A Ray of Hope

by Camoss

Summary

When you shake things up, things don’t settle down the way they used to be. And sometimes, things go from bad to worse before they get better. Bellwether’s plot has empowered some mammals to take drastic measures to cleanse the city of the ones they deem unfit for society. But even in the darkest of times, one only needs to turn on the light to shine a ray of hope.

Notes

Welcome to my first multichapter fanfiction! Buckle in and get ready, 'cuz it's going to be a long ride! The first actual chapter, besides this prologue, will be posted on Friday, December 29, 2017, with chapters being uploaded every second Friday afterward!

You can keep an eye on my DeviantArt channel for story news and my personal journal. I'll also have Patreon set up in the coming weeks!

DISCLAIMER: I OWN ZOOTOPIA! I...Nope. Sorry. Can't say that with a straight face. I don't own Zootopia. That belongs to Disney. Any OCs you see in the fic so far DO belong to
me though. If you want to use them, ASK, please!

Special thanks to my friend and editor Daee17 for her help and inspiration in preparing this, and to my friend TheWinterBunny for her work illustrating some scenes in the fic, and for the work on the official cover art (coming soon!)

And now, without further ado... A Ray of Hope!
A Ray of Hope: Prologue

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3 months after the arrest of Dawn Bellwether

In a lonely office, a single mammal sat. Papers all around him, statistics, formulas, and ingredients. It was past quitting time, but this mammal didn’t care. He had to find his answer, and it was hidden somewhere in the computer simulations and chemical data. If he didn’t find them tonight, he would have to start all over again tomorrow. The active ingredients of *midnicampum holicithias*.

The mammal wasn’t assigned to the antidote team. He shouldn’t have been accessing the material, highly classified as it was. But the stupid lynx that he’d gotten drunk and high enough to get their computer password from DID have the access he needed. And so, it was with the lynx’s computer account that this mammal did his research.

The arrest of Dawn Bellwether and the exposure of the Night Howler conspiracy, as the ZPD had termed it, was quite honestly a blow to the community. However, Bellwether had been wrong. Preds did not simply need to be controlled and subjugated, or even evicted. They needed to be eradicated.

The solution had come to him a month ago while the antidote was just beginning to undergo initial trials. A call had gone out for brave — or stupid, as this mammal preferred — predators, who would voluntarily be afflicted with the Night Howler serum in order to have the antidote tested. Said predators were offered a very large monetary settlement for their services. It was all expenditures that the city didn’t need. Get rid of the predators in the first place, and you wouldn’t have a problem.

The mammal continued his research well into the night, pausing only for the occasional washroom break or trip to the water cooler. The night watch occasionally checked in, but never questioned what the mammal was doing here. Managers often worked late, and this one was no exception.

It was nearly 4 AM when the mammal’s efforts finally came to fruition. Three active ingredients. One amplified fear and aggression. Another suppressed higher brain function. And a compound to assist the others in crossing the blood-brain barrier.

This would be perfect. With this information, the mammal could eventually synthesize all of the active ingredients, and with a little changing of one component, render it harmless to prey mammals.

The mammal downloaded the information to a flash drive before signing off. Papers were swept from his desk and deposited into the particle cut shredder nearby. He would not be needing them. He would come in to work tomorrow, or rather today, as he always did, to keep up appearances, but this newfound data would be shared with his group. Together, they would find a way to destroy the predators in Zootopia. Such savage beasts had no place in civilized society. It was unfortunate that many prey mammals would be lost in this revolution. That could not be avoided. They would be sacrificed for the greater good.

The mammal only hoped that the idiotic rabbit at the ZPD was one of them. She could have had a place in law enforcement in the new world order if she had just kept to the statements she made six months ago. Instead, she decided not to leave well enough alone and, she, along with that jumped-up airhead pop singer, had sided with the filthy preds. And since the arrest of Bellwether, both had
been constantly seen in the presence of filth, the singer with her backup dancer tigers, and the rabbit with a wretched fox.

No, the rabbit and the singer would not be spared punishment in the new world order. They, along with any other prey foolish enough to side with the filth would also have justice meted out. The mammal hoped it would be long, painful, torturous. Maybe even use their families as an example to others.

The mammal slipped the flash drive into a hidden, shielded pocket in his clothes. It would not do to have the item discovered. He would continue his work here for this pharmaceutical company, if only as a front. Tomorrow evening, the real work would begin.

Slipping out of his office, the mammal navigated his way to the elevators, giving a friendly farewell to the one or two others he passed.

In the elevator, the mammal used his key card to access the parkade. Others came and went as the car made its slow, steady descent, before finally depositing him on his desired floor. Keeping a calm face, he got into his car, started it up, and drove out of the underground parking area and up to the security gate. The cheetah nightshift guard peeked out of his shack, curious as to who was leaving at this hour.

As the mammal pulled up, he rolled down his window.

“Late night Mr. Hornby?” The cheetah asked

With a pleasant smile, the mammal looked at the spotted feline. “Absolutely. Higher-ups got to keep the projects goin’ so the money stays flowin’.”

“More work for you, so they can kick back and line their pockets while they do nothing, eh?”

“No kiddin’. Bet they make more money sneezin’ than I do in a day.”

The cheetah shook his head. “That they do. Have a great night, Mr. Hornby.” Finally, the cat opened the gate, and the mammal drove through

*Filthy pred.* Despite seeing the cheetah nightguard almost every night for 10 years, Damian Hornby held no love for him. He would be eradicated like all the rest. There would be no leniency, no quarter, no escape for any filth, if his group had its way.

The drive home was silent, few cars on the road. Soon, the mammal pulled up to a quiet house on a quiet Savannah Central street. No one else was around, everyone asleep or close to it. To add to the atmosphere, a cricket chirped somewhere. How cliché.

The house too was quiet. Only one mammal lived here, so Damian did not need to worry about too much noise. Dropping his keys on the table beside the door, the mammal pulled out his cell phone and dialed. After a few rings, it was answered.

“You got Doug here. What?” came the monotone voice of the ram.

“It’s Hornby. Call a meetin’. I have our puzzle piece.”

“You know the elders won’t be happy if we call them at four in the morning.”

“Then wait until daybreak, I don’t care. Just let them know.”
There was no hesitation. “Alright. Doug out.” The line went dead.

Such was the conversations with the ram. Short, to the point, and devoid of emotion. The ram had gone underground after Bellwether foolishly got herself arrested, and the ZPD had nothing to go on, besides his first name.

Damian Hornby sighed and looked around. There was once a time when two other mammals had filled this house, but now all that was left was memories. Pictures of a family of three adorned the walls. Three chairs at the kitchen table. All of that ended years ago, when a tiger had decided to take the two things most precious to him away.

“My dear Isabel, I do this for you. You and Kole.”

The Texas longhorn bull made his way to his bedroom, stopping in his office briefly to deposit the flash drive in his safe, before turning in for the night.
A Day on the Job

Chapter Summary

A protest goes south, Judy visits Nick at the Academy, and our bad guys continue their dastardly deeds.

Chapter Notes

Terminology used in this chapter

*Code 2: Arrived on site

**ESW: Electroshock weapon. Taser is a trademark owned by Axon corporation and is the brand name for their line of electroshock weapons. Though Taser is the most common brand, correct police nomenclature refers to them as ESWs or, less formally, stun guns.

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Special thanks (and a birthday shout-out!) to my friend and editor Daee17 for her help and inspiration in preparing this!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

5 months after the arrest of Dawn Bellwether

“Unit Z-237 this is dispatch, do you copy?” Clawhauser’s voice echoed through the radio.

Judy grabbed the mic. “Z-237 here, Clawhauser, what’s up?”

“Hopps, we have reports of a large protest gathering in Savannah Central, corner of Serengeti and Tarangire. Please respond.”

“Z-237 copies, we’re on the way.” Judy hung the mic.

Beside her, her temporary partner, Eric Wolford, turned the cruiser around. “Another one, huh? That’s the third protest call this week.”

Judy nodded. “Another one.”

The protests were getting more common. They’d started back before Judy had quit the force, and
had increased in frequency following the arrest of Bellwether. The theme had shifted, however, from predators randomly going savage, or “reverting back to their primitive, savage ways”, to the idea that predators, with the influence of a single, small flower, could be turned into monstrous killing machines. Demands ranged from control, to eviction from Zootopia.

Meanwhile pro-pred groups argued for equal rights for predators, and often included members on both sides of the divide, while anti-prey groups pushed for subjugation of prey species. The ZPD precincts all over the city and in many of the surrounding boroughs had become a revolving door for arrests and releases, as there just wasn’t enough room to hold all those charged. Hate crimes, along with muggings, assault, arson, and vandalism were through the roof.

Judy had been incredibly lucky when she’d returned to Zootopia to solve the night howler conspiracy. Not only was her old apartment still available – She’d only been gone for 2 weeks, and Dharma hadn’t rented the place out, yet, since her lease was still paid up, but Bogo had pulled some strings to get her reinstated with the department effective immediately. Since the only two mammals that knew of her resignation were Bellwether and Bogo himself, and since there was no signed letter of termination or resignation, the official story was that she’d been deep undercover.

Nick had been at the academy for 5 months now. His assistance during the Missing Mammals cases and Nighthowler conspiracy had gotten him fast-tracked into the class that started less than a week after he’d applied. Normally acceptance took several months.

The Chief had assured Judy that Nick would be assigned as her partner – if he graduated in the top 10% of the class. He would not accept anything less. Fortunately, Nick had been keeping well within that 10%, and he only had a month left to go. The rabbit doe was looking forward to when she could spend the day driving around the city fighting crime and making the world a better place with him.

She wondered if he would even be up to spending even more of their off hours together. Maybe a movie night, or some dinner somewhere. She already made the journey to the academy 3 or 4 nights a week to spend time with him.

Nothing’s wrong with that, right?

The protest came in to view and she shoved those thoughts on to the back burner. She would deal with them later. As Wolford parked the cruiser, Judy keyed the radio one last time. “Dispatch, Z-237 we are code 2*.”

The two exited the cruiser and surveyed the scene. The shouting could be heard clear across the plaza. The two groups, one large one composed entirely of prey animals and a smaller one of predators, was an increasingly common site, and so were the insults being hurled.

“Get the hell off our turf, filthy pred!”

“I have just as much a right to be here as you!”

“Fucking savages!”

This had apparently been going on for a while, and before the two officers could get any closer, a shoving match broke out between two of the protestors. Wolford sighed. “Here we go again. Call it in, Hopps. I’ll see if I can break these two clowns up.”

The rabbit doe nodded, and reached for her personal radio.

“Hopps to dispatch, requesting extra units, this is an unruly bunch.”
Wolford had reached the group of protestors, barking orders to back off. The two fighters, a tiger and a hippo, stared at the ZPD wolf, one with utter contempt, and the other with a look of anger.

“What the hell are you to give me orders, pred?”

Same song different day. “Officer Wolford, ZPD. I need you all to take 5 steps back.”

Tensions were high as Judy rejoined Wolford. The hippo looked at her in amusement.

“This is all the ZPD can muster? A wolf and a rabbit? Wait. I know you. You’re the one who figured out preds were going savage! We could use your help.”

The rabbit shook her head. “Sorry, sir, but we’re just here to keep the peace. We can’t get involved.”

“But you support us, right? You know it’s in their biology to be savage killers! You said so yourself!”

Judy let out an exasperated noise. “I have no comment.”

The hippo went in for the proverbial kill. “They’re savages! They’re barely even mammals!”

The rabbit’s face hardened. “Sir, you’re going to have to tone down that language. I don’t want to charge you with a hate crime.”

The hippo scoffed. “Hate crime? You’d charge me for a hate crime? You’re starting to sound like you’re on their side.”

The rabbit doe was starting to get a headache. She chose to ignore the statement and instead turned her attention to a rhino that was looking at the crowd of predators like they were bowling pins.

“Sir, don’t do anything rash,” she said in a commanding tone as she moved to stand in front of him, all the while surveying her surroundings, looking for objects to use as jump points in case things went south. A sign pole, street lamp, the curb, and a bus stop bench for mid size mammals. Not great, but better than nothing. She’d had a lot less available when she took down the rhino at the academy.

The rhino glared at the rabbit, trying to intimidate her. How was it this puny, little rabbit wasn’t afraid of a mammal a thousand times her weight? Instead of backing away, the rabbit stood her ground and stared right back at him as though daring him to try something.

It was at that moment that a voice from the predator’s side of the break that was starting to form piped up.

“You guys gonna let a little bunny intimidate you? You’re more pathetic than we thought!”

Oh boy. This wouldn’t go over well. Where was that backup? Wolford moved to confront the hyena that had spoken. It was too late. The rhino that Judy had been facing was infuriated. Nostrils flaring, the rhino prepared to fight. Judy drew her ESW (**), and set it to the appropriate setting. For her weapon, that would only give her enough charge to drop the subject once, before the thing went dead. Such was the case for her smaller stature and correspondingly smaller equipment. She had to be smarter than her fellow officers when it came to arrests and use of force.

In the meantime, though, Judy continued to face the angry rhino. “Sir, don’t do anything stupid. I don’t want to have to arrest—WOLFORD!” The rhino charged. Jumping out of the way to avoid
being trampled, the rabbit twisted and timed her landing roll so she could bounce back up on her feet facing the scene. The doe aimed her weapon, and with an accuracy borne of her months of training to be the best, fired. Two electrodes sailed across the distance between the two mammals and embedded themselves in the rhino’s back, before delivering an incredibly painful 50,000-volt shock. The rhino tripped and fell, shaking the ground with the impact, before twitching and jerking from the electrical discharge.

The rabbit approached the prone form of the rhino. She was just about to explain to him that he was under arrest and read him his rights when the hippo that seemed to be the groups leader spoke up again.

“You shot him! Did you see that? She shot him! Police brutality!”

Things were starting to descend into chaos. Judy and Wolford couldn’t contain this group on their own. They were just two small cops trying to keep control of a mob of almost 100 mammals. Where was that damn backup?

As if on cue, two cruisers pulled up to the scene, lights on but no sirens, disgorging McHorn, Pennington, Grizzoli and Fangmeyer. Good. Some large mammal muscle would do well to get this mob under control, Judy thought, just as another mammal began lashing out at the predator nearest to her. Things began to descend into an all-out free-for-all brawl. Judy had to resort to bouncing around, using her powerful legs to subdue combatants. It was almost 20 minutes after the larger mammals joined the fray that things began to calm down and the officers were able to start sorting things out.

Once the fighting had been tamed, and the belligerent mammals rendered compliant, the six police officers began the hefty task of issuing citations and arrests. Several transport vans were called in to move the arrested mammals to the precinct one holding cells, or the “sin-bins” as they were informally known.

In all, more than 10 mammals were arrested and 20 more citations pawed out. It took Judy and her colleagues almost four hours to sort the mess out. Eventually, the crowds dispersed, and the six cops were able to clear the scene.

Inwardly Judy sighed, hoping she could get her paperwork done in time to get out of work and on the train to the academy. Her police salary didn’t give her enough income yet to afford her own vehicle, so she was stuck using mass transit, taxis, or the intercity express trains. Normally, this wasn’t an issue. Her apartment was within walking distance of a subway station, and Zootopia Central Station was in Savannah Central, just across the plaza from precinct one and city hall. But the Zootopia Express only ran four times a day, and the next train after the 6:00 PM one was at midnight.

Wolford had just clocked out for the evening when he decided to stop by Judy’s cubicle and let her know he was on his way out. The little rabbit had been assigned a small space of her own since no other mammals came close to her size. The ZPD had also gotten her an appropriate sized computer and furniture for it, so she wasn’t stuck using items that were way too large for her. Her first few weeks she’d been forced to use whatever was available, and that often involved her having to scamper across and jump on elephant-sized keyboards. Not exactly the most efficient way to work, but she’d dealt with it.

“Judy, I’m out of here. Catch you tomorrow? Judy, what’s wrong?” What he saw when he
popped his head in surprised him. Like him, Judy had a lot of paperwork to catch up on with all the citations that had been written that afternoon, so she’d been forced to work overtime. However, quite unlike her usual bubbly self, what he saw was one dejected bunny. Laser focused on what she was doing, and ears almost as low as when he saw her walking out of city hall after turning in her badge.

The only time he’d ever seen her upset was following the missing mammals case.

“I’m fine,” the rabbit doe said, in a tone that made it clear she was ANYTHING but fine. The wolf sighed.

“Hopps, I’ve been married long enough to know that when a female tells you they are fine, they are anything but. What’s on your mind?”

“The time,” she said, not looking anywhere but at the report she was finishing up.

The time? Wolford checked his watch. 6:12 PM. What was so important about the time? He knew they’d worked overtime, but why was she so obsessed with that now? Usually, she’d be one of the first to volunteer for extra work. So why was she so upset with it today? The wolf ran a few scenarios in his head.

The train. The Zootopia Express. She’d mentioned wanting to visit Nick after her shift.

The train that left at 6:00. The train that was now making its way through the city towards the outskirts.

“You were going to go visit Wilde today, weren’t you?”

“Yup.” The rabbit doe continued working on her report.

The timber wolf thought for a moment. There really wasn’t any reason to rush home today. His wife and kids were away, and it was just going to be him and an empty house for the evening. Except maybe now there was a second option.

“Don’t worry about that, Judy. Finish up that report and I’ll drive you to the academy.”

The rabbit’s ears shot up, and she turned to Wolford with a hopeful expression on her face.

“Really? You don’t mind?”

The wolf shook his head, grinning at her sudden change in demeanour. “Don’t worry about it, Judy. Just finish that report and let’s get out of here.”

It was with renewed enthusiasm that Judy set back to work on her report, eager to get out of there.

Nicholas Wilde was exhausted. Between the 3 sessions of the around the house obstacle course, 5 hours of classes, the 5-mile run, and paw to paw combat training, the red fox was physically drained.

This had been par for the course for the last 5 months. They didn’t call it police boot camp for nothing.

Unlike military boot camp, however, cadets were allowed several hours free time in the evenings to do as they pleased. They could have visitors in the common areas (no visitors allowed in the dorms), use their mobile devices on the facility WIFI, heavily censored, of course, chat on the phone, spend time with their fellow cadets, or study. Free time was theirs to do as they pleased.
Free time was Nick’s favourite time of the day. Because free time meant time with Judy, either on the phone or in person. When she visited, they would play cards, study together, watch a movie on the tiny screen of one of their phones, or just chat. The days that she didn’t drop by, she would inevitably call him on MuzzleTime, and they would just chat for an hour, before he called his mother.

Nick had long come to terms with the fact that he had fallen for the little rabbit doe. The mammal that had once belittled him and blackmailed him had saved his life more than once, and given him the tools he’d been missing, and the inspiration, to become the mammal he’d thought had died the night that he’d been muzzled and humiliated at the ranger scout meeting.

What’s more, the change Judy had wrought in the tod’s life had allowed him to patch up his relationship with his mother. They’d been on the outs ever since he was 18, and his mother had found out just how he’d been making money.

“I raised you better than this,” Marian Wilde had said, tears streaming down her face.

Words had been said, and the pain had driven son from mother. Nick’s father had died before he’d been born, killed when he’d been unable to afford proper care for an acute case of pneumonia.

Nick had been shocked when his mother had first MuzzleTimed him months ago, only days after telling Judy what had happened between the two.

The fox suspected that the sly bunny had tracked his mother down and engineered that call, since that was one of the few days Judy didn’t visit or call him. They had talked for hours that night, right up until lights out. Nick had confessed to some of the things he’d been doing, and had told his mother the story of how he’d ended up training to become a cop. Meanwhile, the tod had learned that his mother had quit her old job at the diner she worked at and was now working as an administrative assistant at a pharmaceutical company.

She’d come visit him several times throughout the last few months, and the two had slowly repaired their battered relationship. And Nick couldn’t have been happier.

The fox remembered the first night he’d realized that he was falling in love with Judy. She’d just boarded the train back to Zootopia, and the fox could feel an emptiness in his heart. Like a part of his heart was leaving with her. It had taken a sleepless night for him to realize just what he was feeling. He’d only felt it once before, for a vixen who’d ultimately betrayed him.

How she dominated his thoughts. How he lived to see her beaming smile. How he wanted her to be proud of him. How, as soon as he was out of this boot camp, he wanted to do everything in his power to make her happy, so he could see that smile every day. How he enjoyed spending every moment he could with her. How he loved her. A bit of soul-searching later, and he’d realized that he’d begun bonding with her long before that, back during their quest to find the missing mammals.

But there was a massive problem. He was a fox, and she, simply put, was not. Inter species relationships, while not technically illegal, were highly frowned upon, especially relationships between predator and prey. He would not subject Judy to the social disgrace and prejudice. Besides, he was pretty sure she didn’t feel the same about him. So, the fox had resigned himself to simply love her from afar, and be happy that she was in his life at all.

Today, he was all caught up with his studies, so they’d have some time to do what they felt like. He couldn’t wait for her to get here.
“Thanks again for doing this for me, Eric,” Judy said for probably the fourth time. “I owe you one.”

At the wheel of the wolf-sized sedan, her companion glanced over to her and then back to the road, shaking his head in amusement.

“It’s all good, Judy. The wife and pups are out of town so it would have been just me for the evening anyways.”

“What are they up to?” Wolford didn’t speak of his family much. She knew he had a wife that worked in finance and a litter of 3 pups at home, but it wasn’t the usual topic of conversation while they were on patrol.

The wolf smiled. “Debbie took them to Vancougar to visit her parents. Bogo couldn’t give both me and Delgato the time off, so I was the scapegoat. I stayed home.”

“Well, that sucks. I hope they have a good time, though.”

Wolford smiled. “I’m sure they will. They love the country up there.”

They fell into a comfortable silence for a few minutes, the scenery passing by in the dying light of the day.

“Judy, I’m curious about something. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, though.” Wolford drummed the steering wheel

“Hmm?” The rabbit doe gave the wolf a look.

“What is Nick Wilde to you?”

OK, THAT question wasn’t expected. “What? He’s my best friend.”

Wolford sighed. “You know, when I was at the academy, my friends only visited me once or twice. Period. And they certainly didn’t call me almost every day that they didn’t visit me.”

The doe eyed the wolf. “So, what are you saying?”

Wolford glanced over at her. “The only one who did anything close to that was the mammal who ended up becoming my wife.”

THAT got Judy’s attention. “What?! No! We aren’t… we’re not… we’re just friends…” Some part of her felt like she was lying about her paw being in the cookie jar when she uttered those last words.

“Judy, I’ve seen the way you perk up when anyone mentions or ask about Nick. And he’s often all you talk about the days after you visit him. You’re the only one I know that could turn a two-hour visit with a ‘friend’ into a four-hour conversation about said friend, every day.”

Wait, do I really do that? The rabbit couldn’t help but wonder

“I’m just saying, if there’s something there, don’t keep it bottled up. It won’t do anyone any good. In fact, it’ll probably do more harm than good.”

Judy shook her head. “Even if I did feel that way, and I’m not saying I do, I couldn’t tell him. He’s turning his life around, and interspecies relationships are frowned on, you know that. I’d just be holding him back.”

Wolford looked at Judy, before turning back to the road. “Don’t let what others think stop you from
doing what you want, Judy. I seem to recall you saying something similar."

Silence descended again as the trip dragged onward. In her mind, though, Judy had started a mental war with herself. Her parents had tried to set her up with buck after buck at home, in an effort to subtly sway her from her dreams as a police officer. Most of them went into their date only desiring or wanting one thing: a home run.

Those that didn’t were either sexist assholes that thought that does should just stay in the kitchen pregnant, pumping out litter after litter, little more than second class citizens, or just didn’t care about her own dreams and aspirations.

All of them went home disappointed. None of them ever called her back.

Judy thought then about her relationship with Nick.

At first, they were enemies. He was a lowlife, and only interested in slowing her down. She blackmailed him into helping her out on the same case. But somewhere along the line, something had changed. Tundratown? No, it wasn’t that. She’d engineered the excuse to enter the limo lot and had called him a shifty lowlife.

Mr. Big’s house? No, not really. He seemed to have warmed up a little during and after Fru Fru’s dance with her dad. But she suspected that if he’d had the carrot pen, he’d have walked away with little thought.

Manchas.

That’s when things started to change. First their escape from the savage jaguar. The awe and gratitude in his voice when he’d thanked her for saving his life was there and it was real.

And then the confrontation with Chief Bogo on the sky tram. He could have been done with her right there. No annoying rabbit lording a carrot pen over his head. No threat of arrest or even investigation for tax evasion. He’d be free, and Judy would be out of his fur.

Instead he’d told the Chief off, called him out, stood up for her, saved her job, and escorted her away to a waiting sky tram, all with a few words.

And then he’d opened up to her, and she’d started to see a completely different mammal. He’d told her of his past, and he started working with her as a teammate instead of just tagging along or resisting. She still shuddered to think of some of the things she’d said, even after that.

_Junior detective? How much more demeaning can you get? That sounds like something you’d call a kit in a junior cadets program._

Their work at the Cliffside Asylum just built on that. When she’d surfaced after flushing them down the waterfall, she’d seen, for an instant, genuine panic on his face before he spotted and recognized her.

The press conference. He had no reason to forgive her for that. She’d humiliated him. He’d allowed her to see a little of the real Nick Wilde, and she’d turned around and acted, in her own way, exactly like those mammals at the ranger scout meeting. She’d stomped on his heart. But when he forgave her under that bridge, it felt as though her heart was singing.

Things had been pretty hectic until the museum. But she knew the events within had sealed their trust in each other. When she hit that tusk, she’d immediately known it was bad. If Nick could at least get the case out safely, Bellwether would be stopped. Judy knew she wouldn’t survive. She’d
either be killed or she’d disappear, perhaps forever.

Nick had had the idea of switching out the night howler serum with blueberries after he had wrapped her leg up in his pawkerchief and had to dive for a blueberry that was about to roll out of their hiding place. His refusal to leave her to her fate had warmed her heart. She’d almost laughed too, at the shocked expression on his face when she suggested that he might have to bite her neck to really sell the savage fox ruse if it came down to that.

“I don’t know if I can do that!” his eyes had said.

Her response was a simple, whispered, “I trust you, Nick”

Plan A – plain old escape - hadn’t worked after she’d stumbled and fallen into that metal pole. Plan B, which both of them agreed later was the better of the two anyways, went off without a hitch.

That night, she’d replayed the scene in her dreams, though after Nick had bitten her, her dream had taken a decidedly more erotic turn. She hadn’t had time to go back home to retrieve her things from Bunnyburrow, and she’d been mortified the next morning to discover that her then-new sleepwear soaked through. Worse yet, Nick had stayed over in the same hotel room, in the other bed, at her insistence, not wanting him to go back to sleeping under that bridge. His nose had picked up quite quickly that something was different. She’d headed it off as a “rabbit thing” when he’d inquired.

That had been it for a few weeks, but the dreams had started up again after he had gone off to the academy and she had gotten her apartment back. Some of them were of a decidedly erotic nature, while others were simply enjoyable.

Wait. Best friends didn’t dream of each other in THAT way.

Judy replayed the last few months in her mind. Slowly, she’d gotten to the point where she couldn’t stop thinking about Nick, wondering if he was doing OK, worrying about him, wanting him to be happy and to succeed, wanting to spend her work days with him at her side, and her off time having fun and spending time with him, wanting to be happy with him.

She’d felt righteous indignation and sadness when he’d told her stories of his youth, constantly being bullied throughout middle and high school just for being a fox or a predator, wanting to take that pain from him and somehow replace it with happiness.

She’d once joked earlier on in his stint at the academy that when he graduated, vixens wouldn’t be able to keep their paws off of him. He’d given her a funny look and not said anything, so she’d let the joke die a silent death.

Now though, thinking back on her joke, she felt a pang of jealousy at the thought of Nick with a vixen.

As her police officer’s mind started putting the evidence together, she came to the startling conclusion.

Oh my gosh. I’m in love with Nick Wilde.

“So, how was your day, Fluff?” The two were settling down in one of the common areas of the academy’s residential buildings. There were several such areas, one dedicated to table games, one had a study area adjoining a library, there was a chapel for prayer, weddings, and services, and still another had tables and chairs suitable for games, light suppers, or, conveniently, space enough for two small mammals to sit next to each other while queuing up a movie.
Today it would be Jurassic Park.

The rabbit doe shook her head while fishing for her earphones.

“Another protest that went south. Two mammals down, and I had to spend an hour filling out forms and another talking to IA about why I discharged my ESW** at one and knocked the other out. Among the others I ended up in paw to paw combat with.”

Nick gave her a smirk. “ESW? Who’d you shoot?”

Judy grinned as she pulled the earphones out of her pocket, which of course were a tangled mess. She set to work. “A rhino. The one that got knocked out was a warthog.”

The fox laughed. “I can just imagine the look on everyone’s face when you used your bunny-fu on that hog!”

The rabbit doe continued fiddling with the headphone cord. “As much as I want to say that it stopped the brawl cold, it didn’t. Things went out of control real fast, Nick. A lot of bad blood, and a lot of mammals fighting each other.”

Sighing, Nick shook his head. “That’s not surprising, to be honest. Way I am hearing things, it sounds like predator-prey relations are going even more downhill. Are you OK?”

“I’m perfectly fine, Nick. I’m just glad the day is over. You know, I got a ride from Wolford out here, because we went overtime on the reports. We made 10 arrests and more than 20 citations.”

Nick cocked his head. “Think all those charges will stick?”

Judy finally managed to unsnarl the cord and passed one of the earbuds to the fox beside her. “Yeah. The cruiser’s camera was running the whole time, and caught everything. We were two officers in a crowd of more than a hundred, and the backup was slow to arrive.”

As Judy started the movie, they each popped an earbud into an ear. Silence enveloped them as they fell into the world of the movie.

Nick, however, didn’t fail to notice that Judy was sitting a lot closer to him than she normally would. This would be a tough movie night.

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Meanwhile, somewhere in Savannah Central

In his home in a quiet section of Savannah Central, Damian Hornby sat in his home office staring at the visual on his phone. A video call with the elders was not common, unless circumstances were exceptional. This was one such instance.

“Another of our cells has confirmed that they can procure the new equipment you require,” one of the elders, a buck deer with an impressive antler rack, was saying.

The Texas longhorn nodded, face showing no emotion. “Excellent.”

But the deer wasn’t finished. “You will continue to develop and test the new formula until such a time as we deem it ready for…distribution. Are we clear?”

“Crystal.”

The deer leaned back. “Very good. Now, give us your report.”
Hornby sighed. This part wasn’t as positive as he’d want, but he forged ahead. “We’ve synthesized the first batch and begun mammal testin’. Results have been… less than positive. The second batch will be tested today. We’ll need more fundin’ soon to continue this work beyond this second batch, though.”

Another elder, a sow, spoke up. “And you will have it. But be warned, if our benefactor does not see results soon, he will be less than pleased. It’s been two months now, and we are falling behind schedule.”

The Texas longhorn nodded his head slightly. “It will be done.”

The first elder acknowledged him. “Very well. If that is all, then our business is concluded. For purity.”

Damian Hornby gave the customary farewell, and signed off. “Purity we shall have.”

Rising from the desk, he made his way downstairs and in to the basement. A makeshift lab was set up there, and it was there that two of his colleagues, Doug Ramses and a mustang named Felicity, were stationed.

Plexiglas walls separated a portion of the room into two test chambers, the occupants of which stared out at them in hatred and no small amount of fear, one of them a caracal and the other a ground squirrel. Both mammals were strapped to their respective beds, ECGs and EEGs displayed a myriad of data that would be necessary to determine the test success rate.

“Are we ready for the second test?” The bull ignored the pleading cries of the two captives. Both were homeless mammals they’d picked up early that morning. The two had, as far as they could tell, no family to speak of. Perfect for this kind of test. There could never be any witnesses.

“We are. Commencing now.” Always monotone, Doug turned a valve that opened a water pipe. After a moment, a purple-blue mist began filtering into the two sealed chambers. All eyes turned toward the EEG and ECG monitors.

“Spike in both heart rates. Probably just the fear of the unknown.” Felicity began comparing the data to their previous attempt.

As the chambers filled, the heart rates of both mammals rose dramatically. This was to be expected on the filth, but not on the squirrel.

“Spike in Beta brain waves on the predator. Some areas anyways. This is good. He’s feeling aggressive. Also seeing a bit of a slowdown on the same elsewhere. I’m guessing he’s losing higher brain function. This would be a lot easier if we had an fMRI.” Loud growling and hissing could be heard from the caracal’s chamber.

“We don’t have the money for that yet. Hopefully we will, soon. But not here. ZooPower would probably flag a spike in power usage.” The bull said as he and the mustang turned to the other mammal.

“Hmmm. That’s strange. We have an increase in beta over on the prey test subject, but no associated decrease elsewhere. So, he’s still cognitive but feeling angry or scared.”

The test dragged on. The caracal had lost all higher brain function, and wanted nothing more than to fillet and devour his captors. On the flip side, the squirrel had started screaming in terror and didn’t stop.
“His heartrate just keeps climbing,” the mustang remarked as she eyed the squirrel’s readings. Indeed, the heartrate of the squirrel had more than doubled since the beginning of the test, and it was still going up. “He’s not going to last much longer.”

As if in response to her words, all activity on the monitor ceased as the squirrel’s heart gave up, the heart rate monitor emitting a long continuous tone that was swiftly silenced.

“Looks like we lost another one. I’ll call Woolter and Jesse. We’ll sink them in the Rainforest District waterway,” Doug remarked as he moved for his phone.

Hornby sighed. Another failure. The elders would not be pleased to hear this. Sinking the bodies in the rainforest waterway meant that the relative heat and the river fish would make short work of any evidence on the bodies. Their lack of jobs, family, or any other close ties would mean that even if they were reported missing, it wouldn’t be in time to salvage the evidence.

Moving back upstairs, the bull returned to his office. He had some work to do on one of the components of the formula.

Chapter End Notes

The academy training schedule I used for reference is the RCMP Academy, Depot Division, which is 6 hours per day, 5 days per week, for 26 weeks, not including lunch hour. Cadets have all non-training hours to themselves, though they are expected to devote time after hours to further their training (studying, “homework”, physical activity, additional training, and advanced courses).

Also, I envision the train station in Savannah Central, Zootopia Central Station – the same station that Judy arrived in Zootopia at in the movie – to be similar in nature to Pennsylvania Station in New York City and Union Station in Toronto, Canada. In both cases, the stations serve or have access to the city subway, intercity commuter trains, and long-distance passenger trains.

Did anyone catch the pop culture references in this chapter? Call them out in the comments!

Coming up, on January 12: Graduation Day!

Also, I reply to all comments (except guest comments on FFN)! Got a question? Suggestion? Critique? Want to tell me one of my characters should be turned into a block of cheese? Leave a comment!
This was it. The day Judy Hopps had been both looking forward to and dreading for months. Looking forward to, because she'd finally get to have her best friend by her side all day, fighting crime, and making the world a better place. And dreading, because they'd asked her to make a speech and be the one to present the badges to the graduates.

Judy hated public speaking, after that disaster 9 months ago at the conclusion of the missing mammal case. She even refused to say anything following the exposure of the Night Howlers conspiracy, deflecting all questions with something along the lines of "Please talk to a member of the of the PR department. I have no comment."

This time, however, she wouldn't be taking questions, so the burden was lighter. And she'd run her speech by several friends beforehand. And before that, she'd spent hours upon hours agonizing over what to say. Each attempt had ended with ripping a sheet off her pad of paper, crumpling it up, and tossing it behind her.

Finally, she'd settled on talking about her own preconceptions, and how real life didn't always show through rose coloured glasses.

Cleaning up her apartment afterward was no fun either. Every time she thought she bagged all of the wasted paper, she found another pile. And another. And another. Until she had two fox-sized garbage bags full of paper (the store had been all out of smaller ones).

Carrying them to her building's recycling dumpster and wrestling them in must have looked pretty funny to everyone who saw her. Walking into walls and doors and nearly falling down the stairs because she couldn't see where she was going? Not so funny, to her.

Now, though, she sat on the Bunnyburrow express, rereading what she'd written over and over, trying to memorize every word. She was nervous, to be sure, but at least this time she wouldn't be
blindsided by the whole situation.

She knew that as long as she was the most famous (or infamous, depending on how you looked at it) officer in the ZPD, she would probably need to get used to this kind of thing. It didn’t make it any better though. The recruitment posters with her face on that had gone up after the Night Howler conspiracy were bad enough. Worse was that anti-predator groups had doctored that same image for their own use, and pro-pred and anti-prey groups had not forgotten what she had said at that press conference either.

The protests in the city had intensified lately, and violent and destructive species-related crime was also on a dramatic rise, stretching the ZPD thin. Most years, all of the precinct chiefs made the trip to the academy for the graduation ceremony. This year, however, mammal power was so tight that only the chiefs of precinct one and four others were able to attend.

Judy sighed as the academy came in to view. She just had to make it through the day, and Nick would be by her side as her partner and friend come Monday.

This was it. The day Nicholas Wilde had been looking forward to for 6 months. Because today meant the end of boot camp, and the beginning of a new phase in his life. One where he would be working alongside his best friend, sharing jokes, laughter, and as she liked to put it, making the world a better place.

Nick was the only graduate in his group that would be joining precinct 1. All of the other graduates had been assigned to other precincts. Unfortunately, the number of graduates in this class was less than the number of officers that would be retiring in the next six months, so several more precincts would be even more understaffed, or so Judy had been telling him.

Admittedly, Nick had not made any lasting friendships with his fellow cadets, preferring to keep to himself when Judy wasn’t around, with the exception of his dorm mate. Of course, his solitude and the amount of time spent around the little rabbit doe had started some rumours about their relationship that he would just as soon avoid if possible. Not that he didn’t wish they were true or anything.

The truth was, he did very much wish the rumours were true. Most of them anyway. But he wasn’t willing to compromise his friendship with Judy for the highly unlikely chance that she felt the same way.

The fox went through the day ahead in his mind. Breakfast in the mess. Where he was now. Change into the ceremonial uniform, freshly pressed and clean. Meet at the centre of the jogging track no later than 0930. Graduation ceremony at 1000.

There would be speeches by buffalo butt and the ice queen – his nickname for the polar bear major that had spent the last 6 months yelling “You’re dead, Firefox!” or some insulting variation thereof in his ear. And then there would be the graduation speech and the presenting of the badges by Judy.

That was the part he was looking forward to the most.

The other mammal that Nick was looking forward to seeing today was his mother. She’d only managed to visit him a few times since they’d reconciled, but they talked no less than twice a week. Nick had still not been able to get his mom or Judy to admit to the latter tipping his mother off to the current direction his life had taken. But he was thankful the little rabbit had taken it upon herself to do so. He knew he should be angry at her for meddling in his life, but he just couldn’t bring himself to be upset.
His mother had managed to get time off from the pharmaceutical company she worked for to come see him on his big day though. Nick hoped she'd be proud of him, as proud of him as he knew Judy was.

Breakfast was an opulent affair this time, a rare instance of hot cakes, waffles, French toast, and turkey strips or chicken as opposed to the usual toast and/or cereal that the cafeteria offered. The fox supposed it was a "congratulations" gift to those that had passed the academy's rigorous training regime – or survived it, as the case may be for some.

Nick had been surprised at the fact that in the three classes he'd seen pass through the academy during his time there – his own, the one that had started three months prior to him, and the one that had started three months afterward, there was not a single cadet smaller than a wolf, other than himself. The mammal inclusion initiative put forth by former mayor Lionheart was still in effect, so Nick supposed it had more to do with a lack of interest by smaller mammals. Judy had told Nick how she had fought tooth and claw to be accepted in to the academy in the first place, being rejected multiple times before resorting to the MII.

She'd also told him of the failures and humiliation she had suffered in her first few weeks of training. The fact that the records and achievements wall was half full of her pictures, and the fact that the Ice Queen had opened his first day with a rousing speech about how a bunny turned the place upside down and set a standard so high you needed a space craft to reach it – along with all the degrading daily speeches since – was a testament to how hard she'd worked, and one Nick hoped he could stand beside.

Nick was lost in thoughts when a voice jarred him back to reality.

"Mind if I have a seat, Red?" Nick looked up. His dorm mate, Arnie Pawson was standing there with his breakfast tray.

The fox gestured to the seat next to him. "Go for it."

Taking his seat, the cheetah sat in silence for a minute, just enjoying his meal, before speaking.

"So, I hear your girlfriend is going to be giving one of the graduation speeches."

Nick groaned in frustration. "Her name is Judy. Yes, she will be giving a speech. No, as I have said at least a hundred times before, she is not my girlfriend. She is a girl friend, with a space in the middle. A friend who is a girl."

The cheetah chuckled. "Oh, come on, the way you talk about her? The way she is constantly calling and visiting you? How can she NOT be your girlfriend? Dude, even my girl doesn't call or visit as often as yours does, and we've been going steady for two years now!"

Nick skewered the cheetah with a look.

"For fuck sake, Nick, you can't tell me that you don't want to bang that piece of ass!" Species didn't matter to Arnie. And neither did manners.

"No, Arnie, I CAN tell you I don't want to 'bang that piece of ass' as you so eloquently put it. I told you, she's my best friend, and I'm not going to screw that up. Besides,"

The red canine returned to his meal.

"...foxes mate for life."
Arnie quirked his eyebrow. "So, you wouldn't consider her for a mate? A wife?"

The fox sighed. Obviously, Arnie wasn't just going to drop the subject.

"Would I want her for a wife and mate? Yes, yes, I would. Would she consider it? No, I don't think she would. She's a bunny, Arnie. I'm a fox. I'm her natural enemy. The fact that we are even friends at all is a testament to her character."

The fox sighed

"The best I can hope for is a lasting friendship. If she wants more, she's going to have to initiate it. That's how foxes do it anyways. The vixen leads."

"Well, that's kind of fucked up. If you want her, why don't you just go and get her. To hell with how foxes do it. Be a male mammal!"

The fox dropped his head into his paws.

"It's not about what I want, Arnie, it's about what she wants. When have you ever seen a bunny be with a fox in THAT way? Hell, when have you ever seen a bunny even being FRIENDS with a fox? The answer is never. And there is no chance in hell I'm going to risk everything on the almost non-existent chance that she feels the same way."

The cheetah sighed. "Your loss, dude, but if you wait for her, chances are, someone's gonna snap her up and fuck her brains out before you do. She's hot fuzz, and she ain't gonna stay available for long."

Nick shook his head, fighting down the jealous snarl at the thought of Judy with anyone but him.

"I'll see you later, Arnie. I gotta get ready," the fox said as he stood and moved towards the door.

Moving through the hallways to the locker room after finishing up his breakfast, Nick gave a friendly greeting to the few cadets and instructors roaming them. Most were trying to finish up last minute packing or organize transportation back to the city. Nick would be riding back with Judy and his mother after the unofficial after-grad party, which was being thrown at a bar in the nearby town.

Grabbing his uniform and bag from his locker, Nick quickly changed into the ceremonial blues. It wasn't a particularly difficult task, as the uniform was fairly simple compared to some he had seen out there. Simple yet elegant. A look in the mirror reminded him of the last time he had donned a uniform for any reason. 24 years ago. And he'd only worn the uniform once.

That night was one of the worst of his life. He'd gone in to the meeting with hopes and dreams and left with a muzzle and a crushed soul. And for 23 years he'd thought that mammal with hopes and dreams was dead. Until Judy Hopps had bounced into his life and turned everything upside down.

The fox looked in the locker room mirror one last time before adjusting his tie and gold braids again and grabbing his duffel bag. He'd packed most of his things up last night before bed. Judy had been busy, so they hadn't gotten their usual MuzzleTime call in, a rarity for them the last month or so. She'd also gotten a lot more touchy-feely, but Nick chalked that up to her rabbit nature.

The fox checked his watch. 0920. Time to head outside. He dropped his bag in his dorm to pick it up later, and headed out the door.

Judy Hopps sat on a polar-bear sized chair on the stage that had been set up in the middle of the running track, her stomach turning in knots. Flashes of the missing mammals press conference ran
through her mind. She'd nearly had a panic attack just walking up to the stage, but a piece of advice that Wolford had given her on the drive up stuck out: "Pretend it's just you and Nick. Pretend that no one else exists, and you'll be just fine."

That made things a bit better. It focused her on the reason she'd agreed to do this in the first place: for Nick. But sitting here with nothing to do but wait, her mind had decided to focus on the hundreds of mammals in the audience.

So worried was she, that she almost missed her cue. A nudge from Major Friedkin had clued her in though, and she hopped off the chair, and walked up the steps that had just been pushed on-stage for her, to stand at the podium.

Everyone looked smaller from way up here, the podium being built for a Cape Buffalo and the stage high enough that said Buffalo was above the eye level of even an elephant. It made Judy feel a bit like a giant.

A deep breath and a reminder to "pretend it's just you and Nick" later, Judy spoke.

"When I was a kid, I thought Zootopia was this perfect place, where everyone got along and anyone could be anything. Turns out, real life's a little bit more complicated than a slogan on a bumper sticker."

Boy was that an understatement.

"Real life is messy. We all have limitations. We all make mistakes. Which means hey, glass half full we all have a lot in common. And the more we try to understand one another, the more exceptional each of us will be."

"But we have to try. So, no matter what type of animal you are…from the biggest elephant, to our first fox…"

Her eyes fell to Nick, and she couldn't keep the affection out of her voice. The red canine lifted the aviator glasses he wore and gave her a wink and a huge, genuine smile. One that said to how happy he was with her.

"…I implore you…try. Try. Try to make the world a better place."

Nick's smile got a little bigger.

"Look inside yourself and recognize that change starts with you. It starts with me. It starts with all of us."

That line made Judy reflect briefly on her own changes in the last 9 months, since she'd first joined the police force. She'd gone in believing everything was going to go the way she'd dreamed, only to be slapped with harsh reality. And prejudice, something she thought herself above, but even she wasn't immune to. Her first days with Nick, and her words at the press conference were proof of that.

Judy, still in thought, moved off to the side of the podium, allowing the polar bear major to take her place to call the names of the graduates. Normally, this would be the mayor, but with the city in political strife and the newly-instated mayor Peter Clawheed unavailable, it fell to the chief instructor instead.

The rabbit doe took a deep breath and let it out, ignoring the applause from the audience at the conclusion of her speech, and picked up the box with the first badge in it. The easy part. It took Judy a bit to figure out how to pin the badges on the larger mammals, but she found that jumping up on
Nick's badge. He'd done it, just like she knew he would, and now he was her partner. The polar bear began to speak.

"If anyone had told me 15 months ago that a rabbit and a fox would make some of the best academy graduates I had ever seen, I'd have laughed at you and told you to do 100 crunches and 100 push-ups, and an extra 5-mile run. But times change. Mammals change. And it always comes when you are least expecting it. So, it's my honour to introduce this year's valedictorian, the first fox graduate we've ever had. Nicholas Wilde."

Judy locked her gaze on the fox as he walked from his seat and onto the stage. As he approached her, she opened the felt-lined box with the felt cushion and his name tag and badge inside. On the shield, the words "Trust, Integrity, Bravery."

"I, Nicholas Wilde, promise to be brave, loyal, helpful, and trustworthy."

Nick would finally get the chance to honour the pledge he'd made so many years ago on that ill-fated night. And she promised herself she'd help him every step of the way. Removing the shield from the case, she walked up to him. The smile on his muzzle was even bigger than the one on her own. Pinning the badge to his chest felt like she was giving him something of his that he'd lost.

And when she saluted him, the smile threatened to split his face in two when he returned the gesture. She could see the pure joy and happiness in his eyes, but what was the other thing? She could see something else in his eyes when he looked at her…but what?

The noise of the suddenly celebrating graduates drowned out any further thought on that matter, and the two startled mammals turned to look at the audience. Peaked caps flew, and the elephants trumpeted the completion of the harrowing ordeal of the ZPD academy.

As the celebrations continued, the two smallest officers wandered about the crowd, looking for the one other mammal that Nick wanted to see today. She would be heading back to Zootopia in the afternoon, while Nick and Judy planned to stay until the early evening.

They finally spotted her, closing the distance between them in a heartbeat, gathering her son into her arms. Judy had to fight to hold back tears. After Nick had told her about the falling out he'd had with her, and how they had not spoken in 15 years, she had decided to look Marian Wilde up and see if she could help them mend that relationship.

The rabbit doe had felt a little bad about going behind Nick's back, but seeing the result before her eyes right now, she felt it was all worth it. Now, a mother and a son were reunited.

"Look at you, Nicky." The vixen smoothed over the creases in Nick's uniform. The look of love in her eyes could not be described. "I'm so proud of you. Your father would be proud too."

Normally, when it came to emotion, Nick just put up a set of walls and a grin. Not this time. For the fox that spent the last 15 years on the streets, Judy knew that the only mammals that were allowed to see any sort of emotion from him were those he trusted implicitly. The rabbit's tears finally fell when Nick's own eyes welled up, and he pulled his mother back in for a hug.

Judy stood off to the side for a while, until Marian looked up and opened one arm for her and beckoned her in, to which the rabbit happily obliged. The three stood there for a long while, just enjoying the embrace.

When they finally separated, the three elected to take a walk around the grounds, away from the...
clamour of the celebrating mammals. Judy felt a bit like a third fiddle, this being one of the few times she knew Nick would get with his mother. After a while, she excused herself from the conversation, knowing that this was time they needed alone.

After a moment of walking in silence, Marian spoke up.

"She seems like a very nice mammal."

Nick looked back in the direction Judy had gone. "Yeah…"

The vixen grinned. "You like her, don't you?"

Nick couldn't help the smile that graced his muzzle. "Yeah, I do."

His mother's grin turned predatory, before Nick realized what he'd just said. "I mean as a friend! Not THAT way! Besides, even if I did like her THAT way, and I'm not saying I do, she's a rabbit, and I'm a fox. There's no way she'd like a fox THAT way."

The vixen rubbed her son's back. "There's no shame in it Nicky. I can tell you have feelings for her. Whether or not she's a fox shouldn't matter. Let her decide for herself if that matters to her."

The fox sighed. "She saved my life, in more ways than one. She believed in me when no one else would. And she's the nicest mammal I've ever met. How could I not love her?"

It was several hours later, after things had calmed down, that the pair found themselves at the local bar at the "official unofficial" after-grad party. Judy had skipped hers when she'd graduated, so she was taking the opportunity to enjoy the atmosphere.

Originally, she'd been adamantly opposed to any sort of alcohol, but after the night howler conspiracy, Nick had brought her to one of the bars in Savannah Central. Over time, she'd learned the importance of just taking a load off, loosening up, and enjoying the company of her friends and co-workers without the responsibilities of the job.

And on one particularly embarrassing night, the importance and value of controlling her alcohol consumption.

For now, though, she could just kick back and relax for a few hours before Nick, Marian, and herself would all pile into Marian's car for the trip back to the city. Nick had introduced them to his dorm mate, a cheetah named Arnie Pawson who had been in a different unit and was now assigned to the rainforest district, and was busy regaling the three of them with the tales of his time in the academy, though the bunny suspected he was conveniently leaving out some of the less flattering details.

"So, anyway, here we are, first day on the obstacle course, and Trunkson has never been outside Savannah Central. And he gets to the Tundratown portion of the course and just stops. And slowly walks to the wall and tries to climb up. But you know, slippery ice, new experience, big elephant. He came down in that lake so hard he broke the refrigeration pipes underneath. It took them a week to fix it."

The rabbit and vixen got a good chuckle out of the story. As they were starting to calm down, Nick's mother hit him with a look. Evidently, she had reached the same conclusion as Judy.

"So how about you? Any embarrassing tales about yourself that you'd like to relate?"

Nick's hustler's grin was evident on his face as he responded. "Nope! Pure class from front to back,
Mom! No embarrassing stories here!"

Judy was about to object when a fourth voice broke in to the conversation. "That's not how I remember it, Redtail Wannabe."

The three looked up to see Major Ursula Friedkin and Chief Bogo staring down at their table, the former with an amused expression and the latter with his characteristic stoic look.

Judy saw her opportunity. "Oh? Do tell, Major. I need some good teasing material."

The major's expression turned almost evil. "Oh, you just have to ask me. I have enough material for you for a year or two. Anyway. So, academy training, day 4. Our fox friend is running the obstacle course. And he might have been doing quite well, if he wasn't gloating the entire way. So, he goes through the sandstorm, the ice wall, the canals, the rock climb, and the pine forest just fine, and he gets to the rainforest section."

"Of course, he's gloating the entire way. And just as he's in the middle of the climbing frame, he slips and falls, but instead of hitting the muck, he grabs Howly's tail instead, and pulls him off too, along with Pawsovich. I still don't know how, but in the end, he had himself and 10 of his classmates in the muck."

The vixen and rabbit were laughing at this point, and polar bear turned her attention on the fox, who was exceptionally glad his fur was red in the first place. "It's the first time I've ever had to call a multiple death on that training course."

Now the fox wished he could dig a hole in the seat and crawl in.

The afternoon wore on, and Judy told Nick of the increasing riots and protests in the city, what to expect come Monday morning and his first time in the bullpen hot seat. Both were looking forward to their first day on the job together, wondering what assignments they would get. Patrol? Speed trap? Maybe something more exciting like a Nip raid?

The trio were just thinking about heading back to the city, when Nick happened to glance over at another table. Bogo and several other precinct chiefs had nabbed a booth and were talking amongst themselves. But what was REALLY interesting was how close Major Friedkin was sitting to Bogo. Almost touching hips. How interesting. Nick nudged the rabbit next to him, and discreetly pointed out the scene.

After a moment, the fox leaned over to the rabbit and whispered, "Think they are an item? The Ice Queen and Buffalo Butt?"

"I've never seen Friedkin outside the academy, but I suppose it's possible. I'd honestly rather not think about my boss's love life, though."

Nick's smirk was evident. "What would we call them anyway? You know, how when movie fans think two mammals should be a couple they come up with a nickname for them? So, what would theirs be? Fried Bogo?"

The rabbit burst into laughter. She loved how Nick could easily make her laugh. Still, she had to punish him for that remark. She punched Nick's shoulder.

"OUCH! Damnit, Carrots, I need that arm for work. Your super bunny muscles are going to punch it right off!"

The rabbit snickered. "Oh, come off it, you big baby, it wasn't that hard."
Actually, it had hurt, quite a bit. The fox spent the next five minutes rubbing the very sore spot on his arm. Nick knew Judy was far stronger than she looked. She had to be to compensate for her species' small stature in a very physically demanding profession dominated by much larger mammals.

The party wound down as evening wore on. Marian left early, taking Nick's belongings home with her. After learning that Nick was living in a literal box under a bridge, she set him back up in his old room until he could find a place of his own. Personally, Nick hoped that that wouldn't be a long process.

A few of Nick's classmates came by to wish him good luck, but the majority didn't bother. Some distrustful and jealous looks told Judy that there was a good chance that they didn't think a fox could uphold the virtues emblazoned on their badges, or they were jealous of him being assigned to the prestigious precinct one.

It was close to 8 PM when Arnie called it quits and hailed a cab to take him to his girlfriend's house, a few miles out of town. They'd be moving to Zootopia together, the latter taking a job at the Zootopia national bank in the Rainforest District, where Arnie was now assigned as an officer.

Meanwhile, Judy and Nick meandered over to the train station, taking a longer route than they normally would, just enjoying the ambience and the company of their best friend. Judy broke the silence.

"You did it, Nick. Just like I knew you would."

The fox smiled at the bunny beside him. "I couldn't have done it without you, Carrots."

The bunny shook her head, disagreeing. "Yes, you could have, Nick. You had this in you all along."

Nick looked at her, the bunny he was in love with. The way the street lights and the moon reflected off her eyes, the way her ears stood erect, twitching, turning occasionally to take in a sound he couldn't hear. The smile on her muzzle and the slight bounce in her step as they walked. The scent of her was intoxicating to the fox, clean, and yet at the same time, all Judy. Her movements entranced him. Her voice hypnotized him. The fox shook himself out of his stupor. Maybe in the confines of mind he could be with her, but there was no way he would jeopardize the closest friendship he'd ever had.

"Maybe so, fluff. But without you, I wouldn't have had someone to believe in me."

The two arrived at the station, and purchased their tickets just in time to board the train. The journey back to Zootopia, was a quiet one, the two finding a seat in the second carriage, and settling in for the journey. The rocking motion lulled the fox into an easy sleep, his dreams dominated by a single gray rabbit. Unbeknownst to him, however, the rabbit in question had taken the opportunity to snuggle in close to him, breathing in his own scent, before the rabbit found herself on a journey to dreamland as well.

Chapter End Notes

No one caught the pop-culture reference in the last chapter! Can you find any in this one?
Coming up on January 26: In Concert!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Want to complain about spilling your water on your dog? Leave a comment!
Monday morning. The day many mammals loathed. It meant the end of a nice relaxing weekend and a return to the workforce, a constant struggle to eke out a living and appease the heartless, number obsessed corporations known as the banks.

For some mammals, such as celebrities, money came easier than for others. Judy knew going into her career that police officers were among the lowest paid civil employees, despite the risk they took every day capturing criminals and defending the city. It didn’t matter to her. Bringing home the carrots was secondary. Making the world a better place the only way she knew how was more important for her.

But today was even more special for her. Today would be Nick’s first day on the force. A day that she would be able to share her dream of making the world a better place with her fo—best friend. A day of the easy jokes and banter that had become second nature to the two.

So, it was with greater enthusiasm than usual that she once again silenced her alarm and bounced out of bed. A quick shower later, she donned her uniform, giving her badge an extra polish, before bouncing out the door and heading towards the train station, eager to see Nick.

Nick wasn’t normally a morning mammal. Even after 6 months in the academy, he had a hard time getting himself out of bed. As a fox, he was naturally semi-nocturnal. Most foxes were active in the afternoons and the first half of the night. But there was one thing that was an easy motivator for the red fox: Judy Hopps. His first day as her partner on the force. That one fact had the fox crawling out of his comfortable childhood bed. He’d showered late last night before turning in and was able to get away with a quick breakfast, muzzle wash and brushing of his teeth. He knew Judy liked to
be at work early, and he figured there would be no harm in him doing the same.

His mom had already headed off to work, so Nick just had to remember to lock up when he left. One of the things he had to do this week was look for a place of his own. He wanted one where he could not only crash for the night, but could also invite a certain female over for a movie or to hang out or something. He didn’t have a lot of cash available to him, but now that the main reason for him not having a flat before was out of the way – he had a steady, honest source of income as opposed to a shady, often fluctuating source – he figured he’d have better luck.

He hadn’t been kidding when he had spoken to Judy of living in a box under a bridge. That had been his home for almost 10 years. Rain, shine, snow and hail. One particular winter was so harsh and cold, he’d almost considered trying to patch things up with his mother, just so he could have a warm roof over his head, but his stubbornness had prevented him.

A few mammals glanced Nick’s way as he plodded down the road to the subway station. Many of them gave him distrustful looks, but most were curious at the navy-blue uniform he now wore. A fox cop? Who would have thought? Nick just gave them all his usual half-lidded grin and a finger pistol in their direction. Some continued to stare. Some just shook their heads and continued on their way, sure that the fake uniform was part of just another scam the fox was undoubtedly involved in.

The subway was much the same deal, except the stares from the other commuters lingered longer. The fox didn’t care. Today was day one of the rest of his life. He wasn’t going to let anything ruin it. Nothing at all.

The subway trip, which normally took 20 minutes, seemed to fly by, with the fox lost in thoughts. One half of his mind was reviewing the many things he’d learned at the academy over the last 6 months, and the little tips he’d picked up from Judy during the same time, and the other half of his mind was on the gray doe herself.

That his mom had figured out his feelings for Judy so easily was concerning, in a way. He didn’t want the brass to pick up on his feelings for the doe. They’d separate the two, at the very least, and Judy, being the senior officer would likely get reprimanded, if not fired. He couldn’t let that happen. She’d worked too hard to get where she was, a respected and honoured member of ZPD’s prestigious precinct one.

The fox disembarked at Grand Savannah Central Station and made his way across the plaza. The gleaming edifice of City Hall stood next to the equally prominent precinct one building, to which the fox was making a beeline. The center of the plaza, however had been transformed into an outdoor concert venue in preparation for the Gazelle performance that evening.

Walking into the precinct building, Nick immediately spied the jolly overweight cheetah at the receptionist’s desk, and in front of him, bouncing on the balls of her hind paws was Judy. So engrossed was she in enthusiastically explaining something to the cheetah that she didn’t even notice him approach.

“…so, then Wolford had to spend the next 15 minutes untangling the dingo from the clothesline. The sow wasn’t too happy about her underwear getting scattered to the four winds either, so she was yelling and screaming at us, and I had my paws full keeping that stupid dingo’s partner in line.”

The cheetah in front of Judy nodded in understanding before she continued.

“So that’s what all the 911 calls were about regarding the yelling on Humpback Drive on Thursday.”

Sneaking up behind Judy, and giving the cheetah a wink and a “sssshhh” gesture when he noticed
him, he made to grab the bunny by the shoulders, and give her a good friendly start. He was just about to make his move when the rabbit spoke.

“I know you’re there, Nick.”

The fox froze in his tracks, as the rabbit turned one ear toward him.

“Bunny hearing.”

The fox slumped. He’d been caught. The rabbit turned to face him with a smirk on her face.

“You just wanted to ruin my fun,” the fox complained.

The rabbit’s smirk grew into a genuine smile. “Good morning, Nick!”

The cheetah’s eyes lit up behind Judy.

“Oh. Em. Goodness.” They really did hire a fox? That’s just---"

“Clawhauser, you said the same thing the day I first joined.” Judy cut the big cat off. “Ben, this is Nick Wilde. Nick, meet Ben Clawhauser. Receptionist, dispatcher, and even bigger Gazelle fan than me.”

“Wait, you’re the fox that helped solve the night howler case. Oh wow! So, you and Judy are going to be partners now? That’s so awesome! Who’d ever thought that a bunny and fox would become partners?!”

Judy glanced over at Nick with an affectionate smile at this, something that didn’t go unnoticed by the cheetah. The fox however, was completely oblivious, his face still a mask with that smirk he carried. The cheetah grinned internally. This would be a good betting pool. There hadn’t been one for over a year now, since Officer Pennington finally married her beau.

He would mull this over in his mind. He’d need to come up with odds. Stay friends, become something more? Mammals will want to know odds before they put money down on the relationship and any dates.

Getting word out of the new bet without the bunny or the fox getting wind of it would be tricky. But nothing the precinct one unofficial bookie couldn’t handle.

The rabbit grabbed the foxes paw and started leading him away, an eager bounce in her step. “Come on, Nick. I’ll show you around and introduce you. God knows Bogo won’t.”

Judy lead the red fox on his tour of his new workplace. The first floor held the gym, a large break and recreation room, the bullpen, visitor’s lounge, some conference rooms, and cubicles for the officers. Nick was delighted to learn that he would be sharing one with Judy. It had originally been for a wolf, but with their smaller size, they could easily fit in there quite comfortably.

The second floor was all the crime lab and other forensics services. The morgue, contrary to popular TV shows, was not housed in the police station, but instead in its own building several blocks away.

Short on time, Judy elected to skip touring the third floor, saying it was all administrative offices, though she did give the fox fairly detailed instructions on how to get to Bogo’s office, assuring the fox with a wink that he’d need them in the very near future.

Meanwhile
“Chief, sir, I got word from one of my C.I.s(*) last week. Says there’s a new player in the underworld. He couldn’t elaborate, but he got me some meeting dates and times.”

The massive cape buffalo regarded the smaller wolf officer in front of him.

“You want to be put back on undercover duty.”

The wolf nodded. “Yes, sir. The fact is, this rise in hate crimes has given birth to some underground elements that are using the chaos for their own agendas.”

The cape buffalo nodded in understanding. There had been suspicions that criminal empires would use the civil unrest in the city to make a push. His own contacts in Big’s empire had noted an increase in his businesses, but nothing with any substance that could nail the old shrew.

If there was another element in the criminal underground, they needed to know about it, and soon.

The cape buffalo nodded. “Very well, Wolford. Report to the bullpen. We’ll make it an official assignment there. Dismissed.”

Wolford nodded and exited the office. Heading down to the undercover offices, he reviewed his plan: The rumours were that a pro-prey group had arisen somewhere in the central districts and was currently working on a weapon of some kind. If he could get close enough, he might be able to ascertain the details and stop the project in it’s tracks.

Being outfitted with a disguise that would fool the casual observer was easy. For now, he didn’t need direct interaction. Once that was needed, he would see about other alternatives. A wolf in sheep’s clothing, working to take down a pro-prey group. How poetic.

He was on his way to the bullpen when he encountered the fox and the rabbit heading in the same direction. The rabbit was her usual bouncy, happy self, while the fox sported a disarming grin.

“Hey Eric! Just finished showing Nick around the place! Headed to the bullpen?”

The wolf grinned and nodded. “Yep. Just picked up some supplies for my new assignment. After this morning, you won’t be seeing me for a while. Gotta work some undercover angles.”

The bunny bounced up and down, excitedly. “Oh, that sounds awesome. You HAVE to tell me how that goes!”

The wolf grinned at the bunny’s enthusiasm. Before she’d come along, Wolford had been starting to wonder what the point of doing a job like this was, if seemingly every mammal out there just hated you for doing it. But then Judy on Duty had joined the force with her unbridled enthusiasm, and things had slowly turned brighter. He’d found his love for his job again, and overall was a happier mammal. Judy just had that air about her. Even his wife had commented on it.

“Undercover work, Hopps, dunno how much I’ll be able to tell you,” he said with a wink. “but I’ll still be making the world a better place.” He held his paw up for a fist bump, which Judy gladly returned.

The wolf gave a grin to the fox standing next to the gray bundle of energy. “Keep the reins on her, Wilde, or she’ll end up taking you for another ride!”

The fox rolled his eyes and gave Wolford the smirk that the larger mammal decided was his signature. “Wolfie, if you know her, you know she can’t be reined in. I’ll just have to hang on tight.”
The bunny and wolf laughed at that, all three knowing just how true that was.

“If it’s all the same to you two though, we should probably head to the bullpen. The chief will be there soon, and he’ll have our butts if we’re not there,” Wolford said, and the trio made their way to the aforementioned room.

The briefing went as planned, though, aside from Judy, no one was prepared for Nick’s snark and sarcasm. Although Judy did have to admit even she couldn’t hold in all of her laughter. The smallest two ZPD officers made their way to the motor pool having picked up their keys from Clawhauser.

“So, Judy, since I’m the new guy, I get to drive, right?” The fox gave her his most disarming smile.

It didn’t work

“No, Nick, I’m driving. I had to sit as Wolford’s passenger for three months before I was allowed to drive at all, and I scored higher than anyone at the academy driving course.”

The fox pouted.

It still didn’t work.

“No, Nick, your sad fox face won’t convince me. I’m not letting you drive.”

Well, nuts.

The two reached the carpool and started looking for their cruiser. Though one of the smallest vehicles on the lot, it still dwarfed anything they would normally drive on the roads. Technically, they were small mammals and would normally buy a car relative in size. The ZPD had modified one of its available cruisers to accommodate the two small mammals at the wheel, and still be able to transport anything up to and including a tiger. The result was a vehicle that, to them, was absolutely massive.

Academy training included lessons in advanced handling of many sized vehicles, though.

No one seemed to include lessons in such advanced tactics for the joke mobile though.

Climbing into the cab, the two settled in for the task ahead: find a street racer. Judy fired up the engine and pulled into the street. The fox called in to dispatch, and the two were on their way.

Unfortunately, finding a single street racer is easier said than done. Savannah Central was a large district, and the only evidence they had to go on was that the mammal was somewhere in Savannah Central. That left a lot of questions and not many answers, so the only thing the two could do until they found him or a call came in was patrol the most likely streets a racer would frequent. Long straight runs without a lot of traffic.

That didn’t mean they couldn’t talk though. And of course, Nick has an endless supply of jokes, and it wasn’t long before he had the doe struggling to concentrate on the road through her giggles.

“Hey Carrots. So, a cop walks up to a drug addict and he says, ‘sir, we’re going to have to administer a drug test.’ And the drug addict says…” The fox paused for dramatic effect.

It also gave Judy time to brace herself for another round of giggles.

“Of course, officer! What drugs will we be testing?”
It was a good thing they were stuck at a red light. The rabbit burst into a fit of laughter. Most of the cop jokes she’d heard over the months tended to paint cops in a negative light, or make them look stupid. This was the first one she’d heard that was actually funny.

Once she calmed down, and they were moving again, Judy decided to pop a question of her own. “Nick, would you come to the Gazelle concert with me tonight?”

The coffee that the fox was drinking ended up inhaled.

The fox hacked and coughed trying to clear his airways. After a good several minutes, he shook his head, cleared his throat, and looked at the bunny. “Say what?”

Judy immediately felt even more embarrassed, and started backtracking. “I... I mean…if you’re busy… or you don’t want to that’s OK. I won’t be upset. It’s just... I… I bought two tickets and since Ben is already going I thought we could have some…some fun together?”

Nick’s sly smirk crept onto his face. “Wait. Are you asking me on a date, Fluff?”

“Yes—NO! I mean yes. But as friends! Not…not… Oh sweet cheese and crackers!” Judy’s ears flushed beet red and she dropped them behind her back to hide them.

The fox laughed at his partner’s attempts to salvage the situation. Call it what you want, Carrots, it’ll be a date to me. “OK, Carrots. I’ll go with you to this concert on this not-date.”

The rabbit groaned and dropped her head forward onto the steering wheel, repeatedly banging her head on the upper part of it.

A short blast of a horn from the car behind them informed the rabbit that the light they’d been sitting at had turned green. Oops. Judy gave a quick wave to the irate llama that was behind them.

“C’mon carrots, pay attention.”

“Stop distracting me!”

“Excuses, excuses.”

Judy huffed and refocused her attention on the road. Nick on the other paw reached into an ice cooler he’d brought along and pulled out a pawpsicle. How it hadn’t melted yet was something Judy didn’t want to think about.

“So, are all rabbits bad drivers, or is it just you?”

OK, that’s it. Seeing the light ahead turn yellow, Judy slammed on the brakes. Too bad the fox was just lifting the pawpsicle for another lick. The fox went tumbling forward, despite the seatbelt. She suppressed the laugh that threatened to burst forth when he popped back up, pawpsicle stuck to his eye, instead saying in the most sarcastic tone of voice possible, and with absolutely no remorse at all, “Oops, Sorry.”

The fox chuckled. “Sly bunny.”

“Dumb fox!” was the automatic response.

“You know you love me.” What? Where the fresh peapods did that come from? OK, keep it together Judy, don’t blush, throw him off the trail.

“Do I know that?” She paused, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw the fox beside her lose
some of his composure.

“Yes, yes I do.” *I do, Nick, I do love you.*

Flash. Flash Slothmore. Flash “it-took-six-hours-to-look-up-a-plate” Slothmore. She couldn’t believe it. That DMV employee that had run the plate for them was the street racer!

The rabbit was still trying to wrap her head around that when the day was over. As much as Nick would have liked to cut Flash a break for helping them solve the missing mammals case, there was just no way that they could explain letting someone out of an 85 mph-over infraction. The sloth’s sports car was towed and impounded, and his license was confiscated.

How Flash had not had a terrible accident yet, or killed a pedestrian, was beyond Judy. She couldn’t understand it.

Shaking her head, she decided it wasn’t important at the moment. There was a concert to drag her fo-friend to.

Everyone kept a change of clothes in their lockers for times when they needed to be somewhere in a rush. Like Judy. Whipping off her uniform and changing into a teal T-shirt with a black undershirt and black yoga pants. Not great, but it will have to do.

Leaving the locker room in a rush and running down the hall, phone in paw pulling up the ticket app, she almost ran right into the very fox she would be spending the evening with. Nick caught her before she ran head-on into him, lifting her up slightly so her momentarily still-going legs were running on nothing but air.

“Whoa Carrots, where’s the fire?”

The fox set her down on the floor.

“Sorry, Nick, I’m just too eager to get out of here! You know, we have to get there early so we can get good spots! You know open air concerts don’t do assigned seating. And then there’s food. Do you want to eat first? I’m not very hungry. Maybe get a drink then? Maybe water will do. Should we run home and change and come back?”

“Sheesh, calm down Fluff, you’ll burst a blood vessel or something. The park is right across the road from here and we have two hours. Plenty of time. As for food, I’m not very hungry. Or thirsty for that matter. If you want to get a drink we can. I’m sure they’ll have food trucks there where we can find you a nice fruit smoothie. And as for changing, I think you’re just fine as it is.” *More than fine, actually.*

The rabbit sighed, ears dropping a bit. “OK. I’m sorry, Nick. I’m just so excited and worked up about this.”

Nick grinned. “Excited” described Judy most of the time. So, when she described herself as excited? Watch out.

Letting Judy go, Nick gestured to the door. “Come on Little Miss Excited, let’s go check out the concert.”

On their way out the door, both mammals failed to notice that Clawhauser wasn’t at his desk, and that the light in the Chief’s office was turned off.
Crossing the street to the watering hole plaza was a quick endeavour. The rabbit groaned when she saw the terrifyingly long lineups to get in. They’d be standing there awhile. It didn’t seem like any one line was shorter than the other or moving faster, so the pair simply picked one at random near their precinct and stood there.

After a while, they both had to admit they were a little hungry and thirsty. Looking around, Nick spotted a cluster of food trucks, of the type that you would normally see at a carnival or other outdoor event.

“Hey Carrots, I’m going to see about getting us something to eat.”

“OK, how about smoothies?”

“Sounds good. What do you want in yours?”

“Some veggie blend, please.”

Nick nodded and headed in the direction of the mobile concessions. Scanning over them, they seemed to offer the typical food as well. Everything from heart-attack-inducing greasy to rot-your-teeth sugary. Ironically, the healthier options were the farthest away…but thankfully had shorter lineups.

It still took a good twenty minutes to order the smoothies – Nick had gotten a blueberry blend with raspberries and cranberries mixed in – and find his little rabbit again. They drank their treats in relative silence, finishing up just as they got to the gate. The puma there took Judy’s tickets, frowned, looked at a sheet of paper, and asked her name.

Judy was confused. Why did it matter what her name was?

“Judy Hopps.”

“Judy Hopps, ZPD Officer?”

The rabbit was just able to suppress a groan. Oh, not this again. “Yes.”

“Can you wait off to the side for a minute please?”

The puma gestured to the side, and pulled a radio from his belt, calling for someone. The two small mammals just stood there, both more than a little perplexed as to what was going on.

It wasn’t two minutes later when a wolverine approached them from the side. “Excuse me? Judy Hopps?”

“Yes?”

The new mammal made a gesture to follow him. “I need you to come with me. Your friend, too.”

Glancing at the fox beside her, who gave his own confused shrug, they both started following the dark brown mammal. He lead them out of the area that had been set up for the concert and over to a line of trailers.

The rabbit doe looked around, perplexed. This is not how she saw the evening going. “Sir, where are we going? We’re in the dark here.”

The wolverine shrugged. “We’ll be there in a moment. Oh, and before I forget again, my name is Adrian. Adrian Clawnier. I’m Gazelle’s manager.”
The bunny’s ears shot up. Gazelle’s manager? This was unexpected. Could they…?

“Ah! Here we are.” The wolverine rapped his paw on the door of one otherwise nondescript motor home.

“It’s open!” Came the very familiar Spanish-accented voice from inside.

The manager opened the door to a modestly decorated interior, leading the fox and rabbit inside, the latter a bit in shock, immediately spotting the famous singer, seated on a small sofa in the lounge area of the motor home.

“Ah! Adrian! And this must be Judy Hopps?” The bunny’s pop idol rose from the sofa to greet them, extending a hoof. The bunny grasped it, a bit softly, still in shock at the revelation that she was meeting Gazelle.

“And who might you be?” The pop star’s attention had turned to the fox in the room.

“Nick. Nick Wilde. Judy’s friend,” the fox said with his signature smirk, also extending a paw, to which the gazelle responded. The two then turned their attention back to the still-speechless bunny.

“Is she normally this quiet?”

The fox laughed. “Gosh, no. She’s more a chatterbox than anyone else I know. But I think she broke when she found out she was meeting you. She is quite the fan, after all.” The red fox nudged the rabbit, finally bringing her out of her stunned silence.

“Oh. Hi! I’m Judy Hopps.”

The fox and the gazelle both burst out laughing, causing the poor speech-impaired bunny’s ears to flush red and drop over her face. “Oh, sweet cheese and crackers.”

“Relax, Carrots, take a deep breath.” Perhaps unconsciously, the fox reached over and rubbed the doe’s shoulder, slowly guiding her to the sofa, where they all sat down. Eventually, one eye peeked out from behind her long ears. Seeing only friendly looks, the rabbit took a deep breath and let her ears go.

“I’m sorry. I’m just a little nervous, Gazelle. I didn’t expect this at all and I’m a bit overwhelmed.”

“It’s ok. Would it help if I asked you to call me Isabella? It is my real name.”

“Oh. Ok, Isabella.” The bunny was still trying to reboot her brain, and it hadn’t fully come back online just yet. She shook her head.

“I just…when I bought the tickets, I wasn’t expecting to get the chance to meet you.”

The pop star smiled. “It’s OK. I’ve wanted to meet you ever since you figured out what was going on with Zootopia’s predators. And I’m glad you did.”

The rabbit doe slumped. “I was fixing a mistake I made.”

The look of understanding on the pop star’s face was clear. “From your press conference, no?” There was no accusation in her voice, only kindness.

“Yes. That and more. I screwed up, and I needed to fix what I broke.”

“Judy…may I call you Judy?” Upon receiving confirmation, the gazelle continued. “We all make
mistakes. You should know that. What counts is what we do afterward to fix those mistakes, and whether or not we learn from them. Words have power, Judy, it is one of the reasons I got into music. Like many other things, they can be a force for good or a tool of evil. I wanted to make a difference.”

The rabbit nodded. “That’s why I became a police officer. I wanted to make a difference. To make the world a better place.”

“That doesn’t come overnight, Judy, and a change for the better takes longer than for the worse. Things may be dark now, with the riots, but keep at it, and there will be a light at the end of the tunnel.”

“I hope so.”

The pop singer thought for a moment.

“Judy do you know why I organized those rallies? Why I stand for predator rights, even though I am prey?”

The rabbit doe shook her head.

“Dimitri, can you come out here please?”

There was a shuffling from the back of the motor home, before one of the pop star’s backup dancer tigers appeared. The rabbit looked on, curious.

“Dmitri came over from Russia ten years ago with his parents, his brother and sisters. They immigrated to Zootopia to give their children a chance to pursue their dreams. He and his brother and sisters are now my backup dancers. And he is my mate.”

Silence descended. A gazelle, mated to a tiger? It was unheard of.

“The story of how that happened is one for another time, but what I want to say, is we are not so different. I am sure you know this.”

The bunny nodded. “I thought I understood that. I didn’t even know I was so biased and prejudiced, until that mistake. I thought myself above it.”

“You should never think yourself above anything. Every mammal is capable of both the most heinous crimes and the most gracious altruism. What matters is what we choose to act on. If I chose to flaunt my wealth instead of giving it away, what would that say about me as a mammal?”

Judy nodded. The pop star almost never spoke of her wealth, and when she did, it was as a tool to help others.

“I think I understand, Isabella. But, I was only able to solve the Night Howlers case with Nick’s help thanks to some new information. I qui…almost quit the force because of that conference. Because of my mistake.” The story that she’d been undercover was the one that was given to the press.

“But you still corrected your mistake and sought forgiveness the first chance you got, Carrots.”

Gazelle looked at the fox with a curious expression. “Nickname. Long story.”

A knock came from the door.
“Half hour to show time, ma’am!”

The gazelle sighed. “As much as I hate to cut this short, I need to finish getting ready. I didn’t actually mean for this to become a psychologist session.”

The fox and rabbit chuckled at that.

“I would love to continue our conversation at a later time though, if you would like?”

The rabbit’s ears shot up to full height. “Of course, Isabella! I would love to!”

“Excellent! I am on the road lots. Do you have a card or something though? I can get in contact with you.”

“Uhhhh…no, actually. All of my cards are in my uniform…at the precinct.” The rabbit’s ears dropped again.

“No matter.” The gazelle got up and went to the kitchen area and rummaged around for a moment, producing a pen and paper. Walking back over to the two officers, she passed Judy the pen and paper.

“Here. Write your number down. I’ll get in touch with you next time I’m in town and we’ll do coffee or something, OK?”

The rabbit nodded and scribbled her cell phone number and her name on the paper. “I will. Thanks, Isabella!”

The three stood up, with two of them ready to make their leave. Before they did, the gazelle opened her arms for a quick hug, which Judy gladly reciprocated. Shaking paws with the fox, the singer bid them goodbye.

At the door, Adrian was waiting for them. Gesturing for them to follow him once again, he lead them back to the park.

“We have a spot all set aside for you, stage front.”

You could have pushed the rabbit doe over with a feather if you wanted to.

The concert itself was very enjoyable. The pop singer had opened with her smash hit Try Everything, before moving on to a mix of old favourites and new pieces from her latest album – and some that weren’t on an album yet.

Judy was over the moon, belting out the lyrics to her favourite songs all the way to the train station, despite the crush of bodies as all the mammals left the concert and dispersed to their various night haunts. Nick’s stop was just two stations away from her own, so they boarded the train together, and found a seat to settle down in. The little rabbit couldn’t sit still, foot tapping the air to the beat, and the rest of her bouncing on her butt to the tune in her head.

The fox chuckled. He loved seeing Judy this happy. It gave him an uncontrollable smile just knowing the rabbit was in a fantastic mood. For twenty minutes, the two sat together, Judy gushing about meeting Gazelle, and the concert in general, Nick just enjoying listening to her voice.

The time finally came when they had to part ways, Judy exiting the train with a wave and a “See you tomorrow, Slick.”
The two mammals made their way to their respective homes; Nick to his mother’s apartment, Judy to her reclaimed shoebox.

It was hours before either one of them fell asleep. But when they did, their dreams were oddly populated only by an energetic gray bunny and a sly red fox. But neither of them would tell the other that. Or just what the dream involved.

Damian Hornby rubbed his temples. Another simulation a failure. This would not do.

It had been a month since the last Night Savage test, and things had not been favourable. There had been little progress, and the longhorn was frustrated. He needed answers. The Elders were growing increasingly agitated at his lack of progress.

What good is it knowing this stuff if I can’t use it for the greater good?

The large mammal made an adjustment to his formula and tried again. Maybe this time it would be different.

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Chapter End Notes

Thus ends the portion of this story that coincides with the movie. We are entering uncharted waters now! This wasn't my favourite chapter to write, and I'm still not entirely pleased with it, but writers are their own worst critics, ya know?

Two people picked up the Shrek reference in the last chapter. Can you find the pop culture reference in this chapter?

Coming up on February 9: *censored*! I really should change the name of the chapter because "*censored again*" is a huge spoiler. But I don't have any better names for it, so *censored a third time* is the name of the chapter.

Wait. Why is the chapter name being censored? Oh right. Spoilers. So I guess you guys will just have to wait until February 9th to get the chapter name!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Did your cat eat a package of Oreos? Leave a comment!
In an apartment on the outskirts of the city centre in Savannah Central, one gray mammal's biological clock woke her up at precisely 6:00 AM. Years of helping on the farm back home had conditioned Judy Hopps to rise at the same time every day without the need for an infernal screeching monstrosity known as an alarm.

Today was different though. Today she was not waking up in her own bed in her own apartment. Today, she was waking up on the couch in an apartment belonging to one red fox, Nicholas Wilde. Like the last 10 nights in a row, she'd apparently fallen asleep here after movie night last night.

When Nick had landed the fully furnished flat 2 weeks ago, the two had decided to "christen" it by having pizza and a movie night that night. And the movie night tradition had continued since then, with the exception of the pizza. No one should eat pizza every day. Neither one of them could claim to be a good cook though. So far, the kitchen sat mostly unused, and most meals were bought from a deli down the street.

The rabbit stretched her legs, yawned and sat up, taking in her surroundings. Nick was in the bathroom taking a shower. Or at least she assumed so, given the sounds of the shower from down the hall. She'd been surprised how diligent Nick had been at waking up early, even for the occasional late day shift that they had. Personally, Judy wasn't looking forward to the overnight stints that all officers were required to rotate through regularly, but she knew Nick wouldn’t mind.

Light was just beginning to creep over the horizon, being fairly late in the year, so Judy reached over and turned on the reading lamp, flooding the room with light, before moving to the kitchen. Being sized for a fox, Judy had to hop up on the counter to grab bowls for herself and Nick. She filled hers with cereal and milk and returned to the couch, just as Nick exited the bathroom in his usual Pawaiian shirt and slacks, though he wasn’t wearing a tie.

"Good morning, Carrots!"
The rabbit in question made herself comfortable. "'morning, Slick. Sleep well?" She asked, spooning a mouthful of the one cereal Nick had bought that wasn't loaded down with sugar frosting and artificial flavours. Oat paws. Not the greatest stuff for rabbits, but not the worst either.

"Absolutely. Though I could have done without the dream that I was in a duel with Luke Pawwalker," the fox said as he filled his bowl with Fruit Paws and joined her on the couch.

The rabbit shook her head. They'd been on a Star Wars marathon lately, and had managed to get through 6 of the 8 movies. Today they would try to finish the series. They had pulled the 4-midnight shift today and so had about 10 hours to kill before duty time.

They chatted while they ate their breakfasts, Judy missing the pancakes her mom and her kitchen crew would cook up on Sunday mornings like this one. Nick of course latched on to this and asked if they made blueberry pancakes. Or blueberry syrup. Or both maybe?

The rabbit had to laugh at the fox's blueberry obsession. "You'll find that most rabbits don't actually care for syrup. But yes, we make syrup to sell at the stand."

Nick looked at her as though she'd just ate a canary. "Rabbits...don't care for syrup? That's... That's horrible! A travesty to all mammal kind! Blasphemy of the worst order!"

That drew another laugh from the doe, just barely avoiding choking on the cereal she'd just put in her mouth.

"Nick!"

The fox grinned as he set aside his bowl for a moment and fired up Pawflix. After an ad for Meowana and a movie about a weird looking green monster, Return of the Jedi was playing. The two mammals settled in for the last couple movies of the series.

Several hours later, in another part of Savannah Central

Damian Hornby smiled. The new lab equipment was making things so much easier, and the warehouse they'd been provided by another cell was perfect. No more sneaking in and out of his house. That had been risky, and they'd almost been caught several times, by a nosey ram in a faded blue button-up shirt in the last week. The ram hadn't been seen since, so the bull suspected he'd just been a visitor of one of the other families on the block.

Today would be the third mammal test of the Night Savage formula. His simulations had shown a marked increase in the success probability after altering several key components of one of the active ingredients in his formula.

The new synthesizers allowed the formula to be created much faster than the old method which required extracting the ingredients from the Nighthowler flowers or buying them on the black market.

The test subjects in question today, a brown bear and a deer, separated from each other and from the bull's group by Plexiglas walls as usual, stared back at him. On his side of the barrier, Doug and Felicity stood in front of the equipment, while two other rams, Woolter and Jesse, hung out in the background, ready for the cleanup.

There could be no margin for error this time. The elders were already starting to doubt the viability of the project. The longhorn bull took a deep breath and let it out.
"Let's do this."

Doug and Felicity nodded. Without a word, the mustang started the inflow of the formula. The light hissing sound of the liquid being forced through the spray nozzles was barely audible through the partitions. Unlike previous versions of the formula that were extracted from the Nighthowler flower, the synthesis process eliminated the telltale purple colouring. The new version looked just like water.

The bear was the first to be affected, once the vapour had permeated the chambers. There had been a slight elevation in the heart rate of the deer, likely due to an adrenalin spike or general nervousness, but nothing like previous tests. The vitals of the bear on the other hoof, spiked dramatically, and he fell to his side and began grunting and writhing, as if in agony. And maybe he was, but Damian didn't care. The bear was just filth after all.

It took a while, but the bear's vitals eventually levelled off, but any shred of higher brain function was completely gone, reducing the creature to a roaring, slobbering, and pacing savage. The deer was nervous and begging to be let go, but still coherent. The longhorn bull almost felt bad for the next part of the test.

"Open the barrier. Let's see what happens when prey is introduced to the filth's environment."

With a nod, Doug worked a crank, raising the Plexiglas barrier between the two captive animals. The bear continued pacing for a second, it's attention on it's captors, before it paused, sniffed, and turned towards the terrified deer, the cold, emotionless eyes locking on the newly provided meal.

The deer froze in the gaze of the savage predator. Tried to sift through her brain for something, ANYTHING, from her history classes that might tell her what her ancestors might have done to fight off a bear. Nothing. She hadn't even taken any martial arts or fighting classes before.

The deer doe whimpered as the bear drew closer, before lashing out with her hooves, trying to knock the bear back. She managed to land one lucky blow that made the bear back away momentarily, but after a second, it simply drew back it's forepaw and swiped at her. The deer danced out of the way, but there was little room to move.

Without the benefit of the knowledge the bear's ancestors would impart on their young, the bear's attempts to attack the deer were clumsy at best, but eventually, he scored a lucky hit, his claws catching a glancing blow across the deer's midsection, fabric parting and three bright red lines appearing. A few more failed attempts later, and another blow was struck, this time, a deep gash appearing across the stomach. A portion of the deer's shirt fluttered away.

The deer screamed and flailed, desperate to avoid the savage bear's paws, but it was all for naught, as the bear reared up, and its next blow connected with her temple. Her head slammed into the wall next to her, and her vision went blurry. She felt indescribable pain but could do nothing but scream as the bear tore into her, and soon, she knew no more.

Damian and his compatriots observed the scene with disgust as the bear dug into what would be his last meal. There was a spark of regret for the fate of the deer doe, but it was quickly assuaged by the knowledge that this deer's sacrifice would be for the greater good. The filth should not be allowed to walk this earth.

Eventually, the bear calmed down and stepped away from the bloody mess that had been the deer, cleaned himself, and laid down in a corner, falling asleep. A tranquilizer later, and the bear was guaranteed to sleep long enough to dispose of him in the canals.

Cleaning up the deer was something only a few could do without adding a mess of their own. While
the others were cleaning, the Texas longhorn bull produced a phone and dialed a number. It took two rings before anyone picked up, in this case, the first elder – the deer.

"Yes, what can I do for you?"

"It is done. The new formula was a success. Subject A resisted the drug as expected, and subject B was fully affected." It was necessary to speak in code, in case anyone was listening in.

There was a brief silence as this was processed.

"Has compensation been made?"

"Subject A decided against compensation after speaking with subject B. We have yet to compensate subject B though."

The bull could imagine the deer on the other end nodding.

"See that it is done. We may have to fast track that compensation. Word on the street is that there are other parties interested in what you are developing."

Hmmm. So, someone was on to them. It could be a rival group, Mr. Big's agents, or the ZPD. They needed to move out of here.

"Very well, sir, it will be done. For purity."

"Purity we shall have." The line went dead.

Damian rejoined the group, who had just finished bagging the deer, and were now working on the bear.

"We need to clear out. This location may be compromised."

Ever the emotionless mammal, Doug simply nodded. Felicity on the other hoof looked up.

"Compromised? By whom?"

"Unknown at this point, and it doesn't matter. We will move all of the equipment to the Sahara Square warehouse tonight. Woolter, Doug, and Jesse can do that while we take the garbage out," the bull said, gesturing to the trash bags the two test subjects were in. The tranquilizer the bear was under would stay effective long enough for them to get him to the rainforest waterways and dump him in, but not much longer.

The mammals set to work dismantling the lab and test equipment, securing it in the back of a nondescript delivery van. The test subjects were simply dumped in the back of a pickup truck. It took a few hours to clean everything up, and they had to find some bleach for the floor, but eventually the deed was done, and the five mammals climbed into the vehicles, heading in separate directions, leaving behind no evidence of the experiments performed in that building.

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Eric Wolford had been undercover many times, sometimes for months on end. Those days had been hard on his wife and kids, seeing only fleeting glimpses of him before he crashed back into their lives, not knowing when his next undercover assignment would pop up. The pay was good, often garnering him the wages of a ZPD officer in addition to those of any business or corporation he happened to be infiltrating, if he was posing as an employee.

This time though, he was not infiltrating any business or mob organization. The new group on the
streets was some sort of drug operation, from what he could tell. One of his C.I.s over on the docks had unloaded a large shipment of lab equipment, and when the owner had come to pick it up, he'd paid the fees in cash, with a stipend to shut some traps. It didn't shut all of them, though.

He'd managed to trace the lab equipment to a warehouse not far from the Savannah Central docks themselves, near the border with the Canal District. And it was this warehouse that he was currently staking out, parked across the street and a half block away in a relatively nondescript car. He'd seen five mammals go in, but that had been hours ago. He hadn't been able to hear anything inside, and the chemicals he could smell coming from the building he couldn't identify.

He was about to give up for the night when two vehicles pulled out of the warehouse's lot, a pickup made for medium large mammals, and a delivery van made for medium mammals, both going in opposite directions. Making a snap decision, he decided to follow the delivery van that was now headed his way.

Starting the car, he flipped a U-turn that probably would have had his wife griping at him had she been in the car with him. Good thing she wasn't. Keeping the lights off and allowing his night vision to do the job, he maneuvered the car into a following position about a block behind the van. The black paint would help the car blend in to the night.

"OK, we have two vehicles that left the warehouse heading in opposite directions, a grey medium-large pickup truck and a medium white delivery van, Zootopia license plate Zulu Foxtrot Juliet nineteen sixty-five. I'm following that one right now, east on 26th avenue."

The wolf clicked off the dictation recorder. It was something he'd picked up a few months ago, after seeing how effective his former partner's carrot pen was. The wolf smiled. Judy may have been one of the newest officers on the force, and by far the smallest, but she more than made up for both shortcomings with her willpower and resourcefulness. And her physical strength. He'd seen her take down suspects hundreds of times her own weight, barely breaking a sweat.

*Bogo would have his hooves full with her go-getter attitude and Wilde's snark.*

The delivery van ahead of him was making its way through Savannah Central, still heading east. The wolf noted that they were taking backroads and alleys, and avoiding the main thoroughfares. The avenue they were currently on was a little-known route that skirted around the downtown area, through some run-down neighborhoods, and into Sahara Square, and that's exactly where they seemed to be going.

As they past the border between districts, the jumbled together buildings of Savannah Central gave way to the stifling atmosphere and relative openness of Sahara Square. Whereas Savannah Central was a tight cluster of buildings with a few open parks and grasslands, Sahara Square was quite the opposite, with large barren areas and pockets of houses and buildings scattered around.

On the open road, the wolf allowed a little more space in between the vehicles. The truck could not drive off into the desert, after all. It would just get stuck.

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**Meanwhile**

"I think we have a tail." Jesse was at the wheel, staring at something in the driver's side mirror. Rams didn't have very good night vision, but he could have sworn he saw...there. A glint of the streetlights off of a painted surface. Whoever or whatever was back there was in a very dark painted vehicle and they were running with the lights off.
Trying not to be noticed.

Doug, sitting on the opposite side of the vehicle, looked in his mirror. After a moment, he nodded. "Somebody's definitely back there."

The ram at the wheel thought quickly. There was a subdivision up ahead, a decent sized one. He would turn off there and see if the car followed.

---

Wolford frowned as the delivery van slowed, then turned off the road, heading in the direction of Kalahari Heights. A rather old neighborhood, the Heights were only really known for that, and not much else. Crime was higher, as the ZPD didn't have much presence out here. Patrols weren't as frequent as they were elsewhere in the city, and efforts to revitalize the area had been met with resistance, either from residents fearing gentrification or from city hall not wanting to dump funds into an area of little economic importance.

