, he opened up another program called FastStoat Picture Viewer. He then saved both the mugshots and the webcam shots in his picture files, and opened them again using the new application.

What he said next would have flabbergasted Lieutenant Albert Tufts had he been here right now.

"Open Impalta."

Oh, yes, that would have knocked the Kaibab squirrel for a loop, all right. Civilians, period, weren't supposed to have access to this level of facial-recognition software, much less a 14-year-old fox-kid.

"Where the heck did the kid ever get that?", the ZPD Cybercrimes chief would have no doubt wondered aloud (The answer was, he hadn't; the app had already been in the Beast's database when the young silver fox had moved in here, uploaded and installed there by one Kieran McCrodon.)

Conor had tried to use Impalta all of two times in the past, and had to feel his way through it now. What he wanted to do was run a match between the police photographs of himself and the webcam shots he had taken just now. After perhaps six attempts, he finally got it to work. A patchwork of bright blue lines, resembling an airline route-map flashed on and off over all four images, and then the results appeared in the window underneath.

**POSITIVE ID**
That was not unexpected; in point of fact, it was exactly what the young fox had been looking for.

"All right…to work, to work," he thought to himself before stretching his mouth wide in another yawn.

He went back to PhotoHop and the two mugshot pics.

Going first to the full-face police-file picture, he selected and copied the cheekbones, and then pasted them again as a new layer. And then he spoke into the headset once again, "Image… resize…by percentage…One hundred and five percent….enter."

The new layer enlarged just ever so slightly. Next the young fox called up the warp-brush tool, adding a barely perceptible arc to each cheekbone. Then he pasted them over the originals, placing them just tiny bit higher than where they had been before. In the next step he merged the layers and in the final one, he used the clone-and-heal tool to blend them together. He then performed a similar alteration on the side view image.

Next, he saved both images in his picture files, replacing the originals.

And then he opened them in FastStoat and ran the Impalta match again.

The results were the same as before:

POSITIVE ID

Again, this was not unexpected…and Conor was not perturbed; he was only just getting started.

Going back to PhotoHop, he made another alteration, this time making his ears a smidge bigger and giving them just hint more curvature.

When he ran the image through Impalta, he once more got a positive match.

For the next hour, he repeated the process, sharpening and shortening his muzzle, placing his eyes little further apart, making them just hair larger, lengthening his cheek tufts, and altering the shape of his nose. Each time the result from Impalta was the same.

POSITIVE ID

But then on perhaps the fifteenth attempt, after just barely altering the shape of his forehead, the young silver fox got the result he'd been waiting for.

UNABLE TO MATCH

Just to be certain, Conor made two more subtle changes to his police photographs, and then ran them against both the webcam shots and the unaltered versions of his ZPD photographs.

In both cases, Impalta found no match between the pictures. All right, just one more thing left for him to do.

Conor pulled all six images up on FastStoat, and gave them a long, hard look.

To the naked eye, the fox in all three sets of photos looked identical—which was the whole point of the exercise. If the ZPD tried to use the retouched images to track their fugitive via Impalta, it would be an exercise in futility. Conor could walk right in front of a metro station security camera and the software would see nu-THING, nu-THING, nuTHING! But, at the same time, anyone
simply looking at the altered police photographs would not be able to tell them from the originals. They would have no idea the pictures had been tampered with…or that there had been yet another penetration of the ZPD's database.

Conor made two more minor alterations to his mugshots before pasting them over the images in his police record. First, he made his eyes a shade less bright and second, he added a layer of orange tint. This was not needed to fool Impalta, but it was entirely necessary; the young fox's burning-amber eyes had always been his most distinguishing characteristic. And distinguishing characteristics were often the first thing cops looked for when they called you over for a talk.

He let out another wide-mouthed yawn, yearning for his bed once more.

No such luck, he wasn't done yet. Now the young fox went to work on editing the report itself, opening it up in his own pdf application. Here, he had something of a head start; much of what was in the file was already bogus, courtesy of his fake ID records. Nonetheless, there were still a few tweaks he could make.

For starters, his name; all too frequently, animals wrote it down incorrectly, as Connor, or even Conner. He was sorely, sorely tempted to make that change here, but knew he didn't dare. Too many mammals had already seen this report—with the correct spelling. If he changed it, at the very least, Nick Wilde and/or Judy Hopps would spot it the next time they looked at this report; he would have to let it slide.

His middle name, on the other paw…well now, who pays attention to middle names away? And here he could be a lot more subtle; changing it from 'Severus' to 'Severis'—which he did.

More alterations quickly followed; Conor added an inch to his height, and subtracted several pounds from his weight. His fur color description he changed from 'black, silver highlights,' to 'silver and black'

When it came to 'distinguishing marks', he ran up against another problem; his gold teeth and the scars on his jaw, the souvenirs he'd collected from having his face broken. He couldn't change or delete that reference, someone would notice the alteration in a heartbeat. Oh he could switch the descriptions over; move the scars on the left side of his jaw to the right side, and vice versa but what good would that do? To the casual observer, scars are scars; he would have to leave that one alone as well.

The long scar on his back, however—the legacy of his encounter with the street-punks he'd caught waling on Junior McCrodon—that one he could play with a little; moving it from the left side of his back to the right side of his chest.

And that was the last alteration Conor made to his police file. The rest of it, the description of his arrest, booking, arraignment, etc. he would leave all that alone; it didn't need to be altered anyway, as far as he could see.

He moved his control-gloved index finger to the virtual 'Save As' button and tapped. The ZPD comp immediately informed him,

File CS LEWIS 111983 Already Exists
Do you want to replace it?

[ ] Yes [ ] No

Conor clicked on 'yes', and then 'enter'…but he wasn't quite finished yet. He needed to cover his
tracks before he moved on. If anyone opened that file and clicked on 'File Information,' right in front of them would be the times of the last file access and modification...and just who that heck had been perusing these docs at THAT hour? Fixing the problem would require a bit more skill than the young fox had employed so far; he'd have to go into the ZPD's Acrobat program to do it. Fortunately, he had the tools—and he'd also had a good teacher. In less than ten minutes, the job was done.

But now came the really difficult part, taking care of the DNA match request the ZPD had forwarded to...to...dangit, who had that been again? The Zooopia Health Science Institute? No, that wasn't it. The Zootopia Health Sciences...University? No. Oh wait, the Zootopia Health Sciences University Genetics Lab. (God, he wanted to sleep so bad.)

Conor did a quick search of the ZPD Database, looking for references. He was surprised to learn that his was not the only request for a DNA test that the ZPD had sent to the Genetics Lab of late. There were at least two others, a John and a Jane Doe respectively. Hmmm that might be useful, although the young fox couldn't say why. (He sure as heck felt it though.)

He brought up the copy of the request made in his name and, just as he'd feared, there was nothing he could do about it. The Genetics Lab had already processed the request and placed it in the queue; any alterations at this stage would be...

Wait, hang on, hold that thought; queue?

Conor put his disquiet aside for a moment and began to study the document...and immediately burst out laughing. Whoever had forwarded the request had already misspelled his name; two 'N's instead of one. He didn't know how much that would help, (if at all,) but it certainly couldn't hurt.

He sat back in the zero-gravity chair, thinking. That word, 'queue', just kept flashing in his head, like a message notification that wouldn't shut off.

What did it mean?

Conor knew where to go for the answer. The question was, could he go there without being caught?

Queue...Queue...Queue...

He drummed his fingers on chair arm for a second. If he did this, he wouldn't be going in by way of a backdoor already in place; he'd have to tunnel in under the firewall himself.

It was nothing the young silver fox hadn't done before—but never with a database as well protected as the ZHSU Gen-Lab database had to be. With so much sensitive information on file, the genetic records of perhaps thousands of animals, the place had to be heavily shielded. Of that, he had no doubt.

On the other paw, the gene records weren't the files he needed to access. If they were kept separate in their own secure database, then maybe the rest of the ZHSU Gen-Lab computer was more vulnerable. Could be; that kind of digital compartmentalization was not unheard of in organizations where different animals had different levels of access. The ZPD computer, to cite one example, had both a regular and a secure database.

"Only one way to find out," Conor muttered to himself, and immediately heard a robotic feminine voice in his headset, "Command not understood."

"Aahhh, shaddap!" the young fox growled, silently this time. Oh jinkies, wasn't THIS hack getting
He exited the ZPD computer, making certain to cover his tracks, closing all the files he'd opened and altering the records to show that they had not been accessed just now.

Then he cracked his knuckles and spoke again.

"Zoogle Search, Zootopia Health Sciences University, Genetics Lab."

Several options appeared in the air in front of him, but there was only one that interested the young silver fox, the first one, the link to the ZHSU Genlab's website. He tapped it with a finger and a new window opened in front of him.

The Genlab's website was at once both Hollywool slick and Plain-Jane utilitarian, chrome-plated, stylized lettering, and buttons that jumped out and dropped menus when you touched them.

On the other paw, Conor saw no puffery, no message of greeting, informing you that you had just stumbled into a magical realm, (unlike the Zootopia Academy for the Performing Arts's webpage, he noted with a sardonic smile.)

He scanned the row of buttons at the top of the page again, the usual gang of idiots; 'About Us', 'FAQs' 'Services' 'Contact', etc., and at the very end of the line, 'Log In'.

'Log in' Conor noted, not 'Log In/Register'. That told him if you wanted access to this website's inner workings, you couldn't just sign up and get browsing; you had to be approved in order to get in.

Either that, or…

He stared at the words, thinking. There had to be someone in the ZPD with a username and a password he could 'borrow'; Chief Buffalo Nickel perhaps, or maybe Tough-guy Tufts. Given that bushytailed jerk's earlier mess-up, it was even possible that he'd left his username and password right where anyone could find them.

Fine, great…except for one little problem; at best, it would get him 'read-only' access to the Gen-Lab's database, something entirely insufficient for his present requirements.

Conor tapped on the log-in button, screwed his eyes shut and spoke in a grating voice.

"Open EternalZoo."

This time, had Albert Tufts been present, he would have been chittering in amazement—and horror. EternalZoo was one of the most notorious hacking tools ever let loose on the web. Originally created by the ZSA for the purpose of high-level espionage, the rogue app had become a favorite of cybercriminals specializing in extortion schemes. Only a year or two before, EternalZoo had been used to plant ransomware in the databases of at least two major cities, Catlanta and Bulltimore. (In neither case had the culprits ever been apprehended.)

The first thing the app did was scan the GenLab's computer, looking for possible access points and anti-virus software. As Conor had suspected, it was very well protected, boasting not one but TWO anti-malware apps, McCalfee virus scan and Molewarebytes.

Good…but not enough to stop a demon like EternalZoo

When he entered the GenLab's database, perhaps 30 minutes later, Conor could almost feel his
teeth quivering. At any second he expected to hear an alarm and see the dreaded words, appearing in front of him, 'Unauthorized Access Detected.' That had not yet happened to him here in Zootopia, but it had happened at least twice back in Zoo York City. In both of those cases, he'd had Kieran at his back to foil the trace that followed; here, he was entirely on his own.

One moment, two moments passed…nothing.

Scanning his way around the database, Conor noticed something at once; there was no sign of the genetic records anywhere, none at all.

"Probably airgapped," the young fox concluded, unsurprised. It didn't matter, that wasn't what he wanted anyway. What he was looking for were the administrative files, specifically the 'pending cases', (or whatever they were called here,) and he found them almost immediately.

Right away, the young fox understood the meaning of the word, queue; the ZPD was far from the only client the ZHSU GenLab had; his cheek-swab had been made to take a number and get in line, awaiting its turn to be tested.

Conor knew, without having to think about it, that he couldn't simply delete that file. If he did, it'd give away his game so fast, he would miss it if he blinked. It was too late now to stop it from happening anyway; that DNA match was going to be run.

But if he couldn't stop the process, there was plenty the fugitive young silver-fox could do to slow it down. He began by moving his DNA match request from fourth in line down to nearly the bottom of the pile.

He didn't move it all the way down; that would have been the next worst thing to deleting it. He gave his file the third slot from the end and then opened it, changing the request date from the 12th to the 15th—a not uncommon clerical error, and also a date that would jive with the file's new position in the queue.

That being accomplished, he had EternalZoo search out the GenLab computer's e-mail program. Finding the app, he opened it and issued a new set of instructions; any incoming e-mail from the ZPD, containing the keywords 'Conor' and 'Lewis' was to be treated as SPAM. Again, that wouldn't prevent the ZHSU Genetics Lab from running the DNA match, but it would throw yet another wrench into the works. And, as the young fox liked to remind himself, half a minute could be all it took to make the difference between freedom and pawcuffs.

Conor was about to exit the program when the realization of something hit him like a flyswatter. The ZPD had misspelled his name on the initial request for a DNA match; what if they did it again? In that case, any further correspondence from the cops would end up in the GenLab's inbox, not their SPAM file.

And there would be further correspondence between the ZPD and the ZHSU Genetics Lab—a lot of it; Conor was all but certain of that fact. When the cops found out he'd gone rabbit on them, one of the first things they'd do was make his DNA search-test a rush order.

Well…not if this fox-kid had anything to say about it; he went back and amended his earlier instructions. Now if an email arrived from the ZPD containing the keyword Lewis and either Conor, Connor, or Conner, it would immediately be shunted to the SPAM file.

Okay, that was all, at least for now. Preparing to exit the ZHSU database, Conor first made certain to leave the back door in place, and also to leave a bot behind, to continue to gather data. The chance was very good that he would have to go back inside this computer again at some future
date. Eventually, someone from the ZPD was going to call the ZHSU Gen-Lab, wanting to know why there had been no response to any of their emails regarding Conor Lewis. And when that happened, he needed to be ready to…to do what?

Well…he'd cross that bridge when he got to it. For now, at least, his work here was done.

That awareness hit the young fox like a tsunami of fatigue, and he yawned so loudly that the computer once again informed him that it didn't understand the command.

Conor didn't tell it to shut up again; after making certain his tracks were covered he ordered The Beast to shut down, flicked off the internet connection switch and exited the Furrison Hotel. Behind him, as he stumbled off to bed, he left a trail of strewn clothes on the floor—as if he might need them to find his way back again, after he awoke.

He was out like a flashbulb the second his head hit the pillow.

Conor slept for almost ten full hours—and while he slumbered, quite a number of things happened. Clair Swinton had an encounter with Benjamin Clawhauser in the Precinct-1 lobby, the word went round that a certain young silver fox had escaped from jail, a meeting convened and then adjourned in Chief Bogo's office, and Nick and Judy made their respective statements to Lieutenant Tufts, (the red fox coming within an ace of saying something that could have gotten him suspended.) Afterwards, the two partners went their separate ways; they each had some fursonal business to attend to. Nick wanted to call his mother to ask if he could see her that evening, and Judy needed to get hold of Erin and give her that heads-up on Conor.

The more she thought about it, the more certain she was that the fugitive young fox had not run off to Bunnyburrow. As Nick had earlier pointed out, foxes liked to stick to familiar turf…and Conor Lewis knew the Burrow like he knew the back side of the moon. Except for Erin, her friends, and the Hopps family, there was nobody in Bunnyburrow he could even call a casual acquaintance. And given the rather jaundiced view that Judy's family held of foxes at the moment they'd be on the phone like that if they spotted him anywhere close by.

Conor almost certainly wasn't heading for Bunnyburrow…almost. And the presence of the 'A' word meant that Judy couldn't completely rule out the possibility. If there was one thing she'd learned from her all-too-brief association with him it was that this kid almost never did what you expected.

Erin picked up on the third ring…although she didn't exactly answer the phone.

"Sis, hold on a sec," the younger bunny said quickly, and then her voice was fading rapidly into the background, "Ma'am? Ma'am! Hold up, you forgot your change."

Judy couldn't help smiling; Erin was working the produce stand today. She wondered for a second how her little sister was handling it. Some of the younger Hopps family members seemed to really enjoy the work, while for others, Produce Stand Duty was their Parking Duty.

When Erin returned a moment later, she was slightly out of breath, but recovered quickly, a testament to the fact that the young, white-furred bunny was not only a talented musician, but a skilled athlete. Captain of her school's field-hockey team, (small mammal division,) she had also won several medals in swimming.

"Sorry Jude," she gasped before her normal voice returned, "Gah, why do animals keep doing that?" She had already figured out that Big sis knew where she was.
"Make up a sign that says 'Be Sure To Count Your Change,'" Judy advised her, "Trust me, it works every time."

"Oh great idea," the younger bunny responded perkily.

"No Charge, sis," Judy responded, smiling again, "So how do like working the produce stand?" She figured she might as well get it out of the way right now…just in case the younger bunny didn't like the job.

Erin's mouth pulled slightly to the side. "Ahhh, it's okay, not as much fun as in the fall though." Her expression and voice turned wistful, "That's one thing I'm really going to miss if I get into the Performing Arts Academy."

Judy smiled again, but solemnly. Autumn had always been her favorite time to work the produce stand too, especially around Halloween, when they draped the stand with orange and black crepe paper, put up spooky decorations, and everyone wore…

"All right, business before nostalgia," the doe bunny chided herself.

"Listen, Erin," she said, "the reason I called is because there's a chance—a very small chance, but a chance that Conor Lewis may have decided to head for Bunnyburrow after he escaped from jail."

The younger bunny instantly became a flustered question machine.

"Wha…? Are you sure, Jude? How do you know? Have you notified the Burrow County Sheriff yet?"

Judy made a small, grunting noise, and patiently answered her sister's questions.

"Like I already said Erin, we're not sure; it's only a remote possibility. WHY it's possible is because the last place Conor was seen is the final stop on the Bunnyburrow Line before it leaves Zootopia. And yes, we've notified the Burrow County Sheriff's office."

She saw Erin's eyes narrow slightly and heard her tone becoming dubious.

"Oh-kayyy, then what are you calling me about it for?"

Judy sighed again, but silently this time; Erin already knew the answer, but was going to make her say it.

"Because if Conor did try to run to Bunnyburrow—and again, I'm almost certain that he didn't—if he does come your way, he might try to make contact with you."

"And if he does, what do you want me to do, Jude?"

Erin's face had lost all expression…but there was no mistaking the emphasis the younger bunny had put on the word, 'me'.

Her reaction was not unexpected…and all too easily understood by her older sister.

Being labeled a snitch wasn't quite as big a transgression for a middle schooler as it was for jail inmate. Nonetheless, it would be social suicide if Erin informed on Conor and her friends found out. In that case, they would no longer BE her friends. Even Sue Cannon, whose dad was a Sheriff's Deputy would cut her loose; it was just how things worked when you were that age…like it or not.
And so Judy said to the younger bunny, "I would hope that you'd try to talk him into giving himself up. Other than that, I'd just want you to use your own judgement, do whatever you think is best."

Even to her, that sounded like a cop-out, but when Judy saw her sister visibly relax, she knew she had said the right thing.

"So, what happened, Jude; how the heck did Conor manage to escape from jail?" Erin was back in inquisitor mode again.

Judy gave her the condensed version of the story. Conor had gotten out with the help of his online partner, who had hacked the ZPD's database, and ginned up a phony release order.

"Whoever that animal is, he's very good at what he does," the doe bunny told her younger sibling. Even now she was unable to make herself refer to Conor's silent partner as The Phantom…at least while talking to Erin. She wondered why that was.

And then the younger bunny swallowed and looked away for a second. Although she would never admit it, Judy could guess what was on her sister's mind; she was worried about the young silver fox, about what was going to happen to him now.

Judy knew what she had to say—and it wouldn't be easy; she'd have to give it to Erin straight and not pull any punches.

"Yeah sis…Conor's in big trouble now; I won't lie to you. The Attorney General himself is involved in his case, that's how serious it is. When they catch up with him, they're NOT going to go easy."

Erin winced and then grimaced as if she'd stepped on a cactus thorn—but then her nose began to twitch and her expression became puzzled.

"'They,' Judy…don't you mean, we?"

Now it was the older bunny's turn to look pained. Great, fine, wonderful…all right, might as well tell her everything.