The wolf turned to follow the van, not using his signal light and avoiding his brakes. The less light, the better. The van kept going down the road, passing the Height's run-down welcome sign before entering the populated area and turning right. Wolford imitated this, always keeping about block of following distance. Another turn later, and the large canid frowned. The road they were now on didn't lead anywhere useful. Ahead of him, the van made another turn, back in the direction they'd been heading originally.

Wolford knew what this meant. They were looking for tails. And he was a tail.

*Shit!*

The wolf elected to continue straight, rather than follow the van when it made its next turn. He would try to pick up the tail again. *How many ways to get out of this subdivision were there?* Pulling over, the wolf consulted his GPS.

There were three routes out of here. The main route they had come in on, and two country roads heading north and south respectively.

*Which way would they go?*

---

The car behind them was definitely a tail, and he was good at it. Jesse had made several random turns and the car behind them was still following. Doug knew it too.

"OK, park at the old mini mart up here and stay there. Let's take care of this guy. Cover our tracks."

The ram driving nodded at the other and pulled into the parking lot, backing up to the door to make it look like he was making a delivery. Doug jumped out, brandishing a silenced pistol. It would not do for the residents of the area to call the cops because they heard gunshots. Night howlers were also out, since reports of a savage animal would bring too much heat too soon.

Doug moved swiftly and as silently as his hooves would allow, hiding in an alleyway, watching for the car. The car had made a wrong turn, but the only way out of the area would be through the intersection he was now watching, regardless of which of the three roads he decided to take.

The ram's patience was rewarded. The car came along a short time later, still with it's lights off. Watching the driver, a large canid of some sort, he could see that they spotted the van and had their eye on it. The car continued onward, but Doug's vantage point allowed him to see it turn down a side street a block away.
Wolford hadn't expected the van to stop at the same intersection he was going to scout from, so he had to come up with a new plan. Continuing onward, he turned on to a side street and parked the car. He debated calling for backup, and decided he would check things out first. If they were making a delivery to that mini mart, he needed to see what was going in.

Parking the car, he grabbed his dictation recorder and binoculars. He would watch them from afar, and see where things went.

"The van stopped in front of the Jerry's Mini Mart here in Kalahari Heights. I'm moving to investigate."

The wolf got out of the car and walked back the way he had come, not wanting to get too far from his vehicle, lest he need to get back to it to follow the van again.

Standing in a darkened area, he silently observed. It appeared that two rams, whom he'd seen entering the warehouse hours earlier, were conversing about something, but he couldn't tell what. He was about to move in closer when something else grabbed his attention.

Two tired ZPD officers were looking forward to the end of their shifts and a chance to return home when they turned on to the last segment of their patrol route. Even now, nearing midnight, the fox and the bunny had the air conditioner running on full blast, the temperature of the climate controlled district way too hot for either of their liking.

"Ugh. Now here's a place I wouldn't mind forgetting," the rabbit at the wheel commented as they rolled into the run-down neighbourhood.

Judy had only been to Kalahari Heights once before, on a domestic dispute call a week prior. A caracal couple had been fighting over the husband's alcohol problem and had called the police. When they had gotten there, the wife had tied them up with her long-winded life story, something neither officer cared to remember, and in Judy's case, wished she could bleach from her mind.

"I don't blame you, Carrots. The Heights are not exactly my favourite part of Sahara Square either."

"I haven't seen much of the district," the rabbit admitted, partly wishing she had spent more time exploring the incredible city.

The fox beside her shook his head. "Besides the Grand Palm Hotel, the Mojave Strip, the Mystic Springs, the docks, and the airport, there isn't much to see. Mostly just wide-open desert. That is unless you're one of the alien kooks who thinks there's a UFO stored at the airport."

The bunny laughed. "Mammals actually believe that?"

The grinning fox nodded. "There's a whole lineup of shops over on route 51 that cater to that sort of thing. Toy aliens, flying saucers, conspiracy theorist books, movies, the works."

The bunny thought a moment, making one final turn in their loop. Several blocks ahead of them, a delivery van pulled out of a parking lot and headed out of the area. "One of my litter brothers is in to that sort of thing. He watched a TV show for years that was about aliens. The Z-Files I think? Anyway, he was always dreaming up ways to call down aliens or whatever."

Nick cocked his head. "What's he up to now?"

"Still at home. He's convinced that college and university is the government's way of indoctrinating
us. He just about jumped out of his skin when he found out I was going to the Bunnyburrow college for my degree in criminal justice. He works at my parent's vegetable stand."

Nick was about to say something more when he spotted something. His superior night vision was an asset to the duo on these night patrols, and even he almost missed it.

"Hold up a second, Carrots. Go back."

"What? About the college?"

"No, I mean back up. I saw something."

The bunny put the cruiser into reverse, and carefully backed up, until Nick motioned for her to stop. The fox squinted out the window.

"What is it?"

The fox turned to look at her. "I'm not sure." He flipped on the passenger side searchlight and shone it down the alley. Partway down, they could see the dark shape of a mammal lying on the ground, his back to them.

"Is that a…body?" Judy asked, with no small amount of nervousness in her voice. She'd never had a body on any of her patrols, only seen photos in the academy.

Nick's voice had lost all trace of the happy, joking demeanor of just moments before. "Looks like it," he said, checking his equipment belt and tranquilizer. Judy did the same, as she secured the cruiser and psyched herself up for what she hoped wasn't her first dead body.

Climbing out of the cruiser, the two approached the figure lying on the ground. The alley was dark, with garbage everywhere and the smell of rotting food and urine from various species. For Judy, it was almost unbearable. She could only imagine how Nick was taking it, knowing he had an even more sensitive nose.

"Hello? Excuse me, are you OK?" Judy called out, hoping against all hope that the mammal was just passed out from drugs or alcohol.

"Gun." The fox had spotted the black pistol lying on the ground a few feet from the body. Judy glanced at him, then to the pistol. She quickly moved towards it, kicking it away, before turning back to the mammal. What she saw froze her for only a second, before recognition sank in and she fell to her knees.

Nick saw it too. "Dispatch, Officer Wilde here. We need assistance and the coroner at the alley near the corner of Kathu Street and Kuruman Drive. Shooting victim."

"Officer Wilde, dispatch, acknowledged. I'll get units headed your way. Don't disturb the body, the coroner's an ass about that. We'll have them ID the body."

Nick holstered his weapon and looked again at the scene before him.

"Dispatch, that won't be necessary."

The fox took a deep breath before continuing, moving towards Judy at the same time.

"It's Officer Eric Wolford."

Nick clicked off the radio and looked over at his partner. His friend. The doe he loved.
He had never seen a more broken expression on the beautiful rabbit's face.

The fox walked over to the rabbit, knelt down, and gathered her into his arms. The reaction was almost immediate. The gray doe, usually so brave and so full of positive energy, wrapped her arms around her partner, burying her face in Nick's shoulder. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes. Normally, Nick would make a joke about emotional bunnies, but that was the furthest thing from his mind right now.

Just 20 minutes later, police lights flashed in a seizure-inducing combination of red, white and blue. No less than 5 units had responded to the scene, along with the forensics units and the coroner's office. Residents had piled out of their homes to see what all the fuss was about, only to be turned away by lines of police tape and determined, even angry looking mammals in blue.

Meanwhile, the coroner's staff were working on the body, and the forensics teams were photographing everything, collecting anything they could, and scouring the ground, walls, dumpsters, and everything in between with flashlights, UV lights, and anything else at their disposal. Everyone had a job to do, and everyone was determined to get it done, for their fallen comrade.

Everyone except two small officers. Two small officers that were locked in an embrace none dared separate. Nick had turned so that Judy was facing away from the grisly scene. Judy had not moved an inch, not said a word, and had barely blinked in that 20 minutes. Her ears were laid flat against her back, and Nick stroked them soothingly with one paw, trying to comfort the doe.

"Wilde."

A voice called to the red fox. Chief Bogo. He looked up and back at the Cape buffalo.

"Sir?" This was not the time for their usual back and forth jousting.

The larger mammal regarded the smaller one for a moment before he spoke again.

"What happened?"

The fox shifted and thought for a moment. "Nothing more than you would find on the cruiser's camera, sir. We were nearing the end of our patrol, I spotted something in the alley here and we investigated, found Eric's body. I called it in. And here we are."

"I see. And Hopps?"

Nick looked down at the catatonic bunny. "She…. hasn't been taking this well, chief. She hasn't moved since we found him."

The buffalo nodded, regarding the tiny mammals. He would never admit it to anyone, but he truly did care deeply for all of the officers under his command. He'd had his doubts about Judy, and had even tried to force her out in her first few days, but she had proven herself more than capable. More so, she inspired others to do better, as well. The whole team benefitted from her cheerfulness, optimism, and abilities. Even the infuriating fox, who himself was turning into a very capable officer.

"Wilde, this is her first dead body. These things hit hard, and they can change us for the worse if we aren't careful."

"I know, sir. I've seen it."

Bogo looked at the fox. There were a lot of unknowns with the fox's past. He seemed to be keeping
his head, though, which made him wonder if Nick had already experienced this before.

"Take her home, Wilde. Don't worry about turning in the cruiser either. Just go home. We'll need your statements as soon as possible, but I don't want to see either of you on duty for at least a week. Full pay. You can worry about this paperwork when you get back. And talk to the department counsellor and chaplain."

The fox nodded his understanding, as the chief moved away. After a moment, Bogo stopped.

"And Wilde? Take care of her."

Again, the fox nodded. No further words needed to be said.

The buffalo moved on to whatever he needed to do next, and the fox glanced down at the bunny clinging to him.

"Come on, fluff, let's get you home." He tried to pull the bunny away so they could walk to their cruiser, but her only response was to hold him tighter, making it clear she didn't want to let go.

_Hmmmm. How to handle this?_ The fox shifted her slightly, and looped one arm behind her back and the other under her legs, then lifted her up. Some part of his mind marvelled at how light she was. _How can something so small and light pack such a punch?_ Nick caught a few odd looks as he made his way to their cruiser and around to the passenger side.

With Judy in no fit state to drive, Nick had the responsibility, though he'd have preferred his first time driving the massive vehicle wasn't on such a dark day. It took a lot of persuasion on Nick's part and a lot of whimpering and physical protesting from the gray doe, but he eventually got her belted into the seat and moved around to the driver's side. Climbing in, he got himself situated, made the necessary adjustments, and started the vehicle.

Pulling away from the scene, he glanced at the bunny next to him, before returning his eyes to the road. Judy just stared straight ahead, still as a statue. Taking one paw off the wheel, he reached over to squeeze Judy's shoulder. Before he could, however, the bunny reached out and grabbed his paw, pulling it to her chest and wrapping her arms around it.

It was an awkward way to drive, and not exactly legal, but Nick managed. It wasn't long before he pulled up to his apartment complex, maneuvered the cruiser into his reserved stall and shut it down. Throughout the drive, Judy didn't say a word and never let go of Nick's paw, save for when he exited the vehicle and moved around to the passenger side.

Gathering her back into his arms, Nick shut and locked the car and walked into the building. He got a few odd glances and stares as he stood waiting for the elevator, but he ignored them. They weren't important.

As with the drive home, the ride up the elevator was silent, aside from a few small whimpers from the gray form in his arms. Glancing down, Nick could see that the tears that had been lurking in her eyes since they'd found Wolford were finally spilling down her cheeks.

The doors opened and Nick moved swiftly down the hallway. He set Judy down only for a moment, long enough to get his keys out of his pocket and unlock his door, before picking her back up and moving into the privacy of his apartment.

Moving through his apartment, Nick carried the rabbit doe into his bedroom. It was late, they were both tired. Normally, when Judy stayed over, she was happy enough on the couch. Insisted on it, actually. She was small enough for it, after all. But tonight, she would get his bed, and Nick would
take the couch. That was the right thing to do, he figured.

Nick set Judy down on the bed, and turned to the dresser, searching for his pajamas. Over the last couple weeks, Judy had moved a small stash of clothes and necessities to his apartment for when they had their movie nights and ended up too late to go home. It was more convenient anyways, especially if they had to work the next day.

Grabbing his needed items, he turned and saw Judy still sitting on the bed, staring vacantly off into space.

"Hey, fluff?" No response.

"Carrots?" Nothing.

"...Judy?" The doe blinked and looked up into his eyes. The sorrow in them clutched at his heart, and he wished he could sweep it all away, if only to see the optimistic, bubbly, happy bunny he'd fallen in love with. He reached out and touched her shoulder, reinforcing their eye contact.

"Carrots, go ahead and get ready for bed. You get the bedroom tonight. If you need anything, I'll be on the couch. OK?"

The doe nodded and resumed staring into space. The fox retreated to the hallway and closed the door behind him, deciding to check on her throughout the night. He changed in the bathroom and brushed his teeth, before heading out to the living room and seating himself on the couch. He heard Judy moving around a bit, and assumed she was doing whatever she needed to do to get ready for her own rest.

Sitting there on that couch, Nick reflected for a moment. He hadn't known Wolford very long, only met him briefly a couple times, and now he was gone. Judy on the other paw, had known him and been his partner for more than half a year, and she spoke very highly of him. Nick wasn't unfamiliar with death – he'd seen his fair share on the streets – but he'd never experienced the death of someone close to him. His dad had died before he was born, and his mom and Finnick, his only friend until Judy, were both alive and well.

The fox was jolted from his thoughts when a pajama-clad ball of gray fur climbed into his lap and snuggled into his chest, burying her nose in his neck fur, and shaking in silent sobs. Relaxing into the backrest, the fox wrapped his arms around the doe, holding her close and stroking her ears to try and calm her down.

After a long while, Judy's body relaxed, her breathing evening out, and the fox realized she had fallen asleep. Carefully, quietly, he lifted her up and carried her back to the bedroom. Laying the doe on the bed, he pulled the covers over her and tucked her in, before heading back out into the hallway. He left the hall light on in case she needed to use the bathroom or come get him for anything else, and settled in for a long night on the sofa, closing his eyes and letting sleep take him.

Chapter End Notes

Before anyone says that Nick and Judy are acting out of character here, there is a very good reason for that. DBs or dead bodies are among the most traumatizing firsts for
police officers and different individuals handle it differently.

Judy is experiencing a variant of emotion-induced catatonia. Essentially, her body is operating on autopilot, while her mind is stuck processing what's happened. Individuals experiencing this will be unresponsive for hours or days, possibly even weeks. In Judy's case, enough of her mind is responding (or otherwise rebooting) that she is able to seek out and recognize someone she trusts and indeed loves – thus a source of comfort.

As for Nick, he's accustomed to death, moreso than Judy is, but it still affects him… As much as he doesn't want people to see that it gets to him.

Eventually, most are desensitized to it, but the first one is always the worst.

Check out the artwork for this chapter by the fantastic TheWinterBunny!

No one caught the reference to the song "Day One" by Matthew West in the last chapter, though admittedly both the song and the reference were pretty obscure. More pop culture references in this chapter! Can you find them?

Coming up on February 23: Nightmares and Revelations!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Did your sister stuff a snowball down your jacket? Leave a comment!
Nightmares and Revelations

Chapter Summary

Our heroes start to deal with the emotional fallout of the previous night

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: Scar told me I could own Zootopia if I helped him take over Disney. But Simba kicked him off my balcony. So I still don't own Zootopia.

Special thanks to my friend and editor Daee17 for her help and inspiration in preparing this! She really is a special person.

If you like Harry Potter and Zootopia, check out Jakius Emrys' crossover fic "In Need of Love"!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A tired rabbit and fox were looking forward to the end of their shifts and a chance to return home when they turned onto the last part of their patrol route. Sahara Square was a hot, dry district, and running the air conditioner at full blast was the only way the two could stay comfortable in the stifling heat.

For some reason, though, something that the rabbit couldn't quite place, the atmosphere was different than it normally was. Their usual witty banter was gone, and Nick had refused to look at her all shift.

"Nick, is something wrong?"

The fox didn't answer, didn't make a noise, and didn't even glance her way.

The feeling of unease grew. Something wasn't right here.

Kalahari Heights. The last subdivision of the day. Judy kept a watchful eye on the side streets and alleys, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

The growing feeling of something not being right was stifling now.

"It's all changed, you know."

The rabbit blinked and looked over at Nick. Those were the first words the fox had said to her all day.

"Ever since the missing mammal case and that press conference. It's all changed."

Judy frowned. His tone sounded almost accusatory, and he still refused to look at her.
"Nick, what are you talking about? We solved that."

Nick turned to skewer her with a glare. "Did we? We found 15 savage predators. 15 predators that are still in the mental ward in the hospital, along with all the others that have gone mad since then."

"What? Nick, you know that's not—"

"Turn here," the red fox interrupted her.

"W-What?"

"Turn here, there's something you need to see."

Judy dutifully turned the large cruiser onto the street he indicated.

"Pull over."

Not sure where he was going with this, the rabbit pulled off to the side of the road and parked the cruiser. The fox unbuckled his belt and opened the door, exiting the cruiser before Judy had the chance to say anything. Shrugging, she followed suit, making sure to lock the vehicle behind her.

Nick lead her to a small, dark alleyway a little way down the street. He stopped at the mouth, and gestured into the darkness.

Giving the fox a confused look, she moved up beside him, and glanced down the alley. The darkness made it difficult to discern much of anything with her poor night vision, but she could just make out a shape. She pulled out her flashlight, turned it on, and aimed it at the shape.

Lying on the ground about halfway down, between themselves and the alley's dead end, was a mammal.

"Is that a…body?" This would be her first, if that was the case.

"See for yourself."

It was with some trepidation that the rabbit moved towards the prone form. She tried calling out to the mammal, but didn't get any response. A cold fear broke out, and she could feel her heart pounding. Rounding to stand in front of the prone form, she finally got a look at the mammal's face, and froze in shock. There before her, Nick lay on the pavement, a neat round hole in his forehead.

"You did this to me."

Judy looked at the source of the voice. Beside her, Nick stared at the rabbit with a look of pure hatred.

"W-what do you mean? Nick, what's going on?"

"Your press conference. You killed me. Killed us. Doomed us predators to be hunted and slaughtered," the fox replied, pure malice lacing his words, as he gestured to the body.

"He's right. This never would have happened if you hadn't said what you did." Judy whirled at the sound of another voice, her gaze finding the visage of her partner, Eric Wolford.

"And now that Bellwether has enacted the predator cleansing laws, there isn't anywhere we are safe," the wolf continued.
Nick spoke up again. "That's right. Little hick rabbit from the sticks showed her true colours that day," he sneered, as the rabbit spun to face him.

The fox glanced down. "You going to shoot me, Hopps?"

*What?* The rabbit looked down, realizing she had a service weapon in her paw, aimed at Nick's chest. *But, I was never issued a gun. What's going on?!* She tried to lower the weapon, throw it away, anything to get rid of it, but her body wouldn't respond.

"Nick, I don't want to shoot you! I lo-"

"You what? Love me? You have a funny way of showing that. Besides, you think that makes a difference? You think I could ever love you after what you did? And pointing a gun at me? Just shoot me, Hopps. It'll be a mercy."

The fox lunged for her, grabbing her upper arm, causing her finger to twitch. The gun went off.

"NICK! NO!" The doe watched in shock and horror as the fox crumpled to the ground, and the world around her started to fade...

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Nick awoke to an anguished scream coming from the bedroom, a sound of incredible sorrow and loss, scrambling and tangling himself in the blanket before falling off the couch. His brain slowly kicked in and he remembered that he'd given his bedroom to Judy for the night and had taken the couch for himself.

Leaping to his feet, the red fox raced down the hallway, bursting into the bedroom. Judy was sitting bolt upright in the bed, breathing hard, eyes casting about frantically, panicked and unfocused. Eventually, the doe's terrified eyes locked on his as he made his way to the bed. He didn't even get the chance to sit down on the edge before the rabbit lunged at him, wrapping arms and legs around his neck and torso, burying her face in his neck fur, and burst into tears.

Deep, hard, gut wrenching cries tore from the bunny, and her tears soaked and matted his fur as she wailed. Nick wrapped his arms around her and held her tight, lightly scratching the back of her head as she let out all of the sorrow that was bottled up inside her tiny frame.

After almost 15 minutes, the doe had cried herself out, but when Nick moved to set her back down on the bed, her only response was a shake of the head and to tighten her arms and legs around him. Nick wracked his brain for anything he could remember from his research into rabbits online for anything that could help him comfort Judy. Other than holding her and stroking the back of her head and ears, nothing came to mind.

"Take a deep breath, Carrots. It's OK. You're OK."

The doe shook her head emphatically. "No, it's NOT OK, Nick! I did this! Eric's dead and it's my fault!"

That threw Nick for a loop. He was expecting something to do with Wolford's death but not this.

"Judy, what are you talking about? What happened?"

"It's my fault he was killed! If I hadn't screwed up the press conference, he wouldn't be dead!"

"Carrots, you're not making any sense! We don't even know who killed him, much less why!"
The rabbit didn't say anything, but if possible, just held onto Nick tighter.

A thought came to Nick. "You had a nightmare, didn't you?" There was only tenderness in his voice.

Still no words, but he felt the doe nod against his neck fur.

The fox sighed. He'd had nightmares every day for weeks after the first time he'd seen someone killed, so this was not surprising. What was surprising was her bringing up the press conference now and blaming herself before a case could even get formed.

Instead of saying anything, the fox took a moment to compose his thoughts, whilst continuing to calm the distraught doe down.

After a while, he reached over and turned on the bedside light, then lightly took Judy's paws and pulled them away, just enough that he could pull back from her and look into her bloodshot amethysts.

"What happened in the nightmare?"

The doe stared into the fox's eyes, finding only what she thought was compassion and understanding. Taking a shuddering breath, she closed her eyes and began to recount the dream.

"It was just like yesterday, Nick. You and I were on patrol, but you were mad at me about something. You wouldn't talk to me, wouldn't even look at me. When we got to the Heights, you had me stop the car because you wanted to show me something in that alley."

"But it wasn't Eric lying in the alley. It was you. Then you and Eric started accusing me of causing it when I screwed up the press conference. Of the things Bellwether did as mayor since then. You even mocked me because I lo—thought we could be friends. And then you grabbed my arms and I accidentally… accidentally shot you, Nick."

The fox took a moment to process this.

"It was just a dream, Judy. A bad one, but just a dream. You didn't kill anyone. None of this is your fault."

Nick took a deep breath and continued.

"You made a mistake, Judy. We all do that. No one is perfect. But you remember what Gazelle said? What counts is you tried to fix it. You ARE fixing it."

The doe broke eye contact, looking at the floor.

Nick regarded her a long while. He'd never seen her in this state before, and it honestly scared him. "There's something else isn't there?"

After a moment, Judy nodded, still not making eye contact.

"Is it about the press conference?"

Judy shook her head.

"The nightmare?"

There was a long pause before the doe nodded.
"Want to talk about it?"

The rabbit emphatically shook her head, a look of fear returning to her amethyst eyes.

"Judy, I can't help you if I don't know what's wrong. Is this about Wolford?"

A pause, and a shaken head. The fox thought back to her description of her nightmare. It wasn't about Wolford or the press conference, or any of the made-up stuff that happened in her dream as a result of that.

"Me?"

A long pause, and a nod.

"Judy, you know I've forgiven you for what you said that day, right? I forgave you even before you found me under that bridge."

Wide, amethyst eyes turned back to lock their gaze on Nick's emeralds for a moment, before Judy launched herself back into his arms and the tears started anew. Holding the emotional bunny, he tried to figure out what it was about him that Judy was so upset about. She knew he'd forgiven her, right? It had been almost 8 months since that day under the bridge, and, while he hadn't outright said the words "I forgive you", he'd made it clear with his actions and in the conversation they'd had in the hotel room they'd rented in the aftermath, since Judy didn't have her apartment, and Nick lived under a bridge.

So, there was something else. Something she didn't tell him that was somehow connected to the dream.

"Judy, you said I was accusing you of something. What was I accusing you of?"

The doe hiccuped.

"You were accusing me of killing all predators with the press conference. Said I doomed predators to slaughter."

*Hmmmm. So that was about predators in general. Must be something else.*

"You said I mocked you. What did I say?" The fox began scratching the back of the bunny's head, hoping to help calm her so they could get to the root of the problem together. Instead of calming the bunny, however, she cried harder.

"Judy...?" He pressed, wanting to know what was troubling her. Somehow, he knew this piece of information was crucial.

"You said you could never love me because of what I did. That I should just shoot you even though I'm in love with you. That it would be a mercy!"

*Ah, there we go, I...Wait, what?*

The fox stilled at the revelation, before his eyes drifted down to the sobbing bunny in his arms. Her eyes were closed tight, and he highly doubted she realized what she'd said in her emotional state.

*Judy loves me?*

The shocked fox's thoughts went blank for a few seconds. Then a feeling of hope, love, and happiness welled up inside Nick at the thought that maybe, just maybe, his hidden feelings might be
returned. He held Judy a little tighter, his heart singing.

"I'm in love with you." That's what she said! She said she was in love with you!

At a loss for words, and unsure how they would be taken in this emotionally charged state anyways, the fox continued to just hold and caress the bunny as the sobs turned into hiccups and sniffles. Both of his shoulders were equally wet from the bunny’s tears, but Nick didn't care. He would gladly take a wet shoulder.

A part of his mind couldn't help but think back on his relationship with Judy, trying to see if there were any signs, any indications he'd missed.

How had my emotional bunny hidden it from me?

He'd noticed she'd gotten more touchy-feely about a month before his graduation, but that was about it. She would cuddle into his arms when they watched movies on nights she visited the academy, instead of just sitting next to him, and hugs seemed to go on a little longer. He'd chalked it up to her being a bunny, and maybe the time of year. It was winter at the time, and most mammals experience a bit of a rise in certain urges at that point of the year.

Maybe you were wrong about that? What if she's been harboring feelings for you too all this time, but just like the dumb fox you are, she was scared of telling you?

He wanted it to be true. Gosh, he wanted this to be real. But he needed to know. Nick knew he had to act delicately, in case she clammed up or withdrew her statement.

"Judy?"

Slowly the doe raised her sad eyes to the fox's. Nick stared deep into her amethysts, searching.

"Is it true?" The hopefulness in his voice could not be missed. Please let it be true.

Confusion reigned on the bunny's face, before she gasped, eyes wide, the insides of her ears going pale in the dim light. After a moment, the rabbit almost visibly deflated before answering, in a voice so tiny he barely heard it.

"Yeah, it is."

Joy exploded in Nick's heart. It took everything he had to not squeeze the bunny even tighter. Still, he was a bit taken aback by the situation. In all Nick's dreams, fantasies, hopes, he'd never thought Judy would admit she loved him quite this way.

There were scenarios in his dreams and fantasies, where she announced it after an exhilarating chase, or after solving some huge case, or even watching a romcom on TV some night. Heck, he'd even cooked up a bet that she'd fall in love with him if he kissed her a hundred times. But never did he imagine it happening in the emotional turmoil following the death of a friend. And yet here they were, wrapped around each other on his bed, and Judy looked like she was about to go into a panic, breaking the hug and sitting back.

"I… I mean I… You know… If you don't—" She was silenced by a finger to her lips.

"Carrots…Judy… Why didn't you want to tell me?"

Tears welled up in Judy's eyes again as Nick moved his paw from her mouth to cup her cheek. He brought his other paw up to do the same, gently using the thumbs to wipe the tears from her face.
"Because I'm not a vixen! I'm just a bunny!"

Nick frowned. "That's supposed to make a difference?"

"Yes! Nick, you are already going to be judged because you're a predator. What do you think they are going to say if they knew a bunny was in love with you?"

Nick's expression softened. "I don't care. Let them say what they want. It doesn't matter."

The rabbit was taken aback. This wasn't the reaction she was expecting. She expected Nick to be at worst disgusted, and at best laughing at her. Hope began to seep into her soul, replacing the dread that had been there just moments before when she'd realized she'd blurted out her secret. She stared into Nick's eyes.

"I don't care that you're a rabbit, not a vixen. Don't you know the phrase 'Love is blind'? It's true. And I don't care, because I've fallen in love with you too."

More tears. "Damnit, get a hold of yourself, Judy! Mammal up! You're a cop," she thought.

"...why?"

Nick smiled and pulled the rabbit into another hug.

"How could I not, Judy? You saved me, and gave me a new lease on life."

Judy went quiet for a while, melting into Nick's arms, apparently processing. It had been a long night for both mammals, and this probably wasn't the best time for life-changing revelations and decisions.

"Come on, Carrots, we should get to sleep. Chief Buffalo Butt wants us back at the station tomorrow morning for debrief and to return the cruiser."

Judy nodded into his neck fur, but made no move to let him go, squirming in his lap to get herself more comfortable. After a while, she spoke up, her voice quiet and tired.

"Stay with me Nick. Please. Just stay here with me."

The fox nodded, wrapping his arms around the tired, scared, emotional doe, and lay back, the rabbit following until she was just lying on his chest. Rolling on his side, Nick curled his tail around Judy, and buried his nose between her ears. The two lay there like that for a while, before first Judy, then Nick surrendered to the exhaustion both felt. There would be no more nightmares tonight, only pleasant dreams of a rabbit and her fox.

Meanwhile in Kalahari Heights

12 residences down, 41 to go. Detective Shawn Dancing Rivers was tired. Normally he wouldn't be up at 3 AM, but when one of your comrades is gunned down, it's all paws on deck. The elk was normally assigned to Tundratown, but had been reassigned to Sahara Square thanks to a staffing shortage. The desert climate was way too hot for his tastes.

The tall ungulate knocked on the door of the rundown single story medium-large mammal home about a block from the crime scene. Hopefully this resident may have seen something useful.

The large door opened, and the elk found himself looking at a female camel.

"Good morning ma'am. You wouldn't happen to have-" The camel cut him off
"Do you have any idea what time it is?

The elk was taken aback. "Beg your pardon, ma'am?"

The camel skewered him with a deadly look. "Do you have any idea what TIME it is?"

"Er, yes ma'am." The elk checked his watch. "It's 3:13 AM."

"I ought to sue you for disturbing the peace." The camel slammed the door in his face.

"...You have a good night then ma'am," the detective said to the closed door. He turned and headed back to the street shaking his head, where his partner was just coming up the sidewalk from her part of the canvassing.

"Looks like you're havin' the same kinda luck I am." Detective Nolwazi Longtooth was a lioness and a member of the Sahara Square precinct ever since she joined the force. Having grown up in the district, an odd place for a lion, she had made it her personal mission to clean up the crime she'd seen every day on those streets. Though technically a rookie detective, she was more than competent enough for the job.

The elk looked down at his notepad.

"Well so far, I have 3 drunks, 4 that claim they didn't see a thing, two that offered to sell me something, two with no answer, this lady that threatened to sue me, and an old warthog that claimed it was aliens."

"I got the alien claim too, at least 4 times. Most of the rest didn't see or hear anything. I did get a couple in one house that said they saw a mammal in dark clothes leaving the alley a few minutes before the first police car showed up, and another that said he saw some sort of utility van leaving the area around the same time."

The elk shook his head. "That's not much to go on. Did they say what kind of mammal it was? How big? Anything beyond the dark clothes?"

The lioness shook her head. "Not much. Just that the mammal was fairly big around, compared to it's height. They couldn't even guess at the height, though."

"Well that narrows it down to every mammal that was ever overweight and a few that weren't," Shawn said, frowning at his notepad. "What about the utility van?"

Longtooth shrugged. "Standard medium-small mammal sized cube van. No markings that they could see and it was too far away for them to see a plate. They said it was parked over by the convenience store."

The elk sighed. They'd already submitted a request for a warrant for the store's security tapes, but those took a while to go through the legal system, and almost as long to actually process, assuming there was something actually useful on them. For all they knew, that utility van could have just been there to make a pit stop or check their map or something.

"Did you know Wolford?"

The question shook the elk from his thoughts. "I worked with him once when he was on an undercover op with the Big family over in Tundratown, maybe a year ago. He was a good guy. One of the few that actually liked working undercover."
"He was assigned a partner, though, right?"

"Yeah. Hopps. At least until she got assigned a new partner a couple weeks ago. He went undercover again after that."

"Did he say what about?"

The elk detective shook his head. "He only told Bogo that he'd gotten some info from his C.I.s that he wanted to chase down. He was supposed to check in tomorrow…Well, today, I guess… but that's obviously not happening."

Nolwazi went silent after that, pondering the possibilities. She knew it was far too early in the investigation to form theories or assumptions, but it would be logical for her to consider the possibility that his death may have had something to do with whatever lead he'd been following.

The two detectives made their way back to the crime scene, where the coroner was just finishing loading the fallen officer's body into the transport van. The somber mood was reflected on the coroner's face as the aging raccoon stepped back and closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his muzzle. He looked up as the two detectives approached, nodding in greeting.

"Anything you can tell us, Dr. Mamusson?" The elk's inquiry garnered a bit of a pause.

"I'm afraid at this point, not much more than you already know. A smaller-caliber bullet penetrated Officer Wolford's skull and lodged in there. Won't know more until we are able to do the autopsy."

The raccoon, elk, and lioness stared at the back of the van. This would be the first death of a ZPD officer that any one of them ever worked, and there could be no mistakes. Justice had to be served to whomever did this.

Sunlight invaded the bedroom of an apartment in Savannah Central, slowly creeping down the walls, and along the ceiling and furniture, gently caressing the eyelids of the sleeping doe. Nose twitching, the small mammal shifted, her left arm and paw reaching out and fumbling, searching for something that wasn't there. Not finding the soft warmth that had cocooned her throughout the night, the doe's eyelids parted, amethysts searching for answers. A brief moment of concern at not being in her apartment or on Nick's couch crossed her mind before she remembered the events of the night before.

As her mind fully engaged, she realized what it was she'd been unconsciously searching for: Nick was gone. Well, maybe not gone, but he wasn't in the bed. Her senses kicked in and she could hear him moving throughout the apartment, somewhere. Her nose picked up the aroma of pancakes, something her mother would always make a big production of on Sunday mornings back at the farm. There was also the slightly saltier scent that she had come to associate with cured turkey strips, apparently a favourite breakfast staple of her fox's.

Her fox. She found it hard to believe the revelations of last night. Obviously, it was something that they needed to talk more about, but the fact of the matter remained that she no longer needed to hide her feelings for the red furred vulpine.

The…other parts of last night had been cathartic, though. Of course, it still hurt that she'd lost a friend. Those scars never fully went away. While it wasn't the first death of someone close she'd experienced, it was the first time she'd ever seen a body, and to have it be someone she knew made it even worse.

Sighing, Judy stretched and got off the bed. She might as well face the day. Bogo expected them to
turn in their statement, along with the cruiser…but what then? She supposed she’d figure that part out when it came. Maybe Nick had a nice family comedy they could watch to take her mind off things.

Judy padded toward the kitchen, detouring to the bathroom to heed the call of nature and brush her teeth before resuming her journey.

The kitchen looked like a tornado had hit it. Flour, sugar, salt, baking powder, milk, and blueberries everywhere. The butter dish was upside down on a plate, and the rabbit could not for the life of her figure out how a circle of batter had gotten on the ceiling.

"Sweet cheese and crackers, what happened?!"

The fox in question whirled around, promptly knocking the bag of flour onto the floor. White powder exploded everywhere, sending both the fox and the doe into a coughing and sneezing fit.

After a few seconds the coughing and sneezing died down, and the two took stock of the disaster.

"Seriously, Nick! This place is a mess!"

Nick shrugged. "I just thought we could have a nice breakfast together."

The rabbit frowned. "Nick, you told me last week that you didn't know how to cook."

"I just followed the instructions. At least a few came out edible." He pointed to a pair of stacks of pancakes that had somehow escaped the disaster zone. With a deep sigh, and so not looking forward to the impending cleanup job she would undoubtedly be helping with, she grabbed one of the stacks and inspected it. It looked safe enough to eat.

She took the stack over to the coffee table, since Nick didn't have a dining room table and the breakfast bar was a part of the tornado's swath of destruction. It was a few minutes before Nick joined her, having taken the time to clean himself up a bit. They ate in silence for a few moments, with the only words spoken by Judy, to confirm that the pancakes were actually very good.

After a while, Judy set aside her stack and stared off into the distance. Nick knew she was thinking of something, but decided not to pry until she was ready. After a long while, the rabbit spoke up.

"Nick, last night… did you mean it? All of it?"

The fox had been expecting this. So much of last night was wrapped up in a maelstrom of emotions, one could not expect things that came out in the heat of the moment to be entirely true.

"Yes. All of it."

The gray furred rabbit turned to him with a curious, hopeful look.

"Why? How?"

The fox sighed. He hated letting his guard down, but he knew he could trust Judy.

"Carrots, you remember when I told you about my junior ranger scout meeting?" At the doe's nod of confirmation, the fox continued. "Do you remember who I said scraped together enough funds to buy that uniform?"

Judy thought for a moment. "Your mother?"

"Right. And who was missing from that story?"
The rabbit's eyes went wide. "Your father?"

Nick nodded. "The ranger scouts were just one nail in the coffin. My dad died before I was born. All through school I was made fun of for being the one kit who brought no one for the 'bring your dad to school' days, or when the other kits would talk about what their dad did, and made fun of me for not having one. A few even suggested that he killed himself to get away from me or mom."

The rabbit was horrified. How could kits be so cruel? She knew being bullied was not something unique or uncommon. It certainly was a controversial issue, with school boards stuck between the victim's parents and the bully's parents and forced to try and pacify both. Many saw bullying as kids being kids, and that there wasn't anything that could be done about it.

She'd made her own peace with the bully that had tormented her throughout her school years, and even considered him a friend now. She'd been by his bakery shop a few times on her trips home to Bunnyburrow while Nick was at the Academy, and she found him to be a genuinely likeable individual. Still though, she felt like Nick's experience had been far worse.

"Nick, didn't you have any friends that you could surround yourself with?"

The fox shrugged. "Just Finnick. We've been friends since I was in first grade. Anyway, so our hero fox grows up with no dad in a toxic school environment, with few friends, and when he finally finds something he wants to be and hopes he'll be accepted in, they stomp on him. What do you think happens?"

Judy was about to answer, when Nick did it for her.

"The hero fox eventually gives up on acceptance. Gives up on everything, really."

The doe reached over and placed her paw on his arm. Both stared at it for a moment, the memory of the skytram popping into both of their head.

This time, though, Nick didn't pull away.

"What happens next?"

The fox turned and looked her in the eyes. "It took some time, but someone came along and gave the fox hope for acceptance. A brave, smart, sly mammal with a huge heart. And when she made a mistake, that someone did her best to fix it, and change herself in the process. And instead of tearing the fox down, she built him back up. She gave him an opportunity to be a new mammal, and was his personal cheerleader. She fixed his relationship with his mom for him and showed him how to be more than what the world expected him to be."

Light tears were pricking Judy's eyes by now and she shoved Nick playfully, blushing.

"What about you?" The fox wanted to know.

Judy hesitated for a while before answering.

"I…I started to feel something for you when you stood up to Bogo for me. Back in the Rainforest district. It wasn't love…not then anyways… but something. And when you told me about the Ranger scouts, I realized we weren't so different."

The rabbit sighed and continued. "Even at the press conference, I thought you were different from everyone else. That there was no way you could go savage because you were somehow different. You know, the two and a half months we were apart, there wasn't a day that went by that I didn't
think of you. I wondered if you were OK, what you were doing. Every time we got a savage mammal call, I was scared it would be you. I even tried to find you a few times, but without a car, and since I couldn't do it while on-duty, I could only look for a short while before I had to go home."

"And I didn't expect you to forgive me under that bridge. I hoped you would, but even then, I knew how much I hurt you. And the museum. You refused to leave me. And you helped me get my dream back and stop Bellwether, and you stayed with me that whole time. And you took care of me when I was hurt by that stupid tusk. I think that night was the first time I felt something more for you. I just didn't realize it until…"

The rabbit stopped and looked down.

"Until what, Carrots?"

"…Until the night Eric drove me out to the Academy to see you."

Nick remembered that night. She'd shown up late, explained that she missed the train and that Wolford had given her a ride. He'd also noticed that that night, and every visit afterward, she'd seemed a lot more touchy-feely than normal.

"He said something that made me look at how I felt for you. Asked me what you were to me, mentioned how I seemed to get a little happier when someone asked or talked about you, and told me that even his wife didn't visit him as often as I visited you."

The doe fell silent after that. Nick took the time to process what she'd just told him. In a way he had Wolford to thank for helping Judy out with her feelings but now he would never get the chance. He wished he'd had the time to get to know the larger canid better.

"Are you OK, Carrots? About Wolford?"

The bunny closed her eyes. "Yes. No. I don't know."

Nick stayed silent, waiting for her to continue.

Drawing a deep breath, Judy continued. "Death is something bunnies have to deal with early on. With the big families we have in the burrows, statistically, at least one of your siblings isn't going to make it to adulthood. Some are going to die to disease or accident, and unfortunately, even suicide. By the time I left for the academy, I'd already lost Jackie, one of my litter mates, my younger sister Samantha, and my older brother Charles."

"It's just… It's different when a mammal dies naturally than when one is murdered or takes their own life. I can't really explain it. Wolford was alive this time yesterday, and someone decided to steal that from him. From his wife and kits…cubs, I mean."

Judy was holding back sobs, so Nick put his arm around her and pulled her close.

"I think I understand, Carrots. I was on the streets for years. You see a lot of death out there, even in a city like this one. I've seen it. But you never really get used to it, you know? It's always painful, and especially so if you knew the mammal. And when one takes the life of another for no good reason, it's a whole different level of evil."

The doe nodded and sat quietly for a moment, basking in the comfort being close to Nick gave her.

The fox sat up and pulled Judy with him.
"We need to get going, Carrots. I promised Bogo we'd return the cruiser today and give our statements to the detectives on the case."

Judy nodded and headed back to the bedroom to change. That accomplished, she met Nick at the door, and the two headed downstairs to the building's lot. The mess in the kitchen would have to wait.

Chapter End Notes

YAY! They finally admitted it! It only took them about 7 months (between arresting Bellwether at the Museum and now) to do so!

No one, and I mean NO ONE picked up on the X-Files reference in this chapter! I thought it was pretty obvious, what with the "UFO stored at the airport", the shops on "route 51" with "Toy aliens, flying sauces, and conspiracy theorist books". And then I went flat out and called the TV show the Z-Files!

This time around, there is not one, but TWO references to FAN CULTURE embedded in here! That's right, somewhere in this chapter, there is a pair of references to two other pieces of the WildeHopps fandom! Can anyone find them?

Coming up on March 9: The Road to Recovery!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Did your pet turkey eat your dinner? Leave a comment!
Nick and Judy weren't usually ones to drive to the precinct. Neither of them had a car, so busses and subways were the method of choice most of the time. Every day, once each direction, enjoying a crush of mammals packed like sardines into a too-small tin can on wheels. Personal space? Forget about it. Mammals were just as likely to get groped as they were bumped, and no one could possibly do anything about it.

At least porcupines and other quilled animals were given their own compartment, though they were no less crowded. Still, that didn’t help when some unfortunate skunk who had not undergone gland removal surgery got their tail stepped on by another equally-unfortunate mammal.

Thus, driving to work was a luxury that the two small ZPD officers might have enjoyed on any other day. But any other day, they wouldn't be heading into the precinct to give their account on finding the body of a co-worker and friend the night before.

The ride was a fairly silent affair, with both mammals lost in their thoughts. Death was not an easy thing to come to terms with, and both mammals were dealing with it in their own way. All around them, mammals went about their lives, not a care in the world. A part of Judy wanted to be furious at them. How dare you just go about your day, when one of the mammals protecting you was killed by one of you?!

The larger part of her reminded her that it was BECAUSE of mammals like Wolford, that these same mammals could live their lives without fear of being robbed or gunned down at every corner. As a police officer, Judy knew she'd be the one that had to stand between the bad guy and the innocent. Her family had reminded her constantly throughout her time at the academy what a dangerous job it was.

Even with all the warnings though, she knew part only sunk in last night. She'd had her brushes with death during the Night Howler conspiracy – the rainforest district and the train car, for sure, and Bellwether HAD tried to kill her – but to see it actually happen… it had shaken the doe.

DISCLAIMER: I asked Ursula for help in getting the rights for Zootopia. She told me that as soon as she ruled Atlantica, she would help me out. But since Eric killed her, I still don't own Zootopia.

Special thanks to my friend and editor Daee17 for her help and inspiration in preparing this!
Judy glanced across the car at Nick and she studied him. His usual smirk was gone, and his eyes were scanning the road ahead, as he guided the massive vehicle to the precinct. As the doe watched him go through the motions, an unbidden thought occurred to her: What if, someday, he's hurt or killed? What if, someday, he doesn't come home?

Just as quickly, she decided that that wouldn't happen if she could prevent it.

Glancing ahead, the precinct one building was coming into view. The flags had been lowered to half-mast, and several blue-clad mammals stood in front, staring up at the normally high-flying banners. The atmosphere around the building was definitely different, and Judy almost felt as though a dark storm cloud was hovering over the building.

Nick pulled into the motor pool garage and turned off the engine. After a moment, the two unbuckled and headed to the elevators that would take them up to the main lobby. Still not a word was said, as they waited for the medium-small mammal elevator as they entered, or as the elevator rose.

The atmosphere in the precinct was sombre to say the least. There was none of Clawhauser's usual cheer. In fact, his donuts seemed to be untouched, stacked where he'd put them when he got to the precinct. He wasn't even expounding the latest intricacies of the newest Gazelle related app, video, or song. In fact, he seemed hyper-focused on dispatch duty and something on his computer screen.

Francine Pennington and McHorn stood off to one side, the latter even more stoic than usual, if that were possible. Delgato and Grizzoli had a little more slouch in their gait as they headed for the bullpen, and Higgins was busy shoving a camel in the direction of the holding cells, with less of the usual care that was taken with prisoners.

One large corner of the five-floor lobby was different though. Someone had set out a photo of Officer Eric Wolford and his brass nametag on an easel near the huge front windows, and all around were gifts and bouquets of flowers. Judy nudged Nick, and pointed to the memorial. The two made their way over.

There weren't any names on the gift flowers, but the sizes of the bouquets tended to indicate what mammals might have left them. Huge bouquets from elephants and rhinos, all the way down to single small flowers that may have been left by the mice in accounting and lab services. Orchids, carnations, roses, daffodils, tulips, lilies, all white. They covered the floor around Wolford's photo. Judy found it humbling that there were already so many tributes, far more than mammals that worked at precinct one.

A thought occurred to the rabbit.

"Nick, do you think we could- "

"-stop by Mr. Otterton's and pick up a bouquet? Absolutely." Nick finished her thought. Judy nodded, happy that he'd had the same thought. It seemed like the right thing to do to help honour and remember their fallen comrade and friend.

The bunny and fox turned and walked silently to Clawhauser's desk, ZNN's newsfeed on his monitor.

"Early this morning, a shooting occurred in Kalahari Heights," Fabienne Growley was saying. "While details are not being released, we are told that one ZPD officer lost his life, the first for an active member of the force in nearly 25 years. Mayor Peter Clawheed was on hand this morning to speak of the event."
The feed switched to a press conference that had obviously been recorded early.

"Our thoughts and prayers are with the family of this fallen officer, and all members of the Zootopia Police Department. And I want everyone to know that the ZPD has the full backing of my office to catch the monsters that did this."

Switching back to the anchor desk, Peter Moosebridge spoke up. "ZPD Commissioner Rick Pawnenberg could not be reached for comment."

The cheetah glanced up, and noticed the fox and the bunny, expression sullen.

"Oh. Hey, Judy… Nick…"

Judy could recall only one other time she'd seen the normally bubbly, happy outgoing cheetah so upset, and that was when he'd been assigned to records temporarily during the Night Howler conspiracy.

Without missing a beat, the little rabbit hopped up onto Clawhauser's desk, and opened her arms for a hug, a gesture the cheetah gladly reciprocated.

In times like this, everyone needed to pull together to help everyone else.

Judy pulled away from the hug after a moment, and jumped down to stand beside her fox.

"Thanks, Judy." There were tears in Clawhauser's eyes.

"Hey, Spots? Benny?"

The large cat looked down at the fox that had spoken.

"Hang in there, alright? We'll be OK."

The cheetah nodded, before turning back to his work. The two smaller mammals headed for the elevators that would take them up to the chief's office. The ride was silent, as was the trek along the balcony to the cape buffalo's office. Standing outside, the two could hear voices, before Judy knocked.

"Enter," came the curt voice of the large mammal.

The fox and the bunny pulled the door open and made their way inside. Two other mammals, an elk and a lioness, stood to one side of the chief's desk. Bogo himself was on the phone. The Cape buffalo gave the two tiny officers a "one moment" sign before turning his attention back to the phone. The fox and bunny took a seat on one of the oversized chairs in front of the chief's desk while they waited. Neither one would admit it in front of their superior, but they both felt the need to sit closer than normal to each other, to the point where they were almost touching thighs.

"No…Yes, Mr. Clawheed, I am well aware of that. No. Yes, we already have mammals on the case. Alright. Thank you, Mr. Mayor, I'll be sure to pass on your condolences. Good bye."

Bogo hung up the phone and focused his attention on the two small officers. "Hopps. Wilde."

Judy swallowed and spoke up. "Sir, we were told we needed to give our testimony of what happened last night?"

The elk spoke up. "That's why we're here. I'm detective Shawn Dancing Rivers, and this is Detective Nolwazi Longtooth. Precinct 3."
"Detective Rivers and Longtooth will be overseeing the investigation into Wolford's murder," Bogo said, his gaze on the two tiny officers before him. "They'll be the ones you'll be giving your testimony to."

"Before we get to that, do either of you want a union rep here?" The elk inquired, causing both officers to look at him in confusion. Union representatives were usually only needed for Internal Affairs cases, or cases of officer misconduct.

"It's just a formality, you don't need to have one if you don't want to," Rivers clarified, seeing their expression.

Nick and Judy glanced at each other, then, almost in tandem, answered no.

"Very well. Chief, would you like to take this to one of the interrogation rooms?"

The cape buffalo shook his head. "I don't think that's necessary."

The elk nodded, and produced a digital recorder. He turned it on and placed it on Bogo's desk. "Right. Let's get this over with."

The rest of their meeting with the two detectives and the chief went as smoothly as it possibly could, though it was by no means easy. By the time the two left the chief's office and headed in the direction of the front door, Nick was back to the serious tone he'd had at the crime scene, and Judy was near tears. They'd both been booked with sessions with the department counsellor the next day, something that the chief said was "non-negotiable".

They had barely gotten out of the precinct, when they were mobbed by a group of reporters that hadn't been there before.

"Officer Hopps! Can you comment on the shooting this morning?"

"Officer Wilde! How do you feel about the shooting of a fellow officer?"

"Was this shooting related to any of the violent protests lately?"

"Can you tell us what, if any, cases the officer involved was working on?"

"Do you have any suspects? Any leads?"

"Why hasn't the police chief made any public statements or appearances?"

The questions kept coming, and the flashbulbs kept popping. Nick glanced at the rabbit beside him, just in time to see the look of panic creep over her face. He gave her a quick gentle nudge, and when she glanced up at him he gave her a warm smile.

The panic in the rabbit doe's face cleared up, and she returned the gesture before facing the mob.

"I'm sorry. We can't comment on an active case. However, I'd like to ask that you RESPECT us officers of the ZPD, and not ambush us with questions on a day we lost a friend. Now if you will excuse us…"

You might have been able to hear a pin drop, in the silence that followed. Nick had to hold back a laugh. Not only had Judy shut down all lines of questioning, she'd also shamed the reporters in the same breath.
Unfortunately, reporters don't always take the hint, and many began bombarding the two with more questions. The duo's efforts to push their way through the mob of mammals blocking their way to the subway terminal in Zootopia Central Station were constantly in vain. Eventually, they ended up retreating back inside the precinct building. Standing on the other side of the closed doors, the two considered their options.

"Looks like the only way out is through the garage, unless we want chief Buffalo Butt on our tails for using one of the emergency exits."

The rabbit nodded her agreement, and began making her way through the building. The garage wasn't normally used as a foot exit, but in this case, they didn't have a choice.

Exiting the building once again, the two mammals walked up the driveway ramp and skirted around the precinct grounds, wary of the reporters that were still huddled at the front entrance. From there, they made a beeline for Zootopia Central Station, across the plaza from the precinct and city hall.

Getting onto the subway was as easy as swiping their transit pass, and heading for the correct platform. Both of the mammals lived along the Animalia line, but while Judy's stop was Banyan street, Nick was a little further down the line, near the Watering Hole station.

Standing on the platform, Judy shifted for a moment before speaking up.

"Nick… I don't… I don't think I can handle going home right now."

The fox cocked his head and looked at the rabbit inquisitively. "You want to go grab a bite to eat or something?"

The doe shook her head. "No… well, yes, but… I mean… I just don't want to go home. I can't handle being alone right now."

*I don't want you out of my sight. I don't want anything to happen to you.*

It took Nick a few seconds to click. "Carrots, you know you can stay over at my place any time you want. So, how about we swing by your apartment, grab anything you need, get some lunch, and head back to mine?"

Judy nodded, thankful he didn't seem to mind her essentially inviting herself over. For his part, Nick was wondering if he'd just been hustled. Not that he minded if he had been, in this case.

"Now arriving, Animalia line westbound. All mammals, please stand behind the yellow line."

A pressure wave of air, a wall of metal, and a screech of brakes later, the subway train came to a stop in front of them, and the two mammals boarded the almost empty car. It being mid morning, the rush was over, and the lunch crowd had yet to appear. For once, finding a seat during the day was easy. The two fit easily on a single spot meant for medium mammals, not taking notice of the stares that followed them, particularly when the rabbit doe leaned into the fox's arm in an attempt to get closer.

"Please stand clear of the doors. This train is now departing. Next stop, Elm Street."

The train pulled away, and the two sat there, each in their own thoughts. Judy broke the silence a few minutes in.

"I'm scared, Nick."

The fox shifted to look at her, an incredulous expression on his face.
"You? The bunny that became a big city cop, took out two corrupt mayors, and stopped a conspiracy dead in its tracks? Scared? That's impossible."

The bunny frowned and punched her companion's shoulder.

"This whole thing. It scares me."

"What? About the two of us?" Nick was rubbing his shoulder. Judy's punches tended to hurt. A lot.

Judy turned to Nick, an expression of confusion and an undercurrent of fear on her face.

"NO! Well, yes, I guess a little... But..." The doe hesitated. "I keep thinking about my nightmare last night."

Nick watched her, as she struggled to put her thoughts to words.

"It's just... Nick, you know we're in a dangerous line of work. What if...what if one day it IS you that's lying dead in some alley somewhere? I don't think I could handle that."

The fox nodded. "I guess it's a risk we have to take. You know that."

The bunny steeled herself, silently promising that, if the carrots were down, she'd sooner give up her own life than see Nick die. All her life, she'd dedicated herself to helping others and achieving her goal of becoming a police officer. She's still do that – it was her lifelong dream after all – but somehow, in the months she'd known him, the fox beside her had pulled up parallel to her career as the most important thing in her life. She pressed herself tighter into Nick's embrace, as though to reassure herself that yes, he was still here, and no, the dream didn't actually happen.

"Now approaching Elm Street station. Please remember to take all your personal belongings when leaving the train."

The bunny jolted and glared at the overhead speaker. How dare it interrupt her thoughts.

Nick was also lost in thought. It was something that had been in the back of his mind ever since they'd seen the makeshift memorial at the precinct. His mind had given him a flash of that same memorial, but with Judy's picture instead, her smiling face surrounded by flowers and mourners.

That's not going to happen if I have anything to say about it.

Unbeknownst to the other, each had made a pact to protect each other's lives with their own, even if it meant giving theirs up. What they did know is the comfort they felt and the need to be close to each other. The fox wrapped his arms around the small rabbit, pulling her close, feeling her mould herself to his side.

Glares and disgusted looks continued to be thrown their way, but the two mammals were oblivious to it all, even as the train came to a stop and opened it's doors to let the travelling public go about their day.

Near the other end of the train car, a deer sat reading a newspaper, or so it looked. If one was observant, one would notice the surreptitious glances at the fox and the rabbit. A feeling of nausea nearly overwhelmed Dade Walker as he observed the pair.

This was exactly the kind of atrocities this city had fallen to. Not only was the fox allowed to exist in civilized society, but he had corrupted a rabbit as well. Neither one could be allowed a place in the
Now that Damian Hornby’s cell had achieved success with the new formula, it was time to start planning to use it. Another cell was developing a variety of ways to achieve that end. Perhaps, though, they needed a little extra motivation.

They couldn’t go after the two directly at the moment. That would bring even more heat than the trash disposal last night. None of Damian’s mammals had been entirely sure how a ZPD cruiser had gotten to the area so quickly last night, but the result was that they’d had to leave before the body of the apparent wolf officer could have been dealt with.

The deer continued to watch the two ZPD officers until eventually they got off the train at the Banyan street station. Following at a safe distance, he observed the two as they went on their way. Eventually, he found himself outside the Grand Pangolin Arms apartment building. Not wanting to look like he’d been tailing them, he continued on past.

This presented a unique opportunity. If they could be taken care of in an accident, then perhaps they need not worry about heat after all.

A hole in the wall. That’s what Nick had always likened Judy’s apartment to. Ever since the first time he had visited it, he could barely comprehend how Judy had managed to live in such a small space. Now granted he hadn’t had a place of his own until recently – few landlords wanted a fox "entrepreneur" as a tenant – but having grown up in a modest apartment with his mother, he appreciated having a bit more personal space than this offered.

"Hey bunny cop, you hear the news lately?"

"Shut up! That guy was her partner!"

"You shut up!"

"No, you shut up!"

He also didn’t grow up with the Bucky and Pronk comedy show next door.

Standing in the doorway, he watched as Judy gathered some clothes into a small suitcase. Of course, this didn’t go unnoticed – or unheard, as the case may be – by the rabbit’s loudmouth neighbours.

"Hey, are you packing? You moving out again?"

"She hasn’t been around much at all the last few weeks, haven’t you noticed?"

"Yeah, that’s right! You got a new beau, bunny?"

"Maybe the cops just have her working overtime, and she’s packing some clothes to take to the shop!"

"Would you work extra hours for the rates they pay?"

"She would!"

The fox shook his head.

"Question, Carrots, why haven’t you run these guys in for disturbing the peace?"
The wall went quiet.

"And listening in on your life, that's gotta be some sort of invasion of privacy."

No answer from the wall.

The bunny paused for a moment, thinking.

"Honestly, I never really thought about it. When you grow up in a household with 275 siblings, things are loud, and private lives don't stay private, even if you want them to. You can hear what happens in the room next to you, and even if you don't, you sure found out about it the next day, whether you want to or not."

"Wait, what, are you saying we're like your brothers?"

"That's cool. So, can we tell your beau all your dirty secrets?"

"Wait, is he there with you?"

"No, that's that fox partner of hers."

"So? Weren't you the one wondering who the "Nick" she kept calling out for when—"

"OK, SHUT UP you two! Look, it's been a lousy day already, and YES, the wolf you heard about on the news was my partner. And my friend. And now he's gone. So, I'd appreciate if you toned down a bit."

Once again, silence on the other side of the wall, though this time it lasted longer, before one of them answered.

"I'm sorry, bunny."

"Me too."

Glancing over at Judy, Nick noticed immediately that she'd stopped packing, and her face had taken on a distressed look. Moving from the door to sit on the bed at her side, the fox gathered her up into his arms, pulling her onto his lap. The rabbit turned to bury her face in his chest, shoulders and back shaking, and after a moment, the fox felt a wetness and picked up on a salty scent as Judy's silent tears soaked through his shirt and matted his fur.

Nick knew rabbits were an emotional sort, but he knew that didn't matter when you lost a friend. Only the most hardened hearts never shed a tear. Wolford may have only been an acquaintance, but even then, he still felt the loss. What hurt more for him though was the pain it was causing Judy.

After a long while, Judy pulled away from Nick, rubbing her runny nose, and sniffing. She looked up at the fox, her eyes meeting the concerned gaze of his emeralds.

"Thanks, Nick…"

The fox brought his paw up and wiped away the doe's tears. The rabbit leaned into the touch, closing her eyes.

"Come on fluff, lets get out of here."

Nodding, Judy moved and grabbed a few more outfits and necessities, and the two headed out the door. Not a peep had been heard from Judy's two loudmouth neighbors since their apology.
The week marched on like it always does. On the outside, things may have seemed to have been getting back to normal. Judy and Nick returned to work after a few days of personal time, during which both had been to see the department counsellor. Both mammals were scheduled with further follow up appointments and cleared for patrol duty.

The memorial in the lobby of precinct one was certainly never neglected though, with the number of gifts and tributes piled around the portrait steadily growing. Once in a while, a mammal that Wolford had helped in the past that remembered him or a random concerned citizen would stop by to pay their respects, and there was a steady stream of members of other precincts at all hours of the day and night.

One thing that didn't seem to be getting better was the case with Wolford's murder. Witness canvassing and the crime tips line had turned up nothing but false leads and disjointed facts that may or may not be related to the case.

Nick and Judy's cruiser's dash camera had picked up no other vehicles in the area, save for a lone delivery truck that had stopped outside a corner store around the time of the murder, and even that had been a dead end. The store's security cameras didn't cover the area of the parking lot that the truck had been in and neither of the two officers nor the dash camera had picked up anything remarkable or identifiable about it.

Thus, it was with somewhat sour moods that detectives Shawn Dancing Rivers and Nolwazi Longtooth had arrived at the coroner's office for their briefing, both of them not expecting any usable evidence that may point to either motive or perpetrator.

"I wish I had better news for you two," Dr. Rocky Mamusson said as he opened a file on his computer. Contrary to popular TV shows like Zootopia CSI, briefings were almost never done in the examination room, unless a particular piece of evidence on the body required it. The doctor pulled up a photo of the bullet hole.

"The bullet was a small mammal caliber. It entered the brain through the right temple and lodged against the skull on the other side. We were able to get it out, but that's about all the evidence we got."

Detective Rivers snorted. "I suppose it's too much to ask that the perpetrators carved their name into the bullet."

The raccoon coroner shook his head and pointed to the evidence case. "Sorry, but no. No names, but maybe your lab techs can work some magic with it."

It was Longtooth's turn to scoff. "With our luck this last week, it'll all point to a mammal that's been 6 feet underground in Zootopia City Cemetery for 250 years," the lioness quipped, crossing her arms over her chest.

Dr. Mamusson shrugged. "Can't help you there, I just work with the bodies."

The elk detective sighed. This wasn't unexpected. This week was not one for good news apparently. "What can you tell me about the wound?"

The raccoon turned back to his report. "Close contact. The fur caught a lot of residue gunpowder. Again, something perhaps your guys can make of it."

"Maybe we can reduce that range to 125 years, Longtooth. Anything else? Defensive evidence? Fur? A bug burger custom order sticker?"
"No defensive evidence whatsoever. No missing or broken claws, no foreign blood, no fur and no tissue. Nothing to suggest that he put up a fight at all."

Both detectives glanced at each other and then at the evidence case. More like a Zoopperware container than a case, really. A case that, for now, contained all the physical evidence they had.

The elk stood. "Anything else?"

"No. Just the gunpowder and the bullet." The raccoon handed the detective the evidence release form, already filled out on his end. The elk took the form, filled out his own details as the detective accepting it and signed it before handing it to Nolwazi so that she could fill herself in as the evidence witness.

"Thanks doc. Hopefully this gets us somewhere," the lioness said as she watched her elk partner pick up the evidence case. A case small enough that the brownie she'd packed in her lunch box would have it bursting at the seams.

The two detectives left the coroner's office in about the same mood they arrived in.

"So, we struck out with evidence at the scene, our eyewitnesses weren't overly helpful, camera footage gave us nothing, and all we have from Wolford's person are a bullet and some gunpowder. 0 for 4 so far, unless I missed something," the elk grumped, not at all pleased with how the case had started out. Admittedly, few cases were resolved in a short time frame, and those that were open and shut tended to be more spur of the moment things like convenience store robberies gone bad or crimes of passion involving vindictive individuals.

"Well, Wolford's car is still in the impound lot. Seems that Chief Bogo wants that checked over for evidence that might indicate what Wolford was working on first, so he can assign a new detective to that. But other than that, no, I don't think you missed anything," the equally grumpy lioness said.

The two headed back to their unmarked car for the journey back to the Sahara Square precinct, both wondering what other roadblocks lay ahead of them.

Two days later. A week since Wolford had been killed. Officially, it was still under investigation, but everyone in precinct one was calling it what it was: murder. And today, every member of precinct one was on leave, even the night staff.

Today, the region would be staffed with volunteers from other precincts and districts.

Today was Wolford's funeral.

The last time Judy wore her dress blues was at Nick's graduation, and before that, it was her own. Two of the happiest times in her life. She'd hoped she'd never have to use it for a funeral, but here she was, standing in Nick's bathroom, adjusting her tie.

It had been a hard week for both of them. The idea that a cop killer was on the loose hung over everyone's head, but for Judy the loss was a lot more personal, being that she'd spent six months of her life as his partner.

On the personal front, Judy had spent the week sleeping on Nick's couch. That had been a bit of a point of contention for them since day one. Nick had insisted on being the gentle mammal and had offered her the bed, while she insisted that as his guest, she should be the one on the couch. It was more than big enough for her small frame, after all.
Nick finally gave in after she physically kicked him off the couch when she wanted to go to sleep.

They'd kept their closeness a secret from their co-workers, both worried that the fraternization rule would force them to be separated.

The fox in question knocked on the closed bathroom door. "Hey, Carrots, you ready? We gotta go! The Zuber'll be here any minute!"

The rabbit let out a breath, before opening the barrier separating the two and marching past the fox to the front entryway. Nick followed a few seconds later, and the two headed out the door.

In the Zuber, the atmosphere was one of silence, with both mammals deep in thought. Judy had been to family member's funerals before, so she knew a bit of what to expect. Nick, on the other hand, had never been to a funeral. Heck, he'd never been inside a church before, and ultimately, that's exactly where they were headed – to a church in Savannah Central, though they had to stop at the precinct first.

The Zuber weaved its way through the crowded streets. The driver, a Pygmy hippo, attempted to make small talk, but gave up when all he got were one-word answers from both of them. The ride was lengthened by a traffic jam, but the two got to their destination with plenty of time to spare. They were at the precinct only long enough to grab their cruiser and from there, Judy drove them to the church, where they were directed to park near the back of the funeral procession line.

Upon entering the church, they were ushered into the… Auditorium? Main room? Stadium? Big room with benches in it? Nick wasn't entirely certain what it was called, but it was big. Big enough to fit the entirety of the entourage of animals, large and small alike. Smaller mammals were directed to the front, while larger ones naturally took the rear. The fox and rabbit pair ended up in a bench about three rows back from the front of the church.

Everyone from precinct one was there, along with a sizeable group that Judy recognized as being from the Tundratown precinct. There was also a large group, though admittedly small by bunny standards, of family and friends outside of work.

The casket had been set closed in the centre of the church at the front, with Wolford's police photo and peaked cap set on top. A plaque with all the medals he had earned over his career had been commissioned and sat next to the photo. All around the casket were white roses and lilies.

It took quite some time for all the mammals to get situated, each one taking their cap off and placing it in their lap. A moment of low chatter later, and an organist began playing a song, a hymn, that neither Nick nor Judy recognized. Both felt a little uneasy as some mammals around them apparently knew the correct words.

The hymn was followed by the national anthem (putting the pair a little more at ease), and the department chaplain speaking a few words.

What followed was a procession of mammals, only a few of which either Nick or Judy actually knew, that spoke of Wolford's life as a child, teen, and young adult, and his decision to become a police officer. Apparently, he saw a movie and thought it would be cool. His brother mentioned that Eric had told him later that "he was a bit miffed that real life cop work wasn't like the movies." That drew a round of polite chuckles, particularly from the other members of precinct one.

The procession of speakers ended with Chief Bogo, who looked a lot more serious and solemn than normal. Nick wondered briefly how that was possible. The chief touched on Wolford's professional career, starting when he'd transferred from Tundratown to precinct one to be closer to his family. At
the end, he picked up the fallen wolf's medal plaque. Pointing to each one, he explained what they meant and why the wolf had earned them.

"Commendation – community service. We award this to members who go above and beyond to help their community. Officer Eric Wolford volunteered his time on weekends to coach the junior medium-mammal baseball team in his community, and took special interest in our drug outreach programs for young mammals."

"Commendation – integrity. Wolford was one of the fastest to volunteer for SWAT and undercover operations, but he earned this when he traded himself for a group of hostages at the Zootopia National Bank robbery two years ago."

"And finally, the Purple Shield. This is only given to mammals that are killed or forced to retire from injury in the line of duty. It's the highest honour at the Zootopia Police Department. It's also the one I as chief hope to never have to give out."

The chief looked down at the plaque, rubbing his hoof over the solid gold shield with purple inset, before looking back up at the audience.

"Trust. Integrity. Bravery. These three words are on every shield of every officer in the department. They are the words we swear to uphold every minute of every hour of every day. They are the virtues that we strive to inspire in everyone. And they are the very ideals that Officer Eric Wolford died believing in."

"Mrs. Wolford, it is with my deepest regret and condolences that I present this plaque to you, as Officer Eric Wolford's mate, wife, and life partner."

Debbie Wolford stepped forward and accepted the plaque, holding it to her chest with tears streaming down her face.

Chief Bogo moved off the stand, and the Chaplain began the conclusion of the service. As the funeral march played on the organ, eight volunteers from precinct one and Tundratown precinct approached the casket. They moved the photo and cap off of it and set them on a small table, before draping the casket in the Zootopia flag and lifting it off its stand. They then proceeded down the aisle and out the front door to the waiting hearse. An honour guard of volunteers from other precincts stood to either side of the church's front steps and provided a clear path for the pallbearers.

Once the casket was loaded, the rest of the entourage dispersed into other waiting cruisers and limos, each mammal being directed to their rides, or taking their precinct one cruiser and some designated passengers.

Judy and Nick headed to their own cruiser. They would be travelling alone. Once all the mammals – hundreds of them – had moved to their respective vehicles, the procession began to pull out. Being near the back, it took quite a while before the duo could go anywhere, and when they did, it was with all lights going.

The procession moved to the streets of Zootopia unimpeded. Volunteers from other precincts kept the route closed and free of other traffic, so their journey was smooth, if a bit slow. It left a lot of time for the two to think.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Carrots, but I hope neither of us ever gets a purple shield. I don't think mother could handle it."

The rabbit doe readily agreed. "It would kill my parents too. They didn't want me to come to the city.
or become a cop either. Every time I call home someone asks if I've been seriously hurt."

Nick knew that Judy's parents hadn't been especially supportive of her dream.

"I guess, the only thing we can do is watch each other's backs and try to make sure that we both make it home safely at the end of the day," the rabbit said.

"Wouldn't want anyone else watching my back."

Nick started counting the seconds. He got to three before the blush exploded in the rabbit's ears.

"NICK! That's not appropriate right now!"

The fox feigned ignorance. "What? It's the truth! We have each other's backs, right?"

"You KNOW that's not what you said or meant!"

"Why Carrots, how dare you have such dirty thoughts in the middle of a funeral procession."

"Speak for yourself, dumb fox." Nick might have continued that bit of banter if the death glare she shot his way hadn't killed his ability to speak.

The silence returned for a while before the fox spoke up again.

"I'm sorry, Judy. I was just trying to lighten the mood."

The rabbit sighed. "I know, Nick. And on any other day, I'd be OK with that. Just… not today, OK?"

The fox nodded, a sullen look on his face. The bunny reached across and squeezed his paw. Nick glanced at the paw, then looked up to see a wan smile on the doe's face as she looked between him and the car ahead of them. The tod couldn't help but return a genuine smile of his own.

The procession made it almost all the way to the cemetery without incident. It wasn't until the last mile or two that some impatient motorist had finally had enough waiting, and honked his horn.

The motorist apparently never learned that it's generally not a good idea to honk at a cop car that has its lights flashing, much less dozens in a line. Several volunteers from the other precincts swooped in for the proverbial kill.

"What are they going to charge him with, I wonder," Nick said as he observed the commotion.

The rabbit shrugged as she focused on the road. "Probably misuse of his horn. You're only supposed to use your horn when it's absolutely necessary."

"Right. I'd forgotten that." It was buried in the back of the textbooks they'd had to study at the academy, but it was there.

The procession pulled up to the grave site. Once again, the funeral ushers arranged everyone around the open grave site, with the family in front along with friends. The rest of the mammals were arranged from font to back, smallest to largest, just like in the church. The casket was unloaded from the hearse and marched to the grave, still draped in the city's flag.

The department chaplain said a few more words, and the flag was lifted off the casket by four mammals, who then proceeded to fold it in precise fashion to the mournful notes of a department piper playing a haunting hymn that even Nick knew the name of. The flag was presented to Eric's
wife, who accepted it with tears flowing freely down her face.

For Judy, this was her first graveside service. In Bunnyburrow, rabbits were always cremated. There just wouldn't be enough space in a cemetery otherwise, and once again, she was fighting tears as the casket containing her friend and former partner was slowly lowered into the ground forever.

After what seemed like an eternity, two brown bears began filling the grave in, and the ceremony concluded. Judy stood at the grave side a long while. She hadn't known Eric Wolford long, and this was now his final resting place. Tears began to leak again as she stared at the grave, halted only by the touch of a large paw on her shoulder. She glanced up at Nick, who stood there staring at the same grave she was, his mouth in a slight downturn she'd first seen that morning so long ago in the sky tram. She could tell he as thinking of something, but something told her not to pry, and that he would talk about it when he was ready.

They remained there for a few moments before bidding farewell to Wolford's family. Without a word, the two climbed into their cruiser to head back to the precinct. Glancing back at the gravesite, only Wolford's family remained there.

The two small officers climbed into their cruiser and drove to a nearby hotel, where the city had reserved the largest conference room for the post-funeral reception. Looking around, Judy noted the faces she wasn't familiar with, and wandered over to greet some. Nick stayed by her side while she moved through the crowd and chatted with some of the visitors, contributing to the conversation when he was invited, but mostly there to support Judy.

Over the next little while, she met with the mammals that had been lifelong friends with her fallen comrade. She delighted in the stories they told of his misspent youth, and couldn't help but laugh at the idea that at one point he had wanted to become a famous novelist. It seemed so out of character for the wolf that she couldn't quite picture him hunched over a computer tapping away on a keyboard for weeks on end.

An hour later, Judy noticed the wolf's wife and kids had arrived. Having last seen them at the grave site, they were now exchanging tearful greetings with some of the officers she recognized from the night shift. She'd met Debbie Wolford only once before, at a precinct picnic while Nick was at the academy, and she'd seemed like a nice mammal.

Almost as though the she-wolf felt eyes on her, she turned and scanned the crowd, before her eyes came to rest on the rabbit doe. Judy wanted to look away, fall into a hole, disappear, something, anything to get away from that gaze that was full of pain.

The she-wolf made her way through the crowd to the newcomers. Before Judy knew it, Debbie was kneeling in front of her. After a moment of locking gazes, the she-wolf brought the rabbit doe into a hug. The doe stiffened for a moment before melting into the embrace.

"Thank you for coming, Judy. Eric would have wanted you here."

That almost did it for Judy, and she was barely able to hold back the tears.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Wolford. I didn't… I couldn't…"

"Judy, we both know there wasn't anything you could have done."

Judy nodded into the she-wolf's shoulder. That's the same thing Nick had been saying. After a while, the two broke apart, and Mrs. Wolford stood to greet Nick.

"You must be Judy's partner Nick."
The fox nodded up at the larger canine. "Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry about Eric. I didn't get the chance to know him much, but Judy always spoke highly of him."

The she-wolf nodded. "Eric mentioned you a few times. You were at the academy, right?"

The fox nodded. "Yeah. I met Eric a time or two when I got the chance to come back to the city, and when he dropped Judy off at the academy to visit me. Wish I could have known him better though. He seemed like a really great mammal."

Debbie nodded. "He was. Oh, he had his issues. Even thought about quitting the force when he felt like he was losing time with the cubs, but the last few months, he seemed to enjoy his job again. Always came home happier, with more energy, and still had time for the little ones. I just wish I knew why someone would want to take him away from me…"

"I think we all do, Mrs. Wolford," Chief Bogo said as he came up beside his two much smaller officers. Judy and Nick both voiced their agreement. Cop-killing was a one-way ticket to life imprisonment. That much was certain.

The two mammals stayed for a few more hours before deciding to head home. They were both worn out, so instead of taking city transit, they called another Zuber to take them back to Nick's apartment. Little was said as they each got themselves out of their dress blues and into their sleepwear, Judy taking the couch again, and Nick taking his bed.

But the doe couldn't sleep. Her mind wouldn't switch off. Going through the events of the day again and again, putting together and processing everything that had happened in the last week. She just couldn't settle down.

It was just after one in the morning when Judy's ears twitched. She'd heard something. Sitting up, she turned her large ears this way and that, moving them around before zeroing in on the source. The bedroom. It sounded almost like a whine.

Sliding off the couch, the rabbit padded through the darkened hallways, feeling her way to the bedroom, and cursing her bad night vision all the while. Opening the door, she moved in the direction of the bed, calling the fox's name. "Nick?"

After a second, she heard, "Oh. Hey, Carrots."

"What's wrong?"

A shuffling sound and a huff. "It's nothing, Carrots, go back to sleep."

The rabbit climbed onto the bed and felt her way along it, until her paw rested on Nick's shoulder. She still couldn't see very well, but she could tell that Nick had his back to her.

"Nick, don't lie to me. Please, tell me what's wrong?"

For a long while, neither of them spoke. Eventually, Judy grew tired of Nick having his back to her, and bodily climbed over him, eliciting a grunt from the fox, before lying down to face him in the dim light. Staring into the fox's eyes, glowing green in the dim light, she reached up to lightly touch his muzzle.

It was a long while before the fox spoke.

"Wolford wasn't the first murdered mammal I've seen."
The rabbit shifted slightly, moving her paw to the fox's cheek. She wanted to say something, but decided it best to keep quiet and let Nick work through this at his own pace.

"Years ago, after my mom kicked me out, I started running with a...a bad crowd. I never did anything illegal, but a lot of the group weren't so... they didn't have a very good moral compass. They made more enemies than friends. Usually you do, when you con people to make a living, but these guys..." The fox trailed off.

Judy understood, at least in part. It was one thing to buy a large jumbo pop, melt it down, and sell smaller portions at a higher price point. Businesses mark up product prices all the time. There weren't even any real laws against selling the pawpsicle sticks to a rodent construction company, as long as the wood was properly documented, and despite verbally calling it red wood, he'd correctly identified it as birch on the bill of sale.

On the flip side of the coin, many cons and scams were not nearly so harmless. One popular one was car insurance scamming, and Judy had already arrested several attempted scammers in her time on the force. Those kinds of things tended to make you enemies.

"Anyways, at the time, Finnick and I were just starting to sell rugs and cheap clothes, and these guys had some sort of money scam going on. And it caught up to them."

"What happened?" the rabbit doe whispered.

"They were caught out by a group of gunmammals. But that's not the worst part."

Judy remained silent, wondering what could possibly have made the situation worse.

"The gunmammals didn't care who they hit. And they got a kit that was just on his way to school."

The rabbit could have sworn her heart had stopped.

"Fin and I watched the whole thing from his van. We called the cops, but by the time anybody got to him, the poor kit was already gone."

"Oh, Nick." The rabbit doe shuffled herself closer and wrapped her arms around the fox, pulling him close, moulding her entire body to his head and chest, his muzzle pressed into the side of her neck. A small portion of her mind, some residual fragment of the instincts long forgotten reminded her that this was a predator and he had his teeth near the most vulnerable area of her body, able to easily kill her before she could do anything, but that thought was quickly and ruthlessly stamped out, never to be heard from again.

After a long while, Judy spoke again.

"Nick, there probably wasn't anything more you could have done. If you had stepped in, you and Finnick would both be dead too."

The rabbit felt a subtle nod into her neck. One thing confused her though.

"Why is this coming out now though?"

Nick sighed, and was silent for a long time. "I don't know. It's just... Wolford's funeral made me think of that little kit, that's all."

The doe nodded. She still got reminders of the brother and sisters she'd lost over the years, sometimes popping up in odd places. It's something she knew would never go away.
"That's something that'll happen, Nick, you should know that as well as I do."

The fox was silent.

"Nick, did you...Did you ever find out who that kit was?"

She felt Nick shake his head.

"No. By the time I thought of that, the newspapers had moved on to other things, and the Internet wasn't as readily available as it is now."

"Do you think it might help if we looked that up? Maybe went to go see their grave? Together?"

The fox paused a moment. It made a certain amount of sense.

"Maybe I should."

The rabbit squeezed her arms around her fox tighter. "No Nick, WE should. We're in this together, OK? You were by my side the night Wolford died. You helped me through that. Let me carry some of this weight with you, OK?"

For the first time that night, the rabbit felt Nick's arms wrap around her back, pulling her even closer.

"I'm sorry, Judy. I've been on my own for so long. It's hard to let someone else help carry the weight."

"I know, Nick. But trust me."

The fox squeezed the rabbit tighter. "I do trust you, Judy."

Twice in a row, the fox had used her real name. On the rare occasion that he did that, it always meant he was being dreadfully serious. She held him tight. Words weren't necessary for the rabbit to convey her trust in the fox, so instead, she just held him. After a long while, the fox's breathing deepened and evened out. The rabbit Doe nuzzled into the fur on her fox's forehead and slowly allowed sleep to claim her as well.

Chapter End Notes

So, Nick has some past issues he needs to let go of... Hopefully, Judy can help him there.

An extended version of the scene where Judy heads home after her first day has her disembarking the subway at the "Banyan Street Station". On the ZTA map visible in the subway car lab, the area is covered by a photo of a blue-shirted tiger reading a newspaper. The full version of the map, as released by Disney, the station is spelled "Banyon Street Station" and is on the Animalia line. I decided to use the deleted scene's spelling as canon. I'd also like to point out that this same map labels the "Zootopia Express" that Judy rides early in the film as the "Bunny Burrows" train.

I had a hard time getting real, actual procedure correct for the "body briefing" portion of
the investigation in this chapter, especially being a fan of the CSI Las Vegas and New York shows. In the end, I resorted to a sort of half-and-half, part real life, and part Hollywood.

Regarding the horn, YES this is an actual law! In several states and in most parts of Canada, you CAN be ticketed for misusing your car horn!

Several people got the reference to Cimar of Turalis WildeHopps' collaboration "100 Kisses" in the last chapter, but no one picked up on the "Research into rabbits online" reference to Yitexity's Savage Company. Maybe it was too generic.

No references in this chapter, but keep an eye out for some in the next one!

Coming up on March 23: New Directions!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Do my disclaimers annoy you? Leave a comment!
New Directions

Chapter Summary

A new case for Nick and Judy...but what is it a case OF?

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: Shere Khan agreed to a trade - Mowgli for the rights to Zootopia. But then Mowgli set Shere Khan's tail on fire and he ran off. So I still don't own Zootopia.

Someone who is very special helped me as my editor and friend. Her name is Daee17. Let's all give her a high five!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Warmth. Warmth and softness. Those were the first things that Nick registered as his mind slowly crawled its way back to the waking world from the dreamland he'd occupied for the last several hours. A dreamland that had been full of gray, black, and white fur, amethyst eyes, and a smiling muzzle.

As the fox's other senses engaged, his nose picked up on a unique scent, one that could only come from one mammal. He couldn't really describe it, except that is was pure Judy. Over the time he'd known her, he'd noticed her scent changed subtly, depending on how she was feeling. It wasn't so descriptive that he could tell what she was thinking, but he could tell if her overall mood was happy, sad, anxious, angry, or, despite her claims to the opposite, nervous. At the moment, he could tell that she was happy.

As Nick slowly opened his eyes, memories came flooding back to him from the night before. His breakdown. Judy crawling into bed with him, and comforting him. And the last thing he remembered, falling asleep with his muzzle right in the soft fur of her neck.

Shifting slightly, he glanced at the clock behind the rabbit. 9:03 AM. Plenty of time before their noon shift. Still, Judy got cranky if she slept in too long, and a cranky Judy was one to stay away from. For most mammals anyways. The fox seemed to be an exception to that rule.

"Carrots? Time to wake up, Fluff..."

The bunny mumbled something unintelligible and continued to slumber.

"Carrots? Caaaaaaaaaarrrrrrooooootss…"

"Mhwanhwaaamafaaa..." OK, that was somewhat more than what he got before.

The fox shifted back a bit so he could see Judy's face. Sensing the loss of the warm fluffy fox she'd been enjoying, the doe unconsciously started pawing at the air until she found his chest fur. Which she grabbed and pulled. Hard.
Nick let out a yelp of pain, startling the rabbit awake, and causing both to jerk upright, though this proved to be an even more painful experience for the fox. He yowled in agony.

Judy’s brain finally caught up to what was going on and she released her death grip on the chest fur she’d been threatening to yank out, paws flying up to her muzzle in shock.

"Oh my gosh, Nick, I'm so sorry!"

The fox only whined in response, rubbing the sore area. Judy, her ears flat down her back and blushing almost as red as Nick’s fur, crawled over to Nick, and reached out to put her paw on his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, Nick, I didn't mean to!"

Nick continued to rub his chest as the pain subsided. "It's…ugh… It's OK Carrots."

Judy looked down at the mattress, and opened her mouth to apologize again.

"Seriously, Carrots, it's OK. It's just my fur. My fluffy, exotic, luxurious—" The doe punched Nick's arm.

"OW! Damnit, Carrots, is this how you always wake up? Swinging?"

"You deserved that one."

The fox grumbled, rubbing his arm now.

"Sheesh, what I get for making sure you don't sleep in too late, Ms. Muscles."

Judy looked over at the clock. "It's only just past 9. We don't work until noon." She thought for a moment. "Go ahead and take first shower. I'm going to have breakfast and call my parents."

Nick mumbled something about "super bunnies" and got off the bed, heading for the bathroom. Judy slipped off the bed and padded out into the living room/kitchen area. Grabbing her phone off the cluttered coffee table, she was dismayed to realize she’d forgotten to plug it in last night. She still had about half a battery left, enough for a MuzzleTime chat, since she barely used it at all yesterday.

Heading into the kitchen, the rabbit grabbed some almond milk out of the fridge, checked the date and sniffed it to make sure it hadn't expired, and paused for a moment. The entire time she’d been here, they’d always had take-out, grabbed breakfast on the go, or Nick had attempted to cook. It hadn't occurred to her that the counters were about level with her eyes.

Lifting the milk onto the counter, she hopped up on to it and started rummaging around the cupboards, grabbing a bowl from the kitchenware set that Nick had bought when he moved in. The Carrot Flakes cereal he kept for her was a bit more challenging, being on top of the fridge itself, but eventually, she’d managed to cobble together a bowl of cereal without making a huge disaster, as was the case whenever Nick tried his almost non-existent culinary gifts.

Prize cereal bowl in hand, she headed back into the living room and sat down on the couch, munching on her cereal as she dialled up her parent's cell phone.

After a moment of ringing, Bonnie came up on screen, fumbling with the phone, and one of her youngest siblings at the same time.

"Judy? Is that you? Stu! It's Judy!"
A clattering and voices could be heard behind the Hopps matron, and the camera jerked for a moment again, her father's face filling the screen. Or more accurately, his nose filled the screen. Stu hadn't really got the hang of technology, unlike Bonnie, and had to be constantly reminded to hold the phone away from his face on MuzzleTime calls.

"Jude! Jude the dude! How are you doing! Why aren't you at work yet? Are you hurt?"

"Dad! All I can see is your nose. Hold the phone away from your face!"

Slowly the camera moved away and both of her parent's faces came into view.

"Nick and I work the mid-day shift today. We don't start until noon."

"We were worried when you didn't call us last night," Stu said, giving Judy his best "I'm disappointed in you" look without it being too serious.

Judy shook her head. "Sorry, Dad, Nick and I were just exhausted after the memorial yesterday that I completely forgot to call. I just woke up."

"Wait, you just woke up? Judy, that doesn't look like your apartment." Stu pulled the phone in close and studied what he could see of Judy's surroundings.

"Dad, hold the phone away. No, it's not my apartment, I—"

"Is it possible? Judy, have you finally found someone? We were going to see—"

"DAD! It's Nick's apartment, OK? I stay over here once in a while."

"You stay over at Nick's apartment? Alone? With a fox? Judy, that's not how we raised you!"

"YES, is there something wrong with that? You guys were always trying to set me up with those bucks back home, so how is staying overnight at my...at Nick's place any worse?" She left out the fact that they'd already slept in the same bed twice now, correctly guessing that it would not be a good idea to divulge that information.

The young rabbit sighed. "Look, it's not like we're doing anything inappropriate, OK? Can you guys please just trust me on this?"

The older rabbits glanced at each other, seeming to communicate silently for a moment.

"OK, Judy. We just worry about you a lot. You know how scared we were when you got hurt arresting that sheep."

"Mom, I'm a cop. Getting hurt isn't something I can avoid. But Nick's got my back, OK? He'll be there for me, just like I'm there for him."

Bonnie gave her daughter a long, appraising look. Judy felt her ears heat up at the scrutiny and silently wondered if she'd given up too much information.

"We still worry, Judy. Someday, when you have kits, you'll understand."

Judy's ears dropped flat against her back, and she groaned. Every time. Every sugarcane time, somehow her parent's managed to shoehorn talk of a buck or kits or both into the conversation.

"So how was the memorial?"
Well, at least this was a better topic than the previous ones... somewhat. Judy took a deep breath.

"It was…nice, I guess… It was different from what we do."

"How so?"

"Well, for one, Eric wasn't cremated. He was buried. There's a special section on cemeteries that fallen officers are buried in, and that's where he is now. We had the funeral service at a church, and then drove to the cemetery where he was buried, and then we all gathered at a hotel and talked about Eric and what he meant to us."

Bonnie and Stu both nodded in understanding. They'd been to their fair share of funerals for their own brothers, sisters, friends, and unfortunately, sons and daughters. Every species did things a little bit differently, and even the same species did things differently depending on where in the country you lived. Her mind flashed back to watching the casket being lowered into the ground, and her shoulders slumped.

"We know he was a friend, Judy. The first few weeks are the hardest, but eventually the pain fades."

Judy nodded. She'd been through this before.

She was about to say something more, when she heard the shower shut off.

"I gotta go, Mom, Dad. Nick's done in the shower, so it's my turn in a few minutes. I'll call you back on the weekend, OK?"

"OK, Jude, we'll be here. Just call when you need us, OK?"

"Thanks, Dad. Love you."

"Love you too, bun bun." Her mother ended the call.

Judy breathed a sigh, partially in relief and partially in trepidation. She didn't like keeping them in the dark about the development in hers and Nick's relationship, but, she wasn't ready to let them know about it either. Nick hadn't even asked her out on a date yet.

Speaking of the devil, the fox chose that moment to walk into the living room, clad in his work pants and a white undershirt.

"How was the call to the parents?"

Judy shook her head.

"Same as usual. 'Are you hurt? Why didn't you call sooner? Have you found a buck? When will we get grandkits?'"

The fox cocked his head, a grin appearing. Judy immediately regretted mentioning the last two points.

"Please don't. You know how I feel, Nick, but I'm not ready to say anything to them yet."

*We haven't even gone on a date yet, Nick.* Judy sighed.

"You know, they never really supported my dream either. Tried to get me to settle down and give up on being a cop. After a while, they stopped trying to get me to give up, but they still went overboard on the whole "stay safe" thing. They were HAPPY when I was just a meter maid..."
The doe trailed off and went silent for a moment, before letting out a breath and continuing.

"Anyway, I told them how Eric's memorial service went, and that's about it. It was a bit different from how we bunnies usually do it."

Nick's expression turned curious. "How so?"

"Well, for one, we don't bury our dead. When a bunny dies, they're cremated. Larger families like mine usually have a mausoleum where we put the ashes afterward. For another, the services aren't nearly as long. If they were, we'd spend half our lives in memorial services."

The fox nodded, thinking back to the few times he'd talked about the subject with his mother.

"Mom told me that Dad's memorial was a small one. Just a few mammals," he said.

The rabbit turned to look at the fox. "Why?"

"Foxes are solitary mammals, Judy. We don't have a big circle of friends, and these days, usually only a few siblings. Not to mention, we aren't well liked among mammals."

Judy's ears dropped at that. She'd noticed a trend on the beat herself, where mammals wouldn't give Nick the same time of day, just because he was a predator, and even among predators, because he was a fox. It was the same speciesism that prevented mammals from taking her seriously in her early days on the force, automatically dismissing her as "cute", "token", or just a stuffed animal, even after the two had cracked the Night Howler conspiracy.

Before she could say anything to that effect, Nick spoke again.

"Go have a shower and stuff, Carrots. Want to see if we can get a movie in before our shift? I know you wanted to see Meowana."

The rabbit readily agreed, finishing up her now-soggy cereal, and padding off to the shower to get ready for the day.

"That's it? A week, and all we know is that the gun that killed Wolford is a small mammal calibre? I could have told you that." Rivers was not a happy camper. The week had not been friendly to either detective working the case. First the lack of traffic cameras in the area botched any attempt at tracking the wolf's movements. 10,000 traffic cameras in the city, and not one for miles around Kalahari Heights. The wolf could have come from virtually anywhere, at any time.

Then the lack of evidence so far in the wolf's car, found a block from the crime scene. No laptop, no paw prints other than the exemplars from his family, and no unusual fur. Not even a handy note that said "An elephant packing a gun smaller than his toenail named Pink Pachyderm killed me". The elk shook his head.

The lab techs were still analyzing the gunpowder residue, and they probably wouldn't have any results for a week or two, so they'd been working on the only other bit of evidence they had, the bullet. A bullet fired from a gun that had never been registered or used in a crime in Zootopia. It felt like they were chasing a ghost.

There was also the question of the wolf's clothes. There was still a chance of stray fur or other evidence showing up there, but unlike what they showed on TV, that actually took several weeks, and was almost never a sure result.
"That's it. I had the database search every closed and cold case, along with the locally registered firearms database. The best it could come up with was a 50% chance on almost 6 dozen other crimes," the capybara lab tech was saying, further putting a damper on the elk's mood. From the looks of it, the lioness beside him wasn't fairing much better, as she read through the tech's written preliminary report.

The elk sighed. No new eyewitnesses other than the several hundred "tips" to the crime stoppers tips line, most of which were likely just calling in hoping to catch some sort of reward. Rewards were only given out for good tips, and those sometimes took weeks or months to pan out, because each one had to be first prioritized based on probability, then investigated. So far, they'd had no good ones concerning the wolf. Each one had ended with no answers and more often than not, even more questions.

A voice drew the attention of the two detectives and the ballistics tech. A field mouse lab tech that Rivers recognized as Ray Eriksen, one of the AV techs stood in the doorway – or rather, for him, the mammoth skyscraper-tall hole in the wall, since this doorway was big enough for elephants. "Excuse me, detectives? When you have a moment, I'd like to show you something in the photography evidence lab!"

The elk raised his eyebrow. Maybe something popped up after all? He turned back to the capybara.

"Is there anything else, Mr. Cavida?"

At the shake of the latter's head, the Elk motioned to detective Longtooth for her to follow him. The two made their way to the photography evidence lab, with the mouse taking a much shorter path through a few holes in the walls.

Photography evidence recorded the crime scene in an as-is state, and allowed for in depth analysis of the recordings and photographs. The large screen on the wall of the lab showed three pictures, all seemingly identical. The detectives recognized them as crime scene photos from the night of the murder.

"I was going through the Wolford scene photos. You know, just trying to be thorough. Get everything right. And I came across something I think you should see. Take a look at the time stamp on these photos," the little mouse lab tech said as he scrambled up onto the table in the center of the room.

Nolwazi glanced down at the time stamp. All three photos had been taken in a span of about 5 seconds. Looking at the photos themselves, though, there wasn't anything immediately apparent that separated them. All three were of the same angle, from the same camera.

"Okay…?"

"Take a look at the graffiti on the wall, here," the mouse used a tiny laser pointer to show them the artwork he was referring to.

Looking closer, the detectives could indeed make out that something was different in the second of the three photos.

"What happened there?"

"Well, the camera settings obviously didn't change. Too short a time! But if you look at the ground there," the mouse said, indicating another area, "it looks like one of the squad car's light bars was flashing blue in the second photo! The camera flash washes it out though, so it's not immediately
apparent unless you look at them side by side. See what it does to the graffiti?"

"It made it reflect blue light. But wouldn't any metallic or glossy paint do that?"

"Yeah, I thought that too, until I looked at these photos from in the morning." The mouse used a tiny computer to bring up two different photos. "It's a different angle, but you can see the graffiti. And in these photos, the paint looks like it has a flat finish."

Realization dawned on the elk and lioness at the same time.

"It only takes a couple of hours at most for spray paint to dry in Sahara Square," Detective Longtooth spoke, with a hint of hopefulness in her voice. "It's so hot and arid there. If that's the case —"

"—there's a good chance this graffiti was done around the time Wolford was killed." The elk finished the lioness' sentence, then smiled "We'll have to check it out to be sure, but we might have another witness out there somewhere. I think that might just be the best news I've heard all week. Thank you, Mr. Eriksen."

"Hey, you're welcome! Any time!" The mouse sat back on the table with a satisfied grin.

An hour later, both detectives were back at the crime scene studying the graffiti in question.

"Well, it's definitely dry, and it's certainly not got a glossy or metallic finish," Longtooth said as she moved from one angle to another, watching how the sunlight interacted with the paint in question.

"So that at least gives us a strong case that the paint was still wet when the first set of photos were taken," Rivers commented as Longtooth returned to join him, staring at the graffiti all the while. "Any thoughts as to what it means?"

The lioness shook her head. "I'm not sure. This stylized writing is a bit much for me. That part looks like the word Zoocide, though."

Rivers went in for a closer look. "Look how it's faded and smeared at the edges here…and here… And look how it looks like another colour was smudged up against it, here."

Nolwazi Longtooth frowned. "Do you think someone brushed up against it maybe?"

"Either that or it rained sideways in Sahara Square..."

"No, no, Carrots, I'm telling you, Te Kaa and Te Fiti are two separate beings!"

The rabbit in question followed her fox into the lobby of precinct one shaking her head. "I think you missed the whole point of the story, Nick. When Mooi stole Te Fiti's heart, she lost herself, and she BECAME Te Kaa. Didn't you listen to the song Meowana sang to her? 'They have stolen the heart from inside you, but this does not define you.'"

Nick shook his head. "I'll be honest and say I don't really listen to the songs. I mean, really, who busts out in song at every pivotal moment in the story? Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't recall you singing anything while we were running from Manchas during the missing mammals case."

"Yeah, well, you sure didn't sing anything when I found you under that bridge, either, Slick."

"In fact, I think the only singing that anyone did in that debacle was Bellwether. She sang like a
The rabbit giggled. She couldn't argue with that.

"Hopps! Wilde!" The unmistakable voice of the precinct one chief echoed in the large space. The two mammals in question froze and looked up to see the cape buffalo leaning on the railing outside his office. "Clock in. And get to my office."

The rabbit looked at the fox, the later easily reading her face. What did you DO?!

I didn't do anything! What did YOU do?!

Judy huffed and marched for the time clock, not looking forward to the ass chewing she was sure they were going to get from their boss. Punching in was just a matter of keying in her badge number and pressing the right button. The arduous journey up to their boss's office was arguably worse. When they finally got there, Judy was just raising a paw to knock when the deep voice commanded them to enter.

The two made their way to the oversized, overly uncomfortable chair in front of the imposing chief's desk, climbing up on it, and taking a seat, side by side as usual. Neither mammal admitted it, but a lot closer together than they used to.

The buffalo eyed them for a few seconds before speaking.

"Something's come up."

At the look of confusion on both mammals faces, the buffalo pulled out a file.

"You both know Wolford was working undercover to dig something up. He didn't tell me what, and we have almost no information on his activities for the last two weeks."

The rabbit doe frowned. "Sir, isn't it a conflict of interest to have us involved in investigating his death?"

Bogo nodded. "It is. But you won't be investigating his death."

The looks of confusion deepened.

"Hopps, you and Wilde solved a case of 15 missing mammals with absolutely nothing but a photo to start with. We're in a similar boat here. What I need you to do is find and follow the trail that Wolford was on. Figure out what he was after."

The expressions of the mammals in front of him cleared as understanding dawned.

"HOWEVER," The rabbit's ears shot upward and laser-focused on him. "IF you find anything that may be related to Wolford's murder, you are to immediately turn that evidence over to detectives Rivers and Longtooth, even if it means handing over the entire case. I expect good judgement on this. Consider it a test."

"Oh, you know, we only have the best judgement in the precinct, chief! Why, I'm surprised you don't—"

"SHUT YOUR MOUTH, WILDE!"

Judy took the opportunity to deliver a sharp elbow to the fox next to her, causing him to double over in pain, all without taking her attention off the boss.
"I will expect regular updates from you two," Bogo said as he handed the case file, thin as it was, to the rabbit. "Dismissed."

The two mammals took their leave. As the chief watched them go, a thought occurred to him. *Are they staying just a little closer together than they normally do?*

The cape buffalo shook his head and returned to his work. *Don't want to think about it.*

---

The file was empty. Or close to it. Like Emmitt Otterton's file, there was only one substantial piece of evidence. Date references for some of the last times the wolf had been seen on the streets, either in his sheep disguise or outside of it.

Sitting in their shared cubicle, the two mammals sat pondering their first move.

"We need to figure out who he spoke to, if anyone."

"The jam cams? They helped you with Otterton's case. If I remember, that photo of him that put you on my tail was taken from one of them."

"Us, dumb fox. They helped us."

"Ok, us, then. They helped us. Point is, maybe we can track him and see if he went and spoke to anyone."

"I wish it could be that easy. Chief Bogo could have done that himself. Or put anyone else on it. If he was meeting with a confidential informant, they aren't just going to talk to us, Slick. If they talked to Wolford, it's likely because they owed him."

"The jam cams to start, then. Maybe after that we can figure out what to do next."

Accessing the jam cams was easier said than done. Before, they'd just gotten Bellwether to give them access, after which she'd left them to attend to other matters. Now though, Judy didn't have the same connections at city hall that she used to, so she first put in a call to the chief, who passed their request on to the video archives department of the ZPD.

An hour later, it felt to the two like they weren't going to get anywhere with this when they were finally given the access they needed. Or so they thought. To their dismay, the archives only went back two weeks. The tech's explained that they could get the older footage but it would take several days to get that ready for them.

Two frustrated mammals spent the next three hours combing through footage around Wolford's home and the ZPD hoping he showed his face at either location. Even at high speed, the process felt like a snail's pace.

"Carrots, I think my eyes are bleeding," the fox complained for probably the 34th time.

Judy sighed. She wasn't feeling the greatest either. "Your eyes aren't bleeding, Nick. And we have to be thorough. Any hint of where Wolford's been will help us."

The fox groaned. "And we're only on the first day. There's another 20 days of footage waiting for us." Nick was about to say more, when his phone chimed. A frown briefly crossed his face. The only ones outside the precinct that had his number were Finnick, Judy, and his mom.

Pulling his phone out, he read the incoming text. "Hey, Fluff, what say you and I head for our supper
break in about an hour? Mom wants to know if I can meet her for dinner at Antonio's."

"You can go ahead Nick. Just get back in time. To clock back in."

Nick looked at the rabbit. "No, I mean both of us go. It's just down the block, and you need to eat too. Besides, if I remember correctly, it's my turn to buy dinner."

"Nick, we need——"

"—to look at this with clear heads if we want to make any headway. I know you want to get this moving forward, but we both know it won't help you if you miss something because you're hungry."

The rabbit looked at Nick, his phone, and the still-playing video footage. She hated to admit it, but Nick was right. Besides, it would be nice to see Marian again. And she really liked the fettuccini alfredo at Antonio's. Being so close to the station, the eatery was an occasional for officers of precinct one, and Judy had gone there one night on a lark while Nick was at the academy. It was expensive, so eating there often was out of the question. But if Nick was paying…

"OK, I'll tag along."

They decided to wrap up their viewing session half an hour later, quickly changed into street clothes, and headed out to the eatery. They hadn't gotten anywhere, despite covering almost 12 hours of camera footage between the two of them, and neither one was looking forward to explaining the lack of productivity to Bogo if this course of action didn't pan out.

The two discussed other possibilities while they walked, both agreeing that since the other detectives had interviewed Eric Wolford's family about the days leading up to his death, there wasn't much point to trying to see if they had any information on what he'd been up to. Early on in the viewing session, Judy had called them to see if they could provide any leads on when Eric had come and gone, only to be told of a few general times and days. They'd started to focus on those afterward.

By the time they got to Antonio's, Marian had already gotten a booth. The vixen rose to greet the two, giving both a hug, which proved to be somewhat awkward for the much smaller rabbit, and the two officers slid onto the bench opposite her, situating themselves and picking up a menu to browse. The usual greeting questions were exchanged, but the conversation really got going when Nick asked what the occasion was.

"Can't I treat my son and his bunny friend to dinner once in a while?"

Nick looked a little contemplative. "Carrots, did your mom ever just take one of you guys and their friend out for dinner? Something more than fast food?"

Judy shook her head. "No, that would have been too expensive for a 'just because'. She always had a reason behind it, usually birthdays."

"And since it isn't my birthday, that rules that out. Did we miss a new holiday?"

"Nope, no new holidays. At least none that I know of. Bogo sure didn't mention any."

"So, what could it be?"

"Bunnyburrow had Radish Day last week."

"As much as I like radishes, I don't think I'd want to waste a holiday on one, civic or not. Blueberries on the other hand…"
Throughout the exchange, the vixen's head had been shifting back and forth between the two, to the point where it made her dizzy. "OK, enough you two! I got a raise and a promotion, OK?"

The two mammals across from her smirked.

"You two did that on purpose, didn't you?"

The grins on their faces gave her the answer.

A small smile and a shake of the head later, the vixen continued. "You know I've been a receptionist at Furston Pharmaceuticals for years now. They finally offered me a position as an executive assistant. It's actually what I originally applied for. I decided I'd like to celebrate, and I knew Nick would invite you along," Marian said, looking at Judy.

"That's great, Marian!" The rabbit was truly happy for her fox's mother. But then she frowned. "If that's what you wanted all this time, why were you a receptionist?"

"You have to start somewhere, Judy. Didn't you tell me that you had to start as a meter maid?"

"Yeah, but that was only for two days."

"Carrots, you know how the world sees foxes. Along with ferrets and weasels, foxes have to work twice as hard as most other mammals for twice as long to prove they AREN'T the shifty mammals others think they are."

Judy slumped. "I know. It just doesn't seem fair."

Marian agreed. "It's not fair. But sometimes you have to live with the unfairness of it all, and rise above it. You know that."

"Excuse me, are you ready to order?" The trio looked up at the hippo that had addressed them. After placing their orders, Nick excused himself to the washroom. Judy caught herself watching as he retreated to the back of the restaurant.

Marian eyed the rabbit in front of her curiously.

"You know he likes you."

The rabbit's ears flushed red, and she dropped them behind her head, embarrassed at having been caught staring. "I know. We've said as much."

"It's more than that, though."

That piqued Judy's curiosity. "What do you mean?"

"Judy, you know how Nick's childhood broke him. I thought he might never come back from the path he was on."

Judy nodded. The ranger scouts. It had been a life-changing experience for him, just as her confrontation with Gideon Gray had been when she was nine years old – the same age Nick had been. The two had handled the events in polar opposite fashion, though.

"Judy, red foxes are very resistant to change. We're stubborn. So, when we change so drastically, it's almost always out of necessity. There is only one other thing that can cause such a change in us."

Judy had a suspicion she knew what was coming.
"A red fox will change for... well, for lack of a better term, their chosen mate. Whatever his chosen mate is, or wants him to be, he or she will change to try and become that. And once that process begins, it's rarely one that can be reversed. We call it bonding."

Another blush exploded on Judy's face after the word "mate". "He did tell me he loves me," the doe mumbled, pulling her ears over her face.

This seemed to surprise the vixen.

"It all came out the night Eric died. I had a nightmare, and the truth came out."

"The truth?"

"The truth about my feelings for him. I didn't want to tell him, because I'm just a bunny. But then he told me he felt the same."

Marian hummed. "Did he tell you what he did while you two were apart?"

Judy thought. "Not really, no."

"Maybe you should ask him, sometime. But my point is, you did what I never could. You turned his life around."

"I guess... but he hasn't even asked me out yet..."

The vixen cocked her head. "Is that how bunnies do it?"

"Yeah. Well, most of the time. Usually the buck asks the doe out. Sometimes it's the other way around, but that's rare."

"I'll give you a hint," Marian said conspiratorially, noticing Nick was on his way back from the washroom. "With foxes, it's the opposite. It's the vixen who leads, not the tod."

Judy blinked, and her ears went beat red at the implications. Oh, sweet cheese and crackers.

Nick glanced at Judy as he slid back onto the bench seat, noticed her blush, and turned a questioning gaze at his mother. She had a smirk on her face that he'd seen before. She was up to something.

"So, what'd I miss?"

"NOTHING! Nothing!" Judy's immediate denial made it clear that whatever the two had talked about, it was far from 'nothing'.

The trio continued to make small talk throughout their dinner hour. Nick found it a little bit odd how neither Judy nor his mother wanted to say a word about their conversation while he'd been away, but eventually passed it off as some sort of girl talk.

They found out that Marian had been promoted all the way to being the executive assistant to Furston's chief operating officer, a huge jump from receptionist. Judy couldn't help but wonder what prompted the sudden meteoric rise in position, but cast it off as some sort of corporate thing. Business politics had never been something she'd taken much interest in, though some of her siblings had gone that route. Maybe she'd ask them about it sometime.

The talk continued through their meals. Marian had attempted to question them on their own work, with both mammals regretfully telling her that they couldn't talk about their current case. An hour
later, they were getting ready to go, when Marian pulled Judy aside.

"Think about what I said, OK?"

Judy nodded, somewhat apprehensive. If they wanted to explore their feelings for each other, Judy knew they both would have to find a way to mix and match the apparent cultural differences between them. Until tonight, it hadn't even occurred to her that such a simple aspect of a relationship – who asked whom out first – was markedly different.

But what does he like to do? I've never even BEEN on a real date before, and now I have to ask HIM out?!

The rabbit doe thought through her past conversations with her sisters, trying to get some ideas from them. Dinner...movies... walks in the fields... the Carrot Days festival... video and board game nights...

Wait, dinners and movies? They'd already been doing that, hadn't they? "Well, yeah, but can you really call take-out and Pawflix a date?" Her inner voice asked. "Some apparently would," she answered back.

Maybe there was something playing in the theaters that Nick might enjoy? Something that they both would enjoy? The doe pulled her phone out of her pocket and started searching for movies that were playing in theaters. Scrolling through the options, she spotted one that sounded appealing, just as they walked back into the precinct.

Settling back into their temporary workstation, the two began reviewing the traffic camera footage again.

Two hours later, a loud whoop from the gray rabbit jerked the fox out of a boredom-induced daze, and he nearly fell over backward. Scrambling to regain his balance, he looked at the screen. There, frozen in the frame, was Wolford in his car, and from the location and timestamp, it looked like he was leaving his house about a week before his death.

They used the cameras to follow him all the way to the Savannah Central docks, but lost him amid the clutter of the shipping terminal. Still, it was something, and now that they knew where to start looking, they might be able to get some answers. It was with a giddy attitude that Judy reported the find to Bogo, who told them to clock out for the day and follow up on the lead tomorrow, a command that was obeyed by the fox with gusto.

The two mammals were walking out of the precinct when the fox decided to break the somewhat awkward silence that had existed between the two since they'd left Antonio's.

"So, Carrots, mind telling me what's troubling you?"

The rabbit's ears dropped behind her head. "What? No...Nothing! Nothing's troubling me!"

"That's a pretty obvious way of saying something IS troubling you."

Judy sighed and started nervously playing with one of her long ears. After a while, she let out another breath and looked up at the fox beside her.

"Nick, I was... I was... wondering if maybe you wanted to go to dinner or movies sometime?"

The barrage of words that assaulted Nick's ears surprised him, but after a while, he slipped back into his signature smirk.
"Fluff, we have dinner and watch movies all the time."

The doe shook her head. "No, I mean like…Have a nice dinner, and go to the theater…"

The fox stared. "You mean, like a date?"

The rabbit found the tops of her feet very interesting. "Yeah… like a date…"

"Did she really just ask me out? She DID just ask me out!" His inner voice was jumping for joy. "Of course, she asked you out! You already know she has feelings for you!"

"I mean… if you don't want to… or you want to do something else, that's fine, I just thought that, you know, maybe, we could—" The rabbit's rambling was stopped by a finger on her lips.

"Carrots, I'd love to."

Chapter End Notes

So, a little bit of fox culture and a peak at bunny culture here, and Nick and Judy finally get a new case. Forward progress!

Real world science time! When courting, fox tods will follow a vixen around until the vixen chooses to accept or reject the tod's advances. The "imprinting", the vixen leading the relationship, and changing for their desired mate is one method I'm using to implement some of this.

SO! Because there were no references to be found in the last chapter, you all get a free cookie. If you find the references in this chapter, I'll give you a second one! (They are both about Disney movies)

Coming up on April 6: First Try!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Did your neighbor's pet buffalo wake you up at 2 AM? Leave a comment!
First Try

Chapter Summary

Date night!

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: First off, sorry this is so late. My fantastic editor and friend, Daee17 and I were up until 1:30 AM trying to do the final edit of this chapter thanks to a technical glitch that prevented us from doing it sooner. Then Cruella de Vil marched in and demanded that we give her all our Dalmatians in exchange for the rights to Zootopia. Since neither of us own any Dalmatians, we didn't have any to give her, and so we still don't own Zootopia.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So, this is all the graffiti at the scene?"

"All of the relevant stuff. The rest is old enough that it had been there for quite some time before the murder."

Rivers and Nolwazi were looking at a trio of photos of the crime scene. Three separate pieces of "art" that had been painted at the same time, or close to it, as the murder. They'd also lucked out and found the used spray paint cans in the dumpster. The mammal that had had to go rooting through that dumpster was still giving them the cold shoulder.

They'd found some pawprints on the cans and those had been sent for processing to see if anyone popped up in the system. The paint had also been through the GC-MS, and had the same chemical makeup of the paint samples scraped from the wall and dumpster, and the cans couldn't have been there more than a few hours before the murder, since the dumpster had been emptied the day before. For now, though, the two detectives had to try and figure out what the graffiti meant.

"I still think this one looks like some sort of initials," Nolwazi said, pointing to a black one on the corner of the dumpster. "I'm not sure who or what it might be, though. TWB? WTB?"

The elk shrugged. "My money is on TWB. As for what it stands for, your guess is as good as mine."

The two returned their focus to the other two photos of what they'd termed "murder graffiti".

"This definitely says zoocide. But what's this jumble?"

Four hours and a pair of headaches later, the two were no closer to an answer. It wasn't any logogram-based writing, nor was it any hieroglyphs that either of the two recognized.

"That's definitely an 'M'. And that looks like an 'E'."
"No, that's not an 'E'. It's an 'F'. Look, it's part of whatever this letter here is!"

"But what four letter words do you know that start with M and end in F?"

"Miff? Muff?"

"But those letters don't look anything like 'I's' 'U's' or 'F's'! And besides, muff zoocide? That doesn't even make any sense!"

It was obvious the two were getting nowhere, and the tempers were mounting. The elk drew a deep breath and let it out.

"We obviously need another graffiti artist in here. We aren't getting anywhere."

"But where are we going to find a graffiti artist and just pick him up?"

Detective Rivers shook his head. "We can't exactly walk into Woolmart and look in the Criminals section. And last I checked, there aren't any "Taggers 'R' Us" stores in Zootopia. Maybe there's one or two in holding."

A trip through holding didn't produce any results. "I guess the only thing to do now, is keep the flag we put on graffiti artists last week up, and hope for the best."

It was another 3 days before someone was finally caught in the middle of defacing public property. On that day, 21-year-old raccoon Ricky Skikes found himself in the Sahara Square precinct's interrogation rooms, with the unfriendly faces of an elk and a lioness staring back at him.

"Mr. Skikes, you were caught vandalizing the Heat Street ZTA platform. You are aware that that's a 500 buck fine and up to 6 months in prison, yes?"

The raccoon leaned back and put his hindpaws up on the table.

"Yeah? I'll pay the fine. What's it to you, fuzz?"

The elk shrugged. "Oh nothing. Just an idea. Since this is your first offence, though, we might be able to let you off with a warning."

"Hah! You five ohs ain't gonna do shit like that unless there's something in it for you. What do ya want?"

"Nothing much. Just want to see if you can read this." Rivers put a copy of the graffiti photo on the table in front of the belligerent raccoon. The smaller grey furred predator barely glanced at the photo.

"That's it? All I gotta do is some fuckin grade school reading? Ain't you supposed to be smart and shit?"

The elk didn't take the bait. "Just read it please."

The raccoon dropped his feet from the table and leaned forward, taking the photo. After a moment, he slapped it back down. "More than a."

"What?"

"The piece. It says 'more than a'. Think you popos are missin' parta yur piece."

"How did you get that out of that jumble?"
"This shit's called wildstyle. It isn't meant to be read unless you know how to read the piece. Unless yur an artist."

Detective Longtooth leaned in and regarded the photo, trying to make out the wording.

"I still don't see it," she frowned.

With a sigh of exasperation, the raccoon asked for something to write with. Once they'd gotten a pencil for him to work with, he set about tracing the letters and breaking it down for the detectives. In the end, they ended up with several pages of how-to-read notes, as well as four drawings of the breakdown of what they'd originally thought was just a scribble.

In the end, they let Skikes go with a warning, since he'd upheld his end of the deal, and they'd ended up getting more than they were hoping for.

Once the raccoon had been led out of the room, Rivers looked at Longtooth.

"More than a zoicide."

Rivers nodded, expression grim. "Whoever this artist was, he saw something that night. Or heard something."

The lioness' expression mirrored that of her elk partner. "We need to find them."

Doug Ramses grumbled as he left the drop point, heading to the Sahara Square warehouse. These packages were supposed to have been delivered a week ago. The other cell had blamed a supply chain issue caused by a slow postal system, but the ram really didn't care. All it meant to him was that HIS cell was now behind schedule.

The new delivery van was a plus, though. After being tailed by that filthy wolf several weeks ago and offing him, they'd been forced to make a hasty exit when a cop cruiser had shown up in the area unexpectedly. The old van, along with a voice recorder and a pair of binoculars Doug had found on the wolf, were now a burnt husk in the desert several hundred miles outside the city. Given a little bit more time, the ram would have preferred either stripping it to component parts and scrapping the rest, or arranging an appropriate water burial far from land.

The next step in the plan was to test the open-air usability of their product. If it worked, they'd be ready for a more…lucrative target. He hadn't questioned what Hornby meant or was planning when he said that, but he assumed it was just another part of the plan to turn prey against predator.

The Night Savages had started it initially with Bellwether over a year ago, but that plan had failed. Fortunately, the sheep had remembered the consequences of ratting anyone out, but her carelessness had landed her and much of her cell in jail.

*I suppose it's fortunate that that idiot rabbit vigilante and her fox cohort couldn't provide enough evidence to find me*, the ram thought as he finally pulled into the warehouse garage. Woolter, Jesse, and himself had been forced to lay low for a few months until the heat had blown over. They'd then been joined with Damian Hornby as part of his crew.

Speaking of the devils…

"They finally make the drop, Doug?" Damian Hornby inquired, eyeing the van with some amount of hope.
"Yep. Six devices. Almost ready to go. We just have to synth enough product to fill them and drop them off in the right places."

"How do they work?"

"They are a miniature, high-pressure version of the lab setup that we use. They render what is supposed to be a super concentrated version of the product into an aerosol, and it goes where the wind takes it."

"You said super concentrated."

"Yeah. The stuff we tried on the ocelot and rabbit last week was getting close, but we'll need to water it down even less for these things to have the effect we want. And we have to pack a lot of product into the smaller pressure cannisters and fill the other ones with air."

"And how much product will we need?"

"About thirty litres for all five of these. The last one we'll keep as a spare. The trick is the size of these things. They'll only fit in duffel bags your size or bigger."

The Texas longhorn groaned. Finding larger mammals to make discreet deliveries was difficult. Perhaps the Elders could task one of the other cells with the delivery. He would think on that. If push came to shove, they could hide the devices under the sewer grates at night. As long as they didn't get any hoof or pawprints on the devices and treated them as they had the rest of their lab equipment, and sterilized them, they should be fine, should one fall into the wrong hooves.

"Well, we should have enough supplies to make this batch of Night Savage, but we'll need to restock before phase 2. What about locations?"

"Mojave Strip is probably the best bet. It's the most populous, especially around the Palm Hotel." Doug's voice betrayed no emotion as he spoke, as though just describing taking out the trash.

"Then the Hotel is what we'll hit. Preparations should take about a week or so, if we start today and have the equipment working around the clock. You get Felicity on the line and work out a schedule to get this done."

Without another word, Damian Hornby turned and walked to the warehouse's office area. As run down as the warehouse itself was, the office area was quite modern looking and comfortable, though most of the space went unused. Entering his office, he shut and locked the door, sat at the desk and dialed a secure line.

"Yes?" said the voice on the other end.

"We have the delivery. We will need a week to process it. The Palm Hotel is requesting five units as quickly as possible."

"Any complications with the courier?" Any chance the drop was compromised, or another cop followed you?

"No, the courier did fine. No damage at all."

"And you say the Palm Hotel is requesting a sample?"

"A five-unit sample, yeah."
"Excellent. This will make a good demonstration for our product. Please be sure that it goes off without a hitch. We don't want to lose this opportunity for purity."

"Purity we shall have."

About 30 minutes later, a mammal near the top of one of the tallest buildings in Savannah Central hung up his phone. The large windows along two walls of his opulent office gave him a panoramic view of the gleaming city. A symbol of unity and prosperity. A symbol of peace between prey and predator.

A lie.

Predators had no place in the world. Savages. Killers at the core. He'd been working on a plan to get rid of them for quite some time now, and there had been a few missteps – Bellwether's bumbling of the political aspect was one. She let her personal vendetta against Lionheart take precedence over the goal, so now they had to do something even more drastic in order to turn the population against predators. To make them see just what predators truly were.

She was also a fool, doing nothing to throw that police rabbit off their trail. At least she hadn't sung like a canary, though there wasn't much damage she could do even if she did. The only other contact she knew besides the three rams in Hornby's cell was long dead. He wouldn't be talking.

Once enough of the population was turned against them, they could turn their focus back to the political arena and introduce methods that would allow them to slowly work towards the ultimate ideal: Total eradication of predators from Zootopia, and finally achieving a true utopian society for animals. Filth excluded.

He'd also made a misstep of his own when he'd argued against bidding on the city contract for the Night Howler antidote, but even that had been a blessing in disguise. Ultimately, it had given his group access to all the necessary data, and the increased profits could be more easily distributed where it needed to be.

Doing that without mammals figuring it out was a challenge. He'd had to take care of his previous personal assistant when they'd started asking questions.

At least the new one would be the perfect fall mammal if things went south.

On that note, the mammal keyed his intercom. "Yes sir?" from a prey mammal, the voice might have seemed pleasant, even excited or friendly.

Not from filth.

"Get me the latest reports for the R&D department. Financial numbers too."

"Right away, sir."

To everyone else, he was a company mammal, committed to making the Furston name a success. Until the time was right, that's the role he would play. So, for now, he needed to act like he was concerned with the ongoing research into the Night Howler antidote and any further lucrative marketing contracts for it, now that the supposed crisis had passed.

Of course, he knew that demand for the antidote would spike in a very short time. And if the cards fell right, no one would know what had happened. Night howlers would of course be suspected, but with no evidence to point to a culprit, what could anyone do?
A cruel smile crept over the face of the mammal as he again gazed out over the gleaming city. A city that would be effectively destroyed and rebuilt in the way it should be. It would take some time, but James McStripeson was a very patient mammal. He could wait. He just needed to move all his pawns into place.

One week later

A week. It had been a week since she'd asked Nick out. A week of hoping and thinking and giddiness and nerves. And other things too.

Like the case. The two had managed to find six more instances of Wolford coming and going from his home. He'd always gone to the same dead zone area of the Savannah Central docks and stayed there for anywhere from a few minutes to several hours, and then he would usually drive home. He never took the same route, and always seemed to make random turns, making his return trip two or three times as long.

When the duo had gone to scout out the area, they'd found that most of the area warehouses had cameras that might be able to be used to further track the wolf's comings and goings. The warrant for the footage was still in the works though, which meant they didn't have anything else to go on at the moment. They'd tried asking a few of the working mammals there if they'd seen Wolford, but so far had come up empty.

There wasn't anything else to do though, so they'd gone home for the day, Judy, for once to her own apartment. Today was special, so showing up for her very first date with Nick in jeans and a t-shirt wouldn't be the best idea. She'd bought a nice dress – simple, yet elegant, and green, matching her fox's eyes.

Getting ready took longer for the rabbit than usual. Normally a quick shower with shampoo and conditioner and a few minutes with a towel – the communal showers in her apartment building didn't have a furdryer – was enough for the day. This time though, she spent a little more time with both. She knew she didn't necessarily have to impress Nick, but she figured he'd appreciate the effort.

Of course, her neighbors were providing their usual commentary.

"Dude, I cooked dinner last night! YOU cook dinner!"

"No, I cooked for the last two nights, it's your turn!"

"I cooked the Chef's Delight Gourmet veggies last night!"

"No, that was on Wednesday! Today's Friday!"

Judy piped up. "If you REALLY need to know, Bucky, YOU were the one that microwaved your guys' dinner last night. It's Pronk's turn."

The wall went silent for a few seconds.

"See, even the bunny agrees with me! Go fix dinner!"

"Shut up, Bucky, I'm going!"

"You shut up!"

"How about you BOTH shut up! I'm trying to get ready here!"
The wall went silent again.

"Getting ready? For what?"

"Are you going out, bunny?"

"Who would she be going out with?"

"Her fox lover, you idiot."

"You mean Nick? Are they actually an item?"

"Dude, where do you think she's been for most of the last month? And who she's been talking to on the nights she HAS been here?"

"SHUT UP you two! PLEASE! Just go make your dinners!"

Her phone rang as she was taking a last look at herself in the mirror. Her Zuber was here. With an "Oh, thank cabbages!" the rabbit doe pulled on a coat and grabbed her keys and purse, flying out the door, ears almost aflame.

Nick was just putting the finishing touches on his outfit when he heard the knock at the door. Curious, he headed down the hallway and looked through the peephole. All he could see was a pair of long ears, so it wasn't too difficult to figure out who it was. He opened the door.

"Carrots, you have my spare key. You know you can just—" The fox stopped as he took in the sight of Judy standing before him with a vase and a bouquet of flowers and a nervous smile. He wasn't a florist by any means, but he recognized red tulips, blue violets, and white carnations.

"…Carrots… What's this?"

Judy's ears dropped, and she suddenly became very interested in the floor. Seeing her reaction, he tried to backtrack.

"I mean…they're beautiful. But why?"

The bunny's drooping ears flushed. "I … Well, I just thought that… I wanted to give you something. I know it's just our first date, but—"

The fox, realizing his faux pas, silenced her by stooping down and putting a paw on her shoulder. "Judy, they're beautiful, and they are even more special that they are from you."

The rabbit's ears perked up, and a smile started tugging at her lips.

"Come on, let's put them on the coffee table and get going."

Breaking into a grin, the rabbit followed him into his familiar apartment, and set the flowers down on the coffee table. She was glad that Nick seemed to appreciate the gift, though she wondered why he'd been surprised. Do foxes not give flowers to their dates?

The doe knew there would be differences between the way foxes and rabbits did things. Maybe flowers meant something different to foxes? Judy made a mental note to ask at some point. She didn't want anything to be taken the wrong way.

The two mammals made their way out the door. Judy had chosen a small English diner a few blocks
from Nick's apartment, easy walking distance. The walk to the diner was spent in comfortable conversation, ranging from the protest they'd had to shut down that afternoon, to the weather.

Nick and Judy got more than a few odd looks, both from passersby and from the staff and patrons of the diner when they arrived. Seated in a booth near the back and immediately ordering their drinks, both opting for some soda pop instead of an alcoholic option as they looked over the menu for a few moments.

"I'm thinking the English style haddock." Of course, the fox would go for fish. Judy smiled to herself and shook her head.

"I don't know how you can eat that."

"Hey! Don't knock it 'til you try it!"

"You can have your fish, Slick. I'm having the chick pea and coconut curry."

Nick looked at her curiously. "Is that something you have at home?"

"No, but it looks good. I've never had it before, actually."

"Brave bunny."

"You know it, buster."

Nick laughed and folded his menu down. The waiter came over to get their orders, and the two turned their attention back to each other. Judy seemed to be fighting an internal debate, something Nick picked up on.

"What's up, Fluff?"

The rabbit hesitated.

"I have a question, Nick."

"Shoot."

"I don't have a gun," Judy smirked

"You know what I meant."

"Did I?" Judy's smirk grew. "Yes, yes I did."

The fox grinned and shook his head. "So, what was your question, Carrots?"

The rabbit thought about how she would phrase it. "Nick, last week, when we were having dinner with your mom, she mentioned something called 'bonding'. What is that? I mean, I assume it's some sort of attachment, but what is it exactly?"

Nick blinked. He didn't remember that part of the conversation. When the hell had that part happened?

"Carrots, bonding is something that is...well, it's very personal to foxes. Some other canids too, but I don't know much about that."

Judy's ears were perked forward, completely focussed on Nick.
"Judy, foxes mate for life." Judy opened her mouth to speak, but closed it when Nick continued.

"When a fox is single, they take their time to find the right mate. We'll date for a long time before settling down. But when we do settle down, it's permanent."

Nick took a breath. If someone had told him 2 years ago he'd be explaining fox courtship to a rabbit, he would have laughed in that mammal's face, and conned them out of their wallet.

"When we date, we look for a connection to the mammal we're dating. I suppose that's true for any mammal, but for foxes, that connection is a little more permanent. Hard-wired, I guess. A holdover from our... more primitive days. The thing is, these days, the connection is very specific. It only really forms with the right mammal."

Judy was puzzled. "Does that mean that you can only marry if you find the mammal you can bond with?"

"Not necessarily, no. The bond can form over time with pretty much any fox, just like love, if you let it, but it's much stronger if... well... if the right parameters are met. Stronger, and more personal."

"Parameters?"

"It depends on the fox. I can't speak for others, but for me, it was -- is -- well... you."

Judy was a bit surprised. "Me?"

"You. You had a goal that you wanted to be a police officer? Help others and make the world a better place? Something no bunny has ever done before? Break the stereotype of your species?"

"Not in so many words, but yeah. I wanted to make the world a better place."

"Now think back to what I told you about the Junior Ranger Scouts. You remember what the pledge was?"

The doe nodded.

"'I, Nicholas Wilde, promise to be brave, loyal, helpful, and trustworthy.' Does that sound at all similar to anything else?"

Judy thought for a moment. "It sounds like the oath we took as police officers."

Nick nodded.

"So, after the ranger scouts, we have a fox that is sure that society won't let him be anything other than shifty and untrustworthy. And that's exactly what he decides to be. But maybe he doesn't necessarily want that. And after 23 years, he's starting to believe that's all he'll ever be. His dream is dead, and he is getting closer and closer to doing something that might end with him in a jail cell or worse. Then, along comes a bunny. Now, bunnies are supposed to be fragile, meek mammals, right? Not this bunny. This bunny is out to prove that anyone can be anything. And for the first time in 23 years, the fox's dream is reignited. What's more, the bunny gives the fox the tools he needs to live that dream."

"I didn't give you any tools, Nick."

"Belief in a mammal is a powerful tool, Judy."

"But I screwed up. And I—"
“—and you learned from your mistake, and came back to fix it. And you still believed in me, Judy. You know what mistake I made? I stopped believing in myself. And it took 23 years and someone else's help to fix that one. And when that happened, well, that's how the bond started to form for me.”

"Started to?"

"This kind of bond is always building. Love is…is the emotional part of the bond, but there's also a mental component."

Judy cocked her head as Nick continued. "When the bond starts to form, foxes find it very difficult to, well, move on if something happens. And once we take another as a mate for the first time, that's it. We aren't even capable of taking another."

The rabbit's eyes went wide. She remembered something else that Marian had said. "Nick, do you mean to tell me that you'd already started to bond when…when I…"

"Had the press conference? Yeah."

Judy's ears drooped. "And that…interrupted it?" Nick nodded. She was about to apologize again, but Nick stopped her.

"I think we went over that just a few minutes ago, fluff butt. You made a mistake. This isn't the time to dwell on it. Forget the mistakes of the past. We're here now, right?"

Judy's ears perked up slightly.

"Come on. Let's talk about something else."

Judy liked that idea. "Got something in mind?"

"Hmmm, maybe. I just told you all about foxes and bonding. I think it's your turn to share something about bunnies."

"Ummm… What do you want to know?"

"Well, you seemed a bit surprised at the idea of bonding. How do bunnies…date?"

Of course, he would choose that topic. "Well, for one thing, bunnies…well some stereotypes are true. Bunnies are a little bit more…free during dating. Most of us, well…experiment and mess around during high school. We are monogamous though. That's one thing that's changed for us. It didn't used to be that way."

"Anyway, when we do date, we stop seeing any other mammals, and when we take a mate, it's for life too. At least that's how most bunnies are. There are more traditionalist groups that shun the idea of monogamy, and of course not every family is as big as mine."

Nick chuckled. "I have no doubt. Could you imagine the cost of raising your three hundred something siblings here in the city? You and I can barely afford our apartments and we work full time!"

"We are police officers, Nick. Not exactly the most financially rewarding career on the block."

"True that. Still…" Nick looked into the rabbit's eyes. "I wouldn't trade it for the world."

Judy blushed again and let her ears drop, just as the waiter came to serve them their meals.
"I agree though. My parents would never be able to afford the space to raise all of us here in the city."

The two dug into their meals before Nick spoke up again.

"What's Bunnyburrow like? I've never been there."

"It's what you'd expect, really. Bunnyburrow itself is a small town, and it's surrounded by farmland. My family's farm is one of the largest, and we're just outside the town limits. It's mostly bunnies, but there are some other prey species and a few predator families out there."

"Sounds like it's not as crazy as the city is."

"Oh, trust me, Slick, in my parent's burrow, it's a whole DIFFERENT kind of crazy. Try to think of a hotel that doesn't have room service, a decent sized business, a youth camp, and family life all mashed under one roof. Then mix that all together and you'll have an idea what life at my parent's place is like."

Nick's ears were a little flat by the end of that.

"Of course, with a family that size in close quarters, nothing stays a secret. Someone's going to find out. Who did what when with whom, who put salt in the sugar dispensers, who took a joyride on the combine harvester."

The ears of the fox perked up at that. "So, if I ask your sisters, they'll be able to tell me all about your life growing up?"

"If your fishing for my past experience, Nick, I'm afraid you'll be disappointed."

Nick frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I was the weird one. Well, one of the weirdest, anyways. I wasn't what you call a typical bunny."

"Hate to break it to you Carrots, but you're still not a typical bunny. And to be honest, I hope you never are."

Judy's ears flushed red at that, and she dropped them behind her head.

"What I mean is…. I never dated. At least I never went on a date my parents didn't set up. I was never asked."

The fox was shocked.

"Why?"

Judy shook her head. "The few dates I did have, the bucks didn't care an asparagus stalk for my hopes and dreams. They figured does should just stay home and pop out kits. I didn't want that. Plus, it kind of made the rounds in the school that I wanted to be a police officer, and that's just something bunnies don't do. I was bullied a lot too."

Nick's ears lay flat. "Who bullied you? How?"

"Lots of mammals. Gideon Grey in particular. When I was nine, I told everyone I wanted to be a cop. He taunted me. And then he was harassing my friends and I stood up to him. He pushed me down, and..."

Judy looked down at Nick's paw. She took it in her own and brought it up to her left cheek. Nick looked confused. She moved his paw around for a moment and then stopped. Nick frowned and shifted his paw slightly. He thought he felt…there. Three raised bumps. Lines actually. Three raised lines.

The fox parted her fur and stared, shocked at the three scars.

"Are those… Claw marks?"

The rabbit nodded.

"This Gideon Grey clawed you?" Nick smoothed down the rabbit's fur, and dropped his paw back to the table.

"Yep."

"What happened to this rabbit?"

"He's…he's a fox, Nick."

Nick's ears went flat against his skull. His mind shot back to the first time he'd ever seen real fear on Judy's face. When he'd confronted her after her press conference. She'd been bullied by a predator, a fox no less, and he'd been bullied by prey. And he'd inadvertently forced her to live through that traumatic moment all over again.

No wonder she'd gone for her fox spray.

"Nick, what's wrong?"


"It's OK, Nick, really. Past mistakes behind us, right? Besides, Gideon's a completely different mammal now."

"How so?"

"Well, he's like night and day compared to how he used to be. He's partnered with my parents and he runs a bakery in Bunnyburrow. He's actually a really nice mammal now."

The fox gave his rabbit date a very cynical look.

"He is. He actually gave me the clue that I needed to help us solve the Night Howler case!"

"How so?"

Judy spent the next few minutes telling Nick about how she reconnected with Gideon for the first time since high school.

"Wait, how did you not know the Night Howlers nickname?"

"I only studied them in school and saw them on the farm. No one ever used the nickname around me, and I never really had any reason to look up any information on them. I never actually worked the fields at the farm. I mostly manned the sales stand and took care of some of the younger litters."
That's when I wasn't doing volunteer work at the Bunnyburrow sheriff's department."

Nick laughed. "You actually volunteered there?"

Judy gave the fox a funny look. "Of course. I wanted to be a cop ever since I was 8 years old. I figured I'd have a better chance if I helped out somewhere first. They mostly had me sorting paperwork and answering the phone, and I always had supervision, but it got me some experience, and I was happy."

Nick was still snickering. "Why am I not surprised that you did that?"

"OK, Chuckles. I think it's time you did a little sharing of your own now."

That stopped the laughter. "What do you want to know?"

Judy hesitated. "Do you ever wonder where you might be if those mammals had let you in to the Ranger Scout group?"

The fox shook his head. "No. I don't. There's no use dwelling on it, and if I had ended up joining…"

Nick trailed off, looking down at his now empty plate. After a moment he was a little startled by a small paw that squeezed his own. He looked up into Judy's eyes, eyes that were full of curiosity and more than a little compassion.

"If you had ended up joining…?" She prompted softly.

"If I had ended up joining, then I may never have met you."

Judy blushed, and Nick could see her eyes get a little watery.

"But you would've had a better life…"

"I have a better life now."

The two mammals stared into each other's eyes, when an 'ahem' caught their attention. Shaking themselves out of the trance, they looked over to see the waiter standing before them.

"Would you two care to see the desert menu?"

The two small mammals looked at each other, silently conversing, before Judy spoke up. "Sure, let's have a look."

The waiter left them with a pair of desert menus. Nick immediately latched on to the blueberry pie. Judy wasn't really interested in desert, so they agreed to share a slice.

It turned out to be the right choice, since they only had slices sized for mammals about as big as a wolf. The two dug into the culinary creation, just enjoying each other's company for the moment. They had a little bit of a disagreement over who should pay the bill in the end, with both insisting that they pay the bill. In the end, they compromised, with Nick finally relenting when Judy said he could pay for the next one.

As the two walked back to Nick's apartment, the bunny sidled up next to Nick, looping her arm around his and worming her paw into his own. She smiled to herself, leaned her head against him as they walked, breathing in his scent.

This night couldn't have gone better.
Chapter End Notes

Little bit of fluff before things start to heat up… }:-D Oh, dear, what will happen next?

A little side note on "bonding". It's not meant to be infatuation or anything like that, and despite the confusing (possibly) description, it is possible for foxes to be unfaithful or to move on if their partner dies. Bonding in this case is meant to be a sort of a literal interpretation of "till death do us part". I promise though, I won't go all religious on you guys.

SO! Several people caught the Moana reference in the last chapter (it really wasn't hidden at all), but NO ONE caught the hidden Jungle Book reference! So half a cookie for those of you that found the Moana reference. In this chapter, I've gone back to Zootopia fandom references. Can you find it? I'll give you a hint, it's not a fanfic, but is, instead, a person whose works got me on the WildeHopps ship.

Coming up on April 20: Hunting for Leads!

As a side note: There is only one kind of comment I will remove from any of the locations this story is posted. I will speak very clearly here. You can criticize me, or my story, or my writing style. But I will NOT tolerate comments attacking first responders, be they police, fire, EMS, or military. That will get you an instant removal and, where available, a block.

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Want to complain about your roommate leaving puddles of grease on the stove? Leave a comment!
The alarm had barely chirped before a grey paw had reached over to shut it off. It was with even more vigour and enthusiasm than normal that she got ready for work. She felt great. Aside from a few minor faux pas on both of their parts, last night had gone perfectly.

She couldn’t wait to see Nick today. She couldn’t really explain why, though. She just felt like she needed to be near him. The rabbit flew through her morning routine, grabbing her keys and coat and bolting out the door, much to the bewilderment of her loudmouthed neighbours, who wondered if the rabbit had downed a six pack of energy drinks.

In her haste though, she almost barrelled over a certain fox. A certain russet coloured fox carrying two drinks, along with a sack of eats. She stood there in surprise, not expecting to literally run into Nick on her way out the door.

*Well there goes the idea of surprising him with breakfast*, the rabbit thought as her nose, though nowhere near as sensitive as a fox’s, picked out a blueberry bagel and a carrot muffin.

"Well, good morning to you, Officer Energy. Hope you’re not here to arrest this poor fox, who’s only bringing a humble gift for his rabbit. You wouldn’t happen to have seen her, would you? She’s about your size, and looks a lot like you."

Judy had to resist the temptation to punch him, knowing if she did, the drinks would probably not survive. Instead she jumped up and lightly smacked him on the side of the head.

"OW! Ma’am, I'd say that's excessive use of force."

The rabbit rolled her eyes. "Very funny, Nick."

Her fox grinned. "You know you love me."

"I'd love you a lot more if you paw over that carrot latte and muffin."
A grimace. "Oh. Ouch. You wound me, Fluff. This is what a fox gets for bringing his bunny breakfast? Whatever happened to manners? Why—"

Rather than wait for him, Judy jumped up and snatched the bag of food from the fox. She rumbled around in it, making a mental note of the variety of donuts that was also in there, before claiming her prize and pawing the rest back to the confounded canid. She couldn't help the smug smirk that crossed her muzzle as she started walking towards the train station, munching on her carrot delicacy along the way.

"Thank you, you dumb, lovable fox," she called over her shoulder

The fox shook his head and hurried to catch up with the smaller mammal, grinning like an idiot the whole time. She'd caught him off guard, and won the game he'd planned to play on her without even trying. She'd hustled him good. A light chuckle escaped him as he watched Judy. She had a real bounce in her step today. Not that she didn't on other days, but today it was really noticeable.

He wondered if it was for the same reason he'd woken up early today. Normally, for a nocturnal animal like Nick, getting out of bed before noon was a difficult task at the best of times. But lately, the fox had been waking himself up earlier and earlier. He told himself that it was important for his job, but he knew the real reason was so that he'd get to see Carrots that much sooner.

Around them, the steady stream of mammals grew thicker the nearer they got to the subway station, and both of them had to start dodging around the footsteps of larger mammals. The platform was crowded, but they were able to worm their way through without getting separated, though that may have had something to do with the death grip they had on each other's paws.

Of course, if the platform is crowded, the train itself is twice as crowded. Standing room only, except for one small seat near the back of the car. Spotting it, Judy pulled Nick over to it and unceremoniously pushed him down into the seat. Nick was about to object, when Judy hopped up on his lap, turned, and plopped herself down, returning to eating the rest of her carrot muffin and sipping her latte.

For a moment neither moved, but then Judy heard the fox behind her whisper.

"If you wanted to use me as a seat cushion, all you had to do was ask, Carrots."

Judy froze and felt her ears and face flush red.

"I even come with a built-in blanket."

Judy was sure she would burst into flames.

"And of course, lumbar support and massages."

The doe wanted to dig a hole in the floor and crawl into it. But since you can't do that in a metal train car, she did the next best thing. She twisted and gave the fox a firm punch on the shoulder, before settling back down.

After Nick had finished complaining about the pain the punch had caused him, they spent the ride in comfortable silence. That is, until Judy's ears picked up on some mammals whispering above the din of the train and the various commuters, large and small. Zeroing in on the source, she found herself staring at a pair of llamas. The two were quiet enough that she couldn't quite make out what they were saying, but it was obvious from their gestures that they were talking about herself and Nick.

She lightly elbowed her fox to get his attention, and gestured to the pair. Nick's focus on them must
have triggered something, because the two ruminants looked up and locked gazes. Where Judy's and Nick's held a bit of curiosity and concern, the two llamas' held nothing but disgust and contempt. The staring contest continued until the two llamas backed down, turned their backs on the couple, and went back to their conversation.

Judy looked up at Nick, who just shook his head as the train slowed to a stop at the next station. Mammals shuffled around to let those that needed to get off do so, and in the process the two llamas headed out of the train too. They were almost out the sliding doors, when Judy's sensitive ears picked up on them again.

"Filthy inter sickos."

Her ears snapped up so fast they smacked Nick in the muzzle and eyes. Shoving the last of her muffin and latte into Nick's paw, she made a move to hop down from Nick's lap, only to be stopped by a paw on her shoulder.

She glanced up at the fox as the doors slid shut again, who simply shook his head. She understood the meaning. Not the time, Carrots. Nodding, she settled back down, not really interested in taking a seat in any one of the new vacancies that opened up.

Deep down, she knew Nick was right. The llamas hadn't outright done anything wrong, so getting in their face about it would only make the matter worse. The rabbit let out a breath. Never let them see that they get to you.

She pushed the llamas out of her mind for the time being as the train jerked, jolted, and rolled towards the next station in the line. After another 10 minutes and two more station stops, the two smallest officers of the ZPD got up off the seat, Judy elbowing Nick for another comment he'd made, and made their way to the doors.

The two headed towards the precinct, passing through Savannah Central Park. Around them, mammals went about their daily lives, blissfully unaware of the dangers faced by the animals that protected them. Judy couldn't help but marvel at the thought that she had once been that way. Sure, she knew there were a few bad apples, but she'd been forced to go through a somewhat shocking wake-up in her time in the city.

All in all, though, she was happy. She had her dream career, and now, a male that supported and encouraged her in that department. Life couldn't be better, she decided. She resisted the temptation to take Nick’s paw in her own as they entered the ZPD building. Clawhauser was at his desk and engrossed in his Gazelle apps, as usual. The cheetah was the unofficial head of the Precinct One Gazelle fan club, of which Judy knew Chief Bogo was also a closet member. She'd seen him dancing at the concert and it had taken everything she had not to laugh. She had decided not to point it out to Nick, though, knowing he'd likely use it to aggravate the chief and get them a month of parking duty.

Clawhauser was also the most reliable source to go to when you needed gossip on a fellow officer, as Nick had found out very early on, much to the rabbit's chagrin. She was sure Delgado would never live down the scene he'd caused when Nick had replaced his coffee sweetener with fine ground soap one day.

The bubbly chubby cheetah looked up as they approached his desk, his face lighting up at the sight of his favourite fox and rabbit.

"Nick, Judy! Good morning!"
The rabbit grinned and hopped up on the cheetah's desk. "Good morning, Benji!"

Nick gave the cheetah his signature two fingered salute. "'Morning, Spots. Anything churning around the rumour mill this morning?"

"Well, Wolford's little brother just applied for the police academy. Said it was a way of honouring his brother. He just finished 4 years in the military too, so he's going to be a top-notch recruit."

The rabbit had a huge grin of excitement on her face. "That's great!"

"Fangmeyer, though…Liz isn't doing so good. She just put in for another week of time off."

Judy's ears drooped, and Nick felt a pang of sadness. Of all the members of precinct one, Fangmeyer had taken Wolford's loss the hardest, harder even than Judy. Those at Precinct one knew that the large Siberian tigress had had a very close friendship with the wolf, having been paired with him for several years.

"Some of us are pooling money for a little consolation gift for her. If you—" Clawhauser never had the chance to finish what he was going to say before Judy jumped up on his desk and slapped a 20-buck bill in his palm. He was further stunned speechless when Nick followed that up with his own a second or two later.

The rabbit smiled at Nick and turned back to the cheetah. "Liz needs to know that we care about her. That's all I have in my wallet right now, but let me know if you need more. Whatever it takes to bring her back."

Clawhauser nodded, tears forming in his eyes. In the short time she'd been with the ZPD, Judy had become widely known as having one of the biggest hearts on the force. Every single one of their charity drives and fundraisers, she'd given a sizable chunk of time and money for. He perked up a second later.

"OH! The chief said he left something for you on your desk. Something related to your case I think? Anyway, he said it was something you needed."

Judy's ears shot up from their droopy position. That could only mean the warrants had come through.

"Thanks Benny! We better check that out."

"Catch you lateRRRRR!" Nick was about to give his usual two fingered salute as a farewell, but found himself dragged by the paw towards the cubicles.

As the two small mammals walked away, the rabbit releasing the fox from his makeshift leash, Benjamin Clawhauser sighed. They were close. Oh, so close. It took everything in him to not squeal already. As he watched, Judy lightly shoved at Nick, probably in retaliation for something he said.

"Anything yet?"

The portly cheetah looked at the source of the voice. Officers Higgins and Krumpanski were standing next to the desk, eyes on the retreating forms of the rabbit and fox. Clawhauser shook his head.

"Their scents are intermingled, but that could be from spending so much time together. They aren't acting any different around each other, either."

"But they are seeing each other, right?"
"It's not enough. The betting pool is on until we can confirm that they are actually dating, or more."

Pennington, who had joined the group just as the two watched officers disappeared into the cubicle farm, sighed. "If those two don't do something soon, I'm gonna throw them both in a shared straightjacket and a holding cell until they sort this out."

Higgins scoffed. "Yeah and you'd only do that on the days that's convenient for you. I see where you're going with this."

The elephant shrugged. "What can I say? I need a new TV, and I've got a lot riding on those two."

The other three mammals laughed. "We all have a lot riding on them. Me, I want to get more Gazelle shirts and posters."

"Benny, I've seen your collection of shirts and posters. You have more than anyone else in the city!"

"Hey! No one can ever have enough posters and shirts of the Angel with Horns!"

Nick looked over the warrant details as his partner drove. Six warehouses had security cameras in the area they needed, and they had warrants for all of them. The folder had been lying on Judy's desk when they'd first stepped foot into their shared cubicle, the rabbit almost bouncing up and down in her enthusiasm upon seeing it sitting there. She'd practically dragged Nick down to the motor pool in her eagerness to get on the road.

"So, Carrots, how do we play this? Good cop, bad cop? Smart cop, dumb cop? Or maybe we should both be the 'dumb grunts'?"

Judy shook her head, eyes still on the road. "Just be yourself, Nick. Actually, you know what? That might be a bad idea. For the love of cabbages, though, PLEASE don't aggravate everyone you see."

The fox gave her a faux-shocked look. "I'm wounded Carrots. Truly devastated. Why would you even think that of me? A fox is suave and classy at all times."

"Yeah, keep dreaming, Slick. I see how you are every morning with the Chief. Honestly, it's a shock that we haven't been put on parking duty permanently because of that."

"Oh, come on, Fluff, you know he loves us. Besides, he wouldn't put his star officers on something as menial as meter maid duty."

"And yet, he did while you were at the academy."

"That's because you didn't have a fox partner back then."

Judy sighed. She knew that getting him to tone it down would likely be a lost cause. She just hoped that none of the warehouse staff took issue with the fox's style of humour. She really didn't want to fight anyone to serve the warrants.

The two lapsed into a comfortable silence for a while before Nick spoke up again.

"So, Carrots, what do you think the chances are that we'll get what we need from these cameras? Shitty, off the shelf cameras?"

"Language, Nick. And I hope so. Right now, it's the only lead we have. Wolford never gave his list of CIs to the chief, so we're stuck figuring out who or what his lead might have been from camera footage. Maybe you'd like the alternative though. Questioning every mammal in the Savannah.
Central docks?" The rabbit glanced over at her partner with a huge smirk on her face. Nick, on the other hand had paled at the idea.

Being the busiest port area in Zootopia, the Savannah Central docks had thousands of employees that worked in the area, for dozens of different companies. Questioning everyone individually would take months.

"I think I'll pass on that one, Carrots. I really don't want to spend the rest of my life asking 'Have you seen this mammal' over and over and over again."

"I didn't think so."

"Any idea why Wolford never gave his list of CIs to the chief? Seems to be a bit of a complication if something happens and the officer isn't able to continue the investigation."

"A lot of CIs and officers are like that. If every officer in the precinct knew of Wolford's confidential informants, they wouldn't be very confidential. Wolford probably kept notes somewhere, but so far, no one's been able to find anything."

"Think his killer made off with the evidence?"

"No idea. But if he did, we can count that evidence as compromised and inadmissible."

The fox nodded. With the chain of custody compromised, any evidence they got off Wolford's killers would be sketchy at best and inadmissible on its own.

The two small ZPD officers pulled up to the first warehouse in their list, a relatively new building near the container yard. Climbing out of their cruiser and heading in the door, they were greeted by a fairly modern reception area, complete with the usual desk, this one about the same size as the one Clawhauser used back at the precinct. There was just one major difference. There was no one sitting at it.

The two glanced around for a moment. No one seemed to be in sight. There were a few side offices, but they were all empty. Another door with a keypad on it that lead with the warehouse proper, marked with a sign saying 'employees only. And on the wall next to the reception desk, a button labelled "push for assistance".

A button that was out of both mammal's reach.

The two walked up to the button and stared at it, a good 6 feet off the ground. The rabbit bunched up the muscles in her legs, before letting go, flying up to the button, which she punched with a fist before falling back down. Her ears picked up the faint sound of a buzzer from the warehouse.

After a minute or two, the door opened, and a large hippo – larger than Higgins and definitely more…abundant… walked into the room.

Thomas Mahoney did not like being called away from his duties. Especially not so early in the day, so when the reception buzzer sounded, he let out a loud groan before heading towards the sound of the interruption. He pulled open the door to the office area, and headed to the reception desk.

"I'm sorry. We've been dealing with a very large shipment in the back. Can I help…Hello?" The hippo glanced around, not seeing anyone.

"Excuse me? Down here," a male voice said. The hippo's eyes dropped to see a rabbit and a fox in
police uniform standing just to the side of the reception desk.

The hippo's eyes narrowed at the fox. Turning to the rabbit, he spoke in a decidedly cooler tone. "What do you want?"

The rabbit frowned. Instead the fox continued to speak. "Officer Wilde, sir, and this is my partner, Officer Hopps. We—"

"I wasn't talking to you, fox. Now get out before I throw you out."

This time the rabbit spoke up. "Sir, we are here to serve a warrant." She held out a document. "We need access to your surveillance systems for the past three weeks."

"And just what are you looking for?"

"Sorry, sir, but all I can say is that it's part of an ongoing investigation."

Frowning, the hippo took the tiny document from the rabbit's paws, and placed it on the reception desk, grabbing a magnifying glass to read it. While he read, he kept his eye on the two other mammals. The rabbit stood respectfully, waiting for him to finish reading, while the fox wandered about, looking at various things.

The document was full of legalese, but it was clear that he had no choice but to give the officer access to the surveillance equipment. However… "Fine. You can come with me. The fox has to get off the property though. I will not have anything go missing while we are settling this matter."

The rabbit shook her head. "No can do, sir. Officer Wilde is my partner. He's here for my safety, just as I am here for his. So, you can let us both in, or we'll have to arrest you for obstruction of justice."

"That's in addition to the clear workplace violations I can see here," said the fox.

The hippo was ready to throttle the filthy fox. "Listen here, you—"

"I mean, the large reception desk, that's OK. Everyone needs a desk that's sized right for them. But the fact is, the ring bell for service button? Not many small mammals could hope to reach that. Same with the keypad on your warehouse door, the lowest door handles for your washrooms, and the seating in the waiting area. No provisions for smaller mammals at all."

The rabbit nodded, and continued the fox's commentary. "Now, that's a 5000 buck fine for each violation and a citation to have the problems corrected. Not exactly cheap. Normally, I'd let you off with a warning though, but if you keep an officer from doing their job, I just can't do that. And if that's all I can see just by glancing around, I'm sure that the inspectors would find a lot more violations once we bring them in."

The hippo was seeing red. The fox had threatened him, and the foolish rabbit had gone along with it! Still, as much as he hated foxes for their thieving, dishonest ways, he had to admit, he was in a bind. It would be a death sentence for his career if they went through on their threat.

"Fine. But the fox stays in my line of sight at all times. And if ANYTHING goes missing, that's on you, rabbit."

He led the two officers into the warehouse area, and into a small, dusty, dirty room in the opposite corner of the building. He may have closed a few doors too soon, nearly catching the fox's tail each time. Accidents happen. He didn't even bother to offer them a seat at the security workstation.
"Date and time?" The rabbit gave him some of the information. He keyed it in to the computer, which pulled up the appropriate data. The cameras showed what appeared to be a normal workday, one that was the same as every other workday at this particular warehouse. His staffers moved about the floors, and things came in and out of the building garage doors. He sped the clock up a bit.

"Wait stop! Go back!" The rabbit jumped up on the desk, and pointed to one of the outdoor screens. The hippo backed the feed up and pause it. A large sheep or ram with no horns was on the screen.

"That's him. Go forward a bit, please." The hippo complied. The faster they got this over with, the faster he could get them off his case. As the feed was advanced again, another mammal appeared, but all he could see of him was a green hoodie and blue jeans. He appeared to be about the same height as the sheep.

The two stood there for a moment, clearly conversing before moving off camera.

The rabbit sighed. "OK, sir, we're going to need to confiscate the storage device."

"What?! You can't do that!"

"Actually, sir, check the warrant again. We can. It's ZPD evidence now. You can pick it up again after the case gets sorted out."

"This is crocshit! I should call your supervisor!"

This time the fox shrugged and spoke up. "Be my guest. Give him our regards after he rips you a new one. He's a fun mammal to try to convince."

The next 15 minutes had the two smaller mammals struggling to hold in their laughter as the corpulent hippo got visibly smaller to the loud angry tones of the Cape buffalo police chief.

"Yes, sir, I understand. I'm sorry to waste your time. Good bye."

The flustered hippo hung up the phone, and began removing the security camera recording device from the shelf. It took a while, but the hippo eventually dumped the oversized device in front of the rabbit and the fox, the latter of whom slapped an already filled out evidence tag on it. The device was large enough that the two officers had to carry it out to their cruiser like it was a dining room table or something. It was mildly surprising that neither needed to speak a word and yet they still somehow knew exactly what they were each going to do.

Just as the hippo was beginning to think he'd gotten rid of them, the rabbit marched back in and handed him two more documents.

"What's this?"

"A citation and fine for hate speech, and a notice of inspection. You can expect a call from the city inspectors later this week."

"But, you said…!"

"We said that we'd let you off with a warning if you didn't prevent us from doing our job any more. You argued with us and called our supervisor over something that was written in the warrant. That wasted our time and now we have to deal with said supervisor when we get back to our precinct. Have a nice day, sir!"

The rabbit left without another word.
Doug was enjoying a late afternoon latte with extra foam when his phone chirped.

"Doug here," the ram answered in his usual monotone.

"We have a leaky pipe in the docks warehouse. Same one we received the first delivery from. Can you fix it for us?"

"Of course, I can fix it. Just send me the details, and I'll get right to work."

The mammal at the other end paused. "Make sure there aren't any loose connections too."

Doug nodded. "Of course. I'll call you when it's done."

The ram hung up, and went back to his latte. A few minutes later, his phone chimed again. He checked the messages, memorized the target's details, and erased the message.

He would deal with it tonight.

Seven hours and five more warehouses later, Judy and Nick were back at the precinct reviewing the security footage and the new evidence available to them. The fifth warehouse they’d visited was the jackpot, where they’d finally gotten a look at the face of the mammal that Wolford had been speaking to. He was a mountain goat, about the same size as Wolford, with distinct blue muzzle markings and a pierced ear.

Oddly, though, when they’d traced him back to the warehouse he’d originated from, the manager there claimed to have never seen him before, and denied them access to the employment records without a warrant. They might have been back at square one, if Nick hadn't suggested that they use the DMV database to search for the mammal. Both mammals decided to do that another day though. It was already late, and they needed to file their daily paperwork, as well as file for another warrant for the warehouse's employment records, just in case the DMV idea fell through.

It was another two hours and a grumpy fox later that the two finally trudged out of the precinct. Hopping on the first Animalia Line train, the two found a sort-of-comfy, isolated seat near the back, and the bunny took the opportunity to snuggle into the fox’s chest. They sat there for a while, just enjoying each other's presence. When the disembodied voice on the overhead speakers announced Judy’s stop, it was with some reluctance that the two parted ways.

Somewhere in the Canyonlands

Alarm bells were ringing in Spencer Callahan's head. It had been a long day for the mountain goat, and he'd been put on edge after his boss had come back from dealing with a "police matter". The rest of the day, his boss had avoided him like the plague.

As he opened his apartment door, he listened for the sound of the coin falling to the floor. It didn't. He swung the door opened all the way and looked down. The coin that he kept precariously balanced on the door lay on the hardwood floor. Stooping down to inspect it, he almost missed the movement in the shadows.

Rather than freeze or ask who was there, the mountain goat bolted. Down the hall, taking the stairs to ground level two and three at a time, out the door, and down the road. He glanced behind him a few times, easily spotting the white ram with the glint of forged steel under his shirt.
Unfortunately, crowds had already thinned for the evening, the Canyonlands not a major tourist attraction for any other than the mountain climber types. As he ran, he called 911. Or at least he tried to. A few seconds after hitting the call button, the phone gave three beeps in his ear and gave up. Glancing at the screen, a "low battery" symbol flashed in it briefly before it went dark. Letting out a frustrated grunt, the billy poured on more speed, ducking into alleyway after alleyway, turn after turn, making random changes in direction to try and shake his pursuer.

Five blocks away from his home, his legs gave up. He hadn't seen the ram that had been chasing him for a while, several turns ago.

Bending over with his fore hoofs on his knees, the mammal tried to catch his breath. His species was built for scaling mountains, not running through the vertical canyons of a city. He stayed there a moment, eyes glancing down the alley first one way, then the other. His ear twitched as a soft popping sound reached it. It was the last thing he ever heard.

Doug quickly hid the pistol back in his jacket. The hit hadn't gone as planned. He hadn't counted on the target stooping down to pick up a coin on the floor, nor had he expected the mountain goat to bolt.

Pulling out his phone, he dialled Woolter's number.

"Woolter, I need you and Jesse for a trash pickup in the alleyway behind the Canyonlands Targoat. Be discreet."

He hung up and sent a text message to another number:

"The leaky pipes are fixed."

With that, the ram picked up the pistol's spent shell casing and headed away from the area. If the body was discovered, he'd best not be anywhere near it.

---

A/N

Chapter End Notes

So we're getting somewhere now! What's next, I wonder?

A couple of you picked up on my shout out to the great artist TheWinterBunny in the last chapter. Here's a cookie for those of you that did! *hands out cookies* No references in this chapter though. Stay tuned!

Seriously, though. Go take a look at the graffiti in TheWinterBunny's piece "Broken". That's the graffiti that Longtooth and Rivers were talking about!

Coming up on May 4: Detour!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Did the neighbors hamster escape in his hamster ball and run your foot over? Leave a comment!
Detour

Chapter Summary

Things take an unexpected turn

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: The queen of hearts told me that I could own Zootopia if I wrote up a contract and followed the white rabbit down the hole. Unfortunately, I left the contract in my suitcase and left my suitcase with the Wizard of Oz, so I still don't own Zootopia

Couldn't have done this without my wonderful friend and editor, Daee17! Visit her page and give her a thank-you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nick Wilde struggled to emerge from his slumber. His back felt a bit awkward, and there was an odd weight on his chest and stomach. Prying his eyes open, he found himself gazing down at a grey ball of fur clad in carrot print pyjamas curled up fast asleep on his chest. It had been two days since they'd started their search for the mystery mountain goat in the security footage, and they hadn't gotten anywhere. There were hundreds of mountain goats registered in the city, and the DMV didn't record things like fur dye or facial markings. Too easy to change.

They'd decided to come to his place for a movie last night after work, both frustrated at their lack of progress, and agreeing that some digital entertainment was just what the doctor ordered. She'd dozed off snuggling against him while they'd been watching it, and he'd decided he was too comfy and Judy was too adorable to disturb, and had elected to fall asleep right next to her. Apparently, "next to her" turned into "underneath her" sometime in the night. Nick was sure there was a joke in there somewhere.

Glancing at the clock on his DVR, he noted that there were a few minutes before his and Judy's cell phones would go off in a cacophony of noise to signal the start of the day. Trying not to wake the slumbering ball of energy – how oxymoronic is that – the russet coloured fox reached over to the side table and grabbed both of their phones. Cancelling his was easy. Judy's proved to be a bit more of a challenge. It took him a few tries to guess her password, but he shouldn't have been surprised that it was the year she graduated from the academy.

Carrots, Carrots, Carrots, you really should come up with a better passcode than that.

Moving quickly, he disabled the alarm. After a moment's thought, he took a quick selfie of her sleeping on his chest, sent it to himself, and set it as her phone background. She'd probably be mad at it, but then again, it was comparatively innocent. Besides, she'd gotten a photo of him covered in pancake batter the last time he'd attempted to cook. And THAT one, she'd sent to everyone in the precinct. He'd been the butt of cooking jokes for days afterward.
Admittedly, though, the precinct HAD needed a little lightening up after the death of Wolford, so Nick had been happy to serve as the punch line for a few jokes, if it got some laughs. Even Bogo had gotten in on the ribbing. By banning him from the break room for the day.

As the clocks ticked over to 6 AM, Nick poked at Judy's nose. Stifling a chuckle at how it started twitching, he poked it again, calling her name.

Mindful of the first time he'd woken her up after falling asleep together, he reached down and grasped both her paws in his. Her fingers immediately intertwined with his own, and the rabbit stirred, amethyst eyes fluttering open, searching for a second before locking their gaze on him.

"Good morning fluff ball. Up for making the world a better place today? Or should we just lie here and snuggle and hope that the world doesn't go to hell without us?"

The rabbit grinned, reaching up and scratching the fox's cheek with her small paw. "You know my answer to that, Nick. We make the world a better place."

The two disentangled themselves, and Judy headed off to shower and get dressed. Nick spent the time getting a bowl of Judy's cereal ready for her, and toasting a bagel for himself. They'd grab coffee on the way to the precinct.

Half an hour later, the two were strolling down the block to the subway station, ready to start their day.

One break. That's all they needed. Just one stinking break that would get Wolford's case going again. Nolwazi Longtooth and her partner were not pleased. They felt like they were failing their fallen comrade and his family.

"There has to be sumthin' that we missed. Some piece of evidence." Longtooth pored over the photos spread out in front of her.

"Yeah, the spy cameras the ZIA embedded in every brick in the city. I'm sure if we ask them real nicely, they'll be happy to hand over the footage, too," the elk sighed, looking at the pieces of evidence they had already. Evidence that consisted solely of graffiti photos and the bullet extracted from the wolf's skull. Neither of which got them anywhere.

"I think if we have to chase down another mammal claimin' to be the graffiti artist, I might scream." They'd gotten dozens of calls in the last week from mammals claiming to be the artist, or to know the artist. Each one had proven to be a false lead, and each one had walked away disappointed that they didn't get the reward…and some of them with an extra citation to boot.

"Well, unless the angel of evidence comes down and delivers us the divine key that cracks this case, we don't have much else. I don't want this to go cold, either, but we don't have anything else."

Longtooth sighed. Rivers was right. They had nothing else.

"OK, next 'tip'… A goat says he was in the heights the night Wolford died. He claims he was minding his own business when Wolford grabbed him and begged for help. Says he ran away scared, because the cop was bleeding from bullet holes all over his body."

"Yeah, unless he met up with zombie Wolford, that didn't happen. Cross that one off."

Longtooth shuffled the papers.
"Here's a good one. A Mrs. Catsby says that Wolford was shot by the ghost of her long dead husband."

Rivers snorted. "Well that goes with the ghost gun we're chasing. Did she say whether her husband said "boo" before he shot Wolford?"

The lioness grinned and shook her head. "No, but she did suggest an incantation that would bring Wolford back to life."

"Ugh, no thanks. Me and undead don't mix." The elk shivered.

The fox beside her whooped, startling the rabbit and nearly causing her to fly over backwards in her chair. They'd been at work for several hours already, looking through DMV records for their mystery dyed mountain goat.

Snapping her head around to look at Nick's screen, she immediately recognized the mammal in the DMV license shot as the same one from the security footage days ago. Her ears shot up and she let out a happy squeak as she leapt from her chair onto Nick's, his being sized for a wolf, and examined the details.

"Spencer Callahan. 36 years old. Canyonlands residence. Good job, Slick! He's our guy!" She turned around and boxed Nick's shoulder, then turned back to the screen, hitting the print command on the fox's keyboard, then jumped off Nick's chair and bolted down the hallway toward the cubicle farm's printer.

The fox was left in their shared cubicle wincing and chuckling at Judy's enthusiasm. The bunny's energy and zest never seemed to end when it came to her work. Nick hopped off his chair and made his way after the rabbit at a more sedate pace. By the time he'd gotten to the copy room, she had disappeared again, and he instead made his way down to the motor pool. Judy was already waiting with the address in the GPS when he arrived. And she'd somehow managed to grab both of their coffees from their cubicle.

"Come on, Nick, Flash moves faster than you! We have a mammal to interview!" The fox opened the passenger side door and climbed in, buckling up just in time for the rabbit to hit the accelerator. The two took off towards Sahara Square and the Canyonlands subdivision.

The fox took the opportunity to look over the DMV papers. There wasn't a lot of information, so he switched his attention to the mobile data terminal between the two of them. He punched in Spencer's information, and waited a few moments for the fancy laptop to crunch the numbers.

"OK, Spencer Callahan. Born in Podunk on December 12, 1981, moved to Zootopia in 1994. No living relatives, and a sealed criminal record."

"That's typical for CIs. Their handlers seal their records so that they don't get harassed by overzealous attorneys or police officers looking for leads. We'd need to take it to a court to unlock it."

Nick nodded. "Right. Makes sense. Anyway, he's had his address at the Big Belt Apartments for the last six years."

Judy hummed and concentrated on the road.

"So, when do we get our own confidential informants, Carrots? I mean, think about it… wouldn't it have been easier to solve the Night Howler conspiracy with someone on the inside?"
Judy scoffed. "CIs don't just get assigned to us, Nick, you know that. We pick them up over time. Some volunteer their services. Others…well, others take up CI status in exchange for being let off the hook for some crime or another."

Nick glanced over at the rabbit. "Like me?"

"Well, you were more paws-on than a regular CI would be expected to be, but yeah, sort of. Finnick, if he's still got one paw in the shady side could become one. Even Flash, though I'm not sure how useful he'd be, since he was let go." They'd gotten word that thanks to being caught so far over the speed limit, Flash had been let go from his employment at the DMV. The way they heard it, he was now working in a library.

The two continued to chat about the benefits of confidential informants and who they knew that could qualify for one as they drove through the city. When they finally arrived the Big Belt apartments, they did a quick review of all they knew about Mr. Callahan, which admittedly wasn't much. Climbing out of the car, they approached the building. It was a fairly moderate looking building with a good view of the surrounding canyons.

The lobby was sparsely furnished, and was protected by a door security system. Nick walked up to it, climbing on to a stool intended to provide access for smaller mammals. The fox examined the directory listing before punching in a number and waiting. After several seconds, the sound of the telephone ringing on the other end filtered through the speaker. After several rings, a voice came over the line.

"Yeah, what? I'm not in, leave a message."

Nick hit the disconnect button and sighed. "So much for that idea. Kind of odd that he's not home on a Saturday morning." He tried again twice, with the same frustrating results.

"Well, what about the building superintendent? They should have a number for him or her listed." Judy peered up at the panel and its directory listing.

Nick punched in another number and waited. This time, the phone was answered on the first ring.

"Yes?" The voice was deep, reminding Judy a little of Finnick. She wondered what kind of mammal he was.

"Good morning, my name is Officer Nick Wilde, ZPD. Is this the building superintendent?"

"Yeah, that's me. What can I do for you, Officer Wilde?"

"Listen, we have a lead on a case, and he's a resident of your building, but he's not answering his phone. Could you possibly help us?"

There was a brief pause on the other end. "Yeah, sure. I'm going to let you in, then come to unit 101. I'll meet you at the door." The door lock started buzzing and Judy quickly moved to pull it open. Quite impressive, considering her small stature and the fact that the door was built for mammals many times her size. Personally, Nick would have gone for the electric opener.

The two partners made their way to the unit. An older gray wolf with whitening fur around his eyes and muzzle was waiting for them. The wolf smiled at the two and extended a paw. "Joseph Whitefur. I know I know, kind of an odd last name for a gray wolf. Call me Old Joe, or just Joe."

Judy took the larger mammal's paw and shook it firmly. "Officer Judy Hopps, and this is my partner, Officer Nick Wilde."
"Well, I'll be damned. They really did hire a fox. Times are changing, eh?"

Judy narrowed her eyes and bristled at the implication.

"Not saying that you don't deserve it. But with all the stereotypes out there, foxes got the short end of the stick. I never believed them, though. Used to know a fox over in Savannah central. Honest businesstmammal and a damn good accountant. He did my books for years before he retired."

Judy relaxed her posture, realizing the wolf didn't mean ill.

"Well, Joe, gotta make the world a better place, you know?" Nick couldn't help but use Judy's favourite phrase. He winked at her.

The wolf nodded. "Agreed. Now you were here about a resident?"

Judy pulled out the DMV printout and gave it to Joe. "Spencer Callahan. His listed residence is in unit 324, but he's not answering."

A frown crossed the wolf's face. "Could he be at work?"

The rabbit shrugged. "His place of employment wasn't listed."

Joe sighed. "You know I can't just let you in to his apartment even if he is gone though. You'd need a warrant."

Nick nodded. "Agreed. It's as much for our protection as his. But would you mind if we asked around? Maybe chatted with some of his neighbors?"

Joe smiled. "I don't see anything wrong with that. I hope it gets you some of the information you need. Oh, and here's a business card of mine, in case you need to get ahold of me. That'll spare you the indignity of punching numbers in at the door and hoping I'm home." The wolf handed a small business card to each of them.

Judy grinned and thanked the wolf as she tucked it into her wallet. Nick slipped his into his shirt pocket, while giving the wolf one of his own.

The wolf bid them goodbye and retreated back into his apartment. The two ZPD partners looked at each other, grinned, and headed towards the elevator. They had some residents to interview.

"Well, par for the course," Judy thought as the two blue clad mammals sat in their cruiser at yet another stop light. The interviews hadn't gone at all the way they wanted. They did have a good idea what Spencer was like though. He seemed to be reclusive but friendly to those around him, and his next-door neighbor even mentioned that he'd helped her out with her computer several times.

However, no one seemed to know where he worked. Judy was pretty sure he worked down at the warehouse where they'd found the footage of him talking to Wolford, but without reasonable evidence, they couldn't waltz in and ask for the company's employment records. They'd tried asking nicely when they'd been there, only to be flatly denied.

"Hey Carrots, you hungry? I could really go for some lunch right now."

The rabbit doe was about to argue that they should get back to the precinct as quickly as possible and look into some other options for finding Mr. Callahan when her own stomach voiced its opinion regarding its empty state.
Nick looked over at the rabbit with an expression of shock.

"Golly, Carrots, that beast sounds dangerous! We'd better feed her!"

The doe blushed hard and struggled to concentrate on the road. "Shut up, dumb fox. Fine. We'll find a place to grab something to eat. What are you thinking?"

"I wonder if there's a Five Mammals nearby. I've got a hankering for a Bugburger."

"Ugh, I don't know how you could eat those things."

"Hey, don't knock it till you try it. They are delicious! You should try one!"

"I'll pass. And if you try to switch my order up, I'll make sure they put extra mustard on yours."

She'd learned that her fox hated mustard.

"Fine. But seriously, Carrots, one of these days, you have to try one. Just once."

"No can do, pal."

Nick shook his head and pulled up a list of nearby restaurants. "Looks like the only ones around here are greasy spoons. Maybe we should try closer to the Strip."

Judy gave him an aside glance. "You had to look that up?"

"Hey! I said I know every ONE, not everything."

The rabbit smirked and rolled her eyes.

They didn't REALLY work for the HVAC company. That's just what they had to tell security when they'd been interviewed. They'd had their toolkits examined, sure, but when all they contain is a jumble of parts and piping, and no evidence of any explosives or weapons, there isn't really anything a security guy can do except let you pass when everything you have checks out and you're listed on the day schedule as being expected.

The formula and pressurized air had been delivered several days prior, along with new supplies of pool chemicals. No one seemed to notice the extra pressure cannisters, but then again, who would, in a store room full of cannisters?

Assembling the devices was easy. Getting into the pool maintenance rooms, equally easy when you know how to jimmy the locks on unsecured doors. It took the four wildebeests less time than anticipated to set up the devices, and deploy them where they would do the most good. Their building maintenance escort had unfortunately been forced to check out early, which made their jobs a bit easier. That hyena had been quite the chatterbox too. Maybe someone would even miss him.

In the security office, two mammals sat watching a wall of security monitors

"First, they take something from the storage rooms, and then they head to different floors without their escort? I don't like this. I don't like this at all," a large Arabian camel stated.

"You do know that splitting up saves on labour time, right? If they're all working on one thing, then it would take them longer to do everything they need to." the young kangaroo next to the camel quipped, clearly not as concerned for the situation.

"Wait a minute, are they leaving without their tool cases? You checked those cases, right? Cleared
them for entry?" the camel said as he watched the four unfamiliar mammals he'd been tracking on the
monitor for several hours. They'd spent most of their time on the mechanical levels, which
unfortunately had no surveillance in the rooms, and the one or two times they'd come out, it had been
to grab some cannisters of something from the utility store rooms. One of the hotel's maintenance
engineers had gone in with them too for supervision, and he hadn't reported anything at all.
Normally, they'd at least check in once in a while.

"Of course. I've been on this job for a year and a half, Aizaz. I'm not a newbie. And hey, maybe
they're just going for lunch. Ever think of that?"

"Sorry. I had to make sure. And where's Ed? He should be with them." After a moment, the camel
stood up and headed out the door.

"I'm going to check this out. Hold down the fort." The kangaroo gave the camel a quick nod of
understanding and returned to watching the monitors. As he moved to intercept the three
maintenance workers, he pulled out his phone and called the ZPD direct line the hotel had been
issued.

"Zulu 240, zulu 240, this is dispatch. You there, Hopps, Wilde?"

The two had just pulled into the parking lot for the Five Mammals burger joint on the Mojave Strip.
Even Judy had been looking forward to some food, so it was not without a small amount of
reluctance that she reached for the radio mic.

"Z-240, Hopps here, What's up, Clawhauser?"

"Hopps, call just came in. Suspicious activity at the Grand Palm. Need you to head over there and
check it out. You're the closest available unit."

Judy glanced over at Nick, who groaned. "Come on, Nick, I don't like it either, but we need to
respond. We'll be able to take our lunch break afterward, OK? Maybe hit up a food cart and take a
walk in Sonoran Park."

That seemed to perk the fox up, and he met the rabbit's gaze with a small smile. The doe grinned and
keyed the mic.

"10-4 Clawhauser, Hopps and Wilde responding to the suspicious activity. Did they give any
details?"

"Just that the mammals in question were acting suspicious. Says they came in to do some work, even
had their toolkits checked out, but apparently, they're leaving without them."

Judy frowned. "Couldn't they just be going for lunch, and coming back later?"

"Don't know, Hopps. He just said there were some suspicious contract workers there."

"Copy that, dispatch. Z-240 responding." Judy hung up the microphone and pulled out of the
parking stall they'd been occupying. The hotel was only a quick drive away, made faster with the full
lights and sirens that Nick activated as soon as they were out of the lot.

"So, you lost track of them? Can you describe the mammals? What did they look like? What were
they doing?" The rabbit doe was furiously scribbling in her notebook, as the camel security officer in
front of her explained the situation.
"They were all wildebeests. As for how I lost track of them, I'm not sure. They headed for the maintenance stairwell, but it's like they disappeared. I couldn't find them, and my partner said they didn't show up on the monitors."

"Partner? Where is he now? We'll need to interview him, too."

"He's in the security office. Down that hall, make the first left, all the way to the T intersection, and head right, and you'll see the door"

"I'll go check that out," Nick volunteered. Judy sent a smile and a nod his way, and he gave a lazy salute and headed off in the direction the camel had indicated. Judy returned her attention to the security guard.

"You said they were escorted by a staff member. Where's he? We'll need to ask him some questions, too."

"I was just going to go look for him when you showed up."

That set alarm bells going off in Judy's head. Could you not have mentioned that little detail earlier?! She was about to berate the camel when her ears picked up a faint hissing sound. Twisting them this way and that, she finally located the source. Something in the air vents overhead was making it. She didn't have a lot of time to wonder what, though, as a thick white haze began blowing from them, thickening and filling the air.

Nick was almost to the security office when things went loopy. First, he got a call from some overseas mammal claiming his windows was dirty and that he should clean it. Ok, well, that's not loopy. That's every day life thanks to the scam mammals in the world.

But the thick mist that started pouring through the air vents all around him wasn't normal. The fox stopped to stare. If this was a fire, the building alarm wasn't going off. A quick glance around, and he spotted a panel about twenty feet farther down the hall.

The mist was encroaching all around him, and when he got a whiff of it, it didn't smell like smoke. More like… Chemicals? Something sweet too. Not powerful, just barely there, barely noticeable, even to his canid nose. Something that he felt he should recognize. The closest he could come was the smell of that Night Howler drug lab.

Nick felt the blood drain from his face, even as he began running in the direction of the sounder panel. If this was a fire or chemical leak, the building needed to be evacuated. Just as he got within reach of the panel, he tripped over himself and went sprawling across the floor. He struggled back to his feepaws.

What was he doing? The fox paused, trying to remember. He felt nauseated. The thick mist was making him sick, whatever it was. Mist. Fog. The fox doubled over, clutching his stomach with one paw, and landing on the other one. How can I be so nauseated and so hungry at the same time? And what was I doing? Something with the fog? Yes. No. I was looking for food? What are all those noises? Why is everyone roaring? Carrots! I have to find Judy!

Nick felt himself slipping away. Like something was ripping pieces of his mind apart, replacing it with fear and hunger. Whatever this fog was, it was affecting him in a way that scared him. As memory began to fade, he latched on to one of the only things he could. The memory of Judy falling asleep in his arms last night, and her scent and her smile as he joined her in slumber. Soon, there was nothing more.
The smoke, or whatever it was, was thick. It burned the back of Judy’s throat and made her eyes smart and her nose run, and it smelled like some chemical agent. All around her, mammals were screaming, but underneath all that, she began hearing growling and roaring.

"I'm going to start getting people out of here!" Before the rabbit could object, the camel had disappeared into the back areas of the hotel.

Growling in frustration, the rabbit doe dropped low to the ground, seeking clear air, but whatever it was, it hugged the floor. So, it wasn’t smoke, since that typically left a small area of breathable air close to the ground. It didn’t smell like smoke either. Mist? Or maybe a gas of some sort? The rabbit scrambled along the ground, searching for her partner. All she could smell was the awful stuff in the air, not that her nose was much good for tracking anyway.

"NICK!"

She perked her ears up, twisting them this way and that, trying to locate her partner by sound. If he answered her, she would hear it, and she could use that to locate him.

"Nick, where are you?!

All she could hear were the screams, the growling and roaring. She couldn't make sense of what was going on. She rounded the corner where she'd last seen Nick, only to pull herself short at the feettaps of a large tiger. A large tiger that was down on all fours, growling at a cornered female sambar that the rabbit could just barely make out through the choking mist.

The wild, panicked eyes of the sambar fell on the form of the rabbit officer.

"Help me!" The sambar pleaded.

Judy was thankful for the slight breeze that blew in her face, technically putting her downwind of the predator. He would not be able to sense her unless she made a noise. Her police training kicked in, and the rabbit made a quick survey of her surroundings. She had to lead the savage predator away from the civilian or subdue him right there, call in, and figure out what the hell was going on.

The hall way they were in didn't leave much for her to use, but if she could lead the tiger back into the lobby, there was plenty of furniture there. Making a snap decision, the rabbit pushed off the floor, bounded across two planters to land between the tiger and the sambar.

The sight that greeted her was unsettling to say the least. The eyes of the tiger were not those of a civilized mammal. Instead, they held a deadly, savage stare. Only once before, had Judy ever seen the slitted eyes of a savage predator. Renato Manchas, in the rainforest district, right before he attacked. She'd hoped to never be on the receiving end of one of those stares again, but here she was.

"I'll distract him while you run. Get out of here, away from the building." Judy began to move to the right, bringing the savage predator's attention with her. When she was close enough, she kicked off the ground again, back in the direction of the planters.

With a loud roar, the tiger lunged after her. The tiger apparently didn't expect her to use the planters to redirect herself back at him, though, and a powerful kick to the predator's jaw had it tumbling sideways. Now, she definitely had the feline's attention. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the sambar escaping through an emergency exit. Mission accomplished. The civilian's life was safe now. The problem was, now she had a savage predator with it's hungry gaze locked on her.

The tiger likely wouldn't fall for the kick trick again, so she had to try something else. Not taking her
eyes off the big cat, Judy reached for her stun gun, undid the strap, and thumbed a switch to a setting appropriate for the tiger's size. Thank celery for muscle memory. Before she had a chance to draw though, the tiger lunged. Judy dove left, as the tiger went sailing by, crashing into the wall. He recovered quickly, but by then, the rabbit was already running full tilt for the lobby.

With another roar, the feline took off in pursuit. Judy zigzagged, dodging left and right at unpredictable times, trying to buy some distance. She knew she'd never be able to outrun the tiger. She just needed a few seconds, though.

Racing through the lobby, she dove under a stuffed easy chair meant for larger mammals. She was easily small enough to fit underneath, but the tiger got stuck trying to follow. Judy skittered out the other side and hopped up onto the back of it, just as the tiger managed to free himself. Leaping from one chair to the next, again and again, she kept one eye on the tiger, and another on her goal, a large fountain in the center that doubled as a pillar for the roof. If she could get up there, she'd be out of reach of the tiger and would have a clear shot with her stun gun.

Unfortunately, the tiger colliding with the elephant-sized easy chair she was on knocked her off balance, and before she was able to regain it, she was hit by a ton of bricks. At least that's what it felt like. She found herself sailing through the air. No sooner had she realized this, when she collided with some solid object and fell to the floor. Darkness claimed her, even as she struggled to right herself.

So…this is how it ends…I hope Nick's OK…


The fox knew only these things as he moved though the strange, unfamiliar landscape of flat vertical cliffs bereft of trees and smooth flat ground. Evade the predators. Capture a meal and return to the den.

Keeping to what little shadows he could find, and darting through the unnatural light from the many small suns in the sky, the fox headed in a direction away from the sounds of larger predators. The acrid stench of the fog and the smell of a thousand other mammals confused and disoriented as the fox moved along. The scents he was able to pick up painted a confusing picture. This pathway was apparently used by many mammals for a long time, but those that would suit him for a meal, they seemed to be far less common. He would need to move to better hunting grounds

As the fox continued on, his nose picked up the scent of two new mammals. One of them screamed danger. The other…was prey… Food. But was it? The fox felt that this scent should be familiar. Offspring? No. Offspring did not smell like prey.

The fox trailed the scent of his target. It led to a large open space with an odd round waterfall. The fox spotted his quarry in a heap near the waterfall. That made sense. Prey stayed near water. Waterfalls were a source of water.

Another large predator was also in the area, battling with an equally large mammal with strange black and white skin. This would be his chance to grab his meal and escape. As the fox approached the rabbit, it stirred, large eyes blinking and searching, locking on to the fox. To the fox's surprise though, the rabbit showed no fear. It showed no sign of running. The rabbit made a strange noise, one the fox felt it should understand.

The fox paused for a moment. The rabbit's scent was familiar. Why? Why was it not afraid of him? The rabbit extended a paw to him, and made the same sound it did before. The fox was further
confused. He approached the rabbit, whose expression changed, not to fear as he expected, but… Something else. What?

The fox took a deep breath, the rabbit's scent filling him. Why was it familiar? Had he hunted this rabbit before? Perhaps discovered its burrow? The vulpine regarded the mammal before him, as it rose on shaky legs and approached him. The loud noises from the fighting mammals distracted him for a moment, but was brought back to the rabbit by a soft touch on his muzzle, and more strangely familiar sounds.

Why was this mammal's scent so familiar? The fox sniffed at the rabbit's paw and caught another scent, faint, but still there. His own. This prey had his own scent on it. A sense of security flooded the fox as he breathed the mammals scent mixed with his own. No. Not prey. Mate. This was his mate. And his mate was injured.

The fox gave a reassuring lick to his mate's paw, causing her to burst out in a flurry of unfamiliar noises. Unfortunately, the noise drew the attention of the other predator in the clearing, and with a loud growl, it turned from it's bloodied and subdued foe. The fox positioned himself between the threat and his mate. He would fight to the death to protect his mate.

Oh, my head…

The first sight that greeted Judy as she regained consciousness should have had her running for her life. At some point, the camel security guard had arrived and engaged the tiger, but what drew her attention was the fox. She struggled to focus her eyes, but she could tell right away that it was Nick. But it was Nick with the slitted eyes of a savage. Somehow, he'd been turned as well.

"Nick?"

The word felt almost foreign, and even she could tell that her speech was slurred. Nick cocked his head, an almost comical gesture of confusion. Judy reached out to him, forcing her eyes to focus. Double vision. Throbbing head. Slurred speech. Sure signs of a concussion.

"Nick…"

The fox slowly approached her outstretched arm. He looked curious and confused. Was it possible? Did he somehow remember her? She rose on shaky legs, and slowly stumbled toward him.

A loud crash from the two larger battling mammals drew both of their attention, though Judy recovered first. Keeping one paw on her tranquilizer, she reached out and gently placed her paw on Nick's muzzle. The fox's gaze snapped back to her, sniffing at her paw. A glance at his ears told Judy he was curious. "That's right, Nick. It's me. It's Carrots. Remember your Carrots?"