"Nick and I aren't handling the Conor Lewis investigation any more, sis. It's been given to ZPD Cybercrimes."

"They did WHAT?" The younger bunny was staring thunderstruck into her cell-phone camera, "Why?"

"Because," Judy informed her sister evenly, "Conor's escape from jail was technically a cybercrime. And because of that, the ZPD feels that the Cybercrimes Unit is better equipped to handle the investigation." Not the whole truth, but the whole truth was horribly complicated.

AND…rendering a full account of why she and Nick had been pulled from the Conor Lewis investigation would mean revealing their confrontation with Rudy Gamsbart. And that would mean recalling the incident that had led to their clash in the first place.

No way was that happening.

It didn't matter; the younger bunny had already guessed the worst of it. Her ears shot backwards and her brow flattened out, as if she'd just walked into the teeth of a gale.

"This is about that video of you and Nick isn't it?" she said. She was thumping her foot so hard that
Judy could hear it over the phone.

"Now, hold on a minute, sis," the doe-bunny tried to protest, but Erin was already on a roll…like a runaway wrecking-ball down a steep hillside.

"They can't do this to you, Jude!"

"Erin…"

"After all you've done for Zootopia, this is how they pay you back?"

"Erin, will you please calm down, for heaven's sa…"

"You guys stopped that savage pred thing; how can they just forget about that?"

"I'm trying to explain; will you just let me…"

"It's not fair Judy; they CAN'T kick you and Nick off the Conor Lewis case…"

"Sis will you please…"

"…and for what, because of one, stinking, little KISS?"

Judy nearly dropped her phone

"Shhh…not so loud, Erin!"

But it was already too late; just then, a familiar voice spoke up in the background.

"Erin, who's that you're talking to; is that your sister, Judy? Let me speak to her, give me the phone."

Erin's sister Judy could have face-palmed herself from here to Podunk County; that had been mom's voice just now…and the doe bunny was absolutely NOT yet ready to talk to her folks about Nick, that kissing video, and Rock Hardesty.

"Nice going, blabberbunn!" She was ready to scream Erin's ears off—not that it would have been necessary, the younger bunny already looked as if she could just die right now.

"Oops, sorry Jude," she said, her voice a strangled squeak…and then the image on the screen wiped sideways and her face was replaced by that of their mother.

It was even worse than Judy had expected. Anger she could have handled, even righteous anger. Instead—Bonnie Hopps was doing her best to conceal it, but there was no mistaking the hurt in her eyes. She looked…heartick.

"Hello, Judy." Her voice was as crisp as bone-dry wheat-straw.

"Hi Mom," the doe bunny answered. She took a short breath and crossed her fingers, "Okay, don't rush it," she told herself—and then sucked it up and plunged ahead.

"Mom, there's something about that video of Nick and me that Rock Hardesty didn't talk about. Can I tell you about it now?"

Instead of answering, her mother looked sharply to the side.
"Erin, what have you been saying to your sister?"

Judy closed her eyes and counted to three. This conversation had only just started and it was already in a tailspin.

"Mom, please…She only told me about what was on Hardesty's show last Sunday night and that you, Dad, and Junior were watching it. She didn't repeat a word to me of anything that you guys said."

Judy's mother said nothing, only tilted her head and raised an eyebrow, Hopps-speak for, 'and…?'

"And," Judy went on, trying not to thump her foot, "she didn't tell you about having spoken to me because I asked her not to. I wanted to talk to you about it myself, not through anyone else."

"All right," Bonnie nodded once, waiting.

Judy mentally crossed her fingers and laid down her ace.

"Mom, Nick only kissed me to try and throw off some suspects who were getting suspicious on us. There was nothing romantic going on."

"Wha…What, now?" Her mother's ears were standing at full attention. Okay, score one for Jude-the-Dude.

"Yes, that's right; let me tell you the whole story of what happened," she said.

It wasn't the whole story, but it was enough; Judy left out none of the essentials. She told her mother how she and Nick had been working undercover, about the Rafaj brothers, about the blood diamond, about the hippo moving to block the door. She touched on their kiss for perhaps half a second before moving on to describe the two of them being practically thrown out of the store afterwards.

Judy had planned to end the narrative at that point but then she remembered something; how she'd hurried to rinse out her mouth in a bubbler fountain almost as soon as she and Nick were back on the street. Oh yes, can't leave out that part.

(She did not, of course, repeat any of what she'd said to Dr. Hind about their kiss.)

When Judy finished the story, her mother seemed satisfied—but not entirely, not even close to entirely.

"All right, but then what about that other video?"

Judy pursed her lips…so that mom wouldn't see her teeth grinding. This was why she hadn't wanted to discuss that kiosk-video with her parents yet. She still hadn't seen the other one; she could only guess what was on it.

"Dangit, Erin…" Only one thing to do, and that was to play it straight-up-honest.

"Mom, I haven't watched that other video yet," she admitted, "but I think I know what it shows. Does it have me falling into Nick's arms and then the two of us hugging each other?"

"Yes, that's right," her mother nodded, tight lipped.

Judy sighed, half in relief, half in frustration; just as she'd thought.
An idea occurred to her then; it would be a sacrifice play of sorts, but it would go a long was towards assuaging mom's worries about her and Nick.

"Okay," she said, "that was Nick catching me when my legs gave out…after I realized what a dumb-bunny move I'd just made."

"What, now?" This time, Bonnie's ears seemed to be reaching for the sky.

Judy looked away for a second and then fessed up, telling her mother about the Craig Guilford bust, how she'd jumped off the roof of a hangar and onto the airplane he'd been trying to use to make his escape.

"Oh Judy, you DIDN'T!" Now her mother looked shocked to the bone.

"Afraid I did. Mom," the doe bunny told her blushingly, "And it wasn't even necessary; we could have stopped those two another way; I know that now. But now you know why I nearly lost it back there…and why Nick had to come to my rescue. And believe me, he wasn't any too happy about what I'd done either; he barely spoke to me on the drive back to the precinct."

"Oh, Judy, Judy, Judy," Bonnie was shaking her head, the way she had after learning of her daughter's run-in with Gideon Grey at the Carrot Days Festival, back when she was nine, "What on earth ever possessed you to do a thing like that?"

Judy felt her own ears standing up. Only a few days ago, she wouldn't have been able answer that question. Now, she had a ready response.

"I felt guilty mom…that I hadn't been there with Nick when he uncovered Jerry Guilford's plan to spray-bomb the Carrot Days festival." Seeing her mother's change of expression, she hurriedly raised a paw. "I know mom, I know…and you're absolutely right, but that was how I felt at the time."

"Ohh Judy…" her mother was shaking her head again, but this time her face was tinged with affection. "That's my girl; you never could leave it alone when you thought you'd let somebody down."

"Yes mom, that's right" the doe bunny agreed, and then she added, "But I understand that now … and I'm going to deal with it, I promise."

"Okay, Judy," her mother was nodding. For just a tick of the clock, she seemed to be satisfied, but then her expression became unconvinced once more, "But what in heaven's name was going on in that courtroom?" She seemed incapable of going into any detail regarding the alleged incident.

Nor did she need to; Judy knew exactly what her mother was talking about…and the thought of it made her ears lay backwards against her scalp.

"Okay mom, that's fake news," she said, finally allowing some of her anger to show. "Nick and I did absolutely NOTHING inappropriate while we were…look, do you seriously think that if we'd been 'behaving badly,' we'd have been stupid enough to carry on in a crowded courtroom….or in front of a police-surveillance camera….or a whole platoon of cops fitted with body-cams? Come on, you know me better than that."

Judy's mother said nothing to this but the doe bunny could see that she wavering; her nose was starting to twitch. No matter what kind of poor judgement she might sometimes use, Judith Laverne Hopps was nobody's dumb bunny.
That told her where she had to go next, straight to the heart of the matter.

"Mom, forgive for talking like a TV cop, but let's cut to the chase. Nick Wilde and I are not—repeat NOT engaged in any kind of a romantic relationship—period. I'll swear it on grandma's grave if you want. Nick and I are partners and friends and that's it. I've never lied to you about anything like this before—you know that—and I'm not going to start now."

"Okay," her mother nodded placated at last. "I trust you, Judy."

"Thanks mom," the doe bunny smiled...although she hadn't missed the unspoken coda to what her mother had said. '...don't break my trust.'

It made the words that she had said just now turn to ashes in her mouth...because there was one word Judy had kept to herself. a word that would have changed everything had she spoken it aloud.

The word was 'yet'...as in, 'Nick and I are not romantically involved...yet.'
Chapter 10 – When A Fox Goes Rabbit
(Continued...Pt. 6)

"Agggghh, grrrrr...no, no, nooooo!

Conor Lewis jumped up out of his chair and proceeded to perform an improvised, war-dance, stomping around the kitchen table while slashing with his claws at invisible enemies.

"Dang! Stupid! Aggggh! Grrrr!"

On the third circuit, he finally stopped, leaning with his paws against the tabletop and breathing hard, staring into his laptop's display screen. This was a mistake, right? He hadn't really seen that thing; he'd only imagined it. Or maybe someone was messing with him...yeah, that was it; he was being trolled, spoofed...

No, he wasn't; there it was, right in front of him, his police-file photographs and right underneath, a memo from Chief Bogo to all ZPD Precincts. Be on the lookout for Conor Severis Lewis, silver fox, age 14, just escaped from...

Aggggh, grrrr...they KNEW!

"Dangit, too soon!" Conor fox-screamed at the laptop, "How the HECK did you figure it out so fast? I should have had at least until tonight; TOO! SOON!"

Had he been in a rational state of mind, the agitated young silver fox might have stopped to consider that things could be worse, a lot worse. For instance, the ZPD hadn't discovered his release order was bogus until after he'd made those alterations to his police file. (The memo from Chief Bogo had listed his middle name under the new spelling, Severis rather than Severus.)
And the cops still seemed to have no idea that he'd made those changes—or even that he'd been poking around inside their database.

Conor Lewis was not in a lucid state of mind, however; if that had been case, he wouldn't be throwing a tantrum worthy of a fox-cub half his age.

But what the heck else was he supposed to do? The fact of where his life had gone was finally hitting him full force—down the drain, flushed away, sayonara, and goodbye to all that. No more Performing Arts Academy, no more hanging out with his buds, no more movies, no more jams in Lionheart Park, and no more Erin Hopps.

So the heck with being sensible, I'm gonna lose it over here.

It was inevitable that at some point, Conor would turn his wrath on himself…and that was what he did now, beating himself up from here to downtown Pawkeepsie.

"What the heck did I have to go and oversleep for? Why didn't I set my stupid alarm? Why didn't I at least check in online right after I got up? Dumb, Dumb, Dummity-Dumb!"

He had planned to sleep for no more than six hours, eight hours max. Instead he'd been out for the full count of ten…and three hours into that sleep, Claire Swinton had made a hasty call to Chief Bogo. Eight more hours…eight more precious hours had passed before the young fox learned that the cops were onto to his escape.

Yes, eight hours…not seven. That was the part that really made the furious young fox want to slap himself around the loft. Upon finally awakening, he had insisted upon taking a shower and grabbing something to eat before booting up his laptop. And then…what the HECK, they knew? How had they figured it out so fast—HOW?

He flopped back down on the chair again, his pique finally waning. No one had heard his rant just now; you could set off a bomb in here and no one on the street below would hear it. Letting his paws fall into his lap, Conor tried to get his breathing under control. Dangit, he needed to calm down and think. What the heck had happened while he'd been asleep?

"...and then afterwards, while you were showering and chowing down instead of—SHADDUP!"

There was only one place he could go for the answers, back into the belly of The Beast. He got up and began to follow the trail of clothes he'd left the night before, returning to the entrance of the Furrison Hotel.

Almost as soon as he logged back into the ZPD database, Conor saw something that made him feel better, a lot better…so much better that he even raised his paws and whooped.

ZPD Cybercrimes had been given the task of running him down—yes!

It wasn't that Tufts and his guys would be pushovers; Conor had already succumbed to the siren-song of overconfidence once this afternoon (afternoon!) He was not going to make that same mistake twice…and so he performed a quick mental recap, going over everything he knew about the ZPD Cybercrimes chief. First of all, this was a seriously resilient tree-rat. More than once, Lieutenant Tufts had lost a battle with a cybercrook, only to come back later and win the war. Furthermore, his standard response to any setback was to get his ruthless on; he was willing to play however down and dirty he needed, in order to bring in a perp.

Stroking at his muzzle for a moment, Conor came to a swift conclusion; like Zootopia Deputy Prosecutor Rudy Gamsbart, this squirrel was NOT someone you wanted to dismiss too easily.
Even so, better him than Nick Wilde and/or Judy Hopps. For all that had happened, Conor still both liked and respected his fellow fox and bunny-cop. He would have felt more the a little guilty at having to cross swords with them again. With Tuffguy Tufts and his merry band of cyberthugZ, he had no such qualms. Come and get me, coppers; it's on!

Even better, from the young fox's point of view, he had some leverage on Albert Tufts; an ace-of-spades to lay down on that bushytailed jerkwit if he started to get too close. Wham, Blackjack, chump!

Leaving the squirrel where he was for the moment, Conor moved on through the ZPD database, looking for more info. Ah-ha, so THAT was how they'd figured out his escape. Just his luck that Officer Swinton had been aware of the Neil Moose and Lekins-Pawlker prison breaks. For a moment, the young fox pondered whether Tufts might bring her on board with Cybercrimes for the duration. He hoped not; this sow was one of the sharper tools in the shed.

The next tidbit of information he came across was an order from the desk of Chief Bogo. Effective immediately, all detainees held in the city jail would not be permitted to make calls using their own phones. Conor smiled for a second. In strict, technical terms, this was known as closing the cage door after the bird has flown. Just as quickly, however, his smile faded; an order like that could mean only one thing; the ZPD also knew how he'd planted that malware in their database.

"Do not underestimate these guys," the young fox reminded himself, before moving on again.

Scrolling through the stack of memos, Conor soon discovered another directive from the Chief, this one temporarily suspending all releases from the city youth jail. That was hardly a surprise, but the young fox still wasn't happy about it; he had never liked seeing anyone else pay the price for something HE had done. (He could only hope the order wouldn't stay in place for very much longer.)

The next thing he learned was...whoa, good thing he'd altered his police photos before turning in. Just as he'd predicted, the ZPD was running a search for him using their Impalta facial recognition software. And although Conor had made every effort to avoid being caught by a security camera on his way home the night before, he couldn't be certain he'd dodged them all. The city was getting more and more adept at concealing those little sneak-eyes.

That reminded him of something, and next up, he went to check the status of his DNA match. Yep, again as he'd expected, the ZPD had put it on the fast-track.

Or...wait a minute, not quite.

Hmmm, well now, wasn't this interesting? ZPD Cybercrimes had forwarded a request for emergency funding to City Hall by way of the Attorney General's office; apparently the ZHSU GenLab wanted their pawlms crossed with silver before they'd make the Conor Lewis DNA match a priority.

Conor had logged into the ZPD database with the idea of simply observing, rather than manipulating any data. This, however, was just too good an opportunity to pass up, (and definitely worth the risk.) He swiftly tracked the funding request to the Attorney General's, Office, discovering that as of yet, there had been no reply. And so off he went to the City Hall database.
With all three systems interconnected, it was piece of cake. When he got there, wonder of wonders, miracle of miracles; the request was still pending, pressing circumstances or not.

Three seconds later, with the stroke of a few computer keys, it had been changed from an emergency to a routine funding request. For several more seconds, the fugitive young silver fox toyed with the idea of adding an extra zero to the desired amount, gumming up the works even further. He quickly rejected that idea; while it would certainly add a further delay to the process, it might also motivate someone in City Hall to call the ZPD, asking for an explanation. In that case, it would take Tuffguy Tufts' crew all of half a minute to realize they had a fly in their ointment.

Leaving the funding request with only that single alteration, Conor backtracked to the AG's office and the ZPD, editing their copies as well. When he left the Furrison a few minutes later, he felt almost himself again…and even a little embarrassed at his earlier meltdown.

All right, no rest for the wicked; he had things to get done—and he could start by picking up those clothes he'd left on the floor. After that, he needed to get his bike put away and check his provisions and supplies. (Now that the ZPD was onto him, he was going to need to hole up here for as long as possible.)

After accomplishing the first two tasks, Conor started by checking his food supplies. At present, his larder was about ¾ of the way full; could be better, could be worse. He estimated that he had enough grub to last for maybe a week, longer if he could bring himself to include the military rations stashed in one of the storerooms. And speaking of the storerooms, there was his next stop.

Each one was fronted by a stout fire-door, a two-inch thick partition fitted with a counterweight, and moving on a sliding, diagonal track. All three were painted in obsidian black and equipped with face-hardened padlocks.

The first storeroom contained not only the emergency food rations but also several cabinets of medical supplies. Most of these would serve no purpose; Conor could handle wraps, ointments, and bandages, but other than that, forget it. He didn't have a clue as to how to give himself an injection, much less suture a wound—and what the heck was he supposed to do with a defibrillator? As for the meds, there was Zebuprofen and cough syrup and everything else was a mystery. Furrosemide, what was that for? The young fox didn't know and he didn't want to find out either.

Of much more interest were the two trunks containing a variety of fur-bleaches and dyes—and, most important, a large supply of fur-wash infused with biological deodorizer…enough to last for years, if need be. (This place, after all, had been set up as hideout for a sea-mink, one of the strongest smelling species out there.)

There was also a collection of scents for various other mammals, the majority of which were useless. Nearly all of them were geared towards various mustelid species, animals for which a fox could not possibly hope to pass. (Whoever heard of a weasel with pointed ears?) The only mustelid Conor might be able to get away with imitating was a pine-marten—and even then only if he tried to pose as a bigger-than-average adult.

It didn't matter; over the past three years, he'd managed to accumulate a small collection of scents of his own, all well suited for a fox attempting to disguise himself as some other animal.

Exiting the first storeroom, the young fox deliberately bypassed the second one; he couldn't have gotten inside it if he'd wanted to. And he DIDN'T want to, so much so that he'd made certain access was all but impossible. He'd begun by dipping the key to room number 2 in epoxy glue and breaking it off in the padlock. After that, he had epoxied the door-runners, and severed the
counterweight cable with a pair of bolt-cutters.

The first, and only, time he'd been inside that storeroom, Conor had been shocked at what he'd seen—although in retrospect, he shouldn't have. This loft had originally been intended as a hideout for, James 'The Mister' McCrodon, the most notorious illegal arms merchant on the east coast. It stood to entirely reason that such a creature would want his hideaway fitted out with an armory…in this case, one containing enough ordnance to fight a small war.

Conor hated guns, he always had, and so he'd sealed up the number two storeroom as best he could; he wanted no part of what was behind that door.

It was a wholly inadequate solution, he thought, but the best he could manage under the circumstances—and what other options did he have? He couldn't sell those weapons and for sure he couldn't dump them. So instead, he'd done his best to put them out of reach.

That, however, only applied to the lethal weapons; the nonlethal ones—the traumatic weapons, as Danny Tipperin always called them—had been moved to storeroom number three. Something that wouldn't kill but only disable an opponent—that the young fox could handle no sweat.

When he entered the third storeroom, (the one reserved for miscellaneous items,) the first thing he did was pull up a small section of the floor, reveling a hidden safe. This was not where he kept the money from the Rafaj Brothers…for the simple reason that there wasn't enough room inside; this safe had already been full when he found it—a good six figures worth of cash X2…at least.

Conor had always believed that there had to be a money cache hidden in here somewhere. True, Kieran hadn't mentioned it in the instructions he'd left on the young fox's cell phone…but then he hadn't said anything about the arsenal next door either, (and he HAD dropped one or two hints.) As with the weapons depot, it was a simple matter of logic; no way would The Mister have set up a hidey-hole like this without making certain he had plenty of cash on hand. (Who knew? He might have to flee Zoo York with little more than the clothes on his back.)