The fox in front of her licked her palm.

"Eww, NICK!"

That outburst proved to be a mistake. The tiger that Judy had been evading before turned its attention back to the duo. Growling low, the fox positioned himself between Judy and the approaching tiger. Judy reached for her stun gun. She was still suffering from double vision, so her aim would be lousy at best, but she had to do something.

The tiger continued to approach, hunkered low, and ready to attack. Judy drew her stun gun as her fox continued to growl.
Nick charged first, catching the tiger off guard, latching on to the tiger's ear and biting down hard. The striped animal roared, twisting and turning, and finally throwing the savage fox off, sending him flying into a nearby easy chair that had somehow survived the tiger's confrontation with the camel. Having drawn her stun gun earlier, she tried to force her eyes to focus. She saw two Nicks jump from the now-ruined easy chair onto two tigers, latching his jaws as best he could around the tiger's neck.

Judy knew she needed to end this quickly, or Nick would be killed. The opportunity finally presented itself, when the tiger threw Nick off of him again, this time sending the fox crashing through a glass table. The action presented the tiger's broad side to her, and she finally had an area that she could aim at, where the two tigers she saw overlapped. Her aim was true, and the two electrodes embedded themselves in the tiger's side. 50,000 volts coursed through the tiger's body, who tensed up and let out a deafening roar.

As the electricity coursed through him, the tiger attempted to take a few steps before he collapsed, mewling in pain. Judy knew that pain compliance would only go so far and last so long due to responding to a few savage mammals herself during the Night Howler crisis, so she used the seconds the stun gun bought her to grab her tranquilizer pistol and reload it with an appropriate sized dart. Darting the immobile tiger was a much easier task, and the feline was soon snoring away like a chain saw.

Judy pulled out her radio.

"Dispatch this is Officer Hopps. We have a mass incident at the Grand Palm. Something's got predators going savage again, send heavy backup and as many busses as you can spare."

"Copy that Hopps, backup and busses on the way. You and Wilde OK?"

Judy immediately regretted shaking her head.

"Negative, Clawhauser, I'm injured and Nick's savage."

"Understood, Hopps. Take care of yourself."

The doe put the radio away and moved over to where Nick was just getting back on all fours. The fox turned to face her as she reached out to stroke the fur on his cheek. Nick whined and leaned into her touch, before sniffing at her arm. It was then that Judy noticed the cut.

"I'm sorry Nick. This might sting a little."

The fox cocked his head sideways just before Judy jabbed the dart into the fox's thigh. She jumped back, as Nick twisted to nip at the sudden pain. After a second, he swayed and collapsed. The rabbit...
sat in front of the fox, relaxing against the wall and pulling his head into her lap, stroking his head fur.

"That's it Nick. Take a rest. Go to sleep, and when you wake up, you'll be back to normal."

The rabbit called their situation in to Clawhauser and settled down to wait, her head throbbing, and her vision still out of whack. She felt nauseous too. Her mind continued to process what had happened in the last hour. Visiting Callahan's apartment. Detouring on the way back to the precinct for food, but getting called to the Grand Palm for a disturbance before they'd actually gotten any. Arriving at the hotel to find out that a group of suspicious mammals had been working on the mechanical floor but escaped or disappeared before anyone could do anything.

Then the odd smoke that seemed to come from…wait.

The strange smoke or mist. It started just seconds before everything went to hell, and it had come from the ventilation system. Whatever it was had to have caused this. But how? And who were the workers that had been acting suspicious? It was way too coincidental for Judy's liking. They would need to find out who those workers were, and what they were doing, but the doe knew she was more than likely going to be benched, and Nick certainly was.

Judy felt a fatigue hit her, which she found strange, considering it was barely past noon. As she drifted off, she idly wondered why she herself, the security guard, and the sambar hadn't gone savage, if it was that mist that caused this debacle.

Chapter End Notes

Concussions have a number of varying symptoms. Nausea, dizziness, slurred speech, impaired or delayed judgement, and headaches are pretty much universal. Double or impaired vision usually only happens if it's the visual cortex that gets bruised. In humans, this is located at the back of the brain, immediately above the cerebellum and brain stem.

But hopefully, our duo aren't seriously hurt!

So, since there were no references in the last chapter, here's a cookie for everyone! Once again, no references (I'm slacking!), but there will be in the next chapter.

Coming up on May 18: Forced Downtime!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Tired of all my pop culture references? Leave a comment!
Forced Downtime

Chapter Summary

Hospital stays suck.

Chapter Notes

First off, sorry to the AO3 users that are getting this on Saturday afternoon instead of Friday night. The site was down and I couldn't post the chapter.

DISCLAIMER: My wonderful editor, Daee17 and I were sitting at my desk debating on a change to make to this chapter when Prince Eric walked in and told us our bid to purchase Zootopia had gotten lost in the mail. So we still don't own Zootopia.

The buzzing in Nick’s head was the first thing he was aware of. The second was the beeping machines around him. His thoughts felt muddied and foggy. Groaning, he struggled to open his eyes and remember where he was.

What was the last thing I was doing? I remember falling asleep with Carrots. Is that where I am? The infernal rhythmic beeping and the scent of sterilizers told him otherwise. The fox managed to force one eye open, and immediately slammed it shut again, the bright white light sending a shot of pain piercing through his skull.

Slowly, more carefully this time, he cracked open the eye again, just enough to take in his surroundings. White painted walls, a curtain on one side, sunlight streaming through a window. Stands of medical equipment. That's what the beeping was.

Am I in a hospital? Why am I in a hospital? What happened? Did I have some sort of accident or something during the night?

The fox struggled to remember, but it was like wading through molasses. Today – if indeed it is "today" – was a work day…what were we doing? We were tracking down some mammal in the DMV database…Someone with… Spencer Callahan! That's it! The fox's memories slowly began trickling back to him as he opened his eyes slowly.

We went to his apartment…didn't find him…we were going for lunch and got a call… The Grand Palm… I was going…where was I going? I was going somewhere…

The memories became a red haze after that, punctuated only by brief images.

Down on all fours… hungry…Judy in front of me… Oh God, was I hunting Judy?! The heart
monitor began beeping far more rapidly. Turning his head, the fox spied the buttons to his left, and, with an arm that felt like it was made of cement, he attempted to reach the call button. A tug on his wrist and a jangle of metal alerted him to that which he was not aware of before: He was cuffed to the bed. Trying the other arm produced the same result.

Panic began coursing through the fox's mind. His heart thundered at an out of control pace, and Nick felt his breathing start to accelerate. He tried calling for help.

"Nurse! Hey, can anyone hear me?!" His voice didn't even sound like his own, and came out as a scratchy, hoarse growl, not the shout he was going for. He jangled the cuffs as hard as he could. What if I hurt Judy? My God, what if I KILLED HER?! His panicked mind couldn't get off that thought. If Judy was lying in the ICU, or worse, in a morgue somewhere, he'd never forgive himself.

Nick pulled and tugged at his restraints, thrashing about, not even registering the moment that a mammal ran into the room, followed by a half dozen more. He barely cared, as most of them held him down, while another prepped a needle and injected a fluid into the IV he hadn't even noticed. He did take note when cold sensation began running up his arm, and a heaviness began to settle over him. Maybe I should just close my eyes for a moment…

…No! I need to find Judy! The fox's eyes snapped open again. The room was darker than before. Sunlight no longer shone through the window. Confusion reigned, and the fox was about to go into another panic when a voice spoke up.

"I'm sorry we had to sedate you again, Officer Wilde, but you were a risk to yourself. You woke up before the night howler toxin had been fully purged from your system." The fox looked to his side to see a male hyena in doctor's scrubs standing next to him. "In case you were wondering, you're in the Sahara Square Regional Medical Centre. You and your partner were brought here from the Grand Palm Hotel. I'm Doctor Kazadi."

"Where's…Judy?" The fox's voice was hoarse and scratchy, like he hadn't used it in a long while. It tasted like he'd just stuffed a steel scrub pad in his mouth, and he felt dizzy and tired.

"Hmm? Oh, Officer Hopps? She's on the other side of the curtain. We are keeping her sedated for another day." The hyena gestured to the curtain that separated him from the other side of the room.

"Is…she…hurt?" The fox dreaded the answer, but he had to know.

Kazadi took a breath, while at the same time moving to undo the pawcuffs locking the fox's wrists to the bed. "I can't unfortunately comment on her condition. You'd need to be family, her emergency contact or her medical executor. Doctor-patient confidentiality, Officer."

"I think you'll find, if you look at her information, I AM her emergency contact," Nick said with a smirk. Judy had talked to him about that a couple days after he'd graduated. She'd been particularly tired of having her parents freak out every time she'd gotten a bump or a bruise at that point, and decided that her parents didn't need to worry more than they already did. She'd taken them off her emergency contacts list and put Nick and Chief Bogo on it, with the instructions that one of them contact her parents ONLY if the injury was life threatening. She'd felt a little bad about it, but she knew she'd never hear the end of it if they got a call because she'd had to go to the hospital for some stitches.

Kazadi regarded the fox for a moment, seemingly analyzing or assessing him, perhaps sizing him up. "Why would a rabbit have a fox as her emergency contact?"
The pawcuffs came off, and Nick massaged his wrists. Those things really were uncomfortable. He sighed. "Because she trusts me? Because she wanted to? Because I'm her partner in the police force, and I'm her friend? That's a question you'd have to ask her when she wakes up. Why shouldn't I be her emergency contact?"

"You're a fox," the hyena said, as if that explained everything.

Growing agitated, the fox skewered the larger predator with a glare. "Listen, go check her file if you don't believe me. Or call our boss. Actually, I'd love to see you do that. Have you met Chief Bogo? He's a really nice mammal. But he doesn't like it when people call him for stupid reasons. The last mammal that did that got a new one torn."

The doctor sighed, defeated. The massive police chief had been in here earlier, and just from that one meeting, Kazadi knew he was NOT one to be trifled with. "She has a laceration on her left arm. We're not sure what caused that, but we stitched it up." Nick remembered her having that when he found her…hunted her.

"The real injury is the moderate concussion she has."

Green eyes flew open. "How did that happen?"

"From what she said, it probably happened when she was knocked into something by the tiger she was engaged with. She'll recover, as long as she takes it easy for about a week, and stays off active duty for at least two."

"She's not going to like that."

"Not her call."

"What about the rest of the Grand Palm? What happened there?"

The doctor shook his head. "We aren't sure. We do know that a lot of mammals went savage, but all of you seem to be responding to the night howler antidote."

"But…?"

"But nothing, Officer Wilde. You don't need to stress yourself out on this. You shouldn't. For the next day or two, you need as much rest as possible, until the toxin is completely out of your system."

Letting out a sigh, Nick sensed he wouldn't be getting any more answers out of the white-clad hyena. He turned on his side and closed his eyes, pretending to go back to sleep.

After a while, the doctor left. Nick waited a few moments, then crawled out of bed. Grabbing his IV stand, and the heart monitor hanging from it, he made his way around the curtain. Judy was lying prone on the bed next to him, ears flat against the pillow, an IV and bandage on her left arm.

Nick knew she wouldn't want him to feel sorry for her – she knew what she was getting into when she became a cop, but he couldn't help but hurt at the sight of his bunny laying there on the bed, looking so helpless. Of course, he would never say that in front of her. Not if he wanted to live.

He reached out and smoothed down a patch of ruffled fur on her head. Judy didn't stir, the chemically induced sleep keeping her under. After a while, he moved back over to his side of the curtain, climbing back into the bed and making himself comfortable. Nick tuned out the beeping sounds of the medical equipment and closed his eyes, allowing sleep to slowly take him again.
"Top news today, the ZPD has confirmed that 24 mammals were killed, with an additional 32 missing and hundreds injured in yesterday's incident at the Grand Palm Hotel, an event that the department is calling an act of terror. No known terrorist groups have come forth to claim responsibility for the massacre, and no demands have been made. In a statement earlier today, Mayor Peter Clawheed had this to say."

The image on the television shifted from the snow leopard anchor to that of the large form of the brown bear mayor.

"Our hearts go out to the families of those lost so tragically yesterday in this senseless act of murder. Rest assured, my office will be working closely with the ZPD to ensure those responsible are caught and justice is served."

The feed switched back to the snow leopard at the anchor desk.

"ZNN attempted to reach out to the ZPD for comment, however we haven't received a response at this time. Citizen response has been mixed, with many voicing opinions that the perpetrator is an ally of former mayor Dawn Bellwether. Anti-predator groups have been using the event to stage more protests today, effectively shutting down vehicular travel in multiple locations across the city."

An amateur video was shown, recorded somewhere in the rainforest district. A crowd of prey mammals had blockaded a major road. Car horns blared over the shouts of angry mammals, and the signs clearly showed the group's dislike for predators.

"Predators aren't regressing! They never evolved!"

"Stop letting predators live off our hard work!"

"*BEEP*ing pred pieces of *BEEP*! Go back to the *BEEP*ing wild!"

The amateur video ended and a tapir, obviously the group's organizer, appeared on the screen, speaking to a reporter.

"Predators were built to maim and kill. They have no other purpose and need to be segregated. They need to be separated from civil mammals."

Back to the newsroom again. "Several of the protestors have quoted ZPD Officer Judith Hopps, stating that predators were just reverting to their primitive, savage ways, despite the retraction statements issued by the ZPD, and Ms. Hopps' own efforts to expose the Nigh Howler consp—"

Dade Walker clicked off the TV and turned back to the other two mammals in front of him, and the speakerphone sitting on the table. "It seems our first phase has been relatively successful. The civil unrest in the city will prove useful when we begin phase two."

"Our contact was able to retrieve the devices and dispose of them before the investigators were able to secure the scene. All of them performed flawlessly," a heavily modified and modulated voice from the speakerphone stated.

Dade Walker and the other two elders with him nodded. "And what of other physical evidence?"

"Our guys were wearing gloves, so forehoof-prints should be minimal. They couldn't do anything about the back hooves without looking suspicious. Unfortunately, our guy couldn't erase the security footage before the ZPD secured the building."

"We disabled the building alarm and we had the riot tying up the ZPD down the strip, but apparently
they had other units in the area. They had officers on-site before the devices even went off."

Walker glared at the phone. "Do we know who these officers were?"

"The rabbit and the fox. They showed up about 10 minutes before showtime and were hauled off in an ambulance."

With a sigh, the deer sat down in the one vacant chair. "Any word on their condition?"

None of the elders, nor the caller on the phone spoke. Walker thought for a moment. "Well, we'll table that issue now. What of the effectiveness of the product?"

The beaver with him in the room spoke up. "The product affected all carnivores without fail. Most turned within seconds of inhaling the product, and results were as expected there. However, our mammals on the inside noticed an odd quirk in that predators of traditionally monogamous ancestry would not attack their mates, and pack animals like wolves would not attack each other."

The deer nodded. "Do we have any numbers on how many were affected?"

The voice on the phone answered that. "Nothing concrete, but our estimates put us at a little over 50 predators and over 500 prey animals at the time, just on the conference floors, casino floor, and lobby areas."

The pig, the third elder in the room, grinned. "Not bad for our first outing."

"Not bad at all. But we need to see if it's possible to remove these… shortcomings. I will contact our research cell and see what can be done there. In the meantime, Janus, dig up what you can on actual numbers, and how the ZPD was able to respond as fast as it did. For purity."

"Purity we shall have." The line disconnected.

Judy stirred, cracking open her eyes and seeing the dimly lit features of the ceiling tiles above her. The beeping of a heart monitor told her she was in the hospital. Her head was fuzzy and her mouth dry. She needed a drink.

She remembered the incident at the hotel, along with bits and pieces of the ambulance ride here. A doctor flashing his pen light in her eye. A concussion, the doctor had said. That confirmed her suspicions. The light snoring in the bed next to her, one that she recognized, told her that Nick was in the room with her, just on the other side of the curtain. She smiled, as best she could with her head throbbing. Him being here likely meant that whatever had caused him to go savage was cured.

Before she could answer the nagging call of nature, an antelope walked in carrying a clipboard, and humming to herself. She was just passing Judy's bed, heading toward Nick's when she glanced up to see Judy watching her.

"Oh! Miss Hopps! Good morning! Well, as morning as it is, anyway. It's 4 AM. How are you feeling?"

There need be no thought on that matter. "Headache ma'am. Head's fuzzy, dizzy, I'm thirsty, and I need to go to the bathroom."

The nurse nodded and moved to the side of Judy's bed. "You have a moderate concussion. You basically bruised your brain. The headache, fuzziness and dizziness are to be expected. As for the rest of it, well, we can take care of that." She reached out to help Judy down from her bed, and the
two made their way slowly across the room with the rabbit doe's IV tree to the adjoining bathroom. Judy's legs felt weak, a sensation she immediately decided she despised. The nurse left her alone to do her business, and returned just as Judy was making her way back to the bed, using the IV stand to help her stay upright.

A quick lift back onto the bed, the rabbit doe settled back under the covers. She glanced over at the curtain separating her from Nick, before a cleared throat brought her attention back to the antelope, who was holding a pair of pills and a glass of water. At the doe's quizzical expression, the antelope explained. "Acetaminophen to help with the headache."

Judy frowned. "I was always told to take ibuprofen for headaches."

The nurse gave an adamant shake of her head. "Ibuprofen is a blood thinner. If you take that with a concussion, you run the risk of a brain hemorrhage."

The doe nodded, filing that information away for future use should it ever be needed. She took the tablets and swallowed them, chasing them down with the water. Thanking the nurse, she settled back into bed. She heard the door open and shut, and tried to go back to sleep, but she found it wouldn't come, her mind churning over the events of the day – wait, what day IS it? I forgot to ask.

A light snort from her right brought her attention to the curtain that separated her from Nick. She wondered if Nick was dreaming. What was he dreaming about? After a while, the rabbit decided she was tired of staring at the curtain and slowly wiggled out of bed and padded to the edge of it, grabbed it, and pulled it back, taking her IV stand with her.

Nick was lying on his side facing her bed, fast asleep, an occasional slight twitch of his nose, or flick of his ear giving no hints as to what was playing in his mindscape. Not wanting to get caught out of bed, she crawled back in and lay down, turning to face her fox.

She watched Nick for a while, her eyelids slowly growing heavier, and the throbbing in her head dulling slightly. As she slowly, finally succumbed to sleep again, one last though flitted through her mind, a stray scrap of paper caught in a wind.

If Nick did go savage, why didn't he attack me?

Hushed voices slowly brought the rabbit doe out of her slumber. She didn't even need to open her eyes to recognize the tones of her fox and his mother. Deciding to play the still-sleeping doe for a while, she took the opportunity to eavesdrop on the conversation.

"So, has she?"

"Mom!"

"Oh come on, you can't expect me to not notice! So, has she?"

"Yes, mom. She has. The night we went out for dinner with you, she asked me on the way back to the station."

There was a silence afterward

"Oh, come on, mom, I'm not going to give you the details!"

More silence.
"We went for dinner OK? She brought me flowers and we went for dinner."

"Flowers? She brought you flowers? What kind of flowers?" Marian's tone sounded teasing.

"...I should not have said that." A sigh. "Tulips, Carnations and violets."

There was a long silence.

"Have you asked her what that meant?"

"Uhhhh... no not really."

"Well, it looks like you're out of work for a couple weeks, so it's the perfect time to ask her. Her answer might surprise you."

Marian laughed lightly, just a little bit louder than they had been talking, and Judy decided it was time to "wake up". She shifted on the bed and yawned. The two other mammals quieted down for a moment, before Nick spoke up again.

"Carrots? You awake?"

Cracking an eye open, she nodded. Marian was sitting in the chair next to Nick's bed, sunlight streaming in through the window behind her. Nick was sitting up in his bed, having had it adjusted.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Judy. How are you feeling?" The vixen inquired, genuine concern in her eyes.

Judy groaned, her head expressing its displeasure "My head hurts. And I feel like I'm gonna puke."

Marian nodded. "When Nick's dad had a concussion in high school, he had the same problems. Nausea, headaches, confusion. He couldn't even remember how he got the concussion. I had to remind him that he'd hit his head falling off a desk chair trying to impress me."

Judy giggled. "And? Did he impress you?"

"Watching him get injured wasn't really my definition of impressive. It gave me great teasing material for later though."

"I bet." Judy sat up slowly and raised the back of her bed, so she could lie back facing the two vulpines.

"So, sleeping beauty, how was it being asleep for almost two days?" Nick piped up.

Judy, who had just managed to get herself comfortable, dropped her ears. "It's been that long?"

"Yeah. We clocked out at about noon on Saturday. It's Monday morning. Just about breakfast time, actually. Oh, and Bogo said he'd be coming by to debrief us."

"...and I need to be headed to work. My boss has a meeting with the executives, and I need to be there for that," Marian commented. She leaned down to give Nick a peck on the top of the head. The tod's ears folded back in embarrassment. "I'll see you two lovebirds after work." Now, Nick's ears shot up, before folding back again. Judy stifled a giggle and bade Marian goodbye.

Silence reigned after the vixen left the room.

"Ummm... So... I kind of told her about us... Or rather, she hustled it out of me."
Judy gave Nick a sly look. "Did she actually hustle it out of you, or did you just cave under pressure?"

"Nope. She didn't get it out of me willingly."

Judy just gave him a look.

"And, she may have asked if you'd asked me out. And I may have answered yes."
The rabbit grinned. "And she's OK with that?"

Two nurses entered the room carrying trays of food, quickly excusing themselves when they realized the two were having a private conversation. Nick nodded.

"More than OK, Carrots. I may have neglected to mention this, but she's been rooting for us for a long time."

Judy dug into her breakfast of cereal and muffin, while Nick began with his. The two glanced at each other with the same mildly disgusted look. No matter where you went, hospital food was only marginally better than airline food. Just this side of baked cardboard.

As they continued gnawing on their cardboard…or rather, eating their breakfast, a knock on the door drew their attention. They looked up to see the massive form of their boss entering the room.

"Hopps. Wilde. How are we today?"

Before Judy could answer, Nick decided to take the initiative.

"Well, you know boss, I could get used to days off like this. No work, full pay, room service… of course the food could use some improvement, but hey, nothing's perfect, right?"

Bogo groaned and ran a hoof down his face. "Wilde, I swear if you don't kill those smarmy remarks, you'll spend the last 30 years of your career sorting the cold case evidence room. By paw."

Nick's expression took on a slightly horrified look.

"We're doing better, sir," Judy summed up for them, hoping to avoid having Nick rile the chief up even more.

"Better is subjective, Hopps. You're on paid medical leave for the next two weeks, and after that, you'll be sticking to lighter duty, for at least another two. Your current task should do just fine."

Judy wasn't too happy about taking forced time off, but she knew better than to argue the point with the cape buffalo.

"Yes, sir." Judy slumped back in her bed for a moment, perking up again when two more mammals walked in. She recognized them as the two Sahara Square precinct detectives assigned to Wolford's case and idly wondered what they were doing here.

"Hopps, Wilde, you both know Detectives Rivers and Longtooth."

Before Nick could jump in with a quip about "knowing" someone, the rabbit doe stepped in. "Yes, sir, we know them, but why are they here? We haven't found anything new for their case."

"Actually, officer, that case is being backburnered. We're here to ask you some questions about the Sahara Square attack, if you're feeling up to it," the lioness explained.
"Well, detective, I'm not sure about that. I mean I am lying here on this bed eating cardboard. Not sure what's up with that," Nick said. Judy let out an exasperated sigh.

"What my partner MEANS to say is, yes, we're alright with answering questions. Though why was Eric's case backburnered?"

"Leads have run cold for now. Until we get new evidence in, we won't be able to move forward," Rivers spoke up, an unhappy look on his face. Judy could only imagine that her own face mirrored his. The elk shook his head. "I don't like it either. Something will come up though."

"So, what do you want to know?"

The two small officers spent the next hour relaying the experience at the Grand Palm Hotel, or what they could remember of it. Both of their memories weren't complete, but they filled in for each other nicely.

Rivers looked down at his notepad with a puzzled look. "There are a couple things I don't understand here." He shifted the page back and forth, his other hoof scratching his chin.

"Firstly, none of the victims of the Night Howler attacks remember anything about their time being savage. One minute they were going about their day, and the next, they were waking up in a hospital bed. Some of them were even convinced they were abducted by aliens or the government. Well, actually, that last one was true, so forget I said that. We know that whatever it was, was a Night Howler derivative. So why is Wilde able to remember?"

"For that matter, why didn't it affect Hopps? If this is Night Howler we're dealing with, it should have affected everyone, yet the only savage animals were predators."

"And why didn't Wilde attack Hopps? In the previous cases, the afflicted mammals attacked anyone in range, and Hopps was even injured. You mentioned hunting her, Wilde. Why didn't you attack?"

Nick's face was a mask of confusion. "I don't know. I just…didn't. There was a larger threat in the room, so I guess I was focussed on that."

"But you let her take you to an office, and you didn't attack her then. Why not?"

The confused look turned into a frown. "I don't know, Detective."

Judy could tell that Nick was hiding something, though she wasn't sure what. She'd have to ask him later. The doe glanced at Bogo, and noticed he was eyeing the two with an unreadable expression on his muzzle.

"And you, Officer Hopps. Why did you not subdue Nick first?"

Judy turned back to the Elk detective.

"He wasn't acting threatening towards me. If anything, he was curious and confused. I had my paw on my tranquilizer just in case, though. In any event, Officer Wilde DID buy me time to make sure we took down that tigress." The doe thought for a moment. "Sirs, what happened to that mammal? And the camel security guard?"

"The tigress is recovering, but we can't say anything more that that. The security guard…it wasn't pretty. He's alive, but he might never wake up again. That's assuming he lives in the first place."

Thunderstruck, Judy's ears fell flat against her back, and her expression turned downcast. "I should
Bogo's expression softened.

"Hopps, you were injured, and your partner was savage. You know that an injured combatant is more a liability than an asset. If you had stayed there, it's more than likely I would be having to convince the city to pay for ANOTHER funeral of an officer. And the budget is too tight for more funerals right now."

"Awww, it's good to know you care about us, sir!"

Judy facepawed.

"Although for you, Wilde, I am willing to make an exception."

Rivers and Longtooth snickered.

Once Chief Bogo left, the two settled in for what they were told would be their last day in the hospital. The steady stream of visitors, mostly members of precinct one, provided them with ample conversation. Finnick dropped by in the early afternoon, mostly to make sure the red fox hadn't died yet and to let him know that he wasn't too happy with Nick's mom calling him trying to figure out what had happened to "her baby".

Nick's academy dorm mate also dropped by, the loud foul-mouthed cheetah complaining about being assigned to parking duty for the last month in the rainforest district, envying the fact that Nick got to skip straight to "the good stuff", and even Judy only had a few days of parking duty at the beginning.

The doe had to explain that she'd almost gotten herself fired, with only Bellwether's intervention, and later Nick's, that saved her career. Arnie gave her a sour look at the mention of the former mayor, and Judy felt a little dirty for implying that she had the ewe's help.

At one point, Judy was taken for a final round of tests and x-rays, leaving the fox alone with his friend. A silence extended between the fox and the cheetah, before the latter cleared his throat.

"Yes?" The red fox had an idea of what was coming next.

"So…"

"…buttons on ice cream, see if they stick." The fox was quick to respond.

"What?" The cheetah gave a confused look.

"Sew buttons on ice cream, see if they stick."

Arnie blinked, then shrugged it off. "So…have you?"

"Have I…worked as a police officer? Yes, yes I have."

"You know what I mean dude! Have you asked her out yet?"

Nick frowned. "Have I told you that it's the vixen that leads for foxes? Yes, yes I have. Is it really any of your business? No, no it's not. Do you have a one-track mind? Absolutely."

"Come on, dude! OK, I'll rephrase that. Has SHE asked YOU out?"
"And this is your business…how exactly?"

Arnie stared. "Should I just ask her?"

"The bunny has taken down rhinos, and has more pictures on the academy records wall than everyone else combined. Do you really want to risk her wrath?"

"No, not really." The cheetah looked deflated.

"Look, if that ever happens, AND SHE AGREES TO LET ME, I'll tell you. But don't hold your breath dude."

"I still don't understand you. Dormies at the academy for 6 months and I still don't understand you foxes…"

"Don't understand what?" The two mammals looked up to see Judy being wheeled back into the room by a nurse, the deer doe doctor following with a folder in paw.

"Foxes. Arnie here doesn't understand foxes, even though he roomed with one for six months."

"Ah. Well, don't feel too bad, Arnie. I've known this fox for almost a year now, and if you try to understand him, you're just asking for time with the department psychiatrist."

Arnie burst out laughing, while Nick held a paw to his chest. "Ouch. You wound me, Fluff."

"Looks like you got someone to match your wit, Red." The cheetah looked at his watch. "I gotta go. I'm on break right now and just dropped in to see you guys. Later, Wilde."

After the cheetah left, the doctor looked to the rabbit. "Ms. Hopps, we need to discuss your injuries. Would it be possible for your partner to wait outside?"

Judy waved the doctor off. "It's OK, I want him here for this. He's my partner."

The doctor gave them a critical look and was quiet for a moment, before moving to a light panel on the wall. Flipping it on, she hung a pair of X-ray negatives. "Very well, then. Your x-rays show no skull fractures or cracks, but your concussion is going to take time to heal. Your boss already knows to keep you on med leave for another week and a half, and on lighter duties for another two."

Judy frowned. "He mentioned that." She still wasn't thrilled with the idea of being forced to take another medical leave, especially after what happened at the hotel.

"You'll also need to stay with friends or family, someone who can keep an eye on you. A concussion can easily get worse without warning."

"My family's in Bunnyburrow…"

"No, no extra travel, at least not for the rest of this week. It might aggravate your injury. Do you have anyone in the city you can stay with?"

The fox and rabbit looked at each other. "I have a friend I can stay with."

"Good. I'll get your release forms ready. If you need to call your friend, you can do so from the lobby phone." With that, the doctor and nurse left the room.

Judy's ears dropped low down her back, and she stared at her lap. "I'm sorry, Nick. I kind of just invited myself over for the rest of the week. If it's too much of a hassle, I can—"
"Don't worry about it, Carrots," the fox said with a gentle smile. "I told you you're always welcome at my place. Mom'll probably be by every day to check on me, and I'm sure she'll want to check on you as well."

Judy looked up and grinned at her fox.

"You ready to get out of here, Officer Fluff?"

The rabbit's grin grew. "You know it, Slick."

Chapter End Notes

Ouch. If you've had one, concussions like the one Judy has are not fun. I've had one. And to top matters off, it seems Wolford's case might have officially gone cold. Whatever do they do now, for their fallen mammal in blue?

Finally, the references are back! Somewhere in here is a reference to a TV Show. Can you find it?

Also, I'll be posting an "Ask the author" on my DeviantArt on Monday, May 21. If you have a question about the story that you want me to answer (No spoilers) or just me in general (Nothing too personal please), watch my DeviantArt and comment on the journal entry I post there on Monday! This is just an experiment at this point, so it will be interesting to see how it turns out!

Coming up on June 1: Out of Town!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Want to rage at me for my impossible to find references? Leave a comment!
Out of Town

Chapter Summary

The after-effects of their little adventure continue

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: My awesome editor, Daee17, and I were reviewing a scene I'd added to the later part of this chapter when the peddler from Aladdin came by and offered to sell us the rights to Zootopia in exchange for the ruby from the Cave of Wonders. Since neither of us have that ruby, we still don't own Zootopia.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Authorities still have no identity of the mammals behind the attack on the Grand Palm Hotel last Monday. In this security footage released by the ZPD, the perpetrators were identified as a group of water buffalo, however, none have come forward to identify the suspects. Police are asking all citizens to—" The TV went blank and a frustrated groan emanated from the couch and the mammal watching said TV.

Boredom. There wasn't any other word for it. Judy Hopps was bored. And not just bored. She was BORED. In the last four days she'd managed to do nothing but sleep, watch Pawflix, sleep, eat, watch more Pawflix, and sleep. And eat. Even chatting with Marian, who came by every morning and evening, had to be done from the confines of wherever she happened to be laying down.

Honestly, she hated being effectively chained to a bed, or Nick's couch as it was during the day. He'd actually threatened to pawcuff her to his bed when he caught her wandering around for the third time. What made it worse, though, was the fact that Nick INSISTED on carting her everywhere. A small part of her got a bit of a thrill from that, but it was overridden by the fact that it made her feel like an invalid.

Nick persisted though, and in the end, she couldn't fault him. The doctor had imposed on her the importance of minimal physical activity for the first week, so the fox and bunny had come to a compromise of sorts, though it felt more like the opposite. Nick slept on his couch, then in the mornings, when she woke up, he would come into the bedroom with a breakfast in bed, after which he would carry her to the couch, and they'd spend the day watching TV. Hence the Pawflix. In the evening, Nick would carry her to his bedroom and leave so she could get herself ready for bed.

But now, 6 days after the attack, the two had gone through every episode of Apehunters, and polished off watching the latest season of Race to the Edge. The news was basically ongoing "updates" on the attack last week, and news on the protests that had flared up since then. The doe had been horrified to hear her name and quotes from her press conference speech used by some prey supremacy groups, and had called the ZPD public relations department immediately afterward. They'd issued a statement on her behalf, but that hadn't stopped the groups from pushing their own
Judy had even done up her after-action report by paw and had Fangmeyer pick it up on her way to the station one morning. Nick’s report was somewhere in the mess of other stuff on the coffee table.

Judy groaned again when she heard her phone chime for the umpteenth time in the last hour. All day, every day, for the last 4 days, she’d been getting calls and text messages from her family. The phone call she’d had to endure from her parents the day she’d gotten out of the hospital had been the worst. They’d started off demanding to know what had happened and why they hadn’t been called, and then scolding her for taking them off her emergency contact list.

The headache she’d had continued to grow when they’d gotten a bit too loud in the argument and several of her siblings had overheard that Judy was on the phone. The stampede of bunnies and the clamour of them all talking over one another had been too much, and Judy had signed off and taken a nap to help calm the throbbing.

Another chime. Another groan.

"Aren't you going to answer those, Carrots? They're just going to keep messaging you, you know."

"Nick, I have over 300 siblings. If I start replying, I'm not going to get a moment's peace."

"What if you do a broadcast message? Something to tell all of them to stop?"

"Last time I did that, I got blocked for spamming."

"Well, if it's annoying you that much, and you don't want to reply, why not just turn the phone off?"

Judy really had no response to that and moved to grab the cursed piece of equipment. She was about to turn it off when an idea came to her.

"Nick, how would you like to go out to Bunnyburrow with me?"

The pan Nick had been taking out of the dishwasher fell to the ground with a clatter that made Judy's ears ring, and the doe cringed. "What?"

Recovering, Judy looked at the tod. "I just thought, since I'm off bed-arrest tomorrow, and since my family wants my attention, we could…you know… go to Bunnyburrow? For a few days?"

"A few days, huh? What's there to do out there?"

Judy shrugged. "Meet my family, go see the town, I don't know… I just thought it'd be nice to get out of the city for a bit. If you don't want to, we can stay here..." Nick was shaking his head.

"Relax, Carrots, I was just pulling your leg. We can go to Bunnyburrow. That is, if your parents wouldn't mind me around?"

Judy's face lit up. "Oh, don't worry about them. I've told them all about you. I'm sure they'd be happy to meet you in person!"

The fox's face went from teasing to alarmed. "'All' about me?"

Judy blushed and pulled one of her ears over her shoulder to stroke it. "Well, I may have left out what you did for work before you went through the academy. And the fact that we are...you know... But I told them everything else, I swear."
The fox eyed the gray doe warily. "Should I expect a welcoming party, or a hunting party with torches and pitchforks?"

"No torches or pitchforks. We use flashlights, shotguns, and the combine harvester for our fox hunts these days," the rabbit deadpanned with a straight face. A straight face that lasted all of three seconds. Judy couldn't hold in her laughter at the sight of Nick's horrified look, and nearly rolled off the couch.

"Ha ha. Laugh it up, fuzzball." This sent Judy into another fit of giggles.

It took a few moments for Judy to finally calm down and catch her breath, but the giggles continued to pop up every once in a while. "Seriously Nick, you don't think we live in the dark ages, do you?"

Nick shrugged. "Not really. But honestly, I've never been outside the city before. I'm not sure what to expect."

"Just be yourself. You'll be fine."

Nick hesitated. "What about…us? If we go out there, chances are they're going to figure it out."

"Then we'll deal with that when it comes. Come on, Slick! It'll be fun!"

After a moment, the tod nodded. The idea of visiting her family was an interesting one, even though they seemed to dislike the idea of Judy pursuing her dreams. He knew that they'd eventually cross paths if the two of them were to be an item. That alone scared him more than anything.

Why is it that I am trained as a cop and can ALMOST go paw to paw with Judy, but the idea of meeting her parents scares the all-blessed stuffing out of me?

At Nick's agreement, Judy whooped and whipped out her phone to call her mom and dad to inform them of the new plans.

"Hurry up, Nick! If we miss this train, we'll have to wait for the evening one, and we won't get much of a chance to visit before bed!"

"I'm coming, Carrots, sheesh! It's not my fault you decided my Pawaiian shirts weren't suitable and made me pick out different ones!"

The doe let out a groan. "Nick, those Pawaiians would burn the brain of a star-nosed mole!"

"They're classics! Real silk too!"

"Attention. Zootopia Express will be departing in 30 minutes. All passengers, please board at platform 4. The checked baggage terminal is now closed."

Judy headed over to the check-in kiosk, punching up their booking code. A few taps on the screen later, and the machine spat out their boarding passes. Standing in line on the platform, they spent the time idly chatting away, when a voice behind Nick spoke up.

"Hey fox, this prey botherin' you?"

Nick turned, and Judy glanced around him to see a coyote. A little on the small side, Judy thought, since he was smaller than Nick, and coyotes tended to be larger than foxes. Nick eyed him up for a moment, then turned and winked at the gray rabbit.

"I don't know. Carrots, are you bothering me?"
Judy grinned and clasped her paws behind her back. "Nope. Don't think I am. Am I?"

"Mm-mm nope. Can't say that you are. Now, this other—"

"Listen dude, I'm just trying to help you out here. You don't need that prey shit, they're beneath you." The coyote turned to the small rabbit. "Leave us alone, grass muncher. Go back to your hole and make more of yourself or whatever it is that you do."

Nick saw Judy's grin widen. "Hey, Nick, was that hate speech? It sure sounded like hate speech."

Nick's grin mirrored Judy's own. "Sounded like it to me too."

Judy turned to the coyote. "How about you mind your own business here and stop harassing us?"

The coyote scoffed. "What makes you think I'll listen to a grass muncher like you?"

"Well, you know, you CAN get arrested for harassment."

The coyote burst out laughing. "Oh, that's rich, coming from a grass muncher like you? Who's going to arrest me? That fern over there?"

"Officer Wilde, think the chief would send an on-duty to take this guy in?"

"Oh, I'm sure he will, Officer Hopps. In fact, I'd even wager that he might make an appearance himself."

The coyote's laughing had ceased. "You don't have any evidence," he said, somewhat hesitantly.

There was a momentary garbled electronic noise. "Leave us alone, grass muncher. Go back to your hole and make more of yourself or whatever it is that you do."

The coyote stared. The garbled noise happened again, and again he heard his own voice. "Leave us alone, grass muncher. Go back to your hole and make more of yourself or whatever it is that you do."

Judy cocked her hip and smirked at the dumbfounded canid. "No evidence, you say?"

The two officers stared down the other mammal. After a moment, he seemed to shrink and turned to leave. "Fine. I was just leaving anyway."

Nick fired the parting shot. "Not fast enough!"

The two watched the coyote go. After a moment Nick glanced at the rabbit beside him. "I can't believe you're carrying that thing around with you."

"Hey, you never know when you'll need to collect some evidence," the doe said, shaking her head and grinning. That coyote needed to be taken down a peg or two.

"Last call, Zootopia Express departing in 15 minutes from platform 4"

"Come on, Slick, we have a train to catch," Judy remarked, gesturing to the waiting ride to her hometown.

The badger at the door of the train took and examined their passes, then ushered them aboard. The two stowed their luggage and took their seats.
"You know, Carrots, I don't think you've ever told me why you wanted to become a cop."

Judy looked at the fox beside her.

"I mean, I know it's been your dream for a long time, and that you wanted to make the world a better place, but why a cop? Why not a doctor, or a psychologist, or something?"

The rabbit thought about that one for a moment.

"I've always believed in justice. And helping people. So, being a cop just went hand in hand with that, you know?"

There was a long silence before Judy spoke again.

"I didn't get my sense of justice from anyone in my family. When I was in school, there was a group of kids that were the biggest bullies in town. Gideon was one of them. They would pick on smaller kids, stealing things like lunch money, toys, and other things from them. Normally, they were careful enough to not get caught. Gideon only did because he slashed my cheek. I decided that I would do what I could to stop that. Stand up for the ones that couldn't. Help those who needed help."

Nick stared at the rabbit.

"Why didn't they get caught?"

There was a snort that at other times, Nick might have called "cute", but wisely chose to keep his muzzle shut, lest he court death. "Classic case of 'not my problem'. Their parents didn't care, as long as they didn't end up in jail, the schools couldn't do anything off their property, and in the schoolyard, it always ended up as a he-said-she-said, and the kit bullied usually got the harsher punishment."

The tod frowned. "That doesn't seem very fair."

With a shake of her head, the rabbit continued. "It wasn't. Not by any definition. But when you have a group of five bullies all singing one song, and another mammal and his friend singing another song, the fact is, you have a majority. So, the bully victim gets the harsher punishment, for lying and for whatever the bully was accusing him of, and the bully maybe gets a slap on the wrist."

Nick nodded. This was all too true when it came to how foxes were generally treated, not just in the schoolyard, but in general. The foxes that tried to break the mold, often starting their own businesses since no one would hire them, usually ended up either closing up shop or only making just enough money to keep the lights on and were often targets for insurance scammers.

"Of course, that made ME the target they came after most. They saw someone challenging their… well, I guess the word is dominance… Anyway, they started coming after me."

Another nod. He didn't say anything. Judy knew already how foxes were ostracized, so he didn't feel like this was something he needed to one-up. Judy took the opportunity to continue.

"I wanted to change that. To make a difference. But I didn't know how. But then I saw a news documentary on police officers. And I knew, right then, that's what I wanted to do. I was 8 at the time. Of course, I didn't tell my parents until later. They weren't happy." The doe's ears drooped. "That was the first time they told me I shouldn't follow my dreams."

Nick turned to watch the countryside roll by as he processed that.
"Your parents came around though."

"They did. It took them until I resigned to do it, though."

Still watching the countryside, the fox was silent for a long time, before he turned to look at the doe beside him.

"Did you ever wish you had listened to them?"

That made Judy pause. "I did, for a little while. That week I resigned. I thought I'd broken the world. I thought, if I had listened to my parents when they told me not to, then all the predators in Zootopia would have been better off."

"But then we would have had Bellwether and her goons running around unchecked."

Judy nodded, acceding the point. "You're right." She looked up at the fox beside her. "And I never would have met you." She shuffled closer to him and snuggled into his side, heedless of the shocked looks of the mammals around them.

"So, Carrots, besides farming what else is there to do out here?"

"Well, there's hiking and camping in the summer, skiing, snowboarding, and pond hockey in the winter. There's the planting festival in the spring and the Carrot Day festival in the fall—"

"Wait, wait. you guys have a festival? For carrots?"

The insides of Judy's ears turned a little pink. "It's not just about carrots. Lots of families set up booths and sell their produce. It's also a good place to look for prospective business partnerships. Like my parent's farm and Gideon Grey. We grow the fruits, and veggies, and he makes them into pastries. The Leaps family grows hops that the local brewery uses. That sort of thing. So, I guess that part is more of a business fair. But there's stuff for the kits to do to. Midway games, things like that," Judy explained, conveniently leaving out the plays that grade school kits put on.

"Midway games, huh? You know those things are rigged."

"Says the mammal who used to do something similar for a living."

"And I bet you figured out a way to beat them."

Judy shrugged. "Some of them. Like the shooting galleries. I was pretty good at those and I had fun, even when I didn't win them."

"Getting some pre-training in there? Your marksmanship scores are almost unbeatable at the academy."

The rabbit doe shook her head. "I didn't think of it that way. Those air guns have lousy sights and aim. If I had tried to use that as 'experience', I'd have shot everything else except the target at the academy."

"You mean like the bad guys in an action movie? The ones that can spray several thousand bullets and not hit the broad side of your family's barn? While the hero is one-shotting them with a 19th century 6-shooter?"

"Yep. And I CERTAINLY wouldn't have passed the advanced weapons and tactics courses using that experience."
With a hum, Nick thought. "I haven't been to many carnivals or the like, but I had fun with most of them. Once I learned how to 'play by the house rules' so to speak. It's kind of satisfying to watch the game operators glower when you just keep winning the big prizes."

The rabbit doe next to him laughed. "I bet. Someday you're going to have to come out for Carrot Days and show me the… tricks of the trade."

Nick's muzzle wore a matching grin. "It's a date."

After a while, Judy dozed off, her slight weight a comforting presence against Nick's side. The fox, on the other hand, watched the landscape roll by the window. The coastal forests eventually gave way to rolling hills. This was the farthest outside Zootopia Nick had ever been. And now Nick was going to his bunny's kithood home to meet her family and spend the week. He wasn't sure what to think.

On one paw, he was ecstatic to be spending time where Judy grew up. On the other, he knew her parents were the conservative type that until recently had held some pretty speciesist views of their own. So, while they may have accepted a fox as a business partner, would they accept a fox as… family?

Nick let that thought turn over in his head a few times. He wanted Stu and Bonnie to like and approve of him. Over the next few hours, he decided on a course of action. He knew bunny culture for courtship was quite different from foxes, so learning was in order. He pulled out his phone and began a little research.

Nick woke Judy up about 5 minutes before they were due to arrive. He had to suppress the urge to say how cute the little yawn she gave was, lest she bring the wrath of Hopps on him. The two gathered their bags, and, as the train pulled into the station, he expected to see a sea of tall ears waiting for them. After all, Judy had a ridiculously sized family. He nudged the doe.

"Hey, Carrots, where are all your siblings?"

She glanced up, then out the window as the train came to a halt. "Hmmm? Oh, they're probably busy. If we brought everyone here, it would take every vehicle everyone in my family owns and then some. The rest are either at home, at work, or moved out." She looked at her phone. "School's out though, so you might see some of the kits from litters I helped raise in that group."

Nick hummed, wondering how the kits would react to seeing their sister get off the train with a city fox.

"Attention all passengers. Welcome to Bunnyburrow. The next stop is Podunk, Deerbrooke County. Mammals disembarking, please remember to take all personal belongings when leaving the train. If you have checked baggage, it will be made available to you inside the station. Thank you for choosing Zootopia Transit Authority."

The doors slid open and the two mammals stepped out into the late afternoon sun. Blinking, the fox reached up to put his aviators on—

"JUDY'S HOME!"

The pitter-patter of rabbit feetpaws sounded like an ominous roll of thunder and the red canid looked to see a wave of charging bunnies heading his way. He glanced at the train doors in time to see them slide shut.
Crap.

The thunder of feettails stopped, and Nick looked back. Blinked. Looked again. There wasn't a wave of bunnies. Only 5 or six had decided to run up to them, all of which Judy was currently hugging enthusiastically. The other twenty or so rabbits approached at a more sedate pace.

Age brings wisdom. And patience.

Nick was able to pick out Stu and Bonnie, and noted that they both had their eyes locked on him. They knew he was accompanying Judy, so he knew they weren't surprised. He guessed it was caution.

Turning his attention back to Judy, he moved up beside her as she was greeting each one of her older siblings in turn. He knew it would be a chore to remember all of their names, and chances are, he'd need his rabbit's help for that. One of the youngest though, a very young tan doe had her green eyes firmly locked on him. She glanced down to where Nick's dangling paw was almost touching Judy's arm, then back up to his eyes. After a while, the little bunny spoke up.

"Aunt Judy? Who's this?"

Judy looked over at the tiny rabbit and then followed her gaze to Nick. The fox and his rabbit locked gazes for a moment, before the former nodded slightly. They'd agreed to just address the proverbial elephant in the room before it had a chance to turn pink…with polka dots.

"This is Nick, Cotton. He's my…" Judy hesitated, her ears turning a shade of red and dropping behind her back.

"He's my boyfriend."

The bomb dropped. Nick awaited his untimely demise by pitchforks.

It never came.

Instead, a silence so deafening, no one heard the train leave. Nick wouldn't have been surprised if crickets had started chirping. They didn't.

The young rabbit, Cotton, frowned, looking at Nick. "But he's a fox!" The mammal in question flinched and glanced at the gray doe next to him.

Judy's expression hardened slightly, but the tightness disappeared an instant later, gone so quickly, Nick almost didn't catch it.

"He is a fox, and I love him." Nick felt Judy's fingers worm their way into his paw and squeeze.

The silence extended. Nick noted a few of the rabbits had disconcerted or disgusted looks on their faces, and some of them turned to leave. The fox's heart sank, and he filed those rabbits away, wondering if he'd be able to win them over. He felt another squeeze on his paw and glanced down. Judy was looking up at him with concern in her amethyst eyes. She glanced at her leaving family members and frowned, then shook herself and looked back at Nick with a reassuring smile on her face, one that said, "You're all that matters."

Nick was surprised to feel a pair of tiny arms wrap around one of his legs and looked down to see Cotton wrapped around it. She looked up into the eyes of the much larger mammal. Searching her eyes, he did detect a little bit of nervousness.
"Hello Nick. I'm Cotton."

A grin threatened to split the fox's face in two, but he did his best to conceal his fangs, not wanting to scare the tiny doe.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Cotton."

He reached down and ruffled the fur between her ears, then glanced up. Bonnie and Stu were watching him with a shocked expression, before the former shook herself out of her momentary stupor and gave a small smile. "It seems that Judy's left a few details out of her phone calls. How long has this been going on?"

The fox felt like a coiled spring was slowly relaxing. The look from the older doe was not one that was condescending or judgemental. Nick looked at Judy, whose ears were flat against her back, and red as a tomato. He even thought he could see the blush in her cheeks. He leaned down.

"Careful Carrots. If you blush any harder, you'll burst into flame."

If anything, that made the blush worse. Nick smirked. After a moment, Judy let out a long-held breath. "About three weeks, mom."

Stu was a mix of thoughts. Bonnie had shared some suspicions with him several times, usually after phone calls from their Zootopian daughter. He knew that Judy was her own doe, and that she would follow her own path, but that didn't stop him from worrying about her. There were all the usual worries a father had when his daughter brought a buck – or a fox in this case – home for the first time. Would he be good enough for his daughter? Would he hurt her, use her? Or would he do his best to make sure she was happy, every minute of every hour of every day?

It didn't matter much that Nick was a fox. Not like it would have less than a year ago. At that point, he probably would have done something irrational or unfortunate. But Judy's influence on their lives, even 200 miles away, and their work with Gideon had changed that outlook.

Still, he did wonder how different foxes were to bunnies. How different the dating and marriage customs were. A bit of hard work out in the fields would help him get a read on the larger male, he figured. In the meantime…

"Hey, it's about late in the afternoon, and we should probably get going and make sure the teens didn't burn down the barn."

Bonnie nodded, while Judy thanked her lucky stars for the intervention.

The mob of bunnies and the lone fox made their way off the platform to the waiting vehicles. Nick spotted the old beat up pickup that Judy had been driving when she found him under the bridge months ago, sticking out like a sore thumb amongst a jam of much newer vehicles.

The fox and his bunny loaded their luggage into said truck's bed before climbing into the cab. Stu took the wheel, and, with a little coaxing of the old engine, they were off.

Nick looked around as they drove. Judy wasn't long in starting to point things out to the tod. "We're on the edge of our property right now. Everything on the right belongs to my family. On the left is the Leaps family now, but just up the road, their property ends and the Hareson family's starts."

"Wait, so how much land does your family own, Carrots?"

Judy looked a little fidgety. "Everything you see out your window, Nick. And then some."
Nick's jaw dropped. He could see for miles. And miles.

"The house is at the halfway point between the northern and the southern fields."

Staring open-mawed at the expanse around him, he was completely unaware that they'd turned onto a long gravel driveway. It wasn't until Judy slugged him in the arm that he was jarred back to reality.

"OW! For Pete's sake, Carrots, knock my arm off, why don't you?!"

The rabbit gave her beleaguered fox a smug grin. "If you weren't sitting in the way of the door, I wouldn't have to."

Rubbing his arm, Nick glanced around. They'd parked at the base of a massive hill, with what looked like little round windows strewn all over the place. A large door at ground level told the fox everything he needed to know.

"So, this is the famous Hopps burrow."

"Well, I don't know about 'famous', but yes, this is our home. Not quite what you were expecting, huh?" Stu had climbed out of his side and was unloading the luggage from the bed, along with Judy. The rest of the vehicle convoy had followed a road around the base of the home, likely to some sort of car park or garage, Nick presumed.

"Come on, Slick, we can put our luggage away, and I'll give you the grand tour."

Grabbing his suitcase, Nick followed Judy in.

Nick's first impression of the burrow – from the outside – didn't even come close to the enormity of it. The tod surmised that it would HAVE to be large to house over 300 rabbits, as well as be able to entertain guests of various sizes and species. The closest thing in Zootopia Nick could liken it to would be a mall with an attached hotel. Except instead of stores you had various rooms. Multiple living rooms, entertainment rooms, reading rooms, a full library, and study areas. And bedrooms. Hundreds of bedrooms.

They had taken two hours, and they had only scratched the surface. Figuratively, of course. Judy had alluded to some more specialized rooms elsewhere for some of the hobbies her family engaged in, whether it be artistic pursuits, creative writing, or even drama. When he'd inquired about heating and cooling the place, Judy had explained that there was a whole level farther down dedicated to the more technical aspects, but she never went down there, unless she was looking for someone.

The dinner bell had sounded at that moment, and they had all migrated to the dinner hall. It looked like some sort of massive restaurant, with multiple tables and chairs, usually seating five or six rabbits a piece. The food was laid out like a buffet, and you went up to get what you wanted.

The dinner conversation was in full swing, mostly the events happening in the big city, with Nick and Judy unfortunately forced to hide some of the details, both for fear of her parent's reaction, and because it was an ongoing investigation. Eventually though, the conversation shifted to other things. What her littermates – those that weren't present for dinner were doing, who just started college doing what, how her married siblings were doing in that department.

Dinner was nearly over when the conversation took an abrupt turn.

"So, Nick, before you became Judy's partner, what was it that you did?" The question came from Stu, though Bonnie looked equally as curious.
Glancing at Judy, he noted her nervous, fidgeting posture. The fox thought quickly before responding. "A number of odd jobs. Mostly entrepreneur-salesmen type stuff. When Judy found me, I was running an ice cream stand. Actually, that was her first big clue in the missing mammal case, when she noticed the victim holding one of my pawpsicles in a photo."

Stu nodded, but Bonnie continued the questioning. "Was it profitable? Were you able to live comfortably?"

The fox shrugged. "Some days were better than others. I wouldn't say 'comfortably', or even 'happy', but I was able to live."

"What made you decide to become a police officer?"

Nick swallowed. "Well, I didn't plan on it, originally. But Judy can be very persuasive."

Bonnie snorted, while Stu shook his head. "That she is. Persuasive and stubborn."

"I am not stubborn!"

"Yes, Judy, you ARE stubborn. Always have been," a tan doe with brown eyes said as she walked by, on her way to the dishes cart that was apparently taking too long to reach her.

Judy slumped. "Thanks for the support, Madison."

"Anyway, she decided I could do so much more than ice cream sales and other menial jobs and could actually...do something meaningful. So, I joined after we solved the Night Howler case together. And here we are. And I wouldn't change it for the world."

Stu seemed a little bit unsure, but Bonnie seemed placated. For the rest of the meal, they moved on to some other, less-sensitive topics.

Nick had just put his dishes on the cart when Judy grabbed his paw and began leading him away. Navigating the warren of passages in the burrow was something that Nick knew he would need a long time to learn, but the rabbit doe had both a destination in mind, and the knowledge on how to get there.

"So, where are we heading now? I can't imagine there's much of the place we haven't seen yet."

Judy continued tugging on his paw, eventually coming to a linen closet. She grabbed a pillow and a quilt out of it and handed them to Nick, before taking his paw and leading him further through the maze. She gave off no hints as to where they were headed, though Nick finally began to recognize some of his surroundings just before they reached the front door.

Nick followed Judy outside, her leading the way into the fields and up onto a hill. When she reached the top, she turned and took the blanket out of her fox's paws and laid it out on the ground, underneath a large tree. She then took Nick's paw again.

"I used to come up here every once in a while, to watch the sun set," she said as she looped Nick's arm around her back, cuddling into his side. "This was sort of my spot. When I needed to be alone or when I needed to think, I'd come here. You can see most of my family's property from here, and it's far enough away that you don't have to worry about someone disturbing you."

Nick looked around. You could see for miles. The burrow's entrance, the barns and sheds, and the storage units were just small features in the expansive landscape. Fields upon fields upon fields, acres upon acres. Stands of trees and thicker woods. The evening sun set the view ablaze in a violent
explosion of yellows, oranges, and reds. Birds chirped and crickets sang, and a light breeze rustled the grass around them. In the distance, Nick could see the rail line, the highway, and the town itself.

"It's beautiful. You can see forever up here."

The two stood in silence for a moment. "Are you OK, Nick? I know I kind of dropped this on you at the last minute."

The fox nodded. "It was a little sudden, I'll agree to that. But I think what I was most scared about was meeting your parents, Fluff. I know you told me that they'd changed, but I was still a little worried, you know? These are the same mammals that tried to foist a fox taser on you when you first came to Zootopia."

Judy thought about that for a moment. "I was surprised too, when I found out they were working with Gideon. I still don't know how that came to be. They even told me they never would have considered it if it hadn't been for me."

The doe shook her head. "I know if Pop-Pop were still alive, he sure wouldn't like you. He died just before I quit the force. He used to say foxes were red because they were made by the devil." She gave a small snort. "Of course, he also used to tell stories of how he'd fought in the war – which war he fought in depended on what day you asked – and he used to think my name was Trudy."

The fox beside her barked out a laugh. "Trudy? He used to call you Trudy?" At the doe's "Yup", he couldn't help another burst of laughter. "Gosh, what do you think he'd call me? Rick? Dick? No wait, maybe Mick? As in Mickey?"

"Ugh, I don't even want to think about it. With my luck, he might have named you after the devil himself."

They fell into another silence, Judy resting her head against the fox's side, just enjoying each other's company for a moment. As the sun slowly set, the moon and stars came out, the two mammals continued to stand there. Fireflies danced around them to a tune only they knew.

Judy shifted her weight on her feet and looked down to where their paws were joined.

"Nick, I have a question."

The fox beside her hummed and turned his attention to her.

"Why didn't you attack me when you were savage? You seemed like you were holding something back when you were talking to Bogo, Rivers and Longtooth."

She felt Nick stiffen for a moment before he relaxed again. "It's a little personal, Carrots."

The rabbit doe turned to face the fox, bringing her other paw up to join its twin in holding Nick's. She stared up into his eyes.

"It's important to me, Nick. Please. Don't keep secrets like this. I need to know."

Nick sighed, closed his eyes, and brought his other paw up to pinch the bridge of his nose. "OK. It's kind of hard to explain, but, you know that foxes are very scent-oriented mammals, right?" Opening his eyes, he saw her nodding.

"Foxes… well, we tend to imprint on certain scents. The scent of our parents or our kits, for example." Judy stayed quiet for a moment, waiting. "Mammals we are particularly close with as
Nick closed his eyes and hung his head. "When I first picked up your scent, I smelled prey. But I also knew it was something else. I was confused. Still confused when I tracked you down."

The fox let out a breath, as though he'd been holding it for a long time. "It wasn't until I picked up my own scent on your paw that I realized… who you were to me. The savage part of my mind realized you were…" He trailed off.

Judy slipped herself under Nick's arm, bringing it around to her opposite shoulder, pressing into his side. "Were what?"

Nick hesitated for a long moment. "My mate."

Judy went silent but didn't pull away.

"I know it's a little fast to be thinking that, but that's how my savage brain saw it."

Judy nodded into her fox's side. "I understand Nick. Maybe it is too fast, but it shows what you truly feel, inside. And I love you too."

They stood in silence for a few moments, just gazing up at the twilight sky. A stray thought popped into Nick's head, something he'd been meaning to ask for a while. "Kind of a sudden change in topics, Carrots, but when's your birthday?"

Judy thought that was kind of an odd question but answered it anyway. "September 22, 1990, why?"

Nick stilled. After a moment, he reached into his pocket band pulled out a pawkerchief. He stared at it a long moment, before he passed it to the doe. "Remember this?"

Judy looked at it. "Sure. It's the same pawkerchief you used to tend to my wound in the Natural History Museum, why?"

"Remember the story of me and that Junior Ranger Scout meeting?"

The doe nodded. "Of course."

Nick turned to gaze back up at the stars. "That's the pawkerchief from that uniform. My mom sewed the date of that first meeting into the corner. She was so proud of me. I thought..." He hesitated, before continuing. "I thought that that was the day my dreams would come true. You know how that night ended up. With a soul crushed and dreams destroyed. The thing is, and it took me 25 years to find this out, but I wasn't wrong. That WAS the day my dreams came true."

Nick reached down and lifted one corner of the kerchief, holding it until Judy moved her paw to replace his own. Though faded with time and with light slowly disappearing, the words were still clearly visible. September 22, 1990.

Judy's mouth dropped open, and she looked back up at her fox. Nick straightened, staring into her eyes.

"It was the day you were born."

Judy felt a surge of emotions flood over her. Before she could stop herself, she'd coiled her legs and leapt at him. The surprised fox let out a grunt and stumbled backward a few steps, looping his arms underneath her thighs, whilst hers went around his neck. Locking her feet behind the fox's back, she
gazed deeply into Nick’s eyes for a moment, before closing her eyes and then the distance between them.

Nick’s eyes flew open as he felt Judy’s lips on his for the first time, then slowly closed. The sounds of the world around them seemed to cease, time seemed to stop, and his entire focus shifted to the intimate contact between the two.

Judy tightened her grip on her red fox’s neck, trying to draw him closer, beckoning him. Nick took the chance to shift Judy’s weight to one arm, breaking the kiss just long enough to grab a breath, before tilting his head to the side and bringing his lips back to hers. He cupped the back of her head with his free paw, both mammals seeming to want to melt into the other.

Nick felt a wet prodding sensation on his lips, Judy’s tongue requesting access, a request he was more than happy to accept. Parting his lips, he felt her tongue begin to explore his long muzzle. Being so small, she couldn’t get very far, but instead began to experimentally poke at and curl around his canines. He felt her shiver in his arms and she tried to pull him closer, as if that were possible.

Judy felt truly electrified. This wasn’t her first kiss, but it was her first kiss with any mammal other than a rabbit. So, it might as well be her first. She felt Nick’s tongue fighting back against her own, then demanding entry into her own mouth, a demand Judy had no choice but to yield to.

She felt like her very existence was focused on her lips and mouth. She could taste just a hint of the apple crumble that they’d had for desert.

The doe moaned into Nick’s mouth as he begun to trace the contours of her own with that long thin tongue of his. She felt him trace over her large incisors before colliding with her own questing pink muscle. The battle for muscle dominance was won handily by the fox.

Eventually, the need all mammals have for life giving oxygen overcame their need for each other, and they broke apart, gasping. As they regained the lost oxygen, they gazed into each other’s eyes. Emerald into amethyst. Each burning with a love for the other that was as unlikely as could possibly be, was shunned and frowned upon, yet both knew they would have it no other way.

Judy’s sudden giggling brought a questioning look from her foxy love. After a moment, she shook her head. “Sorry. I just had this crazy thought. What would our ancestors think of us?”

“Well, I’d expect your ancestors would call you suicidal, while mine would say something about loving the taste of rabbit a bit TOO much,” the red canid quipped with a grin. The doe he was holding burst out laughing, shaking in his arms with the force of her mirth.

Nick moved the duo back to the blanket they’d brought out, and lowered Judy down on it before settling down himself, stretching out on his back and staring at the starry expanse above them, and listening to the sounds of the night. The… natural element of the auditory symphony was something you couldn’t appreciate in the city. Aside from the occasional sound of a car or truck on the road somewhere, there were no sounds of civilization to be heard. Just nature at it’s basest.

Nick felt a weight on his shoulder and knew Judy had snuggled up next to him. He felt her pull the pillow and blanket close. Looking down at her, she gestured that he should lift his head. When he did so, she slid the pillow underneath, and then threw the rest of the queen-sized blanket over the two of them.

Relaxing in his little cocoon with his bunny, Nick held her close.

“So, Carrots, do rabbits have names for all these constellations?”
Judy smiled at the fox she was cuddling with. "Well, there's Alaida, the Winged Rabbit." She pointed to one group of stars, tracing it in the night sky. "She flew too close to the sun and got burned." The doe pointed to another group. "And over there is Zack the Joker. He had a gift that could make anyone laugh."

Judy continued to tell Nick the stories of the constellations, those that she could remember anyway, until she felt her fox relax and his breathing even out. She stretched up and planted a short kiss on Nick's muzzle before pulling herself in closer to him, laying her head on his shoulder.

"Sweet dreams, Slick…"

Chapter End Notes

If anyone recognizes the scene with the kerchief, it was written by Zootopepo on tumblr, and was included (though slightly changed) with their permission.

SO! I have been waiting to post this chapter for ages! It kind of starts a transition between act 1 and act 2 of the story, and a particularly fluffy set of chapters.

And of course there is artwork for the kiss! The piece is called "Kisses In The Sky" by TheWinterBunny.

REFERENCES! Last chapter, the hospital scene where Nick watches Judy sleep was based off a CSI:NY episode. THIS week though, I think the reference is a bit easier to spot. Can you find it?

My "Ask the Author" post was moderately successful, though not the turnout I'd hoped. Oh well. Next time!
What do you guys think of an "Ask the Cast" option?

Coming up on June 15: Visiting Bunnyburrow!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques?
Did your bus leave without you on your evening commute today? Leave a comment!
Visiting Bunnyburrow

Chapter Summary

Nick and Judy enjoy some time in town

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: I had my bid to take over Zootopia all ready to go, but the Sheriff of Nottingham burned it when he burned down King Richard's castle. So I still don't own Zootopia.

Huge thanks and praise to my awesome editor Daee17, without which I would be writing 'ass' instead of 'as', and 'tits' instead of 'its'. It's because of her that this is actually a readable story and not a pile of misspelled words and unintentional innuendos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Pain. That was the first thing that registered in Nick's mind, as the fox slowly crawled his way back to wakefulness. Throbbing pain in his back.

The second thing that registered was the warm weight on his chest and stomach. A warm weight whose leg occasionally twitched. He opened his eyes and looked down. The weight on his chest and stomach came with an appropriate sized bump in the comforter Judy had him bring from the burrow.

The memories of last night would stick with the fox for the rest of his life. Meeting Judy's family had gone well enough, he figured, and the bombshell that the doe had dropped about Nick being her boyfriend hadn't resulted in him being burned at the stake, castrated, or run out of town on a rail by a mob of pitchfork-wielding bunnies. On the other paw, he wasn't sure if Bonnie and Stu actually approved, but it was better than nothing. Baby steps, right?

Then she'd brought him out here for the little camp-out under the stars. And the kiss. She had surprised him then, both with the suddenness and with her passion. He knew Judy didn't have a lot of romantic experience, so he figured he'd probably be the one to initiate the first kiss, even though vixens usually did that. Her lack of experience was more than made up for with her passion and eagerness. The feeling of her lips on his was seared into his memory.

OK, that rock under his back was starting to be more than a pain in the ass. He had to move, but he really didn't want to disturb the sleeping ball of fluff. Wrapping his arms around said fluff ball, the fox rolled them onto their sides. The rabbit doe groaned and mumbled something unintelligible. Nick grinned.

Though the first time he'd discovered that she mumbled in her sleep was a painful experience for him, he couldn't help but find it adorable at the same time. Cute, even, though he'd never tell her that. He didn't want to be hauled into the sparring ring as punishment. It was well-known around the
precinct that a certain gray bunny had a nearly unbeaten record on that floor, and curiously, whenever she walked into the fitness room and asked if anyone wanted to be her sparring partner, all of those in the room suddenly had other things to do, so Judy had taken to challenging them instead.

The fox wrestled his phone out of his pocket and looked at the time. 5:59 AM. Nick was surprised. Normally it was Judy that was awake first, especially at this hour. As if on cue though, he felt the doe shift against his chest, mumbling something, and gently pulling at the fur she found in her fists. Moving the blanket down a bit, Nick gazed upon the gray form as she opened her eyes and looked around. There was a brief flash of confusion before she relaxed as recognition set in. Nick smiled as the doe let out a yawn.

"Good morning, Fluff. Sleep well?"

Judy nodded, shifting herself a little to gaze up at the early morning sun. "How about you?"

The russet canid grimaced. "I slept well enough, but Carrots, next time we do this, we are GOING to bring a foamie or an air mattress or something. You might have had it easy, using me as your mattress and pillow, but I got to feel every rock, twig, lump, and pit in the ground underneath both of us. And chances are, I'm going to be feeling them for the rest of the day, too."

The doe's eyes opened wide, and she brought her paws to her muzzle. "Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry Nick. I was so caught up last night that I didn't think of that! Usually those blankets are fluffy and thick enough that it's enough padding for bunnies. Are you OK?"

"Well, I'm a bit stiff and sore, but I'll live. Just, lets sleep in an actual bed tonight, yeah?"

With a nod, the doe pushed herself up into a sitting position, and gave another yawn. Sitting up as well, and feeling every second of it, Nick looked out over the endless fields before looking back at the gray rabbit.

"So, what's on the agenda for today? Back breaking manual labour? Maybe a grilling from the parents? Or a foxhunt?"

Judy gave a snort as she tried to hold in her laughter and shook her head. "Come on Slick, don't be silly. I told you we don't do fox hunts any more, and you only get grilled if you piss us off or hurt one of us."

"And by grilling, you mean..."

"I think you know what I mean," Judy deadpanned.

The two stared at each other for a moment before both burst out laughing. "Nick, relax. Even if my family was going to do things so barbaric, do you think I'd let them?"

"Well, who knows? You could just be lulling me into a false sense of security before sending me off into some sort of weird Hunter Games tournament."

The rabbit doe sighed. "Darn. You figured it out. Our plans to take over Zootopia are ruined now."

"Seriously, Carrots, what are we up to today?"

Judy thought for a moment. "Well first we need to grab breakfast. After that, why don't we go check out the town for a while? I know there isn't much, not like Zootopia, but there are a few things to see. Kind of a tour? After that we can come back here and figure out what to do next."
Nick thought for a moment. "That sounds good, Carrots. I’d love to see the town." Truthfully, Nick would probably have found some enjoyment in visiting a garbage dump, if it meant he visited it – or suffered through it, depending on how you looked at it – with Judy.

The two mammals stood, with the rabbit gathering up the blanket and pillow, shaking them off and folding the blanket neatly before starting back towards the burrow entrance.

The burrow seemed quiet on the outside. Just birds singing their morning song, and the sound of wind blowing across the fields. The inside however was a completely different story. As soon as they opened the door, the fox was blasted by a proverbial wall of sound. Yelling and screaming made up the majority. Cajoling and demanding took up another part. And complaining made up still more.

The fox looked at the rabbit next to him, who had her ears pinned flat. At Nick's questioning look, the doe shrugged. "School day." The source of the noise seemed to come from an alcove off the main foyer. When Nick glanced in, his eyes fell on utter chaos.

Half the kits he saw were the ones yelling and complaining. Older kits were attempting to get the younger ones into their backpacks and jackets, and still other kits of all ages looked on. Before Nick had the chance to comment, Judy grabbed his paw and dragged him further into the burrow, away from the noise.

"Sorry about that. And believe it or not, this is a quiet day. Most of the time, at least with the litters I helped raise, there was a lot more yelling, screaming, and refusals to go to school. You know, typical family stuff."

Nick wasn't sure how 'typical' that was, though for Judy, he suspected that was more the norm. Despite his rough schooling career, he hadn't given his mother a lot of grief when it came time to go. She'd had enough on her plate as it was. He didn't need to add to it.

The further they got from the entry hall, the quieter things got, for which the fox was grateful. It was loud enough with his own hearing. He shook his head.

"How do you deal with that, Carrots? That was loud for me. And unless my memory fails me, you have a lot better hearing than I do."

"Ear plugs were a godsend on the really bad days. On any other day, you could get away with EarPawds or headphones and some good music."

The fox shook his head. He'd imagined that raising a family would be difficult, but 300 kits? Which begged the question…

"Carrots where were your mom and dad in all this?"

"Mom and Dad can only do so much. Dad's out in the fields by now, but I did see Mom in the corner fixing a zipper. When you have three hundred kits though, your time with Mom and Dad is limited. Mom and Dad would spend as much time as they could, but it usually fell to the older litters to help raise the younger ones."

Nick thought for a moment.

"I know you said you helped raise the younger litters, but I didn't think you guys did ALL the parenting."

"We don't. Or didn't. Not really, anyways. We all had set schedules that we cared for the younger..."
litters. Mom still spends most of her time caring for kits, but my parents tried to make time for everyone. We did handle most of the day to day stuff, though." The doe shuddered. "I've changed more diapers than I care to count."

Judy led Nick into the breakfast nook, which, like dinner, was more of a buffet than anything, with a large selection of cereals and muffins, bread for toast, and fruits and veggies. The fox grabbed a plate and bowl and loaded them up. He made sure to add extra blueberries to the cereal.

The two ate a silent but companionable breakfast, the bulk of the Hopps family having already eaten and started their days. A few rabbits bid them hello as they walked by, but no one seemed inclined to chat at the moment.

They had just put their dishes in the dirty dish cart when they heard a commotion from the hallway.

"I'm telling you, Mom! The government indoctrinated her! Why else would she want to do something as crazy as become a police officer, and date that fox? It's obvious he's a government agent!"

Nick wasn't sure whether to be insulted or amused. Judy on the other hand was facepalming.

Nick didn't hear the response from the Hopps matriarch, but it was clear that the rabbit buck didn't like it.

"Mom, they use colleges and universities to indoctrinate mammals! And Judy went to TWO! Can we even call her Judy anymore?"

This time, Bonnie's response was more than loud enough. "Shame on you, Jeremy! That's your sister you are talking about! And while I worry for Judy's safety, she chose her own path. And I highly doubt Nick is in any government agency, besides the ZPD."

"He's hiding in plain sight! Pretty soon, Judy'll disappear into some government program, and we'll never hear from either of them again!"

The sight that greeted them as they rounded the corner was one of Bonnie having been stopped by a buck with huge glasses on his face and a stained white T-shirt, and the words "The truth is out there" in large creepy letters across the front. As soon as he caught sight of them, the buck seemed to panic, and he took off running in the other direction.

Bonnie took notice of the newcomers and sighed. "Don't let Jeremy's antics bother you, Nick. He's always been a bit paranoid."

The doe beside him nodded her agreement. "Remember I told you about him, back before we… patrolled Kalahari Heights last?" Judy was trying to be delicate and not bring up what they'd found that night. The Hopps family heads knew about Wolford's murder, but they didn't know that Judy and Nick had been the ones to find him. Nick nodded.

"That was him?"

"That was him," Judy confirmed

Nick hummed. "Where do you suppose he's off to?"

Judy shrugged. "Probably off to check for crop circles in the south fields again. Come on, let's get out of here."
The two mammals spent the morning touring the town. Small was the first word he'd used to describe it. Judy explained that most of the population did in fact live on the farms, outside of the town proper. Only about 10,000 lived within the corporate limits, despite what the population signs he'd seen said.

"210 million?! 210 million mammals live here?!" he'd blurted out, tensing up and wondering if he'd soon be swarmed with a huge fluffy army.

Judy had laughed. "Gosh, no. That sign's just a prank. You know we're good at multiplying, but we aren't THAT good. It just gets to one billion and rolls back to zero."

Nick relaxed slightly at that revelation.

Judy had taken Nick to see the fair grounds, her schools and through the downtown shopping district. Of course, the stores there catered mostly to bunnies, but there were a number that catered to larger mammals. The two got a few odd looks around town, but nobody actually said anything.

It was about one in the afternoon when a grumbling sound pierced the air. The two stopped and stared at Nick's stomach, the fox flushing under his red fur.

"Carrot sticks, we'd better feed that beast. It sounds dangerous," Judy quipped with a giggle.

She led the fox down the street, pulling open the door on one shop. The heavenly scent of fresh baked goods exploded outward at him, enveloping his senses and making him almost swoon.

"I figured we could hit two carrots at once. This is Gid's bakery, Nick. We can grab…Madison? What are you doing here?"

Judy had stopped as she'd gone through the door, staring in surprise at her sister. Nick remembered her from her brief interjection in their conversation the night before. The tan doe was dressed in a baker's apron and looked up at the newcomers.

"Guess news doesn't really travel out of the burrows, huh? Mom and Dad never told you I got a job here?"

The gray doe shook her head. "Nope. Usually they only bring someone up if I ask them or if someone graduates or is going to have another litter, or something like that."

"Hmph. Guess getting a job at the only fox-run bakery in town isn't newsworthy. Then again, you're the one that's been in front of the cameras more than all of us combined. You and your foxy boyfriend here for something to eat?"

"Yeah. Slick here can't go more than a couple hours without eating something. Honestly, I think his daily food bill is more than the gas we use in our cruiser," the gray doe remarked with a smirk.

Madison laughed. "Let me go talk to Gid. Things are quiet enough after lunch, I might be able to join you if that's OK?"

Nick figured it wouldn't be a bad idea to get in good with some of Judy's siblings too, so when Judy looked at Nick for his opinion, he gave a thumbs up and a grin.

After a while, a portly fox, shorter than Nick and with lighter fur came out of the kitchen. "Judy? Well, damn, Maddy'd told me you were back from the city, but I wasn't sure if you'd be swingin' 'round here or not. And who's this?"
"Gid, this is Nick Wilde. He's my partner on the force. Nick, meet Gideon Grey."

To Nick's surprise, the younger fox offered his paw for a shake, which he gladly took. "Nice ta meet ya, Nick. Though from what Maddy here tells me, you two are a bit more than partners at work?"

Judy's ears dropped, and Nick didn't fare much better.

"Relax, yeh two, I don't mind. I-I'm just glad that Jude here didn't let what I did ta her change that. Dunno if she told ya Nick, but I was a big jerk when I was a kit."

The taller fox nodded. "She told me. But she also told me that you aren't that guy any more and that she forgave you."

Gideon visibly relaxed at that. "She's a good mammal. Most prolly wouldn'ta forgiven me after how badly I messed her up."

"Hey Gid, whatever happened to that ferret we went to school with anyway?" Judy hadn't really had the chance to ask beforehand, her previous visits to Bunnyburrow being very brief.

Gideon looked over at the gray rabbit. "Hmmm? Oh, Travis? I haven't seen him in years, but last I heard he got himself locked up for stealin'."

Judy hummed and got a thoughtful look on her face.

"Anyhow, you guys in for some lunch? I can put together some sandwiches for us if you want." At Judy's nod, the portly fox went into the back room, while the other three mammals sat themselves at a table in front of the store window. No sooner had they gotten settled, when Judy focused her attention on her sister.

"So how long have you worked for Gid, Maddy?"

The tan doe thought for a moment. "Maybe three months now? It was just after you visited last."

"Any reason why?"

Madison sighed. "You know I was on Mom's cleanup squad for years. I wanted to move to the kitchen crew, but then so did everyone else and their daughter it seemed. Every time mom had room, I was the last to hear about it."

"I wanted to learn to bake, and I wasn't getting anywhere at home. So, I caught Gid when he made a delivery one day and asked if he wanted some help around here. He brought me on to work the counter and taught me some of the stuff he knew on the side."

At that point, Nick excused himself to the restroom. The two does watched him go. Silence descended.

"So…Nick seems nice."

Judy snorted. "He's a bit…shall we say, abrasive, but he grows on you. But under all those snide remarks and off-colour jokes, he's really got a good heart."

"You really love him?"

"I do. He was there for me to save my job. He was there for me to help me solve the Night Howler case. And he was there for me when we found Wolford's body."
Madison looked confused, before it cleared up. "Oh! That cop that got killed a couple weeks ago?"

The gray doe nodded. "The same. Wolford was my partner until Nick graduated, and he was a friend."

Madison's expression turned sympathetic. "I'm sorry, Jude. That must have been tough."

The two sat in thought for a while, before the tan doe spoke up again. "How did you get Nick to notice you?"

Looking up, Judy couldn't keep the confused look off her face. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you two are dating right? How did he ask you out?"

"It just sort of happened I guess. We both felt something for each other. We just had to admit it to each other."

"But how did you get him to ask you out?"

Judy shrugged. "Foxes do things a bit different than bunnies. The vixens always ask the tod out first. That's how it works for them. The vixen leads. Why do you…Wait, why are you suddenly interested in fox dating?"

The tan doe's expression went from curious to alarmed.

"Nothing! Just curious! Hehehe! Curious, Judy!"

Judy smirked. "The only fox our age around here that I know of is Gideon. And here you are working for him. And now you're asking about fox dating. C'mon Maddy, admit it."

The tan doe shrank, feeling a bit small, and thinking that this must be what the mammals Judy arrested felt like when she questioned them.

"He is a nice mammal, Judy. And after all the things I've heard you tell Mom and Dad about Nick, I knew you were falling for him. And I…I just…want to know if I've got a chance with him," Madison said in a bit of a small voice.

Judy smiled and shook her head. "Gosh, Maddy. Relax! I'm not gonna rat you out or anything. But I doubt the parental units will be happy to know that I've corrupted another of the Hopps kits with interspecies relationship ideas!"

The two does burst out laughing at that, just as Nick returned from the bathroom, and Gideon came out from the kitchen, carrying a tray of sandwiches and drinks.

The four sat in the lobby and chatted for a couple of hours, with Madison getting up every once in a while to take care of a customer that walked in, while Gideon would excuse himself to tend to the kitchen as needed.

That is, until Gideon brought out the blueberry pie desert.

Nick's eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. He looked over at Judy, then at Gideon, then at the pie, then back at Judy.

Judy laughed. "You and your blueberries, Nick!"

Gideon served the four each a slice and sat back down. Nick stared at the culinary masterpiece for a
moment before he dug in. The moment the pie's filling touched his tongue, he was transported to another world. A world of blueberries. And a gray rabbit too. He struggled to keep from moaning aloud but was jarred back to reality by the sound of his doe's voice.

"Should I be jealous of the pie, Slick?"

Nick blinked and realized that all three of the others were staring at him.

It's a good thing his coat was already red. He still wanted to dig a hole in the seat and crawl in though. Judy looked at Gideon. "I think it's safe to say he likes your pie, Gid. Nick's passion for blueberries makes bunnies look like we hate carrots."

The group laughed again at the fox's expense. Nick shook his head. "You wound me, Carrots. A fox has to have his blueberries, right Gid?"

The younger fox scratched his head, then winked at Judy. "Dunno, Nick. I kinda prefer strawberries myself."

Nick just stared at the other canid.

More laughter.

After a while, the fox just shook his head. "Crazy. All of you."

The four continued to chat for a little while before Gideon pointed out that he and Maddy needed to get ready for the expected afternoon influx of homeward bound school kits looking for a quick snack.

When Judy went to pay the portly fox for lunch, Gideon refused it, telling the doe that he was just happy to meet Nick and spend some time catching up. The two pairs parted ways, with Judy promising that they'd visit again tomorrow.

The two mammals had barely made it a block from the bakery when a smooth voice stopped them.

"Well, if it isn't the Ice Queen herself. I wondered if you would show up around here again, or if you had abandoned your kind for the big city. Although, from the looks of things, it looks like I wasn't entirely wrong."

Judy froze in her tracks, and Nick could feel the tenseness in the paw that was holding onto his. He glanced down to see the doe's mouth set in a thin line and her ears quaking.

"Then again you were never exactly right in the head, so it's not surprising really."

Judy closed her eyes and took a deep breath, relaxing her features before she turned around, Nick doing the same. Before them stood a white hare with blood red eyes. If the fox had to guess, the hare had albinism. He was dressed in what looked to be a fairly expensive suit, the red tie matching his eyes.

"Grimsby." Judy's voice was so cold, it could have frozen everything all the way to Zootopia. Queen Elsa of Aren-dhole had nothing on Judy at the moment. Judy's ears were straight out behind her head, parallel to the ground too, a sure sign that the doe was NOT in a good mood.

A look of annoyance flashed through the white hare's expression. "That's Gerald Grimsby the Third to you, Hopps. Learn your place."
"Grimsby, you think a doe's place is in your bed, so I'm GLAD to not learn 'my place'."

"Still sore about that whore of a sister of yours? She made her choice, a good one at that. Everything she did after that was her own fault."

White hot anger flashed through Judy's eyes, and Nick had an instant to react before she lunged at the pompous buck. She found herself being held back by a large brown and russet paw, fists swinging ineffectively at the open air between herself and the lagomorph most hated by the bunnies of the Hopps family.

"Let me go, Nick! Let me go!"

The white hare smirked. "Yep, that would be a real smart move. Your family spent years paying my lawyer's legal fees. Why not add to that with an assault charge?" The hare regarded Nick for a moment. "Although it is unusual for a fox to display any kind of intelligence beyond stealing from mammals. I'm surprised."

Nick steeled himself inside and took a deep breath. Judy was still struggling against him, and he knew that if he didn't do something, she was likely to break free or turn her anger on Nick himself. He bent down.

"Carrots. Judy. Relax. Never let them see that they get to you, right?" After a moment Judy calmed down. Her ears stayed pointing straight back.

Nick thought for a moment. "Wait a minute. Grimsby? Of the Grimsby cotton fortune?"

The hare turned his smug expression on the fox. "Wow. This fox actually has a brain. Yes of course. I am the head of Grimsby Enterprises."

Nick winked at the doe beside him before turning back to the pompous prick. "Tell me if this sounds familiar, Mr. Grimsby."

"Little hare in a well-to-do family never learns the value of a buck, never has to do any work to get the things he wants and never has to worry about how much his actions cost him or others. One day our pompous little hare inherits all of Daddy's fortune, his company, and his circle of groupies. Life is good for our little hare. Except, whoopsie, the company isn't doing so hot thanks to the mismanagement of our little hare and his father. Of course, double whoopsie, a buck not knowing the value of currency would just keep spending on frivolous things like that ridiculous suit you're wearing until, whoopsie number threesie the little hare is running his Daddy's fortune into the ground."

Throughout Nick's speech, the hare's white fur was getting visibly redder, and Judy's face had morphed from a look of pure anger to a smirk. She picked up the spiel.

"Eventually our little hare has no choice but to actually start curbing his spending. Where's the limo you were driving around town in last time I was here? The chauffeur? All the gold rings and trinkets? Get rid of those too?"

By this time, the hare could be said to have steam pouring out of his ears. "You'd better watch that filthy mouth of yours, Hopps, or I'll sue you for slander. And tell your pet fox to mind its own business."

Spinning on his heel, the buck marched back down the street. For a moment, neither bunny nor fox said a word. It was Nick that eventually broke the silence.
"I've met a lot of mammals, Carrots. Some rich, some poor. And a lot of speciest bigots. But I think that's the first time I've met someone as self-centred as him. How did you cross paths with that guy?"

Judy shook her head. "He was a year ahead of us in high school. Apparently, he got put there by his dad after he flunked out of some ivory league school. He thinks he's God's gift to us does. Or maybe conquests, I don't honestly care at this point. Anyway, he tried to hit on me, and I turned him down."

Nick frowned. "He mentioned your sister."

Judy shook her head and silently started walking the way they'd been going earlier, heading into a small park overlooking the town's river. A pedestrian bridge arced over the water in the distance, and a few mammals were out enjoying the warm afternoon sun. The doe sat down on a bench that was sized for rabbits, which made things a little awkward for Nick. Instead of sitting on the bench, he made himself at home on the ground next to her and waited for her to start speaking again.

"You remember what I told you the morning after Wolford died? About how I've lost siblings?"

Thinking for a moment, the fox nodded. "I don't remember their names, but yeah, I remember you saying something about them."

"Charles, Samantha, and Jackie," Judy clarified. "Charles was older, and Sammy was younger. But Jackie was my littermate."

Nick processed this. "Were you close?"

"Charles died before I could remember much of anything. Sammy died of pneumonia when she was 12. I'd helped raise her. She was a tough loss to take. But Jackie. We were close…"

"What happened?"

"Jackie wanted to be an actress. She wanted to be the Gazelle of movies. She was in the school drama clubs and everything. Heck, she was the one that got me into acting. Anyway, one day, Grimsby sees her and decides she's his next conquest. He promised her he'd talk to some of the people he knew and get her auditions and stuff."

"She went along with it. Ate up every word he said, even when we told her not to. If you haven't noticed, we Hopps's are a stubborn lot. She was so convinced that he was her way in that she didn't want to think about anything else. And when he finally reeled her in… well… it was as easy as making toast for him. Heat up the bread and butter it up."

"She came home the next morning in tears, telling us about how she told him she thought she was in love with him…and he'd laughed at her, called her a fool and a whore. Spread rumours about her in school. I got sent to detention when I beat him up the next time I saw him."

The fox shuddered at the thought. As a conman, he was used to pulling scams that put some dents in mammal's wallets, but he never did anything to emotionally abuse other mammals. There were some lines that should never be crossed.

"That wasn't the worst part, though."

Nick's eyes never wavered from Judy's and he sat silently, waiting.

"She started going through bouts of depression. Locked herself in her room for days on end. Wouldn't talk to any of us, and when she did, she'd have violent mood swings. Eventually, mom took her to see a specialist, and from there, a doctor. We found out she was pregnant, and it was way
The fox frowned. "Correct me if I'm wrong, Judy, but wouldn't she have been showing?"

Judy shook her head. "We all thought she was just putting on weight from her depression. And before you ask, Mom had tried to get her to go see the doctor beforehand, but she skipped out. It wasn't until we essentially forced her to go, that she actually went."

The doe sighed. "Jackie had a litter of 6 kits. 5 of them were stillborn."

There was a long pause.

"Cotton was the only one that survived."

The memory of the tiny tan-furred, green-eyed bunny hugging his leg on the train platform surged into his mind's eye.

Judy slumped. "It all went downhill even faster after that. She couldn't handle the stillborns, and barely acknowledged Cotton. We tried to force the Grimsby's to step up to the plate and at least pay for child support, but their lawyers got the case thrown out as the pregnancy being a "child's mistake that shouldn't be punished" and we ended up saddled with the legal fees. That was the last straw for Jackie. She disappeared, and for a while we had no idea what happened to her. We searched, but it wasn't until later that we found out what happened."

"Someone told us they saw her jump from that bridge over there." She gestured to the pedestrian bridge in the distance.

"We never found her body, and the local sheriff declared it a teen suicide."

The hostility Judy had shown now made sense. Nick laid his paw on Judy's knee, giving it a squeeze. Judy glanced at him. He could see the pain in her eyes, but it was muted. Anger was there too.

The fox sat back and thought. One part of him wished he could dig up some of his old contacts and get some dirt on this guy, something that would either put him behind bars or at least humiliate him. The larger part, the one that sounded suspiciously like Judy, reminded him that he was a cop now, and was expected to do things by the book, and that Judy would be hurt and upset with him if he jeopardized his new career choice.

Still, he would keep an ear to the ground as it were. Maybe ask Gideon to do the same.

In the mean time though, the fox figured a change in topic was in order.

"So, Carrots, what were you and Madison talking about when I came back to find you two giggling today?"

That brought a smile to the doe's face.

The two arrived back at the burrow before dinner. Bonnie's kitchen crew had made up a stew this evening, one Nick found very enjoyable. He noticed that the stares the two got were a lot fewer this time around, and the questioning was mostly about how their day in town had gone. Judy skipped over the encounter with the albino hare, and Nick decided not to bring it up, guessing that it was probably a sore spot with the family.
The two retired to Judy's room, the doe having convinced her parents to allow Nick to share the room, if not the bed. Though he'd grown up living in an apartment, and eventually under that bridge, the earthy, underground room with the small round window felt strangely comfortable for the fox. He suspected it was because his ancestors made their homes in holes in the ground in the days before they had learned to build with tools.

Nick grabbed his toiletries and headed off to the male's washroom, just as Judy returned from her evening preparations. When Nick got back, the doe had already changed into her sleep clothes and was propped up on her bed, scrolling through her phone, tapping out a message every once in a while. When she noticed Nick, she put the phone away and scooted to sit on the side of the bed.

"So, did you have a good day?"

Nick plopped himself down next to her, bouncing the bunny. He shrugged. "It was nice seeing the town. You know, where you grew up. Never thought I'd actually have a reason to visit a bunny town before. I was kind of surprised to hear about your sister though. Do all the Hopps does have a thing for predators?"

Judy shook her head. "Just me and apparently Maddy, as far as I know. I didn't even know she worked at Gid's bakery until today. We weren't exactly close growing up. Not enemies or rivals, or anything, just off in our own little groups."

The fox nodded.

"So, what did you think of Gideon?"

Nick took a second to organize his thoughts.

"I honestly wouldn't have guessed that he'd been a bully of yours when you were younger. From what you told me of him when he was a kit and what I see of him now, it's like night and day."

Judy chuckled a little at that. "That's what I thought when he showed up at my family's farm. Beyond the physical resemblance, I could hardly believe it was the same mammal. The first thing he did when he saw me was to me apologize for his behavior too." Judy smiled, remembering that conversation. "He'd spent a lot of time in therapy since leaving high school. It showed."

Nick smiled. "Well, I'm proud of him. And of you too, for forgiving him. It takes a big heart to forgive something like what he did to you."

Judy smiled at that.

"It also takes a big heart to forgive me. I was a jerk too." She kissed the fox on the tip of the nose as they settled under the comforter.

The fox cupped the doe's cheek in his paws. "Stop worrying about that, Fluff. You've fixed that mistake. Just like Gideon."

Judy nodded, wrapping her arms around Nick, and sighing contentedly when she felt his arms and tail encircling her. It was a while before either of them fell asleep, but eventually, both succumbed and found themselves lost in the world of dreams.
Just a couple of things. In this chapter, there's a bit of a crossover with Midnight Opheliac's Safe Paws. Gerald Grimsby the Third (or 'Gerald Grimsby the Turd' if you so prefer) was created for A Ray of Hope, but he actually made his first appearance in Safe Paws, in chapter 35. Just to clarify, he belongs to me, but was offered to Midnight Opheliac for her use.

Madison Hopps, on the other hand, belongs to me and my wonderful editor. She's our creation. So please ask before using either one! Thanks!

The Bunnyburrow population counter was about 81.5 million when Judy first left for Zootopia, and it was increasing at about a rate of 5 per second.

So…

5 per second x 60 seconds per minute x 60 minutes per hour x 24 hours per day x 30 days per month x 10 months (approximately) = 129,600,000 increase

129,600,000 + 81,500,000 = 211,100,000

I had one "Ask the Cast" question last chapter, on DeviantArt. Keep the questions coming! (All answers are in-universe!)

Last week's references, some people picked up the Star Wars reference, but no one picked up the reference to DreamWorks TrollHunters! Can you find the reference in this chapter?

Coming up on June 29: Fielding Questions!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Was your favourite TV show interrupted by some crazy Canucklehead posting a new story chapter? Leave a comment!
Fielding Questions

Chapter Summary

Things just keep happening in Bunnyburrow...and elsewhere.