Even so, he hadn't discovered the floor safe until nearly a year into his residency, almost literally tripping over it. Looking down at the circle of steel beneath his feet, he could feel his expression turning thoughtful. Unlike the money from the blood diamond sale, the funds inside this floor-safe were guaranteed clean and untraceable. How differently might everything have worked out, if he'd found it right after moving in here? He probably wouldn't be in his current predicament.

"And you'd also never have hooked up with Finnick," the young fox's inner voice reminded him archly, "and a lot of honest, hard-working animals would have had it stuck to them, just because of their species." It was cold comfort at best, but right now he'd take any succor he could get.

He reached down and opened the safe, more to make sure that he still remembered the combination than for any other reason—that, and to make certain that the power-assist was working. (The door was too heavy for him to open otherwise.)

'Power', that brought something else to soon as Conor was finished here, he should have Mother, (his name the loft's Operating System,) run a diagnostic on the generator one floor below. Maybe he should even have her start it up, just to make certain it was running.

He also decided that, like the Ranger Scouts and the scrawny lion said, it was always better to be prepared.

And so, instead of closing the safe up right away, the young fox reached inside and hauled up one of the two duffel-bags stored within its maw, (the one containing the smaller denominations.) He
selected a stack of tens, and then zipped the bag back up again and dropped it back inside the safe.

Yes, he planned to remain cloistered inside the loft for at least the following week ...longer, if need be. However, he was not so young and naïve as to be unaware that reality has a way of dashing expectations; (for example, the cops were already onto him.) There was always the chance he might have to leave the safety of his loft sooner than he expected—whether he wanted to or not.

With that in mind, Conor began to gather up some further supplies.

He started things off by retrieving two items from their wall pegs, a backpack and a messenger bag, both done up in urban camo. To each of these, he added a tactical pen, a pair of hi-def mini binoculars, a tactical flashlight, a can of pepper-mace, (disguised as air-fresher,) and a telescoping baton. Both of the latter were the old skool model, with spring-steel third stages and a lead-filled knob on the end.

That took care of the messenger bag, but for the backpack, a few more things were needed.

Conor started with a small, portable, fold-up, remote-control drone—one that he could run off his cell phone, no extra controls required. To this he added a weapon that looked like a paintball-gun, but was actually a pellet-dart gun, (of the kind once employed by the rogue sheep Doug.) It was a compromise model, a carbine; long enough to have some accuracy over distance, but short enough to allow for at least a modicum of concealment. It could fire either in single shot mode or in three-round bursts. Each of the clips held fifteen shots, and could accommodate either tranquilizer pellets, or...or...

He looked away, out the door...towards his writing desk, where the red and blue pellets Danny had given him remained safely locked away. Why he'd never simply flushed those things, the young fox had no idea, but even now, (especially now,) he couldn't bring himself to retrieve them. Conor had seen what those bad boys could do to someone—heck, he'd done a lot more than just see it—and he never wanted to have that experience again.

He put four extra trank-dart clips in the rucksack, along with two spare CO2 canisters. Then he walked over to a footlocker and flipped it open, pulling out a rectangular black box with Cyrillic lettering on the side.

Inside was a weapon almost comical in its appearance, something that looked like a quad barreled flare gun...or maybe a toy for shooting ping-pong balls. Once, some years ago, Conor had seen Danny Tipperin pull one on a Furrida Panther, an animal at least four times his size. The big cat had taken one look at the thing in the swift-fox's paw and nearly laughed his tail off, "Where's the rest of your gun shorty?"

The next thing he'd said was...nothing; he'd been out cold.

The four barreled oddity was an URSA, a Russian-made weapon that could fire a variety of gas-driven projectiles, lead-core rubber bullets, pepper gas, smoke-bombs, mini flash-bang grenades, and yes, flares. It could also fire a two special cartridges Danny had created himself. The first, a mixture of glue, ink, and etching fluid was for taking out automobile windshields. The second projectile contained a foul-smelling concoction called 'Who Me.'

This wasn't intended simply as a repellent, (although it did have that effect.) Get hit by Who Me while you're tracking another animal's scent and that's all she wrote, son. The stench will instantly mask any odor that your quarry might be giving off...and forget about trying to rinse the stuff out of your fur; it won't even wash out. (Conor made sure to include at least two Who Me cartridges in his backpack; the ZPD had tried to tail him by way of his scent at least one time before.)
The last item to go into the backpack was downright insignificant in its appearance, especially when compared with everything that had preceded it. It was a small piece of electronic hardware, no bigger than a cube of margarine; with a pixel display-screen and an attached USB cable.

Looks, however, could be deceiving; the little device was actually a gadget known as an Icarus Box…and it was one of the most powerful defensive tools the young fox possessed.

Conor shut the backpack and hefted it, feeling the weight. All right, that was enough for now; he would add more items later as he thought of them.

Leaving the messenger bag and knapsack next to the entrance gate, Conor next returned to his bicycle rack,

This time he left the Bolt where it was, opting instead for a different ride.

It was a simple affair, flat bars, flat pedals, a single, fixed gear, and brakes on the front wheel only—the set-up of choice for Zoo York City bicycle messengers.

Unlike everything else he'd requisitioned, Conor's messenger bike had not come with the loft. He'd acquired it on Zbay about a year ago and painted the frame himself.

He'd made a complete mess of it; the messenger bike's frame was a hideous mishmash of black and fluorescent orange, as crudely rendered as drive-by graffiti. The band of duct tape encircling the front of the saddle didn't add to the aesthetics either.

That, in fact, was the general idea; uglifying your ride (to discourage thieves) was another common practice of ZYC bicycle messengers. And the young fox's messenger bike would have been a very tempting target for a rip-off artist, had they known what lurked beneath that paint-job; a titanium frame and a slew of top end components.

Conor hadn't ridden this bike much, but you better believe he knew how to ride it; it was the big brother of the one he'd used to run errands back in the day when The Company all but owned his tail. He'd been an absolute terror on that bike; he'd had to be. Whenever The Mister had given him a message to run, he'd always wanted it delivered five minutes ago. Thus it was that the young silver fox had learned to ride fast and hard through the streets of Barklyn—and devil take the hindmost.

Looking thoughtfully at his messenger bike, Conor wondered for a moment how many of those 'mad riding skillz' he still possessed; he might very well need them shortly.

He left the bike propped against the wall beside the entrance-gate, with the messenger bag parked against its front wheel.

Okay, now for his heavy duty ride.

It stood waiting under a drop-cloth at the opposite end of the loft….which the young fox now pulled away to reveal a stripped down, slab-sided ,electric mini-moto bike. It was an aggressive looking little so-and-so; a Furzarelli NKD, special edition. Slightly mil-spec in appearance, it had flanks resembling solar-panels and a pair of LED headlights. It could go 60 Mph, top end, and travel 75 miles on a battery charge.

Conor was a lot less familiar with this machine than he'd have liked to be. He had never ridden it on the street—strictly illegal—only tooled it around the loft a few times. (Up until a year ago, he'd been too short to ride it at all.)
Even without his limited experience, taking the Furz outside would be a huge gamble for the young silver fox—an even bigger risk, now that he was a wanted mammal. Conor understood that all too well; it was why he intended to make use of this machine either only as last resort, or in case of a dire emergency. Other than that, it wasn't going anywhere.

He hadn't played with The Furz for some time now and so, just as he expected, the remaining battery-power was almost negligible. No problem; there was a charging station over by store-room 3. After plugging it in and parking the backpack beside it, Conor made a quick check of his watch; a little after 3:30.

He looked over towards the Furrison, and The Beast within. At precisely 9:37 P.M., Zootopia Time, Guildenkranz would be logging on to their secure chat-server. He would wait exactly five minutes for his partner to show, and then be gone until the same time tomorrow.

Having already messed things up once today, the young silver fox was determined not to do it again. He lifted his muzzle and spoke for the benefit of the loft's voice control system.

"Mother, record please, ten seconds." he said.

"Recording," she answered in her feminine robotic voice.

Conor waited for half a second and then spoke again—loudly. "Hey dumb fox, get your stupid tail online right NOW and go talk to Guild!"

He waited for the ping to tell him the recording had completed, and then spoke again, toning it down a little.

"Mother, play that back at full volume, 21:15 hours, this evening."

He waited for her to acknowledge the command and then let out a puffing breath. Chatting online with Guild so soon after his escape would be his riskiest move yet—but also entirely necessary; they needed to talk.

Not for a while though, not for another six hours—six long hours that were going to seem like years.

Well…there were a few more things he could get done in the meantime; hadn't he said something earlier about the generator?

And while Conor went about his various tasks, a number of other things were happening elsewhere.

Back at the Zootopia City Youth Jail, the hyena and coyote that had been closest to the fugitive silver fox were each rigorously questioned by ZPD Cybercrimes. Shem Bawula told them nothing and Craig Guilford told them everything—none of which was useful and at least some of which he made up.

That was the first time either one of them had heard of Conor's escape from custody, and as soon as they left the Lieutenant's office the word began to spread—like wildfire. Within the hour, every kid in the detention facility was privy to what had gone down—and they were absolutely loving it. Some of them even dared to make taunting remarks to the correctional officers. Among these animals was Brian Van Staag, the young deer-buck who'd led the applause when Conor had been taken from the courtroom. Scheduled for release himself that day, Brian had at first been miffed to learn that his rendezvous with the street was being postponed. When he'd found out why however, his attitude had done a quick 180. Way to go, fox-kid! Oooo, he couldn't wait to get out of here and
tell the guys.

The young spike-buck needn't have been so anxious; within another half hour, the news of Conor's escape had breached the walls of Precinct-1. An hour after that the first mention of it was posted online; (on Dik-Dok, to be precise.)

And, like all good rumors, this one became juicier and more lurid with each and every retelling.

It was at about this time that Ian Shortal answered his doorbell and found Albert Tufts waiting on his front steps, along with a half-a-dozen officers of the ZPD.

"Sir," the Lieutenant informed the weasel brusquely, motioning to the officer on his right, (Francine Trunkaby) "We have a warrant to search your computer."

Ever the embodiment of grace under pressure, Mr. Shortal insisted upon reading the warrant before allowing the officers access to his home. (It was genuine of course, signed off by the Honorable Judge George L. Schatten.)

When he returned the document a moment later, Tufts had more news to impart. "We also need to ask you a few questions."

"Not without a solicitor present I think," the Scottish stoat responded, coolly, "I know ma rights, laddie."

Just then, a voice called down from upstairs.

"Uh, Lieutenant, I think you better come up here."

Tufts had officer Fangmeier carry him up to the second floor. Entering the bedroom he found one of his techs, a beaver named Del Beirch, huddled in front of the Shortal desktop with his face blocking the screen.

"Dangit Birch, will you move out of the way?" the Kaibab squirrel chittered irritably…and then he was chittering furiously, his tail snapping like a pennant in a stiff wind.

There, on the display screen, was a message.

**Warning – Your Computer Has Been Encrypted With Ransomwear.**

**In order remove this encryption, you must pay $2000.00 by…**

The 'pay by' date listed was the day before yesterday; it was now well past that deadline.

The ZPD wasn't getting *anything* out of THIS computer.

It was shortly after this that officers McHorn and Wolford came strolling up to a sidewalk café table in Sahara Square.

"Hello Finnick." The big rhino rumbled.

The little fennec fox took a sip of his drink before answering, peering over the rim of his sunglasses as he spoke.

"This about the Lewis kid?" he queried in an even deeper voice than McHorn's, "Nothing I can tell you, officers. I haven't heard a peep from him since he broke out the slam."

"Oh, so you KNOW about that?" Wolford asked him, in slightly accusatory tone.
Finnick took off his sunglasses and regarded the wolf with a raised eyebrow for a second; then he laughed and waved up the street.  

"You just crawl outta your den five minutes ago, boy? The whole Square knows about it: I hear-tell the Palm Hotel Casino's laying odds on how long it'll take you boys to catch him."

Now it was McHorn who was raising an eyebrow.

"Seriously, Finnick?"

"Of course not." the desert fox answered peevishly, "But that's the rumor; that's how many animals know the kid went rabbit on you."

He fell back in his chair, looking from one officer to the other.

"Look, there's nothing I can tell you about him and The Phantom; I found out about that same time as you did, later even." He shook his head at the tabletop. "Conor never said a word to me about no loan-shark or anything like that. If he had, I would of tried to talk him out of it; dumb kid."

"Fine," McHorn snorted, putting his hooves on his hips. "You don't know anything." He nodded over his shoulder at the police cruiser parked across the street, "You can tell us the rest of what you don't know back at Precinct-1. Let's go."

Finnick picked up his napkin and slapped it down on the table-top.

"Why you pointy-faced….you been plannin' to haul me in all along. Dangit, I already told you, I got nothin' that can help you find the kid. We have a deal, him and me; when we're not working together he stays out my business, and I stay out of his."

The two ZPD officers remained unmoved.

"Yeah, yeah…save it for the Lieutenant," Wolford growled as he motioned for desert fox to get up from his chair.

Finnick folded his arms and regarded the wolf balefully. "And suppose I decide I don't want to be on your quiz show?"

It was McHorn who answered him, aiming a finger at the fennec's van, resting curbside, about 15 feet away.

"Got any outstanding traffic tickets, Finnick? And sayyy, that ride of yours doesn't look any too roadworthy, now I notice it. Maybe I aughta write you up an order to bring it down to the DMV for a safety inspection. And… oh yeah, that's right; the Lewis kid's been seen inside your van a few times hasn't he?"

"Yeah, maybe he stashed something in there while you weren't looking," Officer Wolford chimed in, picking up the thread, "Maybe we should get a search warrant…"

"All right, all riight!" Finnick snarled and heaved himself out of his chair, "But I'm telling you now, you're just wasting your time."

"We'll be the judge of that," McHorn snorted again.

"Yeah, whatever you say," the desert fox grumbled. He started to move in the direction of the police cruiser but found his way blocked by Officer Wolford "Haven't you got a bill to pay first,
"bub?" the timber-wolf asked, pointing over Finnick's head at the check, laying on the table behind him.

The fennec-fox growled and reached for his wallet.

"Blankety-blank little silver fox moron; I shoulda stuck to working solo when I had the chance."

It was while Finnick was getting in the police cruiser that Chief Bogo finally saw what he'd been waiting for, (if not looking forward to.)

It happened while he was watching ZNN News on his desktop monitor—something he normally did about as often as he went to the dentist.

As he'd hoped, the Conor Lewis jailbreak wasn't the lead story; it wasn't even the lead local item. That honor went to the arson fire in the Rainforest District, (a decision with which the big Cape buffalo wholeheartedly agreed.)

But when the newscast cut to a commercial break with still no mention of the young fox's escape, Bogo began to fret. Was the network even going to report on it at all?

It wasn't until the ads finally ended that his worries were finally allayed. There, on the backdrop screen behind Fabienne Growley was an overhead shot of Precinct-1. And superimposed over it were the front and side-view police photographs of Conor Lewis. The caption below read simply, 'Escaped'.

"And in more local news," Ms. Growley began, "an escape last night from the city youth jail has local authorities baffled."

Bogo winced and then snorted. That might have been true this morning but not anymore. "Blast it, didn't anyone give these magpies an update? Right now, we know exactly how the Lewis boy pulled off that jailbreak."

He could only hope that the story wouldn't go downhill from here.

"At approximately 11:00 PM Zootopia time," the snow leopardess was saying, "a young silver fox identified as Conor Severis Lewis was released from custody by order of the Zootopia Supreme Court." She allowed herself a short, dramatic pause, and then delivered the punch line. "The police later discovered that the order had been a forgery. Mr. Lewis is now officially listed as a fugitive, and the ZPD is asking that anyone with knowledge as to his whereabouts..."

Bogo smiled at this, but crookedly. Most of the calls The Department would get in response to that request would go something like this.

"ZPD, what is the nature of your call, please?"

"Hi, is there any kind of reward being offered for that fox kid who escaped from juvie?"

"Not at the present time, sir..."

*CLICK!*

On the other hoof, if the ZPD received even a single phone call with useful information, it would more than make up for all the cranks—and at least there wouldn't be as many as if there WAS a reward being offered. (Word that there wasn't would spread quickly after the first few inquiries.)
What Bogo heard next made his eyebrows fly upwards and caused him to blow a note of surprise through his nostrils.

On the screen in front of him, Fabienne Growly was telling her audience, "At the time of his escape, Conor Lewis was being held on a charge of assaulting a police officer and is listed as a violent offender. If you see this young fox, do not attempt to apprehend him yourself..."

"What the devil?" Chief Bogo demanded aloud, speaking to no one in particular. Whatever other problems he may have had with that fox kid—and they were many—one thing that Conor Lewis was not was a violent offender. The Chief had seen plenty of that kind in his day....and the Lewis boy absolutely did not fit the mold. In fact, Bogo had actually started to come around to the view that maybe the young fox hadn't bitten Nick Wilde on purpose. (It was hearing the kid had been put in V3 restraint that started it.)

"For all the good that will do him now," the Cape buffalo murmured to himself. He could guess whose bright idea it had been to tell the press that the Lewis kid was violent by nature; Lieutenant Albert Tufts, wasn't it obvious?

Well, he could have word with the squirrel about that later. For now, Ms. Growley had wrapped up her story and had passed the baton to her co-anchor, Peter Moosebridge, who was talking about the upcoming 125th anniversary of The Junior Ranger Scouts. Bogo reached over and switched off the monitor; he had seen enough.

All in all, he gave it 6 out of 10 stars. The network had been critical of the ZPD's performance, but at least they hadn't tried to sensationalize the story.

And yet, there was something about the way they'd handled it that the ZPD Police Chief didn't like...though for the life of him, he couldn't pin it down.

It was only after he got up from his desk that it hit him. The Phantom; ZNN hadn't said a word about the Lewis kid's silent partner, not even once. Anyone watching that newscast would have been tempted to assume that Conor Lewis, age 14, had hoodwinked the ZPD entirely on his own.

That was not good, not good at all; 6 out of 10 immediately became 4 out of 10.

It was right about then that Nick Wilde stepped off a bus in Haymarket.

That was the neighborhood's official name, but nobody who lived there ever called it that. With the flare for irony so typical of the downtrodden, they had unofficially rechristened it Happytown.

It was the closest thing Zootopia had to a ghetto, dilapidated buildings, boarded up storefronts and swatches of graffiti everywhere. The sidewalks were cracked and sprouting with weeds, and you couldn’t go more than four blocks without coming across an abandoned vehicle in an alleyway—often with someone living inside. Only a single busline served Happytown, and the nearest Metro Station was Vole Garden, at least five city blocks away. Once upon a time the neighborhood had been serviced by an electric tram line, but that had long since ceased to run.

Many, if not most of the animals who still lived there were members the so-called maligned species; rats, hyenas, coyotes, jackals, Afurican wild dogs (aka, painted wolves,) nutria, skunks, various members of the weasel family—and yes, foxes. It was a place the 'better' animals of Zootopia liked to pretend did not exist.

It hadn't always been this way; in years past, when the area was still known as Haymarket, it had been a thriving, working-class community.
That had all changed with the construction of the Witty Alton Expressway, which ran directly over
the neighborhood, (no exits.) Now, instead of having to pass through Haymarket on their way into
or out of town, folks could bypass it entirely…which they did. The results had been catastrophic
and nearly instantaneous; commerce had dried up, local businesses had gone under, and those who
could afford it had begun a steady exodus from what soon became known as Happytown.

Nick Wilde was all too aware of this. He should have been; he'd grown up here. Looking up and
down the street as the bus rumbled away, he would have been unsurprised to see platoon of
zombies come lurching around the corner; glassy eyes and arms outstretched, "Braaaaiiins…"

He turned and began to walk, not bothering to think about where he was going; his feet would
know where to take him.

As he moved along the sidewalk, Nick drew stares from the occasional passersby. It wasn't that
they were unused to seeing uniformed police officers, and /or foxes here in Happytown—far from
it—but never both at once.

And furthermore, this particular cop looked as if he was getting ready to march in the annual
Founder's Day parade. He was clad in a super-snappy dress-uniform; bright buttons, a stiff collar,
and creases sharp enough to cut pizza. The only thing missing was a loop of gold cadet's braid;
(Nick had come with a hair of including that as well.)

By rights, he should have found his ensemble about as comfy as a straight-jacket, especially in the
heat of summer. At the moment, however, he was too nervous to be uncomfortable. And if he'd
ever needed to look sharp, it was right here, right now.

As he continued on his way, Nick's route took him past several of his childhood landmarks. Some
of them brought back happy memories, like the park where he'd often played as a boy…now
overgrown with weeds, the swing-sets fallen into rusty ruin. Other locations conjured up far less
pleasant recollections—such as the community center where he'd had his encounter with George
Schatten and Company. Except for a different set of doors, it looked virtually unchanged from that
time. That was all the red fox needed to see, and he moved on quickly…before the ghost of his
younger self came running down the front steps with tears in his eyes and a muzzle on his face.

Nick did NOT need to revisit that memory, especially now.

Three blocks further on, he stopped and took a deep breath. Right around the corner was the most
heart-wrenching memory of all—if it was still there.

He made the turn and there it was, a brownstone store-front, long since abandoned. All the
windows were broken or at the very least cracked and there was enough graffiti on display to
decorate a battleship.

And yet, for some reason, the name above the door had been left untouched—John Wilde, Nick's
late father. And beneath that, just barely visible, were the words, 'Fine Bespoke Tailoring; All
Species Welcome.'

Right up until the very end, the elder Wilde had never given up on that dream.

Nick had promised himself that he wouldn't say it—or even think it—but of course he did.

"Aw Dad, I wish you could be here to see me."

John Wilde had always wanted his son to grow up to be law-abiding fox…and now here his boy
was, helping to enforce the law.
Nick felt his eyes beginning to mist up and hurriedly went on his way. If only one bank, if only any lender had been willing to approve his father's loan application…

"Then he would have gone bankrupt anyway, when the neighborhood went under," the red fox's inner voice reminded him.

"Maybe…but at least dad would have had a chance to try and make it work," he responded snappily, for once refusing to let 'the voice' have the last word.

He picked up the pace and hurried on.

A short while later, Nick found himself on one of the few streets in Happytown that had not yet gone to seed, small, neat houses with small, neat yards; one or two of them even having flower beds out front. There were no cracks in the sidewalk here, and the roadway had been paved fairly recently; even the streetlights were in decent working order.

It should have a cheering sight, but Nick knew that it couldn't last. Urban blight is not unlike a potato blight; creeping and relentless, it always wins out in the end.

The house he was looking for was about a third of the way up the street, a two-story, red-brick cottage with a sun-porch and a wrought iron weathervane on the roof.

Stepping up to the front door, Nick looked at his watch, then gazed in the ovular window in the center of the doorframe, checking his appearance as best he could.

He was stalling, and he knew he was stalling. After perhaps another half minute of this, he pressed the doorbell with a rigid finger, trying not to grind his teeth.

For a long moment, there was only silence and stillness; Nick saw nothing and heard nothing…and a false hope began to arise within him; maybe she had forgotten he was coming over.

No such luck, just then a shadow move in front of the window, and then the knob turned and the door swung open.

Ellen Wilde was tall for a vixen, almost as tall as Nick and with lighter fur than her son. She had put on some weigh since he'd last seen her, though you could still call her slender. Her slim figure made her look younger than she actually was, and the bottle-thick glasses with she peered up at her boy made her appear much older. She had added some gray to her muzzle and cheek-tufts since…how long ago had it been since his last visit?

She was dressed in well-worn jeans, a chambray shirt, and a nursey-mammal's vest; her head was wrapped in speckled scarf and topped by a broad-brimmed hat. (She would have looked perfectly at home in Bunnyburrow. ) The specks of dirt on her knees attested to the fact that she'd been working in the backyard garden when Nick had arrived.

She blinked, and then spoke quickly, a slight rasp in her voice.

"My son isn't here, officer…and he hasn't done anything wrong!"

She hurried to shut the door, and Nick moved just as quickly to block it with his shoulder…all the while stifling a groan, this was not what you would call getting off on the right foot.

"No, Mom…it's me; it's Nicholas."

His mother narrowed her gaze and leaned in close, sniffing at him…as if she couldn't trust what her
eyes were telling her.

And then they went wide behind her spectacles.

"N-Nicholas? What are you…? Don't just stand there, come on inside, son."

Nick felt his chest relaxing. Okay, this was more like it.

It didn't stay that way for very much longer. No sooner was he through the door than his mother slammed it and threw both deadbolts.

He felt his ears go up and point at each other.

"Mom, why did you lock the…? Hey, what the…what are you doing?"

She had turned and was frantically attempting to unbutton his uniform shirt.

"Nicholas, don't just stand there; help me get those things off before someone sees you!"

He just stared for a moment, uncomprehending.

"What, you mean my uniform?" he said, batting her paws away.

"YES, that's what I mean!" she said, her voice an exasperated growl. "Do you have any idea how much trouble you can get into for impersonating a police officer?"

She reached up again and Nick brushed her off again—all the while stifling a grimace. No, things had definitely NOT gotten off to a good start.

"Mom, stop it. I'm not impersonating anyone; this really IS my uniform."

She reeled back, wide eyed…and then leaned forward, eyes narrowed into doubtful slits behind her glasses

Nick forced a smile, reminding himself that given the way he'd lived his life, up until two years ago, his mother had every right to be suspicious. (Robyn McFerral hadn't been the only vixen he'd lied to about quitting the hustle game.)

"I know Mom, I know," He told her, looking down at himself self-consciously, "Sometimes I still can't believe it myself…me, of all animals, a police officer."

He took her paws in his own.

"But it's for real, mother, I swear I'm not pulling a hustle here, it's the truth. I really am a cop…and a darn good one. Just last week I stopped a …(No don't say terrorist attack, she REALLY won't believe you.) …I stopped someone from dumping load of defoliant on a whole bunch of mammals. My Chief says I'm a shoo-in for the detective squad if I keep this up." (Not exactly 100% true but close enough.)

His mother said nothing to this, only gazed at him wide-eyed…or maybe that was just the effect of her glasses. It didn't matter, because Nick could see that her lower-lip was trembling.

She believed him.

He turned and nodded over towards a picture on the wall, a stout red fox in a blue blazer and checked shirt; bushy eyebrows and a scholarly smile. More than ever Nick wished that his father
was here to see him.

His voice softened and even cracked a little.

"I did it, Mom…I'm an honest fox now, just like Dad always wanted for me."

His mother blinked, and even though those bottle glass lenses, Nick could see that her eyes were getting wet. And then her paws were clasping his tightly.

"Oh Nicholas," she said, sniffing back a tear, "So NOW am I going to see some grandchildren?"

Nick yanked his paws away from her, as if she'd given him a static shock, groaning though locked jaws.

"Mommomm…can't you ever give it a rest?"

He turned around, muttering under his breath.

"You're not getting any younger, Nicholas."

From behind, he heard, "You're not getting any younger, Nicholas."

He let out a breath and said. "Do you know how many times your father and I tried to have a cub before you were born…how hard we tried for another one?"

He heard his mother say, "Do you know how many times your father and I tried to have a cub before you were born…how many years we tried for another one?"

"What was that?" he muttered.

"What was that?" his mother demanded… adding quickly, "Nothing mom."

Nick tried to stop himself, but…

"Nothing, mom—Aggggh, grrrr!".

That was when she hit him with a curveball.

"And with a bunny, Nicholas? How am I supposed to see any grandchildren, if you take up with a rabbit?"

Now, it was Nick's turn to look stunned. He turned around, staring slack-jawed at his mother. What the…? How could she possibly know about Judy, if she hadn't been aware until just this second that he was a police…? Agggh, grrrrrr, of course; that surveillance camer video…again!

He raised his paws and made a stopping motion, as if ordering an approaching vehicle to slow down.

"Mom, just take it easy. That FuzzTube vid of Judy and me isn't what it looks like. We were on an undercover assignment, and…"

"Video, WHAT video?" his mother demanded, putting her paws on her hips. "I was talking about that picture in the paper… of the two of you at that costume party, the one where she pinned that party favor on your shirt."

Nick felt his teeth trying to clench again.
"Mommmm, that was my Police Academy graduation and that was my BADGE she was pinning…"

"WHAT video, Nicholas?" Ellen Wilde interrupted. Her tail was frizzing and her voice was starting to gekker.

Nick tried to put his paws on her shoulders; she batted them away.

"What video?"

He could have bitten his OWN face off.

"No video Mom, nothing at all, I-I was thinking of something else." Even as he said the words, he knew they wouldn't fly. She was already wagging a finger in his face.

"You might as well tell me Nicholas, I'll find out sooner or later." Her eyes narrowed and her lip curled upwards "I found out you were running that shell game, didn't I?"

Now HIS eyes went wide—and his mouth dropped open into a stammering cave.

"Wha…? H-How did you…? I-I mean…I don't know what you're talking about, mom. "

She just folded her arms and tapped her foot on the floor,

Nick threw up his paws at the ceiling. "For crying out loud mom, I was 13 years old!"

"12!" she snapped, "And what was that you said, Fuzztube? What's that, one of those…websides, or whatever they're called?" She turned and stalked into the living room, with her son pleading after her.

"Really, Mom…It's nothing, nothing at all. Listen, can you just sit down? I'll make you a nice cup of tea."

His mother glared at him over her shoulder. "You know I can't stand tea, Nicholas."

Nick grimaced and almost bit his tongue; what the foxtrot had he been thinking, it was true, she did.

He followed her across the living room and into the den, where an ancient, roll-top desk stood waiting. Giving her son another smoldering look, she unlocked it and slid back the cover.

Nick didn't know whether to feel relieved or completely bewildered. The computer nestled within wasn't just an antique; it was practically a fossil, an Ameerkat 65. The CRT monitor had a screen the size of an Etch-a-Sketch, (and looked like it had approximately the same resolution.) Half the keys on the keyboard were missing their characters, and there was no mouse visible that he could see. Everything was covered by a thin film of dust; this machine clearly hadn't been used for some time.

His mother turned and leveled a finger at him.

"All right, you; you just march yourself upstairs right now and wait in your room until I call for you."

Nick came that close to giving himself a face-pawlm.

"Mommmm, I don't live here anymore, remem…? Ohhh, what's the use?"
He slunk over to the stairs and hauled himself upwards, tail dragging limply behind him.

"Thank God Carrots isn't here," the exasperated red fox mumbled to himself, searching for a silver lining as he pulled open the door to his old room.

At once he experienced a rush of memories. Except for the items he'd taken with him when he left, everything was exactly the same as the day he'd moved out. Here was the same comforter on his bed. There, on his dresser, was his old RC car controller. (The car itself had died an untimely death when he'd accidently driven it down a storm drain.) Even his old Limp Fuzzkat poster was still here, tacked to the wall.

"Crikey, did I actually LIKE those guys?" he wondered, looking at it with a tilted expression.

There was a beanbag chair parked over in the corner beside the poster, a little bit ragged, but any port in a storm. He went over and just sort of collapsed into it, offering himself a silent pep-talk as he sat there.

"Okay Nick, calm down…she'll never find that video. That computer looks like something left over from when floppy discs were the next big thing. Heck I wouldn't be surprised if it still uses dial-up to get online. And that's another thing; MY mother…trying to surf the web? Hah, that's a good one; she wouldn't know Zoole from a doodlebug. No problemo, Nick; you've got nothing to worry about…"

"NICHOLAS PIBERIUS WILDE! YOU GET DOWN HERE THIS INSTANT!"

This time there was no one to see him; Nick's pawlm had an immediate close-encounter with his face.

"I could have just LET Mr. Big ice me, but nooooooo…!"

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:

I tried to go for little more humor on this one; hopefully, I succeeded

Trying to find the name of Nick's mother is a chore to say the least. I've seen at least five different opinions on the subject. Finally I just picked name and went with it.

Ditto for the actual location of Happytown. I've only seen one map of Zootopia showing it...while all the rest of them have nothing at all in that location. The concept art I've seen of the place shows a parkway passing overhead. Again, I just picked a spot and went with it. Nick's relationship with his mother is based on something Rich Moore said on Twitter, shortly after Zootopia's release; She still lives in Zootopia, in the same house where she raised Nick and she's waiting for a grandkit.
Chapter Summary

A little bit of a shorter piece to wrap up the chapter...and yet another mystery is spawned.

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 10 – When A Fox Goes Rabbit
(Concluded…Pt. 7)

Conor Lewis took a short sip of his soda, never once allowing his eyes to stray from the image in front of him.

For the past few days, he'd been unable to perform his daily ritual; looking at the picture he kept of his mother, (so as not to forget what she looked like.) Because of that, he was allowing himself an extra few minutes tonight.

More and more, this image was becoming the young silver-fox's last tenuous connection to the vixen that had borne him. Beyond her appearance, he knew practically nothing about her. What had she done for a living? (Had she even had a job?) What about her friends, who were they, what had they been like? What had she liked to do for fun? Conor couldn't remember any of that…and the few memories of his mother that he had managed to retain were fading by degrees. They had lived in an apartment, he knew that much, but in what city? Once upon a time, he had could have answered that question, but now…agghhhh, grrrr, somewhere back east; other than that, it could have been almost anywhere. There were other recollections as well, but mostly they were just fragments; the kid next door he'd played with, (a ringtailed cat?) and the older vixen—he thought it was a vixen—who had sat with him from time to time. And had she watched him over the weekend once or twice, maybe even for longer than that? That was it; that was all the young fox had left of his mom in his memory bank.

That is, except for…the one thing about her that Conor knew he would never forget; whenever she tucked him in for the night, his mother would sing him a song before turning the lights out. He'd been able to hold onto that memory, at least in part, because she'd eschewed the 'public domain lullabies' in favor of her own preferences, 'This Must Be The Place.' by Talking Herds, and Sarah McLachlion's 'In the Arms of the Angel' to cite just two examples. Her all-time favorite had been a tune the young silver fox had since learned to play himself, "Who Know Where The Time Goes?" by Furport Convention.
Mom had always sung that one with a special beauty.

"Across the evening sky...all the birds are leaving.  
But how can they know...it's time for them to go?"

And then, one day, it had been time for her to go...

Conor moved the cursor and closed the image. Enough was enough, and Guild would be logging into their secure chat room in just a few more minutes. He drained his soda-can, tossing it into a nearby wastebasket when he was finished.

And then he settled down to wait.

He was inside the Furrison Hotel again, seated once more in his zero gravity chair; surrounded by a trio of display screens and with a fourth one overhead. He wasn't bothering to go VR this time; that was fine for work, but not for chat.

Anyone watching him would have seen a slightly different looking young fox than the one who'd stumbled into this loft in the wee hours of the morning—and also a different smelling animal; he had toned down his scent as well.

After finishing his clean-up chores, Conor had given himself a good, hard work-out, and then taken another shower, this time using the fur-bleach and the deodorizer-infused fur-wash.

He had employed them both only sparingly; it was something else Danny Tipperin had taught him. The key to effectively changing to your appearance and/or scent is to make it a gradual process. Don't do it all at once, give it time to settle in. So it was that the young fox's fur was only fractionally lighter than before, and his scent only a tiny bit less noticeable.

Conor blew a puff of air against his nose. Danny had once given him some further advice along that line; if you really want to change your scent, try changing your diet. "Like the old saying goes, you are what you eat," the swift fox had said.

Unfortunately for THIS fox, that option wasn't open to him, at least for the time being. Having to lay low inside his hidey-hole, he'd be scarfing on his usual fare for at least another week.

When it came to changing his appearance however; there were a few more things he could do. For starters, he could alter his wardrobe, swapping out his usual clothes for something a bit more homeboy; stressed jeans, a hoodie and t-shirt, and a ball-cap turned askew.

As for his burning-amber eyes—the young fox's most distinguishing characteristic—he had made preps to deal with them a long time ago. Over the past three years, he had acquired several sets of theatrical contact lenses, two sets in brown, one in grey, and two more in blue. (Those last ones actually made his eyes turn green, but never mind, as long as they looked different than before.)

He had one of each color-set, laid out in the bathroom and ready to insert if needed.

The clock in the corner of monitor #1 ticked down to 9:36; one minute left, it was time to get ready.

Conor clicked on his mouse, moved it, clicked again, typed some instructions and then double-clicked. This time he did not use voice control. When interacting with Guild—or with any other member of The Circle, for that matter—voice-chat was strictly verboten, a legacy from the days when Kieran McCrodon had run the show.
"Even the best voice-maskin' software can't disguise *everythin',* boyo," the Irish sea-mink had once informed him, "*F'rinstance,* it can't change yer speech-pattern, can it?"

Needless to say, web-cams were also out of the question.

Conor clicked again, and the secure chat window materialized before him. As always it was set for high-contrast, jet black with the young fox's username, (Eiffelsogudg_x9%), showing in the sidebar, the lettering in bright, canary-yellow.

The time stamp changed to 9:37…and a new name was added to the sidebar, this one in florescent lime-green, Guillycrakks75##3.

And then a message appeared in the main window.

Guillycrakks75##3 : Hey, Who RU & What are you doing here?

Eiffelsogudg_x9%,: What MI doing here, what are YOU doing here?

Guillycrakks75##3 : Lking 4a frend,

Guillycrakks75##3 : FRIEND

Eiffelsogudg_x9%,: Dunno who U mean. Not me.

Guillycrakks75##3 : Ri. I be Out of here.

Eiffelsogudg_x9%,: Nighters

Conor settled back and waited for Guild to return. Their exchange had actually been a coded ritual; a test to make sure the other animal was who said they were. Had either one of them typed an incorrect response, the other would have instantly closed the chatroom and then deleted the program.

The giveaway wasn't only in what they'd said, but also how they'd said it. They had messaged each other in a mixture of phonetics and plain English, (RU and 'Are You',) a not particularly common practice in chat. The misspelling and correction of 'friend' had been intentional as well.

When Guild came back, what he had to say nearly caused the young silver fox to do a full 360 in his zero-gravity chair.

Guillycrakks75##3 : I'm switching over to voice-chat.

Conor blinked, and then stared at the center screen. Wha…? That couldn't be right. He typed a quick reply.

Eiffelsogudg_x9%,: Don't think that's gud idea.

Guillycrakks75##3 : Y not Conor? Already know who U R.

Eiffelsogudg_x9%,: Yes, but I dunno who UR. 2 Danger-S 4 U

Guillycrakks75##3 : My risk 2 take…and we'll B done fstr F we U-Z voice.

That was true, but Conor still didn't like the idea. Before he could type a response however, his partner beat him to the punch.
Conor felt his chest seize up for a second. When Guild typed in all caps you had two choices—
either go along, or watch him disappear.

He took the first option, flipping on his headset microphone and engaging the speech-alteration
app. Only then did he click on the 'voice' button.

"Okay, here I am."

Guild's response sounded like a talking vacuum-cleaner; he too was using voice-cloaking software.

He also wasn't wasting any time.

"So you're only 14, huh?"

Conor felt his ears go up and point at each other. There was something about the way Guild had
said that…

He let it pass; probably just the voice-changing software.

"Yep, now you know." He said, and then quickly braced himself. He knew what was coming next.
First, the sound of a pawlm against a face, followed by something to the effect, 'If I'd known
THAT before I…how could I ever have been so…? Blah…blah…blah…I HATE myself.'

None of that happened. Instead, Guild told him. "Okay, let's recap. What have you been doing
since you got out of jail?"

Conor felt his ears standing up even further than before. What, now? Wasn't his partner even going
to ask him where he'd gotten the money they'd been lending out?

"That'd sure as heck have been the FIRST question out of my mouth," the young fox marveled
silently. Their transactions had all involved payments of cash that would have been excessive even
for a high-schooler to have had available… much less a kid at least a year away from getting his
Learner's Permit.