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: My awesome editor Daee17 and I were munching on a fruit salad and enjoying wine while editing this chapter, when Grumpy the Dwarf barged in and told us the Evil Queen had stolen our bid acquire Zootopia. So we still don't own Zootopia.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Endless fields. Endless grassy fields. Earthy and fresh. The fields smelled like a certain gray bunny. A certain giggling gray bunny that he was now chasing on all fours. Dodging right, left, over rocks and under logs, in constant pursuit of the beautiful gray mammal. With one mighty leap, he pounced on her, pinning her to the ground still shaking with giggles. As she calmed down, she leaned up and planted a kiss on his nose.

"It's time to wake up now, Slick."

What? But he was already wide awake! Wide awake and having just caught his bunny.

He felt a pressure on his shoulder. "Wake up, Nick…"

The world around him grew fuzzy, lost focus and started fading away.

"Wake up…"

Nick's eyes popped open. He wasn't in endless grassy fields. He was in Judy's bedroom, on her bed, where he'd fallen asleep with her the night before. Judy herself was kneeling on the bed next to him, shaking him awake. The fox groaned.

"Five more minutes, Carrots."

"C'mon Nick, Dad's expecting you to help him out today, and you need to eat beforehand! You don't want to do farm-work hungry, Slick. Especially not in the summer!"

Grumbling, the fox rolled on to his back and sat up, blinking and rubbing the remaining sleep from his eyes, Judy rubbing his back.

"Up and at 'em, Slick. You do a good job today, and that'll earn you some serious brownie points with mom and dad."

The fox nodded and dragged himself out of the bed, shuffling out to the common male's washroom in Judy's wing.
The doe took the opportunity to dress herself, and was on her way out the door when Nick returned. Once Judy was through with her morning routine, the two headed down to breakfast. It was Saturday, so the meal was a slightly more opulent affair. No eggs or turkey strips or turkey sausage, but still plenty more options than yesterday. Before Nick could grab anything, Judy snatched his plate and began loading it up with mountains of fruit, a bowl of oatmeal, and a glass of juice.

At the fox's curious look, she explained. "You'll need lots of energy today, Slick. Working the fields isn't for the weak, and dad's probably gonna have you do some of the heaviest lifting."

"Great," the fox mumbled. "Can I at least get coffee?"

Judy shook her head. "Mom and dad don't do the whole coffee scene. Those of us that do, usually get our taste from the coffee shop."

"You're kidding me? Carrots, I can't survive without my coffee! Don't you guys have anything with caffeine?" At the shake of the does head, Nick whined. "I'm gonna die. I'll be dead before noon. Tell my mother I love her. I leave all my things to Clawhauser."

Rolling her eyes, Judy shoved the fox, nearly knocking him off the chair he was sitting on.

"...and now you're pushing me around. Is it not enough to sentence this fox to an early grave?"

Several of Judy's siblings, who had been listening in, were fighting to hold in laughter.

"Eat your breakfast, Nick, or you'll miss it and you'll be a VERY hungry fox by the end of the day."

Grumbling, Nick dug in. The fruit salad was actually very good, and Nick found himself heading back to the serving area for a second helping. His meal was interrupted by his gray doe, though, reminding him that he had to get to "roll call" before 6, if he "wanted to make a good impression on her dad."

The fox reluctantly finished up and, straining his memory, navigated his way out of the burrow's front door and around to the barn. Stu was busy talking with a group of younger rabbits, so the fox stood politely off to the side and waited for the older buck to finish up. When the buck noticed the fox standing there, he dismissed the group he was talking to and waved the tod over.

"You're gonna be working with me. We're building a new addition to the machinery shed. Think you can handle a little heavy lifting?"

At the fox's nod of affirmation, Stu gestured that he should follow. "You know I don't know anything about construction though, right?"

"Don't need to. We got our own team for that. All you gotta do is help us move stuff around."

Nick spent the next several hours working in relative silence with Stu, moving boards and beams, holding things steady, and hauling load after load of wood from the barn, where the rabbit buck had stored the supplies.

It wasn't until after 10 that Stu broached the subject of the tod's relationship with his daughter.

"Why Judy? Why a rabbit?"

Nick had seen this coming, though he honestly expected it a little sooner. After only 4 hours, the tod
was feeling the work. He paused in the process of unloading his latest batch of wood beams. "How much about me has Judy told you?"

Stu gave the fox a critical eye. "Not much. She said you were an entrepreneur of sorts."

Nick grimaced. "That's…not exactly true." At the look from the buck, Nick continued. "Sir, you know that foxes aren't held in the highest regard, right?"

Stu nodded. "Until Judy changed our minds, and until I started working with Gideon, I was among that crowd."

The fox nodded, continuing the process of unloading the beams.

"You're not the only one. Even among canids, foxes are kept in pretty low regard. Most of us can't even find a steady job, and those that do often don't get very far or keep it very long. My mother was a receptionist for years before she became some executive's personal assistant. She watched other mammals less qualified promoted over her."

Stu kept silent, so Nick continued. "Anyway, so I made money for myself walking the edge of what was legal. My methods and business was legal, but some of my practices…well, they could have gotten me in trouble. They did get me in trouble."

"It was in the middle of one of these…jobs… that I ran across Car-Judy," Nick smirked. "She did not like me after that first day. I'll admit, I tricked her into buying the supplies I needed for the job."

At the glare from the older rabbit, Nick held up his paws. "I've already apologized and paid back her investment, sir. And if it's any consolation, she got me back even worse the next day. But that's a story that she needs to tell you."

"Yes, it seems that she's left a lot about you out," Stu murmured.

"Back to your question though. I wasn't always that dishonest fox. When I was 9, I wanted to join the Junior Ranger scouts. That was my dream."

Stu pondered for a moment. "Aren't the Junior Ranger Scouts one of those organizations that are supposed to teach youngsters good morals and life skills?"

"Right in one. We didn't have a lot of money back then, mom and I, but she still bought me a new uniform for that. I was… Well, let's just say the speciesist troop didn't let me in. And I gave up on being an honest mammal. Started playing in the gray area of the law when I got older. And when mom found out, she wasn't happy."

"I spent a long time on the streets, before Judy stumbled on our little operation. And we did NOT get along. She needed my help, and at first I only did it because I had no other choice. But then I realized just what kind of opposition she was facing, even from those that were supposed to be her teammates. And why she needed my help. No one else was helping her at all. Even tried to get her fired."

Nick looked Stu in the eye. "When I looked at her in that moment, I saw myself, as I was before that scout troop. Before my dream got crushed."

"Things got easier between us after that. She did mess up a little bit that put us on the outs for a while though. But before that, she did something no other mammal's done before. She offered me a chance to be her partner on the force."

"We kind of went our separate ways after her press conference. But when she found me again and
asked for my help and forgiveness, I couldn't say no. And by the end of it all she made sure I had the tools once again to turn my life around and even better, live my dream again."

Stu thought for a moment, staring off into the distance. After a moment, he shook himself out of the reverie and gestured for Nick to follow him. "Come with me, Nick. I want to show you something."

Dropping the load of wood, Nick followed the older buck around the barn to the garage, where Stu gestured for him to get into one of the waiting vehicles.

20 baskets down, 10 to go, Judy thought as she grabbed the daily laundry load from yet another laundry chute and loaded it onto the cart with the other similarly full baskets, replacing it with an empty one. Getting the laundry cart going took a bit of effort, and one wheel squeaked, but it wasn't anything Judy hadn't done before.

"So how did you meet Nick, really?" Madison had volunteered to be Judy's laundry mate for the day, after hearing that that's where Judy had chosen to work for the day.

"Would you believe me if I told you I met him while he was selling ice cream?"

Madison thought for a moment. "Probably not. You would have told mom and dad if it was something that simple."

"You're right. It was more complex than that. You know foxes aren't really thought of as the most legal of mammals, right?" At the tan doe's nod, Judy continued. "That's what Nick had to do. He'd buy popsicles from an elephant ice cream parlour, melt and refreeze them into smaller portions, mark them up, and sell them to smaller mammals."

"That doesn't sound very illegal."

"It's not. Not on it's own anyway. And Nick had all the correct documentation. It's just toeing the line. So, I caught him in the middle of that. I tried to arrest him."

Madison laughed. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"Anyway, so he ran circles around me, left me standing in wet cement. I got him back the next day though. Blackmailed him with tax evasion into helping me with the missing mammals case."

The other doe laughed even harder. "Seriously? You, Judy? Blackmail?"

"Yep. He really didn't like me after that. Did everything to make my day as frustrating as possible."

"You probably didn't let him get away with that, did you."

"I had leverage on him that could have put him away, and I needed his help. Of course, I didn't."

The two grunted as they pushed the heavy cart up a ramp.

"Ugh! Why hasn't dad done anything about this, yet?"

"You know him, won't change anything unless it's necessary. One of the younger pairs actually lost control of their cart last week. He started putting handle brakes on a few of them."

The two strained up the last of the ramp.

"So, what changed with Nick?"
"I saved his life when we were being chased by a savage jaguar. And then he stood up for me when my boss demanded my badge. Things…changed for us after that. He started letting me in, and we started working together."

"So, you started as enemies, huh?"

Judy nodded. "Enemies to friends and co-workers, and now more…"

The two were quiet a moment as they entered the laundry room, the rumbling of machinery loud enough that they had to raise their voices slightly. "So, how far have you gone?"

"MADDY," Judy yelped, aghast.

The tan doe laughed. "Relax, Jude, I'm just curious. I know you aren't like our certain unnamed siblings that have to share every sticky detail about their love lives."

The gray furred rabbit sighed. "We shared our first kiss the night we arrived here."

Madison gasped, brown eyes wide. "You mean out in the fields? Under the stars?"

"Right in one."

"Oh my God, that is soooo romantic! Was he any good? Did he start it or did you? How far did you go? How did that work, with him being so much taller than you?"

"Maddy! Slow down! One question at a time!"

The wide-eyed doe cringed, looking chastised. "Sorry. I'm just excited for you."

Shaking her head, Judy took a breath. "You know I don't have a lot of experience, but I thought he was good. And I started it. He told me something that happened to him as a kid, and he connected it with my birthday. I was just…overwhelmed, and I almost tackled him. Jumped at him. It got heated, but we didn't go past kissing and cuddling."

Her companion just stared back, looking starry-eyed.

"And we fell asleep on a blanket out there."

The squeal that the tan doe made was loud enough to draw the attention of every other rabbit in the room.

"Maddy! Cheese and crackers, you'll give Clawhauser a run for his money!"

"Sorry Judy, that just sounds so awesome! But, who's Clawhauser?"

"Clawhauser's a cheetah cop I work with. He's very…enthusiastic, too…and the world's biggest Gazelle fan."

Madison scoffed. "Judy, I'm sorry, but I have a hard time believing anyone could be a bigger Gazelle fan than you."

Her gray companion laughed. "Oh, believe it. I once caught him showing off the latest Gazelle app to a perp that we'd brought in for drug trafficking. Clawhauser was talking about this thing like he'd been the cavemammal that discovered how to make fire. The perp was so bored, he begged us to throw him in the cells, just so that he wouldn't have to listen to it!"
Maddy started loading the laundry into the first machine as she cringed slightly. "OK, that does sound pretty bad."

Judy began loading laundry into a different machine, occupying herself with work for a moment until the rest of the room started to go back to what they were doing. Laundry detail was always one that required good organization. You had to keep track of not only the colours and fabric of the clothes, but also what wing and chute it came from. Once everything was done, one sorted it based on initials stitched on the clothing.

"So, how did you two go out on your first date?"

Judy grinned. "Well Maddy, after I asked Nick out, we decided to go out for dinner…"

Madison listened, enraptured, as Judy began to tell the story of her first date with Nick.

Stu gestured for Nick to get out of the truck as he brought it to a standstill. They were back at the Bunnyburrow fairgrounds. Nick had seen them the day before with Judy, but they hadn't gone in, mostly just a passing visit.

The fox glanced around at the empty stalls and buildings. The place felt a bit desolate and abandoned, and Nick spent a moment trying to imagine what the famed Carrot Days festival would be like in full swing. An army of imaginary rabbit kits scampered from one booth, one midway game to another, winning stuffed carrots and other cheap prizes.

Nick followed Judy's father around a set of buildings. The older buck stopped for a moment in front of what looked like a barn.

"Judy's 4th grade class had a play here during the Carrot Days festival about what they all wanted to be when they grew up. She wrote the part with herself and her friends in it. That's where she announced she wanted to be a police officer."

Nick looked at the older buck. "Judy was in a play? I knew she was good at acting – she almost had me convinced when we pulled off the gambit to get Bellwether to confess – but I didn't know she was in a play. Was it any good?"

"It was… a child's play. I'll just say that."

The expression on Nick's face made it look like he'd just found a lost city of gold.

"Any chance you have it on tape?"

"We do. Somewhere in the archives." Stu looked at the grinning fox, before developing a smile of his own. "I'm guessing you probably want to see it for yourself?"

"Of course. Anything to embarrass Judy a bit."

"Embarrass? You should ask Bonnie to dig up Judy's baby photos."

Nick chuckled at the idea.

"We didn't support her dream. Even tried to shoot her down. But nothing we did discouraged her. We found out when she was 17 that she'd been volunteering for the sheriff's office for over a year. Grounded her and tried to force her to do other things, but she still managed to slip out. She got a scholarship for her volunteer work, and took off to college. She wouldn't listen to us when we tried
to get her to stay home and be safe."

"She is stubborn," Nick agreed. "Did she ever tell you how she got my help with the missing mammals case?" At the shake of the buck's head, Nick continued. "You should probably ask her when we get back. She used some pretty questionable methods."

Stu regarded the fox for a moment. Whatever he was thinking though, he chose not to say anything.

"Anyway, the reason I brought you out here is to show you something." He led the red fox out into an open area behind some of the stalls.

"Did Judy tell you about her past with Gideon?"

"You mean that he was a bully, and he mauled her?"

"Right. This was where he attacked her. She ended up getting stitches. And we used that to really try to drive home that she could get hurt as an officer. But after that she seemed more determined than ever to be a cop."

"My point though is that Judy doesn't have a good past with foxes. But she trusts you. And that worries me. And it's not because you're a fox."

Nick nodded. "You think I'm an unknown quantity."

"Yes. Gideon's the only fox I've dealt with on a regular basis. But that's strictly for business."

*It may end up becoming more than that,* Nick thought as he listened to the other male. "If it helps, Mr. Hopps, I was bullied as a kit too. By prey animals. The difference is, Unlike Judy, I gave up on my dream because of that, and played up the fox stereotype of shifty and untrustworthy. My mom was so upset when she found out about that, that she kicked me out. Judy gave me the push to get back on track. I can't thank her enough for that," the fox said with sincerity.

Stu cocked his head at the fox. "The bullying…was it because you're a predator or because you're a fox?"

Nick shrugged. "A bit of both."

The rabbit buck nodded and hummed.

After a while, Stu turned to Nick.

"Listen, I don't necessarily agree with this… and I certainly don't understand it… but I'm willing to accept it for Judy's sake. You and I both know if I tell her not to do something she wants to do, she'll do it anyway."

Nick snorted. "If you told her not to do something she has her heart set on, she'll just go out and try to be the best at whatever it was you told her not to do at all."

The older buck laughed at that "Ain't that the truth?"

"Oh my gosh, you two shared a blueberry pie at the end? Did you feed it to him? Like, as in—"

"MADDY! It was our first date! So, no, I didn't feed him. Or anything like that!"

The starry-eyed tan doe drooped a little bit. "Come on, Judy! That was so romantic!"
"No, Maddy. We did not share utensils, we did not feed each other, and we did not kiss."

Maddy sighed. "I'm sorry Judes. I'm just excited, you know? You never dated in high school and college, unless Mom and Dad set you up, and now you're dating a guy and he isn't even a lagomorph!"

Judy shrugged. "Those guys in school weren't worth my time. Nick isn't trying to get me to stay home and pop out kits, or give up on my dreams or anything. At least not any more. "Judy grinned slightly.

A drier buzzed, indicating the end of yet another load, and the two rabbits moved to empty it in preparation for the next.

"Why did you wait almost a year to ask him out, though?"

As the two worked, Judy told her sister the story of how she'd been scared he didn't feel the same way, and how it all came tumbling out one very sad day not too long ago.

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Once they got back to the burrow, Nick spent the rest of the day hauling lumber for Stu, and lifting and moving crossbeams that were too large for the average rabbit. It was getting on 4, when a younger buck emerged from the burrow and whispered something to Judy's father.

The puzzled expression that crossed Stu's muzzle was brief, but disappeared quickly. He turned to look at Nick.

"Nick, do you fancy running a load of fruit over to Gideon's bakery? He just got a school order, and we need someone to help with the delivery."

The fox found it a little odd that Stu was tasking him with this, but he agreed anyway. One of Judy's older brothers, a black furred buck named Garth, accompanied him. The drive to the bakery was mostly silent, with the rabbit only asking a few token questions. As they pulled up behind the bakery, the familiar portly fox opened the rear door of the building for them, waving as he did so.

Nick jumped out and began unloading the crates of refrigerated fruits.

"Well, I'll be darned, Nick, didn't expect ta see you on this delivery run."

Nick grinned, setting down a crate of raspberries. "I was kind of…drafted, I guess you could say. Judy thought it would be a good way to get in her folk's good graces."

"Ah hear ya. You got no idea how surprised I was when they agreed to supply me with fruits and stuff for my work here. I was really strugglin' beforehand. Everyone was chargin' me double for their produce, so when Stu an' Bonnie agreed to sell to me for a discount, and in exchange for publicity and a partnership, I jumped on it. Apparently, a coupl'a their kids had been by the place and told them they liked what I made."

"Thing is, they told me it was Judy that changed their views about our kind."

Nick hummed, setting yet another crate of fruit into the bakery's small walk-in refrigerator. Brushing off his paws, the older city fox looked around. "Is it usually this quiet on weekends?" Nick knew the answer, of course.

Gideon shrugged. "Yeah. Weekends we get the occasional walk in customer, but it's mostly just stockin' up and gettin' ready for the next week. Usually don't have Maddy come in unless we're
'spectin' a big rush. Not like we're a full restaurant, ya know?"

Nick nodded. He'd seen a few fast food restaurants around town, and one Tim Howltons coffee shop, but the bakery wasn't really suited for a sit-down lunch. "Judy seemed surprised to find out that her sister worked here."

Gideon nodded. "She came to me three somethin' months ago. Said somethin' about wanting to help out here, and askin' if I could teach her what I knew. I figured there wasn't any harm in that, and I did need the help, since things were startin' to pick up. So, I brought her on. She's been a gem here. Always comin' with a smile on her face and eager to learn new things and try new stuff."

Nick continued to unload the truck, stacking the fruit where the younger fox told him to.

"She's a good friend too. Always willing to listen when I need to unload. She's gotten a lot more touchy-feely lately, too."

Nick smiled at that. He didn't want to make things awkward between Gideon and Madison. Let them go at their own pace. Still, he might be able to help that along.

"You got a vixen in your life, Gid?"

The portly fox shook his head. "Not many foxes 'round here to start with, and those that are here, they don' want much to do with me. Oh, they'll come in and buy somethin' now and then, but those that aren't already mated aren't my type, ya know?"

"Yeah, I understand that. Just, keep an open mind there, yeah? The right one might surprise you. And she may not be a fox."

Gideon gave Nick an aside glance. "You mean like you and Judy? I mean, Madison's great, she seems to enjoy bein' around here, and I certainly like her, but do you think she'd consider that?"

"Why not? Just let her come to you if she does."

"Just like a vixen, huh?"

"Just like a vixen."

Garth came in, brushing his paws on his overalls. "Hey Nick? I got the last of this stuff. Let's get home before dad chews us out for being late."

Not willing to upset the older buck, Nick bid Gideon goodbye as he and Garth piled into the old pickup truck and headed out. Once they got back to the farm, Stu declared work done for the day. It was getting on supper time, and Nick was incredibly hungry.

The fox sought out his doe, and, not finding her, headed to the dining room. There weren't many there, so Nick grabbed a tray of food and sat down in a quiet spot. He had just begun to dig into his food when he felt the bench next to him shift. Glancing over, he came face to face with Cotton.

"Mr. Wilde? Is it OK if I sit here?" She inquired, likely ignoring the fact that she was already sitting there. Nick grinned. "Of course, Cottonball. How was your day?"

The small rabbit shrugged. "OK, I guess. Played with my sisters. I don't like weekends as much."

Nick cocked his head. "Why not?"

"Because I like school. I get to see my friends and learn things and stuff."
"What are your favourite subjects?"

Cotton thought for a moment. "I like English and science. And math too. Except multiplication. That's hard!"

Nick, in the middle of drinking a glass of juice, just about did a spit-take. Struggling to regain his composure, he looked at the young rabbit, innocently eating her food. The fox was about to say something, when he felt a paw on his shoulder. He glanced up to see Judy taking a seat to his other side, along with Madison.

"You aren't corrupting my niece are you, Slick?"

"The very idea, Carrots! That I could possibly think to corrupt the pure soul of a kit!" Nick looked back at Cotton who had a curious expression on her face.

"Aunty Judy, why does he call you Carrots? You don't look like a carrot!"

Judy's ears dropped for a moment as she contemplated how to explain that to a nine year old. "It's a… nickname."

"He gives bunnies different names?"

"No, not Nick name, nickname. Like how Grandpa Stu and Gramma Bonnie occasionally call each other sweetheart, or something? Like that."

"Oh. OK! You called me Cottonball earlier. Is that my nickname?"

The grinning fox nodded. "Yup. Perfect for a soft, adorable ball of fluff, don't you think?" He strategically avoided the use of the C-word.

Cotton pondered this before grinning and nodding.

"So, Carrots, how was your day?"

The fox and the three does spent the rest of the meal in conversation, comparing notes on their days. After dinner and a game of Monopoly Junior Bunny (as requested by Cotton), where all the properties were vegetable patches and fruit orchards and the houses and hotels were instead produce stands and markets, Nick and Judy retired to the latter's bedroom.

The two snuggled in the doe's bed, Judy breaking the silence.

"Dad was really impressed with the work you put in today."

"Well, Carrots, I am a pretty impressive fox."

Judy lightly slapped the fox's chest. "You know what I mean.

"Do I, Carrots? Yes, yes I do."

"I have to say, though, I'd forgotten how much I hated being on the laundry crew. At least I got to work with Maddy. She's quite happy that she's not going to be the first doe in the Hopps household to fall for a predator."

Nick smirked. "Think she's going to ask Gideon out?"

"I know she is. Just a matter of time. Think Gid will accept?"
The predator nodded. "Pretty sure he will. He seems pretty open to the idea, and he told me he doesn't have vixens lined up around the corner."

Judy was quiet for a moment. "Do you ever worry about what'll happen when the world finds out about us?"

Nick, feeling the exhausting work of the day taking its toll, hummed. "I try not to, Carrots. Mammals will think what they want, and we can't avoid that. I'm more worried about Bogo."

He felt Judy nod against him. "I am too. I really don't want him to split us up."

The fox smirked. "Guess we'll just have to impress him so much that he won't split us up."

Judy looked up at him, grinning. "So, you're volunteering to NOT get on Bogo's nerves every morning at role call?"

"Hey, now. That's pushing it a little far."

Judy chuckled and settled in further. A few moments later, she heard the deep breathing of a sleeping fox. It wasn't long before she followed him on his journey away from the waking world.

"We do not have any new information as to why certain instincts were not affected by the formula, Elder."

The deer elder frowned. "This is unacceptable. The original serum did not have such flaws. The only change we wanted was to make it so that it would not affect herbivorous mammals. Clearly this is a success, but with some major drawbacks."

"Elders, the formula clearly regresses the targets to a prehistoric state. This small flaw should actually work to our advantage."

The three elders glanced at each other, before returning their attention to the Texas longhorn on the video call.

"A video surfaced online a few days ago. Leaked footage of our Grand Palm test."

Hornby frowned. "There's a ton of that out there. Cell phone cameras, camcorders, news footage. Why is this one a concern?"

"This was leaked security footage of the lobby. I'm sending you a link. See for yourself." Hornby's phone chimed with an incoming message. Unknown number. All it was, was a link to a EweTube video.

He tapped his hoof on the link and was presented with a high-angle view of the Grand Palm's main lobby. He could see glimpses off one edge of the camera of a tiger, who appeared to be fighting something. But what was most evident in the camera's field of view, was the mammal lying on the floor. Clearly a rabbit, and by the looks of the uniform, a police officer, which meant Judy Hopps.

The feed continued for a second when a second smaller mammal came into the frame. Also wearing a uniform, this one was clearly a fox, and was clearly stalking the rabbit, just getting to her feet. The longhorn expected the rabbit to run, but to his surprise, she didn't. Instead she turned and reached out to the fox. Without audio feed, Hornby couldn't tell if the rabbit was saying anything, but it was clear that the fox was not reacting as one would expect to the presence of it's natural food.
The longhorn fought down the urge to vomit when the red filth's interactions with the rabbit became almost affectionate, though the scientific part of his mind marveled that somehow, some instinct within the fox overrode that to hunt and kill. Perhaps some social or mating instinct, as was exhibited by the others? The idea of the latter was nauseating to say the least.

The fox turned his attention to the presence of the large tiger, and to further the surprise, attacked the savage tiger. The fight went on for a few minutes, before the tiger was subdued. The rabbit led the fox out of the frame, and the video ended.

"The fox is confirmed to be one Nicholas Wilde, recent addition to the PD. The rabbit is obviously Judy Hopps. Hopps was treated for a concussion, while the filth was treated for night howler savagery. What I find unacceptable here is that the fox showed no inclination to attack that which is his prey."

Hornby's frown deepened.

"If a fox under the influence of our formula can overcome the instinct to hunt and kill his natural prey, what use is it?"

Damian nodded. "I understand. We'll get to the bottom of this."

"See that you do. You've made it this far. And our benefactor is not happy with this failure. This could undo everything we want to accomplish."

"Understood."

"For purity."

"Purity we shall have."

The Texas longhorn disconnected the video call, and leaned back in his office chair, pondering the behaviour of the filth and the deviant rabbit. After a moment, the bull opened up his computer and began a web search. It didn't take him long to find the Wallapedia article on red foxes. Scrolling through it, he finally located the section on prehistoric mating habits. Most of the information wasn't relevant, and he ignored that, instead seeking a particular detail. There. Foxes were largely monogamous, though some dated records suggested that at least a few populations did not hold to that practice.

So, this seemed to line up with his previous hypothesis that somehow, certain social and mating instincts were unaffected by the new formula. More revisions and testing would be needed. The bovidae settled down at his desk for a long night of staring at formulas and simulations.

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The sound of frying vegetables filled the air as a polar bear stirred them around the pan in the oil, adding spices as she did so. In the living room, a cape buffalo sat on the couch, staring at the latest reports from his charges.

"Any progress with Wolford's death?"

The cape buffalo grunted. "No. We've got so little to go on there, we've hit a dead end. Figuring out what he was up to has also been a pain."

"I heard you put Hopps and Wilde on that."

"I did. You know Hopps solved the missing mammals case with nothing but a photo to start with,"
and the night howlers mess without police support. I figured, if anyone could actually get somewhere with next to nothing, it would be those two."

Ursula Friedkin transferred the veggies to two plates and added some fish she'd cooked up earlier to one of them. She carried both plates to the living room and sat down next to the cape buffalo, grabbing a case file and looking it over.

"Hopps and Wilde were actually on their way back to the station after checking out a lead when they got the call for the Grand Palm Hotel."

"I'd heard they were involved in that."

"More than involved. They were right in the middle when the attack happened. Hopps got a grade 2 concussion, and Wilde was rendered savage, like he was hit with a night howler. We couldn't find any evidence of night howlers at the scene though."

The two mammals dug into their dinners, each one occupied with their own thoughts.

"You know, If you had told me a year and a half ago that a rabbit and a fox would make two of the most promising recruits I'd ever seen come through the academy, I'd have laughed your ass off and told you to run an extra 100 laps."

The cape buffalo beside her snorted. "You're not the only one, Ursula. When I let her take the Emmitt Otterton case, it was only because Bellwether had informed Lionheart that she'd taken it. And you know that Lionheart would have made a huge spectacle about me firing his token rabbit. When I told her she had 2 days to finish it, I was sure she'd be out of my fur at the end of it."

Bogo shook his head. "I even tried to force her out early. But then, she and Wilde managed to find not only Otterton, but 14 others as well. And then she did it again with the night howlers."

Ursula regarded the precinct one chief for a moment. "OK, Adrian, I know there's something else. There's another reason why you gave those two the task of retracing Wolford's footsteps, isn't there?"

"There is. Does Hopps remind you of anyone?"

"She does. She reminds me of you when you first started off. Maybe a little more cheerful and happy, but she's got the same drive, and you told me yourself, she's a good cop."

The cape buffalo nodded.

"Are you grooming her?"

A grunt emanated from the cape buffalo. "She's got a lot of potential. She just needs a few of her finer points tuned, and she needs experience. But I think that we can build that up over time."

"And the press conference?"

A snort. "Political crock shit at it's finest. She'd been on the force for three days and hadn't been given any training in public speaking. Bellwether had me put her in the spotlight. I wanted to have one of the PR spokesmammals cover it."

Friedkin was silent for a moment. "Hopps started out as one of the worst applicants I'd ever seen. She failed at EVERYTHING. But by the same token, I've never seen someone more dedicated to succeeding. If something wasn't working out for her, she ran herself ragged until she found someway to make it work. Lights-out for her just meant propping up a study text so she could read by
moonlight while doing crunches, push-ups, or any other exercise that she could get away with. I told her to quit more times than I can count, at first. And each time I did, she just pushed herself harder."

Bogo thought for a moment. "If you tell her she can't do something, she'll take it as a personal challenge to prove that she CAN, no matter the cost to herself."

"Maybe that fox will rein her in. He struck me as the more calculating of the two."

The buffalo agreed. "As much as Wilde gets on my nerves, he does have that quality. Hopps does seem to have relaxed herself a bit in the last couple weeks. They still seem to end up in the thick of things though."

"Hmmm."

"I hope the two are taking it easy while they can. With Rivers and Nolwazi on the Grand Palm attack, Hopps and Wilde are the only ones that have any leads on Wolford's dealings. If they can figure out what he was doing, that may just lead us to his killer."

Ursula Friedkin agreed. "Judy Hopps was the best trainee we've ever had through the academy. The level of improvement from start to finish aside, her name is on more spots on the records wall than any other applicant. If she has the leadership skills and some more experience, she'd make a good chief."

Adrian Bogo nodded. "That was my thought."

Chapter End Notes

So, it seems that the bad guys aren't the only ones that are scheming!

Madison Hopps is, again, created by myself and Daee17. She's our little bunny. Please ask if you want to use her. Thanks!

ASK THE CAST!

Cimar of Turalis-WildeHopps asks:

Judy, on a scale of one to ten, with one being "I really want to kick him in the face", and 10 being "I want to pulverize his face," how would you classify your disdain of Gerald?

And Nick, do you like Carrots?

Judy: Is there at 20?

Nick: *Looking at Judy* I love Carrots.

SO! References last week. No one got the call out to the X-Files, and one person found
the reference to Frozen. Can you find a reference to another Disney property in this chapter?

Keep an eye on OceRydia's Deviantart page for a drawing of Madison Hopps in the next couple days!

Coming up on July 13: Return to Zootopia!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Want to scream at me for being late in posting this chapter? Leave a comment!
The week drew on for the fox and bunny. Some days they would spend together, just enjoying the time off. Others, Nick and Judy would spend time with the family separately, either working or just relaxing.

The last full day in the burrow had Nick seeking Bonnie out. So far, he'd only been asked to help out on Stu's various crews, and he wanted to see if Bonnie had anything for him to do. It couldn't hurt to get in good with her, too.

It turns out that Bonnie had in fact been looking for him as well, and it wasn't long before she found him and dragged him off to the kitchen. How ironic, considering Nick's culinary skills rivaled Judy's in the non-existent department.

"Uh, Mrs. Hopps, you know that I'm absolute pants in the kitchen, right? Judy's probably a better cook than I am."

Bonnie smiled. "Call me Bonnie. And don't worry. You won't be doing any cooking. You'll be on the serving and cleanup crew. And if your skills there are worse than Judy's, then I feel sorry for the both of you. We had to ban Judy from the kitchen after she almost burned the burrow down. More than once."

"More than…? Oh, Bonnie, you have to tell me how that happened."

The bunny matron gestured to the lunch buffet plates that were ready to go out to the dining room. "Help me with this and I'll tell you."

The fox grabbed several of the serving platters and headed out to the dining hall.

"Judy probably told you this, but we didn't really support her dream. I'd even go so far to say we actively discouraged it."

Nick's ears went flat, an action Judy's mother noticed.

"Believe me, Mr. Wilde, It's not exactly something we're proud of."
Nick's ears remained set in that position as he set the platters down and went back for another pair.

"We tried a few methods to discourage her. How there had never been a bunny cop before, how dangerous it was, how she was too small, not strong enough. Everything we said to her only increased her resolve."

The fox snorted as he picked up two more serving platters. "That sounds like Judy alright. Tell her she can't do something, and she'll run herself ragged proving she can."

"We realized that too. She once overheard her brothers complaining about having to dig the last of a new irrigation ditch for the south fields, how it was taking forever because the digger broke down when they were almost done. She grabbed a shovel and spent an entire weekend working on it."

"Did she finish it?"

"Eventually, yeah. She refused help from anyone, but the south fields got their water thanks to her."

Bonnie busied herself with a few more serving platters before continuing.

"You've probably noticed this, Nick, but we have different teams that do different things around here."

"Yeah. Judy told me before we came here, that it was like a hotel mixed with a business, a youth camp, and family life all rolled into one. And to be honest," he said, glancing at a loud group of kits that came spilling into the dining hall from one of the dozens of hallways, "I kind of agree with her."

"I don't blame you. Judy said you were an only kit. It must be a shock to you, to see a family with more than 300."

The fox nodded.

"Anyway, so when a kit turns 14, they are assigned to a team. Sort of like chores. If there's something that a kit is particularly good at, we might try fitting them onto a team if there was one and a spot's available. Judy wanted us to create a burrow security team."

Nick snorted in laughter and nearly dropped the platters he was carrying. "Let me guess. She had a whole plan laid out that included everything from security systems to missing item reports when somebody's plushie goes missing."

"And speed limits for tractors in the fields."

Nick had just finished putting the platters on the buffet table. It's a good thing too, because the fox doubled over laughing. "Speed limits… tractors… What was she going to do, fine them for going a mile an hour over?!!"

Even Bonnie was grinning at this point. "I have no idea. But we told her, if she did fine anyone for any 'infraction', guess whose allowance it was coming out of?"

"Anyway, you can probably guess that we told her no. We tried putting her on the kitchen cooking crew. But she managed to set fire to a pan of water stir-fried veggies."

Nick stared at the doe. "OK, I may not be the most kitchen savvy fox out there, but… how do you set fire to stir-fried veggies done in water?"

"We still don't know that. The rabbit that would have been most interested in investigating the crime
was the one who committed the crime."

The fox shook his head, grinning.

"Anyway, so we kept that up, but no matter what we tried, she just could not get the hang of it. Disaster followed every attempt. So, we moved her off the kitchen crew to the caretaking crew. And that's where she stayed until she went out to college. We did let her volunteer some time in the maintenance shed though."

Nick hummed. It was at that moment that a thought occurred to Nick. "Bonnie, what's Judy's favourite food?"

"You mean she hasn't told you?"

"Not really. Actually, it hasn't really come up in conversation. She hasn't asked mine either."

Bonnie thought for a moment. "She loves the vegetable garden spaghetti that we do. We don't do it often, because of how long it takes to make enough spaghetti sauce. Why do you ask?"

Nick shuffled a bit, his ears a little low. "Do you think you could teach me how to make it?"

Bonnie looked surprised. "I thought you said you were no good in the kitchen?"

"I'm not. But we can't keep ordering from the deli or getting microwave dinners all the time. Hurts the bottom line and we don't have a really big income as cops, you know?"

Bonnie nodded. "Tell you what. I can teach you this afternoon, and we can give her a special meal for dinner, OK? But if you set fire to anything, you're back on dish duty."

Nick smiled. He put himself through academy training for Judy, kitchen boot camp should be a walk in the park. Err, Burrow.

The two finished putting out the trays of food. Bonnie left Nick to carry out the dishes and utensils while she went to resolve something in the nursery. She got back just as Nick had finished fixing himself a sandwich.

Bonnie cocked her head. "I hope you haven't been bothered by the lack of fish or chicken around here."

"It's not a problem. I can go for a while without. I just usually end up snacking on more fruits when I do."

The doe nodded in understanding. "I know you and Judy are heading back tomorrow, but when you visit next time, we'll make sure we have Gideon drop off some fish or something. I hear you like his food."

"Some of the best I've ever had, and I hear most of it comes from your farm."

Bonnie nodded.

"Wish we could get some of your produce in the city. The streetside vendors are OK, they usually get their product from nearby farms, but the stuff from the supermarket, a lot of that tastes like it's been stored a couple weeks."

"Gideon's been thinking of opening up a branch in Zootopia if he can find a good business partner."
Nick thought for a moment. "I might know someone. He's a bit of a cantankerous old fox, but he's pretty decent in the kitchen."

"Oh, well, you might want to put him in contact with Gid, then." A bell chimed. "Hmmm, time to start the dirty dishes cart."

"I got that, Mrs. Hopps…Bonnie," he amended at the doe's stern look. The fox grabbed the dish cart and wheeled it out into the dining hall. He made his way up and down the aisles, collecting abandoned dishes, and accepting those from the rabbits gracious enough to bring them to him.

The cart was nearly overflowing when the fox returned to the kitchen, and Nick had to make a few dives for some plates that decided to make a break for freedom. He might have laughed at that at some point, but for the moment, he didn't find the idea nearly as amusing as the rabbits who saw him trying to balance a plate on each arm while trying to keep the cart from rolling away with his foot, with a glass in each paw and a bowl upside down on his head.

He finally made it into the kitchen again, swearing he would never work in a restaurant if it was the last job on the planet. Bonnie had him stack the dishes in the large triple sink. When he inquired about washing them, the doe waved him off, explaining that they had another crew for that. Nick began to wonder just how many "crews" there were.

The fox spent most of the rest of the afternoon following Bonnie around as she tended to various tasks around the burrow. He read stories to the younger kits when it was time for their nap. Privately, he was quite surprised how forward and trusting the younger ones were of him. He helped move furniture around one of the many entertainment rooms and watered the various plants around the outside of the burrow.

Some time before dinner, Bonnie pulled him aside again to take him back down to the kitchen. He was given a separate preparation table, and a list of the things he would need. Rather than supervise the kitchen as a whole, this time, Bonnie left that task to a buck that looked a little younger than Judy and instead watched over Nick as he slowly, methodically followed her directions.

"So, when did you two have your first date? What did you do?"

Nick blinked and flinched, not expecting this line of questioning.

"Ummm, well, we went for dinner at a nice diner a couple blocks from where I live. We ended up talking a lot about how we grew up. That's actually where I first learned about Gideon."

A thought occurred to Nick.

"Actually, there's something I've been wondering since that day. I keep meaning to look online, but keep forgetting. When Judy showed up at my door for our date, she was carrying a big bouquet of flowers. Is that something bunnies do?"

Bonnie looked surprised. "Do foxes not give flowers to their dates?"

Nick paused for a second. "Not really. Some foxes do for things like weddings and anniversaries, but not for first dates."

The doe hummed. "Well, you know that most rabbits out here are farmers. Plant husbandry is what we do. So, presenting your date with a well-kept bouquet of flowers is sort of a customary start to a date. In fact, if you give Judy a bouquet of flowers, don't be surprised if she eats one of them."

"Eats one?"
"It's kind of symbolism. It's a way to say that the gift is a part of them now. What's more, is what the flowers actually mean."

"Mean?"

"Flowers, at least for rabbits, have different meanings. A yellow rose means friendship, for example."

Nick thought for a moment. "What do blue violets mean?"

The doe beside him thought for a moment. "Faithfulness. She was promising to stay faithful to you."

Nick was taken aback. "What about white carnations?"

Bonnie turned to look at Nick. "They mean 'I love you.'"

The last one, Nick was sure he knew, but he decided to forge ahead anyways. "And red tulips?"

Bonnie looked a bit shocked, and maybe even a little worried. "Nicholas Wilde, I'm going to be very clear about something. You may not have been dating for very long, but the message Judy was giving you in that bouquet is usually one you would only see in a wedding."

"I don't know what else I can say except that it'll probably kill Judy if you break her heart. Red Tulips mean undying love."

That shut Nick up. For the rest of the time he spent making his and Judy's dinner, he processed what Bonnie had just told him. If she meant what those flowers did, then she'd bared her heart, and he hadn't understood it at all.

_Dumb fox_, the voice in his head said, sounding suspiciously like the gray rabbit. _Dumb, dumb, dumb fox._

The fox resolved to find something similar to do for her when they got back to Zootopia.

When it came time to serve dinner, Nick was given two plates, dished himself and his doe out some of her spaghetti, and carried it out to the tables. Spotting her amongst the crowd would have been a challenge, had she not been sitting in the same spot as she had for the last six days. The russet canid quickly made his way over to her, arriving just as she was getting up to serve herself.

The surprise on her face was tangible and her eyes looked up into Nick's, shining in the overhead lights. He sat down next to her.

"Seems this old fox can actually make something in the kitchen if he puts his mind to it." He gave her his lopsided grin.

"How much of this did my mom make?"

"None, actually. I just watched over him." The two turned to see the matronly doe walk past, apparently headed down the row of tables to break up a food fight that had started at the other end.

Judy's expression morphed into one of shock and adoration, and she leaned over and gave Nick a peck on the cheek, eliciting a few whistles and calls from nearby family members. The doe scooted over and planted herself closer to the fox, before digging into her meal, sighing with contentment.

"I take it I did an OK job?"
"More than OK, Slick. This is excellent."

"Fear. Treachery. Bloodlust. Thousands of years ago, these were the forces that ruled our world!"

A small bunny hopped into view, nose twitching, ears erect, listening, eyes alert and scanning.

"A world where prey were scared of predators… and predators had an uncontrollable biological urge to maim, and maul and…!"

A spotted jaguar wearing a tiger costume leapt out of the shadows and growled threateningly at the rabbit, who let out a loud shriek. She began pulling red paper streamers out of the stomach of her costume. "Blood, blood, BLOOD…!"

The rabbit fell to the ground twitching, squirming, trying to get away, when a fountain of red spurted up and all over the young rabbit’s costume. With one last shudder, the rabbit collapsed. "And death…"

All the while the jaguar simply stood there with a bewildered expression on his face.

Judy wanted to die. Actually, scratch that. She wanted to dig a hole in the floor and disappear forever. But digging a hole in the floor would just lead to the games room and digging a hole in THAT floor would land her in the water treatment room, and that floor was concrete.

It didn’t help that the fox that supposedly loved her was rolling on the floor cackling with tears streaming down his muzzle. Instead, she turned her glare to the source of her misery. Her own parents. How could they betray her like this?

The two older rabbits just sat there smirking at Judy, rolling their eyes as the home movie continued.

Judy just huffed and crossed her arms, slouching on the couch. And as much as she glared at the TV screen willing the video to stop, the TV to malfunction, or the video player to explode, nothing happened. It just kept on going, as if to spite her. Mock her. Toy with her.

She hated it.

The video kept playing.

The laughter from her fox kept coming.

It wasn’t until the video ended that Nick started to calm down. Judy glared at him. "You finished?"

Nick was still trying to catch his breath but nodded. "Good, because if you aren't, I'm sure that Marian has some good baby photos or a movie or two of you as a kit. I'm sure I could find a way to convince her to show them to me."

Nick looked horrified.

"I even have her on my phone." She pulled out her iCarrot. "Maybe I should call her and ask? Actually, I think I'll text her." Judy began tapping away at her phone.

For a few horrifying seconds, Nick just stood there, trying to process the implications. Snapping himself out of it, he lunged for the phone, only for the doe to dance out of the way. Instead, he slammed into the couch, before sliding off onto the floor. His head hit the ground with a clunk. He didn't move.
"Oh my gosh! Nick, are you OK?!" Judy rushed to his side, dropping the phone. For a few long seconds, the fox didn't move, and Judy was on the verge of panic. When Nick finally spoke, he couldn't help but grin.

"It's called a hustle sweetheart."

Judy blinked. "Wha…?" Only then, did she realize she didn't have her phone and it wasn't where she had dropped it. She glanced back up at Nick who was already unlocking it.

His self-satisfied smirk disappeared when he saw the message on the screen. The message had not only been sent, but his mother had also read it.

"Damn it," the fox muttered as the cheerful 'bling' told him his mother had already responded. He glanced at the phone.

'Oh, you don't have to worry. I have plenty of that for you! *evil grin*'

Nick dropped the phone and collapsed on the couch. Judy stood in front of him, arms crossed, with a self-satisfied smirk on her face.

"Who's hustled now?"

Nick harrumphed. "At least now I know where you got your overly dramatic 'death' at the museum!"

That got Stu and Bonnie's attention. Bonnie was the first to speak. "Death at the museum? What?"

That got a smirk from the fox. "Oh, she didn't tell you how we got Bellwether's confession?"

Stu shook his head. "She was…not very forthcoming about those details."

Ignoring Judy's pleading looks, the fox settled in. "Well, then, I think it's my turn to tell a story."

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*Natural History Museum, 7 and a half months ago*

"How did you know where to find us?" The question confirmed Nick's own suspicions, that the mayor's arrival at the closed museum was just a little too convenient.

"I'll go ahead and take that case now." The sheep made a move to grab the case from Judy, who backed up, holding the case, and the weapon it contained, under her arm.

"You know what? I think Nick and I will just…take this to the ZPD." The two turned to leave. Or at least that was the plan, until they saw the massive ram standing between them and freedom. One thought went through both of their minds, voiced at exactly the same time.

"Run."

The two took off, heading for the construction tarps that separated a wing from the museum's main lobby. Nick, in the lead, spied a pillar they could take refuge behind, and was aiming for that, when he heard Judy yelp. The fox skidded to a stop and turned to see Judy crumpled in a ball, sliding across the polished tile, the case lying beside her.

"Carrots!"

Nick ran back to Judy's side and scooped her up, glancing back the way they'd come to ensure that the sheep and her cronies couldn't see them, and held her up as they ran behind the pillar.
Nick carefully set the injured doe down, propping her up against the marble column. The cut in the rabbit's leg was bloody but didn't look too deep. Nick dug around in his pocket for a second, pulling out the kerchief he always kept there, along with the blueberries that he'd stashed in it.

The fox barely kept his exclamation to a loud whisper as the berries came tumbling out, bouncing and rolling across the floor. He managed to grab one before it fell, offering it to Judy. When the doe refused it, he popped it in his mouth and set to work tying the kerchief around the wound.

"Come on out, Judy!" The sound of the sheep's voice had both of them worried for a moment that they'd been found. Judy grabbed the case they'd absconded with and shoved it at the fox.

"Take the case! Get it to Bogo!"

Nick was shocked. "I'm not going to leave you behind, that's not happening!"

The doe was insistent, pushing the case into Nick's paws. "I can't WALK!"

The look in the doe's eyes was clear. She knew Bellwether wouldn't let her go. Nick's mind scrambled for a solution. "Just...we'll think of something!"

"We're on the same team Judy!" The two glanced in the direction of the sheep. In doing so, Judy accidentally kicked a bunch of the blueberries that had gone tumbling earlier. One of them began rolling out into the open. The russet furred canid dove and grabbed the little blue ball before it could give away their position.

Little blue ball. The fox stared at the wayward berry in his paw. He looked at the case Judy was holding. A glance at the doe told him that she was thinking the same thing. She popped open the case and retrieved the weapon. After a moment of inspecting it, she opened the ammunition chamber. The two stared at the night howler pellet for a second, before the doe removed it, trading it with the blueberry the fox had been holding. She added a couple extras to be certain.

"So how do we do this?" Nick wondered as Judy placed the gun back in the case and closed it.

"I think just trying to get out of here should be our goal, but I can't run."

Nick agreed. "We need a backup plan."

"If she shoots you, she's going to expect you to go savage. She won't shoot me, because she can't have prey going savage too." Judy thought for a moment. "I can play the part of the scared bunny if you can pretend to be the savage fox."

The fox nodded. "So, I 'go savage' and pretend to hunt and chase you?"

"Yeah. I'll try and goad her into making a confession. You have the carrot pen, right?"

Nick grinned and pulled out the orange device, holding it out to the doe. Judy glanced at it a moment, before taking it from him and slipping it into her back pocket.

"So, we record her with that. But you can't just chase me. I'm injured. I wouldn't be able to get away from you."

A thoughtful look crossed the fox's muzzle. "We need some way to sell it." Looking around, he spotted a sort of a prehistoric mock-up of what looked like a rabbit, picked it up and set it in front of the worklight that some construction crew had conveniently provided for them. He then grabbed Judy, hoisting her up, hearing Bellwether snap her fingers, likely having spotted the shadow.
"You need to bite me."

The fox's mind stopped dead, and he nearly dropped the doe. "What?! Carrots, you…"

"Nick, we don't have much time. And in the old days, foxes used to kill rabbits by biting their necks, right? So, do that."

"Judy, if I screw up on that, you're a dead rabbit! I don't…" He was silenced by a paw squeezing his arm. The doe stared straight into his emerald eyes.

"It's OK. I trust you, Nick."

I trust you. Those three words rang a bell in Nick's heart. Judy, a rabbit, and his natural enemy trusted him. With her life. The fox swallowed a lump in his throat, squared himself, grabbed the weapon case and began to run towards the exit, half carrying the injured gray bunny.

They didn't get as far as Nick had hoped. They were within sight of the door, spitting distance really, when Judy squawked and nearly fell as her good left leg got tangled up with his right. He slowed for a moment to pick Judy back up. It proved to be costly, as the Arnold Schwarzeram wannabe slammed into his side and sent them both flying.

After what seemed like an eternity, the two landed, Nick on his side, and Judy on her back. Pain shot through Nick's arm. Not broken, but that's definitely going to bruise, he thought. Looking around, he took stock of where they were. Some sort of scaled-down open pit exhibit. Fake prehistoric deer. Fake stream. Fake plants.

He looked over at the rabbit beside him. She was lying on her side, her arm hugging her injured leg to her chest, her face showed concern for him, for their situation, and just a hint of pain. He reached out to her, wanting to offer her some comfort, but that's when Bellwether decided to show her ugly mug and began taunting Judy

"What are you going to do? Kill me?!" The defiance in the doe's voice was unmistakable. But the sheep just chuckled, as though the answer was the most obvious in the world. "No of course not!"

The sheep's look turned malicious, menacing…evil.

"He is."

Before either of them could do anything, Bellwether whipped out the pellet gun, aimed, and shot Nick in the neck.

Nick expected the sting of the berry, but he didn't think blueberries could hurt as much as they did. Turns out, a blueberry flying at you, propelled at the speed that it was from that gun, hurt a LOT. Nick collapsed onto his side, convulsing and doing his best to act like his mind was slowly being ripped away from him. He felt Judy's paws on his back, and reassuring as though that might have been, he couldn't let it affect him. Focus on the mark, Wilde.

He heard Bellwether call the police. Perfect. If they could keep her occupied long enough, she'd have signed her own arrest-on-site warrant. Judy urged him to fight the effects of the pellet, and if he didn't know better, he'd have said she was actually worried. Scared even.

That was when the sheep decided to use Judy's own words against her. Biologically predisposed to be savages. Hah. Like you'd fair any better, 'your wooliness'. The fox let out a growl and turned to stare unflinchingly at the rabbit near to him, snarling menacingly. Judy bolted, as fast as her injured leg would carry her. Nick gave chase. He expected Judy to flee, and maybe dodge, fake-out, and jog
whenever she could to throw him off.

He did not expect the deer. The stuffed mock-up of the feral deer as big as the doe herself, that she threw at him as he lunged. Nick and the stuffed deer went down in a tangle of limbs. Rather than toss off the unwanted stuffed animal, Nick decided to buy some time and do what a real predator would do, and attacked it.

'I hope the museum has insurance,' he thought as he destroyed the stuffed prop. Bellwether's grotesque "headline" ALMOST made him break character, but he kept the act up.

Shredding the deer wasn't a pleasant task. *I'm going to be picking stuffing out of my teeth for weeks.* Task done, Nick turned his attention back to the direction Judy had gone. He could smell excitement mixed with a little bit of fear, and the copper scent of her blood. She was out of sight, so the fox relied on that sense of smell to guide him to her.

Just like his ancestors would.

He could hear Judy goading the stupid sheep on. *Good job Carrots. Keep her talking. The more she says, the more you have against her.* Pushing through a stand of fake grasses, he came upon the bunny, back to the wall. He snarled, getting the rabbit's attention.

"Oh, Nick. No…" The look of terror on the does face was so convincing, he almost thought it was real. Almost. She was a good hustler, and actor, but he could tell it was an act. She slowly pushed herself away from the fox, until her back was almost against the wall.

The insane sheep laughed. "Bye-bye, bunny." *Unbelievable. Bellwether's actually willing to just stand there and watch while I rip Judy to shreds.*

In one final, sudden move, the fox opened his jaws, twisted his head to the side and clamped down on the doe's neck and torso. Not hard enough to pierce the skin, but he had no doubt that Judy could feel his sharp teeth.

The gray rabbit let out an ear-piercing shriek. Nick had to fight the urge to flinch, so loud was the bunny's cry…

Present day

"I broke character after that. It was hard enough to keep from laughing, knowing she convicted herself. Bogo showed up right after that and caught her with the weapon in paw. Hoof, I mean. We also caught three of her rams in the process too. The three from the train car disappeared, though. We still haven't found them." She left out the fact that two of the rams that had been arrested had been police officers.

Across from them, Bonnie and Stu sat, still as a statue, staring in shock. And maybe a little bit of horror.

Silence permeated the room. After a long while, Bonnie broke it. "How could you have done this? Judy, you could have been killed!"

The gray doe in question sighed. "Mom, I know the risks of my job. Every time I put on my uniform, there's a chance I won't come home. I have Nick, OK? We watch each other's backs. Our friends on the force watch our backs."

"We just want you to be safe, bun-bun."
"I know, mom. But you have to understand that this is who I am. Danger is part of my life. I need to face the danger, so it doesn't find someone else, someone who can't defend themselves."

Stu broke his own silence. "We know, hon. Your mom has said it before, when you have kids, you'll understand. You'll want to keep them safe."

"I…" Judy let out a frustrated huff. "You know what? Never mind. I'm not getting into that."

Nick could see that Judy needed an out. "Hey Carrots, what time does our train leave in the morning?"

"8, why?"

Nick showed her the screen on his phone. 10:32. "I think if we want to get there without being rushed, we'll want to get some rest soon. We still haven't packed."

To her credit, Judy caught on without so much as a blink. "Good point, Nick. We gotta get up early." Judy stood and crossed the room to her parents, giving each a hug. "Night mom, night dad."

"Sweet dreams, bun-bun."

The two older rabbits watched as the bunny lead the fox out of the room by the paw.

"So, what do you think, Bon?"

The doe beside him sighed. "He seems like a nice guy. Honest, at least with us and Judy."

"I just worry about what she's getting into."

Bonnie shook her head. "We couldn't stop her even if we wanted to, Stu. I think it's pretty clear that they care for each other a great deal."

Stu thought for a moment. "I know that things are different now then they were when you and I were just starting out. I thought I'd seen it all when your sister's daughter married that hare. But I don't think I've ever heard of a fox and a rabbit couple. I mean, I can accept Gideon as a business partner, and maybe even a friend, but as a son in law, that's a whole different ball game. And Nick? We barely know him."

"Judy knows him. She's spent almost all her time in Zootopia with him."

Stu nodded. "I guess there is that. And he does seem to want to be an honest mammal. If I didn't know better, I'd say he thinks the world revolves around Judy."

"He does adore her, I'll say that. He wanted me to teach him to cook her favourite meal, just so he could surprise her today."

"He spent all of Tuesday pulling all that lumber out from storage, and working with our construction gang to build that new addition. He never even complained."

The older doe thought for a moment. "Judy's always been different. Never fit into any box, even if we tried to force her into it. So, I guess, in a way, I'm not really surprised if she found someone to love who isn't a rabbit."

Staring at the hallway the two had disappeared down, Stu couldn't help but silently agree.
After getting ready for bed, separately, two mammals found themselves cuddling in Judy's bed, each silently processing the events of the day in their own way. After a while, Judy spoke.

"Nick, can I ask you something?"

Curious, Nick looked down at the rabbit as she turned herself over to face him. He couldn't help but smirk. "Carrots, you just did."

Judy let out a groan of exasperation and lightly slapped Nick on the chest. "You know what I mean, you dumb fox."

"Yes, yes I do."

They lay there for a few seconds, Judy staring off into the distance.

"Nick, have you… have you ever wanted to have kits? Of your own?"

That wasn't the question he'd been expecting, but a part of him wasn't surprised, considering what her parents had said before they'd left for bed. The fox thought for a moment, going over the past vixens he'd dated.

"I never really thought about it. Being a hustler… a conmammal… it's not exactly a career you want to raise a kit around, you know?"

The rabbit doe was quiet as she considered Nick's words, before nodding, silently agreeing. "But if you could… would you?"

Nick stared into Judy's eyes, searching. "Judy, is this about what your parents said earlier?"

The silence and stillness from the rabbit was all the answer Nick needed. "Judy, you shouldn't feel pressured to have kits. This isn't your parent's life to live, it's yours. If you don't want to have kits, that's your decision."

Judy frowned. "But shouldn't it be our decision? I mean, what if you want kits, and I don't? What happens then?"

Nick sighed. "Would I like some say in the decision? Yes, yes I would. But there are a lot of options for us."

The fox considered his next words carefully. "Let's pretend for a moment that we aren't two completely different species that, as far as anyone knows, can't conceive in the first place. As long as I've known you, you've been focused on your goal of being the best cop in the world. It would… it'd be selfish, unfair and cruel for me to ask you to give that up, even for a few months, just because I wanted to have kits of my own."

The rabbit doe's frown deepened. "But, Nick, how different would it be if I told you to give up on something you wanted… kits of your own… just because I wanted to focus on my career?"

Nick turned the doe's words over in his mind. "If you put it that way, it wouldn't be much different."

Judy nodded. "That's my point. It'd be selfish, unfair, and cruel for me to shoot down any possibility of that without considering how you feel, too."

"Like I said before, Judy, I never really thought about it. There is a certain appeal to it, but, by the same token, do you REALLY want little mini-me's running around?"
Judy snorted in laughter. "Yeah, that does sound like a disaster waiting to happen." Her mood turned somber again. "But if it's something you want, Nick, I don't want to refuse you completely."

"And if it's something you don't want, I don't want to force you. As far as we know we can't have kits of our own anyways. If and when we're both ready, we can always adopt."

"But what if something does happen? What if, by some miracle, I do get pregnant?"

The fox was a little surprised by the rabbit's choice of words. She's used "miracle", instead of "coincidence", "mistake", or something like that.

"If that did happen, I wouldn't mind having a kit. But I would support you in whatever decision you make."

"I can't be the only one to make the decision, Nick. That's not fair to you."

The fox let out a breath. They could go in circles for hours.

"Alright. IF the time comes, we can decide. But that won't be for a while, Fluff. I don't think either of us are ready to take the step necessary to start that process." He couldn't help but smirk.

The doe sharing the bed with him blushed, but nodded in agreement. "I just want you to be happy."

"And the same goes here, Fluff."

Judy was quiet for a moment, before she shuffled closer to the fox, snuggling in close, planting a kiss on his lips, before pushing her muzzle into her fox's neck.

"I love you, Nick."

The russet furred canid pulled the doe close, wrapping her up almost completely in his arms and tail.

"I love you too, Cottontail. Let's get some sleep. You don't want to drag a dead fox to the train station, do you?"

Judy hummed, as Nick reached over and turned out the light. Within minutes, he felt Judy's body relax and heard her breathing even out. Sleep was not long in claiming him, either.

The next morning saw the fox and rabbit boarding the train back to Zootopia. The two had enjoyed their time off away from the city, but it was time to get back to the grindstone. As Bunnyburrow faded behind them, the two took a moment to reflect on the week. Nick had gotten to meet Judy's parents and see where she grew up. He'd had the chance to work with Bonnie and Stu, and let them get to know him.

For Judy's part, she'd enjoyed the time home visiting her family and showing Nick around. Madison had been an unexpected, yet pleasant surprise. She hadn't been overly close with the younger doe growing up, but it seemed now that they had more in common than she realized.

The train was about halfway to Zootopia, when Judy's phone chimed. A glance at the screen told her it was a text message from McHorn. She'd asked a favour of him after getting some information from Finnick beforehand, and it looked like the huge rhino had come through. The doe excused herself for a moment and walked to the vestibule, where Nick was less likely to overhear. When she was certain the fox's attention wasn't on her, she called ahead for a Zuber to pick them up at the station. That done, she returned to her seat, snuggling up against the fox and pulling up a game on her phone to
play.

It was about an hour before the train finally arrived at the station in Savannah Central, and the two gathered their things and left the train. The station itself was its usual hive of activity, and the duo was forced to dodge around the groups of much larger animals, including one decidedly odd clique of a giraffe, a hippo, a lion, and a zebra that were loudly discussing their recent trip to Africa.

When they finally worked themselves free of the crowds, Judy spotted their taxi already waiting. She waved at the hyena driver and gestured to the fox next to her to help her load the suitcases in the trunk. The two climbed into the back seat.

The driver was the quiet type, not much for conversation, and he got the two to Nick's apartment without any fuss. Judy paid him, and sent him off, before following the fox upstairs to his apartment. The two dropped off their suitcases, and Nick was about to unpack, but Judy grabbed his paw and started tugging him back out the door.

"Uh, Carrots? Where are we going?"

The rabbit closed the apartment door and locked it, and lead the fox back down the hall, down the stairs, and out the front entrance.

"Just, someplace I think we both need to visit. I'll tell you when we get there."

She led him to the subway. A few stops and train switches later, she pulled him off the train, and, consulting her map on her phone, led him on a journey down and over a couple of blocks. After a while, she pulled up short, and turned to the fox.

"Nick, you remember the night after Wolford's funeral, you told me of the kit you saw gunned down?"

Nick's ears went flat.

"Was the kit a raccoon?"

The fox looked down, staring at his feet for a long moment, before nodding almost imperceptibly.

Judy dropped her ears behind her head, and reached out to take the fox's paw in both her own.

"I asked Finnick for some details and had McHorn track down the shooting. He found the kit's resting place this morning. I thought you and I could go visit him together."

Nick thought for a moment that he should have been a little miffed that Judy hadn't consulted with him before going on this mission of discovery, but the fact that she wanted to be here with him when he did, he felt that made it worthwhile.

Seeing the fox nod, Judy kept her grip on Nick's paw and lead him into the cemetery that had been their destination.

Judy searched the rows upon rows of markers, until she found the one she'd been looking for.

Jayson Glass
May 4, 1993 - April 22, 2003

Nick stared at the grave marker for a long while, Judy standing silently and resolutely beside him. After a while, Judy tugged on the fox's arm to get his attention. He looked at her.
"Say something."

At the questioning look, Judy elaborated. "Talk to him. Is there anything you would want to say to him if he were standing here?"

The fox thought for a long moment.

"Hey…Jayson… You probably don't know me. Or if you do, it's from wherever you are now. I'm Nick. This is Judy. She brought me here."

Nick sighed and thought for a long while.

"I guess I need to apologize, buddy. I was there the day you were killed. I couldn't do anything but watch. Sad part is, I knew the guys that got you. Your parents probably told you this, but they're all in jail now. I'm just…I'm sorry I didn't do more to help you out. Carrots here tells me that I couldn't have done anything, but I still get that feeling that I could have, you know?"

Judy tightened her grip on Nick's paw. She'd been here before with her three siblings, and she hoped that talking would help ease the burden on Nick's shoulders.

The fox just stood there for a while, talking about random things. Some of it before Judy had met him, some of it after. After a long while, Nick finally seemed to run out of things to say. They remained there in silence for a few minutes before Judy tugged on Nick's arm to get his attention.

"Ready to go, Nick?"

The fox nodded. "I think so."

The two made their way out of the cemetery, each of them deep in thought. They were all the way back to Nick's apartment and the two were sitting on the couch before he broke the silence.

"Thanks for that, Judy. I know it might seem a bit weird, but I really do feel better now."

The doe smiled and shuffled over to him, wrapping her arms around the larger mammal, snuggling in to his side. "I thought it might, Nick. When my siblings died, I found it helped a lot to go to the mausoleum and talk to their ashes. Even though they're just ashes, it helps to talk about what's troubling you. And you know you can talk to me, right?"

Nick wrapped his arms around the bunny, enveloping her. "I know, Fluff. And thank you."

"You're welcome."

Chapter End Notes

So, the pillow talk scene took an unexpected turn here. I knew the conversation was going to have to come up at some point, but I actually didn't expect Nick and Judy to bring it on now, and it caught me by surprise. How interesting it is that characters can take stories in unexpected directions.

I'm not trying to stir up any pro-life/pro-choice arguments here, nor am I endorsing any
side of the argument. What I DO endorse however, is equal consideration in the decision-making process.

Jayson Glass is a not so subtle shoutout to my favourite chuckwagon racer, Jason Glass. The day of his death, April 22, is the day I actually wrote that portion of the chapter.

One person caught the reference to Tim Hortons in the last chapter, but NO ONE caught the reference to Tangled! And I cheated by giving you guys one reference in this chapter (Jayson Glass), but can you find the other reference?

Madison Hopps, as always, belongs to myself and my editor! Only we have permission to use her!

No Ask the Cast questions this week, so keep them coming! The cast wants to hear from you!

How many of you saw OceRydia's drawing of little Maddy? She is so CUTE! And yes, Daee17 and I are allowed to say that!

Coming up on July 27: Back to the Grindstone!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Did my chapter tardiness cause you to have a breakdown? Leave a comment!
It had only been two weeks since a certain gray rabbit and red fox had crossed the threshold into the lobby of ZPD's prestigious Precinct One. But for the rabbit, it had felt like much longer. While she had greatly enjoyed her time off with her fox and the visit to her hometown, it was police work that she wanted to be doing. Finding out what Wolford was after. Righting the wrongs committed by others. Making the world a better place.

The change in atmosphere from just a couple of months ago was immediately evident, though. Clawhauser wasn't playing with his Gazelle apps. There weren't groups of officers standing around chatting. The civilians being hustled to their booking were just a little quieter.

She knew why, of course. The loss of a brother in blue and the recent terrorist attack had sidelined pretty much every other investigation.

Judy and her fox made their way to the portly cheetah receptionist's desk. The donut loving feline perked up quite a bit upon seeing the two, waving at them.

"Judy! Nick! How was your time off?"

Judy grinned "Ben! I missed you guys! How's things been going here?"

Clawhauser slumped a bit. "Things haven't been very good around here. Rumor has it that Wolford's case is dead in the water, and the attack that you got stuck in has everyone on edge."

The rabbit doe frowned. "Have they made any progress with that?"

The cheetah shook his head. "I'm not sure. Longtooth, Rivers, and Bogo are being very tight-lipped about that. Of course, the media is in a frenzy about it."

Judy hopped up on the edge of the desk and sat down, her ears flat down her back. "I hope we figure out who's behind that soon."
Clawhauser nodded. "Anti-predator groups are claiming that this is just more evidence that predators shouldn't live in Zootopia. Some are calling for predators to be evicted. One group is even calling for them to be exterminated."

The doe nearly fell off her perch. "Exterminated? That's absurd! They were drugged!" Judy couldn't believe what she'd heard.

Nick shook his head, ears flat. "Mammals don't care why. They just want to be safe."

Clawhauser nodded. "All the affected predators were treated for Night Howler exposure. Some of the pro-pred groups picked up on that and are saying this is some sort of targeted Night Howler."

The doe nodded. That made sense. Still, what kind of mammal wants to just completely wipe out predators? That was worse than Bellwether's bid for power almost a year ago. Judy's shoulders drooped for a moment before she straightened up. After a moment, her phone chimed, signalling that they needed to punch in and start their day. Judy jumped down from the desk and walked over to stand beside Nick, who was wearing a somewhat subdued expression. She reached over and squeezed his arm. The fox looked down at her and gave her a wan smile, and Judy turned her attention back to Clawhauser.

"Sorry Benji, but we really need to get going."

As they were walking off, Judy turned to look at the fox beside her.

"Hey, Nick, you OK?"

The fox's eyes were downcast. "I'm just not surprised. This kind of speciesism, it's hard to hide, even harder to get rid of. Whatever's going on, whoever's doing all this, it's just Bellwether 2.0: New and Improved."

"We'll figure this all out Nick. You, me, everyone here. Just like with Bellwether, we'll all figure this out. We'll fix it."

"How can you be sure?"

Judy stopped her walk and stared at Nick for a moment. "Because of how far we've come already. Nick, a couple thousand years ago I wouldn't be standing here talking to you. I'd be dead and eaten. Instead, here we are, and the mammal I trust most in this world is one that my ancestors would flee from and pray you wouldn't find them."

The fox stared into her eyes, seeing the truth in them, and the love as well. She was right. Mammalkind HAD made some impressive progress, despite some mammals' desire to mess it up. Still… "How can you be so optimistic about this?"

Judy's eyes grew a little distant. "Something I read in a book. If someone can go out of their way to show kindness, then it'll start a chain reaction of the same."

The fox let a smile creep over his muzzle. "Make the world a better place, huh?"

Judy's grin matched. "Yep."

Nick's expression turned thoughtful. "You know, that should be something to have up on the wall. You know those 'inspirational' quotes with the pictures that some guy pairs with them?"

"Like that one with the desert about perseverance?" The two started walking again.
"Yeah. Personally, I think we could change a few of them. Think Buffalo Butt would spring for a few Judy-quote posters?"

"Agh! No, no, no…"

"Oh, come on, Carrots, you're always the optimist here! You have to have some more quotes that we could market."

The doe rolled her eyes at the fox. "They weren't my quotes, Slick. Besides, I bet you heard at least a few while growing up."

The russet canid thought for a moment. "There was one that my mom told me the night after the ranger scout incident…"

Judy looked up at the fox beside her, concern in her eyes.

"She told me, 'All it takes is one small light to shine a ray of hope, and the darkness will run from it.'"

Judy paused for a moment and smiled. "I like that one. Maybe we should put that one on the poster."

"As long as it's not with a ranger scout uniform for the picture, that might be a pretty good idea."

The two smiled as they headed off to their shared cubicle.

"Hey, Carrots, listen to this!" Nick punched a few buttons on his desk phone. A familiar voice blared from the speaker.

"Officers Wilde and Hopps, It's Old Joe. We met a couple of weeks ago about one of my building's tenants. There's something you need to see, if you could come to the Big Belt apartments. Give me a call and let me know. My number is on the card I gave you two."

Judy scrambled for her wallet, rifling through it to pull out the small business card the wolf had given them the day they'd gone out there the first time. Finding it, she handed it to Nick, who dialed the number. After a couple of rings, a voice filtered through the receiver. Even though the fox had taken it off speakerphone, the rabbit could clearly hear what was being said.

"Hello?"

"Old Joe? It's Officer Wilde, ZPD. I just got your message. How can we help you?"

"Officer Wilde! Thanks goodness. I need to show you something here. How soon can you get to the Big Belt apartments?"

Nick glanced at Judy, who gave him a thumbs-up. "We can be there in about 45 minutes, Joe. Something the matter?"

"Just something you need to see, and I don't know who else to show this to."

Judy's face morphed to one of concern. Nick noticed. "Joe, are you in danger?"

"I don't know. All I know is that you two need to see something."

"We'll be right there. Sit tight, Mr. Whitefur." Nick hung up and glanced at the doe beside him. "Think we caught a break?"
"God, I hope so! We need something more to go on besides dates and times. I just hope Joe isn't in trouble."

"Agreed. So, I say we'd better get our fluffy butts down there and see what he wants to show us."

He couldn't help but grin; Judy was already racing down the hallway toward the stairs. Nick took off after her, determined to at least catch her before she got to the motor pool. This was not to be, however, as the rabbit proved not only stronger than she looked, but faster as well, and by the time Nick made it into the garage, she was already climbing into the driver's side of their cruiser. The fox went around to the other door and climbed in. Judy started the engine, and the two took off.

As they drove, Nick pulled out their case file. They didn't have a lot on Spencer Callahan, no more than they had before, but it never hurt to polish up, especially since they hadn't been able to do any work for the last two weeks.

Unlike the last time the two had made this journey, this time it was relatively silent. Judy drove while Nick used the MDT to try to pull up more information he could on the mountain goat. Just like last time, he didn't get very far. Besides this call from Joe, nothing new had come up.

The two pulled up to the Big Belt apartments, climbed out of their cruiser and had just opened the main door for the building, when Old Joe appeared and let them in.

Immediately, they could tell that the wolf was on edge. His eyes flitted left and right as though looking for something when he opened the inner door, and he was tense.

"Come in, you two."

The two police officers exchanged a glance and followed the wolf into the basement of the building. Off the parkade was a large electrical-mechanical room. In the corner, a single PC sat, covered in dust, and it was to this that the wolf led the two officers.

"After you last visited here, I kept an eye out for Mr. Callahan. You know, let you know when he showed up. The thing is, he never did. And when he was late getting his rent in yesterday, I took a look at the security footage to see when the last time he was around."

The wolf logged on to the computer and clicked through some websites. "Our old camera recorder went down about a month ago, so we've been installing this new cloud security camera system. It's pretty cool."

The wolf double clicked on a set of saved files. "The last time we saw Mr. Callahan around here was the day before you showed up the first time. Take a look."

The screen showed the basement parkade. A car showed up and pulled into a stall. The angle of this particular camera didn't let them get a plate, but the fact that a mountain goat with distinctive blue facial markings got out made it clear whose car it was. The goat walked across the garage and into the elevator lobby. Joe started the next file playing. This one was of the hallway outside Mr. Callahan's apartment. The goat appeared and walked to his door, paused for a moment, stooped to pick something up, and then, suddenly, came running back the way he came. Just as he disappeared from the frame, a second hooded mammal appeared from within the unit, chasing the mountain goat.

"Whoa whoa, stop for a second." Judy had picked up on something. "Go back a bit." The wolf complied, slowly reversing the footage. Nick spotted what Judy had already seen a few seconds later. The second mammal was holding a gun. The two cops shared a glance.

They continued through the footage, until the cloaked mammal had chased the goat out of the
building. "I'm sorry to say that the outside cameras weren't up in time to catch this. So, this is all the footage we have. The mammal in the hood showed up about 5 minutes before Mr. Callahan did, but you can't see it's face."

"Did Mr. Callahan have a roommate?" Judy inquired

"No, he lived alone."

Judy frowned. So, they had an unidentified mammal with a gun chasing their witness. They'd need to see the footage of the traffic cameras for the area to see if they caught something the building security didn't. She turned to the wolf.

"Mr. Whitefur, we'll need to see Mr. Callahan's apartment."

The gray wolf nodded. "I can't argue with that. I'm sorry I didn't let you in earlier, but—" Nick held up a paw.

"We understand. You had no reason to believe anything was wrong. This is a whole different ball game."

"We'll also need the recordings of this. Anything with this mammal, or Mr. Callahan," Judy pointed out.

"No worries. I thought of that after I called you." Joe unlocked a drawer in the desk, pulled a USB flash drive from it, and gave it to the rabbit. "Here you go."

Judy accepted it with a smile, and the three headed out of the room. The ride up the elevator was quiet. Judy stared at the flash drive in her paws, wondering what it was that Mr. Callahan had gotten himself into.

Exiting the elevator, the three made their way down the hall to the mountain goat's unit. The wolf picked a key from his keyring and unlocked the door for them, letting them inside.

It wasn't a large apartment by any means, and Callahan was apparently a bit of a slob, but that wasn't what they were concerned about. The duo made their way through the unit, examining everything they could, taking note of the items that they could see. The television was in place, and there was a monitor, keyboard and pointer for a computer, but, suspiciously, the computer itself was missing.

The rabbit doe ventured down the short hallway, past the laundry closet and bathroom to the only bedroom. Pushing the door open, she stepped inside. A light 'plink' drew her attention to the floor. A small penny lay there. For a moment, she wondered where it had come from, before remembering an early lesson at the academy: paranoid mammals will use carefully-balanced pennies as a simple, cheap way to tell if a room had been accessed without their knowledge. She left the penny where it had fallen, and looked around the room. Nothing seemed disturbed there. The doe even spotted a large wad of cash sitting out in the open on the dresser

Judy was careful not to disturb anything, but she did glance at a few pieces of paper that had been left lying about. Mostly monthly bills, nothing interesting. She made her way back into the main area. Nick was crouched at the door, inspecting something on it at the moment. Judy made her way in the opposite direction.

The large window in the living room wouldn't have been useful for getting in and out, being several floors above ground level. An elephant or other very large mammal could reach it, but they wouldn't be able to get in. She was about to give up and go see what Nick was up to when she happened to glance down. In the carpet, next to an easy chair, were two impressions. Square and deep, it was
clear something had been sitting there for a while, and then been moved.

The doe crouched down to look at the indentations in the carpet, and the easy chair next to them.

The feet of the chair and the indentations lined up. Someone had moved the chair.

Judy walked around to the couch, coffee table, and TV stand. None of them had been moved. She returned to the chair and stood in front of it for a moment. So why had this chair been moved?

The doe turned to face the room, moving left and right. Moving the chair wouldn't have gotten her a better viewing angle for the TV, and the windows to the outdoors were behind her. She turned to face the chair again. A thought occurred to her.

The doe walked around to stand behind the easy chair, hiding her from view from the door. Plenty of room for her, but a mammal the size of the one they'd seen in the security footage, it would be a tight fit…but unless she missed her mark, the mammal could fit. She peeked out the side of her hiding place. The vantage point would give anyone hiding back there a clear view of the door, while not being immediately evident to anyone just entering.

"Hey, Carrots? I think I found something!" Nick clearly thought Judy wasn't in the room.

"So did I," she said, while hiding behind the easy chair. There was a silence.

"Fluff, where are you?"

She peeked out from behind the chair. Nick was turning his head this way and that, apparently trying to locate her. She ducked behind the chair again.

"Over here, in the living room!" She had to stifle a giggle. She found it incredibly ironic that she was, in a sense, encouraging a fox to hunt her, in a game of hide and seek, just to prove a point. A soft sniffing could be heard, and Judy knew that Nick was using his nose to locate her. She peeked out again, briefly, to see Nick with his nose held high, trying to zero in on her. The rabbit ducked back out of sight and stood stock still, and waited until he came around the side of the easy chair.

"Well, Carrots, I found you. And I'm surprised at you. Aren't you the one always telling me not to play games when on the job?"

The rabbit punched the fox in the shoulder.

"Ow! Jeez, Carrots, do you have to beat up mammals like that?"

Judy rolled her eyes and walked out from behind the chair. "Relax, Nick, I didn't hit you that hard. Anyway, I wanted to show you something."

The red canid smirked, following her to the centre of the room. "And what was it that you wanted to show me, except that you can play hide-and-seek?"

"Exactly that, Nick. Did you see me at all, before you actually found me?"

Her fox companion shook his head. "Of course not."

"Precisely. I had a line of sight to the door from where I was, and that easy chair is easily big enough to hide the mammal we saw chasing Mr. Callahan. You had no idea where I was, and you were looking for me."

"You think that's where the mammal that ambushed Callahan was hiding."
"Precisely. But why didn't the ambush work? Something alerted him. But what?"

The fox thought for a moment, then looked back towards the doorway. "I thought this might have been just something that fell out of someone's pocket, but maybe there's something else to it," he said, as he walked back in the direction they'd come. He stopped near the door threshold and pointed down. There, on the wood floor, was a single penny.

The rabbit doe frowned. "Why leave a penny lying on the ground?" She looked around. There was no other wayward change, and the penny was too far from the door for it to have accidentally slid there.

"Exactly. I see three possibilities. One is that it's the ambusher's. He walks into the room, somehow drops the penny and doesn't pick it up. Callahan comes in, sees the penny, bends over to pick it up. Gets startled by our friendly neighbourhood assassin, chase ensues. The second is that the penny is Callahan's and he dropped it on his way into the apartment. The third—"

"Callahan set a penny trap," the doe finished for him. Nick nodded, happy that Judy had picked up his train of thought. Penny traps were used by some mammals in less than legal walks of life as a simple way to alert them to a compromised safe house. You balance a penny on a door knob or on the top of the door itself and close the door. When the door is opened, the penny falls. Hear the penny hit the floor, and the room hasn't been entered. No penny hitting the floor, and someone's been in the room and didn't reset the trap. "So, we have a hiding place, a possible penny trap, and a failed ambush."

"And this too." Nick pointed to the door knob. While Nick had been crouching to look at it, it was at eye-level for his rabbit companion. It looked like any other doorknob in the building, except for the scratch and pry marks.

Judy examined the knob closer. The scratches were fairly well defined, so they were likely pretty recent. She looked up at Nick. "Picked lock?"

Nick nodded, and turned to the grey wolf, still standing in the hallway. "Did Callahan ever need to call a locksmith? Broken key or something?"

Old Joe shook his head. "Tenants are supposed to come to me first if they can't get into their units. I have the master key. Even if their key breaks in the door, they should call me first before a locksmith. Besides, we haven't had a locksmith here in months."

The fox turned back to his rabbit companion. "So, our friendly neighbourhood assassin picks the lock of our mountain goat's apartment…"

Judy picked up on Nick's theory. "He hides behind the easy chair, but it's too small a space for him, so he moves it, just a bit. Now he can see the door without being immediately evident…"

Nick finished off the train of thought. "Our mountain goat bends to pick up the penny and the assassin isn't expecting this, so he readjusts his shot. Callahan notices and hauls ass."

The rabbit doe looked around. "Guess we'd better get the crime scene techs in here to comb the place." She turned to the old wolf. "We'll need to take it from here, Joe. Just let us know if you need anything. Oh, and anything you or the owner has on Mr. Callahan would be great."

The grey wolf nodded and bid them goodbye before heading back to his own unit. Judy keyed her radio.

"Dispatch, this is Officer Hopps, requesting crime scene tech support at 4212 Fraser street. Big Belt
Apartments, unit 324.

"Officer Hopps, dispatch, copy your request for the crime tech support at 4212 Fraser Street. Do you need backup units?"

Judy thought for a moment. "Yeah, we'd better, there's a lead that Nick and I need to chase down."

"Copy that, Hopps, backup units on their way as well."

The gray doe looked over at her fox companion. "So, Nick, ready to take a look at the traffic cams again? Maybe they caught our two mammals when they left the building."

Nick groaned, hoping that didn't mean another several hours of staring at camera footage.

It did mean staring at camera footage, but not as long as the fox feared. They had the date, time and location that they needed to look up. And it wasn't long before they had the traffic camera feeds going back at the precinct. The two had opened a missing mammal case for Callahan as soon as they'd gotten back to their cruiser, linking the file to Callahan's DMV photo and records, and noting him as a mammal of interest in their own case. Now they just had to figure out how far he'd gotten, and from there, who was the last one to see him.

After a few minutes of clicking through the possible cameras looking for the mountain goat, they finally spotted him running through an intersection. The unidentified second mammal was still chasing him, pistol in plain view.

"I wonder if anyone called 911 about this?" Judy pointed to several bystanders that ended up shoved to the side by the fleeing mountain goat. She switched to the next camera in line. "Maybe we can get a description of this attacker."

The mountain goat kept running for several more blocks, before disappearing behind a Targoat. Judy switched to a camera that might have had a view of the alleyway's exit, but no one appeared. She glanced at Nick.

"So, Slick, know any alternate ways out of that alley?"

Nick shook his head. "Other than up the canyon wall or through the store itself, no." He gestured that Judy should back up and switch to the previous camera. The two saw the still unidentified attacker pause at the entrance of the alleyway before ducking behind a large dumpster. A few moments later, the attacker emerged, wiping down his gun. He glanced in both directions before heading out of the frame. Nick glanced at the timestamp.

"I'm willing to bet that 18:23 was a very unfortunate moment for our guy." The fox gestured to Judy to let him take the controls for a moment, which Judy relented. Clicking through the camera feeds, he found one that had a more direct view of the alleyway. He backed up the recording a moment and slowly moved it forward, until the attacker was positioned in the frame, this time with a head on shot of the mammal's face and head.

"Hey, Carrots, does that—"

"Doug."

The chemist that had manufactured the original night howler toxin. He was somehow involved with Callahan's disappearance. Judy reached for the keyboard, hitting the keystroke to send the screenshot to the printer near their cubicle. She also took the time to note the cameras they needed and the time
frames for everything, so that the video technicians could attach the files to their case. While she was taking notes, Nick decided to move the footage forward again. He let it play for a while, then stopped. Backed up. Stopped. Played again. Stopped.

"Hey, Carrots, doesn't this seem a little odd?"

The rabbit looked over Nick's shoulder. "What?"

"This delivery van. A blank delivery van shows up about ten minutes after Doug left the area."

The rabbit thought and then shrugged. "Best thing I can think of is maybe they were there to drop something off. They may have seen something though. Can you get a plate?"

Nick shook his head. "They're in and out in a few minutes, and they took the route down Hoover Falls Street. That route doesn't have traffic cameras."

Judy squinted at the image on the screen. The van itself was in good focus, but reading the plates was certainly a bust, and the driver and passenger both had their sunshades down, but she could see mammals in both seats.

A passenger and a driver.

Two mammals.

A nondescript delivery van.

"Nick, look at this. You remember there were three mammals we didn't catch from the Nighthowler case, right?"

Nick nodded, thinking. "Yeah. Doug, and two other rams. One had an eyepatch. What were their names?"

Judy frowned. "Jesse was one of them. Walter, maybe? It had a funny accent though. Woolter?"

The fox shrugged. "You're the one with the ears."

"We never figured out which one was which though."

"Yeah Ms. Bunny Muscles kicked Doug out of the train car before he had the chance to introduce us. And they weren't too happy with Ms. Bunny Muscles for running off with said car either, so they didn't give us their names for the record."

Judy socked Nick in the side of the arm.

That shoulder of Nick's was going to be permanently bruised at this rate. He rubbed it, trying to assuage the pain. "Anyway, so what are you getting at, Carrots?"

"Nick, there's two mammals in that delivery van. We saw Doug earlier. Now what are the chances that a delivery would just HAPPEN to happen within minutes of Doug walking by…AFTER chasing our mammal into that very same alley and coming out alone?"

"It's definitely stretching plausibility, that's for sure."

Judy was getting animated, laying out her theory. "So, Doug chases our mammal into the alley, then a few minutes later, he calls his buddies. They come, but instead of a delivery…”
"...they're there for a pickup," Nick finished the train of thought

Judy nodded. A silence descended over the two small mammals.

"You know what this means, right Carrots?"

Another nod from the doe, her expression grim. "We may have another body out there some where. And three rams somehow involved with him."

Nick's expression grew concerned, and he reached out to put his paw on the doe's shoulder. "You going to be ok, Carrots? I mean, you didn't take it very well when we found Eric."

Judy's ears fell. "I know. I thought I'd be ready for that. But you're never really ready, you know?" Upon receiving a nod of affirmation from the fox, the rabbit continued. "You know we cremate our dead in Bunnyburrow. Usually only a day or two after death, unless there is some reason they shouldn't. So, I've never actually seen a dead body until then. Only ashes."

A long sigh escaped the gray mammal. "I saw plenty of photos in the academy. But now, those all seemed sort of abstract. Like it wasn't quite real. Like you would see in a movie, you know?" The fox's understanding look urged her to continue. "It just made it worse that Eric was a friend. Almost a brother, really."

"Will you be alright if that's how this turns out? As another body?"

After a long pause, the doe gave a small smile. It was all Nick needed to see.

"That's my strong bunny. Now why don't we see if we can figure out where this delivery van might have gone?"

The two mammals turned back to their workstation, clicking through the traffic cameras as they followed the van from the Canyonlands Targoat. The lack of cameras on Hoover Falls was made up for by the fact that they'd chosen to make a turn onto a street with plenty of the said cameras. The route eventually took them the length of the climate wall, through the northeastern tip of the downtown core, and into the rainforest district.

Much to both of their dismay, though, they lost the van when it took a side street off of Vapor Road on the edge of the Meadowlands. Several groups of traffic cameras and almost two hours later, they still hadn't located it.

Judy had taken to marking down the van's route on her own computer. The map she'd used showed a dozen possible routes the van could have taken, leading in various directions to the Meadowlands, the Canal District, the Marshlands, and more than a few that went out of the city entirely.

Trying to figure out where the van had come from produced the same frustrating result, only this time the driver had popped up near Polar Lane in Tundratown, right on the coastline.

Nick looked at Judy's route traces. "That's not much to go on, is it?"

Shaking her head, the doe pointed to the map. "If it was Woolter and Jesse in that van, they might have been heading back to the Meadowlands. Don't most sheep in the city live out there?"

"I'm no expert on the demographic distribution of the city, but it seems that way."

Judy tapped a finger on her lip. "So, if they are based in the Meadowlands, what were they doing in Tundratown?"
Nick sat back and pondered. "They might have a hideaway there or something. Or they may have stopped for coffee somewhere outside the view of the camera. Who knows?"

The doe sighed. "We don't even know if this van was related or not. They could have just been making a delivery."

Nick couldn't help but agree to that. "We'll need to talk to the staff at that Targoat. Maybe they saw something."

Judy clicked away from her makeshift map and brought up the warrant application. She figured that they'd probably hit another brick wall if they asked for the store's outside camera footage without it, and she'd rather start that process as soon as possible. She sent the form to the printer and hopped off her chair.

"Come on, Slick. We have some sheep to catch."

Chapter End Notes

WOW! They’re actually making forward progress! Yay!

Just as a warning, the next update may come later than usual, as I will be travelling on the 10th!

I had no “Ask the Cast” questions for the last chapter. Seriously everyone! Ask Judy, Nick, Bogo, Madison, Gideon, (or anyone really!) anything you want!

Several people picked up the Madagascar reference! Yay! Cookie for all of you that did! Can you find the reference in this chapter?

This chapter marks 100,000 total words in the story itself. That's a HUGE milestone for me, considering that, before this, my longest was less than 3,000 words!

Coming up on August 10: Evidence!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Did the Genie make a mess of your father’s brother’s nephew’s cousin’s former roommate’s flat? Leave a comment!
Evidence

Chapter Summary

The heroes start finding evidence!

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: I was about to post that I'd finally secured the rights to Zootopia, but then found out that Maleficent had burned the contract when she turned into a freaky dragon. So not only do I still not own Zootopia, I have to pay hazard pay to my messenger.

I couldn't do this without my amazing editor and friend, Daee17. She keeps me grounded in this crazy world!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Officer Liz Fangmeyer felt a profound sense of loss as she walked through the doors of Precinct one. The usual hustle and bustle was still there, but she couldn't bring herself to muster up a smile. She just didn't have it in her.

The last time she'd walked through those doors, Eric was alive.

Her therapy sessions and the constant flow of her fellow officers visiting her had helped of course, but the hole in her heart was still there. The two had met at the academy and become fast friends. Both had come from a family of police officers, and over the years, their friendship had grown.

She still couldn't believe he was gone.

She'd been off duty when she'd heard the news, just climbing in to bed when her phone rang. What followed was honestly the worst things she'd ever heard since finding out her father had died. She'd collapse on the floor in a heap, curling into a ball, bursting into tears, loud enough to draw the attention of her neighbors.

The next few days had been absolute hell. Her mother had insisted that she come home to her old room for a while, and had doted on her, trying to lift her spirits. During the funeral, she'd been almost catatonic.

She'd spent the next few weeks in a funk. It took a gift from her fellow officers at Precinct one and almost daily therapy sessions to bring her out of the shell she'd crawled into. Around this time, she'd learned that it had been Judy and her partner that had found Eric's body, and the tiny doe had been as badly shaken as she was.

She'd tried calling the small officer, only to find out that she'd been involved with the incident at the Grand Palm Hotel and was on leave, so she'd decided to come in today to see if she could talk to the doe and her boss.
The tigress took stock of the scene in front of her. Clawhauser was munching on donuts – big surprise there – but the usually bright atmosphere was as dull and dreary as her mood. Still, there wasn't any place she'd rather be, here among her extended family.

She'd barely made two steps, when she heard a voice call out to her.

"Liz?"

She recognized the voice instantly and looked around, spotting a grey blur heading in her direction, and a red fox following close behind. The rabbit's call had alerted others in the area, and soon she found herself surrounded by her colleagues, asking how she was doing, how she was feeling, if she needed anything, what they could do for her.

It wasn't until she'd assured everyone that she was OK for now, followed by a shout about loitering from Bogo, that everyone had reluctantly dissipated. Everyone but two officers.

"How about you, Judy? How are you doing? You've had it harder than most."

The tiny officer shook her head. "Not as hard as you, Liz. I'm doing better. At least I can feel like I'm doing something to help." An alarmed look came over the gray mammal's face. "Not to say that you're not! Or that you can't help! I mean, what I meant was…"

The tigress got down on her knees and placed a huge paw on a comparatively tiny shoulder. "It's OK, Judy, I know what you mean." The two stood there for a moment, before the rabbit moved closer, hopped up, and wrapped her small arms around the tiger's neck and best she could.

"I can only imagine how things must have been for you, Liz," Judy said into the tiger's ear. "You knew Eric a lot longer than I did."

The two stood there for a while before a clearing of a throat drew their attention. "Carrots, as much as I agree, I think we better get going before a certain boss of ours finds us still loitering here and puts us on large mammal bathroom duty."

The bunny broke the hug, her ears drooping for a moment before perking up again. "Nick's right. We need to head out."

The tigress gave a lopsided smile. "Bogo got you on another big case?"

"Yeah! We're trying to figure out what Eric was up to while he was undercover."

A frown marred the large cat's face. "He didn't report in?"

"Apparently not. We've had to track him down as best we can."

"Well, I'll let you guys go then. Whatever it was, it must have been important."

The bunny and fox agreed and bid the larger officer farewell.

Liz Fangmeyer watched the two as they made their way towards the carpool. A year ago, she would have laughed at the notion of a rabbit being a police officer. She'd been sure that, the smaller you were, the less you were suited for this line of work.

How wrong she had been. What the bunny and fox lacked in physical size, they made up for in resourcefulness. Plus, she'd come to realize that there were certain things Judy could do that no other officers could. Beyond the normal day to day trappings of police work, the smaller bunny could
interact with smaller mammals without them feeling threatened, and she could get into places that officers such as herself couldn't.

A few months back, a water main had broken under one of the streets in Sahara Square and the resulting flooding of the street had washed an unfortunate mouse family and their Minnie Van down a storm drain.

Rather than wait for a rescue crew, Judy had crawled into the storm drain herself and retrieved the wrecked vehicle, with all of it's occupants shaken and cold but alive. It had been quite amusing to see the city crew show up a half an hour later to repair the pipe and have to search for another lost mouse family, only to be told that they were too late for the last part.

The rabbit, and it seemed her fox partner, excelled in the day to day tasks of the job as well, with ticket quotas and arrest records that exceeded almost everyone else.

Yes, I was certainly wrong about small mammals on the force, Fangmeyer thought as she made her way to the precinct's mail room. Particularly that rabbit. She still found it amazing that the doe had managed to, in the space of a little more than two days, find 15 mammals that had gone missing over the course of the previous two months, with literally no help at all other than a fox she'd found in the street.

A large part of her had been incredibly jealous and envious, and had dismissed it as pure dumb luck. But then she'd gone and done it again, exposing the biggest political scandal the city had ever seen. So astounded was she at the tenacity of the rabbit, that Fangmeyer had been one of many in precinct one to advocate the rabbit's return to the force.

Liz had been a little upset at being assigned a new partner while Wolford was paired with Judy, but she couldn't think of a better mentor for the doe.

Shaking herself out of her thoughts, the tigress was a bit surprised to find herself outside the mailroom with a pawful of letters. Apparently, all this time, she'd been running on autopilot. Liz began looking through the mail she'd gotten over the last month.

Union dues and notices… department memos… IT advisories – she hated those… A letter from Debbie Wolford… A reminder that she was due for her firearms recertification…wait, what? Liz backed up a couple of envelopes.

A nondescript envelope, printed on a computer, lacking a stamp and any sort of address, the only hint of it's origin being the name Eriadu Wayland in the return area. The tigress frowned, moving to her cubicle, pondering. Eriadu Wayland. E. W. Eric Wolford. The tigress smiled for a moment. When he was undercover, Eric always signed his letters under an assumed name, but used his initials to identify himself. The smile was quickly replaced by a look of perplexion. Why had he left the envelope for her? When?

Fangmeyer sat in her office chair, and set the rest of the mail aside, opening the envelope from the wife of her deceased friend. She almost dropped the memory card that spilled forth when she pulled the letter out of the envelope, but caught it just in time. The letter contained within had been written and printed on a computer as well, but the striped feline immediately knew who sent it.

Liz:

Hope you're doing well. Sorry I haven't been in touch, but I think I've found something big. One of my CIs alerted me to an incoming shipment at the docks. I was able to get these pictures, but I don't know what they are or what it does. Apparently, some mammal paid big bucks to keep this quiet, but
my guy didn't know whom.

I've traced the shipment to a warehouse on the Savannah Central waterfront. Whatever's going on, it seems to involve a fairly small group of mammals. No more than 5 or so.

Get this to Bogo. He'll know what to do.

Will catch up as soon as I can,

Eriadu Wayland

The tigress' eyes flew open wide, realizing what she held in her paw. The tigress sprinted off in the direction of the cape buffalo's office.

It turns out, the fox and bunny didn't need a warrant after all. The Targoat manager had been more than willing to give them access to the external security camera footage, after confirming that no delivery had taken place on the day of Callahan's disappearance. The mongoose had even provided the officers with his store's delivery schedule.

The forwardness of the store manager was a refreshing change from the hostile attitudes of some of the warehouse managers they'd dealt with before.

The cameras didn't provide a whole lot of useful information. They were fairly low quality, so they couldn't pick out details such as license plates, but the two were able to confirm that two rams had indeed loaded a body into the back of their van and driven off.

"Looks like we're still a step behind these guys," Nick commented as he stared at the blurry image of the delivery van leaving the alley, Judy scribbling some notes in her book at the same time. "Really hoping we can pull up even sometime soon."

"Oh, stop being a Pessimist Patty, Nick. We'll figure this out."

The fox gave the doe beside him a mock offended look. "In case you didn't notice, Officer Fluff, I am a male. Therefore, the proper terminology is 'Pessimist Patrick'."

Judy's eyes roamed over the fox for a moment, before grinning. "Do I know that? Yes. Yes, I do."

Shaking his head, the fox turned back to face the TV screen, thinking. "So, we know these three had something to do with Callahan's disappearance. The question is what? And who set them on him?"

The gray bunny cop nodded. "Not to mention, 'Why'. We should check out the alley." She used her phone to grab a screenshot of the position of the delivery truck on the monitor, figuring it might come in handy.

Nick sat back, deep in thought. His face gave no indication of what he was thinking. After a while he stood up and ejected the tape from the playback machine.

"Agreed, Carrots. Let's let the manager know this tape is ours and head around back."

It was another surprise that the manager had no problems with them taking the tape. Judy filled out an evidence claim tag and handed it to the mongoose, before dropping the tape itself in an evidence bag and sealing it. Since her uniform didn't have pockets big enough and she really didn't want to carry the bulky tape around for the next hour, she handed it to Nick as they were heading out the back door.
The alleyway was just like any other alleyway in Zootopia: comparatively narrow, not aesthetically pleasing in any way, and generally a mess.

Spotting the store's outdoor camera was easy. It was mounted in a pod high on the wall, looking right down the alleyway towards the entrance. Judy moved to stand underneath it, then turned in the direction it was angled. She pulled out her phone and studied the screenshot she'd taken moments before.

"Hey, Nick! Could you move over there for me?" She indicated a spot in the alley between herself and the far wall, adjacent to a sewer drain cover. The fox moved to the location she requested, a curious look on his face.

It took a bit of back and forth guidance on Judy's part, but she eventually got him where she wanted. "OK, so the delivery trucked stopped where you're standing, facing the alley entrance."

The fox nodded. "Which means wherever Callahan was, he had to be off-camera that way." He pointed to Judy's left, and the doe nodded in agreement. Turning in the direction he had indicated, she took a couple of photos with her phone's camera, before switching it to video mode and capturing an overall look at the alleyway in both directions. It was a one-way alley, only there to serve the store's loading dock. Directly across from the store's rear, the canyon wall stood, the imposing sheer rock wall easily dwarfing the building.

"Hey Carrots, are rabbits good at climbing?"

Judy shrugged. "We're not the world's greatest, but we can climb." She turned back to the fox, who was studying the rock wall intently.

"I don't know about you, but I don't think even a mountain goat could climb that." He was right. The cliff soared several hundred feet overhead, at nearly a right angle to the ground. The cliff face had almost no footholds worth noting, and even the lowest outcropping was too high up to reach. The store's loading dock was flush with the rest of the cliff face, so there was no escape there either. It was either through the store or past the van, and both mammals knew Callahan didn't go either way.

Without a word, Nick and Judy began searching the area. They weren't entirely sure what they were looking for, but at this point, anything out of the ordinary would be helpful.

The answer came to them, not in the form of what was there that shouldn't be, but what was not there that should be. Nick noticed it first. "Hey Carrots, does this patch of wall look cleaner to you than the rest?"

The doe looked at the patch he had indicated. The majority of the brickwork of the wall was dusty and dull from years of being exposed to the elements, but one patch looked like it had just been scrubbed. "The only reason I can think of to wash down just one section of wall is if you're trying to hide something."

"Or an elephant really needed to take a leak," Nick smirked and winced at the inevitable punch to the shoulder.

The rabbit, in the process of calling for crime lab services, nearly dropped her phone.

"Nick! That's disgusting!"

"So you're sure you never saw Wolford, Clawhauser?" The intimidating cape buffalo eyed the portly cheetah.
"No sir. I went to drop off some paperwork for Officer Grizzton, and came back, and it was on my desk. I wasn't gone more than two minutes!"

Chief Bogo grumbled but accepted the answer. "Alright, Clawhauser. That's all. Get back to the desk."

The cheetah nodded and turned to leave. "I'm Gazelle, and you are one hot dancer, Ben-jammin Claw-house-er," his pocket said.

"And stop playing with the Gazelle app while on duty!"

Clawhauser winced as he shut the door to the chief's office. Liz Fangmeyer had to suppress a snicker. If there was one thing more that Clawhauser was known for other than his love for donuts, it was his love for the pop singer. She turned her attention back to her boss.

"OK, Fangmeyer, so you just found this in your mailbox this morning?"

The tigress nodded. She'd just spent the last couple hours reiterating her last interactions with Eric to the chief, which hadn't been much. She'd been assigned to tac team duties the day he went undercover, and hadn't seen him since then. A few phone calls, all personal, and a couple of emails, and now this. She'd already given it in a statement to the detectives handling his murder case, but for some reason she didn't know, Bogo had wanted to hear them again.

"Yes sir. I hadn't physically seen him since the day you assigned him to undercover duty, and hadn't heard from him either besides the emails and phone calls I told you about before."

She watched as the cape buffalo sat back in his oversized chair and sighed. "This may not help with finding his killers, but it might shed some light on what he was up to." Bogo reached for his desk phone, and dialled a number.

After a few moments, the line picked up. Though she couldn't hear what was being said, she recognized the voice as the diminutive rabbit officer.

Judy had just finished getting the crime lab tech all situated when her phone rang, the tone being one she reserved for the Chief. A frown crossed her face, idly wondering why he didn't have Clawhauser call them on the radio. She answered.

"Hopps speaking. Can I help you, Chief?"

"Hopps, I need you and Wilde back at the station, ASAP."

A frown creased the rabbit's features. "Sir, can it wait? We just got lab services down here at the Canyonlands Targoat for some analysis on something."

"Negative, Hopps. We've come across some vital information that concerns your case. Call in backup if you have to, but you and your partner are needed back here."

"Copy that, Chief. Wilde and I will get there as soon as we can."

"See that you are. Report to my office as soon as you get here. Bogo out." The surly chief hung up before Hopps could bid him goodbye.

Still wondering what the Chief needed, she keyed her radio. "All units, Zulu 240, Hopps here. Anyone able to spot us for guard duty in Canyonlands?"
There was a long silence before the radio crackled to life. "Hopps, Bearton here. I can spell you on your task. What's up?"

The rabbit activated her mic. "Got lab services taking a look at something behind the Canyonlands Targoat, and Chief Bogo just called us back to the shop."

There was another silence, though this one was not so long, and when his voice came back, there was a smile behind it. "Copy that Hopps, coming to babysit the eggheads. Will be there in 5."

A groan escaped Judy's mouth. Bearton was well known on the force for being a very "paws and guns" cop and held a slight disdain for the lab personnel and crime scene technicians. His frequent phrase was 'it's easier to hold a suspect with handcuffs then with beakers and test tubes.' The bunny opened her mic again to reply. "Bearton, you know they don't like being called that."

"Yeah, yeah, I know the spiel, Hopps. They're just as important as the rest of us. See you in a few."

The rabbit sighed in exasperation. Normally she got along with everyone, but Bearton was one she couldn't see eye to eye on some issues with. The sound of an approaching mammal got her attention, and she looked up.

Nick had been talking to the store manager throughout the exchange, but had overheard her conversation with the large ursus. Now though, his attention was on her, silently asking her what was going on.

"Bogo called us back to the station. Said he had some information for us. I called in Bearton to spell us here."

The fox cocked his head. "Information for us? Like what?"

"He didn't say. Only that it couldn't wait," Judy said with a shrug.

"Well, the manager confirmed that no one unexpected ran through the loading dock, and that they didn't receive any deliveries that day. The doors back here were buttoned up tight."

Judy tapped a finger to her lips. "So, Callahan runs through the alley, probably not knowing it was a dead end, or maybe hoping to sneak through the store to get away. He's trapped in the alley and taken down by Doug. Woolter and Jesse are called in to pick Callahan up, and take him someplace else."

"That sounds about right. Still two questions left about all this, though," Nick commented, staring down the alleyway.

Judy finished his thought. "Where did they take him, and why were they after him in the first place."

The fox beside her nodded, not saying a word. At the end of the alley, Bearton's police cruiser pulled up and disgorged the large bear. A brief conversation with the brown bear revealed that he'd been camped out on the Canyonlands expressway watching for speeders when Judy had called him up, and, not having much luck, had volunteered to take over.

The duo bade Bearton goodbye and climbed into their own oversized cruiser. Nick called into dispatch to notify of the change in plans, and the two headed back to the city center.

"Think maybe Callahan just wandered into the precinct and said 'hey! You guys looking for me?'" Nick grinned as he stared out the windscreen.
Judy rolled her eyes, mindful of the road as she drove. "I highly doubt that, Nick. But it's obviously important if he didn't want to say anything over the phone and didn't want to call us back over the open radio."

The fox in the passenger seat nodded. "So, what do you think it is?"

The gray rabbit shrugged. "Could have been a tipster that walked in, could be a call to the tips line, could be something that one of the other teams turned up. It could even be someone picked up for some unrelated offence that spouted off a bit too much."

Nick's sly smirk fell on his muzzle, and he turned his gaze to his partner. "Bet you five bucks that it's just a random guy that wants either a piece of a reward or to get out of something else. Honestly, anyone will do anything for money."

Judy glanced at the fox, her own smirk gracing her features. "Not everyone, Slick, but you're on. I'm going to go with an honest tipster who's just trying to help."

"Deal. Prepare to kiss your five bucks goodbye, Carrots."

Judy snorted. "I could say the same for you, Blueberry."

The two chuckled as they continued down the road to their destination.

When they got back to the precinct, Clawhauser pointed them to Conference Room 3, one of the smaller ones, and told them that the chief was already waiting for them. Both officers were surprised to walk into the room to find Fangmeyer, Rivers, and Longtooth all there. And no tipster or other unfamiliar mammal.

After greeting the senior officers, Judy turned to the form of the cape buffalo.

"Sorry that took a while, sir, we were in the Canyonlands, and we needed someone to spot for us."

The chief shook his head and indicated that they should take a seat, an action that one officer obeyed without question. The other, on the other hand, did so with his usual lack of self control for witty comments.

"Oh, come on, chief, I was just going to get you some ice cream! You know, to cool you off!"

That lead to a hoof being put to the cape buffalo's face in frustration, and a long sigh of exasperation. "Hopps, would you mind?"

The tiny officer grinned and nodded. "Certainly sir. No problem!" She promptly elbowed the fox in the gut.

"Thank you, officer Hopps." The rest of the room couldn't help but snicker at the fox, currently regaining his breath and rubbing his stomach. "Now, Officers Hopps and Wilde, I assume you can guess why I brought you down here."

"New evidence, sir?" Judy's eyes were hopeful.

"Potentially. First, I need to know if you've found anything related to Wolford's death." The chief gave them a critical eye.

The rabbit's ears dropped, and she looked down at the floor. "No, sir. We've been trying to figure out what it was Wolford was chasing, and even there, our leads aren't panning out well. A witness might
even be a murder victim, we don't know yet."

Bogo frowned. Well, he frowned more than he usually did. "Have you entered this in a missing mammals report?"

The ZPD's first fox officer shook his head, and in a rare statement that wasn't snarky, told the chief that they'd only found out for certain that morning

"We opened a case when we found out, and spent the rest of the day tracing where he was last seen, but you called us here," Judy finished for her partner. "But sir, there's something we need to talk about. Alone in your office, if possible."

The imposing cape buffalo stared at them for a moment. "Very well. My office, after this briefing."

The rabbit and fox nodded.

"As to why I brought you here, we have potential new evidence for Wolford's cases, and I'd like to review it with you."

"Fangmeyer received a letter the day before Wolford died, but because she's been on leave since that day, she didn't receive it until now." The chief passed out copies of the letter. "It was addressed from Debbie Wolford."

"That explains why we didn't catch it when we checked through your mail for communication from Eric," Longtooth commented as she read. "We were lookin' for things addressed from Eric or one of his known aliases. When I saw that envelope, I thought it was just a thank you letter for attendin' the funeral or somethin'."

Nick's expression turned thoughtful. "Wasn't it postmarked or anything? Usually the stamps they use have the date on them. That should have been a dead giveaway."

The chief nodded. "Normally, you'd be right, Wilde. But this one was dropped off at the precinct, put directly in Fangmeyer's mailbox."

That got the rabbit's attention. "Sir, a letter like this, from an unknown source, shouldn't it be sent to quarantine?"

It was Rivers that answered her. "Right in one, Hopps. SOP calls for the letter to be quarantined and inspected 8 ways from Sunday for all manner of toxins, drugs, and infectious diseases. It'll also be paw printed and sent to questionable documents as well."

The lioness beside him frowned. "One thing I don't get though. Who's Eriadu Wayland?"

Fangmeyer spoke up. "Eric liked to sign his name different ways when he was undercover. First letters of his first and last name were always the same, but the words he used were always different. Easy Whiskey. East West. Egg White."

A snort emanated from a certain red fox. "Eric signing his name as Egg White? EW!"

"Can it Wilde!" Bogo's yell didn't stop the snickers from the other three mammals present.

Silence descended as the two detectives and the two tiny officers read over the communique. One by one they finished up and put their copy down.

"Sir, this sounds a lot like what we're already working through," Judy commented as she scanned the
letter again. "The CI he mentions might be the same one we're trying to find right now. Spencer Callahan."

Fangmeyer looked up. "He's mentioned that name in the past. I never really asked him about it, but I just assumed he was a friend."

Bogo looked at the tigress. "Anything else that he mentioned about him?"

The striped feline shook her head. "Nothing important, sir. Just the name. I got the impression he worked or lived at the docks here in Savannah Central though."

Nick and Judy looked at each other. They both knew where the mountain goat lived, but where he worked was still a question. They both assumed he worked at the docks in one of the warehouses, but they had no proof.

"This Callahan guy, do we have an ID?"

Judy nodded and pulled out her phone, accessing her copy of the DMV file. "Just his DMV license. We've been able to track down where he lives, but that's the only thing we could find on him. He has a criminal record, but it's sealed." She passed her phone around to the group.

Longtooth glanced at her letter again. "Those crates, have you been able to find anything about them?"

The rabbit shook her head. "We were hoping to ask Callahan, but his landlord called us this morning and told us he hasn't seen him since before the incident at the grand palm."

Bogo looked at them with an unreadable expression, before shaking his head and turning back to the other two. "Has the name Callahan come up at all in your investigation?"

Rivers and Longtooth both shook their heads. "Nothing. We suspect there may be a witness to the crime who hasn't come forth, but so far, we don't have any details on who that might be." Rivers' expression could accurately be described as "peeved".

"I've been seein' graffiti in my sleep," Longtooth quipped with a scowl.

A thought occurred to Nick. "Hey, Judy, do we know where Callahan was the night Wolford was killed?"

The doe skimmed through her notes for a moment, before shaking her head. "Nope. We only have a few dates that he did meet with Wolford, and the day he went missing." She looked up at the fox she was sharing a chair with. "You thinking Callahan might be their missing witness?"

The fox shrugged. "It's a stretch, but it's possible. Kalahari Heights isn't that far out of the way if you're taking a back road into the Canyonlands from Savannah Central."

The group fell silent for a moment, each one processing this new possibility.

"We were never able to determine where Wolford came from that night. There aren't any cameras for miles around the heights, and a few of those ones that might have caught them before they went into the dark zone were down for maintenance." The elk detective scratched at his chin.

The lioness beside him frowned. "But if this Callahan is our missin' link, why didn't he come forward?"
Chief Bogo sighed. "There might be something in his past that's preventing it. I'll see about having that record unsealed." Three mammals nodded. "Now you'll note that, in the letter it mentioned some photos. The camera card is down in the cybercrime lab being checked for digital malware, but they were able to provide me with a few printouts of the photos on it." He began handing out copies of the photos. It wasn't a professional printer by any means, but it got the job done. Nick and Judy had to share a set.

After a while, Judy noticed something in one of the photos. "Hey Nick, look. Callahan." Sensing the eyes of the other mammals in the room on her, Judy looked up. "Oh, sorry. Photo 5."

The two examined the photo. Callahan and two other mammals were standing off to one side while a fourth mammal sat in a forklift. On the tongs was a large wooden crate, easily half again as tall as the mountain goat himself. There were few markings visible on the side, but the word "FRAGILE" in large red letters was clearly visible.

Nick squinted at the background for a moment, before shuffling between photos and comparing them. "Hey, Carrots, does this warehouse seem familiar to you?"

The doe leaned closer and examined the photos. "It looks like one of the ones we had a warrant for the security footage for. Different angle though. That's out in the yard. See, there's the front parking lot, over there."

Bogo scrutinized his two tiniest officers. "Do you two happen to remember an address?"

Judy looked at her notes. "421 Wharf Street."

Rivers groaned. "Another dark spot for traffic cameras."

Nick couldn't help but put his two cents in. "Carrot-breath here had me going over hours of that footage only to find that out. And hours MORE security footage to find the mammal Wolford was talking to."

The doe glared at her partner for a moment before she continued the conversation. "We found about four warehouses that captured Wolford and Callahan conversing. None of them had audio, so we couldn't tell what was said." She flipped through her notes. "421 Wharf Street had the most footage of Callahan, but our warrant didn't cover the yard or interior cameras, and the warehouse manager wasn't too keen on telling us if Callahan frequented the place or worked there."

Nick rolled his eyes. "Told us to stop playing big brother and come back with a new warrant if we wanted that information. He seemed a little bit nervous if you ask me."

The chief of police frowned. "I don't recall you filing for any other warrants."

Judy squared her shoulders. "We never had the chance, sir. The Grand Palm attack happened the very next day."

"Well, getting you those warrants is probably the next order of business. Rivers, Longtooth, does any of this information help your case?" The cape buffalo chief was hoping for some forward progress on his fallen officer.

The elk detective shook his head. "Unless you catch Callahan with a can of EZ-Kuhlur paint and he's singing 'I know who killed him' to the tune of 'Mary Was a Little Lamb', no, this doesn't look helpful at this point. Still, we shouldn't rule out the likelihood that his investigation and his death are related."
"Agreed. Hopps, Wilde, you two are to keep these two as well as me in the loop on whatever you find on Callahan. You'll have those warrants on your desk tomorrow or Wednesday. I expect you to serve them promptly. In the meantime, see what else you can dig up on Callahan."

Judy nodded. "Yes, sir."


Judy had been in the chief's office for her own reasons only once before, to request Nick as a partner. It felt a bit weird to have been the one that, at least in a sense, had called this meeting. But no matter what, she knew it had to happen.

The hulking police chief stared down the bridge of his nose at her. "Alright Hopps, what is it you two needed to talk to me about?"

The doe took a deep breath and let it out. "Sir, you remember back when I was being debriefed about the Nighthowler case? How there were three rams in the subway?"

Bogo thought for a moment. "Yes, as I recall, you could only give us first names and descriptions, and you weren't sure about two of them."

Judy looked at Nick, who glanced back at her, giving her a subtle nod. She turned her attention back to her boss. "We believe at least one of them is involved with Callahan's disappearance."

Bogo's eyebrows shot up.

The doe pulled out the flash drive she'd been given by Old Joe. "We came across a couple security recordings today. Callahan was fleeing from a mammal in his apartment, and they chased him out into the street. We followed them with the Sahara Square traffic cameras and it lead us to the Canyonlands Targoat branch. We got a good face shot of the mammal chasing Callahan. Doug was his name. He was the chemist that created the Nighthowler pellets."

Chief Bogo leaned back in his oversized chair, thinking. "We never found the rams because the description couldn't be matched to a specific mammal, and we only had first names."

"Right. Was there anything else to tie Doug to the Nighthowlers?"

The cape buffalo shook his head. "The train car and its contents were pretty much destroyed. We seized the contents of Bellwether's office – both the mayor's office and her old one in the boiler room - but I don't think we found anything with Doug's name on it."

Nick's ears fell. "I think I can see where this is going."

"Shut it Wilde. You have a potential lead or suspect, and no evidence of his whereabouts or how to contact him, except for one." The Chief leaned forward staring at the rabbit and fox in front of him.

Judy's ears drooped as well. "We have to talk to Bellwether."

Bogo nodded. "One other thing, too."

The two small mammals watched him, waiting for what he had to say next.

"We're arming both of you with lethals."
Chapter End Notes

Liz is baaaaaaaaack! And here I am sitting at the North Pole. Well, not quite. I'm in Anchorage, Alaska at the moment, looking out at a week long vacation along the Pacific coast.

A few people sent in ASK THE CAST questions, and Nick and Judy were thrilled! Keep them coming! Want to know what Damian Hornby eats for breakfast? What about Liz Fangmeyer? Ask away!

SO! Someone caught the Spaceballs reference in the author's notes, but no one caught the reference to the friendly neighborhood Spiderman! This chapter there are THREE hidden references, as well as a sort of a hidden reference to an iconic Disney character. See if you can find them!

Coming up on August 24: Demons from the Past!

**I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Want to brag about your vacation plans? Leave a comment!**
Demons from the Past

Chapter Summary

Nick and Judy get new weapons and visit an old acquaintance.

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: My friend and editor, Daee17, and I were debating the characterization in part of this chapter when Pinocchio showed up at the front door to tell me he'd delivered our bid to own Zootopia. Unfortunately, his nose grew so fast when he said it, that he knocked me out. So we still don't own Zootopia.

Police nomenclature used in this chapter:

APB: "All-points bulletin" or "All-points broadcast". This is a general broadcast to all personnel to keep an eye out for something or someone. This could be a suspect, a missing, stolen, or suspect vehicle, a missing person (such as a kidnap victim), a certain activity associated with a crime spree.

Some police departments use the term "BOLO" or "BOL" instead, both of which stand for Be on the lookout"

I also make reference to ESWs (Electro-shock weapons, known by the Taser brand name) again in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nick and Judy just stared at the police chief.

"I know we should have armed you with more than an ESW and a dart gun some time ago, but we didn't have anything in your size. But we just got some new, smaller Wolfer weapons that suit mammals your size."

Nick grinned. "Just like the James Buck movies!"

The doe beside him groaned. "Why do I get the feeling I'm going to be hearing the words, 'Wilde… NICK Wilde' for the rest of our careers?"

"At least it'll be you, Hopps and not me. However, I would suggest that, unless you want to be stuck on parking duty for a month every time I hear it, you teach him that saying that around me is a bad idea."

Nick couldn't help but snicker at that.
"If you think I'm joking, Wilde, just try it. Now you two have work to do. See the rangemaster for your weapons after you go to the prison. They won't let you carry in there anyway."

The two mammals in front of him climbed down from the oversized chair and left without a word, though that may have been due to the death glare that the rabbit sent the fox's way. The chief sighed as they shut the door behind themselves. He had no idea how Hopps could put up with all the snide remarks and off-color comments day after day. Just being in the same room with the fox for an hour was aggravating enough.

He couldn't discount their effectiveness as a team, though. Everything that had been thrown their way, they found a way to deal with it, usually in a manner and speed that left his more seasoned officers jealous.

He wondered just how long that would last.

The atmosphere in the cruiser wasn't one of jubilation, snide comments, jokes, or off-color remarks, though. Instead, both mammals were quiet, lost in their thoughts. They didn't have to say it, but the last time they had spoken to Bellwether directly, was back at the museum. When the sheep had tried to get Nick to kill Judy.

Judy in particular had been thinking about how any one small mistake on their part could have wound up with one or both of them dead. And the sheep would have done nothing to prevent it.

*What would have happened if we failed? If Nick and I both died?* She thought about the recent protests. The ones that called for predators to be segregated, collared, evicted, or even, according to Clawhauser, eradicated.

*Is that what it would have come to? Did we just slow things down?*

For his part, Nick wasn't thinking about the larger picture. The only thought on his mind right now was blueberries. But not in the way his mind normally thought of blueberries. Instead, he'd been picturing what might have happened if he hadn't grabbed those extra ones from Judy's family truck. Or if he'd ate them beforehand. Or if he'd lost them in the train crash. Or if they'd not had the idea to switch the Nighthowler pellet.

*I'd have killed her. I'd have gone savage and killed her, eaten her.* The thought made him sick, and he had to fight to keep his stomach from rebelling. He glanced over at the doe driving the oversized car. As though sensing the tod's eyes on her, she glanced in his direction, before turning her attention back to the road. Just that one glance told him that she was struggling with her thoughts as well.

After a while, Nick tentatively reached over and squeezed her shoulder.

"Hey, Carrots...you OK?"

The rabbit blinked and looked at the fox next to her, before returning her eyes to the road. After a long moment, she spoke. "Did we really do anything?"

Nick frowned, not quite sure what she meant.

"I mean, all that's going on right now, did we just slow it down? I mean, if we hadn't stopped Bellwether, would the Grand Palm attack have happened anyway? Would Wolford still be dead?"

"Carrots, what are you saying?"
"It's almost as though arresting Bellwether didn't do anything. If anything, things are worse now." She sighed "I was hoping things would go back to the way they were when we locked her up."

The fox in the passenger seat nodded. "That's what most probably wanted."

"I just can't understand how someone could want it worse than what Bellwether had going. I mean, how did we go from one sheep and a group of rams wanting to seize power to protests calling for predators to be…” She couldn't even say the word.

"I don't know, Fluff. Maybe Bellwether kicked a hornet's nest."

The bunny harrumphed. "Too bad none of those hornets stung her."

Nick grinned. "I can think of a gray one and a russet one that stung her pretty badly."

That did the trick. The gray doe cracked up, a fit of giggles overtaking her. A smile spread across Nick's muzzle. He hated seeing Judy down in the dumps, so if a lame joke from him brightened her mood, he'd gladly provide.

After a while, Judy calmed down a bit. She must have seen something in his face though in one of her glances his way, because it wasn't long before she turned the tables on him.

"What about you, Nick? What's troubling you?"

It was the fox's turn to sigh. "I just keep thinking back to all the things that could have gone wrong when we brought Bellwether down. Like if I hadn't grabbed those extra berries, or if we'd lost them, or if Bellwether had gotten wise."

Nick turned to look away from Judy, at the buildings and streets passing by his window. "Something tells me one of us wouldn't be around to pull the rug out from under that sheep if that had happened."

Judy pondered that a moment. "Nick, do you remember what you told me back on our date? How you don't ever wonder how your life would be different if you had joined the Junior Ranger Scouts?" She waited until her fox gave a small nod. "I seem to recall you saying there's no use dwelling on it. Why would you say that?"

Before Nick could answer though, Judy continued. "Because it really is useless. We could consider the what-ifs of the past all day, and it won't get us anywhere."

The fox couldn't help but grin. "Way to use my own words on me, Carrots."

His partner smiled. "At least I didn't use them AGAINST you this time."

The fox's grin grew. "Sly bunny."

The response from Judy was immediate. "Emotional fox!"

It took some time to get processed through security at Zootopian Maximum Security Penitentiary. The prison itself was actually, in a way, four separate prisons stacked one on top of the other. The lowest level was for large mammals, then medium, then small, and finally, extra small animals occupied the top.

Supposedly, it was designed that way to ensure that mammals of similar sized were the ones grouped together, reducing the risk of injury or death, but many suspected that it was also designed that way so small mammal convicts that had large mammal accomplices or employees could not simply have
said large mammal help them with a jailbreak.

In order to get through to the small mammal section however, you had to be processed through the large and medium mammal sections first. Once they were through, they were lead to a private interview room, with a single interview station, the sides separated by a large bulletproof glass partition. A speaker inset into the partition allowed the conversation between the inmate and the guest to be heard through the glass unimpeded.

It was a few minutes before the door in the other half of the room opened and a small ewe was led in, her hooves cuffed in a four way chain. An ugly sneer came over her muzzle when she saw who her visitors were. Idly, Nick wondered if Bellwether got many visitors at all, outside of her family and close friends.

The guard escorting the sheep sat her down in the chair at the table, and locked her chain to a loop of metal underneath. Once the task was completed, both the ewe's escort guard and Nick and Judy's retreated to a safe distance to watch over their charges, but not interfere.

It was Bellwether that spoke first.

"Well, well. Look who it is. Judy Hopps herself, and it looks like she brought her pet, too." She leaned back in her chair. "I should probably be flattered that you'd bother to come visit me. Do you do this for all of the innocents you put away, or just me?"

Judy was about to retort when a light brush on her paw drew her attention to Nick. His face remained neutral, but his eyes told her everything. Never let them see that they get to you. The doe took a deep breath.

"Bellwether, when we arrested you, you had six other rams as part of your conspiracy. We caught Officers Rammington and Woolslly, and that security guard, but there were three others that disappeared. Doug, Woolter and Jesse. Where would we find them?"

Bellwether's smirk only grew. "Wow, Judy. No small talk? Not even asking how I'm doing? I'm fine by the way. You'd be surprised how much respect a mammal like me gets in prison. Even got my own little band of body guards, when I'm allowed out of my cell that is. The food in here could use some improvement, though. Hospital food is probably better."

The rabbit doe glared through the partition at the former mayor. "We're not here to chat, Bellwether."

"Oh, but I think chatting is just what I need. There's so many rumours going around right now! Like how things are spiralling out of control in the city? I even heard that there was a big attack on the Grand Palm! Tell me about that! More predators going savage, I hear!"

Before Judy could get a word in edgewise, the ewe continued. "Seems I was right after all, huh? Even though the population know about the Night Howlers and what I did, it seems that they can't let go of the idea that it's only a matter of time before the fox next to them turns into a slobbering, savage monster. I told you Judy, fear always works."

Judy's expression immediately hardened, and she had to struggle to reign in her emotions. "We're not here to listen to you monologue, Bellwether. Now I asked a question. Where would we find Woolter, Jesse, and Doug?"

The ewe's expression turned to one of mock shock. "My, my! You haven't found them yet? Surely the famous Judy Hopps, who solved 15 missing mammal cases on her own could find three missing rams! Oh, whatever could have happened to them?"
The gray doe bristled at the fact that the sheep had quite conveniently left out Nick's contribution. Judy took a deep breath and let it out. "How did you meet them?"

"I met them at the county fair!"

The rabbit doe suppressed a growl. She didn't want to be here in the first place, and this stupid sheep was making her day even worse. A thought occurred to her, just as she was about to verbally lash out. She stood up and gathered her notebook and pen. "Come on, Nick. She obviously doesn't want to hear what we have to offer her."

That got the sheep's attention, but she couldn't help but scoff. "I'm serving 16 life sentences. What could you possibly offer me?"

Judy shrugged, glancing at the fox beside her, who had a knowing smirk on his muzzle. "Not much. Doesn't general population sound better than isolation? All the extra privileges? But you obviously don't want it, so we'll be on our way." The two police officers turned to leave.

"Wait!"

Judy couldn't help the sly grin that appeared on her muzzle. Steeling her features, she turned around, Nick mirroring her actions. "Yes?"

The sheep stared at her hooves. "I.. I don't know much. More about Doug than the other two. Just that he belonged to a gun club, and he had a background in chemistry. The other two were hired goons. I don't know how he knew them."

Judy was scribbling in her notebook. "And how did you meet Doug?"

The sheep went silent for a long moment before she answered. Her eyes darted around the room, seeming to be looking for something. "I met him at a community hall meeting in the Meadowlands during Lionheart's campaign tour. I remember he offered me a glass of Champagne and wished us luck."

Nick narrowed his eyes. "Are you sure about that?"

The ewe turned a hateful glare on the red canid, and spoke to him with an equal amount of venom. "Of course I'm sure! If you had any friends at all, you'd know, filth!"

"That just sounds really suspect, if you ask me."

The ewe's glare intensified. "Well, that's the only answer you're going to get out of me. Keep on asking and I might just ask for my lawyer."

Judy's eyes flashed in anger, and she just barely clamped it down, remaining professional, despite the desire to somehow break through the glass and throttle the sheep. A deep breath in and out later, Judy continued her questioning, as though she didn't have any red flags in her head. "Alright, how did you keep in contact with him?"

"By phone of course. Your colleagues seized my offices when you locked me up, right? Surely such accomplished detectives like yourselves would have found something?" She was back to her smug self, Judy decided. Inwardly, she knew they probably wouldn't get anything more out of her. Outwardly, the doe officer nodded and made some more notes on her pad. "Anything else?"

The sheep thought for a moment and shook her head. She watched as Judy pocketed her notebook and that cursed carrot-shaped pen. "Thank you, Bellwether." She gestured to the guard on
Bellwether's side.

The sheep looked around, noticing her guard was already moving towards her to unlock her from the table and take her back to her cell. She looked back at the gray rabbit doe. "So, when will I get moved out of isolation?"

It was the fox who answered, and normally, she might not have listened, but the smirk on the bunny's face told her that the pelt had something to say. "Dunno, Bellwether, whenever the courts and the prison system decide you get moved."

A look of confusion settled on the ewe's face. Judy's smirk grew wider. "You really should learn what sort of power police have. We can't actually get you moved to general population."

The ewe was beginning to grow distraught. "But you said…"

"We commented that general population sounds better than isolation, and I think that's the truth, don't you, Carrots?" The red fox looked at his bunny companion. The similarities between the smirks both of them wore was uncanny.

The bunny nodded. "It does sound better. Almost anything would be better than isolation."

Dawn Bellwether was beside herself. "But…but…"

The two police officers looked at the gobsmacked sheep and spoke at the same time. "It's called a hustle, sweetheart."

The small sheep continued to splutter indignantly as she was lead from the room. Judy and her fox continued to stand there for a few seconds, pondering. "I don't know, Nick, do you think we were over the line?"

They turned to leave the room, their guard accompanying them. "I don't think so," the red canid said after a few seconds. "We didn't actually lie, and when all this is said and done, maybe we can put in a suggestion to move her there."

The doe nodded, partially satisfied. *That sheep did try to get Nick to kill me, turn the fox I love into some unrecognizable monster.* "One thing bothered me though. Did you see how she hesitated when I asked her how she met Doug?"

Nick made a sound of affirmation as they passed through the first of the three security checkpoints. "She said she met him during a community event in the Meadowlands."

The barred door of the checkpoint slammed shut behind them. Two more to go. "Lionheart's campaign wasn't that long ago, and I could tell you how I met almost every friend I ever had, without hesitation. Why would that question be so difficult to answer, unless…"

Nick gave her a look that told her he knew what she was thinking. "…unless she was scrambling to come up with a suitable lie."

The doe hummed. "That would actually fit. She hesitated, and her eyes were all over the place. And from what little we know of Doug, he's either a mercenary, or he's anti pred. So why would he be attending a predator's election campaign?"

The fox thought for a moment. "That election, it was all predator candidates. If Doug is an anti-predator, then he wouldn't be attending any election events, except as a protestor, and they keep those outside."
Judy nodded, as they approached the second checkpoint. "If Bellwether was part of the campaign party at that point, it would have been her or Lionheart offering the Champagne, not the other way around." The two paused their conversation long enough to get through the checkpoint. One more to go.

The walk down the now much larger corridor continued. "Bellwether may have been telling the truth about two things though," Nick commented as he scratched his chin.

The doe thought for a moment then spoke. "Her keeping in contact with him by phone and meeting him in the Meadowlands?"

Nick grinned. Contrary to popular entertainment, you could easily have both brains and muscle, and Judy was a perfect example of that. "Right in one."

The doe brought a finger to her lips, thinking. "We know Doug got his last target over the phone. We might need to get those case details, so we can see whether Bellwether made that call. And meeting him in the Meadowlands…"

"...Would make sense if Doug lived or worked there. That actually fits with the security recording we saw of his two cronies. They were heading along the edge of the Meadowlands when we lost them."

Clearing the last of the security checkpoints was an easy task as the conversation paused yet again, both mammals chewing on their thoughts. Judy was the first to voice hers.

"We'd need more details on that delivery van. A plate or something else that identifies it. If we had that, we could put an APB out on it. If we put a general call out for white sheep-sized delivery vans, that might tip them off that we're looking for them, even if we gave out Doug, Woolter and Jesse's descriptions with it."

Nick thought for a moment. "I wonder if Finn would be helpful. He might demand payment or a favour, but he knows how to not be noticed. Even if they did see him, he wouldn't be as obvious as a police cruiser and uniformed mammals."

Judy shook her head. "He's just one mammal, Nick. He can't be everywhere at once." The two reached the police cruiser and climbed in. "Still, I have to admit, one possibility is better than none at all. And we can have Bogo put out a memo to the unmarkeds in the area. But what about Tundratown? That's where we saw them coming from."

The fox scratched his head and thought. "I really don't have anyone we can ask over there. Not legally anyways. Mr. Big would want a favour."

"The vehement shake of her head was emphasized by the bunny's answer. "No. We're on the right side of the law now, Nick. We might be in Big's good graces thanks to saving his daughter, but we can't go down that path. You know I've not seen even Fru-Fru since we interrogated Duke Weaselton."

Nick held up his paws in a placating gesture as the doe started the engine and pulled out of the stall. "I know, Fluff. It was an idle thought. And trust me when I say I have no desire to go down that road again."

His partner sighed. "I know, Nick. I'm just so frustrated with this whole thing. I feel like we have a chain on our foot and it's attached to a pole. No matter what direction we run, eventually the chain yanks us back."
"Just gotta find the weak link in the chain, Carrots."

Judy hummed her agreement as the two headed back for the city.

Shawn Dancing Rivers sat at his desk, a pen tapping on the hard wood surface. Tap tap tap. When that didn't help him, he got up and paced. Still not helping. He sat back down. Tap tap tap.

"Alright, what's on your mind, Rivers?" The other occupant of the room was growing annoyed at his antics.

The elk glanced up at the lioness.

"Just something that's bugging me."

Nolwazi Longtooth cocked her head. "What?"

"I'm not sure. Just feel like we're missing something that is glaringly obvious."

The lioness detective moved to their sketch board, where they'd pasted markers for all the evidence they had for their two cases, and stared at it. "Well, for the Grand Palm attack, we know that someone inside had to help out. That's the only reason the locked doors would have been conveniently jimmed without anyone noticing, and the security recordings went missing. The maintenance mammal is dead, one security guard is comatose in the ICU, and the other one – the kangaroo, William Brown – is missing. The security footage and eyewitness statement confirm that four water buffalo were seen entering and then leaving the building shortly before the attack. The security footage cuts off about ten minutes after the attack, too. Just stops dead. Only officers on the scene at the time were Hopps and Wilde."

The elk hummed. "Brown's still my favourite for being the inside mammal. Wilde was on his way to chat with him when the devices went off. Hopps mentioned that the other guard left him in the security room to go hunt the water buffalo, and that's when the buffalo disappeared."

"If the kangaroo is our inside guy, he could have been deliberately misleading his partner. Either to buy the water buffalo time to escape or to lead him to an ambush," Longtooth said as she stared at the evidence board. "He would also have the access necessary to shut down the security cameras, and would know how to do just that."

"At least we have a suspect and all his information for that part. We still don't know who the water buffalos were, or where they got the chemicals or equipment." The elk stared at the security camera shot of the four mammals in the loading dock. "Did we even get any of the equipment that they left behind?"

"Just some tools and little bits and pieces. Nothin' that could point us in any reasonable direction."

Nolwazi pinched the bridge of her nose.

A few moments of silence followed, broken when Rivers' cell phone chimed. He picked it up and looked at the incoming message, reading it before speaking. "Lab mammals just got done with the residue they found inside the vent shafts. Asked us to come for a visit."

That got Longtooth's attention. "Did they say anything else?"

The elk shrugged "Just that text message. Hopefully we'll get some answers."

The journey down one floor to the crime lab was a quick one, and they quickly found themselves in
"Shawn! It's been a while, hasn't it? How's Tundratown been for you?"

"Brass felt fit to punt me across the climate wall for a while. I'm assigned to Sahara Square for a while. Longtooth, this is Kagiso Omiata, forensic toxicologist. Kagioso, this is my temporary partner, Detective Nolwazi Longtooth."

The lioness detective extended a paw to the hyrax, who took a single finger and shook it, the male's tiny paw dwarfed by even that.

Pleasantries exchanged, the two detectives took a seat on the other side of the smaller herbivore's comparatively massive desk. Omiata turned to the large monitor mounted on the wall, turning it on with the remote.

"I had the chance to FINALLY get to that sample of liquid that we found in the vents at the Grand Palm hotel. You know I really wish that machines worked like they do on TV! They just stick the sample in, and a few seconds later, DING! It pops up with the result! And it's 100% right all the time! Anyway, I finally got to it after all this time. We took several samples from several different locations."

He brought a bar graph up on the screen. There were moderate concentrations of many different substances, but none of them really stuck out in particular as higher concentrated, except a few that he recognized as basic compounds. One column was completely empty though.

"We took into account what Officer Wilde said about smelling Night Howlers beforehand, and the fact that the victims responded positively to the antidote. This is a sample of a Night Howler flower, or rather, the chemicals you would find in it if it were directly liquefied."

Another graph appeared, this one looked almost identical except that some chemical elements were amplified while others were muted, and again, the same column as before was completely empty. "This is a look at the contents of the serum pellet that Hopps and Wilde recovered from Bellwether and her group. See, as you can tell, all of the chemicals are still there, but the extraction and purification process their chemist used altered a number of the values. Most went up thanks to the higher concentration of the serum, but some went down, likely boiled away or evaporated."

A third graph appeared, radically different from the other two.

"This is the substance we recovered all over the ventilation ducts. As you can see, these three peaks, here, here, and here, are all present in the original flower and the serum, but this peak, here, isn't present in either."

Longtooth and Rivers looked at each other. "So, is this some sort of new strain of Night Howlers?"

Omiata shook his head. "Not in the slightest. See, even after the Night Howler was extracted and concentrated, it still retained a lot of its original chemical compounds."

"This peak here, is similar to a sedative used to suppress brain activity in hospitals. It's used to treat patients with serious head trauma, though this is obviously targeted to suppress the parts of the brain responsible for higher function and cognitive thinking." He moved to another one. "This peak is almost identical to a few street hallucinogens designed to amplify fear and aggression. It also gives the Night Howler it's unique scent."

Nolwazi Longtooth shook her head. "Why would someone want to spend their drug trip bein' scared the biological and chemical evidence lab office. The hyrax lab scientist was hunched over his computer when the two much larger mammals walked in.
of every damn thing they come across anyway?"

Her partner shrugged. "Probably the same reason they think acting like a complete idiot is somehow cool."

The hyrax didn't have any insight either. "Beats me, too. Those things consume you. One of my brother's friends was a drug addict. Back when red sand was first hitting the streets. Got hooked on that, and a few years later, died of overdose. Tore his family apart too."

The three fell silent for a while, before Kagiso spoke up again. "Anywho! These last two peaks. This one here resembles a compound used, also in the medical industry, to assist some drugs and medications in crossing the blood-brain barrier. It's not identical, but it's close enough.

He moved over to the last peak. "THIS peak, it hasn't shown up anywhere else. We analyzed it, and it seems to be designed to help the other compounds in latching on to proteins that are abundant in carnivores and omnivores, but absent in herbivores. Some of the other compounds in the original flower did the same thing but were targeted to proteins more universal to all mammals."

Omiata turned back to the two detectives. "There was also a high concentration of water, likely used as a carrier. The thing is, a formula this specific, and this refined, it can't grow in the wild. Even in a lab, you'll get traces of all the other compounds extracted from the original flower, along with chemicals used in the extraction and purification process."

Longtooth's eyes narrowed. "So, someone is engineerin' this stuff?"

The hyrax nodded. "And that someone has the know how to do some pretty high-level work in chemistry."

The three went silent for a moment.

"So, we have a high-level designer drug that is specifically targeted at predators, created by someone who has access to some money and a chemist to make it. They gas the Grand Palm...for what? A test? A statement? Why are they doing this?" Shawn Dancing Rivers was rubbing his head.

The lioness beside him snorted. "I can think of two possibilities: One, it's a group of predators and they want to make a statement by creatin' the perfect weapon to attack prey with – use other unwittin' predators to attack prey. The other is that it's a Bellwether copycat that's tryin' to turn prey against predator. Neither one is particularly appealin'."

The trio of mammals was silent for a moment, processing the implications of what Longtooth had posited. "Well, we can't really answer why, but we may be able to answer who, or at least part of it." Rivers was scratching his chin in thought. "Furston got the city contract for the Night Howler antidote, so they're the ones that have the research into the plant's properties. Maybe we should start there."

"That would certainly be a logical place to start," Kagiso Omiata interjected as the two larger mammals stood to leave.

"Thanks for the help, Kagiso. I owe you one," the elk commented, extending a hoof, which the much smaller herbivore shook.

"Any time, Rivers."

Judy turned the weapon over a few times in her paws. Even though she'd completed the advanced
weapons and tactics courses, and excelled at them, not to mention her high scores in basic and advanced marksmanship, and even though she knew it would be required at some point, she didn't relish the idea of carrying a lethal.

The Wolfer P20 Special felt light and fit well in her paw, and the holster didn't take up too much space on her utility belt, so the added bulkiness wasn't too much of a concern for her. Glancing over at Nick, she saw him securing his own side arm, a slightly larger version of her own, the Wolfer P22.

One thing they'd been taught that didn't apply to most of the mammals in the service, was that, despite being called lethals, they were actually ineffective against larger species such as rhinos and elephants. Their small size made their penetrative power too weak, and they were advised to stick with their ESWs and tranquilizer guns for such large mammals. She did feel a little better though, knowing that if they did run into a medium or smaller mammal that was similarly armed, they wouldn't have to run for their lives.

"You OK, Slick?"

Nick turned to her. Though he was wearing his signature sly grin, the rabbit could tell he was troubled. "Why wouldn't I be?"

The gray doe shrugged. "You just look troubled, that's all."

The fox's smirk faded, and he let out a deep sigh. "I can't get anything past you anymore can I?" He holstered the weapon, then sat down on a nearby bench, staring at the ground.

Judy hopped up next to him, and put a comforting paw on his back, rubbing lightly. At the same time, she reached down and gripped his forearm, staring into his eyes.

"You know what happened with that gang I ran with for a while. How they were killed by a bunch of mammals that didn't care who else they hit."

Judy leaned into the fox's side, trying to provide what comfort she could.

"The mammals that killed them, and that little kit, they used lethals." He paused a long moment. "I'm just worried that some day, some innocent mammal is going to get caught in the crossfire, and I'll accidentally hit them."

At this the rabbit wrapped her arms around the fox's neck in a hug.

"Nick, you are different from those mammals. You want to know why?"

Judy felt the arms of her fox wrap around her smaller frame, pulling her closer.

"You said it yourself. They didn't care who else they hit, who got caught in the crossfire. But you do care. You are better than them, in every way."

Nick couldn't help but smile at that. And he knew, if Judy believed in him, he could do it. For her. After a while, the two broke apart, Judy scanning the area a bit self-consciously, somewhat relieved to see that no one was around.

"Come on, Slick. Let's go talk to Finnick, see if we can find some mammals to keep an eye out."

The two headed out of the building, having already signed the appropriate forms and papers. Their cruiser stood outside waiting, and as they climbed in, Judy had a thought. She started the car and pulled out of the gun range and into the street, tapping her thumb on the steering wheel. It wasn't
until the third red light that she turned to her fox and spoke.

"Hey Slick, what do you think of the idea of going out for a date this weekend?"

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhanger!

So, I'm back from my trip with a new chapter for your enjoyment! How was everyone else's two weeks?

We had a few ask the cast questions, but Zero to Hero44 on Archive of our own deserves special mention for his insightful questions. They literally had me pondering the answers over a cheesecake and a coca cola in the atrium of my cruise ship! Keep them coming!

So August 26 is a very special day. It's the day the proverbial pen first touched the proverbial paper for A Ray of Hope. One year ago, on August 26, I finally began writing the story you guys are now reading. What should I do to celebrate?

REFERENCES! I'm not sure ANYONE caught the reference in the last chapter. Eriadu Wayland. Eriadu and Wayland are two planets in the Star Wars universe. Eriadu was the birthplace of Grand Moff Tarkin, and Wayland was another Imperial world. No references in this chapter though, so stay tuned!

Coming up on September 7: Meetings in High Places!

Also, a note about comments. I recently got one questioning my decision to moderate comments. This was a decision I made on AO3 after a comment insulting first responders showed up, followed by another insulting me personally. I choose to moderate the comments because it is my right to do so. And for the record, I have only ever deleted two comments in all three of the sites this story is posted.

Still, I reply to all other comments, except guest comments on FFN! Got constructive criticism, or want to complain about the construction next door? Don't like the fact that Damian Hornby eats plain oatmeal for breakfast? Leave a comment!
Meetings in High Places

Chapter Summary

Meeting mammals for meetings.

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: I had my bid to buy Zootopia all written, signed, and on it's way, but King Louis decided he would use it as kindling to make his "Man Fire". So I still don't own Zootopia.

My close friend and editor, Dace17...I couldn't do this without her. Thanks is not enough!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"So, here you can see, when we won the city contract for the Night Howler antidote, profit margins went up substantially. Hospitals have continued to ensure that a supply of the antidote is kept up and have been replenishing that regularly as the antidote batches expire."

James McStripeson watched with interest as Furston's Chief Marketing Officer, a musk ox, switched the year-end sales and net profit graph on the conference room screen with a new graph.

"Hospitals have also been reporting success with the antidote on the latest attack on the Grand Palm hotel. In the last two weeks, orders have come in for large quantities of antidote, both to replenish lost stock and to increase their available stockpiles in case of another attack. Profits are expected to rise another 50% by the end of this quarter on the antidote alone."

A third panel was brought up. "City Hall has expressed interest in funding continued research into the toxin and antidote, as well as equipping all first responders. I'm told, however, that the current antidote requires a wait time if the subject has been dosed with standard police tranquilizers." The head of marketing turned to the Chief Research Officer.

The Water Chevrotain head of the research division shuffled some papers in front of him. "Ahem. Yes, our research teams have told me that hitting most mammals with a police-issue tranquilizer dart and a dose of antidote in quick succession – or even within a few minutes of each other – can cause arrhythmia and may even lead to cardiac arrest. Propofol is safe though, and hospitals have been using that to keep mammals undergoing the antidote treatment sedated."

The chief marketing officer considered this. "Is there any way we could make it work? I think it would be a pretty good selling point if we could send the affected mammals back to their families without the long hospital stay."

The chevrotain shook his head. "Sadly no. The chemical cocktail in standard issue tranquilizers acts
much like a fast-acting sleep pill. It also slows the heart. It's bad enough on a mammal under the
influence of night howler toxin, but since our antidote also does the same thing, it could lead to a
fatal condition, like I said earlier."

The musk ox marketing officer sighed. "That's disappointing. Nevertheless, I'd like to ask that efforts
be made to see if this can be done, before I say yay or nay to the city."

The chief research officer nodded, and the marketing musk ox was about to continue, when another
voice spoke up.

"This jump in antidote supplies has put our production facilities in a bit of a squeeze, though. We
may need to scale back production of other products so that we can keep up with demand," the Chief
Production Officer stated. The Naked Mole Rat may have been the smallest mammal at the table, but
he was a shrewd businessman that kept a watchful eye on all of the company's production facilities
and throughput.

"If we do have to utilize other facilities, and dial back production, we can raise the prices of those
items that we are forced to short, to compensate for the losses in profits there."

The meeting droned on for another hour before it finally broke up. Though most of the points weren't
of the COO's immediate concern, the need for more antidote, and increased funding to both research
and production did pique his interest. Embezzlement was certainly illegal in Zootopia, which is why
he'd been carefully placing mammals and cultivating them to take the fall. There was no guilt in what
he was doing. It was for the greater good of mammalkind, after all.

"Sir, you had a couple of calls while you were in the meeting. I know you didn't want to be
disturbed, so I left notes on your desk."

Including his filthy personal assistant.

"Thank you, Marian. I'll call them back right away." He had to bite back the bile threatening to rise
at the forced act of appearing polite to the filth.

"You're welcome, sir."

How could such a pleasant voice belong to such a filthy pelt? The zebra moved into his office, and
shut and locked the door, not sparing a glance at his fox assistant. Walking over to his desk, he
picked up the note the fox had left on it. Two numbers, with the time they called and whatever other
details she felt were relevant. Both of them had notes to call back at the earliest convenience.

The striped mammal picked up the phone and dialed the first number.

On the third ring, Dade Walker picked up. "Yes?"

"You called for purity."

"Purity we shall have. I have unfortunate news. Our research teams have been working toward a
resolution to our two problems with the formula, but they are requesting more funding."

The striped mammal hummed. "How fortuitous. The company's marketing division is quite happy
with the results this quarter. More profits. And the finance department can probably be persuaded to
allocate more funds to our community donations."

"I assume those community donations will include the charitable organizations necessary for our
mission?"
"Of course. Once the funds are received, see that they are distributed in a proper fashion to our research and manufacturing teams. I am quite happy with the results of the first public test, known issues aside. However, I am curious. You mentioned two problems. I am aware of the first. What is the second?"

The deer on the other end of the line hesitated. "Our research team would like to figure out a way to engineer the product so that current remedies no longer work with it."

The zebra liked the sound of that.

"I assume they need funds for mammalpower, equipment, and test subjects?" He turned to look out his office window at the gleaming metropolis before him.

"Test subjects aren't necessary. Our target demographic for them is more than willing to work for free."

The zebra had deliberately kept himself out of the details about the test subjects. Better to not know.

"I see. Well, inform our people that they shall get the funding they need in short order. For purity."

"Purity we shall have."

The zebra hung up and sat back in his chair. The rat he'd had placed down in accounting would see to it that sufficient money would be donated to the proper organization.

The second phone call for him was from his wife's attorney. The mare had ended 35 years of marriage just like that, for no other reason than she felt like he was spending too much time at work, and not enough time with her. Shrugging, he picked up the phone to call his own attorney. He'd deal with his ex-wife the legal way.

He couldn't say he was too broken up about the divorce. After all, some sacrifices had to be made if his vision of the city was to become a reality. Not to mention, he'd recently found out she supported predators in their desire for the equality they didn't deserve.

She'd been fairly demanding in the divorce, having felt she wasn't at fault. Their one colt was well into his adult years, though, so at least she couldn't take him away.

"So, how DID you meet Finnick?" Judy glanced at her partner as she navigated the streets of Savannah Central looking for the small canid. They'd tried calling his cell phone, but he wasn't answering, so they'd decided to take a tour of the spots Nick knew he'd be most likely to frequent.

"Well, you remember I said he's been a friend since first grade? Caught the little guy trying to copy my math test results. So, I started writing down the wrong answers and then correcting them later. He wasn't too happy at his flunking score."

The doe in the driver's seat snorted. "That doesn't sound like the base for a very good friendship!"

The fox chuckled. "Oh, trust me. The little guy was about as pissed at me as you could possibly be at that age. We did fix that up though, and we kind of formed our own little club. Stayed that way until you met us. Finnick and I against the world. Eventually that grew into hustling for money, and from there... well you know where you found us."

The doe hummed as she scanned the streets.
"Finnick didn't have a really good home life either."

"His dad was...harsh. Not abusive, just harsh. And his mom, she wasn't really the nurturing type. So, he kind of stayed off on his own. Played video games, read books, whatever he could to keep out of his parent's way. He spent a lot of time over at our place in those early years before we could go out on our own."

"I had a friend like that too. Her name was Sharla. She was a black sheep, the only one in her entire family line. Her parents were great, but she didn't feel like she belonged with other sheep. We were fast friends and stayed that way until she moved away. She's across the country now, last I heard she was training for the air force and to become an astronaut. That's been her dream for a while."

Nick thought a moment. "You know, Finnick never really told me if he had any dreams or hopes. We never really talked about it, especially after the Ranger Scouts. It was kind of a sore spot for me."

His gray companion nodded. "I understand, Nick." She was about to say more when she spotted a familiar van. "Hey, Nick, isn't that Finnick's van?" She pointed out the windshield, at a van that had just turned into the road farther ahead.

Nick turned his attention to where she had indicated, and a grin came over his muzzle. "Sure is, Carrots. What do you say we give him a scare and light him up?"

Judy sighed. "You know we can't misuse police resources, Nick."

A sly grin came over Nick's face. "Well, that would be true, except if we don't, we could end up following him all day. Besides," he said as the light ahead of the van turned from green to yellow, and the van slowed to a stop. "One of his brake lights is out."

The doe glanced over at her fox companion, a grin crossing her muzzle to match his own. "OK, Slick, as soon as he's through the intersection, light him up."

The light turned green and traffic proceeded forward. Nick reached over and, just as the old brown van crossed the pedestrian walk on the other side, he activated the light bar and gave a "whoop-whoop-whoop" on the siren. The vehicle pulled over into the streetside parking area, with Judy following suit, lights still flashing.

The doe was about to hop out her side of the car when Nick put his paw on her shoulder. She looked over to see him with his signature smirk on his muzzle.

"Let me take point on this, Carrots. Just back me up." He got out of his side of the car and moved around the front, while Judy hopped out her side. They could hear the cursing and incoherent grumbling coming from the driver's side, in a voice none could mistake for being anyone other than the small fennec fox.

The window rolled down, and the surly voice burst forth. "OK, why'd chu pull me...Wilde? Seriously? What, it's not 'nuf that bunny cop gotchu workin' with the fuzz, ya gotta pull over old friends too? Not makin' enough on the ticket quotas?"

Judy decided to speak up. "Umm, hi! Down here!" Finnick's head popped over the side of the sill to
stare down at the bunny.

"And here I thought maybe you'd grown tired of ol' Nicky, bunny cop."

The red fox in question recoiled holding a paw over his heart and feigning insult. "How could you think that? How could anyone ever grow tired of little ol' me?"

His gray doe companion cocked her hips and tapped one finger to her lips. "I don't know, Slick. Maybe we should ask the chief, or Delgato, since you're still in the toilet with him."

The fennec let out another laugh. "Just two, bunny cop? I'm surprised. Nick has a talent for drivin' mammals insane."

The gray doe rolled her eyes. "Don't I know it."

Nick couldn't help but glare at the two. "Har-har. You two should take that comedy show on the road."

The doe hummed. "Thanks, but no. ANYWAY, Nick, I believe YOU wanted point on this?"

The tan canid looked at the red. "What's she talkin' 'bout?"

Nick sighed. "We need your help, Finn. We're trying to find a mammal out in the Meadowlands area. We have a description and a first name, along with a little bit of video footage but that's it. We can't put extra marked units out there, or he'll go to ground. Our unmarked units haven't had any success since he showed up in the original Nighthowler case, so we figured maybe we could ask you to keep an eye out and an ear to the ground."

The tiny fox with big ears let out a sound that was somewhere between a groan and a growl. "You know how business works Wilde. You want somethin' like that, you gotta pay somethin'. So, what you offerin'?"

Judy hesitated. "We can't offer much, but if a tip turns out good, we do have a bounty pool that we can pay out from, and we'd owe you a favour."

The fennec eyed the bunny. "Dangerous words, bunny cop. Owing a favour isn't something you take lightly."

She nodded. "If it were anyone else, I wouldn't even consider it, but Nick trusts you."

The fennec sat back in thought as the traffic continued to flow by. "So, you want me to become a confidential informant. In return, I get a payout and a favour."

"That about sums it up, yes." Nick replied, still leaning on the sill.

The tan fox hesitated. "You know I'm just one mammal, right? I can't be everywhere in this goddamn city on my own."

Nick smirked. "We kind of figured you'd get in contact with some of our old friends, if you still talk with them. We have a general location, and our undercovers will be out looking as well."

Finnick cocked an eyebrow. "Where at?"

Judy shuffled through her notes. "We're looking for three rams. We saw them take a side street off Vapor road – Falls Street – along the edge of the Meadowlands. Driving a white sheep-sized delivery van, late model."
Finnick's gaze grew distant. "Falls Street?"

"Yeah. It's in a traffic cam blind zone."

The desert fox was silent for a while. "Don't know if this is useful, but I heard somethin' from someone about a white box van there a coupla weeks ago. Stopped on the bridge to the Meadowlands over the Susani Canal, stayed there a coupla' minutes, then continued on."

Both officer's ears perked forward at that. "You didn't hear anything more did you?" Judy voiced the question on both of their minds.

"Nope. Sorry, bunny cop. That's all I heard."

Judy's ears dropped in disappointment. "I'll keep an eye out for your van. Jus' don't forget this. You two owe me."

Nick winked at his old friend and pushed off the sill. "You got it, pal. And don't forget to fix that brake light of yours!"

"Yeah, yeah, I got it, Nick. Ciao." The fennec started his van and pulled away, leaving the two small officers to return to their squad car.

Climbing in, they sat there for a moment. "I still don't like the idea of owing anyone favours, Nick."

The fox beside her shrugged as she started the car. "This is how things are done in the shady world sometimes, Fluff. A favour is often worth more than money. Finnick's also not the type to call in the favour to get out of something big. You might see him call the favour in if we catch him running a stop sign or a red light, but I wasn't the only one that wanted to stay on the right side of the law. He did too."

The doe sighed. "I suppose it's better than owing a favour to Mr. Big or some other similarly criminal mammal."

As they pulled out into the street, the fox let out a breath. "I wouldn't even want to think about what Big would have you do. Steal evidence, make a mammal disappear, clean up a crime scene… those are all things he would love to have a cop in his pocket for. We're both lucky you saved his daughter first. Between sparing our lives and…helping us…with Weaselton, he probably considers us even."

"That's what I'd hoped." As much as she thought Fru Fru might be a decent mammal, her father was a different story. She'd done some digging while Nick was away at the academy, and the evidence against the shrew was scant at best. Some cold case murders that had tenuous ties to the Tundratown mafia, some suspect shipments at the Tundratown docks, suspicious events in the history of the area, and bits of circumstantial evidence on dozens of other cases that ultimately amounted to very little that could be used.

"In the meantime, Carrots, I think its high time we get some legal muscle, so we can turn that warehouse at 421 Wharf Street upside down. I think a certain warehouse manager has some explaining to do about a certain mountain goat that he swore didn't work for him."

Judy grinned. Yes, that was a lead that would need to be followed up on, VERY soon.

The Furston tower wasn't the easiest building to access. The downtown core was notorious for its poor parking and access. It was marginally better in the late morning or early afternoon, but during rush hour and at lunch time, the place was a nightmare to try to navigate.
It had taken almost an hour just to get into the core, and almost as long to find parking for their oversized unmarked police vehicle. Once they were able to park, Shawn Dancing Rivers and Nolwazi Longtooth made their way to the imposing skyscraper. They’d called earlier and set an appointment up with the chief of research. It had been delayed because the mammal had had a meeting earlier, but he’d agreed to meet them afterward.

The atrium was expansive, a huge space spanning multiple floors. The first two major floors housed a food court and public relaxation areas, along with a small collection of small early 20th century aircraft. Skybridges connected the massive skyscraper with other buildings in the core, effectively creating an indoor skywalk miles and miles long.

The actual Furston lobby was up on the 76th floor of the building, the first 50 being occupied by other tenants. The two stepped into an express elevator, choosing the appropriate skylobby. The ride up was surprisingly quiet, with most mammals either in their offices or in meetings. The two detectives took a moment to review what they knew and the things they needed to talk to the CRO about.

It took a few minutes for the high-speed elevator to traverse the 75 floors to the Furston skylobby. When the doors did open, it was to a wide-open space, furnished with couches and chairs of all sizes, and wall-to-wall, floor to ceiling windows looking out over the city in the direction of the bay. You could see all of Sahara Square, as well as a good chunk of Savannah Central and a sliver of Tundratown. Really, it was quite breathtaking.

A mongoose sat at the opulent reception desk, looking rather bored, and barely gave the two a glance as they made their way towards her. It wasn't until they addressed her directly that she actually looked up. "May I help you?"

The two detectives pulled out their badges. "I'm Detective Rivers, and this is my associate, Longtooth. We're here for a … Mr. Ellismaw?"

The mongoose immediately tried to look and act more alert. "Oh! He said you'd be coming. Hold on a second, I'll page him." She picked up the phone and dialed a number. "Yes, I have two detectives from the ZPD, here to speak with Mr. Ellismaw? Yes. Yes, I'll tell them." She hung up. "Mr. Ellismaw is still in his meeting, but his personal assistant will be down in a moment to take care of you."

The two detectives nodded and moved to sit in the waiting area, Rivers letting out a sigh. "C-suite guys. They make you march to their schedule. On time or early, you gotta wait for them. Late, and you get chewed out." Longtooth couldn't help but agree.

A couple of minutes later, one of the elevators dinged and disgorged a female spectacled bear. Rivers had met one of them in the past and had wondered if that species name had ever caused any social problems if a member of the species had to wear glasses. A bespectacled spectacled bear.

He shoved the idle thoughts aside when the comparatively small mammal – only slightly larger than Judy, the elk noted – greeted them and extended a paw up at them for a shake. The two detectives obliged, having to stoop down to reach the bear's outstretched paw.

"Detectives?" At their nod of affirmation, and the presentation of their badges, the small mammal continued. "I'm Sofia Lopez, Mr. Ellismaw's personal assistant. He is still in his meeting with the other senior management, but if you follow me, we can get you situated and comfortable."

The two detectives nodded and moved to follow the small bear to the elevator bank. Unlike the express elevator they'd ridden up on, these ones were all called by key card, which the personal
"Mr. Ellismaw's office is on the 98th floor, along with most of the other executive offices," the spectacled bear explained, leading them into the elevator when it arrived and pressing the appropriate button.

Rivers smirked. "Let me guess. The Chief Executive's office and the boardrooms are the only things occupying the 99ths floor?"

Mrs. Lopez turned and gave him an odd look. "Have you been here before?"

The smirk on his face not fading, the elk detective shook his head. "No, ma'am. But that's the way it always seems in big corporations. The higher up you are, the higher up your office is."

A grin flickered on Longtooth's face, but the spectacled bear remained as professional as ever. "Well, you're not wrong, Detective Rivers. Mr. Furshaw's office is on the 99th floor, along with that of his personal assistant and the boardrooms."

"Most of the upper floors are senior management, with accounting and division management right below that. Most of the other offices are on the 77th through 90th floors. We have multiple other buildings, offices, and warehouses throughout the city, but this is the main one."

This took Longtooth by surprise. "You don't do your research here?"

The spectacled bear shook her head. "No, all our research is conducted at our R&D campus on the edge of the city. It's a secured facility"

The elk and the lioness exchanged glances at each other. While it made a certain amount of sense, it also meant more driving and searching to get the answers they wanted, unless they got lucky. The lioness bit back a groan of frustration. This was not how she wanted today to go, but she knew it was all part of the job. If they could solve the attack on Sahara Square, maybe by then some new evidence would have come to light about Wolford's murder.

The elevator bell chimed, and the small mammal lead them out into the elevator lobby of the so-called C-suite – One of several floors that housed the offices of the highest ranking and richest people in the company.

For the most part, the floor was quiet, only the sound of typing on keyboards or music being played on office speakers. A few mammals in suits bustled about, no doubt tending to their boss's needs. The elk nearly tripped over a frazzled looking red fox, the latter calling out a hurried apology as she raced off carrying an armload of papers and binders.

The small bear led the Detectives to a corner office with a view of the downtown core. Not the most opulent of views in the city, but a far cry from the view of the precinct motor pool that Longtooth and Rivers got from their office. She directed them to have a seat and offered them a coffee. While Rivers declined, his lioness partner chose to take the spectacled bear up on her offer. The smaller mammal excused herself from the room and hurried off to chase down said coffee.

While the assistant was out, the two detectives took the opportunity to survey their surroundings. The office was decorated with photos of birds and planes. There were model planes on various shelves, and on the large desk in the corner of the room. One of the two walls held a trio of framed certificates from one of Zootopia's prestigious universities. The elk grunted.

Longtooth looked over at her partner. "What's up?"
"I'd have to give up a year's pay to get a week at these institutions." The lioness joined him in looking at the certificates.

"So, for a 4-year course…"

"I'd be paying the tuition fees for the rest of my natural life."

"Ugh. I couldn't imagine havin' that hang over my head for my entire life. I just got down payin' for my degree in criminal justice, and that was at Zootopia U. Hoofvard?" The lioness shook her head.

It was at this moment that the spectacled bear re-entered the room, pushing an equally small cart loaded with a very large cup of coffee. "Sorry this took a while. We're down a coffee machine, and it isn't easy to carry around a cup this size when you're a small mammal. I can't imagine how Marian does it."

"Marian?" The lioness cocked an eyebrow.

"Oh, the COO's new PA. A red fox. The COO's a chain coffee drinker, and ever since he's brought her up, he never goes to get it himself any more. Always sends her instead. Normally these are filing carts for papers, but we had to permanently repurpose one, just so Marian could do her job safely."

Rivers frowned. "That sounds a little like she's being taken advantage of."

The spectacled bear shrugged. "She doesn't seem to mind. She once told me that it's because she's a fox, she has to work harder."

Rivers couldn't help but wonder if Hopps' fox partner faced the same kind of obstacles and roadblocks in his past. He had noticed that foxes, weasels, ferrets and rats often got the short ends of the stick, just because of what they were. He hadn't subscribed to the stereotypes himself but found that an unfortunately high percentage turned to crime simply because they had no other option.

The three mammal's attention was drawn to a water chevrotain that entered the room. "Apologies, everyone, sometimes these meetings go longer than they should. Particularly bad when we don't order up sandwiches or at least snacks."

Rivers chuckled. "Oh, trust me sir, we understand. When we have meetings, we have to be quick to grab snacks, because someone invariably takes more than their fair share. In fact, I think the Precinct One receptionist and dispatcher survives only on donuts and sugar cereal."

The water chevrotain laughed. "I wonder if he's related to our CFO? I swear that black bear eats an entire bakery's worth of donuts every meeting we have."

"Hmmm, nope, not related, at least not likely. Our guy is a cheetah," Rivers replied with a shake of his head, extending a hoof. "Detective Shawn Dancing Rivers. This is my partner, Detective Nolwazi Longtooth."

The water chevrotain took the elk's immense hoof in his much smaller one and shook. "Graham Ellismaw. Pleasure to meet two of Zootopia's finest." He took Longtooth's extended claw and shook it as well. "I trust Ms. Lopez has taken care of you?"

At their nods of affirmation, the small ungulate gestured to his desk, where a number of various sized chairs sat in front of it. The two detectives picked appropriate sized chairs and sat down, while the water chevrotain climbed up the other side to sit behind the massive workspace.

"So, what can I help you two detectives with?"
The two mammals in question glanced at each other, before turning their attention back to the businessmammal. "It's about the night howler research and antidote." Rivers figured it'd be best to get right to the point.

Ellismaw sighed. "I figured you guys would come calling when I heard that the hospitals had found that the antidote worked on the new outbreak."

Beside Rivers, his partner leaned forward. "Then you can probably guess why we're here."

The water chevrotain was silent for a long moment. "First, you have to understand that a lot of that is a trade secret. Ever since we won that contract, we've had to deal with several cases of corporate espionage. Furrizer, Antlerson & Company, Zootopia Pharmaceuticals, they've all sent agents in to steal the research and the formula for the antidote."

The two detectives exchanged glances. This was concerning. If this was true, the mammal behind the attacks could be at any one of those companies.

Rivers considered his next questions. "Did any succeed?"

The CRO shook his head. "Not as a whole. They only got some parts of it."

A confused expression crossed Longtooth's face. "How could they only get part of it?"

Leaning back, the ungulate businessmammal regarded the two officers. "The research teams are broken down. Each one works on a specific part and only that part. The only ones that have access to the whole thing are the project leaders and senior management. Sort of like the secret recipe for Pawla Cola."

The lioness shook her head. "I always thought that was just corn syrup with vanilla and caramel flavouring."

Ellismaw gave her a wry smile. "That's probably what they want you to think. But I guarantee that if you were to mix that up with some carbonated water, you'd be very disappointed. He sighed. "My point is, detectives, there is very little I can do for you without a proper warrant."

A growl from the lioness caught the attention of the room's other two occupants.

"I understand your frustration detectives. But you have to understand my position here. I have to look out for my company's wellbeing, and that means keeping secrets."

Longtooth scoffed. "Yeah, well, two of our own were caught in that attack at the Grand Palm! One of them was turned savage, and the other was injured. Not to mention the mammals hurt or killed."

Ellismaw held up his hooves placatingly. "And I sympathize. But tell me this. Would the ZPD turn over the evidence to a case if two officers just waltzed in and demanded it? No, if I understand police procedure, you would not just turn it over."

Longtooth just sat there, steaming.

"In the meantime, I will be glad to answer questions that don't relate to the formulation of the antidote or the research or the mammals involved."

Rivers hummed and shuffled his notes for a moment. "Fair enough. These corporate espionage cases. Were they handled internally, through the court system, or turned over to the ZPD?"
"Some were handled internally. The rest were handled in the courts. To my knowledge, the ZPD has been engaged only to arrest the individuals involved."

Rivers jotted down the information. He'd have to go searching through the ZPD's database for those cases. It was probably a dead end, if the formula was as incomplete as the other mammal had suggested, but it was something to look into.

"OK, here's one. Our lab was able to break down the formulas for both the original night howlers and the more recent formula used in the Grand Palm attacks. How is this a secret? It seems any pharmaceutical company could do it."

That got a laugh out of the smaller ungulate. "Because knowing the cause is just a small part of the battle. The real research is finding a formula that can counter that without harming the subject. Take cancer for instance. We know that the cause, in general terms is a breakdown in the safeguards inherent in all cells. Mutations. We know it causes corruption and out of control growth of altered cells. But we've spent billions of dollars on research, and still we are forced to resort to surgery and chemotherapy to combat it."

The two ZPD detectives had to concede the point. Longtooth looked over her notes. "Have you or your company received any threats lately? Any warning that may have preceded the Grand Palm attack?"

Another laugh. "We receive angry mail, threatening letters and emails on a daily basis, detectives. Mammals whose siblings, sons or daughters got addicted to one of our prescription medications. Or didn't read the label or follow the pharmacist's directions. Or the paranoid types who think we are financing an alien invasion. Most of it goes to the legal department, and they decide whether to follow up on it, disregard it, or turn it over to you fine folks. But as for the Grand Palm, no, not that I am aware of."

There was a knock at the door. Ellismaw's personal assistant poked her head in. "Excuse me sir, your three o'clock is here."

Ellismaw stood and hopped down from his desk. "Thank you, Ms. Lopez. Unfortunately, detectives I need to cut this short. As I said before, if you can get a warrant for what you need, we'll be more than happy to accommodate you. In fact, I'll take you to the research facility myself. And if we do hear anything about the attacks, we will be in touch."

He offered his hoof to the detectives, who again had to bend over to shake it, before ushering them out the door. The trip back to the ground floor was a silent affair, and it wasn't until they'd gotten back to their cruiser that either of them spoke.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'd say that was a wasted trip," The elk said as he climbed into the driver's seat, the lioness securing herself beside him.

"Kind of, yeah. But we have a few more leads to look at, whether he wanted to give 'em to us or not." The Lioness was flipping through her notepad. "We know they've been subject to corporate espionage since the night howler contract was awarded."

Rivers nodded. "And if finding the ingredients and compounds was as easy as Omiata and Ellismaw implied, then synthesizing it wouldn't be too far out of reach, especially if the base chemicals were already widely available."

Longtooth tapped a pen to her lips. "Could this all be a marketin' ploy? A way for Furston to boost sales while hidin' behind the veil of corporate secrecy?"
That hadn't occurred to the elk. "That's possible. It wouldn't be the first time a corporation has done something like this to boost sales, though perhaps not on this scale."

It was a troubling possibility, that much was certain, and the thoughts plagued the two detectives all the way back to the precinct.

Chapter End Notes

The interior of the Furston building is based on the Suncor Energy Centre in Calgary, Alberta, as is the skywalk system (known as the Plus 15 system, also located in Calgary).

The distribution of offices of the Furston company, each serving a specific purpose, is inspired by Disney itself, who have multiple different physical office buildings serving as administrative headquarters scattered around the United States for various aspects of the company, and even more around the world, as well as Shaw Communications in Canada and various Canadian energy companies.

Thanks to those of you that wished me a nice vacation! I did have an awesome time, thank you!

I've started a DeviantArt exclusive set of special features, that you can find by looking at my DA account. For now they are a selection of scenes that got removed or were originally going to be very different, and this is your chance to see the originals (or as much of the originals as I had written)!

Still no references in this chapter. Am I slacking or what? Cookie for everyone!

Coming up on September 21: Arrested Developments!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Are Longtooth and Rivers invited to your best friend's cousin's birthday party? Leave a comment!
While Monday had been a flurry of activity for Nick and Judy culminating in submitting a search and detain warrant for the warehouse that Callahan had been spotted at, Tuesday was little more than searching for Doug and his cohorts while patrolling the Meadowlands district. Their search had come up empty, so the two had just made a day of giving out traffic tickets and responding to the occasional call that came their way.

Wednesday was a different story.

It started with a voicemail from Old Joe. "Good morning, Officers, it's Old Joe. I just emailed you some information I got from the building owner here about Mr. Callahan. I'm hoping it helps you find him!"

The two checked their email to see a copy of the scanned tenancy form. Most of it was stuff they already knew, but one detail stood out. Judy pointed at her screen. "He'd been employed at Zootopia Coast Distribution starting a month before this application was filled out. That's the one at 421 Wharf Street."

"That confirms the photos and the video footage that caught him there. It also confirms that that warehouse manager was lying when he said he didn't work there," Nick said, glancing through their case notes.

The gray doe nodded in agreement. "I know it's not a requirement that you update your application..."
whenever you change jobs, but I'd say it's too big a coincidence that he shows up on their security
.cameras and unloading a shipment in surveillance photos if he doesn't actually work there."

"Our warrant for that warehouse came through last night, too." Nick pulled the piece of paper out of
their inbox.

Judy took it from Nick's paw and read it over. "Well, if their employment records match up with this,
that'll give us a reason to arrest the manager we dealt with the first time. Part of me wishes it was that
stupid hippo, though."

The fox she shared the cubicle with grinned. "Why's that?"

Judy returned his grin with a smirk of her own. "Because I'd pay to see the look on his face when
you arrested him for obstruction of justice. Let's go, Slick."

"My, my, is our little straight-laced bunny developing a vindictive streak?" The fox commented as he
hurried along behind the doe.

Judy flashed a smirk over her shoulder. "I would have thought you figured that out when I hustled
you into helping me with the missing mammals case." Nick had to concede the point.

The two made their way down to the car pool, stopping occasionally to greet their colleagues.
Fangmeyer in particular had been looking a lot better than she had that first day back. Being around
the other officers was helping, she'd told them, and Judy always made sure to give the large tiger an
extra-long, extra hard hug.

Nick had actually really warmed up to the large feline. Unlike some of the other officers here, she
hadn't judged Judy for her species when she'd originally joined, but instead had decided to wait and
see for herself how the rabbit did. The same had been true for Nick, with her coming up to him on
his third day, and wishing him luck…and getting a not-so-subtle jibe in about keeping Judy on Duty
under control.

The two had shared a laugh at the doe's expression of mock annoyance.

The tod shook his head to clear his thoughts as he climbed into the passenger seat of the duo's
.cruiser, the doe starting the engine and steering them in the direction of the Zootopia Coast
Distribution warehouse.

As they drove, Nick read out the files they had on Callahan and the Zootopia Coast Distributing.
Most of it, they'd already been through a dozen times. They were about halfway to their destination,
stuck in construction traffic, when Judy had an idea. She told Nick to check the mountain goat's
.revenue service tax filings.

With a sly smirk, the fox beside her tapped some keys and clicked through some menu options.

"Well, he's been keeping up to date with his tax filings, that's for sure. But would you look at this?
Up until two weeks after his disappearance, a certain employer was making biweekly deposits into
his tax account. But said employer told us last time we were there that they'd never seen him before
in their lives."

The rabbit officer snickered. "Well, I wonder if prison cafeteria food was worth the lie. As I recall,
you didn't much like the idea."

The fox had to chuckle, both at the thought and the bunny's own reference to how they'd met. "No,
Carrots, I did not like that idea much."
The doe tapped her thumb on the steering wheel. "So we have a warehouse manager, or possibly an entire company, smuggling potentially illicit goods into Zootopia. Callahan gets wind of it and tells Wolford. Wolford stakes the warehouse yard out and catches them unloading the suspect containers. The manager lies to us about seeing or even knowing Callahan. And then…what? Who or what were the goods destined for? What were they?"

Nick shook his head, his ears low. "I wish we knew. No one's found Wolford's ledger, and his letter to Fangmeyer didn't include any details."

Judy couldn't help but grumble. "There's a lot that seems to be missing. Wolford's dictation machine hasn't turned up, either." She'd mentioned it to the chief during his debrief with herself, Nick, and the two other detectives just after her former partner's murder. The detectives and the chief had seemed surprised, to say the least.

Traffic thinned out a bit, and the two were able to resume their journey to the docks. One of the frustrations of the big city that didn't exist in small towns. Judy navigated her way through the main thoroughfares to the dockside portion of Savannah Central. Pulling up into the parking lot of the Zootopia Coast Distribution warehouse at 421 Wharf Street, the two quickly secured the vehicle and ran through a mental checklist of things they needed to cover personally before going in. Judy grabbed the microphone for the radio.

"Dispatch, Zulu 240 is 10-23, 421 Wharf Street."

"Zulu 240, dispatch copies your 10-23 at 421 Wharf Street. Take care out there."

"Thanks, Clawhauser." Judy looked over at Nick, who had just finished checking his utility belt and weapons. The rabbit made a quick check of her own equipment, making sure everything was the way it was supposed to be. Satisfied, she looked at her fox companion.

"You ready, Slick?"

He gave her his signature smirk. "Yeah. Born ready, Carrots." Judy couldn't help but grin back at him.

The two exited the vehicle and marched into the warehouse's office area. A leopard was seated at the reception desk, hurriedly typing away at her computer. She glanced up at the two officers as they came in, and quickly wrapped up whatever it was she was doing. "May I help you, officers?"

Judy pulled out the warrant. "We're here to speak with a Mr. Taylor Blackford."

The female leopard nodded and moved down the row of offices, knocking on one. "Mr. Blackford? Some cops here to see you. There was a muffled reply and the leopard nodded, turning back to the two small officers. "He's just in the middle of some private matters. He'll be out in a second."

The next sound Judy heard wasn't one she normally associated with personal matters. It was the sound of a paper shredder grinding, straining, and finally seizing up. The mammal in question began cursing at the malfunctioning machine. The doe snapped her fingers and gestured for Nick to follow her.

They made their way to the door of the office and peered inside. Taylor Blackford, a wood bison, large, but by no means as intimidating as the chief, was straining and fighting against the shredder in question, the machine apparently having been fed too much at once. The alarm bells sounded even louder when the doe noticed that the topmost sheet was clearly marked with the words "Record of employment". The doe sprung into action, drawing her ESW, with Nick just a half second behind
her with his tranquilizer.

"Sir, step away from the machine and put your hooves in the air! Hopps to dispatch, requesting backup, our location."

"Dispatch, Zulu-231 McHorn and Grizzoli here, we can respond to that backup request."

"10-4, Zulu-231, Hopps, backup is enroute."

All the while, neither officer took their eyes off the bison in the middle of the room. Nervous eyes flicked around, looking for an escape route, settling on the window.

"Don't even think about it sir," the rabbit warned, tensing up and moving towards the same window, ready to give chase if the mammal bolted.

He did. The double glass window was no match for a charging bison, and the doe had to shield her face from debris as the bison made his escape. Not a half second later, she launched herself through the hole, hit the ground in a roll, and took off after the fleeing Bovidae, Nick hot on her heals.

"Dispatch, officer Hopps! Wood bison, Taylor Blackford, dark brown fur. Suspect is attempting to flee northbound on Wharf Street, Hopps and Wilde in pursuit!" She mentally cursed the fact that their cruiser was in the exact opposite direction, on the other side of the building, otherwise she might have gone to get it.

The bison was surprisingly slow for a mammal his size though, and the two police officers had no trouble keeping pace. Neither officer could line up a very good shot though. The two chased the bison down the street, each yelling at him to stop and get on the ground with his hooves behind his head.

"When do they ever actually listen to us, Carrots?" Nick couldn't help but ask, earning an eyeroll and a groan from the bunny just ahead of him.

The few mammals on the sidewalk jumped out of the way as the bison and the two officers went flying past. With fences topped with razor wire on either side of the road, the bison really had little choice but to keep going one way until he hit an intersection, or side alley. He cut across a parking lot and headed down a less crowded side street, the officers behind him unrelenting in their pursuits.

The bison cut into an alleyway, an action that the rabbit called through the radio. She faltered for a moment as she considered her options, then sped back up, taking a running leap at the wall of the alley and using that to change her direction.

 Ahead of them, the bison was weaving around dumpsters, wood pallets, garbage bags, and various other rubbish. The zig-zagging path the larger mammal took made it easier for the small officers to catch up, with Nick running straight down the middle of the narrow road and Judy leaping from dumpster to dumpster, bouncing off the walls, using as much of the strength in her powerful legs as she could.

The end of the alley was near. The wood bison could taste freedom. He glanced behind him long enough to see only the fox hot on his tail. Good. Out in the open he could—

His thoughts were interrupted by someone hitting him in the side of the head with a baseball bat. A small, fuzzy baseball bat. The blow was enough to snap his head to the side and set his vision swimming. Taylor Blackford stumbled, tripping over his own hooves, and fell to the pavement, hard. His vision began to fade, and he barely registered the pinprick in his flank, before he lost consciousness altogether.
Judy rolled to a stop, back on her feet and in a combat stance in an instant. It was immediately quite evident that it wouldn't be necessary. The bison was out cold, with Nick's tranquilizer stuck in his rear. The rabbit looked around, taking stock of her surroundings, while Nick secured the runaway bison with the metal flexicuffs that officers were now being issued.

"Dispatch, Hopps. Suspect apprehended, but we need a medium-large prisoner transport for this Zoolympian wannabe."

"Copy that Hopps."

"Dispatch, Zulu 231 here. We'll continue heading to back the mini duo up. We've got the large transport cruiser today. ETA one minute."

"Zulu 231, dispatch copies you. Good job, Hopps!"

"Thanks, Clawhauser."

The two officers did a safety check of the downed mammal, securing a pocket knife for evidence and pulling his wallet out at the same time, confirming his identity. Securing the scene, they sat back to wait for McHorn and Grizzoli to show up. Fortunately, true to their word, in only took them about a minute, before the rabbit spotted them, lights and sirens going. The two larger officers pulled up to the curb and piled out, staring at the prone form of the attempted runner.

"Jeez, you two, a wood bison? What'd he do to piss you two off?"

The rabbit waved her warrant. "Tampering with and destruction of potential evidence, obstruction of justice, resisting arrest."

Nick smirked as he walked up next to the rabbit. "And attempting to run from Wilde and Hopps."

Grizzoli scoffed. "That'll add a couple of decades to his sentence. You want us to load him up and drive him back to wherever it is that you came from? Or book him?"

The doe shrugged. "Book him. If he's got anything to say, he can say it to us in the cells. If not, we'll let his office do the talking. We caught him panic-shredding something right before he took off. We'll just have to make sure we clean his office out for him."

McHorn finished mammalhandling the unconscious bison into the back of the cruiser. Brushing off his hooves, he addressed the two tiny officers. "All loaded up. We'd offer you a ride back, but…"

Nick finished for him. "Thanks, but I'm not sure Carrots and I would enjoy the trip being crammed in the back with Drooling Sleeping Beauty." He indicated the snoozing Bovidae, leaning against the window, a line of spit dropping out of his slack mouth.

McHorn gave a snort as he took the pocket knife and wallet Judy had found on the mammal's person, already secured in evidence bags. "We've got this you two. We'll see you back at the station."

Nick gave his signature two fingered salute as Grizzoli and McHorn piled into their cruiser and headed back towards the city center, leaving the two small officers alone again. The fox sighed. "Well, I wasn't expecting to get into a foot chase this early in the day. That bunny-fu of yours was spectacular though."

Judy shook her head and grinned as she headed back in the direction they'd come. "Don't sell yourself short, Slick. You did good keeping up with him and tagging him with the TQ after I took
him down."

The fox officer smirked and puffed his chest out a bit. "I ALWAYS do a good job, Carrots. I am a fox after a—OOMPH." Judy's sharp elbow hit it's mark in the fox's gut.

"Like your ego needs any more inflation, Nick. Come on. Let's see what that guy was up to."

It took a while to walk back to the warehouse, and by then, the bison's former employer had become a hive of activity. Judy and Nick spent the next 15 minutes kicking everyone out of the office, and taping it off, before calling for lab services and turning their attention to the room itself.

It wasn't much different from some of the entry level offices at the precinct. A lot more industrial, which was understandable, given the function of the building. Judy made her way over to the shredder, examining the documents stuck within. The employment file for one Spencer Callahan. Jackpot, the rabbit thought, as she looked for a way to free the stuck file. Failing that, she simply unplugged the shredder so that it wouldn't try to start again, and went back to examining what she could see of the pink coloured document.

It listed Callahan's date of employment some six years ago, consistent with his other documentation. What was even more interesting was the date of termination – the day after she and Nick had originally visited.

She pulled her iCarrot out and snapped a photo of the document, before moving on to other things.

Nick was busy interviewing the other employees of the company and trying to get their statements, so Judy kept busy in the office. At first glance, she didn't see anything else of note, until she woke up the computer. A cursory inspection of some of the emails sent the day of their visit mentioned something about leaky pipes.

The rabbit thought that rather unusual, since she hadn't heard anything about leaky pipes the day that they'd been there. She decided to let the lab mammals deal with it, since they'd probably be able to get more out of the computer than she would.

In the meantime, she photographed the room and made an overall video. Her bodycam would have caught some of it, but she wanted to be sure. She was just finishing up when her fox walked back in, ducking under the crime scene tape she'd put up.

"So, no one noticed anything particularly unusual, the last couple of weeks, at least among the managers here. Most of them described Blackford as fairly opinionated on mammals, but not overly so."

Judy thought back to when they'd met him, weeks ago, while tracking Wolford's whereabouts. She'd noted then that he hadn't seemed very fond of herself or Nick, and he'd stonewalled them when they asked if Callahan worked there. Clearly he had, and for some reason had used the need for a warrant to stall for time. But for what?

"The night crew don't come on for another few hours, but most of the day crew described Callahan as a quiet, reserved sort of mammal, didn't say much. They were all surprised when he just didn't show up for work one day."

"The day after we came here," Judy remarked, casting a glance at the half-shredded document.

Nick nodded. "Yep."

Judy thought for a moment. "Did he have any history of disciplinary action?"
Shaking his head, the fox looked down at his notes. "Nothing recent. He mostly tried to, as one mammal put it, 'fly under the radar.'"

Judy tapped a finger to her lips, deep in thought. "So, we come here, tracking down Wolford, and ask if the person Wolford is talking to works for them. They clam up, force us to leave, and the next day he turns up missing, and his employment is terminated."

The rabbit's russet companion scratched his chin. "Definitely too much of a coincidence. I don't know about you Carrots, but I try to avoid jobs where quitting means you also exit stage life."

Judy couldn't help but snort. "Yeah, those jobs tend not to attract applicants, unless there's lots of money in it." The doe looked around. "Did anyone say anything about the shipment that Wolford was tipped off about?"

Nick shuffled some papers and handed Judy one. "This is the manifest for all the containers that were handled that night. Take a look."

Judy scanned over the document, her eyes quickly tracing over the columns. Most of it was foreign language to her, but only one container stood out. Whereas all of the other ones had been dispatched to their next destination, one was marked received but there wasn't any record of it being sent on its way. She pointed it out.

"You noticed it too. That one is the only one from that shipment that, as far as anyone knows is still somewhere on the property. The contents declaration isn't much help either. 'Agriculture equipment'."

The rabbit doe shook her head, handing the paper back to Nick. "'Agriculture equipment'? That could mean anything from shovels to hammers to combine harvesters. How did they get away with that?"

The fox took the paper and put it with the others. "I'm not sure. But that's one of the questions we'll need to answer if we want to figure out what's going on."

Judy stared off into the distance. "We'll need to track down the other shipments from that night too. Make sure they match up."

Nick put his notepad away. "Boss here said he was going to dredge up as much info as he could about that shipment. Who received it, where it came from, the crew on duty that night, everything."

The rabbit hummed as she moved to take a peek in some of the filing cabinets while the two waited for lab services and their new backup to arrive. "I'm glad he's being helpful, at least. Did he say much about Callahan?"

The fox wandered over to stand beside her. "Nothing more than what we already know, Carrots. Callahan didn't spend much time here anywhere other than the warehouse, the yard, and the breakroom. That's just off the main warehouse area."