Well…it might have been curious, but it wasn't unwelcome. Truth be told, his revenue source was
the last thing Conor wanted to discuss with Guild right now—or ever. And so, he gave his partner a
quick summary of everything that had happened since he'd left Precinct-1 (Wisely, he chose to
omit the part about having overslept, and offered no details about his hideaway.)

Guild's response to this was a simple, "Okay," and then he wanted to know, "Have you told anyone
else about me? Sorry but I have to know."

It was fair question and Conor even felt a little bit relieved. Finally his partner was asking
something he SHOULD be asking. He said, "Don't worry; I didn't say a word to the cops."

"Not the police, but you did tell somebody, am I right?" Guild's response was a tense as a
bowstring; he had caught the inflection in the young fox's voice.

"Now you know why I wanted to stick to texting." Conor grimaced silently. Nothing to do now but
come clean—and he would have to tread very carefully.

"Okay…I never gave him your name, or anything…but I had to tell my attorney that I was working
with someone …"
"You did WHAT?" Guild almost screamed; coupled with his altered voice, it sounded as if someone had set off mega-bass boom-box inside of the young fox's head. Aaggghhh, grrrr, he was probably going to need a whole pawful of Zebuprofen when he was done here.

"Will you calm the heck down?" he said, "I didn't tell him anything he and the cops don't already know—except that the guy I work with isn't The Phantom—told him there ain't no such animal, and that's all I said."

Guild was anything but satisfied

"That's enough so they cops will know they've been looking for me in the wrong place."

"Only if my attorney tells them…and he won't," the young fox reminded his partner. "Don't forget, Mr. Rodenberg's not just a lawyer, he's a mob lawyer."

"What the heck does THAT have to do with it?" Guild was almost screaming again.

"Everything," Conor answered patiently, "A regular lawyer only has to worry about being disbarred if they violate the attorney-client thing; a mob lawyer has to worry about being used to paint a house, you follow what I'm bringing out?"

Guild didn't follow it apparently. For a long time, he said nothing. If it hadn't been for his username, still visible in the sidebar, Conor might have assumed that his partner had bailed. When he finally spoke again, his words were both slow and deliberate.

"Don't be so sure about that kid. You can't….you…just don't be so sure about it."

Conor stared as the screen for a second. This was the first time Guild had ever called him 'kid'. Yes, it was a given that he would be older than the young silver fox, but still…

He opened his mouth to reply but Guild had already changer the subject.

"Listen, you probably already know this, but were you aware that the ZPD has a warrant out for Mr. Shortal's computer?"

For a long moment, Conor just sat there, head tilted sideways in confusion. No he hadn't been aware of it, but at the same time, it was hardly a surprise. Why did Guild seem to think that it was some kind of a big deal?

"No, I wasn't," he finally said.

"Didn't think so; don't worry, I took care of it," Guild had mistaken the young fox's hesitation for something else, "I infected his hard-drive with ransomwear. Even with a clean-room scan, the ZPD won't get a thing out of that computer."

"Huh? What'd you do that for?" Conor was both bemused and confused. That sounded like a serious case of overkill.

"Sorry, had to do it." Guild's voice was just barely apologetic, "Shortal got careless on us; forgot to delete your last e-mail message and his brother-in-law saw it. Animal named Weaselton, Duke Weaselton; he's the one who informed on us to the police. Uhhh, you didn't know this?"

"Of course I knew it," Conor all but snapped at his partner, "My lawyer made the cops give Weaselton up while I was being questioned." He allowed himself a small snark. "There's other ways of getting information besides going online ya know."
Annoyed as he was, the young fox had to admit that his partner had a point. If Mr. Shortal had left THAT piece of information out in the open, then who knew what else he'd forgotten to delete? And though Conor had known since day 2 that the Dukester was the animal who'd given him up, the cops had never said HOW their informant come by the info he'd given them. Now, finally, the last piece of the puzzle was falling into place.

"You sound like you know that weasel," Guild replied, ignoring the jab; he seemed to have grasped that he'd unknowingly insulted his partner's intelligence.

"I know about him," Conor said. (Finnick had once filled him in on Weaselton.) "He's a street operator, rip-off artist—strictly small time; likes to hustle pirated DVDs and games. On the street, he's known as the Duke of Bootleg; word is, he can't stand that name." Something occurred to the young fox then and he asked, "Do you happen to know if he snitched me out as part of plea deal?"

Guild hesitated for a moment before answering. Whether it was because he had to look up the information or for some other reason, Conor couldn't tell.

Finally, his partner came back.

"Yes, they're letting him plead down from first degree burglary to possession of stolen property, why?"

Conor answered that question with one of his own.

"Was he able to make bail, do you know?"

"Uhhhm, yeah," Guild answered nervously, and then, "You're not planning on getting some payback, I hope."

A sly grin wrapped itself around the young fox's face. "Nahhh, way too risky…but wouldn't it be great if we could let the cops THINK that's what we're planning?"

"Oh, oh, ohhhhh—YES!" Guild's voice was almost gleeful, "Give the ZPD a little distraction; oh yeah, I like that idea. Only how are you going to set it up?"

"Don't know yet," the young fox had to admit, "I'll think about it, though. And if you come up with anything, lemme know."

"Will do," Guild replied, and then made an odd noise. It took Conor several seconds to realize that he was clearing his throat.

"Listen, getting back to Mr. Shortal; you never did collect that final payment from him, am I right?"

"Yeah, that's right," Conor said, "You thinking I should let him keep it, to make up for your having to ransomware his computer?"

He heard Guild making that noise again, obviously embarrassed. And why not, it wasn't HIS cash that he was proposing to give away.

Just the same, the young fox agreed without waiting for him to say it.

"Yeah, let's do it; I couldn't collect that money now, anyway. The ZPD knows I shined on that last payment…so you better believe they're gonna be watching that weasel close."
Another odd sound came over his headset, this time easily recognizable as a sigh of relief.

"Okay, good," Guild said. "I'll try to see if I can find a way to let him know about it. Oh, and except for our transactions, he had all of his data backed up in the Cloud. Once he gets his computer replaced, he should be back in business, no problem. Uhm, you sure you're okay with giving up that money?"

"Yeah, I can handle it." The young fox answered, "I didn't get into this for the bucks anyway.

He instantly wanted to kick himself; what the heck had he said THAT for? *Now* Guild would start pestering him about where a 14-year-old kid could have laid his paws on that kind of cash.

But instead he only made that throat clearing noise again.

"Yeah, about that…listen kid, I'm not very good at this kind of thing, but I'm sorry for getting you into this."

Conor's ears went up again.

"Wha…? *You* didn't get me into this; I did it to myself."

Guild was having none of that.

"Yes, I did; it was my idea, remember?"

The young fox came back swiftly,

"The first time yeah, but I was the one who wanted to run with it. If you'd had your way, it would have been a one-off deal—and I wouldn't be hiding from the cops right now. I pushed it, I own it, end of story."

"All right, I'm not going play reverse blame-game with you." Guild responded wearily. Just then Conor heard another voice in the background. He couldn't make out the words, but he heard his partner say, "I'll be there in a minute, just wait." The words were not spoken harshly; in fact, they sounded almost…affectionate, and maybe even just a tiny bit familiar.

Then Guild said, "All right, I have to go; same time tomorrow?"

"Yeah," Conor said, "I probably won't be on, but go ahead and check in, just in case."

You never knew; something might come up between now and then.

"All right, later," Guild said, and then he was gone...

No, not quite, he still had one more thing to say.

"It was good while it lasted though, wasn't it? We helped a lot of animals."

"Yep, we did," the young fox agreed. Privately, however, he wondered if the whole thing had been worth it. Okay, maybe what he and Guild had been doing wasn't what the ZPD and everyone else had thought it was, but still—he had thrown his future down a garbage disposal in order to make it happen.

He was only just now becoming aware of that fact.

"Okay, Nighters." Guild said, and then his name disappeared from the sidebar. A split second later,
Conor fell back in his chair and shut his eyes, trying to absorb everything he'd just heard—and not heard; Guild still hadn't asked him where a 14-year-old kid could have gotten the kind of money they'd been lending out.

That alone would have been head-scratcher, but the young fox's partner also hadn't said a word about how a kid that age could have managed on his own for three whole years...with NO adult supervision.

And those were just for openers; Guild hadn't brought up the Performing Arts Academy, he hadn't asked how Conor had managed to get someone like Vernon J. Rodenberg to represent him...heck, he hadn't even asked what the young fox's real name was.

But the biggest anomaly was this: As expected, Guild had expressed surprise at how young his online partner actually was...but even through all of that digital voice alteration, Conor had been able to tell it had all been forced.

It made him stop to wonder; could Guild have been aware of his age all along? Did he know a more than he'd been letting on about the animal he'd been working with for the past couple years? It was certainly possible; like foxes, hackers have secrets that they never share with anyone. (For example, the other members of The Circle didn't have a clue that Guildenkrantz and Feelsogudd had been moonlighting as guerilla bankers.)

Conor opened his eyes and tapped his forefingers together. What did he really know about Guild anyway?

All right, first of all, his partner was the longest serving member of The Circle, one of the few from before the young fox's time with The Company. He'd been Kieran McCrodon's right-paw mammal within the group—of which he was now in charge following his chief's incarceration. As such, he'd known the sea-mink for longer than any of the other Circle members...a certain young silver-fox included. The difference was that, unlike Conor, Guild had never met Kieran face-to-face.

"Or...HAS he?" the young fox asked himself, feeling an urge to apply a slap upside his head. How did he know for certain that the two never met? The answer was, he didn't; he'd only assumed that was the case. Aggggghhh, grrrr...big mistake for anyone to make that kind of conjecture—especially a young fugitive on the run; he would have to be more careful from now on.

One thing that he did know for certain was this: Like Conor himself, Guild was one of only a Pawful of mammals who had been aware that Kieran McCrodon was the legendary Druid. Even today, more than three years after his arrest, the police were unaware of that fact; they knew Kieran had been a hacker all right, but not THAT hacker.

Guild, however had known; it was something to give even more credence to the theory that they had known each other offline.

Maybe so, but it still left one big question unanswered—if Guild had known all along that Conor was just a kid, why the heck had he gone along with that money lending scheme?

THAT was one puzzle for which the young fox had at least a partial solution. Guild had always held a special loathing for banks and bankers; how crooked they were and how they always stuck it to regular mammals, (especially if they were members of a maligned species.) He'd supposedly been hacking into the databases of various banks even before he'd joined The Circle. And what he'd found—the young fox had seen it—was downright sickening.
No, it made perfect sense, when you thought about it. Something that involved giving it back to a bank, even in a small way; there was something Guild would be up for, and the heck with his partner's age.

Conor stretched his arms and made small grumbling noise. At the end of the day, their backstreet lending program had probably hurt Zootopia's banking community about as much as a bottle-rocket is capable of hurting a concrete bunker. On the other paw a pinprick action like that was probably the ONLY way Guild would have been willing to take on a bank. He was the kind of hacker Kieran call a 'Hot-Bottle,' the whistleblower who accumulates a warehouse full of damning evidence, only to get cold feet at the prospect of leaking it to the press or passing it on to law enforcement.

Shaking his head as if attempting to clear it, Conor tried to make sense of it all; the more he thought about Guild, the more questions he had. In fact, there was only one thing he knew right now for certain.

And that was, he had taken enough risks for one night and it was time to get offline while the getting was good.

He moved his mouse to the 'Shut Down' button and clicked, waiting for The Beast to power off and put him back in isolation.

It occurred to him then that the next few days were going to be incredibly boring—and lonely.

Nick Wilde would have had very little sympathy for his fellow fox right then; at the moment, HE wanted nothing more than for the world to go away and leave him alone.

He was sitting on a bus, on his way back to the Vole Garden Metro station, not caring when, or even if he ever got there.

Nick looked a far cry from the sharp-dressed cop he'd been when he'd arrived in Happytown earlier in the day. His tail was dragging, his cheek tufts were sagging, and that once-snappy uniform of his now looked as if he'd acquired it by dumpster pouncing.

After more than an hour of concerted effort, he had finally managed to convince his mother that there'd been nothing romantic going on between him and Judy Hopps; that was the good news. The bad news was—with that out of the way, mom had seen no reason why she shouldn't started pester him about grandkids again; out of the frying pan, into the fire.

"Hey buddy, isn't this your stop?" The panda driving the bus asked him, not unsympathetically. (He was the same animal who'd dropped the red fox off a while back—and he was not unaware of the change in his passenger's appearance.)

Nick looked out the window and saw the entrance to Vole Garden Metro station. He mumbled something that might have been 'thanks', and then got up from his seat and headed for the door.

Halfway down the station steps he heard the call of a hunting-horn, coming from his pocket; someone had had just sent him a text.

He almost left his cell-phone where it was; probably a parting shot from mom.

"But what if it isn't from her?" his inner voice queried. Okay, he'd check… but NOT until after he boarded his train.

When he did, all the seats were taken, and oops… can't text while holding a strap; he would have
to let it go a wee bit longer At the next stop, Walnut Street, a whole bunch of animals got off, and Nick was finally left without an excuse for not checking his inbox.

He sat down and looked at his cell-phone screen…and at once, his ears were standing tall. What, now? In all the time that Nick been with the ZPD, he had never once gotten a text from Chief Bogo; for the big Cape buffalo, it had always been voice communications or nothing.

The message read:

Meet me at the following address, tomorrow at 11:00.

403 Hanging Fern Ave, Otterdam, unit number 1620, the entrance code is 5025#. Tell no one about this message and delete it as soon as you’ve read it (and memorized the address.) I will be contacting Officer Hopps separately.

Extremely important that you be there! Lives may depend on it.

Bogo.

Nick knew at once that he would be there; no question about it.

It wasn't the urgency of the message that made up the fox's mind for him. In fact, he wasn't at all sure that the summons was really from the Chief and not some kind of set-up.

No, it was simply that if Nick WAS about to walk into a trap, he didn't really care right now anyway.

"Dangit Mom, why does it always have to end up like this?"
Judy flattened herself against the wall, reaching with her paw and feeling for the keypad next to the door. On the opposite side of the doorframe, Nick Wilde was holding a pocket-mirror, tilting it so that his partner could see the control-panel without actually looking at it.

No way were they going to open this door while standing directly in front of it…or even in front of the access panel.

Both of them were dressed in their civvies. The Chief’s text, (if the sender was Bogo,) had warned them in so many words that secrecy was absolutely vital. With that in mind, they had each decided separately to leave the cop-clothes at home. (Uniformed officers have a way of attracting attention.) Accordingly, Nick was dressed in his standard faux-Hawaiian ensemble, while Judy was wearing dungaree shorts, a knit shirt, and a hoodie, with a faded denim ball-cap to top it off.

She studied the mirror carefully, nose twitching in concentration. The reflection of the keypad was a reverse image of the real one and she needed to be certain of her actions; who knew what might happen if she entered the wrong access code?

The access code….dangit, she'd known it a minute ago!

"Nick, what're those door code numbers again?"

There was no answer for a few seconds.

"Nick?"

"Hold on, I'm thinking," the red fox replied, grumbling under his breath. Oh, swell…he'd forgotten it, too.

"Some pair of supercops WE are," Judy groaned inwardly, "So long Detective Bureau; maybe we'll
catch you again someday."

Then Nick finally answered her.

"Okay, try 1620."

Judy's teeth came together and began to grind. "That's the UNIT number, Slick."

"Right, Right," he answered apologetically, "how about 403?"

If Judy's paws had been free, she would have...well, she wouldn't have known who to slap, herself, or the dumb fox.

"That's the address, Nick, and the door-code has FOUR digits."

"Sorry, Sorry...Oh wait, I know it's...uhm...uhhh, how about A113?"

"NICK!"

"Dangit Jude, I'm a fox, not an elephant. All right, wait...okay-y-y it's...5025, followed by the pound key."

"Are you...?" she started to asked

"Yes, I'm sure," the red fox snapped, sounding anything but certain of his response.

Neither was Judy, but she couldn't hold like this for very much longer. She reached a little further and began to enter the access code.

"One thing in our favor," she said to herself. "If there IS anybody watching from the other side of that door, they'll be too busy laughing to get the drop on us."

She drew in a short breath and pressed the #pound key; a soft click answered.

Taking hold of the doorknob, Judy slowly twisted it clockwise and then looked at Nick, who nodded and began to count off on his fingers; one...two...

On the count of three Judy threw open the door and the pair of them dived through the opening, landing in a prone position with their tranx-guns at the ready.

No one was there...or was there? Just then, they heard a familiar, gruff voice, coming from somewhere around the corner.

"What's all this then, amateur dramatics?"

Nick and Judy looked at each other, more irritated than embarrassed; what did Bogo expect after sending them a cryptic message like that?

"At least we're here on time," the red fox pointed out, speaking either to the Chief or no on in particular. He got up and offered Judy a paw.

She allowed the fox to help her to her feet, but then realized something...how had Bogo known about the 'drama' if he hadn't been able to see...? Uh-oh, there it was, mounted on the ceiling

"Nick...camera," she hissed and he quickly let go of her. Secret meeting or not, they couldn't afford the risk; the last thing either one of them wanted was to give Rock Hardesty a little more
ammunition.

Still, a camera…aimed at the door? That was odd, but it was also somewhat familiar. Judy had seen a set-up like this at least once before—but where?

Before she could remember, Chief Bogo appeared in the hallway. He too was out of uniform; shirtsleeves and suspenders. Throw in a shoulder holster and he would have looked the quintessential TV police-detective.

Typically, he was not in the mood for small talk.

"This way," he said, turning and beckoning for the fox and bunny to follow.

The further Judy ventured down the hall, the more curious—and recognizable—the surroundings became. This was supposed to be a commercial office space, and yet it contained a kitchenette (with a refrigerator), a bathroom with a shower, and just visible through a half-open door, a pair of twin beds.

All of these were in large-mammal size, (although the shower stall appeared to have been fitted second, smaller spray-nozzle and controls.)

But it wasn't until they reached the 'living room' that the doe-bunny finally got it. There, dominating one wall was a big screen-TV. And parked against the diagonal wall was a long, blond-oak table. Underneath that she could see six electrical outlets and hookups for eight separate telephone jacks.

There could be only one possible reason for such an arrangement…but just to make sure, Judy went over and tapped on a window her finger-claw. It responded with a dull 'thunk'.

Just as she'd thought—bullet-proof; she turned around again.

"This is a safe house, isn't it Chief?" she said and was rewarded with a small grunt.

"Yes, that's right; we've kept many a witness under wraps in this location—so I expect you two to keep it to y'selves." He said this while pointing at the fox and bunny in turn.

Nick just raised an eyebrow.

"Hmmm, we're on the top floor here…so I take it there's rooftop access?"

A small, droll smile wiped itself across Judy's face. Her partner was apparently not about to be put off—or outdone—by her. Just the same, it was a shrewd guess; this building had a wide, flat roof, perfect for a helicopter evac if the situation arose.

Bogo snorted again, and then grunted.

"Right, but you'll understand if I don't point it out," he said, and then directed them to the sofa facing the big-screen television. It was a little too large for either of them, and Judy was obliged to give Nick a boost before hopping up after him, (oddly enough, the coffee table facing the couch was just the right height for a fox and/or bunny.)

There was a large-mammal tablet lying on the tabletop and Bogo scooped it up as he took the seat crosswise of Nick and Judy. He gave them each a warning look and then his voice became portentous.
"What I'm about to tell you is not, repeat, NOT to leave this room…under any circumstances. Do you understand that, Hopps?" His eyes were boring into her like a gimlet.

Judy swallowed and said, "Yes Chief, I understand that."

Bogo nodded and turned his gaze on Nick, "Do you understand that, Wilde?"

His response was bit more flustered. "I, uhm, well, ah…yes sir."

"Good," the Chief nodded, and thumbed his tablet.

A video promptly appeared on the screen, 'Watch MoleJo presents, Gazelle's Top Ten Hottest Dance Moves.'

Bogo made a sound more appropriate to a rodent than a hooved mammal and frantically thumbed the tablet again.