The doe paused. "If he was just part of the yard and warehouse crew, he probably wouldn't have had a computer or corporate email or anything here." Nick nodded as he turned to check out the rest of the office, studying it, eyes roaming over the contents.

The safety sheets and provocative posters on the wall weren't all that surprising, nor were the numerous post-its with phone numbers on them. The names written on the notes didn't match any of the known mammals that were on their list.
In a way it was kind of a relief that lab services and their relief officers showed up just then. The two turned the crime scene over to the newly arrived officers and returned to their cruiser. The two spent the ride back discussing how they would approach Blackford and his little cover-up scheme.

"How 'bout I be the bad cop, Carrots? The fierce fox and the kind bunny?"

The rabbit hit him with an aside glance. "What, you don't think a prey mammal can't be fierce? A bunny?"

Nick gave her a smirk. "Oh, I know you can be fierce. Badass Carrots."

Judy laughed. "And don't you forget it, Slick!"

Nick fell silent for a few moments. "Think we'll get access to Smellwether's office contents any time soon?"

With a snort she couldn't hold back, Judy nodded her head. "That's not very nice, Nick. But I hope so! There has to be something that the initial investigation missed that might lead to Doug or his cronies."

The fox shook his head as they turned up Center Street. "Do you know if the mammals in charge of that even looked around for any security camera footage?"

"They did. The station that the Nighthowler lab was at had been abandoned for decades. There also weren't any security cameras in the tunnels, I was told. The other stations, none of them seemed to show up."

The fox scratched his cheek. "So, Doug, Woolter and Jesse either got lucky, or they know the city subway system, at least enough to avoid security cameras."

His rabbit partner made a sound of confirmation. "We checked the ZTA personnel records, but none of them showed up there, at least not under those names."

Nick shook his head as the rabbit turned them into the precinct motorpool lot and found their spot. "I guess that would be too easy wouldn't it?"

Judy silently agreed as she secured the vehicle and shut it down. None of this had ever been easy, so it wouldn't make sense for things to just start falling into place. They'd gotten a few solid hits the last couple days from Fangmeyer and Old Joe. The doe had to wonder what would come up next, though. Were these shipments even related to the case? What were they about? So many questions bounced around in her head, but this time, at least she knew someone who might have the answers.

As the two small officers made their way into the precinct, the doe mentally catalogued what she knew of Callahan and Blackford. Both worked for Zootopia Coast Distribution. At least one was involved in the shipment of questionable materials. Blackford may have been the last known mammal to see Callahan alive. Blackford also didn't want the police to know that Callahan had worked for him for more than six years.

It all added up to a picture painted to look like Blackford had a strong hand in Callahan's disappearance. But a picture painted without all the facts might not be accurate. And facts were needed to fix that problem.

The doe sighed. This had already been a busy week. She'd been grateful the last couple days that Nick had allowed her to stay over at his place. Even his couch was much more comfy than her concrete slab in her hole in the wall. It wasn't actually a concrete slab, but that's what it felt like. She
felt more rested even on Nick's couch than she ever did at her own place. The doe caught herself gazing fondly at the fox beside her.

Clawhauser was enjoying his afternoon bowl of Lucky Chomps when Nick and Judy got to the main lobby. They barely made it in before the cheetah spotted them and waved them over. Swallowing his mouthful of cereal, he spoke. "Hey, you two! Had some action out there?"

"Of course, Spots. Mammals just can't help but underestimate the Wilde-Hopps duo! He thought he could run from us, but he found out how foolish an assumption that was."

The feline grinned. "Judy do her knockout move? I've seen that a few times in the ring. I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of it!"

The vulpine nodded sagely. "The bison didn't make it another five steps before he toppled over, and I tagged him with a dart. Cuffed, searched, and sent here."

The spotted cat's ears and tail perked up at that. "Oh! He should be awake now. Just a minute." He pulled out a clipboard. Some of the ZPD's technology hadn't yet caught up with the modern era. "He's booked for interrogation room four. You guys have it for now."

Judy grinned and jumped up onto Clawhauser's desk to give him a fist-bump. "Thanks, Ben! We'll be there if anybody needs us!" She hopped back down to the floor and grabbed Nick's paw, dragging him off, as he gave the portly feline his two finger salute.

Benjamin Clawhauser sighed as he watched the two small mammals depart, Judy dragging the stumbling fox behind her in her zeal. He was starting to grow a little desperate, knowing his week in the betting pool was coming up. Maybe he could give them a little nudge.

Taylor Blackford sat in the interrogation room, only a table, chair, two way mirror and a glass of water to keep him company. He still couldn't believe that rabbit and her fox partner had caught him.

He'd woken up on a cot in a holding cell, unsure at first of where he was, though that had changed a few minutes later when a rhino had come in to escort him to his current location. He was in a police station somewhere. Without windows, though, it was impossible to know exactly where.

The rhino had left without saying anything other than that the officers would be in to see him shortly.

That had been almost 15 minutes ago, and only now did the door open to admit the two tiny police officers.

Of course it was the same two that had been a thorn in his side twice now. Why not make it three times? The rabbit hopped onto the metal table, staying to the opposite side, and well out of reach.

She pulled a card out of her utility belt and began to read from it.

"Mr. Taylor Blackford, You've been arrested for interfering with a police investigation, obstruction of justice, resisting arrest, and tampering with and destroying evidence. I'm required to inform you that you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to have an attorney. If you cannot afford one, one will be appointed to you by the court. With these rights in mind, are you still willing to talk with me about the charges against you?"

The wood bison glared at the small rabbit. "For now."

The rabbit, Hopps, he remembered, nodded. "Alright. When you last spoke with us, we asked you
explicitly if Spencer Callahan worked for you. You denied ever knowing him, yet we have seen security footage of him working in the yard, while we were there. Furthermore, we have surveillance of him working there several weeks prior, and we recovered the employment record you tried to shred that gave his date of employment over 6 years ago, and his date of termination as the day after we served you the warrant for your streetside security cameras. With that in mind, why did you tell us you had never seen him before?"

Blackford shrugged. "That's the question isn't it?"

The fox frowned. "What do you mean?"

The wood bison grinned. "Well, if you two haven't figured out why I might or might not have lied to you about this mammal's alleged employment with the company I work for, then I guess you'll need to keep searching."

Hopps sighed. "Sir, we really don't have time to play games. So let's try a different question. Why was he let go?"

That was an easy one. "He didn't show up for his shift."

The fox shuffled through some of his papers. "Other employees said that he didn't have a history of disciplinary action. Why the harsh penalty for a first offence?"

The wood bison's gaze flickered between the two. "Zero-tolerance policy for missed shifts."

The fox and rabbit looked at each other, before turning back to the bison. "No one else mentioned a zero tolerance policy," the fox said.

The wood bison rubbed the top of his left hoof with his right. "It's new."

With another sigh, Hopps spoke up again. "You know, as part of our training we're taught how to recognize when mammals are lying. Do you want to try those last two questions again?"

The bison stayed silent.

"I'll take that as a no," the fox said, turning to his partner, who cocked her head.

"Are you sure you don't want us to call your lawyer, or allow you to call him?"

The bison shook his head.

Hopps frowned and looked through her papers again. "About a month and a half ago, you received a shipment of suspicious goods. Who purchased them?" She laid a few photos of a shipping container on the table. The warehouse was clearly theirs, and the date on the photos matched the day he knew to be correct. But he couldn't say anything. He just stayed silent.

"Do you have anything else to say?" Hopps asked after several long moments. The bison shook his head.

"OK, but if you find you want to say anything, or want to talk to a lawyer, you can ask the holding cell guard."

The two left, and soon after, the bison was escorted back to his cell.

Nick and Judy watched as Officer McHorn took Taylor Blackford out of the interrogation room and
back to the holding cells. The fox was the first of the two to speak.

"He seemed nervous."

Judy nodded as she watched the scene in front of her. "At first, he was toying with us about Callahan, but once we started pointing out the flaws, he got nervous. And when we asked about the shipment, he went silent."

Her fox nodded. "He knows something."

The doe tapped her lips with her pen. "The question is, what does he know, and why is he willing to go to jail for it?"

"I don't know Carrots. But I get the feeling we're going to find out, one way or another."

The two turned to head back to their cubicle to file their reports and go over what was said in the interview with a fine-tooth comb, hoping there was some underlying message that they may have missed.

Elsewhere in the city, Dade Walker hung up the phone, and turned to the two other mammals in the room.

"That was our procurement team. One of their contacts at Zootopia Coast Distribution was arrested."

The two other elders barely blinked. "Shall we make sure he stays quiet?"

The deer elder shook his head. "Too risky right now. It'll be much easier if we wait until he's in the prison system and have one of our agents get him there. For now, he knows the consequences of saying too much."

After a moment, the pig and beaver agreed.

Chapter End Notes

What consequences are those, I wonder? And FINALLY! An arrest has been made! Where do they go from here I wonder?

So, I'm sitting here trying to fight a cold or something. I almost didn't post this chapter, because of that, but decided you guys deserved it for being so patient. Hope everything is going well for you guys!

Second part of Removed Hope (A Ray of Hope's deleted scenes) should be up on my DeviantArt soon! Check it out there!

Special shout-out to billybob1941 on AO3 for his insightful questions and statements that took me almost a week to answer! Keep them coming! The cast loves them!

Coming up on October 5: Beach Bunnies and Backstories!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques?
Did Taylor Blackford steal the lettuce from your sandwich? Leave a comment!
The rest of the week didn't hold much in the way of ground-shaking discoveries for the fox and the rabbit. Taylor Blackford steadfastly refused to answer their questions and was eventually transferred to the local minimum-security prison. Finnick and his contacts had no luck locating Doug or his lackeys, and they hadn't been able to get at the seized evidence of Dawn Bellwether's offices yet, since it had been put in deep storage after the trial and conviction of the sheep.

The two mammals had been a little dejected as they headed back to Nick's apartment on Friday evening. Judy had spent the first couple days of the week sleeping on Nick's couch, not really wanting to go back to her own apartment after the evening at Nick's place, but after spending a week sharing a bed in her childhood home, it had felt a little odd, so she'd snuck into Nick's bedroom and made herself at home right next to him.

The fox had been a little surprised the next morning to discover the gray ball of fur that had burrowed into his bed at some point in the night, but had shrugged it off with a grin, waking the little rabbit up so that they could start the day.

For his part, Nick had been entertaining the idea of asking the doe to move in with him, and take his spare bedroom for her own, though he actually wondered if she'd ever actually sleep there, given their sleeping arrangements lately.

Still, Saturday dawned bright and early for the duo, and both decided to make the most of their day off, starting with a few movies in the fox's apartment and finishing off with a trip to the beach. Judy had never been there before on anything other than official police business, a fact that seemed to be all too common where the doe was concerned. Maybe it was time to change that. Nick, being a native Zootopian and a street mammal for years, knew of a lot of hidden secrets that most didn't. He might have liked to have shown her a couple, but when your date is adamant about going to the beach, it's not a good idea to argue.

Not normally one for spending time doing absolutely nothing – you didn't earn money in your hustle by doing nothing – Nick did find this quite relaxing. He supposed, though, that it may be in part due
to the company he had. For her part, Judy had been enjoying the relaxing day immensely, and, with her in her purple and teal one-piece, the fox had a hard time not staring at her.

Nick had brought along a Tom Clawncy techno-thriller to read, while Judy had been engrossed in, unsurprisingly, a crime thriller. So here he was, laying on a towel on Crescent Beach on the border between Savannah Central and Sahara Square, while Judy was off hunting for some cold treats. They'd spent a few hours here, at first taking advantage of the cool ocean, then, as the day got cooler, lounging around reading.

Slight movement out of the corner of his eye drew his attention to his bunny. She looked a little comical with a fox sized double scoop ice cream cone in one paw and a bunny-sized sundae in the other. Nick had offered to come with, or get them himself, but she'd adamantly refused. When he'd asked why, she'd just told him it was her treat for getting on so well with her family.

It was with a practiced grace that she folded her legs and sat herself back down on the towel. Nick shook his head while taking the oversized cone from the bunny, knowing that if he'd tried that, he'd have ended up with the cone on his head, the Sunday on his tail, and his face planted in the sand. It wouldn't have been pretty, in any case.

"Thanks, Carrots," he said while licking the blueberry double scoop frozen treat. He glanced at his companion's sundae. "That carrot-flavoured?"

Judy shook her head. "Caramel. Decided to really treat myself."

The fox grinned and shook his head.

Judy went back to reading her book, while the fox just sat and watched her, while enjoying his own treat. Part of him couldn't believe this adorable, fluffy, tiny mammal could kick his arse eight ways from Sunday, and another part marveled that she'd fallen for him of all mammals.

A chirp from the bunny's phone drew both of their attention. An incoming text message. Judy grabbed her phone, and, after a moment of reading, a slow, sly grin formed on her muzzle. She tapped out a response and sent it to whoever it was, then put the phone back down, ostensibly to continue reading. But the smirk never faded.

Before Nick could ask who that was, or what they wanted, another chirp sounded. The rabbit picked her phone up, looked at it, and her smirk exploded into a full on evil grin. She tapped out another message and sent it, before turning back to her book.

"So, Slick, I hear you were quite a fan of spaghetti yourself as a kit."

The fox made a guarded noise of affirmation.

"In fact, your mom was just telling me how much you liked it."

Alarm bells started ringing. The fox finished off his ice cream and wiped his paws and muzzle, wondering just what those text messages had contained. Fearing the worst, he made a grab for her phone, but she deftly moved it out of the way.

"Now, now, Slick, you know it's rude to just grab a mammals phone," the rabbit teased, tucking the phone away, out of his reach. "So, tell me, did you?"

The fox set his face in an easy smirk that he'd honed in his hustling days. "And why would you say that, Carrots?"
The bunny's grin grew predatory. "Oh, no reason. Just, your mother mentioned it."

His mother…Oh…Oh, crap. She wouldn't…Would she? Maintaining his smirk, the fox crossed his arms. "No idea what you're talking about, silly bunny."

The rabbit's grin grew, and the alarm bells started ringing even louder. Judy tapped for a second on her phone, then turned it towards him. "Care to explain this?"

The fox stared at the phone in the rabbit's paw, showing a photo of the end of the world. Or more precisely, the end of HIS world. He'd seen that photo many times, when his mom had trotted out the family photo album for guests and relatives. He even knew what page it was on. And apparently his beloved mother had decided to turn Judy against him with it.

The photo of doom showed an infant Nick Wilde. In and of itself, that might not have been much of a problem, but this particular photo was one of those ones you wish you could burn and forget about. Little Nicholas Wilde was stark naked, with spaghetti smeared all down his cream chest fur.

He knew the story behind it of course. He'd been three at the time, and his mom had her attention on putting the leftovers from their dinner away. While her back had been turned, he'd divested himself of his clothes, and attempted to help himself to more spaghetti.

The endeavor hadn't gone according to the fox kit's plan, and he'd ended up knocking the sauce pan off the table, all over his front, and onto the floor. His mom had grabbed the old camera and snapped the photo, torturing him with it for the next 31 years.

He knew he couldn't tell the rabbit that.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Carrots. That must be my long lost twin brother, Rick."

Judy snorted. "Funny, you never mentioned a long lost twin brother. And neither did your mom. Oh, and did you know that even monozygotic litters have different fur colours and markings?"

Well, that got shot full of holes. "I have no idea what you're talking about, dumb bunny."

"Oh, and your mom confirmed it."

There it goes. My life is over. I am forever shamed. The grin slipped from his face.

"And what about this photo?"

Oh no. She didn't. The rabbit turned the phone toward him. She did. The fox sighed

The supermammal photo. The cursed supermammal photo. Taken when he was four, and dressing up for Halloween. They'd had spaghetti for dinner that night too. A bad idea, his mother had said in retrospect. Nick agreed. In this one, he was wearing a supermammal costume, complete with the red cape and briefs and the faux gold belt. This outfit had an added accessory though: a bowlful of spaghetti, noodles included this time, upside down on his head.

Unfortunately for Nick, he didn't remember the story behind it, only that his mom had to scramble to get the tomato sauce stains out of the costume before his first trick or treating, a fact she never let him forget.

And now, Judy would likely never let him forget it either.

The grinning rabbit put the phone down and crawled over to the fox. "She also told me about the fact
that you asked for spaghetti for almost every one of your birthday dinners until you were 14.

"Yeah, I kinda grew tired of it by then. What's your point?"

Judy's grin turned feral. "No point at all. Just thinking how cute—"

"Wait, if I can't use the c-word, then you can't either."

Judy shook her head, her grin not wavering. "Bunnies can use the word, Slick. You should know that by now. Anyway, I was just thinking how cute you were in that little supermammal costume… or with spaghetti smeared all over yourself…"

"Don't say it, Fluff."

She said it. "…Naked as the day you were born."

Nick growled, turning himself over, and pounced on the bunny before she could react. She let out a brief squeak as she suddenly found herself flat on her back, staring up at Nick.

"You will learn, my inquisitive, teasing bunny, that there are consequences for teasing a fox." The rabbit's eyes flew open wide and Nick could easily smell the excitement rolling off her.

That's when he began the tickling. The doe screeched, and started squirming, twisting and turning, writhing and just generally trying to get away from the ticklish paws of her foxy boyfriend. And the laughter. The musical sound filled the air around them. Fortunately, there weren't many mammals around, so disturbing others wasn't an issue.

Nick knew full well she wasn't really trying to get away. They both knew that, despite his larger size and weight, if she actually wanted to get away, she could easily put him on his stomach in a rear arm lock. And THAT would likely involve a kick from her large feet, which he was ever mindful of as they twitched and kicked at the air from his tickle assault.

Come to think of it…

The fox ceased his assault on the doe just long enough to reposition himself. Those feet just looked so ticklish.

Unfortunately for Nick, Judy had a faster recovery time than he expected, and the doe wrenched herself free, before tackling the fox and initiating her own tickle assault on the hapless canid. The fox didn't even get the chance to set up a defence. Judy seemed to be able to figure out exactly where his weak spots were, and she took full advantage of that, attacking each new point with vigor. The pads on his feet and forepaws were particularly ticklish, and Judy delighted in giving Nick the tickling that he'd given her.

It wasn't long before the fox was pleading for mercy, and Judy eased up. The two fought to contain their giggles at their impromptu tickle fight, and after a while, Nick regained his voice. "Seriously, Carrots, you're going to delete those photos."

The bunny looked at him with an expression that was curiosity mixed with mischievousness. "And what if I don't?"

The fox's grin morphed into one just as mischievous as the bunny's. "Then a certain bunny is going to get a soaking."

The rabbit doe kept grinning. "You wouldn't dare."
Nick's smirk turned feral. "Oh, just you wait and see, Ms. Hopps. Now I suggest you drop the subject of my infant spaghetti misadventures."

Judy didn't know when to quit, and when the doe's phone chimed again, she didn't hesitate to grab it and see what Marian had sent her.

_Here's another one for you! I caught him in my closet ;)_

The photo was of a very young Nick. He'd apparently decided to play Mr. Dressup in Marian's closet. Somehow, he'd managed to get his paws on a purple shirt, a yellow shirt and a pink shirt, and had them on all at once. He had his own little pair of green shorts on but over that, he'd decided to try on a brown pair of pants much too big for him.

And to complete the ensemble, he even had Marian's sunhat on. It was way too large and rested on the young fox's muzzle, almost completely obscuring his eyes and ears.

Judy couldn't help it. She burst out laughing, dropping the phone and falling over backward in the process. The fox next to her snatched up the device, scrambling to see exactly what his mother had doomed him with.

The gales of laughter from the bunny next to him, and the image on the screen, confirmed to him that his mother was trying to make him die from embarrassment. _Here lies Nick Wilde, Handsome, clever fox officer of the ZPD, killed by his own mother, embarrassed like no other._

He decided that there was only one way to end this. The fox got to his feet and scooped up the laughing doe, throwing her over his shoulder.

This of course only made her laugh even harder, and the more she tried to stop, the more that image popped into her head and the laughter began anew. Even the fox couldn't help but smile despite the circumstances. Judy's scent told him she was excited and happy, and her feet, suspended in the air in front of him, kicked occasionally from the force of her laughter. Oh, he loved the doe, but she was going to pay.

Even when she realized just where the fox was taking her, she couldn't stop the giggles, her half-hearted attempts at telling him to put her down constantly getting lost in the giggles. The fox waded into the water and stopped. "Last chance, Carrots, now are you gonna stop torturing me, or get soaked?"

There was a pause, before a voice spoke up, still thick with giggles. "You should have tried on some necklaces while you were at it, Slick! I bet they would have complimented that _just fine._" More giggles.

Nick shook his head. "Hoo-kay, you asked for it, Gigglypuff." He grasped the doe by the waste, and with a grunt of effort, threw the shrieking bunny as far as he could. She landed with a splash far larger than any mammal her size should have been able to make and disappeared.

For the moment, Nick just stood there, enjoying the peace and quiet. He'd have to figure out a way to get his mom back for this, not to mention Judy. Maybe, he'd message Bonnie and ask if she had more ammunition to use against his doe. Or perhaps Madison. Being her younger sister, she'd be privy to that information, right?

Nick didn't have time to ponder further, as, just as he'd turned back to head back to their little spot on the beach, he was knocked forward as a gray missile flew out of the water, tackling him from behind. The fox landed with a splash, the weight of said missile straddling his back.
The water was deep enough where he'd been standing that he could barely reach the bottom, even while being weighed down by the doe currently giving him a painful noogie. Rather than paddle his way back to shore, he elected to do the one thing the doe didn't expect.

He rolled over.

And of course, this had the effect of tossing the playful doe off of him again. Twisting in the water, he grabbed her in a tight hug from behind, and stood up, still holding Judy tight against his chest. The two surfaced, the rabbit sputtering and coughing against him, and squeezing in all manner of vegetable-related curses when she could. He leaned down close to her ear.

"Do you surrender, Carrots?"

The bunny stilled, and he thought he detected a slight wiggle from her tail, currently pressed into his stomach. He didn't have much time to think before he felt her slip down and out of his grasp and swim off.

The fox looked around. The setting sun reflecting off of the water at odd angles and the froth they'd stirred up in their tussle obscured everything until it was too late. The grey weapon struck again, only this time, it was a torpedo, taking his legs out from under him, below the surface of the water. Flailing, the fox went down, slipping beneath the waves with a yelp. He was just opening his eyes and getting his bearings when he felt two powerful legs plant themselves on his back and push off hard, sending him into another disorienting spin that only ended when his head popped up above the surface.

By then, Judy was already back on the beach, her hip cocked and a sly smirk across her face. The only difference, besides her attire, between this and her body language the day she'd blackmailed him into helping her with the missing mammals case was the fact that her soaking wet ears were flat down her back.

"You should know by now that I don't give up, Slick. A little water doesn't scare me." She turned and walked back up the beach to their stuff, shaking her body to get the water off…an action that did very interesting things to her rear and tail, Nick couldn't help but notice.

The fox shook his head, a grin gracing his features. That bunny was going to be the death of him. And he was perfectly fine with that.

Nick waded back to the shore, shaking his fur out and thinking he would need a lot of time with the fur drier and brush tonight. Judy had apparently decided it might be time to pack up and head out too, since she was already in the process of rolling up her towel.

"Calling it a day, Carrots?"

The doe nodded. "You know my parents wanted to call. I'd be more comfortable doing that if we were at your place, not out here."

Nick nodded and moved to pack up his own stuff. It wasn't much, just a towel, which he used to dry himself off, and a duffel bag containing his change of cloths, his phone, wallet, and keys. The two trudged up to the changing rooms, going their separate ways. Nick took a little longer, thanks to his thicker fur, but before long, the two were heading away from the beach side by side towards the nearest subway station.

Neither one of them noticed the mammal that had followed them with his camera. A subway ride, a transfer, another ride and a walk later, and the mammal was watching as the two entered an
apartment building. He knew it wouldn't be a good idea to follow them into the building, but he'd seen enough.

The mammal stashed his camera away and headed back to his office. This would make an interesting column.

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Damian Hornby was incredibly, unequivocally frustrated. Every time he tried a new scenario with the formula, he never achieved the desired results.

Fix the loophole that allowed social mammals to overcome their urge to hunt. It seemed like such a simple requirement. Yet he could never seem to achieve success.

For the last two weeks, he'd run countless simulations, stared at chemical formulas and slammed his head on his desk more times than he could count. They'd even run a few live mammal tests of the product.

The results of the tests had been…less than satisfying. Two couples that they'd grabbed, along with two wolves of the same pack, the mammals had either displayed affection towards the other, or passive acceptance. The third couple, the last test they'd performed…He wished he could scrub that memory from his brain. They'd tried upping the amount of the chemical meant to induce aggression in the formula, and the pair had certainly been more aggressive. In all the wrong ways.

After that, they'd all resolved to avoid mammal testing until they had a more favourable simulation result. It was probably a good thing too. Someone was going to notice if too many couples and close friends went missing.

"What if we increase the fear response and the aggression at the same time? If we do that, the target might label the other mammal as a threat and attack."

Felicity Stang was similarly stumped. As a neurologist, she'd taken on the bulk of the theoretical work on the new version of the formula. And just like Hornby, the unfavourable results had frustrated her.

The big longhorn shook his head. "The filth could just as easily run away. You've watched documentaries on rattlesnakes, right? Many of them will only attack a larger mammal if they have no other option."

"You mean if they're backed into a corner." The mustang frowned, glaring down at her papers.

"Precisely." Hornby went back to his own work, and silence reigned for a while.

"Why are we doing this?"

The Texas longhorn looked up from his own work at that statement from the mustang. "What?"

"Why are we doing this?" The mare repeated.

Hornby frowned. "Because the Elders told us to."

With a shake of her head, the neurologist elaborated. "No, I mean…why? If what we want is to show the predators reverting back to their pre-evolved state, doesn't the formula accomplish that?"

She continued to frown at her papers.

With a sigh, Damian Hornby turned to address her directly. "Because that's not what we want. What
we want is for mammals to see predators not as devolving and a problem to be cured, but as a threat to be eradicated. If a mammal can relate to the filth's social behavior, then that behavior needs to be removed. Sure, we'll get some mammals on our side if they are just devolving, but many will still see the filth as something worth helping."

"Take that video of the fox and rabbit officer for example. The fox didn't attack the rabbit, despite the rabbit being its natural prey. What will mammals think when they see that? They'll think that a filth could have feelings of affection towards a civilized mammal."

Stang sat back in her chair, deep in thought. "But what if it could? What if a fox could feel affection, or familial attachment to a prey mammal? Or a wolf for that matter?"

Her longhorn companion stared at her for a long moment. "Stang, listen to yourself. Do you even realize what you're saying? You're suggesting these filth are actually capable of love, compassion!"

"I spent years studying to become a neurologist, Hornby. Carnivores and omnivores have the same emotional centers in the brain that herbivores do, as far as we can tell. EEGs and MRIs have shown that certain centers of the brain are activated when a mammal experiences an emotional response to external stimuli. One test showed a mammal a photo of his mate, a personal enemy, and someone he never met before. For the stranger, there wasn't any response, but in the other two, the same center of the brain got activated. We can't be sure what the mammal was feeling, but there was emotional response.

Hornby raised an eyebrow. "So, for all you know, the mammal could have been feeling animosity for both."

The mustang shrugged her shoulders. "Perhaps, but there are other cues, often involuntary or unconscious. When he was shown the photo of his enemy, he ground his teeth and growled. With his mate, he smiled."

"That's not very solid scientific evidence," the Texas longhorn commented with a frown.

Another shrug from the mustang. "It's the best we got at this point. Until someone develops a machine that can read brain waves and provide an actual, visual output – basically mind-reading – that's what we have to work on. You should know as well as I that the brain is a very complex place."

Going back to his computer simulations, the bovidae nodded. "You're right about that. But you're wrong about something else. Anything that needs to eat another animal to survive isn't capable of love or compassion."

This time, it was the mustang's turn to frown, as she rounded on the larger mammal. "And how can you be so sure of that?"

The longhorn's expression grew distant. "I've seen it."

Four years prior to the Nighthowler Incident

It had been a long trip, a long flight from Clawndon, and Damian Hornby was tired. Two hours on the Underground to Heathpaw Airport, two hours in the terminal, and 11 hours on the flight back home next to a leopard that had one too many drinks and had decided his arm was a pillow for slobbering on. He was looking forward to being with his wife and son, not to mention getting to sleep in his own bed for the first time in a week.
His wife hadn't answered the phone when he'd called to let her know he'd landed, so he'd been forced to call a cab. That wasn't uncommon though. She was often out late on Tuesdays, volunteering for a community outreach program.

Out of habit, the longhorn slipped his keys into the lock and turned the deadbolt, not bothering to check to see if it was already unlocked. It turned out it was, much to the mammal's surprise. They didn't live in a rough neighborhood, but that's the kind of place where both he and his wife had grown up, and some things stuck with you, like locking the door when you enter or leave the house.

Before he could wonder about that any more, the mammal was hit with a pungent, horrid odour, one that set his hindbrain screaming that this was a bad place. He couldn't place it, but knew the smell was a bad thing.

The smell intensified as he slowly moved through the house, calling his wife and son's name. "Izzy? Kole? Are you here?"

He checked the garage. Both his and his wife's car was there. Closing the garage door, he turned back around and surveyed the living room. It was then that he noticed the things that were missing. The TV, blu-ray player, computer were all gone.

The longhorn's anxiety shot through the roof, and he began desperately searching through every room in the house for his two family members. Basement great room, where they entertained guests, guest room, Kole's room, bathrooms. He was desperate when he burst into the master bedroom, and the sight that greeted him, was more gruesome than any that he'd seen before, in movies or real life.

His wife and son were sprawled out on the floor, in dried pools of their own blood. Kole's neck was twisted at an unnatural angle, and he had several deep cuts in his neck, while his wife had similar cuts across her abdomen, right through fur, skin, muscle and fat to that which lay within. There were flies everywhere, and the stench that had permeated the house was twice as strong here as it was elsewhere.

He couldn't help it. The longhorn dropped to his forehooves and knees and threw up, heaving whatever he had left in his stomach onto the carpet. He couldn't tear his eyes from the sight before him. Eventually, he was able to gather his wits, and he called 911, explaining that he'd just found his wife and son dead in their home.

The ZPD and other emergency services had been swift in responding, a murder in the city being a rare enough occurrence, and a double involving a child nearly unheard of. The officers had cordoned off the house, and a swarm of investigators, lab technicians, and coroner's staff had descended. The place looked akin to an anthill now, and neighbors had come to investigate.

Hornby barely remembered the questions the detective had asked him, his mind instead stuck on what he'd seen inside. That night, he'd been offered a bed at a friend's place, but sleep was, for obvious reasons, not going to come for the Bovidae.

The investigation had been long and hard, and after two years, they'd finally tracked down the mammal responsible. The tiger that had broken into his home was doing so as part of an initiation into a carnivore supremacist cult, and when handed his sentence – life in prison without parole – the mammal had simply grinned and mocked Hornby as he was lead away to begin his life behind bars. He'd lost control and tried to lunge at the smug predator, only to be held back by his lawyer and a group of bystanders.

Present day
"I vowed that day to avenge my wife and son's death."

Felicity stared at Damian Hornby for a long moment before turning back to her work, processing what he'd said. After letting the silence extend for an almost unbearably long moment, the mustang spoke up again. "I'm sorry for your loss, Damian."

The longhorn looked at the other mammal, studying her. There was a sincerity in her words, but her face told Damian there was something she wasn't saying. On its own, it wouldn't have raised an alarm, but taken together with the comments she'd made earlier about emotions, it gave Hornby cause for concern.

He turned to his computer and opened his email client. The message he composed and sent held only six words: "We may have a bad apple."

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**Monday morning**

The weekend came to an end as it always does, and, as is always the case, mammals had to go back to work. That included the ZPD's two smallest police officers. Their first week back had been productive, and both were eager to continue the momentum they'd built.

What they weren't expecting was the mob outside the doors of Precinct One, one so thick that neither could just slip through. The shouting from the mammal's created such a din that the whole Watering Hole Plaza had taken notice. Judy was able to pick up snippets of the yelling even from a distance, and she immediately deduced that the protestor's issue was with the idea of prey interacting with predators.

Rather than face the mob and the potential ramifications that involved while just trying to get in to work, the two decided to sneak in the back way through the motor pool garage. There were no protestors here, but they'd barely gotten to the lobby before they heard the thundering voice of a certain cape buffalo.

"HOPPS! WILDE! MY OFFICE! NOW!"

Judy's ears fell, and she looked at her fox partner. What was going on? The pinned ears and the confused expression on her companion's face told her he was as bewildered and concerned as she was. The two began the long trek to the chief's office, a walk often referred to as the funeral march behind the stoic chief's back.

The rabbit didn't even need to knock before they received the order to enter. The two took their seat on the single oversized chair in front of the imposing mammal's desk, and waited.

And waited even longer as the chief stared at them. Finally, when the silence had become almost unbearable, Bogo spoke.

"So, how was your weekend, you two?"

This was unexpected. When the chief opened with small talk like this, it was a sure guarantee that you were in for a bad time. The two smaller officers looked at each other, before Judy answered for both of them. "Fine, sir. Why do you ask?"

The police chief glanced down at something on his desk before continuing. "Oh, no reason. I was just wondering when you planned to inform me of this."

He picked up the newspaper on his desk and turned it towards them.
Chapter End Notes

Interesting thing about animals (and even humans): Fur/hair colour is determined by a number of different factors throughout the development cycle. So, while it's common for identical (monozygotic) twin (etc) humans to have similar hair colours, they are very rarely exactly the same, and it's almost impossible for two furred animals from a litter to have the same coat. So even if Nick or Judy had a monozygotic twin, the chance of them having the same fur colour and markings are slim to none.

SO! Date number two! And this one has some artwork to go with! There are two versions available: The original scene, on my Deviantart, and one with some different dialog, on TheWinterBunny's page!

And guess what? REFERENCES in this chapter! Yay! Who can find them?

Coming up on October 19: The Truth Will Out!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Need help deciding what kind of pickles to have on your hamburger? Leave a comment!
They say the truth will set you free. But for Judy Hopps and the fox sitting next to her, the fact that the truth was being printed in a newspaper for all to see was ANYTHING but liberating. The doe felt like she was being dangled over the edge of the Grand Canyon, staring down at the hard, unforgiving ground far below.

Nick didn't feel much better, his stomach twisting in knots, flip-flopping, and doing it's best to climb out of his mouth as he read the article that screamed his doom.

*ZPD's Star Officers: Partners On and Off the Job?*  
by Thomas Redtail

_It seems love may be in the air for an unlikely couple, and a most unusual love at that. ZPD's Officer Judy Hopps, known for uncovering last year's divisive Night Howlers conspiracy, and her partner, Officer Nicholas Wilde, a fox, were seen spending the afternoon at Crescent Beach._

_Opened last year, the beach is a slightly cooler alternative to the hot white-sand beaches of Sahara Square. However, it also has several more secluded areas with less traffic that are popular with romantic couples, and it was in one of these areas that the two mammals were spotted. While their activities couldn't be directly observed, what this reporter was able to see suggested a level of familiarity that goes beyond mere friends and partners on the esteemed police force._

_Further research online uncovered a EweTube video of leaked security footage from the attack on the Grand Palm two weeks ago, in which Wilde, in a savage state, was observed to act friendly, even affectionate with the rabbit officer, despite his hunter instincts._
Comments on the video speculated on the state of their relationship, especially when one noted he'd seen the two of them board the Zootopia Express together a week later. Those that suggested that the pair was more than just friends received widely divisive feedback, ranging from support and an optimistic outlook on the possibilities, to spiteful and derisive, and still others shunning the very possibility.

The ZPD couldn't be reached for comment as of press time, though a look at the laws regarding interspecies relationships shows that they are offered the same protections as other relationships in the workplace.

Nick couldn't read the rest of the article, because the Chief's hoof was blocking it, but he felt he didn't really need to. It was all there. He looked over at the doe next to him. The inside of her ears were a lot paler than normal, and her eyes were wide, nose twitching.

"So, Hopps. IS any of what this article says true?"

The rabbit looked up at her superior, feeling the same gaze coming from him when he'd chewed her out for abandoning her meter maid duty. She swallowed, closed her eyes, and let out a breath. "Yes."

The rabbit and fox had never heard such a deafening silence before.

"How long has this been going on?"

Judy opened her eyes again, looking into the eyes of the cape buffalo. The intense glare made her feel like the kit caught with her paw in the cookie jar, but she thought she could see a hint of understanding behind it. "Since the night of Eric's murder, sir."

The gaze of the police chief softened ever so slightly. "Can you recite me the ZPD's policies regarding partner fraternization, please?"

Judy took a deep breath. This was part of what she was afraid of. "Relationships between partners are discouraged, due to the possibility of questionable judgement on the part of the officers involved when one or both are involved in a potentially dangerous situation."

The buffalo nodded, turning to the fox next to her. "And Wilde, the policies regarding fraternizing with a senior officer?"

The fox's ears fell. "Also discouraged, due to the possibility of workplace sexual harassment and bullying. Sir."

The hardened police chief nodded. "Very good. You both remembered. Now, maybe you can tell me why I shouldn't split you two up, and assign you two different partners, or even to different precincts."

The ears of the two tiny officers shot upward at that, both looking at each other for a long moment, before turning back to their superior. "Because despite this, Nick and I are still an effective team. We know what's at stake, sir. We know that when we put on our uniform, our duty is to the mammals of Zootopia first, our fellow officers second, and ourselves third."

A small smile threatened to break the stoic exterior of the large cape buffalo. Even though it was likely just as much because they hoped that's what he wanted to here, he knew that it was at least sincere on Judy's part. He decided to play the other card in his deck.

"Well, fortunately for you two, what the policies don't say is that enforcement of said policies is at the sole discretion of the police chief. Now normally, I would go through with splitting you two up,
but two things are staying my hoof – for now. The first is your performance at the Grand Palm. Hopps, you chose to put yourself at risk to save that civilians life, even though you knew your partner was in trouble."

"The second is a phone call I got from Mayor Clawheed about an hour ago. Seems you still have some political sway, Hopps. He requested that you two be allowed to remain partners, despite my reservations, because, and I quote, 'it would help with the current racial tensions to show predator and prey working together in both a professional and a personal capacity.'"

He watched as the two small officers glanced at each other, communicating in that silent way that they seemed to have developed.

"HOWEVER!" That brought the duo's attention back to him. "If I hear ANYTHING about misconduct or public displays of affection while in uniform, or I see ANYTHING that negatively affects your performance in any way as a result of what you have going on outside the job, I will NOT hesitate to send one of you to another shift or even another precinct. This is your only warning. Have I made myself clear?"

Both mammals nodded their heads, neither one wanting to find out what might happen if they pushed their luck.

"Good. Now, on to other things. Your case. You have that buffalo behind bars and he isn't saying anything. And I understand you want to look through the Bellwether evidence to see if there's something that was missed the first time around."

Judy nodded again, elbowing the fox when he opened his muzzle, likely to let out a snarky comment that would have gotten them put on parking duty, or, as the case today was, separated. "We went to visit her, and she really didn't have a lot to say, other than the fact that we should look through her office."

"And the ram you're looking for?"

"That's who we're looking to find clues on. This 'Doug' ram. We know Bellwether was in contact with him somehow, and we know he's involved in our mammal of interest's disappearance. Bellwether told us what she knew about him, but we haven't been able to match that with any known rams. It's like he's a ghost."

The chief gave a grunt of understanding. He'd had many cases like that in his time as an investigator, where leads just didn't pan out and evidence lead nowhere. "Besides the Bellwether evidence, have you found any more leads?"

Wilde shook his head this time. "We think they're based somewhere in either Tundratown or the Meadowlands. We've reached out to a few of my…former associates, in hopes of locating them, but so far we haven't had any luck."

"It's only been a week though. I'm sure something will come up sooner or later," Hopps, ever the optimist, couldn't help but interject.

The chief agreed. "Quite so, Hopps. But don't rely too much on that. If you have other avenues you haven't tried yet, perhaps now is the time to pursue them."

Judy thought for a moment, before something occurred to her, her ears shooting up, and a grin filling her muzzle. "I think I know just where to start, sir."

The chief suppressed a smile. "Good. Now I have much to do, and you've used up too much of that
time already. Don't you have some case work to do?"

Judy jumped up and snapped off a salute, before grabbing her fox partner's paw and almost literally dragging him across the room. The fox gave his lazy two fingered salute, just before Judy tried pulling him through the partially opened door…A door that wasn't opened enough for the larger of the two mammals, who ended up getting a nose full of the doorframe. He let out a yip of pain, to which Judy's disembodied voice was heard apologizing profusely, and leading the fox on a safer route out of the office, one that didn't involve bloodied fox noses.

Another 'test' for Hopps and Wilde. You've gone soft. If anyone else had tried this, you probably would have shipped their ass to Tundratown and ordered them to sell ice pops on the corner of Titanic Drive and Berg Street.

The two smallest ZPD officers were making their way back to their cubicle, just passing through the lobby when they heard a familiar voice call out to them.

"Nick! Judy! Over here!" Clawhauser was waving them to his desk, and no less than twenty other mammals were gathered around as well.

The two smallest mammals wandered over to the portly, jubilant cheetah's desk, and gave him a questioning look. "What's up, Benji?" Judy didn't really want to wait this out.

"Is it true?"

Nick frowned. "Is what true, Spots?"

The cheetah gestured between the rabbit and fox. "You two! Is what this article says true?" He waved the same article that the chief had shown the two in front of their faces.

Nick sighed and glanced at his doe, who nodded. Might as well face the music. "Yes, Spots, it's true."

Pandemonium ensued. The high-pitched squeal from the cheetah was only partially drowned out by the clamouring voices of the rest of their co-workers. When did it happen? A fox and a bunny? How does that work? How far have they gone? Do they "fit"? The questions got more and more crude, and it wasn't long before Judy had run out of patience.

"OKAY! Okay! We've been on two dates, alright? And we shared our first kiss last week, at my parent's farm! That's it!" Silence permeated the atrium for a moment. Nick's ears went rigid, and the doe's ears dropped as she realized what she'd just blurted out in front of her co-workers. "Oh, sweet cheese and crackers."

Nick shook his head, and let out a huge breath. This was not the way he'd hoped the day would go. Out of the corner of his eye, though, he caught his portly cheetah friend surreptitiously pulling out a book from under his reception desk, and thumbing through it.

He had a sneaking suspicion that he knew what it was the cat was doing. "Hey Spots, what you got there?"

Clawhauser scrambled to hide the book, and in the process dropped it on the floor, wide open for everyone to see. Names. Numbers. Dates. To Judy's credit, it didn't take her long to put the pieces together.

"You guys were betting on us?!"
The looks on the faces of the mammals present said it all. Guilt, a little embarrassment, and some fear of reprisal from the rabbit well known for her paw to paw skills. After all you didn't get to be the all-time record holder at the academy, along with valedictorian, and the smallest mammal ever to graduate to boot by having poor paw to paw combat skills. One only needed to look at the megafauna she'd arrested over the course of her career to see that.

The insides of her ears were red with both embarrassment and anger, pointed straight back. Her foot was rapid-fire tapping on the floor, and she crossed her arms. Nick's mind scrambled to come up with a solution, before his bunny lost her temper or embarrassed herself further. He leaned in close and whispered in her ear, mindful of the fact that her ears could pick up just about anything. "Just go with me here, Carrots."

He straightened and turned to the assembled mob. "Who was the bookie?" The mob pointed at Clawhauser, who buttoned up his maw, looking for someone else to point to.

"Spots! I never would have guessed. How did you do it?"

The overweight cheetah grabbed a donut and stuffed it in his mouth. "I muff alk oo fe offer whim oo wenf aroumf."

That made no sense to the fox at all. He looked to Judy, who wore an equally perplexed expression. He turned back to Clawhauser. "What?"

The cheetah swallowed with an audible gulp. "I just talked to the others when you weren't around." Ben's voice was barely above a whisper, but both of the tiny officers caught it.

"Just when we weren't around, huh? What's the pool up to?"

The flustered cheetah scrambled with his book, picking it up and dropping it on several occasions, before flipping to the right page. "$2,461.83."

Judy's ears shot upward, laser-focused on the large cat. "2,461.83?! How many mammals bet on us?"

Clawhauser hid his book. "Well, to be fair, not everyone bet on you getting together. Some bet on you NOT getting together, but…almost everyone in the precinct one staff. Over 100."

Rabbit ears fell back down again. "Crackers, Benny, please tell me you didn't get a wager from the Chief."

The horrified look on the cat's face helped dissuade that idea. "Heavens no, Judy! None of us have a death wish!"

The fox shook his head. "Yet you were betting on a certain rabbit behind her back."

At least half the mammals had the decency to look ashamed.

"Who's the pot winner?"


Nick continued pressing for answers. "What happens if Bogo finds out about this?"

The collective reactions of the assembled group were not a positive response, but the answer came from Higgins. "He'd confiscate the money and donate it to the Mustard Seed homeless shelter."
This would work out well, then, and might even earn him some brownie points with Judy. "Well we can't have that. So, here's what I'm thinking. How about Carrots and I each get a hundred off the top, and you split the rest evenly between Francine and the homeless shelter, everyone's happy?" Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his bunny perk up and a smile cross her muzzle.

The group of assembled mammals looked to Clawhauser. They weren't getting anything out of the bet, so it fell to the bookie. The majority of them agreed, internally that yes, yes that would be a better option than having Bogo find out about their betting ring. Clawhauser agreed as well.

"I'll let Francine know. That's a good idea, Nick!"

The fox winked at the large cat and put his paw on Judy's back, guiding her away from the gaggle of officers, in the direction of their cubicle. The two were silent almost the whole way there, before the doe broke the silence.

"That was a good idea, Slick. I'm proud of you."

The fox, usually full of snarky remarks and witty comebacks, was speechless. Not that Judy had never said she was proud of him before, but it always gave him a warm feeling whenever she told him that.

Part of the fox still marvelled at how much his life had changed in the last year alone. He'd gone from a shifty conmammal whom no one would trust to a police officer, sworn to uphold the laws he had spent so many years skirting. He'd found someone to love, and who loved him back, who was his partner both on the force and off.

It was risky, but Nick couldn't help it. He scooped the doe up, who emitted a surprised squeak, and wrapped her up in a hug, before setting her back down again.

"Nick! You know we can't do that around here! Bogo can still split us up!"

The fox let out a breath and walked towards his side of the cubicle. "Sorry, Carrots. It just means a lot to hear you say that, that's all."

Judy's expression went from annoyed to sympathetic in a heartbeat. She knew Nick didn't have an easy life growing up, and his relationship with his mother had hit a downhill slide after the junior ranger scouts. She had no doubt that the vixen had still been proud of her kit, but the fact that they'd separated in a fight and been estranged for so many years may have diluted that.

Then and there, Judy decided she'd make sure Nick knew how proud of him she and his mother were. She wouldn't let him forget. Not every mammal could completely change the course of their life for the better, and in as little time as Nick had.

"So, what do we do today, Fluff?" The fox's voice jarred the smaller mammal from her thoughts, and she looked over to see Nick checking his emails. "Deep archives still hasn't processed our request for the Bellwether evidence, and our feelers haven't turned up anything on Doug or his cronies."

"Callahan's our only lead right now. We put in requests for his cell phone, email and Internet history last week, that should have been more than enough time for the providers to act. We should give them each a call and see if they need a fire lit under their butts." The doe climbed into her own chair and woke up her computer.

"Hmmm. Lighting a fire under a mammal's butt isn't generally a good idea. Fur's pretty flammable."

The groan that emanated from the doe and the sound of her face planting itself on the keyboard was
"Hey Carrots, I have a question."

"Shoot." The rabbit didn't divert her attention from her screen.

"I'm not sure you would want me to do that, Fluff, especially since we have lethals now." Nick couldn't help the grin that crossed his face, thinking back to the similar joke she'd pulled on him on their first date.

Another exasperated groan as the doe slumped back in her chair. "I should have seen that coming."

Her fox partner laughed as she sat there staring at the ceiling, her ears hanging straight down behind her head. "So, I was wondering, you know, now that everyone and their pet iguana knows about us… Would you want to…" The fox trailed off, suddenly nervous about what he was going to ask. It wasn't the tod that usually took the initiative for new steps in a relationship, but their situation was unique.

Judy sat up and looked at Nick, leaning her head to the side in curiosity. "Want to what?"

The red canid closed his eyes, took a deep breath and let it out, steeling his courage. When he opened his eyes again, he had his hustler's grin on. "I wanted to ask you if you want to move in with me. Take my extra bedroom if you want. Be my roommate and all."

Judy stared for a moment. It didn't escape her that he'd resorted to using the old mask he used to put on when hustling, and she couldn't fight the grin that crossed her muzzle, knowing that it meant he was nervous. "My, my, is a shifty fox asking me into his den? What should a poor, innocent, bunny do? What might the fox be planning to do to her?" The mask cracked. The grin slipped, threatening to fall. Judy laughed. "Nick, I practically live there anyway. I'll take us all of an hour to grab the rest of my stuff from my old place and move it to yours. And that guest bedroom of yours is bigger than my whole apartment. I'll gladly take it."

The look of relief on the fox's face was one she wished she had her camera for. She waited until the fox had grabbed the drink he had on his desk and was taking a sip before finishing her statement. "But the bed in YOUR room is SOOO much more comfortable."

The rabbit's laughter at the fox's spit take rang throughout the cubicle farm.

Getting Callahan's cell phone and email records turned out to be the easy part. But, if you asked Nick, sifting through the bank records, call records, and text messages was at least more interesting than staring at surveillance and security camera footage.

In his former life, access to this information would have been a treasure trove for a hustler. Now though, he was looking for anything that might be connected to either his suspected disappearance at Doug's hoofs, or his involvement with whatever was going on at Zootopia Coast Distribution.

The two had identified Wolford's throwaway number fairly quickly thanks to department requisition records, and from there had at least been able to filter out the exchanges between himself and the fallen officer. Their first exchange had been the day before Wolford had been assigned to undercover duties. The conversation, drawn out over the course of about a week, was pretty vague on the details, hinting at a "delivery" at his place of employment, and suggesting a "rendezvous". Nick was at least thankful for the fact that they could match that with the day the suspicious crates had shown up at the distribution warehouse with this so called delivery. After that, though, the messages had dropped off
to only a few check-ins per day.

The last message between the two, sent to Wolford's throwaway a few hours before Nick and Judy had found the other officer, was as simple as it was ominous: "Don't let them catch you."

The two mammals mulled over that one, along with the unusually large sum of money that had been deposited into his account the night after the delivery had taken place. The bank had been forthcoming enough to inform them that it had been a cash-only deposit, which the bank had thought odd at the time, but since it was under $10,000 and wasn't followed up with similar sized deposits, they hadn't opened a case, and the deposit was cleared.

A call to Zootopia Coast Distributors got the two cops routed through to the company accountant, who, in a case of a mammal actually being helpful for once, confirmed that no, the company had not cleared any bonuses for any of the night staff in the last six months, and had had their own bank fax over the records to prove it.

So, the question of where the cash had come from still remained. Very few of the bills in the cash deposit had been marked at any point, and those that had, the track record had been as random and innocuous as anything else they'd seen. Pay for a coffee here, a PawTunes gift card there, a bag of groceries somewhere else.

A few deposits, Nick and Judy identified as discretionary funds from the ZPD itself, and they highlighted those, intending to follow up on them. All of them had been before the current case, so there was little chance they had anything to do with the current situation. Still, as Judy often said, "it never hurts to be thorough."

Around lunch time, they finally got the call that Bellwether's evidence had been retrieved, and that they were free to look it over. The two headed down to the evidence locker to retrieve it. There ended up being several boxes full, so the two took over one of the evidence rooms to sort through it all.

"How can one sheep have so many pens and pencils?" Judy had not been happy with the mounds of writing materials in her first box, especially when she found out that, over the months in storage, one of the pens had ruptured and sprayed ink all over the inside of the evidence bag, which had leaked.

"They weren't kidding when they said they confiscated everything. Look at this. How could her glasses cleaning wipes have been part of the conspiracy?" Nick held out a box of glasses cleaning wipes, many of them still in their individual packets.

Judy shook her head and kept rummaging around her box, pulling out random evidence bags and putting them on the table. "A pad of post-it notes, nothing on them. Her 'world's greatest dad-assistant mayor' mug. I can't believe she kept that…"

"I'd actually totally forgotten about that mug." Nick frowned as he stared at the contents of his box. "Not much else in here except old files, and bills to pass to the city council."

"Maybe one of them can give us some hints?" Judy suggested, hopefully, as she pulled out more bags of meaningless office supplies.

Nick shrugged and set the box aside. "Maybe. Thing is, we'd need a lawyer to read those documents, or someone else who understands these things. They're hundreds of pages long."

Judy finished off her box and stared at the piles of seemingly useless junk on the table. "Seems like
such a waste of time to grab up things like pens and pencils. It's not like they can say 'this pen proves she was the conspirator!''"

"Well, they can match ink formulations," Nick pointed out, surprised that Judy hadn't thought of that.

The doe nodded. "Yeah, but that only lets you match it to a batch of pens. For all we know, a batch could mean a thousand sheep sized pens."

Nick chucked. "Or one elephant size one."

The doe couldn't help but join in. "Yeah, an elephant pen would probably hold about that much ink."

The two decided to pull out the paperwork in Nick's box and at least organize it, so that they could have someone from Legal read it over if need be. It turned out though, not everything in the box was legal documents and bills. Buried in the bottom of the box, was a single black book, a day planner, with the ewe's name printed in gold ink on the front.

Nick and Judy glanced at each other with mirrored expressions of curiosity. The doe reached in and picked the book out of the box, turning it over in her paws. It looked like an ordinary dayplanner, with a personalized cover.

"Maybe she wrote her targets down? 'Today, I'm gonna have Doug shoot Emmitt Otterton.'" Nick quipped. Judy couldn't hold back the snort and covered her mouth with one paw, the grin fully evident on her muzzle.

Still giggling, Judy signed and dated the evidence tag and broke the bag's seal, grabbing latex gloves and handing a pair to Nick as she did. Neither mammal liked the feel of the things, but it was necessary to help avoid evidence contamination.

Carefully removing it from the plastic bag, the doe turned the book over a few more times, then speed flipped through it, stopping when she past the end. She turned back a few pages. Nick leaned in closer to read at the same time, his cheek almost touching hers, and his scent surrounding her. She found it liberating that those same things that would have had her ancestors running away screaming, instead are part of what made him attractive to her. She mentally shook her head and continued what she was doing.

The ewe had already marked several appointments on days that would have followed her arrest, and as they backtracked closer, the entries got more numerous. Most were innocuous, such as city council meetings, and meetings with various species representative groups.

"Hey Carrots, does it look to you like the only meetings she had with the species groups were all prey?"

Judy flipped forward a few pages, then went back again. "You're right. Look. Here's one for herds and grazing. Here's another for rabbits and hares…tree-dwellers, so that would be squirrels and chipmunks. Heck, there's even one for fruit bats in the Nocturnal District. But you're right, no omnivores or carnivores." The doe sat back a moment. "Though it's not really surprising. She was pushing an anti-predator agenda."

Nick frowned. "You'd think that predators would have caught on to that ostracization. But I didn't see anything like that."

Judy nodded. "She played her cards well. Had us all fooled." After a while, she turned back to the day planner. They got to the day she'd been arrested, and the nearly empty calendar date ended up being a huge disappointment.
The only thing on that page was a small 'X' in the corner, and a luncheon with the Sahara Square Society for Special Service Sloths.

"Boy, try saying that ten times fast," Nick remarked, as he read the organization's name. The fox then tried, only to get his tongue tied halfway through the third attempt, stumbling over his words, eliciting giggles from his rabbit companion.

A thought occurred to Judy. "You know, I don't think the members of that group had any trouble pronouncing their name at a speed comfortable to them."

Nick cocked his head. "Why do you say that?"

The rabbit smirked and pointed to the name. "They're all sloths."

Nick blinked, glanced down at the page, then broke into a grin. "Sahara… Square… Society… for—OW!"

The fox's arm smarted, and the rabbit guilty of causing him indescribable pain still had the smirk plastered on her face. He sighed and looked back down at the page.

"I wonder what this 'X' means?" He pointed to the small mark in the corner.

Judy stared at the page for a moment, then flipped ahead on the calendar. "Look, there's one here too." She flipped a few more pages, and found a third one. Going backward she found another one. "This one was the day Gazelle had her peace rally. I was working crowd control there. A polar bear went savage that day." More page flipping. "And here. Delgato and I responded to two savage wolves. Twins. They were outside Mr. Freezies' Coffee and Hot Drinks in Tundratown."

The green eyes of her partner widened. "Each one of these 'X's was an attack. Or would have been in the case of those two after she got arrested."

Judy stared off into the distance. "We knew she was planning these in advance. She also called her targets in to Doug." She turned to face Nick, her eyes going bright. "Maybe we can match these dates up to her phone records—"

"-and find a common phone number!" The russet canid immediately caught on to her train of thought. And the thousand watt smile she flashed him drew a smile from him as well.

The doe was already heading for the computer terminal, and before long, she'd pulled up the digital record for both the ewe's cell phones. She'd been arrested with two, a cheap burner phone and one with a regular plan. Both phone records had been pulled, as well as her office phone, and home phone.

She put all 4 windows side by side and began scrolling through them. It didn't take long before she'd noticed a few recurring patterns.

"OK, here's one she called every day, looks like all the same time. Could be a friend or family member?" She clicked the number, and after a while was awarded with confirmation. "Yep, Agatha Bellwether." She turned back to the list of phone calls. The other recurring numbers turned out to be mostly city councillors and representative groups, often the same ones she had luncheons with in her day planner.

They chose to focus more on the burner phone than the other two, figuring that Bellwether would likely not have been stupid enough to call a hit from one of her main phones. Patterns started emerging there, too. Once a week, she received a call from an overseas number that lasted anywhere
from 5 minutes to two hours. It always occurred on the weekend.

The number always stayed the same, and when they tried to call it, they got an automated message in another language that neither one of them recognized. A check of the country code revealed that it had originated in Zussia. Nick checked the case file, but the request for the number's owner from the local exchange carrier had gone unanswered, and the lead had been left alone when it proved unnecessary for the case.

In this case though, the number always called Bellwether, never the other way around.

"Could be a fake. Lots of ways to get around phone tracing," Nick suggested. Judy nodded, having seen her share of revenue agency scams and tech support scare tactics that used the same trick. She’d lost count of the number of times she and Wolford had responded to mammals calling to complain about the scammers.

The two turned back to the phone records, focussing on the days in the ewe's planner that had the little 'X's on them. It turned out to be the right choice, since the pattern was immediately evident.

"One number. She called this one number every day that had an 'X' on it," Judy breathed.

Beside her, Nick shuffled through the police reports for all of the savage mammals. He pointed to the dates on the missing mammal reports. "The dates match here too."

The doe clicked on the number and waited for the information to get pulled from the telephone company's system. Fortunately, it didn't take long.

"Unknown," Judy read aloud as she stared at the screen, trying not to let the disappointment show through. Why was it they kept hitting these kinds of blocks? It's like Doug was always a step ahead of them.

Her fox companion was also frowning, before he brightened up. "Maybe we can figure out where he was when he got these calls, we can figure out where he might have holed up. We won’t be able to get an exact location…Not like those TV shows… but at least it's a start."

Judy’s smile returned, and she nodded her head. "I'll call the cell phone company. Maybe they can tell us."

It turns out they could and were more than happy to provide the information. While the majority of the calls were received in a backroads, run-down area of Sahara Square, where the two knew he'd kept his lab, a significant number were on a small tower in the northwest corner of the Meadowlands.

"That area's pretty run down too, if memory serves," the fox officer commented as he stared at a map of the city with their newly circled area of coverage from the tower in question.

Judy left the computer terminal and joined the fox. "I'm thinking this is something we should go and check out."

Her fox companion smiled. "I'm thinking I agree with you, Fluff."

Chapter End Notes

So, as I finished this chapter, I was 36,000 feet over the Pacific Ocean, northbound to
Alaska. Isn't technology great?

An All Nick and Judy chapter, with a sprinkling of the rest of the P1 cast! Who'da thought!

No artwork, but REFERENCES! No one picked up my reference to Disney's Haunted Mansion rides (though one reader came close), nor did anyone catch my Pokemon reference (no I don't watch the series or anything). Can you find the references in this chapter?

Also, keep the ask the cast questions coming!

Coming up on November 2: Finding a Ram or Two!

I reply to all comments, except guest comments on FFN! Questions? Critiques? Did your sandwich cheese go bad on you? Leave a comment!
Finding a Ram or Two

Chapter Summary

Sometimes, when you are looking for something, you never find it. Other times, it falls right in your lap.

Chapter Notes

After talking with a reader about characterization, I'm wondering what you guys are thinking. The thing is, some of my character choices haven't been received as well among some people, so I'd like to hear what you have to say, good bad, or indifferent. How can I improve?

DISCLAIMER: My editor and friend Daee17 and I were busy celebrating our new bid to own Zootopia when we found out Scuttle had mistook it for a Norwegian singing tool of some sort. Last we heard, he'd swallowed it.

Nick hadn't been kidding when he'd said that the area of the Meadowlands was run down. If Judy had to be the judge, it was orders of magnitude worse than Kalahari Heights. At least there, most of the buildings were habitable, if not exactly 7 figure mansions. Here, there were more boarded up and abandoned buildings than there were habitable ones. And those were the ones that were still standing. There seemed to be a lot of burnt out husks and piles of rubble where buildings once stood.

Judy stared at the desolation around her. The mammals weren't much better off, clearly of the lower working class, if they had any job at all, and struggling to get by on even that. The majority of the population was undernourished, and as they rolled through the area, the hopelessness the mammals felt was palpable.

"What happened here?" Judy hadn't made it out this far into the Meadowlands before, and the idea that such a place existed within Zootopia's borders shocked and appalled her. It didn't even have a name, except as part of the Clover Valley subdivision.

"Drug gangs. A decade ago, these streets were a haven for a trio of gangs in a constant war for turf and product. The ZPD could barely keep up with the death rate. Almost a mammal a week at times. The ZPD finally rolled through and took the gangs apart in what ended up as a virtual street war." Nick shook his head and stared morosely out the window.

The light clicked on in Judy's head. "Now I remember. They got the gang leaders, right?"

The fox sitting in the passenger seat nodded. "It came at a price though. A lot of families lost someone when civilians got caught in the crossfire."

Judy's ears drooped as she processed the information. The dark side of Zootopia was something that always weighed heavily on the doe's mind whenever it reared its ugly head. She wanted to believe in
the best of mammals, but sometimes it seemed that mammals had nothing better to do than find more and more cruel ways of destroying each other.

The doe took a deep breath and steeled herself. She wouldn't let this get her down. She had to stay positive and work to make the world a better place. It wouldn't do it on its own.

The two continued to patrol the area, looking for any sign of the ram they were after. With so many of the buildings left to the elements and subsequently condemned for mammalian habitation thanks to mold and rot, it was a wonder anyone wanted to live here at all. It was a shame some just couldn't afford to live anywhere else.

The two mammals eventually gave up, not finding anything of interest, nor seeing any suspicious activity, and they headed back into the city center, both wondering what they seemed to be missing.

"Well, that was a waste. And how did it end up being the only part of the Meadowlands with no sheep?" Judy was pissed.

Nick was silent as he pondered the same question. While he said he knew everyone, he wasn't as knowledgeable about the city's demographics, but as long as he'd known it, the Meadowlands were populated almost exclusively by sheep and other herd animals. The thing is, what they'd seen in that little corner was a mix and match of several carnivorous mammalian families, none of them matching the rest of the Meadowlands' demographics.

"Maybe that's the key. The lack of something that should be there. Why would predators live in a largely prey area, even if it is a slum? Most predator species that can't afford decent housing live on the fringes of the Nocturnal District or in the older run-down areas of Tundratown or Sahara Square."

"You think that's something Bellwether did?"

"Maybe not Bellwether specifically, but someone somehow got the less-well-off predators to move there."

The rabbit doe frowned. "But then why would Doug live out there? Or even associate with that place?"

Nick shrugged. "It's just my theory at this point. Unfortunately, I haven't got any other clues."

Tapping her thumbs on the steering wheel as she drove through the streets of the Meadowlands, Judy considered the possibilities. "Is it possible that we were looking in the wrong place? I mean that area would have been only a small portion of the tower's coverage."

The fox glanced over at her as she negotiated the left turn onto another road. "What are you thinking, Carrots?"

Judy hesitated a moment before answering. "Well, when we first found Doug, he was in an old subway train car. A train car that the ZTA hadn't reported stolen or missing. It was also tying up an active, powered maintenance line. Why didn't the ZTA say anything about that? Or Zootopia Pacific Railway, since they use the same track?"

Nick chuckled, remembering the aftermath of that. "They sure complained when an ex-cop rabbit and a fox decided to play chicken with one of their trains, then changed the switch on them, which necessitated a $100,000 repair to the track work. Good thing we got a get out of jail free card for that."
Judy couldn't help but nod in agreement. The verbal lashing she'd received was second only to when she almost got herself fired on her second day. Fortunately for her, Bogo had actually been on her side, and had lobbied for her reinstatement, repeating what he'd said the day she resigned: "The world's always been broken, that's why we need good cops like you." He'd warned her though that she probably wouldn't get a third chance and that destruction of city property was not a good thing on her resume.

Clearing her head of her thoughts, she glanced at her partner. "My point is, Nick, that somehow Doug got access to that stuff and no one complained. No one said anything. What if he was doing it here? Using a public utilities building or something as his hideout?"

The light bulb went on in the fox's head. "That's possible. Not sure what, why, or where, but that does make a certain amount of sense. But how would he get access to those buildings?"

The doe shrugged, making another right turn onto an on ramp for the city ring road. "Maybe he's an employee in the utilities sector or he knows someone who is."

"Didn't the ZPD get all the ZTA and city public utilities employee's names after the Bellwether debacle?"

Judy nodded, still concentrating on the road. "We didn't find any rams named Doug, Woolter, or Jesse. They could be aliases, but we didn't know for whom. None of the photo IDs matched the descriptions."

Another trash run. Jesse Bighorn was getting sick of them, and he could tell his brother was as well. There wasn't much they could do, though. The higher ups paid big bucks for the risks they had to take, and they'd been told, both in words and in money, that their service was invaluable to the cause.

This one was a rush job and they'd been caught off guard. They needed to get to their garage in Tundratown from the Meadowlands, and quick. Jesse took a corner at a little bit to high a speed, shaving off a little bit of the expensive rubber compound on their tires before hitting the onramp to the ring road highway that would take them to their destination in an old mechanic's shop near the south end of the climate wall.

"Hey, take it easy, Jess, you're driving like a damn lunatic!"

Woolter had his hoof firmly grasping the safety handle on his side of the small sedan.

"Quit your whining Woolter, you know as well as I do that you can't drive any better!" Jesse swerved left across four lanes of traffic, looking for an opening in the knot of cars that they'd found themselves behind

"Well, cool your jets. We don't want to attract any attention."

Murphy was not on their side. Red, white, and blue lights lit their sedan up, and the whoop-whoop of a siren told them they'd been spotted.

The younger of the two brothers looked in the rear-view mirror, and his blood ran cold. Not from the sight of the police cruiser behind them, but from the mammals inside. He'd encountered them only once before, and had managed to escape, but if he pulled over now, he was sure they'd recognize him.

He stepped on the gas harder.
"HOLY PEANUTS!" Came out of one mammal's mouth, at the same time as a "Shit!" from the other and a hard brake and screeching of tires, as a gray car swerved across the freeway in front of them, nearly taking out their brush guard as they passed a slow-moving Minnie Van.

"Cheese sticks, that was close, you crazy nutcase! Light 'em up and call it in, Nick!"

The fox gave a sly grin and hit the lights and sirens. "Dispatch, unit Zulu 240 initiating 10-11 on a gray Dodge sedan southbound on the Deer Foot Freeway, license plate bravo Zulu romeo thirteen eighty-one. That's bravo Zulu romeo one three eight one. Reckless driving-" he glanced over at Judy's speedometer. "-and speeding."

Clawhauser's response was somewhat muffled, like his mouth was full, but given the cheetah's propensity for food, Nick guessed it probably was. "240, Dispatch, copy that. Do you require assistance?"

The fox glanced at his partner, who was laser-focused on the situation. ''Affirmative, Spots, we're good for right now, but an extra unit would be great in case this goes south." Judy swerved around a large semi, earning a few horns before the mammal driving realized that honking at a cop in a chase situation was probably a bad idea. "Further south," Nick amended, somewhat belatedly.

Woolter slammed up against the window once again, as his brother took a wild route through the traffic, trying to shake the persistent police cruiser that was chasing them.

"Dude, I know you don't want the five oh to bag you, but I WOULD like to live through this, you know!" The ram was irate, and that turned into shouting at his brother, who also happened to be the driver.

"Listen, idiot, that fox and bunny cop is in that car! If they see us, they'll connect us to the Bellwether scandal! Doug and the brass would shear us if we got caught!"

Jesse stepped on the gas harder. He had to lose the fuzz.

"And of COURSE, they don't pull over when you want them to."

Judy frowned and pointed. "He seems pretty desperate to get away." Up ahead, the gray car forced its way between an elephant's compact and an SUV suited for a mammal Nick's size, causing both to swerve dangerously into other lanes to avoid a collision. "We might want to call in air support."

Nick grabbed for the radio again, giving Judy a sly look. "What? Is SuperBunny giving up?"

After an emphatic shake of her head, Judy returned her attention to the road. "Not at all. But if we keep this up, someone is going to get hurt." The car up ahead jigged into an open lane, forcing Judy to try and find a route through the traffic. Unfortunately for her, a cheetah's pickup truck was in their blind spot and she couldn't switch lanes. "Stupid cheetah, get out of my way!"

Nick grimaced and keyed the microphone. "Dispatch, better get HAWC up, this guy's not stopping, and Hopps is getting mad."

"Zulu 240, this is Zulu 238 we'll join your pursuit on the next onramp. Do you mean mad as in crazy, or mad as in angry?"

The fox snorted. "Zulu 238, 240. What do you think, Delgato?"
"Mad as in crazy, then."

Nick watched as Judy's eyes narrowed. "You know she heard that, right?"

"Zulu 238, this is 237, Delgato, you are a dead cat."

"256 concurs with 237. Hope you like mat burns." Francine Pennington's voice was unmistakable.

"Yeah, you'd know all about that Rhinesman. That vid of Judy taking you out in the Academy went viral WITHOUT being released to the Internet!"

Nick burst out laughing, and even Judy couldn’t suppress a chuckle. "You going to kick their asses, Bunny Muscles?"

"NOT the time, Nick," The rabbit doe had trouble suppressing the giggles as another voice filtered through the radio.

"All units, cut the chatter! 240, Sergeant Higgins in 226, I'm headed your way."

The doe finally found an opening in the knot of traffic, whipping around a giraffe's ForTwo, and pulling up parallel to the fleeing car. The two officers glanced into the other vehicle's cab, gesturing that the other mammals should pull over.

That is, until the two mammals in the fleeing car looked their way. The surprise was immediately evident on both officer's muzzles.

"Cheese and crackers. It's them! Woolter and Jesse!"

Nick didn’t hesitate. "Dispatch, positive identification on the occupants, names known only as Woolter and Jesse, wanted from the Night Howler case. Middle age rams, one with an eye patch."

"240, dispatch, 10-4 on your ID and request for air support. They are enroute. Got anymore information?"

Nick shook his head as though Clawhauser could see him. "Nope, sorry, Spots, we got nothing for you." He grabbed his safety handle as Judy backed off slightly and used her car to begin pushing on the gray sedan's rear quarter panel. Unfortunately, the ram driving chose that moment to make another sudden lane change away from them, and the doe was forced to pull back.

Judy fell in behind the two rams again, as they came to another cluster of traffic. "We need to end this soon."

No sooner had she said that though, when an errant lane change from the speeding, erratic vehicle caused another car to swerve right into the side of a third vehicle, one for smaller mammals. Both lost control and ploughed through a third lane and the car occupying it as well. All three vehicles slammed into the guardrail, with the largest of the three punching through to the other side.

"CRACKERS!"

Nick let out a yelp as Judy braked hard and swerved to avoid the wreckage, bringing their cruiser to a sliding, screeching halt just shy of the mess. Beyond the accident, the gray sedan tore off into the distance. The doe grabbed the radio. "Dispatch, Zulu 240! Accident on Deer Foot freeway, southbound between Great Valley Parkway and Rammundsen Street! Three cars, need assistance!"

"10-4, Hopps, need fire or medical?"
The doe shook her head. "I'm not sure, Clawhauser. Send them our way, just in case."

"240, this is 238, pulling up on your six, we'll handle the scene, you go get the perps."

"Thanks, Delgato." The doe stomped on the gas, resuming the pursuit. There was a fire in her eyes as she zeroed in on the fleeing sedan, the gap between them already shrinking.

The scene was one of carnage, with the three cars scattered across the center divider, shoulders and at least one lane on both sides of the freeway. Delgato climbed out of his cruiser, followed soon after by his partner, a tiger by the name of James Siberius, aptly nicknamed "Kirk," and the two ran towards the twisted, mangled remains of the three cars involved in the pile-up. The smaller of the three vehicles, belonging to a family of raccoons, had fared the worst, and they had to sit tight and wait for fire rescue to arrive with the hydraulic rescue tools.

Meanwhile, the other two vehicles, one belonging to a pair of moose, and the other a pickup truck owned by a very vocal and irate zebra, were slightly better off, despite the moose's having gone through the guardrail.

The moose and the raccoons were just happy to be alive and thanked the two officers when they checked on them. The zebra on the other hand, was not so happy.

"You useless mammals can't even stop a speeder! Why the hell is the city paying two worthless pelts like you?!

Siberius and Delgato both put their paws on their ESWs in case the angry mammal decided to get violent. "Sir, please calm down, we-" Whatever the lion was going to say next was cut off.

"Calm down? CALM DOWN?! You jokers wrecked my truck! You might as well turn your badges in now, because I'm going to make sure you idiots never work in this city again!"

The two cops remained expressionless but prepared themselves, snapping the retaining straps on their holsters off and resting their palms on the butts of their tranquilizers.

Another sneer from the zebra. "You think those little sleepy darts will do anything to me? Just try it, I dare you!"

Delgato sighed internally. This guy seemed to be itching for a fight. His partner wasn't so reserved. "Sir, these darts are rated to take down elephants. That's a lot of sleepy dart. The thing is, for smaller mammals, like yourself, if we use too high a rating of dart on you, say, these elephant stoppers, that's a lethal dose. You'd fall asleep and then your heart would stop. You wouldn't even know it."

The tiger moved to the side, and the zebra's attention followed him. "Now, if you were to attack us, we'd be forced to defend ourselves with one of these. That wouldn't end well for you. Once we shoot you, the toxins get injected almost instantly, so you'd have to hope that you get medical help, and quick, because first aid won't save you."

The zebra decided it might be a good idea to back down and return to his vehicle. But that didn't end up going his way either, as he found the maned cat blocking his way.

"Stay where you are, sir, and keep your hooves where I can see them. You're not under arrest at this time, but you haven't been co-operative, and we need you to stay out here, for everyone's safety, understand?"

The zebra frowned, "so, what, you just stick up whomever you feel like, whenever you want? That's
crocs! Your supervisor is going to be hearing from me!"

The tiger glanced at his partner. "Actually, sir, our cruiser camera is on and recording, and it would have picked up your threatening remarks. If you go to our supervisor, that recording will be brought in as evidence, and you might end up with a charge for obstruction or even threatening an officer."

The Zebra shut up after that, and the two cats were happy for the silence.

"Zulu 240, Zulu 240, this is HAWC One approaching the incident from the west. ETA, two minutes."

"240, this is 256, we're rolling up on your six."

The radio chatter from the ongoing chase didn't stop, though.

No sooner had Jesse thought they lost the first pursuit vehicle, when the blasted thing showed up again. Jesse cursed, both at the 5-0's persistence, and the fact that he had to try and navigate pre-rush-hour traffic at high speed while blind in one eye.

The car he was in didn't handle all that well either, but it was the only one they had, and they'd been called on short notice. He pushed on the gas harder. He had to lose this new cop car - two of them he now noted. The one that had just joined the chase was moving ahead to cut him off, while the other was moving in beside him.

They were going to try boxing him in.

In a surprise move, Jesse slammed on the brakes, causing both fuzzmobiles to overshoot him, and swerved across the freeway for the offramp. The screeching sound of tires told him that the popo had seen his maneuver, if a bit too late. The ram braked hard, swerving around several civilian cars, and taking the heft hand corner at the end of the offramp at high speed, before flooring the pedal and racing off in the direction of Savannah central.

"Shit!" Nick swore as he saw the car they'd been chasing swerve off to the right and down an onramp. "What the hell is this guy, some sort of pro driver?!" The fox had a death grip on the safety handle on the passenger side.

Judy hit the brake, skidding to a stop as they heard unit 256 on the radio commenting that they had also lost the vehicle. "Either that or he spends way too much time playing Need For Speed or Grand Theft Auto."

"Zulu 240, HAWC 1, we've got eyes on your reckless vehicle, heading westbound on Klondike Drive. Just turned right, now northbound on Aurora Way. Lots of traffic."

Judy turned to her partner, who was craning his neck to watch the black and white painted helicopter above them. "Try and get ahead of him and spike him?"

Nick grinned. "I've always wanted to try setting up a spike."

The rabbit shook her head. "It's not as fun as it sounds. You throw the spike chain into the road and wait for him to run them over." She grabbed the mic.

"HAWC 1, 240 here, we're going to try and get ahead of him and lay down a spike chain. Keep us apprised!"

"HAWC 1, roger that. Your quarry is slowing down, still headed north on Aurora."
"256 here, we 'll back 240 at the spike stop"

"237 coming from the east, we 'll try and herd him to you guys."

Judy consulted the city map on the GPS unit. "237, copy that. See if you can force him to the Deer Foot onramp at Rammundsen Street. We 'll set up there. Any other units able to lend a hand?"

"240, Grizzoli and Fangmeyer here in Zulu 221. We 'll help keep the guy pointed your way."

Judy grinned. "Copy that, Grizzoli, and Liz? Glad to see you back on the streets."

"Gotta make the world a better place, Hopps." Both Nick and Judy could hear the smile in her voice.

Jesse was pissed. He 'd finally lost the cops, but now he had to get back on track. He and Woolter were going to be late. Turning onto Aurora Way, he consulted the map of the area in his head. He 'd go north for a few blocks before heading east and crossing under the freeway.

As he drove along, he couldn 't help but shake his head. It was just awful luck that the cop car that happened to spot them belonged to the two mammals that could identify them.

Woolter was in the same frame of mind. They 'd barely evaded getting caught the last time they 'd encountered these two, and he was the one that got the most physical abuse in that altercation. He 'd been down for days after that rabbit had kicked him into the switch stand lever, and the concussion he 'd gotten when the fox had tricked him into ramming Jesse out the front window hadn 't been any better.

Jesse tapped his forehoof on the steering wheel. "Think we should call Doug? Get him to give the fuzz something else to think about?"

Woolter shook his head. "No. The heat 's already up from that wolf cop about a month ago. They haven 't bagged him yet, and I haven 't seen any wanted posters for him, so they may not have made the connection. Let 's not give them any more reason to look for him."

Jesse pulled up to a stop sign and was about to turn left when he spotted another cruiser sitting on the side of the road. He decided to continue on to Rammundsen. He 'd head under the freeway and take a side road to Sahara Square that way.

No sooner had he proceeded through the intersection, when the cruiser lit up and pulled out, heading in his direction. The ram swore again and hit the accelerator.

"237, we 're on the suspect 's tail. Right on route too."

The call was music to Judy 's ears as she raced to the Rammundsen Street onrams, full lights and sirens blaring. When she reached the exit, she hit the brakes and maneuvered her vehicle into a position to block the road, noting with satisfaction that the other cruiser behind her moved to block the rest of the road. The only route that the car could go was onto the freeway.

McHorn and Pennington climbed out of their cruiser and began directing traffic away from the intersection. Nick, on the other hand went to the back of their own cruiser and pulled out the spike chain. "You know, Carrots, this is nothing like the old Need For Speed games where you just push a button and the spike chain drops out of your rear bumper while you 're going 100 miles an hour."
Judy couldn't help but smile. "As much as I like video games, those racing games got almost everything wrong about police chases."

Nick laughed. "Among other things, fluff. I can't imagine being able to survive a collision with a suspiciously impenetrable guard rail at that speed either, much less being able to just drive away like nothing happened."

Judy joined in the fox's chuckling as she slammed the trunk shut. "Let's go catch us some rams, Slick."

Rammundsen street was not in his original plan, but now he had two police cars after him again, and he wasn't able to shake them. Rammundsen was straight, narrow, and offered no alleys and few side roads to escape down.

His heart sank as the freeway overpass came into view and he found the way straight ahead blocked by two more cruisers. His only option was to take the onramp. Not an ideal solution, but at least it would give him a chance to get away.

The ram blew through a red light, earning several horns and gestures as he did so and steered toward the opening, and hopefully freedom. A motion out of the corner of his eye caught his attention briefly, distracting him. The fox police officer throwing something…

Shit!

The wait was killing him. Figuratively, of course. He knew that patience was the name of the game, but he couldn't help but feel more than a little bit excited for what was going to happen. Judy was back in the cruiser, ready to give chase as soon as he had done his job. McHorn and Pennington were busy turning all of the other cars approaching away, and Nick himself was hidden behind the support post for the highway sign.

"240, 256, this is 221, hope you guys are all set up! We're closing in and this guy's got a lead hoof!"

Judy's voice came through the radio next.

"240 and 256, all set up! Southbound onramp is open for the package. Keep your distance!"

"Copy that, Hopps!"

"237, we read you, in behind 221 here!"

The sound of a hard-working engine and protesting of tires could be heard, and the gray sedan rounded a slight bend in the road and blew through a red light, narrowly missing a larger pickup truck. The car didn't slow, and veered straight for the open onramp, just as they were hoping.

The fox heaved the spike chain with seconds to spare, keeping a light hold on the retract cord, ready to let go if the chain got caught. The seconds passed like hours as he watched the belt unfold to span the whole roadway, just as the sedan ran over it. The pop-hiss of the spikes doing their job was the sound of accomplishment, and Nick couldn't help the smirk that crossed his muzzle.

The fox yanked the retract cord, getting the spikes off the road just as the two pursuing cruisers flew past, and gathered up the chain as quickly as he could. Judy was already in motion, maneuvering the large cruiser around the concrete barrier, pulling up next to him. Nick opened the trunk and secured the spike chain in the proper location, then slammed the trunk shut and ran around to the passenger
side. As soon as he was seated, and before he was even belted or had the door closed, Judy stomped on the gas and accelerated out of there, chasing the wounded gray car.

It turns out Nick didn't need to pull the door shut. The sudden acceleration did that for him.

Belting up, Nick grabbed the safety handle and glanced at his partner. She had the same look of intense concentration and barely masked excitement that she had when chasing down Flash, and Nick couldn't help but grin himself. This is what Judy was born to do, and this is what you were born to do right beside her.

They quickly caught up to Woolter and Jesse, along with the other two chasing units. Despite all 4 tires being completely flat, the rams pushed on, desperate to escape. The freeway was too wide for three cars to execute a rolling block and with McHorn and Pennington still back at the onramp, Judy decided on a different course of action.

"Nick, get on the radio. We're gonna PIT them."

The fox nodded and made the appropriate radio call. The other two units backed off slightly, and the doe pulled up alongside the ram's quarter panel, then twisted the wheel, tapping the rear of the fleeing car, then forcing it out of alignment. The deflated tires, and still-high speed, combined with the push Judy was giving it was enough. The car spun around, suddenly turned around and facing the wrong way, sliding sideways and backwards. Nick glanced into the cab to see one ram holding on for dear life while the other fought with the steering wheel.

The car came to rest against the concrete divider, with 221 and 237 coming in to block any chance of forward escape. A hard brake and an equally hard turn later, and Judy had squelched any chance of them backing out of their predicament. She threw the vehicle into park and slammed on the park brake, before shoving her door open and diving out, her lethal already in paw, with Nick following close behind. Another advantage to their smaller size, they could get out the opposite side of the cruiser when in a sticky spot, whereas the center console equipment would block most of their colleagues.

Grizzoli and Fangmeyer were out of their vehicle, shouting for the two captured rams to keep their hooves up, and Rhinesman, who had backed his cruiser up a bit to allow access to the car's side doors once Judy had blocked the car's rear, was just climbing out as well. All three had their lethals drawn and aimed at the two vehicle occupants.

Seeing Nick and Judy in combat stance, covering the rear and drivers' side of the vehicle respectively, Grizzoli began barking orders. "Keep your hooves where I can see them!" He moved in slowly, gun never wavering, close enough to grab the door handle and pull it open. "Out of the car and on the ground, NOW! You in the driver's seat, roll down your window and crawl out of it!"

The two rams slowly moved to follow the large bear's orders, while Rhinesman moved to spot Nick, and Nick moved to back up Judy. The ram climbing out the driver's side needed assistance, but it wasn't long before the two were lying side by side on the road, hooves cuffed behind them.

"Jesse and Woolter Bighorn," Nick remarked, reading their driver's licenses. "At least now we have full names we can attach to them. Jesse's the one with the eyepatch."

Judy stood up straight and marched over to the two prone rams. "Jesse and Woolter Bighorn, you two are under arrest for conspiracy, accessory to assault, accessory to attempted murder, reckless driving excessive speeding, and fleeing the scene of an accident." The doe pulled a small card from her utility belt and began to read from it. "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to have an attorney. If you cannot
afford one, one will be appointed to you by the court." She continued to read the two their rights, as Nick moved to assist Fangmeyer in searching the vehicle.

"So, Fangs, helluva day, huh?"

The tiger nodded as she continued "Didn't expect to get into a high-speed chase on my first day back on field duty."

The fox grinned. "You should have seen Hopps. She was like a bunny in a carrot store!"

Fangmeyer laughed. "I bet she was. Eric was always saying how she was bouncing in her seat whenever they ended up in a chase, no matter how brief."

Nick was about to say something else, when he stopped. Sniffed. Stopped. Turned his head one way, then the other. Kept sniffing.

The tiger raised her eyebrow at the fox's antics, as he followed his nose this way and that.

"What's up?"

The fox's response made her blood run cold.

"Night Howlers."

Chapter End Notes

Contrary to popular belief and depiction in media, spike belts/chains/strips do NOT cause the affected vehicle's tires to explode or instantly deflate. On the contrary, they – the spikes – are specifically designed NOT to do this, as an explosive deflation poses a risk to the officers, bystanders, the occupants of the target vehicle, as well as property.

Instead, spikes are designed to slowly deflate the tire over the course of 10-30 seconds, enough that the driver of the vehicle is less likely to lose control.

HAWC1 and HAWC2 are the call signs for the helicopter (airborne) police units in Calgary. The HAWCS program (stands for Helicopter Air Watch for Community Safety) was the first municipal police helicopter program in Canada, launched in 1995.

A couple people picked up the Titanic reference in the last chapter. Cookies to them!

Can you find the references in this chapter?

Coming up on November 16: One Mammal's Trash!

**Questions? Critiques? Did the pea soup you were served not have peas in it? Leave a comment!**
One Mammal's Trash...

Chapter Summary

Nick and Judy deal with the aftermath of the car chase

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: I gave my bid to own Zootopia to a messenger and they were in the process of delivering it to Disney when the bid got washed away from all the water being carried by Sorcerer Mickey's brooms. So I still don't own Zootopia and now I have a lot of water to clean up.

New coverart has been uploaded, thanks to TheWinterBunny! Check it out!

As always, thanks to my editor and friend, Daee17, without whom I would have lost my mind somewhere after chapter 6!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What's up?"

The fox's response made Liz Fangmeyer's blood run cold.
"Night Howlers."

The silence in the air was tangible, and it was a while before either mammal broke it.

"Night Howlers?"

The fox nodded, turning his head this way and that, trying to locate the scent's source. Up high, down by the carpet, in the glove box, in the boot, even the engine compartment. Of course, Nick's actions didn't escape Judy's notice either, and the doe wandered over to investigate.

"It's faint, almost non-existent, but I caught the scent of Night Howlers in the cab," the canid replied when Judy inquired.

"Is it recent?" Judy began searching the vehicle for any trace herself, using her eyes, since her nose wasn't nearly as effective as Nick's.

Nick shook his head as he resumed his search of the cab. "Hard to say. Could be faint because it's such a minute amount, or it could be faint because it's been a long time."

Judy followed close behind, looking for something, anything out of the ordinary. "Can you tell about where it's coming from?"

Nick searched the cab for a few more minutes, moving around a bit before concentrating on the front passenger seat. "Seems to be strongest around here."

His doe partner climbed into the backseat area and laid down on the floorboards. Her smaller size made it easier for her to see underneath. She took her phone out and turned on the flashlight function, shining it into the relative darkness. Old coins, a few candy bar wrappers and a whole lot of lint greeted her. Clearly, it had been a while since the two miscreants had vacuumed the car.

She was about to give up and see if Nick turned up anything in front, when a small glint caught her eye. Wedged in the seat springs under the cushions was a tiny piece of something. The doe grabbed her evidence tweezers and reached in to grasp it and pull it out.

Once she got it into the light, she turned it over in her paw a few times. It was a piece of clear plastic bag, likely pinched and pulled off when someone had stuffed something wrapped in it under the seat. Sniffing it, she couldn't detect anything, so she got up off the floorboards, thinking she'd need a shower after this, and headed around to the front seat.

Her fox was sniffing around the underside of the glove box when she called out to him, hoping she wouldn't startle Nick. "Hey Nick, check this out."

He pulled himself upright and looked at the small piece of debris she was offering. He looked at her and raised his eyebrow. "Carrots, that seems like an odd gift, especially from you."

An exasperated groan. "No, Nick. I mean does it have the scent we're looking for?"

The fox smirked and brought his nose up, inhaling. His eyes went wide for a second. Sniffed again. "As much as I would like to quote Star Wars here, yes, it does have the scent we're looking for. Where'd you find it?"

Judy dropped the tweezers and piece of plastic into a small evidence bag and sealed it. "Under the seat. It was pinned between the foam and the springs."

The fox sat up, dusting himself off. "Sounds like someone stuffed something under the seat and then
Judy smiled as she secured the evidence in a belt pouch. "Exactly. If this bag was stuffed full of Night Howlers, they may have been using the car to transport them."

Nick turned back to the car and thought for a moment. "That gives us cause to take this back to the garage and tear it down doesn't it?"

The doe nodded. "Even more, it might even be enough to secure a search of their house."

The duo turned and started back towards their cruiser, where the two rams sat, cuffed and leaning against their cruiser. "You think we'll be allowed to be a part of that raid?"

Shaking her head, Judy moved behind one of the rams. "On your hindhooves, you two. It won't be a raid, Nick. Just a home search."

Woolter, whom Judy had a hold of, yanked on his cuffs, but the doe kept a firm hold. "You can't just go bustin’ in to a mammal's flat! I got rights! You need a warrant to search"

Judy jumped up and grabbed the cruiser's rear door handle, yanking the door open. "HAD rights. I told you what rights you had left. In you go." The doe ushered both rams in, then climbed in herself, securing the two seatbelts, a grin forming on her muzzle. "And I'm sure we can convince a judge to fast track a warrant to search and seize." Her grin turned into a smirk. "Better get anything you don't want us to find out of there."

Nick snorted as the doe jumped back down to the ground. "Kind of hard to clean out their house if they're in custody isn't it, Carrots?"

A mock thoughtful expression crossed the doe's face. "Well, gee, I hadn't thought of that!" She smirked. "Too bad. Looks like we'll have a lot more stuff to go through!"

The two rams sat in stunned silence as the doe slammed the door, sealing them inside. It was another moment before muffled yelling could be heard from the inside. Judy keyed her radio. "Dispatch, Hopps here. Scene secure and suspects in custody. Two for booking. We'll also need auto services to grab this car. Suspected Night Howlers."

There was a silence before Clawhauser's voice echoed back. "Copy that Hopps. We'll have two coolers ready for you when you get back. I had auto services on the way when you called in the code 4."

The coolers were the precinct nickname for the holding cells. In the basement, surrounded by concrete, and with poor heating, the holding cells were often quite chilly even in the summer, and mammals not conditioned for cold weather often had to be afforded blankets. The city hadn't felt the need to cough up the funds to correct the issue, and so, the cells gained their nickname. The doe opened her mic. "Thanks, Benji. You're the best!"

Both mammals could practically hear the obese cheetah blushing on the other end of the radio.

"Hey Hopps! You want their personal effects? Got a couple phones, wallets, an e-cig, some keys and a pocket knife."

Grizzoli held up a zipper bag with the items in it.

"Yeah, log that for evidence. It could be connected to two cases here." No sooner had she said that when one of the phones started ringing. A minute later it stopped and the other one started ringing.

"Someone must want to get a hold of them pretty badly," Nick commented as they secured the
evidence in a transport locker in their trunk.

"Hopefully we can get a warrant to search their phones and figure out what they were up to. Fingers crossed it had something to do with our case." Judy slammed the trunk shut.

"Didn't you used to be able to search phones without a warrant?" Nick was thinking back to several times cops had searched through his phones without a warrant.

Judy nodded. "Used to be able to. That changed in 2013 when new laws came into play. Now we can't search anything beyond the lock screen."

The fox frowned as he climbed up into the passenger seat, with Judy signing off on the evidence transfer from Grizzoli. The doe then walked around to the drivers side and climbed in, letting out a huge breath. "What say you and I get Tweedle-dee and Tweedle-dum over to the precinct, then go grab some lunch?"

A mock shocked look came over the fox's face. "Doest mine ears deceive me? Did Carrots actually suggest getting food BEFORE doing paper work?" Nick twisted and turned in his seat, looking for something.

The doe rolled her eyes. "What are you looking for, dumb fox?"

The fox sighed and sat back down. "The nuclear apocalypse. I was sure that would have to happen before Judy On Duty suggested food before work."

The size of the vehicle saved him from the punch that would normally follow, but he knew retribution would come later.

"You two are sick. A fox and a rabbit. Shouldn't even be speaking to each other, never mind screwin'," Woolter remarked from the back seat.

The two police officers stayed silent.

"It's bad enough the fox is ruining this city, you gotta stoop to his level, rabbit?"

More silence.

"You ain't right in the head, rabbit. You need a damn shrink."

Nick turned in his seat to face the belligerent ram. "You know, you have the right to remain silent. I wish to God you'd use it."

Judy couldn't contain her laughter.

"They should've been here by now." Doug was in the Tundratown garage with their delivery van waiting for his two comrades.

Damian Hornby checked his watch. "They're only overdue by about 15 minutes. I heard on the radio that there was some sort of accident on the freeway that had lanes in both directions blocked. Maybe they're caught in the traffic."

The ram shrugged. "Doesn't explain why they're not answering the phone though. I've tried both Woolter and Jesse. Neither one of them are picking up."

The two decided to wait a few more minutes before they eventually gave up. Doug climbed into the
delivery van and took off toward the Sahara Square warehouse, while Hornby headed to Savannah Central. The ram wasn't sure why the Texas longhorn needed to be there, and honestly didn't care.

Knowing the Deer Foot was clogged with traffic, the ram elected to take a few of the side streets to his destination instead, bypassing the traffic jam. He turned on the radio anyways to listen to the news.