The big screen instantly winked out.

"You NEVER saw that!" he belled …so loudly that the windows rattled.

Judy bit her lip and nodded, saying nothing for fear of what might come out instead. From the corner of her eye, she could see Nick pressing a foot down on his tail; he was also trying desperately not to laugh.

Bogo, meanwhile, was working the tablet again…and now a new image appeared on the screen, the smoldering skeleton of building, somewhere in the Rainforest District.

"This happened, the night before last," he informed his officers grimly, and thumbed the tablet again. The image vanished and new one appeared, of another smoking ruin, this one on a pier somewhere.

"The Canal District, two nights ago," the Cape buffalo said, "And this last one I think you two may recognize; Savanna Central, last week."

The view shifted to a row of storefronts, gutted in the shape of a V, with debris strewn all over the street in front of them. Judy grimaced and turned away with her eyes shut tight. That erased the image of the burned out building but not the one playing back in her head; a bundle of live electrical cables, drifting slowly towards the stream of water where she was standing.

Oh yes, she recognized that location all right; the broken power pole at the end of the building was a dead…was the giveaway.

"Are you okay, Carrots?" she heard Nick saying from beside her. His paw briefly brushed against hers, but did not take it; not in front of The Chief, and definitely not with Rock Hardesty on the warpath.

"Sir, with all due respect," the red fox queried stiffly, "Why are you showing us these photos?" He seemed angry and Judy wondered if it was on her behalf; piqued off at the Chief making her relive that experience.

Bogo folded his arms, the way he did just prior to making an announcement.

"Because Wilde, those fires were all deliberately set—and in all three cases, it was the work of professionals, not amateurs; the arson squad's confirmed it."
Nick's ears turned forward and his head tilted sideways…and Judy felt her nose twitching curiously. So…? So someone was running a fire-insurance scam; serious to be certain, but not urgent. Certainly it wasn't critical enough to require a secret meeting like this one. What the heck was going on here?

"Chief, I-I'm still not sure I understand." She said.

"Me neither," Nick agreed from beside her.

Bogo pointed at the image on the TV screen.

"There were several shops destroyed in that fire…but we've determined that the arsonist's target was a franchise of Tux-On Tuxedo shops."

That was even more confusing…to Judy. Nick gasped so loudly that it triggered a brief coughing spell. Maybe SHE didn't recognize that name, but with him it rang a cathedral bell.

Bogo moved back to the second picture, the smoldering pier.

"And this was formerly a franchise of Interspecies Recycling Services," he said, and this time there was no reaction from Nick except a puzzled look. Ditto for Judy; that name meant nothing to her.

Bogo clicked back to the first image.

"And THIS is what was once the Rainforest District branch of Tundratown Limousine Services. "

Now Judy gasped…even louder than her partner. She knew that name, how could she ever forget? Her confrontation with Nick at the fenceline, the discovery inside that limousine, the scratches, the polar-bear fur, and Mr. Otterton's driver's license; Tundratown limo was a name all but etched in her memory.

But mostly what she remembered was Mr. Big's ire upon learning that she and Nick had been caught nosing around the premises. If that was his reaction to a mere snooper, how would he feel about someone burning down one of his limousine stands?

Unless…hang on a second; unless it had burned on HIS orders; since when did gangsters not indulge in the odd insurance scam?

Except, if that was the case, what the heck was this meeting for, and why was it being held in secret?

Well, there was one possible way to determine if those fires were only about insurance; Judy posed the question as delicately as if she were venturing onto thin ice.

"And…Interspecies Recycling and Tux-On Tuxedos; are they also Mr. Big’s properties?"

Bogo's face turned stone-cold grim.

"Tux-On yes, the recycling plant no; that belongs to, or should I say, formerly belonged to THIS individual." He thumbed the tablet and a new image appeared on this screen.

Nick let out a whimper, and Judy would have done the same if rabbits were capable making that sound.
There, in front of them, was a surveillance-camera image of a burly javelina with reddish-brown fur. From his mode of dress he might have been just a regular-joe construction worker, a headband, a sleeveless ripstop jacket, and a greasy-blue work-shirt. His face, however, told a different story; a narrow gaze and an amused grin, as if he knew the ZPD was watching him—and was equally certain they couldn't touch him.

"Oh my God, the Red Pig." Nick was practically keening with apprehension.

Judy bit her lip and tried to recall everything she knew about the animal on the screen in front of her.

Rocco Peccari, aka the Red Pig, godfather of the Sahara Square Mob and Mr. Big's most hated rival. He had earned his underworld nickname not by way of his coloration, but for another reason. Whenever he lost his temper, (a not infrequent occurrence,) his face would turn the color of a ripe tomato—visible even through his facial fur.

Peccari had gotten his start as a lowly street enforcer, rising quickly through the ranks to become head of The Razorbacks, the Sahara Square Mob's strong-arm squad. Eventually, he had gone all the way to the top, an elevation that, according to Nick Wilde, had driven Mr. Big to a state of near apoplexy—and the feeling was apparently mutual. Not to put too fine a point on it, they hated each other's guts.

"Chief," Nick sounded a schoolkit, who hadn't understood the teacher's question, "we know those fires were set on purpose, but has there been any...are we sure that either The Red Pig or Mr. Big was behind any one of them?"

Bogo answered him by clicking to another image.

"This is from a surveillance camera, taken just before the Tux On shop went up; you tell me."

Judy felt as if she'd been punched in the gut. The surveillance camera photo showed a pair of animals apparently fleeing the scene. The image was grainy and slightly blurry and they were visible as barely more than silhouettes—but the profile of the first one was unmistakable. A curved snout, a flattened nose, tushes and floppy ears; this face could only belong to a member of the hog family.

"And the other locations?" The doe-bunny queried...half-heartedly, as if she already knew the answer.

Bogo didn't disappoint her...or perhaps it would have been better to say, he disappointed her mightily.

"The Quarantena Canal—that's the waterway that runs past Interspecies Recycling—was found to be full of polar bear fur on the morning after the fire; we haven't been able to make any individual identifications but it was definitely from that species. As for the Tundratown Limo fire, The ZFD found a discarded overshoe left outside the door. Forensics says it was definitely worn by some sort of smaller hoofed mammal, and it was also found to contain hog hair. We've also got a security camera photo from that location." He gave a small snort, "I won't bother showing it to you; I think you've got the idea."

"Yes Chief, we get it," Nick responded, sounding suddenly very tired, "But why us, why are we here?"

Bogo grunted and the hint of a smirk flitted across his face, as if this was the very question he'd
been hoping the fox would ask.

"Because," he said, "The last property to be set alight belonged to Mr. Big; that puts the ball in his court, doesn't it?"

He set his paws on his hips, looking from the fox to Judy and back again.

"There's no one on the force as familiar with that arctic shrew as you two. You, Hopps, are the Godmother to his daughter's little girl...and you, Wilde; you were his associate for many years."

"Until he excommunicated me," the red fox pointed out, "for selling him that skunk butt rug. After that, I was completely shut out of the loop."

Bogo raised an eyebrow.

"I thought he'd forgiven you for that."

"He has," Nick admitted, "but that doesn't mean I'm a friend of his, much less a friend of ours, if you know what I mean." He leaned forward with his paws on his knees. "Especially since I joined the ZPD; the only way I could get back into his good graces NOW would be if I were to go on the take and...well, you know I won't do that."

He said this last while looking earnestly up at the Cape buffalo, who made a small sound and nodded in grudging approval.

"Quite right, but you've still got some idea as to how he thinks, haven't you; the way he operates?"

"Mmmm, yes...I suppose so," the red fox nodded reluctantly.

"Okay Chief, we get that," Judy interjected, "But you still haven't said what it is that you want from us." She really was curious, but at the same time, she hoped to deflect him from what she was sure was coming next; a recap of the method by which she and Nick had 'persuaded' Duke Weaselton to give them Doug.

Again, she saw that barest hint of a smirk, "Because, as I said, since Mr. Big was the last injured party, it will be his turn to light the next fire...and if we can determine when and where he's going to strike, then maybe, just maybe, we can stop it before it happens." His expression turned wanly hopeful. "Perhaps we can even put an end to this tit-for-tat arson business before it escalates any further."

He got up and began pacing back and forth, gesturing with a hoof—while Judy stared with her nose twitching. She had never seen him do this before.

"I don't think I need remind either one of you what a gang-war between the Tundratown and Sahara Square mobs would mean for this city; panic, chaos, collateral damage, civilians caught in the crossfire." He stopped and looked directly at her and Nick.

"In fact, it's happened already, hasn't it?"

To illustrate what he meant, Bogo snatched up the tablet and moved his thumb over it. The photo of the Tux-On fire reappeared on the screen.

"Not only Mr. Big's establishment, but that entire row of shops has had to be condemned," he said, "Four innocent animals, none of whom had anything to do with either Mr. Big or the Red Pig have lost their businesses because of that fire."
Judy breathed an inward sigh of relief; for a second there, she had thought he was going to bring up…

"…to say nothing of how you nearly paid full price because of it, eh Hopps?"

Judy felt that punch to the gut again. Over on the right, Nick was halfway out of his seat and trying not to show his fangs; it did not go unnoticed by the Chief.

"Sorry, had to say it." The big Cape buffalo shrugged. For perhaps half a second his expression was sympathetic, but then his features turned as dark as a black hole, "When someone endangers the life of one of MY officers, I take it very seriously."

Nick and Judy regarded each other for a moment, the fox looking slightly contrite. Yes, he did, and everyone on the force knew it.

"So," Nick finally ventured, "I take it what you want from us is some insight as to where and when Mr. Big will hit back?"

"Yes, exactly that." the Big Cape buffalo said, folding his arms again. Judy suspected that was far from everything he wanted; otherwise, why all the secrecy? Did he, for example, expect her to try and get anything out of Fru-Fru? If that was the case, sorry, but the idea was a complete non-starter. Not only would Fru never give away any of the family secrets, she had no secrets to give. Mr. Big had always gone out of the way to keep his daughter insulated from 'that life,' as he called it. Fru-Fru probably had little more knowledge of her father's 'business dealings' than Bogo did—if that much.

Meanwhile, her partner had a suggestion, "Chief, before we go any further, may I offer something that might help us avoid becoming redundant and repetitive."

He said this with just hint of a sardonic smile—and Judy rolled her eyes. That was Nick; even now, he couldn't resist playing the sly fox.

But then he got serious.

"How much do you actually know about the relationship between Mr. Big and the Red Pig?"

Bogo thought for minute.

"Hmmm, let's call it the gist but not the specifics," he said.

"Well, I don't know anything," Judy suddenly said, in an outburst that surprised even her. "WHY the heck do they hate each other so much? It can't be all just fursonal."

"You're right, it isn't." Nick told her. He looked at the Chief, who nodded as if giving the fox permission.

"It actually goes back a lot further than the Red Pig, Carrots," he said, "Remember what I told you once, about how Mr. Big's dream has always been to open a casino—his own, legal gambling casino—in Tundra town?"

Judy did remember. "Yes, and you also told me that he was never able to make it happen."

"Right," the red fox nodded, "and for that, he can thank the Sahara Square Mob; every time he tried to make it happen, they blocked it."
Judy felt her nose beginning to twitch again.

"How'd they manage that; was someone on the City Council taking payoffs?" It wasn't hard to imagine Dawn Bellwether accepting kickbacks from the mob.

It was Bogo who answered her.

"Didn't need one, Hopps; the last time Mr. Big tried to get license to build a casino in Tundratown was right before you joined the force. " He snorted cynically, "I'll never forget it. The day of the vote, a group called the Million Mammal Mums staged a protest rally outside City Hall. Huge crowd, practically a multitude; so many animals in attendance, they were backed up all way onto the steps of Precinct-1. I had to dispatch every officer in the building to go help keep the peace—even Clawhauser, yes, I know!"

He drummed his fingers on the crook of his elbow waiting for his officers to stop sniggering. They couldn't help it; the thought of Benjamin Clawhauser in *riot gear* was just TOO much.

"Anyway," Bogo finally said, "Leodore Lionheart was mayor back then, so you can imagine how HE reacted when he saw that crowd; no casino in Tundratown—ever! We later learned the buses that delivered most of protesters were paid for by the Red Pig; so was the crew that cleaned up after them. And as I've already said, that was the last time Mr. Big tried bring legalized gambling to Tundratown."

"All right," Judy nodded. Her next question felt like something only a dumb bunny would ask, but she had to know. "But why would the Red Pig want to keep Mr. Big from getting a casino in the first place?"

Bogo's answer was mercifully absent of any condescension, "because the Sahara Square Mob is perfectly happy to have only ONE legal gambling establishment in Zootopia; the Palm Hotel Casino—in *their* territory."

Judy felt her ears standing up.

"Hold on, *they* own that casino?" This was sure as heck news to her.

Bogo waved a hoof.

"No, but they're certainly skimming the take. We've never been able to prove it, but we know they're doing it; every time one of the Red Pig's captains sits down at a table in that casino, he always gets up with a LOT more money than he brought with him."

"AND the Sahara Square Mob controls every service industry connected to that casino," Nick Wilde reminded them both, "Food and beverage, sanitation, uniforms, janitorial services, even security."

"Quite right, and to say nothing of their hold on the Service Workers Union," Bogo nodded in concurrence. "If he wanted to, the Red Pig could shut down that casino with a snap of his fingers. It's the sort of arrangement Mr. Big can only dream about; and the Sahara Square mob's not about to share the wealth—with anyone, and especially not him."

"Ohhhh, I see," Judy nodded again, but then Nick Wilde spoke up.

"Ahhhh, I'm not quite sure if you do, Chief…Carrots?" he said, "You see, this casino business isn't just about greed; for the Sahara Square Mob, it's a matter of survival."
"Survival?" Judy's nose was twitching again.

"Survival?" Bogo echoed, staring confusedly at the fox, "What d'you mean then, Wilde?"

Nick got up off the sofa. "The Tundratown Outfit is the largest crime-family is in Zootopia, sir. Mr. Big controls at least twice as much territory as the Red Pig, and has three times as many soldiers—BUT!" he raised a finger, "thanks to the Palm Hotel Casino, the Sahara Square Mob is much richer…and that kind of money buys a lot of outside muscle."

"So if Mr. Big were ever able to open a legal gambling casino…” Judy prompted, beginning to get it at last.

"…it would change the balance of power," Bogo was musing thoughtfully, "And that explains why those two have never come to blows…at least until now. Please Wilde, do go on."

The red fox did just that.

"So Mr. Big has never gotten along with the Sahara Square Mob—but things really started to come off the rails when Rocco Peccari took over." He looked at Bogo, "And that one IS mostly fursonal Chief. Mr. Big thinks The Red Pig is nothing more than an elevated street thug—which is at least partially true—and Rocco Peccari thinks he's some kind of relic, 'past his expiration date,' is how he puts it."

A corner of Bogo's mouth turned wryly upwards

"Hmmm, sounds like you were privy to some of their exchanges, Wilde."

"Only one sir," Nick answered him, "but I can't forget that evening. It was the first time they ever met face-to-face, at the Bella Notte restaurant in Savanna Central."

"Neutral ground," the Chief observed with a grunt, "Figures."

"Right," Nick nodded. "The Red Pig was just a captain back then, but he was considered a real comer. Anyway, after we sat down, Mr. Big delivered a lecture about the importance of honor and proper respect. Peccari listened politely, or that's what everyone thought, but then he snorted and said, 'Get the heck outta here, Big; that stuff went out with rotary phones. You wanna waste yer time swimmin' in the Egyptian river, go right ahead. Me, I don't got time for that stuff, I got business to conduct; this ain't the old country and we ain't any of your so-called mammals of honor—we're crooks. That's what I am and that's what you are. And the sooner you face it, the better off you're gonna be."

Judy stared, and Bogo let out a low whistle.

"Good Lord, how the devil did the Red Pig ever get away with talking to Mr. Big like THAT?"

Nick shrugged and his expression turned sly. "Because he was right and deep down Mr. Big knew it. That—and Peccari had half the Razorbacks with him; even Koslov was going to think twice before taking them on. They may not be the biggest animals in Zootopia, but enforcers don't come any meaner than those pigs."

"And they're fanatically loyal to their boss," Bogo snorted, "Mmmm yes, that'd do it, I shouldn't wonder."

"Yep, that's right," Nick nodded, again with that sly smirk, "It did come close though. When Kevin and Koslov heard what Peccari was saying to their boss, they both went for their jackets—and
Raymond slipped me a gun under the table; I just about wet my pants."

All three of them shared a hearty, cathartic laugh…and then Nick pulled yet another surprise from out of his sleeve.

"But what you need to understand sir is that Mr. Big was every bit as much out of line back there as The Red Pig."

"What then?" Once more Judy and the Chief were staring dumbfounded at the fox.

"I know, I know…it sounds crazy." Nick told them, making 'slow down' gestures with his paws. "But you see, it's completely against mob protocol for a boss to give another boss's captain a lecture like that…especially behind his back. As they say across the pond, it's 'Not Done.' And when the Red Pig's chief heard about it, he went right through the ceiling. He called up Mr. Big and told him, "You backstabbing little shrimp; I'll pour gas on myself and play with matches before I'll let you open a casino in Tundratown . It's never happening, you hear me; NEVER!"

Bogo let out another low whistle.

"Cor, I'll bet Mr. Big didn't like that very much."

"No sir, he didn't," Nick nodded, "and he blamed the whole thing on the Red Pig." He threw up his paws, as if in surrender. "That was it; that's where the bad blood between those two really got started."

"And it's only gotten worse since then, hasn't it?" Bogo observed pointedly.

Judy whistled through her fingers, as if to call 'time.'

"All right, let me see if I got this," she said, "It sounds to me as if a gang war between the Sahara Square Mob and the Tundratown Outfit has been brewing for a long time now—but they've never actually come to blows because they're too evenly matched; neither one of them can actually win that fight, am I right?"

"That's about the size of it, Hopps." Bogo's hooves were on his hips again, "And I'll guess that your next question is, then why've they chosen to ago after each other's businesses now?"

"That's about the size of it, Chief," Judy said, unable to keep the wryness out of her voice.

The corners of Bogo's mouth turned in opposite directions.

"If it were Mr. Big that started it, I'd be every bit as puzzled as you are, Hopps." he said, and then the amusement vanished abruptly from his face, "only it wasn't him, was it? It was the Red Pig drew first blood—and since when has that walking volcano ever needed a reason to go off on a rampage?"

Nick Wilde's paw shot upwards, as if grabbing for a runaway balloon.

"With all due respect sir, I disagree with you there. The Red Pig may be crude and he may be temperamental…but a loose cannon, he's not. If that was the case, he'd never have lasted this long as boss of the Sahara Square mob. Matter of fact, the word on the street is that they've been earning better than ever since he took over. Believe me; Rocco Peccari would never put a match to one of Mr. Big's properties over anything trivial, no matter how mad he was. It'd take a lot more than say, an imagined insult to make him go that far."
Bogo nodded and that sardonic smile crossed his features again…but his time filled with a significance that Judy wasn't sure she liked.

"And that," he said, "is precisely why I've asked you to be here." He pointed to a desk, propped against the far wall, where a stack of thick Manila folders lay.

"Those are the case files from the three arson fires. I need you study them and then put your heads together; try to figure out where—and possibly when Mr. Big is likely to take his revenge on the Red Pig."

He pulled out a memory stick; in his oversized hoof, it looked like a soap-flake.

"The video files are here," he said, passing it to Judy, who took it as if it might contain a hidden booby-trap.

"How long do we have?" she asked him.

Bogo tapped at a horn for a moment.

"I'll need something preliminary by tomorrow afternoon; other than that, take as much time as you need, but try to work fast as you can; I don't think I need remind you that the clock is ticking."

"Actually sir, I think we have some breathing space," Nick Wilde responded, disagreeing with his Chief yet again. "Mr. Big won't hit back right away; his motto has always been, 'Revenge is a dish you want to eat cold.'"

"What, that line from 'The Wrath of Khamel?'" Judy's ears were pointing straight up at the ceiling.

Nick smiled slightly. "It's actually an old Sealpolitain saying—and what it means is, if you want to get payback on someone don't do it right away, give your emotions time to cool down, so you can think it through logically."

"Right, and you also want to give it some time so's to lull your opponent into a false sense of security."

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"Right, and you also want to give it some time so's to lull your opponent into a false sense of security."

Chief Bogo was also familiar with the homily. He frowned, deeply, "Except that won't happen with the Red Pig, will it? HE won't be fool enough to lower his guard, no matter how long Mr. Big holds off."

"No sir, he won't," the red fox agreed, "But Mr. Big will still give it some time before he retaliates; I've never known him to do anything else."

He seemed to immediately regret his words—and Judy thought she knew why; however unintentionally, he had just roped them into this job.

Not that she minded, at least not as much as her partner. The Chief was right; a gang war between the Tundratown and Sahara-Square mobs would be a cataclysm for the city of Zootopia. And if it was within her means to help prevent it…of course she'd accept the assignment.

"In the interest of security," Bogo was saying, sweeping his hoof around the room "I'd like you to make this your temporary headquarters. And again, you're to say nothing of what you've seen and heard here, not to anyone else; and that includes your fellow officers."

His final admonition caught Judy almost completely by surprise; what, not even the other cops? She was tempted to ask him why, but something inside the gray-furred bunny was telling her to keep it to herself, at least for now.
"Right then, is there anything you need, before I go?" Bogo asked. He seemed to have just now realized that he had important business elsewhere.

"We could use a laptop." Nick Wilde submitted.

The Chief pointed to the desk where he'd left the case files.

"There's one in the top drawer there," he said, "It's got a wireless remote so you can connect it to the wall TV if you like. Anything else?" He was raising an eyebrow while squinting with the other one; Bogo-ese for, 'I wouldn't say yes, if I were you.'

"Noooo, I think we're good," Judy answered him—quickly, before Nick could put his foot in it.

"Right, I'll leave you to it, then." The Cape buffalo told them, turning for the hallway. "Let me know at once if you get any ideas." He went to the door and left without another word.

Judy waited until he was out of hearing range, and then turned and spoke to her partner.

"Well, at least now we know the real reason he let us get pulled off the Conor Lewis investigation." The Chief had seemed a mite less reluctant to let that happen than he'd indicated, (or that was how it felt anyway.)

Nick stubbornly folded his arms.

"That's still the case I'd rather be working, Carrots."

"So would I," Judy thought but did not say. Even so, there was no denying that the assignment they'd been given took precedence. Serious as it was the young silver fox's escape from custody wasn't putting any lives in danger. A full scale gang-war would, and then some—unless they could stop it in time. However, given the expression on her partner's face, Judy decided that it would be most unwise of her to say so. Instead she opted instead for a change of subject.

"I didn't want say this while the Chief was here, Nick, but why all the secrecy; do you have any thoughts about that?"

As a matter of fact, he did.

"Yes, but you're not going to like it, Carrots. I don't know what the situation is now, but back when I first knew him, Mr. Big had at least a few ZPD officers on his payroll."

Judy's paws flew up to her mouth; if anyone else had said that…

"And could he still, do you think?"

"Not a clue," the red fox admitted, shrugging, "But Chief Bogo seems to think it's at least a possibility…and if I were him, I wouldn't take chances either." He looked at her with an eyebrow raised, in sardonic imitation of their boss, "Anything else?"

Judy giggled; she couldn't help it, and then she got serious.

"Just one thing; is there anywhere around here to get something to eat? I've got a feeling we're going to be working straight through dinner."

"There's a food-cart collective right around the corner," the red fox told her, ever the savvy mammal when it came to the streets of Zootopia. And then he went over to the desk, where the case-files lay. It was a little too tall for a fox-sized mammal, and he had to scramble up onto the
desk chair in order to reach the folders.

"In the meantime, let's see what we have to work with here."
Nick and Judy each go looking for clues...while a warning appears elsewhere.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The Fire Triangle—A Zootopia Fanfiction

Part One:

Fuel

Chapter 11 – The Fire Next Time
(Pt. 2...Continued)

"So then, which one of you is making the report?"

This time, Chief Bogo had the sofa while Nick and Judy were standing. It was a little small for a Cape buffalo, but he managed by stretching out his legs. It gave him the appearance of someone just kicking back and taking it easy—which couldn't have been further from the truth.

"Either one of us," Nick Wilde said, although he knew it would be mostly on him. A clever bunny was Judy Hopps, and a close friend to Fru-Fru she might be—but she still didn't know Mr. Big the way he did.

While he hadn't been associated with the Tundratown crime boss for quite some time, Nick actually knew a lot more about him than he'd been willing to let on earlier. Mr. Big had always been an 'old skool' gangster…and that kind of wiseguy tended not to change his habits over time. When Kevin and Raymond had hauled him (and Judy) before the Big Shrew nearly two years ago, it was the first time they'd been face-to-face in more than a decade. And yet, except for those bushy eyebrows and a few extra tufts of gray, almost nothing had changed. The animal facing Nick across that desktop might have stepped straight out of a time-warp. His mannerisms, his way of talking, his paw gestures; all of it had been exactly the same as the red fox remembered.

If none of THOSE things were any different, it was a pretty safe bet that his attitude was still the same old, same old.

"Okay," Nick reminded himself, remembering Judy's advice, "Good news first, and then the bad... good news first and then the bad."

He said, "Before we begin Chief, Officer Hopps and I have a recommendation to make. Remember
what I said yesterday about how the Red Pig has the cash to hire some serious outside firepower? Well, if he starts to bring in those guns, THAT'S when you'll know things are about to get real."

"We're already watching the airport and the train stations, Wilde." The Chief informed him, beginning to sound testy. (As if the ZPD would miss such a basic step.)

"Yes sir," the fox responded quickly, "but is anyone watching the Palm Hotel Casino? Out-of-town wiseguys can't resist that place; it's one of the things that used to drive Mr. Big crazy."

"And," Judy spoke up for the first time, "I don't think the Red Pig would have a problem with his new hires going bust before things even start."

"He'd love it," Nick said, raising a thumb, "They'd have to go to him for a bailout, and no wiseguy does that kind of favor without expecting a bigger one in return."

"Hmm," Bogo nodded, looking satisfied…as if to say, 'this is more like it.' "All right then, duly noted. Anything else?"

"Yes, sir." Nick answered immediately, "as to where Mr. Big is likely to strike back…well, obviously we can eliminate Tundratown, but I believe we can also write off Sahara Square."

Bogo considered this for a moment, and then raised an eyebrow. "Too risky d'you think… or is there some other reason?"

"A little of both," the red fox replied, "Hitting the Red Pig on his home turf would be extremely dangerous all right…but it would also be an open declaration of war. Believe me; if it comes down to that, Mr. Big is NOT going to want everyone thinking he started it."

"But…he DIDN'T start it." Bogo was staring at him quizzically.

"That's right Chief, and that's how it looks now," Nick told him, "But if Mr. Big hits Peccari in his home territory it'll be a different story. What you have to remember is that you're dealing with La Cosa Nostra here; these animals play by their own rules, they don't think like you or me." He shook his head, "I never completely understood it sir, then or now, but that's the way their minds work."

He stopped momentarily and took a deep breath. Okay, now for the bad new; Bogo wasn't going to like this.

"And that's why—forgive me sir, but I have to say this—that's why the arson fire at the Interspecies Recycling facility feels completely wrong to me, like nothing Mr. Big would have ordered; it's just not him."

The Chief scowled deeply and his breathing became the angry rattle of a furnace bellows. Nick knew why of course; he and Judy were supposed to be trying to ascertain the future, not dwelling on the past. He could only hope that the big Cape buffalo would at least let him offer an explanation.

Bogo did, but in a manner that left no doubt; his clarification had better be a good one.

"And why's that, then?" he snorted, regarding the fox with a jaundiced eye and folded arms.

Nick looked over at Judy before answering; she nodded and motioned encouragingly with her paws.
"It's three things actually, sir," he said, ticking them off on his fingers. "Number one, the time frame; as I said yesterday, Mr. Big likes to wait awhile before he takes his revenge. Hitting back only a week after the Tux-On fire isn't like him at all."

Bogo said nothing to this, but for maybe half a second Nick saw him purse his lips; the first crack had just appeared.

He went on.

"Second, that set-up was much too complicated for Mr. Big's tastes." He cleared his throat and changed his voice to a wheezy imitation of the arctic shrew. "Always keep your schemes simple; in and out, done and done. That Mission Impossible stuff is only going to get you pinched." His voice became his own again, "I must have heard him say something like that at least half a dozen times …and that's one thing about him I'm sure hasn't changed."

Again, Bogo remained silent, but now his brow was furrowed. Two more cracks had gone snaking up the façade.

Nick took another breath and laid down his ace.

"But the biggest thing wrong with it is, as we all know sir, Mr. Big is a Don from the old school, honor, respect, and especially tradition…and one of the oldest and most important mob traditions is 'an eye for an eye.' If someone takes out one of your shops, you have every right to take out one of his." He let out a small growl, "Fine, except it wasn't any shop that was torched down in the Canal District; it was a whole darn recycling plant, worth at least five times as much as Mr. Big's tuxedo store. That's not an eye for an eye, Chief, that's a whole stinking HEAD for an eye. As much as he hates Peccari, I can't see the Big Shrew ever signing off on something like that."

It should have been the clincher, but Bogo only snorted, "Yes, but you're forgetting something aren't you? Mr. Big's tuxedo shop wasn't the only business lost in that fire. As I've already said, that entire building's had to be condemned; six other shops besides Tux On lost, to say nothing of the offices upstairs." He folded his arms again. "And you should know better than I do Wilde, Mr. Big is also a firm practitioner of mob 'justice'. 'Burn my business if you must, but leave my neighbours out of it…or else.'"

Nick let out another noise, this one half a growl and half a sigh. The Chief was right, but…dangit, the Interspecies Recycling fire still felt like overkill to him; overkill on Nighthowler.

Well, he'd made his case as best he could, and now it was time to get to the heart of the matter.

"Yes sir, of course…but that being said, there was one thing about the Canal District fire that had Mr. Big's name written all over it. And it may give us a clue as to where he's liable to strike back."

"And what's that, then?" Bogo was now keenly interested, leaning forward with his hooves on his knees.

Nick puffed out his cheeks and blew a breath of air.

"Well sir, as I'm sure you're aware, the Tux On stores were Mr. Big's first legitimate business in Zootopia; started from scratch, before he was even a made mobster."

"And…?" Bogo was raising an eyebrow, still attentive, but becoming impatient.

"And," the fox replied, "I didn't realize this at first because it's a relatively new business, but Interspecies Recycling was the Red Pig's first legitimate venture—which he also built from the
ground up."

Bogo's ears went up and he blew a note through his nostrils.

"Cor, are you daft, Wilde? He owns plenty of businesses older than that."

"Yes, he does," the fox responded quickly, "But all of those outfits were started by someone else; Peccari either bought them or inherited them when he became boss of the Sahara Square Mob. Interspecies Recycling is the first honest business he put together himself."

"Ah yes," Bogo was folding his arms and nodding, beginning to get it at last, "And that fits rather well with what you were saying about an eye for an eye, doesn't it?"

"That's right Chief, it does," Nick nodded, "and that's what may give us a clue as to what's coming next. Which of the Red Pig's business is the equivalent of Tundratown limo? Figure that out and you might have some idea as to where he's likely to get hit."

"You…don't know that y'self?" Bogo was thoroughly surprised.

"I'm afraid not, sir," Nick admitted, unabashed, "I may know a thing or two about Mr. Big, but Rocco Peccari's a mystery to me; I always tried to stay as far away from that hothead javelina as I could, back in the day. As for Tundratown Limo, that didn't come along after my time with the Big Shrew. I had no idea it was even his until Carrots…er, Officer Hopps and I were caught there by two of his polar bears."

Bogo blew another note; this time, one of surprise, "Huh, when was this, then?"

That brought Judy back into the discussion

"It was back before Officer Wilde joined the force, sir, when he was helping me track down that missing otter."

"Right, right, right, I'd…er, forgot about that." The Chief looked uncharacteristically embarrassed for a moment. Nick was almost amused…almost.

"So now you understand that I know very little about Tundratown Limo," he said, "But if there's anything unique about that business, something it shares with any of the Red Pig's enterprises, then there's your likely target."

Bogo slapped his knees and got up again, "Right then, anything else?" It was the same signal he'd given yesterday before taking his leave.

And it was Judy Hopps who answered him.

"Yes Chief, that first arson fire was in Savanna Central, the second and third attacks happened in the Canal District and the Rainforest District, which are basically the same ecosystem."

Once again, Bogo raised an eyebrow. "And…?"

Judy nodded to Nick, passing him the baton.

"And by rights, Mr. Big should have retaliated for the Tux On fire by hitting The Red Pig in one of HIS Savanna Central business ventures." He said this and moved on quickly, before the Chief could object, "I can understand why he didn't, but now he may decide to correct that little oversight. It's a long shot I admit, but something we can't ignore."
"Hmmm, no, I suppose we can't," Bogo pinched at his chin, looking thoughtful for moment, and then seemed to make up his mind about something. "Right then, I'm off. In the meantime, you two keep at it."

For the second time in 24 hours, he turned and left without another word.

Nick waited until he was gone and then called through the door with a cupped paw, "What can we say, you're welcome!"

An angry bellow from somewhere down the hall informed the fox he hadn't quite waited long enough. He turned to Judy with a sheepish expression.

"Ahhh, heh…Anyone for parking duty?"

She didn't seem to notice…and now he noticed that she was thumping her foot.

"Um…what?"

She answered him by throwing up her paws.

"Keep at it? Keep AT it! We've been over these files at least half a dozen times already." She swept an arm over the coffee table, currently strewn from one end to the other with Manila folders. "There's nothing more to be found here; what the heck else does Bogo want from us?"

Nick coughed into a fist.

"Ahhh, I think what he wants Carrots, is for us to do some leg work."

"Leg work, what do you mean, leg work?" Judy squinted and her nose began to twitch. And then a light seemed come on behind her eyes and her ears slapped hard against the back of her neck. "Nuh-uh, no Fru-Fru. No! Way!" She was thumping her foot even harder than before. Nick, for his part, was aghast.

"For crying out loud Fluff, even Bogo wouldn't ask you that."

It seemed to cool her down, but only slightly, "All right, but then where else can we go for some information?"

"Think, Carrots," Nick couldn't help showing a foxy smile, "That last arson fire was at a branch of Tundratown Limo, and what other animal do we know who's familiar with that place?"

Judy stared for a second, and then the heel of her paw slapped hard against her forehead. "Ohhhh, of course, Nick…Mr. Manchas!"

"Exactly," he answered, cocking a finger. "And with a little luck, he still isn't back from his guilt trip." The few times they had encountered the ebony jaguar in the past two years he had avoided their gaze and spoken hesitantly. Nick thought he knew the reason; Renato Manchas had once nearly torn both him and Judy to shreds—while in the grip of Nighhowler poisoning to be sure, but he'd never completely forgiven himself. Nick reasoned it might be good for prying some information out of the big cat.

But then Judy said something even more surprising.

"Mmmm, do you think you can handle him without me, Nick?"
His ears turned upward and pointed at the ceiling.

"Well, uh, I suppose I...why, Carrots?"

She made a sound that was either a sigh or clearing her throat.

"What you just said reminded me of something; there's another lead we can follow...but I'll have to handle this one myself."

Nick felt his head tilting sideways.

"Really, who?"

Judy said nothing for a moment, only thumped her foot in frustration again; it wasn't Fru-Fru, but it wasn't much better.

The first one was spotted in Sahara Square, on a wall, down by the Beach Promenade.

Anywhere else, it might not have been so noticeable; (in Happytown, it would have been practically invisible.) In this neighborhood, with whitewashed walls everywhere you looked, it stood out like bloodstains on linen.

Even then, it might not have been worthy of the ZPD's attention; just another piece of drive-by graffiti, as if that was anything unusual. However, with the city's new anti-vandalism policy in play, things were different. Letting such a high-visibility doodle just sit and wait for the clean-up crew was absolutely not an option.

Accordingly, the Sahara Square precinct sent two of its officers to investigate; Hakim Jerama, a Barbary sheep, and Alan Sartaq, a Gobi bear. Both of them were relative newcomers to the ZPD and more or less ambivalent about their new assignment. There were worse jobs; they could have been put on foot patrol, (a dreaded beat in this district, especially at midday, and in the heat of the summer.)

On the other paw, this whole thing was a fool's errand and both of them knew it. Conventional wisdom says, if you don't catch a graffiti artist right in the act, you're not going to catch him at all. Still...you never knew; they just might get lucky.

"There it is," Hakim swung his finger off to the right, towards a structure down a winding concrete path.

"Where, I don't see anything," Alan squinted thought the cruiser's windshield. He was neither bothered nor surprised. Of course his partner would spot it first; a sheep's eyesight is much, much keener than a bear's.

"Over there, on the bathhouse wall, do you see it?"

Alan was tempted to inform his partner that what he was looking at wasn't a bathhouse, but instead he peered closer. Yep, there it was, next to the entrance, visible to him as only a crimson smudge, but definitely something that didn't belong there.

He pulled over to the curb and the two of them got out.

As they made their way closer, more and more details of the graffiti became discernable. After another few steps, Sartaq made a noise that fell somewhere between a grumble and a sigh. Couldn't
these kids at least come up with something original? As if he hadn't seen *this* design a thousand times…"

"What is that, then?" Hakim had stopped and was pointing at the wall.

"*You have GOT* to be kidding!" the Gobi bear groaned silently, turning to his partner with a bewildered look on his face.

"Wha…? Don't tell me you've never seen an anarchist's 'A' before."

"Of course I have!" the Barbary sheep snapped, and then pointed again, "But if that's what this is, it is upside down, yes?"

Alan looked closer, and saw with some chagrin that his partner was right; the bright red letter in the center of the circle was a 'V', not an 'A'. (He took some comfort in the fact that this was only a slightly less common piece of graffiti than what he'd thought it was.)

"That's the emblem from the film 'V, for Vendetta,'" he said. Being a second generation Zootopian, he was bit more familiar with the local pop-culture than his partner, a first-generation immigrant.

"Oh…Oh yes," The sheep said, nodding skittishly as the memory caught up with him.

But then he frowned.

"Noooo, I don't think that's quite right either. Go and look more closely."

Alan moved closer to the impromptu wall-art, and quickly saw that his partner was correct again. It WAS the V for Vendetta logo, but with a number of minor alterations.

Two downward slashes had been added to the ends of the V, turning them into a pair of pointed ears. Likewise a pair of eyes had been added, along with a crude smile. The text above the artwork, hastily applied, read, 'He Fought The Law.'

And underneath it was written, "And HE Won."

The two officers looked at each other and then at the graffiti again,

"What animal is that?" Hakim asked, pointing at what was clearly now recognizable as a face.

"I don't know," his partner admitted, "looks like a rat to me,"

He was wrong of course, but he had no way of knowing it. The unknown artist, aware of Conor Lewis's species, had left his design in the wrong location—near the entrance to the *Small* Mammals locker room. (The actual place where the law had made the young silver fox was in the *Large* Mammals facility, one building over from here.)

Hakim and Alan had heard something about that incident, but nothing specific. Certainly they were unaware of what had happened in Judge Schatten's courtroom the other day. They knew about the Lewis kid's escape from custody of course; their precinct had been alerted about it yesterday. Even so, they hadn't the slightest inkling that it might be connected to the kitsch-art sprayed on the wall in front of them. Certainly they couldn't know that a close copy of it was currently gracing a wall in the alley where The Phantom's courier had been taken down.

No; the two Sahara Square officers were privy to none of these facts. Neither, for that matter was the subject of this wall-art; cloistered away in a secret location, he was unaware even of its
existence.

If he had been—if either he or the officers had known the full story, they might have realized that this was only the beginning—and they might furthermore have recognized the graffiti it for what it was…

...A declaration of war.

In times past, one of the favorite local hangouts in The Rainforest District had been Misty's-On-The-Vine—until the Zootopia Tourist Authority started writing it up in their guidebooks. The results had been predictable; Misty's had become a tourist trap, high prices and homogenized eats that the natives wouldn't touch with a ten-foot spoon. Since then, the residents of the Rainforest District had been keeping their favorite dining spots to themselves.

Of these, one of the most popular was, Cataranas del Paraiso a café featuring South American street-food; Buñuelos, Arepas, Tamales, (wrapped in banana leaves rather than corn-husks,) and Hormegas Culonas, dry-roasted ants. The recipe for their private blend of coffee was one of the most closely guarded secrets in all of Zootopia.

Located at the corner of Steam and Fig streets, Cataranas del Paraiso was only a few blocks removed from the intersection of Vine and Tujunga. It went without saying that a certain dark-furred jaguar could often be found here on his off hours.

The place was built roughly in the shape of a Conestoga wagon, with rounded windows bisected by curving, asymmetrical lines and a roof overgrown with creepers; it took its name from a nearby waterfall, one of the local landmarks.

Nick spotted his quarry almost as soon as he walked in the door, seated in one of the back booths with his chauffer's cap parked on the table beside him. He couldn't help smiling; didn't it figure that Mr. Big's fursenal driver would be accorded a choice seat in here?

And lucky him, the table adjoining the booth was currently unoccupied; go for it, fox.

If it looked too good to be true, it was. The instant he began to move, Nick heard something that set his teeth on edge.

"Now some of these do-gooders may think that it's perfectly all right for the city to allow predators and prey species to…"

Aggghh, grrrrr…what the heck was the Rock Hardesty show doing, playing in here?(And dangit, that blankety-blank hyrax would be going on a tear about preds and prey-species NOW.)

Nick stopped and shook his head—and in that moment, someone brushed past him, a kinkajou and a tayra…headed right for the table he had selected; wonderful, just great.

He growled irritably to himself. "They should rename this place the Pour-Forest District—because it never just RAINS here."

Well-l-l, there was a way around his problem wasn't there? All he had to do was go over to the table, show his badge, and…

…And when Manchas saw it, he'd know that Nick was here on police business and he'd shut up tighter than a frozen oyster. Aggghh, grrrr, a zillion catches in the world, and he'd just caught #22.
But then the jaguar leaned out of his booth, yelling something at the front counter.

"Raimondo, apaga eso, ¿quieres? Ya sabes que no soporto a ese idiota."

He was answered by a wheedling voice, coming from somewhere behind the counter. "¡Eh! A mí me gusta."

"Well, I don't," Manchas was out of the booth and on his feet. Nick could see that his fists were knotted, and now he could understand what the big cat was saying, "So change the station please; I'm asking you nicely this time."

An unhappy sound from some smaller mammal followed, and the radio switched over to a Latin Jazz station; much better.

Without thinking Nick said to the jaguar, "Thanks, I don't think I could have taken much more of that."

Manchas just waved a paw. "Ah, no problem; what's Raimondo trying to do anyway, lose every pred customer he's got?" He leaned forward slightly and his tail began to twitch. "Ohhh, Nick... don't know why I didn't recognize you. Yeah, you REALLY wouldn't like that pendejo hyrax, huh? Come on and sit down. amigo."

He took his seat again, gesturing towards the opposite side of the booth...while the red fox blinked in amazement; it couldn't possibly be this easy.

It wasn't; the booth was built for large mammals and even by standing on the seat-cushion, Nick was barely able to see over the tabletop. Oh well, he was here on business, not pleasure.

"Glad to see you're okay," he said, "Where I heard about the Tundratown Limo fire, I immediately thought of you."

"Ahhh, no problem for me," the big cat said, waving another paw "I don' work out of there anyway; still up in Tundratown, the Big Shrew's fursonal driver."

"Right," Nick nodded, keeping a close eye on his host; Manchas had been trying to sound nonchalant, but there was no mistaking the bitterness in his voice. He was more than a little bothered by that arson-fire. The question was, how best to play it?

The answer to this was another question; if this were just a chance meeting, what would he say to the jaguar next?

Well, for starters, "Whoa, I'm just glad I'm not part of that investigation. I'll never forget the time my partner went looking for Emmit Otterton and got caught inside The Tundratown Limo yard. What a crazy scene that was."

"You did WHAT?" Manchas was staring slack jawed, "You lucky you didn't get iced, amigo."

"We almost did," The fox admitted, with a slight shiver at the memory, "If it hadn't been for Judy saving Fru-Fru's life the day before..."

"Oh, si...that I heard about," Manchas answered with a grin that quickly faded "Good thing; you two were loco go anywhere near Tundratown Limo Service."

In spite of himself Nick couldn't help feeling a little defensive.
Believe me…if I’d had even the slightest idea that Mr. Big was the owner, I wouldn't have—only how could I? He’d warned me to keep far, far away from him after I…uh, you know. And up until then, I'd done what he said. He must have opened Tundratown Limo only a little while before we were caught there; otherwise I'd have known it was his.

Manchas closed his eyes and tapped thoughtfully at the side of his head. "Yeahhhh, that business with the skunk butt rug; heard about that, too. Mmmm, lessee, when was this again?"

"It was right before…" Nick started to say, and then hastily changed gears, "It was the day of Fru-Fru's wedding." (He'd been about to say, "Right before you got darted with Nighthowler.)

"Oh, hokay, now I remember," the big cat nodded, "and you're right, it had only been open for few weeks back then."

"Wow," Nick let out a low whistle, "The place must have doing turn-away business to have grown that quickly; we must have seen a hundred cars in that lot." (This was an exaggeration and not exactly true; there was another reason for Mr. Big's underworld nickname—he never did anything small.)

"Si," Manchas nodded, "Even Señor Gran Musaraña was surprised at how well it did—though he shouldn't have been; I told him it was gold mine." He looked suddenly embarrassed and quickly walked it back, "Well-l-l, maybe not a gold mine, but still…"

"What do you mean?" Nick interrupted, very much interested in where this was going.

Before the big cat could answer him, an armadillo appeared at the booth.

"Is there anything I can…?" he started to say, and then his head jerked backwards and his face hardened. "Heyyyy, aren't you that fox who kiss….?"

"You gotta problem with that?" Manchas asked him, in a low, unfriendly purr. In that instant, Nick was reminded that this jaguar was not just your regular, garden-variety chauffeur; he was the fursonal chauffeur to a mob boss. THAT job involved a lot more than simply driving his employer from place to place…and could occasionally get very messy.

Even so, Nick was practically dumbstruck by what he was seeing. Was this the same animal who'd been unable to meet his eyes when last they'd met? What the heck had happened with him since then?

"Uh, n-no, no problem," the armadillo was saying. He appeared calm enough, but his order pen was quivering like a seismograph in an earth tremor. Nick decided to cut him some slack.

"Bring me a house-blend coffee, sugar, no creamer and some patacones," (Fried plantain chips.)

"Coming right up," the armadillo replied and hurriedly departed the table.

Nick watched him go and looked at Manchas again. Ordinarily, he might have chided his host for coming down a mite too hard on that waiter—but not while he was trying to drum up some information.

He said, "I'm sorry, you were saying…about Tundratown Limo?"

"Ah si," the jaguar answered, warming to his subject, "What I was about to say was that I knew Tundratown Limo was going to make money because Zootopia was begging for a decent limousine service back then The other two limo companies in town were doing a terrible job; their
drivers were always showing up late, making wrong turns, talking rudely to customers; I tell you this mi zorro, nobody behaves like that if they work for the Big Shrew."

"Don't I know it!" Nick's response was practically a fox-scream. That was Mr. Big all over the place; a taskmaster who tolerated no shenanigans from his employees, but was notably generous with those that lived up to his expectations.

All right, he decided, enough dancing around the edges; it was time to get to the subject that had brought him here in the first place.

"Tundratown Limo must really be doing well, if the Big Shrew's been able to open up a franchise in the Rainforest district."

"Oh, he's opening branches everywhere," the big cat said…and there was the opening Nick was waiting for. He made his ears stand up and point at each other.

"Even…in Sahara Square?" he asked, pretending to sound incredulous.

"Uh, well…no, not there of course," the big cat admitted, not a little embarrassed, "But everywhere else yeah, Savanna Central, Outback Island, Old Growth City; he's even trying to open up a Tundratown Limo in the Canal District. That one'll use boats a' course; the Big Shrew says he's got it all worked out."

"Really, no kidding?" Nick asked the jaguar carelessly—but on the inside his mind was churning; something was telling him that he should abandon his intended line of questioning and move in a different direction.

He decided to trust his instincts.

"Even for Mr. Big, that's pretty ambitious," he said, not knowing exactly where this would lead him.

Manchas let out a laugh that was almost a snarl.

"Oh, you don't know the half of it, compadre. He's been expanding into everything; so much new business I can't keep track of it all."

Nick forced his ears to stay down.

"Really, how long has this been going on?"

"Mmmm," the big cat answered, flipping a paw, "about two-three months I'd say,"

"So not that long," the fox observed, trying to keep it casual. In truth he was eager to get out of here; but not yet…no, not quite yet. It was an old, established rule with Nicholas Wilde; NEVER take a walk as soon as you have the information you're looking for, it's an excellent method of giving your game away.

And besides, you never knew what else might happen if you hung around a bit longer. Even so, Nick had the answer to at least one of his questions—and possibly a few of the others.

"Maybe," he cautioned himself, "maybe. It all depends on whether Carrots is able to find out anything useful."

He mentally crossed his fingers.
At that instant, the subject of his musings was stepping through the door of a shop in Old Growth City, Zootopia's temperate forest district. Nestled between The Rainforest District and Tundratown, it was perhaps the 'greenest' district in the city, with many of the apartment and office structures built right into the trees. A good number of the signposts and traffic signal gantries were living trees as well. Even the bridges spanning the various waterways had an organic feel to them.

OGC, as the locals called it, was also the city's Bohemian enclave; what the Left Bank was to Purris, what The Village was to Zoo York City, what SoHo was to Liondon, Old Growth City was to Zootopia. Here you could find a cornucopia of artist's studios and artisan shops, offering for sale nearly every kind of craft imaginable. The trees of Old Growth City were home to the city's largest population of squirrels, and the riverbanks hosted the largest contingent of beaver…and also otters, one of whom was the owner of the floral shop Judy had just now entered.

As she came through the door, she was forced to suppress a wince. The chime sounded eerily similar to the one that had once adorned the threshold of Rafaj Brothers Jewelers. *That* was a place she preferred to think about as little as possible these days.

The flower shop's interior was set roughly in the shape of a half-moon, taking up one side of a big Sitka spruce's ground floor. The light was soft but not low and the interior smelled of blossoms, mist, and wood shavings; the display tables all appeared to have grown straight out of the floor, (and possibly, they had.)

The instant that the door closed a familiar cheery, sing-song voice called from behind the counter, "Hel-lo-o-o, how can I help you to today?"

Judy fought back the rising heat in her throat.

"Lily, it's me…Judy Hopps."

At once a head popped into view.

"Judy? Well, what a nice surprise. Hello."

Lily dropped down out of sight again, but only for half a second, and then she was around the counter and skittering in Judy's direction. Like all of her species, Mrs. Otterton moved somewhat awkwardly while walking upright, but was incredibly fast and nimble while moving on all fours. Before Judy knew it, she was right there in front of her with her arms wide open.

Somehow, the doe-bunny managed to return Lily's embrace without stiffening. And once more she was grateful that rabbits were incapable of puking. She hadn't felt so wretched since the Conor Lewis bust; no, on second thought, this was worse. Seeing the kid who'd saved her life being taken down in front of her had been anything but enjoyable—but at least it hadn't felt like a betrayal. Surreptitiously pumping a friend for information felt exactly that way.

And Lily was a *very* good friend; she had never forgotten who it was that had found her missing husband, hidden away inside the old Cliffsiede asylum. When Judy had left the force, in the wake of her disastrous press-conference, Mrs. Otterton had pleaded with her to reconsider—and come closer than anyone else to succeeding.

"*Think of what a gang war will do to Zootopia,*" the doe-bunny reminded herself for the hundred-and-nth time.

"So, what brings you in today, aren't you working?" Lily tilted her head slightly, and Judy felt a layer of guilt peel away. This was one question for which she had a ready answer.
"Well," she grinned, "since when do police officers work regular hours...and why I'm here is, my kid sister Erin is auditioning for acceptance into The Zootopia Academy of the Performing Arts. And if she gets in—excuse me, when she gets in—I want to get something nice for her. She just adored that gift basket I sent her for her birthday."

Judy was able to say this without any taste of ash in her mouth because all of it was true; Erin had raved for weeks about that gift basket, according to what their mother had said. And wouldn't it be nice to get her something to help celebrate her acceptance into ZAPA?

"I-I-I think we can come up with a basket just right for the occasion." Lily smiled and turned, beckoning for Judy to follow, moving with the half-tottering gait of an otter walking upright.

Like most brick-and-mortar florists, Riverside Floral didn't just deal in flowers, (a necessity if you wanted to keep ahead of the online competition.) A Riverside gift-basket might contain chocolates, perfume, fur conditioner, massage oil, a manicure kit, even an item of jewelry. The one Judy had sent Erin for her birthday had contained an opal pendant that the younger bunny had cherished from here to Podunk. It had swiftly become her good luck charm—until she'd lost it and gone into a panic and then a weeklong funk.

One thing you had to say about Lily Otterton, she knew her stuff when it came to putting together a gift set. In practically no time at all she had a basket assembled that Judy couldn't wait to present to her younger sister.

"The big thing this year is electronic gadgets," Mrs. Otterton was saying, "and if Erin's off to the Performing Arts Academy, I'd suggest a wake-up-light alarm clock; they're all the rage with college students these days."

"Wake-up-light...alarm-clock?" Judy queried with her nose twitching. She had never heard of such a thing.

"Oh yes, they're amazing," beamed, "Instead of ringing, they work by simulating a sunrise—or they can ring too, if you want; and they have built in radios and Wi-Fi. You can even..."

"Okay, okay," Judy laughed and raised her paws, "you had me at 'simulate a sunrise'." Oh yes, something like that would be a perfect gift for a bunny. She should get one for herself as a matter of fact.

And that reminded her...

"Let's include that tentatively, but I'd better check with my folks first; make sure she doesn't already have one." Erin had always been something of a techie.

"Good thought," Mrs. Otterton replied, and at that moment, they heard a door snap open in the back of the store followed by the sound of wet feet on tile.

"Mom, we're here, can we go now?" a young voice called.

Lily turned and responded over a shoulder.

"Your father will be back any second Nelson; then we can leave."

"Mommmmm...!"

"There's plenty of time, and I'm with a customer," Lily answered sharply and the whining abruptly ceased. She turned back to Judy and lowered her voice, "Junior otter-polo league; they're crazy
about it."

"Well, can they come and say hi?" Judy asked her, "I haven't seen Nelson and Alice in…oh, almost a year now."

"Soon as they dry off, it won't take long," Mrs. Otterton told her. (An otter's fur sheds water like a rain-slicker.)

It took hardly any time at all; in less than half a minute a pair of young otters appeared, their fur almost completely dry. Each of them was wearing a one-piece, brightly colored swimsuit with a number and a team-name printed on it—orange and blue, 19 and 55, Sharks and Water-Dragons respectively.

The Otterton children had grown a little since Judy had last seen them; hmmmm, and how old would they be now? Nelson must be about 11 and Alice had to be pushing 9. The boy's mood was slightly sullen, while his sister was as chipper as a game-show host.

"Hello, Judy," Nelson said, looking immediately at his mother as if to tell her, 'Okay, I said hi; NOW can we go?'

His sister was much more cordial—if not particularly tactful.

"Hi Judy, did you really kiss a fox?"

"Alice!" Lily looked as if she wanted to dive under the floorboards…and Judy wasn't feeling much better. Oooo, if she ever got her paws on whoever had posted that video …

"What, mom?" Alice Otterton looked thoroughly confused, "The whole team knows about…"

That was as far as she got before her mother came back to her senses…and then came down like a hammer-fist.

"I don't care WHO else knows about it; you apologize to Judy this instant."

"But mommmm...."

"Now, young lady, or no more otter-polo for the rest of the month; I mean it."

Alice sniffed and looked up mournfully at Judy. (Over on the sidelines, her brother was rolling his eyes and mouthing, 'sisters!')

"I-I'm sorry, Judy." Alice's paws were clasped and her ears were wilting. She looked almost the same as her mother had, that time she'd barged into Bogo's office, begging for his help in finding her missing husband.

…Which why all that Judy could say to her was, "It's all right, sweetie."

Alice nodded and Judy saw her shoulders relax. The little otter-girl's mother, however, seemed only partially satisfied; they'd be having another talk about this later.

Just then the front door chimed again, and another familiar voice called out.

"Back...sorry, there was line-up at Zoo-PS."

Lily's features tightened with concern.
"Oh dear, did the shipment make the cut all right, Emmit?"

"Yep, it's on the way, no problem," her husband assured her, coming into view around a store display. He looked dapper today in twill pants and a checked vest. That was when he saw he had a visitor.

"Well, hello Judy, what surprise," he said, before going over to kiss his wife.

"Hello Emmit," the doe-bunny replied, suppressing the urge to shake her head in disbelief. She had never met a more sweet-tempered soul than this otter. Who could ever believe that he had once nearly torn off a jaguar's face?

"What am I thinking of that for, all of a sudden?" she wondered to herself.

"So, have the kids been behaving?" Mr. Otterton was asking Lily.

Nelson smirked and Alice looked as if she'd caught a sudden chill, but their mother only said, "They've been fine," (while giving her daughter a sideways glance.)

"Good, good," her husband said, and then looked at his watch, "Okay then, you three better get moving ...and sorry again for taking so long."

"It's all right Emmitt," Lily told him, and then beckoned to her children. "Come on kids, let's go."

"About time!" Nelson mouthed as soon as her back was turned, and then followed her into the rear of the store. A moment later, Judy heard the access door snap open and shut again and saw three dark shapes, streaking through the water, headed downriver.

"So what brings you here today?" she heard Emmitt asking from behind her. "Let me guess...Fru-Fru, am I right?"

Judy's ears went up and she turned from the window with her nose twitching.

"Uh, no actually; I came in to order a gift-basket for my sister. But what's this about Fru-Fru?"

"Oh didn't you hear?" Mr. Otterton asked, looking pleased that she hadn't, "Fru's expecting again...a boy this time."

"Well, finally," Judy answered, forcing a smile and swallowing a lump. Like it or not, this was the opening she'd been waiting for. "Her father must be thrilled to death." (Mr. Big was old school in more ways than one.)

"Oh he's over the moon," the otter-florist told her, "His grandson hasn't even arrived yet, and he already invited me to the christening."

"And no doubt he'll be ordering flowers for the occasion," Judy suggested, with a slyness that would have done Nick Wilde proud.

Otterton laughed and spread his arms. "Practically ready to buy out the store," he said.

"Okay, here we go," Judy thought to herself, and mentally crossed her fingers. She felt as if she were about to ride a bike without training wheels for the very first time in her life. "It's good hear he's been getting some good news, I mean what with all the um, other problems he's been having."

"Yes, I know," Emmit Otterton answered, grimly shaking his head, "Especially now; just when he's trying..." He stopped, seeming to have suddenly realized that one of the display vases was out of
place, and hurriedly reached up to fix it, "Ahhh, but it's really not for me to say, Judy."

"No you shouldn't," the doe-bunny agreed, hiding her disappointment, "But anyway, I should get something for Fru myself. When is she due?"

And to herself she said, "Dangit...SO close."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note:

Thanks to **voleitor drakeru** for assisting with the Spanish translations.

End Notes

I am going to try something a little different than with the Fire Triangle Prologue. This time the chapters will be somewhat shorter, but they'll be updated more often than before.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!