"...sources say the accident was caused when a vehicle fleeing police forced one vehicle into another. The resulting shutdown is expected to continue well into rush hour and may affect things further into the evening. The ZPD could not be reached for comment, though one driver reportedly stated that the chase of the other vehicle was being led by controversial ZPD officers Nick Wilde and Judy Hopps."

The ram switched the device off, and continued winding his way through the busy streets of late afternoon Zootopia. Around the van, some mammals went about their day as though without a care in the world. But, if you looked closer, you could see a marked change in the behavior of many. Parents would pull their offspring closer when a predator passed by, many staring with a wary eye. Some predators would be eyeing prey with suspicion and even malice. There was even the occasional sign: "Predators not served here." "Prey not welcome."

It seems that the seeds of division were ripe and blooming.

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This wasn't how the day was supposed to go. They were supposed to go for a trash run. Get the delivery van, pick up the trash, and dump it. They weren't supposed to get involved in a police chase that landed them in the basement of Precinct One, taking advantage of the outstanding hospitality that the concrete floors, walls, and ceiling, metal furniture, and stoic, no-nonsense guards offered.

Even the heating down here was bad.

For the fifth time since being thrown in the fox and rabbit's police cruiser, Jesse cursed himself out. He should have listened to his brother. Shouldn't have rushed out, attracted attention.

Should have taken a different route. Damn the fuzz. HAD to be right there waiting for him.

The ram gave a futile yank on the chain that locked him to the table in the room. He couldn't see him, but he was certain his brother was in another room somewhere in this pit of hell, in a similar situation.

"Yep! They came from home. Sunny Acres apartment complex. That's at least six buildings, but six buildings are better than 600!"

Nick's jubilance made Judy smile as she turned to look at his computer screen. She'd been filling out the mountain of forms that needed to be worked on in light of their high speed chase through the outskirts of Tundratown, while Nick had been playing back the traffic camera footage in an attempt to figure out where the two rams had come from. It backed up a phone call the two had made earlier to the apartment management, confirming that the address on their license was correct.

"What else is around there?" The doe stood on her chair and hopped across the space between them, landing in the small space right next to her fox and plopping herself down. She grabbed the salad that was on their desk and started munching on it as she sat there.

Nick hummed and pulled up the area in Zoogle maps. "Lots of shops, a few restaurants, and a whole lot of wide open space. Guess that's where it gets the name 'Sunny Acres'."
Judy pulled up a few photos. "Unit 6401." She picked up Nick's desk phone and called a number, telling the mammal on the other end that they had confirmation of where Jesse and Woolter lived. The response was immediate. Their request for a search and seize warrant on the apartment was approved. They just had to pick it up from the justice hall.

The doe quickly finished up the rest of her salad, while Nick chowed down his chicken burger and fries, and the two headed out the door, waving to Clawhauser as they passed.

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Damian Hornby wasn't accustomed to meeting an elder in broad daylight. But the matter was urgent, and it was the elder that had chosen the location. A park on the banks of the Peace river, near the border of Savannah Central and the Rainforest District.

The Peace river was actually a small branch off the main river through the city that flowed into St. Charles inlet instead of Zootopia Bay, and served as an outfall for the Rainforest District's southern irrigation system.

It was a popular place to get out and exercise, with miles of pathways for walking, running, and bicycle riding, and children would spend time playing their own games in the grassy open spaces or even hide and seek in the wooded areas. But none of this interested the large mammal.

"For purity," the now-familiar voice of the First Elder came from behind him. The longhorn bull turned.

"Purity we shall have."

"You wished to meet." The deer stood a few arm-lengths away, his arms behind his back, looking on expectantly.

"I did." Hornby gestured to the path, indicating that they should keep moving. The deer stag nodded, and the two set off for a quieter area.

After a while, the longhorn's companion spoke. "What can I help you with, Mr. Hornby?"

Hornby sighed. "I have concerns about Felicity Stang."

Dade Walker looked at the larger mammal in surprise. Stang had come at the longhorn bull's recommendation, after she'd been discharged from her hospital for refusing to see predator patients. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"I think she's begun to question us."

The deer glanced at the larger mammal as they walked. "Question us, how?"

There was a long silence. "A conversation with her that I had on Saturday. She asked me 'Why are we doing this.'"

"To convince the masses of the threat to their wellbeing that needs to be eradicated." They'd been over this before, of course, when Hornby had first been recruited into the organization, as they did with any new recruit.

"That's what I told her. She went on about a study of mammalian emotions and such, and posited that carnivores – that filth – could actually feel compassion or love. Even mentioned studies into the brains of some to that effect."
The deer nodded. "That's certainly a logical assumption. But let me tell you something."

The deer sat on a park bench, and gestured that the longhorn do the same.

"Many years ago, before you and I were even born, there was a string of murders in the plains North and East of Zootopia. Next to Deerbrooke County. No one could understand it, but over the course of six years, 20 mammals disappeared. The only thing connecting them was the fact that they were all children, and all were rodents. Chipmunks and squirrels mostly."

Walker sighed as he continued the story. It wasn't until many years after the killings, that the case was finally solved. A schoolteacher at the local high school. A history teacher, well liked by both the students and the faculty. A wolf. And when asked his motivation, his reason, he simply said, 'because I could.'"

The deer skewered the longhorn with an intense look. "It's certainly possible that they can indeed feel those emotions. But even if they could, that should not and cannot affect your assignment. If we are to ever achieve true peace and build this city into a beacon of that, mammals need to be taught that for filth, the civility they exhibit is only the mask hiding a killer, nothing more and nothing less."

Dade Walker stood up and faced down the Texas longhorn. "Stay on course Mr. Hornby. Don't let these things distract you from your goal. And if Ms. Stang continues to be a problem, inform us immediately. She may need to be... terminated."

The deer walked away, disappearing around a corner, leaving Damian Hornby with his thoughts. He didn't relish the idea of having to have Felicity Stang disposed of, but he knew that joining this organization was a one way trip. Once in, there was only one way you were allowed to leave. The four waterbuffalo that had planted the Grand Palm Hotel device had found that out when they had had a bout of remorse and threatened to go to the police. As far as Damian knew, they were buried somewhere in the desert east of the city.

The Texas longhorn wondered how much longer it would be before they were reported missing. There wasn't anything to tie them directly to the organization, and any contact with them had been directly and through anonymous channels. Like many of the mammals in the organization, they had no close kin, no one that would notice them missing in short order.

The bull stood for a long moment, then walked back to his car, deep in thought.

It would be a shame if Felicity needed to be silenced.

"Well, that was easy," a certain red canid remarked as he and his gray lapin companion exited the justice hall. An old, historic building, it housed the courtrooms, the justice department offices, the judge's chambers, and a number of other offices all catered toward one thing: passing judgement.

They'd been in and out, barely there long enough to sign for the warrant papers and go, and both mammals were thankful for that. It had been a long day already, and it looked to be a while before they would be able to clock out.

"I know! I can't wait to see what we find in that apartment." Judy's grin was threatening to split her face.

"Think we'll be able to find some information on Doug?"

The doe shrugged as she climbed into their cruiser. "It would be nice. That ram has eluded us for too long." Nick jumped into the passenger seat next to her, and the two took off through the streets of
Savannah Central, heading towards the Meadowlands.

The two were silent for a while, each absorbed in their own thoughts. Nick was the first who spoke, as the doe guided the cruiser along the road through the canal district.

"How do you think they managed to hide in Zootopia, and no one noticed?"

A thumb tapped on a steering wheel, a good sign that it was bugging the doe as well. "I don't know. Mammals have an easier time identifying individuals of their own species, rather than members of others. Jesse had the eyepatch, though. That's pretty distinctive. But Woolter... he could be any ram if you ask a random mammal to watch for him."

She sighed. "You and I have special training to identify individuals from different species, but the average citizen doesn't. That's why we have to be careful when putting up wanted posters. Most of the calls are likely to be false."

Stopping at a red light, she turned to her partner. "When you were hustling, did you have to be careful not to hustle the same mammal twice?"

Nick thought for a moment. "Yeah, we did. We were always careful to not pull the same scam on the same mammal twice, if we could help it. I guess I learned on my own how to pick out individuals. A zebra with a unique mark on their forehead, or a cheetah with a spot on it's shoulder in the shape of a chicken drumstick."

Judy nodded. "Exactly. You have to pay attention to those details. But most mammals don't. That doesn't mean that they can't it's just that they don't if they don't have to. If someone works for you or is a friend, you'd be able to pick them out, but line 5 similar looking strangers up, and unless the mammal has a reason to remember them, they probably won't be able to make a positive ID."

Nick hummed, deep in thought, as Judy maneuvered around a car stopped to make a left hand turn. The two processed the conversation in silence, before Judy spoke up again. "There's also the possibility that Doug doesn't even live in the city. There's a whole lot of desert just east of here and forests and mountains to the north that he could hide in."

The fox turned to the rabbit in the driver's seat. "If Bogo asks us to comb that desert, he'd better give us an elephant-sized comb."

Judy snorted and struggled to maintain her focus on the road ahead of her, a grin splitting her face.

Doug was not happy. The two idiots still hadn't shown and he'd been forced to load the garbage into the truck himself. Fortunately, they'd been relatively small specimens – a grey fox couple that they'd caught out of town. All he needed to do now is dump them in the canals.

A part of the ram was concerned though. Woolter and Jesse had never failed to get back to him before. In all of their past interactions, if they couldn't make a deadline, they'd called him about it, though he did note that they never could seem to get his latte orders right.

As the ram navigated the streets of Zootopia, he kept a sharp eye out for any potential law enforcement. If they identified him, he knew they'd be able to connect him to Bellwether.

The weeks and months following the ewe's arrest had been harrowing for the three rams to say the least. They'd been forced to take refuge in a safe house out of town, relying on delivery services for essentials like food. At least the organization the two had been a part of had been generous enough to provide him with that.
When they were finally brought back out of hiding, and assigned to Hornby's cell, the first couple weeks had been filled with paranoia, but after a while, that had worn off too. They'd been careful when dispatching the pelt officer that had been following them, but the heat had been pretty high after that too. At least no one had been witness to that. Word on the street was that the case had gone cold, and they were waiting for new leads.

Stopping on a secluded bridge in the Canals District, the ram took a look around, before opening the back door of the van and removing the garbage. The disposal was a little trickier than loading it up, but it wasn't long before the two filth plummeted over the railing and into the murky water. The cinder block tied to the two would ensure they sunk, the biodegradable bag would dissolve, and the marine life would find a feast within.

The ram didn't linger. After casually checking around him for mammals that might have seen him and finding none, he climbed back into the cab of the van and set off. His first stop was Woolter and Jesse's flat to see if they'd gone home for some reason.

It hadn't taken long to get to their destination, and even less time to get the building superintendent to let them in to the unit in question. While not as affable as Old Joe, the black-tailed prairie dog was cooperative and didn't put up a fuss, something Judy was thankful for.

The apartment itself wasn't very remarkable, at first glance. Clean, except for the kitchen and the coffee table. Both looked like the rams had been in the middle of something when they just up and left. The coffee table held the remains of lunch and a laptop computer that hadn't been closed all the way, while the kitchen had the leftover remains of the meal, some sort of sautéed spinach, Judy's nose told her.

Nick moved into the living room and opened the computer, pressing a key. After a second, the screen popped up, prompting for a password. "Damn. Guess it was too much to ask that Jesse's laptop be one of the few not password protected in this day and age. I'm guessing Cyber will want to have a look at this."

The doe nodded, glancing around. "They don't have a landline. Guess that's not surprising. Most mammals these days don't, if they can afford a cell phone. Nuts."

The russet canid grinned as he made his way around the coffee table. "Hoping to listen in on some of their voicemails?"

Judy shrugged. "Or at least see who called them." She looked around. "Nothing jumps out that would tell us what they were up to…or where they were going in such a carrot-picking hurry."

"Maybe something in the bedrooms?" The two moved off down the short hallway that lead to the two small bedrooms. Judy took the closest one, flipping on the light and looking around. This room wasn't just clean – it was empty save for the bed, which had obviously been slept in, and a dresser smaller than her own in her shoebox.

The doe walked over to the dresser, donned a pair of sterile gloves and started pulling open each drawer and riffling through them. Not finding anything, she moved to the bed and peaked underneath.

And promptly sneezed at the dust underneath. Which, of course, stirred up more dust. And prompted more sneezing, and more dust. It was a vicious cycle, one that the universe was more than happy to inflict on the police doe, until she backed away and caught her breath elsewhere.

Returning to the room, she peaked back under the bed, holding her breath. The now-dusty air down
there irritated her eyes and they threatened to tear up.

It was then that she spotted it: A piece of paper on the far side that looked like it might have fallen out of a pants pocket. She got up and moved around the bed, crawling underneath to retrieve the wayward paper, backing out, and standing up.

Covered in dust and faded, but still legible, was the receipt from a farming supply store for a large number of mature Midnicampum Holicithias plants. It wasn't a Zootopian address, but that wasn't what concerned her.

After the Night Howler scandal, the plant had been swiftly banned in Zootopia and all of it's associated counties for use as anything other than pest control on farms. Possession without a license was a felony, and the number of individual plants that they'd bought – 212 – was easily a class 1 felony, and would land them, and the mammal that sold them, a lengthy jail sentence.

She checked the date of the receipt, and it did indeed land after the effective date for the new laws.

Someone else was going to land in her pawcuffs very soon. The doe couldn't help but grin, thinking that they were finally making some headway with their case. She left the room, bagging the receipt in the process, and headed to the other bedroom in search of Nick.

She walked into a war zone. At least that's what it looked like. There were clothes strewn everywhere, electronics, blu-rays, and what looked like game time cards scattered about, not to mention old pizza boxes and soda cans.

"Cheese and crackers, Nick! What happened in here!"

There was a yelp and a rustle, followed by a crash, and the sound of God knows what falling over in the closet. "Cripes, Carrots, you trying to give me a heart attack?! And don't look at me about the mess, it was this way when I found it."

The doe cringed as another crash and another yelp emanated from the closet. She began picking her way through the destruction of whatever tornado had hit the place. "Sorry, Slick. I guess whoever's room this is, they're a slob. You find anything?" She peered into the closet, and was confronted not by clothes as you would expect in such a room, but by mountains of computer equipment. Old, new, assembled, in pieces, you name it, it was there.

"Wow, has he got enough computer equipment? Sheesh. Looks like he's gearing up to hack the Zootopia Treasury."

"I'm not so sure he wasn't," Nick remarked as he tried to get out of the closet, tripping over wayward cables in the process, before turning and observing the disaster. "I'd love to see what Cybercrime can make out of this mess. Did you find anything?"

The doe showed Nick the evidence bag with the receipt in it. "A receipt for a mass purchase of M.H. We'll have to check with the store owner and see who actually made the purchase and whether they were licensed, but this might get us somewhere."

Nick scowled down at the date on the receipt. "This was just a few weeks before I got out of the academy."

Judy made a noise of agreement. "Which means that they were still doing something with Night Howlers after the scandal. And before the Grand Palm attack."

The fox blew out a breath. "Think they were involved?"
The thought had occurred to the doe. "It's entirely possible. We'd need to know for certain, and if they are, we'd need to bring it to Bogo."

Nick nodded and gazed out at the mess. "Fancy getting lab services to clean up this mess, Carrots."

The doe smirked and shook her head. "This is as much our mess as it is theirs. But yeah, getting them down here wouldn't hurt. You and I can dig through the rubble until they get here."

"Two rams are reportedly in custody after the high speed chase this afternoon that caused a multi-car collision and has continued to tie up the Deer Foot freeway for the majority of the evening rush hour. The ZPD have not released the identities of the mammals, however, sources say that they may be connected to the Night Howler Scandal late last year."

Doug sat there in the delivery van, staring at the police cruiser parked in the stall in front of him. His normally stoic expression was instead one of anger.

It didn't take a genius to realize that the two rams that the newscaster was talking about were Woolter and Jesse, and that somehow, the fuzz had already gotten the go-ahead to search their apartment.

He briefly considered trying to ambush whichever officers happened to be doing the search, then discarded the idea just as quickly. This wasn't an undercover cop. For all he knew, it could be a pair of tigers up there searching. Venting his frustration against the steering wheel and starting the van, he pulled out of the lot and headed back to the Tundratown safe house.

He didn't notice the brown van that turned around to follow him.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: humans have an easier time identifying members of their own race (Caucasian, oriental, African, native American, etc) than they do others.

SO! More case progress! And it looks like Dougie might have a little more madness coming his way, too!

A couple things I'd like to bring up here. The first, we're coming up on the 1-year anniversary of A Ray of Hope finally going live! That'll be on December 28. I'm considering, at the suggestion of my editor, taking a posting break for a month after that so that I can catch up with the writing, and take a few days off. What do you guys think?

Second, it's my birthday tomorrow (well I guess today in some parts of the world)! Yay! XD

More than a few people caught the Star Trek reference in the last chapter, cookies for those of you that did! Can you find the references in this chapter?

Coming up on November 30: ...Is another Mammal's Treasure!

Questions? Critiques? Did Goofy burn your hamburger? Leave a comment!
I love to read them!
Chapter Summary

More aftermath of the car chase

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: Well, another bid to own Zootopia went down the tubes when Colonel Hathi trampled it. It was on my best paper too. So I still don't own Zootopia.

And of course, a HUGE thanks to my editor and friend, Daee17! She's the best!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Finnick was tired. He'd been out all day working his latest venture, shopping himself around as a mammal who specialized in procuring rare items. The Pawpsicle business had dried up after Wilde had gone legit, and since his friend had made the change to the right side of the law, Finnick decided he might try too.

Unfortunately, the legitimate job market for small canids was still frustratingly small, unless you wanted to flip chicken burgers and constantly ask mammals if they want fries with that. So, he'd turned to one thing he knew he could do: Finding rare things for mammals and making cash for it. He hadn't had any luck until a wolf had agreed to hire him, on the condition that he only get paid after the job was done.

Fortunately for the fennec, the item hadn't been overly expensive, and he'd been able to fulfill the request off some of the money he'd saved while conning with Nick. The payout had been a good percentage, enough that he'd been able to finally get the engine in his beloved van rebuilt, and now she purred like a kit. Which was quite fortuitous, since he now found himself glad he didn't have that backfiring happening to give him away to the mammal he was now following.

When Nick and his bunny cop had approached him last week, in an effort to locate the van he was now following, he'd at first been upset that he'd be working out in the Meadowlands, rather than the more lucrative Savannah Central, or the Mojave Strip. But it seemed like it ended up paying off.

The small fox reached for his phone to call his old friend, only to find out that the battery was low from all the phone calls he'd made that day. Of all the days to leave his charging cable at home. Finnick tossed the phone down into the passenger seat, cursing under his breath and continued to follow the delivery van through the streets of the Meadowlands, then Tundratown.

Tundratown was a bad idea. Being a fox from the desert, he preferred the warmer areas of the city, and Tundratown was the opposite of that. When he'd been running the pawpsicle hustle with Nick, they'd purposefully limited their time outside and had to keep the van running so that it stayed warm. More than once, he'd had to leave Nick for a few minutes and thaw himself out.
Shivering, he reached over and cranked up the heat on the dash, thanking the heavens that the rebuilt engine also improved the heating. Not for the first time, Finnick wished he had snow tires on the vehicle. Though not required, snow tires were recommended for mammals that spent any length of time in the district, since the deep snow and ice made driving unpredictable.

Up ahead of him, the white, unmarked van made another turn, heading deeper into the icy district. Finnick breathed a sigh of relief when they drove straight past the turnoff for Glacier Estates, and the home of the Tundratown mafia boss hidden deep therein. He didn't need or want a run-in with Big, since he was in just as much hot water over the skunk butt rug as Nick was.

The route here had skirted the central business area in the district, staying to side roads, so the small fox knew they wouldn't be caught on traffic cameras. Of all 12 districts in the city, Tundratown was the least equipped with traffic cameras, since the cold tended to cause the regular camera's mechanisms to freeze up, so the city opted to invest in a more expensive cold weather version…and fewer of them.

Another turn, and the fennec followed. In his mind he kept track of where they were. Pulling up to the street, he peeked around the corner, just in time to see the van pull into a garage a quarter of a mile away. Finnick glanced up at the street sign. Chilikoot Trail.

He waited a few minutes, then turned down the road, following the fresh tracks in the snow to the garage in question, and proceeding right past, glancing at it only long enough to get the building number. 1067. He'd get that to the two crazy cops as soon as he could find an out of the way place to make a phone call.

That proved to be an easy task as the nearby Woolmart had plenty of space for him to pull over in their lot. He picked his phone back up from the passenger seat and made the call, praying to whomever would listen that Nick would pick up before his died.

"Well, I'd say that about does it, Carrots. Lab services is here, and they're cleaning the place out. We got anything else to do, or are we going to head back to base and grill some sheep?" His doe companion shook her head.

Judy had been giving the apartment one last once-over to make sure they hadn't missed anything, while lab services had done what they needed to do with the computers, shut them down, and put them into evidence bags and boxes, along with anything paper that the two officers had found, a few items of clothing that Nick had identified as having come into contact with night howlers, and a wallet belonging to Woolter.

Both officers were helping the lab mammals load the evidence when Nick's phone rang. The fox pulled it out of his pocket and stared at it for a second before answering.

"Hey! What's up, big guy!" His easy, familiar grin quickly dropped, almost in sync with his ears perking up and his eyes widening. "Hold on, Fin, we're on our way."

Judy glanced over. "What was that all about?"

Not wasting any time, Nick grabbed the bunny's paw and dragged her toward their cruiser. "We have to go. Finnick found Doug. He's in Tundratown."

Give the bunny credit, she was quick on the uptake, and was soon the one doing the dragging as she sprinted for their cruiser, letting go as she reached it, yanking open her door and jumping in. She had her seatbelt fastened and the engine running before the fox had even gotten around to his side, and he
opened his door to the sound of the doe telling him to hurry up. He didn't even get the door closed before Judy was in gear and pulling out of the parking stall, and had to scramble to get his seatbelt on.

"Sheesh, Carrots, you'd think your little cotton swab of a tail was on fire!" Nick was tempted to use the word cute in his statement, but elected not to, in favour of preserving his life. The glare the doe shot his way was evidence enough that he's made the right decision. He hit the sirens and radioed their change of destination to Clawhauser.

"So where are we going?" The doe decided to enact her revenge on the fox for the cotton swab comment later. It always was best served coldly and unexpectedly.

"The Woolmart lot near Chilikoot Trail. Finnick's holed up there for the time being."

Judy nodded, focused on the road, mentally thanking God that the mammals on the road now actually seemed to be heeding her vehicles sirens and getting the heck out of her way.

"They've been arrested."

"Woolter and Jesse? How can you be certain?" The voice of the Texas longhorn on the other end was not a happy voice.

"I went by their flat and the police were already there. The news also mentioned the arrest of two rams in connection with the car chase this afternoon." Doug's monotone voice betrayed no hint of emotion, though anyone watching him could tell he was agitated from the pacing he was doing.

The grumble from the other end told the ram all he needed to know about the other mammal's mood, and the ram had a feeling he knew what question was going to come next.

"Where were they taken?"

The ram shook his head, as though the longhorn could see him. "Unknown at this point. Likely the Tundratown or Meadowlands cop shops, but if the fuzz connect them to Bellwether, they could get moved downtown."

There was a long silence on the phone. "We need this taken care of. They know too much about what we're doing. If they say a word, this whole thing could come down on us."

The ram caught the hidden message in the longhorn's statement. "Call Janus. He'll want some action."

The mammal on the other end of the line hummed. "And clear out the Tundratown safehouse. They knew about that one. No one followed you there, right?"

"Not that I saw."

"Good. You know what to do if anyone sees you."

"Lead them away from the city, away from any safehouses."

"Right. Now get out of there." The Texas longhorn hung up.

Shit.

The ram grabbed his protective gear and hastily cleaned the inside of the van, then scrambled for the
few items they kept at the safe house that he knew authorities should never find. There weren't many – a laptop, a couple computers and a burner cell phone – but any amount of evidence could compromise everything.

He was almost to the back door when he heard the perimeter chime followed shortly by pounding on the door.

5 minutes ago

The police cruiser had shut it's lights and sirens off long before it reached the Woolmart parking lot. The last thing either of the two mammals inside needed was to alert anyone that something was afoot. Losing the suspects could mean that the entire case goes down the tubes.

Pulling into the lot, the cruiser slid up next to the drivers side of the brown van and rolled down it's passenger side window.

"Almost gave up on ya two. Was beginnin' ta think chu weren't comin'."

The fox in the passenger side of the police cruiser smirked. "Oh come on, Finn, you think I would miss the chance to say high to my little kit?"

Tan glared at red. "Say something like that again, and I'll bite your face off."

"That sounds a lot like harassment of a law enforcement officer, don't you think, Nick?"

The tan fox turned his glare on the gray bunny as Nick grinned and winked at her. "Sure did, Carrots."

Both police mammals snickered and the tan mammal rolled his eyes. "Are you two gonna keep clowning around, or are you hear to listen to what I have to say?"

Twin gray ears shot up. "Sure Finnick, I'll listen! I'm all ears."

Nick looked at his gray companion. "Actually, fluff, I'd estimate that you're only about one third ears, if that."

Even Finnick had to laugh at that, while the bunny doe groaned and dropped her head onto the steering wheel. "I walked right into that, didn't I?"

"Yes, Carrots. Yes, you did."

There was one last chuckle from the fennec fox. "Alright ya two jokers. 1067 Chilikoot Trail. I saw the van pullin' out of the lot for an apartment complex in the Meadowlands and followed him here. Same ram, same make 'n' model of the van, everything. Almost didn't believe it at first. Drove right past me."

The doe looked up the address. Only a half block away. And this might be their only opportunity to catch Doug. "Anything else you can tell us, Finn?"

The tan fennec shook his head. "Nuthin' you don't already know, Officer Toot-toot." Judy suppressed a growl. She hated that nickname, being a constant reminder of how she had failed in her first days.

"You know that's gonna net you a right beatdown, right Finnick?"
The smaller fox scoffed as Judy frowned. "You can't expect me to believe that the Goody-two-shoes in your driver's seat would go all police brutality on me."

Nick's voice was full of snark when he replied. "You'd be surprised. She is the officer that hijacked and crashed a train car, you know."

Finnick smirked. "I though you wuz always jokin' about that. Imagine my surprise when I found it wuz true." The fennec started his van. "I need to be goin', you two. Let me know if I can be of any more help. And when I can expect the payment. Ciao."

The small canid drove off. "Well, Carrots, you think we can catch a third ram for the day?"

The doe in question grinned and grabbed the mic. "Dispatch, Zulu 240, requesting backup at 1067 Chilkoot trail. We have a potential suspect holed up there. Staging at the nearby Woolmart lot."

There was a silence before their radio squawked again. "Zulu 240, Clawhauser here, we have a unit 2 minutes from your location."

"Thanks, Clawhauser." The doe put away the radio and started the car again, waiting for the other cruiser. In the meantime, Nick pulled up what he could on the address. When the mobile data terminal came up with his search results, he burst out laughing.

"Well, I have no idea if this is legit or not, but the building is owned by a company named 'Brr, Inc.'"

Judy stared for a moment before bursting out laughing herself. "Well, I guess you COULD say Doug might be on the BRINK of losing his freedom."

Nick snorted, before mock-realizing something. "Hey! No fair! Bad puns are supposed to be MY specialty!"

Judy's smirk only grew. "You got it all wrong, foxy, my puns are un-brr-lievable."

The fox groaned and turned to the window.

"Hey, don't give ME the cold shoulder!"

Nick pulled his ears down. "Oh god, save me, I'm trapped in a car with a bunny that thinks she's funny. Where is that damn backup?"

Judy mock pouted. "That's just cold, Nick."

"Zulu 240, Zulu 136 Greymane and White here, we got your six. Who's the target?"

"SALVATION!" Nick dove for the mic. "136, target is only known as Doug. White ram, hornless, middle age, last name unknown. Wanted for the Night Howler case and making Officer Hopps tell bad jokes."

"Zulu 240, we'll defer to your judgment on that last one. We'll follow you to the target."

Judy put the cruiser in gear and pulled out in the direction of their target. "Alright Nick, since you're so serious right now, how about telling me how many entrances and exits this building has?"

The fox clicked through the listing. "Looks like only a couple doors…two and a loading area. Full garage type thing, actually, not one of those raised platforms like at the Woolmart or Clawsco."

The doe's nose twitched in thought. "Good way to hide a vehicle you don't want seen."
"That's what I was thinking. Good to know the cold hasn't numbed your brain!"

The growl from the bunny told him his arm would be paying for that quip later.

The nondescript building at 1067 Chilikoot Trail was on the small side, and fresh tire tracks in the snow told the two small officers that the driveway had been used very recently.

On the mobile data terminal, Nick had pulled up the area map. "Lots of space to run out back, but not a lot of space to hide. Clear shot to the trees, if he makes it out the door. This way, he's bordered by the road, and on either side, he's got a couple other buildings." Nick tapped and clicked at the fancy laptop. "If he did run, he'd probably go for the trees. Easiest to lose us in there."

Judy looked up at the dimming light of the late afternoon. "I'm not going to be much help if it's too dark in those trees." Her ears drooped behind her head.

"Leave that to the wolves in the other car, fluff. This is our show. We get to take the front door." Nick grinned as he watched his partner perk up. She grabbed for the radio.

"136, cover the back. Wilde and I will take the front door. Keep an eye out for any escape routes and bolt holes he might use."

"Copy that, Hopps. 136 heading around back."

Judy maneuvered the cruiser to block the garage door, while the officers in the other vehicle quickly parked theirs and ran around the rear of the building. In a flash, the two smaller officers had checked their equipment and exited their vehicle, taking the keys but leaving it running in case they needed it.

Sneaking up to the door, Nick stood off to one side, while Judy stood to the other. A quick nod to each other later, and the doe reached out, testing the door to find it locked, and then and pounding on it. "ZPD! We've got all doors covered! Open up, Doug, we know you're in there!"

The doe's sensitive ears picked up the sound of scrambling inside, along with a single curse, from a voice that Judy recognized. It's him, she mouthed to her partner, who gave her the thumbs up. She reached out and pounded again. "Open up, Doug! We have a warrant for your arrest!"

More crashing and banging. The doe looked around. The solid steel door was designed to keep even large mammals at bay, and she doubted she could kick it down. No fire department lockbox either. Instead she turned her attention to a window off to the side. Wandering over, she hopped up to get a better view. Just a plain sheet glass window, and the room looked to be empty. An idea formed in her head and she dashed to the police cruiser, returning with a crowbar.

Nick grinned and keyed the radio. "136, 240 is breaching. Can one of you come and help cover the front?"


The fox moved to stand underneath the window, gesturing for Judy to climb on his shoulders, which the doe gladly did. After a moment of studying the window, more crashes from inside, and a nodded greeting to officer Greymane, the rabbit wedged the crowbar into the sill and yanked. Old wood surrounding the window crackled in protest before giving way, exposing the old spindle locking pin. With nothing holding the pin back, the window opened easily, and the rabbit doe slipped inside.

Judy was on high alert, her ears twitching as she pulled out her lethal, checking to ensure that the safety was off and the weapon was chambered and cocked. She couldn't take any chances. As quietly as possible, she moved out of the room, thankful that the rooms door didn't have a lock and
returned to the hallway, where she unlocked the front door and let her fellow officers in.

Greymane stayed back, covering the door, while she and her fox pushed ahead, her listening to the sounds of movement, and pointing it out to the fox, who guided them through the building, having memorized the public records of the floor layout. Both mammals checked each room as they went, not finding anyone, but instead uncovering what looked to be sleeping quarters, and one room with a computer station that was missing the actual computer. At the end of the hall, the last door that they'd yet to check.

The noises stopped as they approached, and the doe had to strain to hear anything. The sound of hooves moving around, and the sound of metal on metal. Almost like a…

"136, Officer White! Suspect on the run! Suspect on the run! Heading your way, Greymane!"

…door being opened. The two small mammals flung open the door to the room, and dived to the side to avoid any booby traps. When nothing happened, they peeked inside. The room itself was a mess, but a ladder and an open trap door told them all they needed to know. Doug had escaped through the roof. Before Nick could stop her, the doe was halfway up the ladder and covered the remaining length to the roof before Nick had even reached the base.

Judy hopped up onto the ledge surrounding the roof and took a quick look around. The impact crater in the snow below told her where the ram had landed, and the hoofprints lead out into the trees. White was at the edge, following a scent she couldn't detect. But she would not be just standing there while her suspect escaped. No sir. The doe grabbed Nick's paw and jumped, dragging the fox with her into the soft snow.

She didn't wait at the bottom either, taking off for the treeline with her fox hot on her heels. She let Nick take the lead at the treeline again, his nose working overtime, tracking their prey. At that thought she had to stifle a giggle. In a way, she was the predator now, hunting their prey so that they may lock him up.

With both Nick and officer White tracking the ram, it hadn't taken long for them to catch up with him, and from there, the crashing of the ram charging through the woods was more than enough for Judy's sensitive ears to home in on. Though it was dark, she was still able to see well enough to keep up, and her sense of direction told her that he'd looped back in the direction of the road.

The ram burst out of the treeline and right into traffic, several horns blaring their indignation at the fleeing mammal. Nick was close behind, but hit a patch of ice and lost traction when he turned to avoid a car, sliding into a bush. Judy fared a little better, hopping up onto the hood and sliding across it, just in time to see a black sedan pull up beside Doug and stop. When the car pulled away just seconds later, the ram was gone.

"What the…?"

Doug glanced over at his rescuer. A large reindeer, or caribou as some folks up north called them, was sitting in the driver's seat, carefully navigating the black vehicle away from the scene.

"240, 240, we lost the suspect! You guys got him, 136?"

"Negative, 240, he ghosted. Saw a black car pull up and that was it."

"Dispatch, 240, we need a perimeter set up around 1067 Chilikoot Trail. Suspect on the loose, possibly in a large black late model sedan with dark tinted windows, no visible plate." The ram recognized the female voice as that of that wretched bunny cop. This would be the second time she'd
interfered with the plans.

Perhaps it was time to arrange an appropriate accident for her.

Staring out the windshield through the dark and the snow that had just begun to fall, Doug broke the silence.

"Janus, I presume." Hornsby had spoken of the mammal, and hinted that he'd had something to do with the elimination of the quartet of water buffalo that had executed the Grand Palm test.

The reindeer nodded, not taking his eyes off the road as he guided the car through the streets and into back alleys, all the while listening to the police scanner chatter. When a unit reported in, a quick turn made sure their escape route didn't happen to take them right into a roadblock.

"I assume the elders sent you." The ram's words were more of a statement than a question, but he did get an affirmative nod from the other mammal.

"Why?"

The reindeer gave a snort as he turned down another road. "Your two lackeys are in jail. Brass thought it'd be wise to send you some backup in case one or both of them flipped. Not sure which one did, but they got the safe house location pretty fast."

Doug grunted in agreement.

"I trust that you were at least able to destroy any sensitive data there?"

The ram nodded. "I got all the critical stuff. Anything left isn't going to point to our activities."

'Janus' nodded his approval. The two were leaving the city heading northeast into the desert. They wouldn't get a chance to ditch and burn the delivery van, unfortunately, but staying out of the pen to fight another day was more important at this point.

It was about an hour before the new safehouse came into view. Doug would lie low here, until he was needed again.

"I still can't believe he got away again." Judy Hopps was cold and pissed. She'd started off as just pissed, stomping back in the direction of the building Doug had been in. And decided to take her anger out on something. And the tree she'd punched hadn't taken too kindly to said punch and had dropped a load of snow on her.

Hence the cold part.

The perimeter call had gone out and the number of units that had responded was staggering. Lab services and now two more cruisers were poring over the building, while other officers were canvassing passersby and other buildings in the area, hoping for eyewitnesses and security camera footage of the mysterious black car that had absconded with the fugitive ram.

The room that the ram had escaped onto the roof from was littered with broken computer parts, the remnants of Doug's apparent attempt at destroying data. Effective too, or so she was told. The mechanical parts wouldn't stand up to much abuse.

On the flip side of the coin, Nick was digging through the paper shredder.

"Anything good in there, Slick?"
The fox turned to look at her then shrugged, looking back at the bin full of paper clippings. "First look? A whole lot of nothing and a bin full of nada. Unless a portion of a receipt from McRoarnald's means something to you."

The doe shook her head. "I've tried their veggie menu. Honestly, I think it's probably healthier, safer, and more tasty, to eat dirt. I'm surprised it's not a crime to serve that stuff. It's an insult to herbivores everywhere."

Nick shrugged. "Well, their chicken burgers are pretty good. Not as good as some, but decent."

Judy shook her head. "I'll take your word for it." She finished up gathering the broken computer pieces into yet another bag and set it with the first three.

"You should at least try it, Carrots." Judy's ears sprang up, and she turned to give her fox an incredulous look. "Seriously, it won't hurt to just try it."

The doe rolled her eyes and pointed to herself. "Nick, I'm a rabbit. We eat plants. Not meat."

Nick's Cheshire grin told her she'd made a mistake. "Well, A Rabbit, I once knew this cop… her name was Judy, and she was a bunny… used to go around saying, 'try everything'. You wouldn't happen to know what happened to her, would you?"

The bunny's growl was almost on par with a predator.

"Well, if you see her, tell her I love her and miss her, and I want her 'try everything' attitude back."

The doe balled her paws into fists.

"You wouldn't happen to know that song, would you? Catchy tune. Always had her—"

"OK! OK! Fine! I'll try! Just shut up!" The doe finally caved, and the grin on the fox's muzzle only grew wider.

Shaking her head, she went back to combing through the debris.

Doug was just settling in to his new temporary home when his cell phone rang. "Doug here."

The voice on the other end was unmistakable as the deer Elder. "Janus informed me what happened. The Tundratown safehouse is a write-off."

"Yeah. ZPD rolled on that place just after I got there."

"And where were you before that?"

Doug frowned. "Checking out Woolter and Jesse's apartment. The ZPD had officers there already."

There was a brief silence on the line. "Did they follow you?"

The ram flipped on the news. Apparently, the commotion in Tundratown had been enough for an evening segment alongside the car chase earlier that afternoon. The way the news played it up, though, made it sound like they'd busted one of Big's operations. "No, they didn't follow me."

"What about unmarked cars?"

The ram let a little irritation slip into his voice. "No, no PD vehicles followed me. The first I saw any
of them, they tripped the sensors at the safehouse. Why?"

The tone of the mammal on the other end was slightly condescending. "Oh, no reason. I just find it extremely coincidental that, in the space of one day, two of our operatives get arrested, their apartment is raided, and one of our safehouses is raided shortly after THAT, and all three of these problems were caused by that rabbit and filth duo. Not to mention that we lost the delivery van. And Blackford's arrest last week. I trust you at least got rid of anything to use against us?"

"I had the chance to bleach the inside of the van before they got there, and I destroyed the computers we had there. All of the paper data had already been shredded."

There was an audible sigh. "Well, that's good at least. But for now, you're out of the picture. Enjoy your time in the new safehouse. For purity."

"Purity we shall have. Doug out." He hung up the phone and continued watching the news.

"Officers? You need to come see this." The fox and rabbit looked up from their current tasks to see a white wolf standing in the doorway. Glancing at each other, they dusted themselves off and went to follow the mammal.

"Sorry we couldn't get to this earlier. We had to let the thing air out." The white wolf commented as he led the two to the garage.

"Air out?" Judy didn't like the sound of that.

The wolf pushed open the door to the garage, and a blast of cold air and the sound of fans running at high speed assaulted the two smaller officers. "The moving van you found. We cracked open the back, and the smell was enough to make us dizzy. Had to clear out real fast."

The doe sniffed the air, and immediately caught the smell of chemicals, and she and her fox both said the same word at the same time. "Bleach." The telltale scent was unmistakable.

The white wolf nodded. "Right. But that's not what I wanted to show you." He led them around to the back of the van, and pointed inside. While the ceiling and most of the walls were fairly clean, the floor was covered with a glowing blue substance. Luminol. "We took some samples, and were able to confirm the presence of blood, but the vehicle was bleached down."

The three stared at the glowing blue mess that indicated the presence of blood for a moment. Nick broke the silence. "That's a lot of blood."

Chapter End Notes

Shazam! How do you like them apples?

So Doug slipped through their fingers...or did he? Did he? And who is this Janus guy!

Several people found one or more of the cookies in the last chapter, but I don't think anyone found all three (Mass Effect, Space Balls, and Alice In Wonderland). Can you find the cookies in this chapter?
Coming on November 14: Blood, Blood, Blood, and Death!

Questions? Critiques? Did the turkey on your dinner plate get up and walk away? Leave a comment!
"That's a lot of blood."

No one refuted the fox's claim. The interior floor of the van was literally glowing, and they could immediately tell that someone had used a bleach covered mop to try and clean up the mess. But fortunately, or unfortunately depending on how one looked at it, there was more than enough left behind.

"Any idea how recent it is?" The inquisitive bunny asked.

The white wolf CSI shook his head. "Impossible to say, at this point. Once we get it back to the garage, we might be able to get an idea of how recent it all is. The smell of bleach though, that's new."

Nick shook his head as he peered into the van. "Either that's one big mammal, or a lot of smaller ones." The other two agreed.

"We'll get this to our lab and see what we can get you," the white wolf commented, as he started putting his things back in his kit.

Judy turned to the large canid. "This vehicle was involved in the disappearance of a mammal of interest in our case."

The white wolf grinned. "I assume you probably want some results as soon as we can?"

The doe nodded.

With a shake of his head, his grin grew wider. "Good thing for you, I know Chief Hardass has your case as high priority, Hopps. By the way, my name's Wolfowitz. Tim Wolfowitz. I'd shake your paw, but honestly that might not be a good idea until I wash up." They shared a wry chuckle, and the smaller of the two moved around to the cab.

"You guys search the cab yet?"
Wolfowitz nodded. "Found a lot of long fibers, possibly wool, but we'll have to check that out, along with hoof prints. Not 100% certain at this point, but I'm pretty sure they came from a sheep."

Judy gave the wolf a thumbs up and headed back in the direction of the door.

It was a couple hours before they'd finished up at the scene, and in that time, they'd found more hoof prints, some too large to be a sheep, and tire tracks that didn't match the delivery van in the garage. All in all, it was a lot of evidence to look over, and the duo knew they'd be busy for the next couple days. At least they might be able to get some time to relax on their weekend, Judy thought.

Three hours. That's how long it had taken the reindeer to completely change his appearance. He'd started with some fur bleach and dye that made him look like an albino, along with contact lenses, some strategically placed prosthetics and fur, along with some padding and musk mask, and he was ready to go.

The mammal known to most as Janus Redfohn had walked into his prep room, but the mammal that walked out was Howard Strafford, one of the names in Strafford & Hughes attorneys at law firm out in Deerbrooke county. A smart suit completed the disguise, and the reindeer walked out the door to climb into one of his cars and head back to the city.

Of course, there was no partner named Hughes. Nor was their any Strafford & Hughes, attorneys at law. It was a shell set up some time ago for cases like this. He wouldn't need to deal with Blackford – that wood bison was going to have an accident thanks to one of his contacts in the same penitentiary – so that left the two rams as the only loose ends. Though it would probably look suspicious to have three mammicides in one night, that option was better than the alternative.

Finding the precinct that the rams had been shipped off to wasn't hard. The news had been pretty clear that the arresting officers had been the fox and rabbit, and they were assigned downtown. A couple questions to the right mammals had confirmed that, so that was where the reindeer was headed now.

The evening traffic had thinned out a bit, a quiet moment before some of the nocturnal mammals not living in the aptly named district began their nights. Navigating the roads and mindful of the traffic cameras, avoiding them as much as possible, the freshly minted attorney pulled into the visitors parking of the city center police station. Parking in a stall that would enable a quick exit if necessary, the reindeer climbed out of the car, earning a few inquisitive looks along the way, since albino reindeer were very rare, and walked into the police station.

He surreptitiously observed his surroundings and compared them to the mental notes he had for the police station layout. Nothing had changed since the place was built, a boon to the deer as he approached the rather obese cheetah that seemed to be packing away his work for the evening at the reception desk.

It didn't take long for the cheetah to offer him an unusually enthusiastic greeting, and the reindeer held up a hoof. "Good evening. I am Howard Strafford, Strafford & Hughes. I believe you are holding my clients." He offered the cheetah a business card, and produced a fake drivers license to back up his claim.

The cheetah scrutinized the two items for a moment, glancing at his face a few times and comparing it to that on the license. When he was satisfied, he made a quick note on a clipboard on his desk, and then turned it around for the deer to sign. Glancing at the form, he found it to be an attorney visitation form, and that the cheetah had already filled out his name and drivers license, and the company he "worked for". The deer filled out the rest with similarly false information and signed his name.
Taking the clipboard back and reading it, the cheetah nodded, grinned, and told him to wait a moment, then picked up his phone and called another officer. In no time at all, the deer was being escorted to the cells in the basement.

Once he was in the first cell, and had secured the privacy of his client, he turned to the only other occupant of the room.

"I hope you exercised your right to remain silent, Woolter."

The ram looked at the reindeer strangely.

"...because it will make it a lot harder for me to get you out of here if you've said anything."

Woolter scoffed. "You and I both know I ain't getting out any time soon. They connected me to the Bellwether thing."

"That remains to be seen. Tell me what's going on."

Ben Clawhauser was suspicious. The normally cheerful cheetah had a frown on his face ever since that reindeer had come through the door. He stared at the clipboard again, trying to make heads or tails of this. The business card had seemed legit, and the website he'd pulled up certainly seemed to be authentic, but he couldn't figure out why a law firm would travel over 300 miles to represent a client. Why wouldn't the two rams get anyone closer?

A call to the Deerbrooke county courthouse went unanswered, it being well past office hours. The local sheriff's department had come up similarly dry, the desk sergeant there admitting that while he didn't know all of the law firms in the area, he wasn't familiar with that one. And to top it all off, the address the reindeer had put on the signin sheet was for an old, closed bookstore, according to Zooge Maps.

Acting on a hunch, the portly cat wandered out to the visitor's lot. It being fairly late in the evening, the Reindeer's car was the only one there, making it stand out. It was a high-end model, certainly one that one could expect from a high-profile lawyer. A quick glance around, and the cheetah whipped out his phone and snapped a photo of the license plate and the VIN.

Retreating inside to his desk, he connected to the DMV database, and plugged in the number. A few moments later he had his result. The plate was valid, and the vehicle matched. It hadn't been flagged as stolen. The registered owner's name was different, too.

What else?

The mammal's license. He pulled over his clipboard and typed the mammal's license number into the field. Another few seconds and the computer came back with a very different result. The number was a valid one, but it came back to a mole rat living in the Meadowlands of all places. The cheetah's eyes flew open. Desperate, he called the chief.

The first ram was the most difficult, but fortunately, the reindeer had been able to ascertain just how little information the ram had given out about the current operations – none at all. He hadn't even been interviewed. Perfect.

A glass of water requested from the guard, a little something added before it was given to the ram, and then it was to the next cell, where the other ram was kept. This one went even smoother, and the reindeer was out of that cell in an even shorter period.
"All done?" The desk guard was a chatty one, something that annoyed the reindeer, who nodded.

"Yes, sir. I'll be seeing you tomorrow." The reindeer walked back to the elevators and hit the button for the main floor. The ride up was quick, but when the doors opened, he was happy to see the lobby relatively clear. As he headed for the door, though, a tiger moved towards it and locked it.

Shit. Ducking out of sight, and running down a corridor, he pulled up his mental map of the building. Two lefts, a right, and one long corridor later, he was through an emergency exit and out into the night. The exit alarm went off the moment he was through, blaring into the night. He was almost home free to his car when a loud voice rang out.

"Freeze! Move, and I'll shoot!"

The reindeer turned around to see a large cape buffalo with an equally large lethal aimed at him.

Judy and Nick were just finishing up in Tundratown when the call went out. "Dispatch to 240, need you back at the station, pronto!"

Nick looked up from his notepad, where he'd been cataloguing the evidence they'd collected, including the bloody van, a look of confusion on his face. Judy had no doubt that her face mirrored Nick's. "What's up, Clawhauser?"

"Not over the radio. Just get yourselves back here on the double."

The two small mammal's eyes went wide at the implications, and they quickly hurried to their cruiser, jumped in and took off, lights and sirens, for precinct one. Traffic was light, so they were able to make it back downtown with minimal delays, and no idiot mammals getting in their way.

Packing their cruiser in the garage, the two walked into the precinct, only to be grabbed by Clawhauser. "You two need to check on the rams you brought in."

Nick and the rabbit doe frowned. "What's going on?"

"When you brought them in, did they ask for a lawyer, or say anything about one?" Clawhauser whispered. The two shook their heads.

"Some white reindeer walked in claiming to be their lawyer. The thing is, he had a fake driver's license, and his car was registered to someone else."

Nick and Judy looked at each other and without a word, took off towards the holding cells in the basement. The warren of passageways were a blur as the two raced ahead, dodging the occasional mammal. When they finally got to the holding pens, they were surprised to see the guard not at his post like they would have expected, but instead, the cell doors were open, and a pair of gurneys in the hallway, with the guard standing between them.

Peering into the cells, Judy was shocked to see a team of paramedics at work on each one. "What happened?"

The puma guard shook his head. Their lawyer came to see them. He left just before both collapsed.

That got the fox's attention. "Clawhauser didn't think that was his lawyer. And that's a little too convenient. A mammal visits them, and they both collapse? Did that mammal ask for any water, or something to drink?"
When the puma nodded, Nick turned and got the paramedic's attention. "You need to treat him for poisons." At the skeptical looks from all the mammals, he continued "That was his method. Tetrodotoxin, or cyanide, most likely, dissolved in water. Tasteless, odorless to most mammals."

The paramedics didn't hesitate and scrambled for their poison control kits. He turned back to Judy and the puma guard. His doe was looking at him with an expression of pride mixed with curiosity, and he couldn't help but give a smile in return.

The moment was shattered though at the sound of gunshots, and both of the small mammals' expressions turned to that of shock. "Those were gunshots." Judy's comment came as she turned and took off down the hallway towards the stares, Nick in hot pursuit and both mammals drawing their lethals as they ran.

_Minutes ago_

In retrospect, it probably wasn't the greatest idea to try to run from a mammal carrying a lethal. But the reindeer had managed to get to cover, if only to use it to plan his next move. He'd left his Clawck in his car, a precaution in case he was searched. Police wouldn't find the poison, but a handgun would be cause for unnecessary attention and alarm.

"Sir, don't make this any more difficult than it has to be. Come out with your hooves up."

The reindeer didn't say anything, instead looking around for an escape route. The police station backed up onto a lit park with a stand of trees. The play set was about the only other thing around. He glanced around the tree he had taken refuge behind. The cape buffalo was gesturing to the officers around him to fan out. He didn't have much time.

To his left was the play set and a wide open field, likely for track running for the fuzz stationed here. To his right was a cross street, but it was about 150 feet away. He waited until the cape buffalo had glanced away for just a second, then bolted for the roadway, cursing his choice of highly visible white fur.

The shouting behind him intensified, and he heard the telltale sound of tranquilizer shots, the darts whizzing past as he ran. If he was captured, he had one last option. There must be no possible way to trace him back to his employer.

He made it to the street, and the police stopped firing, no doubt fearful of hitting a civilian. So much the better. His car was around the front, and if he could make it to that, that would buy him some time. All in all, this was not a well thought out mission, but normally, he wasn't trying to assault a police station. This would be the first and the last. He could only hope his associates had taken care of the wood bison.

The reindeer sprinted down the street, dodging the odd mammal, the police in hot pursuit. He barely made the corner when a group of ZPD cruiser pulled up in front of him, blocking his path. Too much to vault over, and that's ignoring the lions and tigers and bears that were piling out of them.

Back the way he'd come? No. The police chief and an elephant were coming from that direction. Head left? Rhino and hippo closing in. The only other option was back into the precinct, and he knew that door was locked.

_Shit, shit, shit._ This wasn't supposed to happen. How had they found out so quickly? The number on his business card would have been valid, and they didn't normally run ID checks on driver's licenses, unless they felt they needed to. What tipped them off? Or rather, what tipped the holding cell guard
off? That receptionist wasn't smart enough.

There were only two ways out of this predicament now. One was in a body bag, and he really didn't relish that idea. The other…well, a slightly less chance of being in a body bag.

Chief Bogo was furious. This was an assault, an attack on his home turf.

Not even Big had been so brazen and bold as this.

But despite his fury, there were still rules and regulations to follow. Even if it meant chasing the accursed mammal halfway down the block before his officers were able to set up a blockade. Only seconds after they'd managed that, however, the albino reindeer had raised his hooves in surrender.

Delgato moved in to cuff the mammal, but just as he'd begun listing the charges, and reached for the deer's hooves, the albino whipped a knife out of nowhere and sank it in to the lion's arm. The large cat yowled and backed off, and the reindeer took off at a run, heading away from Bogo.

The cape buffalo chief silently thanked his foresight to grab his glasses on the way out of his office, and he leveled his lethal, let out a breath, and fired two shots. Both hit their mark, and the reindeer went down, clutching his neck.

Keeping his gun trained, the cape buffalo slowly approached the deer. The knife lay a few inches from one of the mammal's hooves, and the police chief kicked it out of reach. The deer had been hit in the side and neck, and the latter wound was bleeding profusely.

At that moment, his two smallest officers came bursting out of the precinct, their own lethals at the ready. Of course, they would come rushing, the much larger mammal thought as he yelled for the paramedics and reached down to stem the bloodflow from the reindeer's neck. The other mammal didn't appear conscious, and the pulse felt thready.

It was only a moment later that Nick and Judy reappeared, dragging two of the paramedics that had already been in the building with them. The two medical mammals set to work trying to save the reindeer's life, while Bogo backed off.

The area around the police station was complete pandemonium. Inside, one of the rams had been covered with a tarp, having passed away during the efforts to save his life from the poison he'd been given. The other was alive, if only just, and headed to the hospital. The off duty watch had been called in to cover the infiltration and attempted assassination, while the day watch, or what was left had been forced to stay late to answer questions.

Outside, mobs of reporters fought against a barricade of police officers from the other precincts for the perfect photo of the body lying 50 feet from the car he had no doubt been sprinting for, also covered with a tarp.

Clawhauser was surrounded by a group of 3 officers, all of whom were taking his statement, and Bogo had been forced to surrender his firearm to the internal affairs officers when they'd arrived.

Judy and Nick stood together, to the side, both having been interviewed earlier, and, having arrived later than most of the others, not had much to tell. Neither one of them was looking forward to the night ahead. They'd both been hoping for a relaxing evening snuggled up on the couch – Nick's couch – watching a movie, but that just didn't seem likely at the moment.

Officially, they were both off the clock, having worked over 10 hours already that day. It just seemed
like one thing after another. First the visit to the Meadowlands, then the car chase, then the visit to Woolter and Jesse's apartment, followed by a side helping of a raid on a commercial building in Tundratown and finally an assassin at their home precinct. Woolter had been hauled off to Zootopia General Hospital in critical condition, while Jesse had died at the scene.

Looking at her fox, Judy recognized the slight slump in his shoulders that told her his energy levels were low. Normally she'd go find him some coffee to perk him up, but she didn't think that that would be a good idea at this late hour. Last time he'd had coffee in the evening, he'd not gotten to sleep until, in his words, "30 seconds before the fluffy living alarm went off." That comment had earned him a fist to the shoulder.

Now though, she wasn't sure what else she could do to help, so she reached across the miniscule distance between them and squeezed his paw, as though trying to give a little bit of the miniscule energy she had left to the fox. The larger mammal blinked and looked down at her, giving her a tired smile.

They couldn't show much in the way of physical affection out here, not with the reporters and lookie loos swarming the police line tape, but a paw squeeze was innocent enough. She smiled in return, before turning her attention back to the scene in front of her, her sensitive ears picking up tidbits of conversations among the reporters.

The majority of them seemed to be trying to pull "facts" out of thin air into a useable story, while some were on live camera reporting on the "events" behind them. Of course the lookie loos around had their phones out, recording and taking photos.

"For purity." The doe's ears twitched, then twisted and turned, scanning for the source of the voice. *Purity? What about purity?*

"Purity we shall have. Quite the scene here." The doe frowned, straining to locate the speaker.

"Indeed." There was a pause. "So only one of the rams died? Not both?"

"That's what I heard," another voice said, this one a little bit gruffer. The doe began scanning the crowd.

"I see." Judy couldn't be sure, but she thought she detected a tone of disappointment in the voice. "And the other?"

"It'll be fine. He's safe."

"Good. I must report back to the others. Keep me informed. For purity." *There's that phrase again. What kind of purity?* The doe spied what she thought was a deer and a goat on the edge of the police tape near a conveniently dark alley, just disappearing into the crowd.

She was puzzled. What was that about purity? And another? Were they talking about Jesse, in the hospital? She nudged Nick, who looked down at her. "Do you know what the phrase 'for purity' and 'purity we shall have' means?"

The fox shook his head. "I've never heard it, and unless my memory has totally gone to bed, that wasn't a phrase that any of the known cults used."

Judy nodded. "Right. The closest that we covered at the academy was 'shining for purification' that hellfire and brimstone church used a few years ago, until they were all arrested for falsifying identities. They claimed it was a 'way to break from your past'."
Her fox made a sound of agreement. "Why do you ask, fluff butt? Thinking of starting some sort of religious group?"

An eyeroll and a fist to the fox's arm later, the doe sighed. "No, you dumb fox. I just overheard two mammals talking about Woolter and Jesse. A deer and a goat I think." She gestured to where the two mammals had been. "They used the phrase like a sort of a handshake, as a greeting and a farewell."

Late nights seemed to be the norm for Marian Wilde now. The extra money was nice, but she could do with a little more time at home. She hadn't been able to see her son and his doe ever since they'd gotten back from Bunnyburrow.

She sighed as she filed away some of the huge stack of papers she'd been given, sorting the few that her boss had marked for disposal into another pile so that she could make a note of them before they got shredded and the paper recycled. The loud bang of her boss's door slamming closed as he marched past startled her, and she ended up dropping the stack she'd been working on. Cursing quietly to herself, she stooped to pick up the scattered papers, sorting them as she went.

She was just about done when one of the sheets caught her eye. It was a standard donation authorization form, one the company used to approve tax deductible donations to various charities across the city. Generally, they got filed in duplicate. One down in accounting, and the other with the corporate officer that authorized the transaction. Her boss had signed the approval, but he'd also signed the disposal approval.

Was this some sort of oversight? She took the paper back to her desk to look at it. The donation was for several million to the Organization for Welfare of Prey Mammals. The vixen frowned. She'd memorized the list of approved charities a long time ago. It wasn't a requirement of her job, but she'd done it anyway. And she knew that this organization, whoever they were, were not on that list.

She set the sheet aside, and opened up a document on her computer. Another piece of initiative on her part, and a little bit of personal protection, she kept notes of all the documents and stuff her boss had her destroy. The long years of being under suspicion just for being a fox had fostered a bit of paranoia. It wasn't a long list, and today's batch would easily double it, but she was somewhat relieved that no other donation forms had made it into the waste bin since she'd moved up here. She glanced at the paper again.

Only a week ago. That set alarm bells ringing. Documents like this were supposed to be kept for a minimum of seven years before they were destroyed, and this was barely a week old. She remembered the date too. She'd been on her way down to accounting to drop the donation forms off when she'd almost run into two mammals carrying ZPD badges. She'd been in a rush that day, and hadn't looked at the forms themselves, only dropping off the copies with one of the accountants and hastily signing her name with the accountant for the delivery before heading back to her office.

The vixen frowned, pondering the implications. After a moments she started rifling through the stack of papers she'd already sorted, finding two more donation forms, and another one in the pile she hadn't sorted out yet.

Four forms, each to charities she'd never heard of, all on the same day last week, and all marked for destruction. Why? Who were these organizations? Why had she never heard of them? And more importantly, what should she do about it? If this was some sort of embezzlement racket, who else was involved? The accountant? More than one of the executives? Her heart began racing and her palms got sweaty.

The sound of the phone hanging up in her boss's office and the hooves making their way towards the
door jarred the vixen from her thoughts. She quickly closed the document on her computer and hid the donation forms in a drawer in her desk, resolving to get them out later, then returned to the sorting she'd been doing earlier. As her boss's office door opened, she prayed she didn't look like a kit whose paw was just in the cookie jar.

She needn't have worried. Her boss walked right past her, heading for the elevators, with nary a word spoken in her direction. A shuddered sigh of relief later, the vixen resumed her task, this time checking each and every document for anomalies before putting it into the disposal pile. But the niggling thought in the back of her mind persisted. If her boss was embezzling from Furston, how can she stop it? And more importantly, why was he hiding it the way he was?

Felicity Stang tossed and turned in her bed. Tired as she was, she just couldn't get to sleep. It had been the norm for the last week or so, and she'd been forced to resort to coffee, something she almost never drank, just to keep up appearances with her work colleagues. It was a losing battle though, and she knew eventually, someone would notice, if they hadn't already. No one had said anything though.

One could say that the mustang mare was haunted. When she'd originally read those behavioral sciences reports all those years ago, she hadn't given them any thought – someone thought that predators had the same emotions a prey. So, what? That was just one group of studies. How could anything that had to eat the flesh of another animal, living or not, have any sort of emotion other than the need to feed and procreate?

She'd shoved it into the back of her mind. That is, until that video of the fox and rabbit officer at the Grand Palm had surfaced online. She'd decided to watch it one evening, out of pure scientific curiosity, and as the night wore on, she found herself comparing the behavior of both mammals to known behavioral patterns in other species, and it had shocked her how much of it she could relate to. Shocked and terrified her.

Then the news article, a few days ago. The same rabbit and fox. A beach date? At a beach that was starting to become known for its seclusion and privacy, and popular with romantic couples? It had shaken the equine.

She couldn't even remember why she hated predators so much. Ingrained belief from her parents and peers? Perhaps it was their past as hunters or their need for meat that repulsed her. But lately, she'd started asking herself, was it really that bad? It's not like commercially available meats came from sapient mammals. Very few cared when a bird was killed by a car or airplane, or if a fish was accidentally killed by a boat. Just as few cared if a specific tree was cut down for wood or for a new housing development.

And no one thought twice about mowing their lawn.

Was it the killers that seemed more predominant among predators, than among prey? No, that wasn't it. Some of the worst serial killers in history had been prey animals – Mustang Sally, Rhamston the Fleecer, and the Tundratown Phantom, a caribou buck, had all been prey, and were the worst serial killers ever, based on the brutality of their actions.

The fitful slumber that finally claimed the equine did nothing to calm her troubled mind.

It was well after three in the morning when an exhausted pair of ZPD officers finally trudged into the safe confines of Nick's apartment. Both were so tired that neither one bothered to change out of their uniforms, instead dragging themselves to the bed and collapsing on top of it, both asleep before they...
landed.

Neither could know however, that across the city, another mammal in the Zootopia Minimum Security Prison had gone to sleep, but unlike the two ZPD officers, the wood bison would never wake up again.

Chapter End Notes

A/N

Wow, lots happening in this chapter! So, the police station break in was probably not at all realistic, but I hope it was at least entertaining. I obfuscated some details there, since I don't want people using my ideas for a REAL raid on a police station!

SO! No one found the reference to World of Warcraft in the last chapter! Can you find any in this chapter?

Coming on December 28: The Aftermath is the Worst Part

Questions? Critiques? Was your Christmas tree knocked over by a purple pumpkin popping parakeet? Leave a comment!
The Aftermath is the Worst Part

Chapter Summary

The Precinct One officers deal with the aftermath of the last chapter's mess

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: My bid to own Zootopia got lost when Ralph wrecked the Internet, so I still don't own Zootopia, and I also don't know why my word processor is writing messages proclaiming how awesome Vanellope is on it's own. I think my friend, Daee17, and I have gotten rid of all of them in this chapter though.

And on that note, a happy birthday to her (Daee17)! She's been my editor ever since I started writing this, and I can't do it without her!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Normally, they would have had a day off after an event like that which took place at precinct one. You don't have an assassin break into a police station to kill two suspects every day, after all. That kind of thing can be pretty stressful. Instead though, it was all hands on deck after a quick four hour power sleep.

Power sleeps are not very restful though, and the rabbit and fox that dragged themselves out of the subway station towards the police precinct were not the usual happy bunny and snarky fox. Instead, the rabbit looked irritable, with her ears drooped forward, while the fox looked like he'd slept in a gutter and was just downright grumpy.

Their moods didn't improve when they saw the mob that was still outside the precinct, and any diplomacy they had left was quickly erased when the mob spotted them and began harassing them with questions.

"Why did the police chief murder that prey mammal?"

"How do you justify the killing of fleeing mammals?"

"How did the killer get in?"

"How can we expect you to keep us safe when you can't even keep those in your own custody safe?"

"I pay your wages, and you are all incompetent fools!"

"Yeah! What he said!"

"That pred shit got what he deserved! Shoulda been stabbed a hundred times! Filthy preds! They all
need to die!"

Throughout the whole exchange, the two had remained silent, simply looking for a way around or through the mob of animals. The last comment stopped both of them cold. Judy's ears went ramrod straight and turned in the direction of the voice. Her paws clenched and unclenched, and her face was a mask of rage. Her fox, on the other hand, had his ears straight back and was fighting to avoid baring his teeth.

"Who said that?" The bunny's calm, low voice held a definite note of danger. If it had been directed at him, he would probably be backpedalling and looking for a nice, big, thick reinforced concrete bunker to hide in for the rest of his life. Most of the rest of the crowd fell silent.

"I did!" The pig that had spoken was apparently not that smart. The rabbit doe's eyes snapped toward the mammal in question, and locked onto him with all the focus and accuracy of a laser. If looks could kill, the pig would be a radioactive crater. If he was lucky. The doe marched over to the pig, the crowd parting before her like Mawses and the Red Sea.

Planting herself in front of the belligerent mammal, she crossed her arms and her right foot began to tap. "Care to rephrase that little comment about predators?"

The pig looked down at her with an expression that was equal parts smug and disgusted. "Of course, you would defend a predator. Filthy inter predophile sicko. You're just as bad as the predators themselves! Speaking of which, get the hell away from me, fox," he said, addressing Nick. "Go back to your cave or mudhole or wherever you came from."

A quiet chirp from Judy's phone caused the rabbit's ear to twitch, but Nick doubted anyone but the two of them heard it. She turned to address the pig again.

"Sir I'd advise you to watch your language. Harassment of an on-duty officer is a criminal offence."

Nick caught the words 'on-duty' and pulled out his phone. Sure enough, the time for him and Judy to punch in had come and gone. He pulled up his text messages and sent one to Clawhauser. 'Hopps and I stuck in mob outside. They don't seem like a happy bunch.'

He slipped his phone back into his shirt pocket, and refocused his attention on the mammals around him. Most of the crowd had gone back to shouting at the closed doors of the precinct, but those closest to them were much more interested in the drama unfolding between the rabbit cop, and the pig.

"You can't do anything to me, rabbit. I got my rights, and one of them is voicing my opinion of you and your filthy friends!" The pig sneered. "So why don't you just hop along, and this won't turn out badly."

A slight grin tugged at the rabbit's muzzle. "Well, sir, I can't do that, because now, you are under arrest for threatening a police officer." Her unflinching gaze at the larger mammal hardened even more, and she pointed to a spot on the concrete behind the pig. "So, get down on the ground with your hooves behind your head. Do it, now."

Nick popped the clasp on his tranquilizer holster as the pig barked out a laugh. "You must be joking. You think I'm just going to do what you say?"

"You will if you know what's good for you. I'm an officer of the law giving you a direct order." The ice in her voice was no less evident.

"Phffft. Whatever. I don't listen to predophiles. Go fuck that fox or something." He crossed his arms
and stared back at her defiantly. The rabbit drew her ESW. The pig looked at it, seemingly unimpressed.

The doe flipped the switch on, charging the device. "This here's rated to take down elephants. It can deliver a jolt of over 100,000 volts for as long as the battery lasts or I hold down the trigger." She turned to Nick. "What was it like, Nick, when they did the pain compliance training at the academy?"

The fox shuddered. "It was like one of those cramps you get in your leg, but all over your body, and it doesn't let up. You just lock up, and your whole world is pain." Nick shook his head. The pain compliance training was one of the worst experiences in the entire 6 months he was there, and having to relive it during recertification training was one thing he wasn't looking forward to.

At least now, though, the pig looked a little uncertain, and backed up a few paces, as Judy continued. "Now, if you get on the ground WILLINGLY, I won't have to use this But, if you don't, we'll have to force you to comply, and that won't be pleasant for any mammal. You'll be in pain, and I'll have a ton of paperwork to fill out."

Nick shook his head. "Trust me. You don't want to give her extra paperwork to do. The whole precinct avoids her when that happens."

The pig looked toward the fox, then back at the rabbit, then to the mammals around him, who were all backing up slightly, obviously not wanting to get on the rabbit officer's bad side, even if they disagreed with her. Seeing no overt support, the pig surrendered, and turned and got down on his knees, just as the doors of the precinct opened and a tigress, an elephant, and a hippo exited, fanning out to try to contain the mob.

Judy finished securing the flexicuffs on the pig and yanked on him, guiding him to his hindhooves. She then proceeded to pat him down, before marching him into the precinct. The spectacle over, the rest of the crowd resumed yelling their mantras, though some couldn't help but give a disgusted look towards the rabbit, the fox, or both.

The three mammals, one being pushed by two smaller officers, entered the precinct to a hive of activity. Several sections of the building were cordoned off as crime scene techs from other precincts inspected the area.

Judy guided the belligerent pig to Clawhauser's desk, and had the cheetah send him to booking for harassing an officer, while she and Nick went to clock in, late. They hadn't even made their cubicle before Judy's cell phone rang. Frowning, the doe grabbed it, stared at the screen a moment, then hit the answer button. "Officer Hopps here."

Nick couldn't hear the other side of the conversation, but he watched as Judy's eyes went wide, and her ears dropped behind her head. He cocked his head as the conversation continued, to which Judy glanced at him and held up a finger, mouthing "one second," before letting the mammal at the other end of the line know that they'd be "there" as soon as possible and hanging up.

"What's up, Carrots?"

Judy took a breath and let it out. "Taylor Blackford's body just showed up at the coroner's office."

Damian Hornby was pissed. But not just pissed. He was PISSED. And he was currently in the process of explaining to the elders just how pissed he was.

"This guy was supposed to be an ex-blackops operative! And he botched getting rid of THREE
mammals that are directly connected to us! To MY cell!"

The elders on the other end of the line were silent, glancing at one another. The Texas longhorn sighed.

"We've lost two of our garbage mammals and our asset is dead. The problem from last week has been dealt with, but four deaths in one night is going to raise some questions."

The elders were silent a few more seconds before the buck deer spoke up. "We are well aware of the complications this development has caused. And we understand that another of your assets is also on the police department's radar."

The Texas longhorn gritted his teeth. "Yes. Doug is hiding out in our desert safe house at the moment. The rabbit police officer saw his face. Were it not for Janus, they likely would have caught him."

The beaver elder tapped his blunt claw on the table the three were seated at. "Perhaps it's time for the rabbit and fox to be dealt with."

The pig sow to his right vehemently shook her head. "Two more deaths of police officers would raise even more suspicion. Three of last night's deaths are directly tied to them, so if they were to be killed or disappear, someone else would simply take over for them, and we'd have heat on us for three officers for which they'd be looking for the killers, even if two of them were filth, and the third was a perverted freak."

The beaver sat back in thought. "Could this all be made to look like they were responsible? That they actually bailed Doug out by calling Janus, and had him take care of the other problems while they had an alibi at the Tundratown safehouse?"

Another head shake. "We could try, but I doubt it. The rabbit arrested Bellwether last year and gave the police the first information on Doug, Woolter and Jesse at the same time. And now, she's been outted as a predophile, so her associating with our kind would seem even less likely."

More silence. "What about the fox filth? They are untrustworthy."

The deer elder spoke this time. "Perhaps. But we have to tread lightly here. We don't yet know what kind of evidence the department was able to recover from the safe house, or what any of our four expired agents said to anyone before they checked out. Regrettfully, we've not been able to recruit anyone in the department, yet. We can table the issue until we know more."

The deer wrote something on a tablet before continuing. "The issue now is how to continue testing our formula. With the loss of our Tundratown safe house and garbage van, we have limited options, and our benefactor is pushing for another public test."

Hornby shuffled his own notes. "Our new test and production building that we bought out in the desert is working well for us. It's possible we may be able to recruit some of the locals to help us out, but someone might notice if they go missing, since they all have homes and public lives. Our best bet is to stay with our current demographic. It's been working well for us so far. If we stick to smaller filth, we won't even need a new garbage van."

The Texas longhorn frowned. "That kind of limits our options for which filth are the available for testing. Foxes, otters, and a couple of bat species, but bats are hard to catch. Wolves would be too big."

The deer elder nodded. "Very well. Focus on foxes and otters. Foxes aren't trustworthy, so mammals
may not notice if they go missing so much as otters." He shuffled more papers. "On to the other issue. What is the status of your bad apple?"

Hornby frowned. "She's been doing her job, and hasn't said anything concerning lately. I've been monitoring her work."

The deer elder nodded. "Good. See that she does not and cannot sabotage our work in any way. She is an important asset, but if she becomes a liability, she must be dealt with."

The Texas longhorn nodded. "Understood."

The pig elder sitting in the middle held up her hoof. "One more thing. What is the status of the latest version of the formula?"

With a shake of his head, the longhorn bull sighed. "We've not made any progress. Not without rendering the test subjects completely comatose or killing them outright."

There was a chorus of discontentment from the three elders.

"We might be close to something though. If we can get the filth's instincts to label a family member as a threat, it may be enough to override the…other instincts. We're looking at other additions that may assist with that."

The three elders each glanced at the others, before giving their approval. The pig had one final question though. "Will it be ready for our second public test date?"

Damian shrugged. "Unknown. Could go either way. Depends on if we can source and test the new additions in time. We may have to push that back."

The deer elder spoke this time. "If that is what must be done, then that is what we will do. Our second test must not allow these filth to propagate any sort of emotion when they are affected. For purity."

Apparently, the conversation was over. "Purity we shall have." The longhorn disconnected the call and sat back in his chair with a sigh. He did not relish the idea of eliminating Felicity Stang, but if that was what had to be done, then he would ensure that it happened. Their mission could not be compromised. The bull turned back to his computer and began his search for a product to add to the formula that could possibly help him achieve the desired result.

She'd been here for five minutes and the doe had already decided that she hated the place. The coroner's office stunk of disinfectant and airborne scent neutralizers, but beneath all that, there was the scent of death. A scent that had her hindbrain warning her that this was a bad place and they should leave.

She ignored the voice in her hindbrain, but that didn't stop the occasional twitch from her nose. Instead her attention was focussed on the body of the wood bison on the examining table in front of her. "What happened?"

Dr. Rocky Mamusson shook his head. "The guards found him this morning when he didn't show up for breakfast or role call. The night shift said he was already sleeping when security made their last round before lights out."

Nick looked at the lifeless shell in front of him. "I'm guessing that isn't the case."
The raccoon coroner shook his head. "He was dead well before lights out. I can't put a specific time
down, but I'd guess about 9:00 last night. And smell this." He indicated the wood bison's mouth, to
which both officers stared at the raccoon with slightly sickened expressions. "Trust me."

Both mammals leaned in and sniffed. Judy frowned. "All I smell is his scent, death, and a whole lot
of disinfectant."

Nick on the other hand took another sniff. He'd detected something faint, almost like... "Burnt
almonds." The raccoon coroner nodded, a satisfied look on his face. At Judy's questioning glance,
Nick explained. "Burnt almonds is what cyanide smells like. Most mammals can't smell it, but to
those of us that can, it smells like burnt almonds."

The doe stared down at the buffalo for a moment. "So, he was poisoned – just like Jesse and
Woolter."

Dr. Mamusson nodded. "That's my preliminary cause of death, yes."

"9:00 seems like an odd time. That's hours after supper is served at the prisons." Nick stared at the
body, pondering.

Judy frowned and flipped through her notepad. "We were in Tundratown then. Tearing apart Doug's
hideout."

Her fox partner leaned over her shoulder. "What time were we called back to the precinct?"

Judy pointed to the entry. "9:17"

Nick frowned. "How much of a margin of error are we looking at, Doc?"

The raccoon shuffled over to his preliminary notes and looked at them. "I'd say about a half an hour
either way."

The fox's frown deepened. "So that leaves anywhere from about 45 minutes of time to about 15
minutes too late for it to be the same mammal that got to Woolter and Jesse." He pulled up Zoogle
Maps on his phone and plotted a rout between the two facilities. "It takes 34 minutes to get from
minimum security to the precinct, and that's if you run out of the prison like your tail's on fire and
there's no traffic."

Judy slumped a little bit. "So that reindeer wasn't our guy." Her eyes went a little wide. "Unless he
had help."

Her russet canid partner nodded. "If he was slipped something in his water or something, anyone not
in a cell could have done it."

Dr. Mamusson jotted something in his notes. "I'll have blood and stomach contents sent over to the
lab as soon as I can."

Judy wrote down what they knew and suspected in her notepad, before tapping her pen to her lips.
After a moment, she gestured to Nick. "Come on, Slick, we need to talk to Bogo."

Damian Hornby stretched as he rubbed his eyes. Last night had been a hive of activity, and the
Texas longhorn hadn't gotten a lot of sleep. Between having to bail Doug out to tying up the loose
ends, he'd been up until three in the morning.
Not to mention, the Elder's desire to perfect the new formula. The simulations he'd been running for the last several days hadn't been favourable.

Of course, simulations were no substitute for live mammal testing. Reptile testing came close, and most labs used them or birds when testing new products. But, lowly and filthy as predators are, you can't test a formula like theirs if the test subject has no sapience to begin with.

The need to lay low for a while and the loss of Woolter and Jesse as assets was a setback, for sure, but sacrifices had to be made for the greater good.

The longhorn bull moved to the kitchen, past the table that still had three chairs arrayed around it, and to the coffee maker that had just finished it's latest brew. A little cream, a little sugar, and the Bovidae was ready to get back to work.

One good thing that came out of laying low was working mostly from home. He would log on to his computer, connect to the secured network some other cell had set up, and started going over his notes again, or running simulations. A pop-up from the messaging app told him Felicity had just signed on and was running her own tests.

The bull's thoughts turned to the mustang mare. She hadn't made any more concerning remarks since their conversation on the weekend, but he was still wary. He couldn't have the work compromised, not now, so he'd purposefully kept her in the dark about a few of the details he'd been trying, as well as the planned second public test. It would not do for her to have any more second thoughts.

With the majority of Precinct 1 closed to those who didn't need to be there, this was the perfect day for the search warrant for Furston's research campus to finally be able to be processed. Shawn Dancing Rivers and his partner had contacted the Furston Chief Research Officer, who agreed to meet them at the site.

Rivers and Longtooth had not had the greatest of weeks. Every lead seemed to run dead, every tip a dud. It would feel good to get to some solid leads and evidence, and right now, the possible corporate espionage at Furston and their link to the original Night Howler antidote seemed like the best one.

The cheetah at the guard shack waved them through as soon as he verified their clearance and their reason for being there, pointing them to the visitor's lot outside the front door of the main building. Parking their cruiser, the two detectives made their way into the lavish entry hall. The hall spanned the entire height of the four story structure, and was easily large enough to fit a small herd of elephants. A large, ornate glass and steel sculpture dominated the center of the massive foyer, from floor to ceiling. Longtooth made her way to the plaque at the base of the art piece to see what it had to say.

"'Research and Progress Through The Years', by Alphonso Lombardi. Commissioned to celebrate the centennial of Furston Pharmaceuticals," she read, before staring up at the seemingly nonsensical sculpture of glass and steel twisting and protruding in every which direction. "I don't see it. How does this represent research an' progress?"

Rivers shrugged. To him, it just looked like a mass of glass and steel that reflected the light in weird ways. "You're not the only one that can't see it, Detective", came the voice of Graham Ellismaw. The two looked towards the elevator banks to see the water chevrotain they'd met with before heading towards them. "I've long said that that monstrosity was a waste of money. People hardly come through here anyways." The Furston CRO stuck his hoof out for a shake, which the two detectives gladly took.
Squaring his shoulders, the chevrotain gestured that they should follow him. "Most of our research staff work here. A few work at the manufacturing plants as final quality assurance leads." He led them to the elevators and pressed the call button. "We have ten separate buildings. The research for the Night Howlers antidote was done in this one. Saves us having to head to one of the other campus buildings."

"What do the other buildings do?" Longtooth enquired, just as the doors opened to allow them in.

"All of the different buildings house multiple research labs, teams and projects. Most of them are similar in size to this one, though they don't have the fancy foyer or sculpture."

The elevator took them up to the third floor. The water chevrotain let them down a maze of corridors, swiping a keycard at multiple access doors. This piqued the lioness' interest. "How many people have access to this buildin'?"

"Hmm?" The small ungulate glanced up at Longtooth. "Oh, everyone has access to the parking garage, lobby, and most of the main floor, along with the access tunnels to the other buildings. Security for each building has access to the whole of that building alone. For most of the research staff, they only have access to the area of the building where their team is. That doesn't stop mammals from visiting friends in other areas though. It's frowned upon, but it happens."

Nolwazi Longtooth frowned. "That seems like it would circumvent the physical security, if someone can just invite someone into their secured section of the building."

Ellismaw nodded. "Like I said, it's frowned upon. We've been cracking down on things lately though, since the last bout of corporate espionage. We're getting an employee tracking system put in and beefing up our security staff." At the look from the lioness, the ungulate sighed. "Don't take this the wrong way. No matter what you do, employees can find ways around almost any security measure."

"I assume you have penalties for employees that allow other employees into secured areas they are not supposed to be in." Rivers was eyeing up the security cameras he saw installed at every intersection and corner.

"Yes, suspension for the first offence, and loss of your job for the second, whether you are the visitor or the 'host'."

The two detectives nodded. That seemed appropriate, given the circumstances. The ZPD had similar blocks on parts of it's facilities. For example, IT and Cybercrime divisions were closed off from everyone except the police chiefs, precinct captains, and the staffers that worked there, and the labs themselves were restricted to those who needed access, meaning that officers and detectives could come and go, only as long as their case remained active.

"Have you had to take any disciplinary action in that regard recently?" Rivers asked, hoping the answer might expand their suspect pool.

Ellismaw shook his head. "Not recently that I'm aware of."

Well, nuts to that. "Is there anyone that can move between secured areas?"

The water chevrotain pushed open the door to a conference room. It wasn't huge, by any stretch of the word, rather, it looked to be about the size for a decent team of mammals to have a meeting, or even a conference. "The team leads can move between secured areas. They're allowed to. No one else though."
Well, that was an interesting detail. "We'll need to talk to—" Rivers began before he was interrupted by the smaller ungulate.

"The team lead for the Night Howlers project? He should be on his way. I have to warn you though, these guys don't always take too kindly to having mammals sniffing around their work and their team." At the look the two detectives gave him, he held up his hooves placatingly. "I understand, this is a police matter. Just warning you." He gestured to the seats surrounding the table, indicating that the two should sit down. "I'll be back in a moment."

Silence descended on the room for a moment, before either of the two spoke. "Well. Seems cozy," the elk remarked with no small tone of sarcasm.

His lioness partner snorted. "Didn't even offer us a glass of water."

Rivers nodded, scratching his chin. "So, what do you think so far?"

Nolwazi Longtooth thought for a moment. "Well, based on what we learned this time and at our first meetin' with this guy, it seems to be a fairly limited pool of possibilities. The team leads for one. They had access to all the research, all the data, the final product. It could also be a buncha' the lower level researchers and grunts that had access to just enough to make their own working product." She glanced at the door, before lowering her voice. "It could also be someone higher up the food chain."

"If this is even the place to be anyways. We could still be yapping up the wrong tree."

Both detective's complexions darkened at that possibility. Neither one wanted any more case delays, since they'd already backburnered the case for the murder of their own colleague. Their conversation didn't go any further though as the door opened and three mammals stepped into the room. Ellismaw was followed by a lynx dressed in a white shirt, red tie and black pants, and a bighorn sheep that was dressed in a full gray Armawni suit, looking for all the world like a lawyer.

The two detectives stood in greeting, shaking paws and hooves with the newcomers. "Detectives, this is Perry Devorak. He was our team lead for the Night Howlers antidote. And this is Jeremiah Ramshorn. He's here from our legal team."

Yep. A lawyer. The bighorn spoke up. "Good afternoon, detectives. I'm just here to make sure that everyone stays on track and the terms of your warrant aren't violated."

Both detectives nodded and voiced their agreement, but both were internally stewing at the development. Not that they'd intended to violate the warrant, but it meant that a one hour meeting and tour was going to turn into a four hour meeting and half of a tour.

The five sat down and waited while the lawyer read the entirety of the warrant, line by line, page by page. The pace was agonizing. Finally, the bighorn sheep put down the document and turned his attention on the two detectives.

"Alrighty then. What can we do for you?"

The next three hours were spent going over the development and testing of the night howler antidote. Mammals had come and gone, but the only ones that knew of the entirety of the project were the two in this room.

The two ZPD members sighed. This didn't seem to be getting anywhere. "Is there anything you can tell us about the latest strain of Night Howlers? Could your research have been used to help engineer that?"
Again, the lynx spoke up. "Your own lab was able to reverse engineer that toxin. Any other pharmaceutical company could have done the same. It would have been up to them to identify the active ingredients and mix up or refine the toxin into what was used at the Grand Palm."

"What about corporate espionage? Could enough data have been stolen to be able to produce what we're seeing out there?"

The lynx frowned and stayed silent, while the lawyer spoke up. "Detectives, I can assure you that none of the cases of espionage could have possibly resulted in enough viable data to engineer this new toxin so quickly."

"It would have taken months of research to get the rest. And then there's the development and testing phase," The lynx said. "How would they have managed to keep testing of such a blatantly targeted weapon out of public knowledge?"

The bighorn nodded his agreement. "All our test subjects were well compensated, and volunteered of their own free will. They did sign a non-disclosure agreement, so are not allowed to speak of the trials."

Rivers flicked his pen for a moment, staring down at the notepad. "We'll need to speak to those test subjects."

The bighorn lawyer thumbed through the papers he'd brought with them, pulling out one and reading it over. No one spoke for a few moments, and when they did, the bighorn sheep was the one that broke the silence. "You're in luck. The contract doesn't forbid the test volunteers from talking to the police, as long as a Furston legal representative is present."

Rivers eyebrows shot up at that. "Would we be able to get a list of the mammals that volunteered?"

Jeremiah Ramshorn shook his head. "Sorry, but that information is confidential. If you want to talk to them, it has to be on Furston's property, and we have to be the ones to contact the volunteers."

In other words, they want home field advantage. Guess we have to play ball by their rules for now. Rivers wasn't too pleased, but nodded his agreement.

"Well, gentlemen, I think that concludes our business," Ellismaw said as the bighorn, the water chevrotain, and the lynx all stood up, the last somewhat reluctantly. Hooves and paws were shaken, and the two detectives made their way out of the building.

Neither Rivers nor Longtooth said much for the first few minutes.

"Did you see the lynx's reaction when you asked about corporate espionage?"

The elk thought for a moment. "Yeah. He frowned. Almost like he wanted to say something but couldn't."

"Or wasn't allowed to."

"You think maybe there was a case of corporate espionage that may have gotten more than they are telling us?" Rivers inquired.

The lioness next to him shrugged. "Or something like that. Some dirty corporate secret they don't want to get out."

The two pondered this as they headed back into the downtown core.
Nick and Judy were more than a little stunned as they stared at the imposing Cape Buffalo across from them. They’d just explained the suspected connection between their existing case and the attack on the precinct last night.

"You what, sir?" Judy had a hard time believing her ears, long and sensitive as they were.

"I'm assigning you two to the assassination case." The buffalo’s response was a mere repetition of his previous words, blunt and to the point.

The fox and rabbit looked at each other for a moment, before the smaller of the two spoke up again. "Isn't that a conflict of interest?"

The buffalo sighed. "Under normal circumstances, yes, but you have shown to be impartial in the past. You arrested Bellwether and Lionheart, both of whom gave you their support and endorsement without hesitation or remorse. There are other aspects of your judgement I have found questionable in the past, however, I feel your time here has tempered those. Don't make me regret this. Now go see Clawhauser for the case file." Bogo pointed at the door, apparently indicating that the conversation was finished.

Judy's exhuberance could not be contained though. The doe bounced into the air, pumping her two tiny fists before she landed, then bounded out the door and around the corner. "Come on, slick, we need to review that case file!" The doe’s voice got quieter the further away she got.

The fox grinned, gave the chief his two fingered salute, and disappeared in the direction the rabbit had ran off in.

Bogo let out another sigh, wondering how many more gray furs he was going to get before he retired.

Nick and Judy spent most of the rest of the day reviewing evidence gathered from the precinct assassin case, matching the photo of him without the prosthetics and fat suit to a single traffic camera feed from the area of the commercial building last night, and confirming that they were in fact the same mammal.

By the end of the day, the two were tired and were looking forward to their day off tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it! More stuff coming together, more corporate roadblocks, and more general nonsense from speciesist idiots!

For those that haven't yet, I'd encourage everyone to go check out MrFallenAngel's "How Could Anyone Love A Fox Like Me". It's a wonderful story that starts right after the Bellwether arrest scene in the movie. He'll be going on leave for a bit, so go over there and leave him lots of positive comments to come back to!

As for last chapter's reference, NO ONE picked it up. Here's a hint: Howard Strafford of Strafford and Hughes. Maybe that was way to obscure, but Howard Hughes was a pioneer in the aviation industry, building, among others, what would become the largest
aircraft in the world at the time (the Hughes H-4 Hercules), only surpassed by three jetliners in size

No references in this chapter though. Keep an eye open for ones in upcoming chapters!

Coming on January 11: Skater Fox You Are Not!

Questions? Critiques? Did Iron Man show up at your door and tell you you were being recruited for The Avengers Initiative? Leave a comment!
"I can't believe you're moving out, bunny."

"Dude! Her name is Judy!"

"I know that! Shut up! Where are you moving, bunny?"

"You shut up! So, where you going?"

"You shut up!"

"You shut up!"

Judy sighed in exasperation. One thing she wouldn't miss about her old place was… the neighbors. While they'd been a mainstay of her time in the city, they needed to learn to quiet down. Especially in a building with paper thin walls like this one.

"You two had enough? I can still run you in for disturbing the peace, you know."

"Nah, we're good, bunny. Take care of that foxy toy, ya hear?"

The doe growled softly to herself at the idea that Nick was just a mere "toy." The canid in question was leaning on the door frame with his arms crossed, staring with an amused expression at the wall separating them from the current targets of the doe's wrath.

"You know, Fluff, I doubt I'd have lasted as long as you did with the Bucky and Pronk Show playing 24/7 next door. I don't know how you managed it."

The doe walked over to him and dumped a bag full of clothes into his arms. "Shut up, you dumb fox, and help me carry this stuff." She grabbed two bags for herself and ushered the fox into the hall, closing and locking the door. Skipping down the hall, she stopped at Dharma Armadillo's flat,
handed over her key, remarking that she hadn't lost it, before continuing on her way out the door.

The two wandered down the street to the Banyan subway station, boarded the train, and headed for Nick's apartment. The rest of the week had been fairly quiet. The lab had been hard at work processing the evidence from the Tundratown raid, as well as that of the assassination attempt at Precinct One, but nothing was ready yet. Mammal interviews were ongoing, handled at other precincts, and security had been beefed up as well.

As much as she didn't like the idea, it did feel good to get away for a day and take care of things outside the job. Like moving into her fox's apartment. Part of her was still excited about that, and another part was nervous. She couldn't really put a finger on why, though. After all, they'd been sleeping in the same room on a daily basis since they'd gone to Bunnyburrow, so it wasn't like this was something totally new. She even had her own bedroom and bed if she needed it for some reason, heaven forbid.

Lately, ever since the news article had run, the fox and doe had found themselves the targets of unwanted attention, mostly looks of disgust and vitriol, though some looked intrigued, and one or two had looks that almost seemed hopeful. She couldn't figure those ones out.

Today, though, the ride in the subway was thankfully without incident or questionable looks, and the two made their way through the streets again, finally arriving at Nick's place just after ten o'clock in the morning. The doe spent the next half hour unpacking what little she didn't have at Nick's place already, all the while thinking that this was so much better. They'd be able to share expenses, and she wouldn't have to worry about her fox as much. No one was going to hurt him while she was around.

Judy was just finishing up her task, having organized all her clothes into the small dresser and hung her uniforms in the closet, when a thought occurred to her. It had been getting chilly lately, and she'd been thinking of all the winters they'd had at home. One thing that she'd loved doing was skating on the frozen ponds in the fields of her family farm. Maybe Nick would enjoy that?

She pulled out her phone and tapped away in the search bar. A few seconds later, she found what she wanted—a public skating pond in the heart of Tundratown. The skate shack nearby also offered rentals, which was perfect, since her own skates were back home. Smiling to herself, she finished up with the task at hand and left the room.

Nick was in the kitchen finishing up a glass of juice when she walked by.

"Come on, Slick," Judy said. "We're going out." She as she grabbed his paw and pulled him to the door.

The fox spluttered, scrambling to put his glass in the sink as he was towed forcibly away from his little sanctuary. "Out? Out where?"

Judy smiled. "We're going skating, Slick."

Nick couldn't help but feel a little perplexed. Skating? What brought this on? he wondered. He hadn't been roller skating in years, only learning to do so once for a hustle, and never doing it again. He was certain, though, that he could at least perform decently enough to impress the doe. He hoped.

It was not to be.

She didn't take him to a rollerdrome. Nowhere near one. Instead, she'd taken him to Tundratown. He supposed he should have clued in when she had grabbed his winter coat and given it to him that she had something else up the sleeve of her own fuzzy winter attire.
Instead of a nice warm indoor roller skating rink, they were now seated on a log at the side of a frozen pond in Tundratown, strapping on the blades that the doe had rented for them.

They weren't the only mammals here. Far from it. In fact, there were dozens out enjoying the sunshine and the cold, gliding along the smooth surface. Some were clearly accomplished in the ability, either through winter sports or simple practice. Others balanced themselves with traffic cones, large egg crates, or anything else that they could find, just to stay upright. Almost all of them were cold weather mammals that could usually be found around the district: Polar bears, wolves, deer, elk, moose, and even arctic foxes, among others.

But they were the only red fox and rabbit there.

"So, Carrots... When you said we were going skating, I assumed you meant roller skating," the fox commented as he laced up the blades, his bunny beside him doing the same.

"Why?" The doe's curious tone made him look over. "Worried you'll slip and fall or something?"

The fox scoffed, pulling his pant leg down where he'd finished up lacing up. "I happen to be an expert skater fox, Fluff Butt. Ice skating can't be that different from roller skating."

Judy couldn't help the eyeroll at Nick's comment, as she got to her feet and pushed off, gliding effortlessly across the ice. "OK, Slick Nick. Let's see if your skating skills are as smooth as your talking skills." The doe picked up speed and skated a lap around the pond, stopping short of the log, where Nick was just getting to his feet. The slight wobble in his legs told her everything she needed to know.

Skating backwards, using her ears and sensitive hearing to keep track of where everyone else was, Judy watched as Nick made his way toward her.

The fox shoved his paws in his pockets. "Try not to be too smitten, Toot-toot. My moves will be like nothing you've ever seen."

Judy grinned and continued backward. "Skating on ice is different than skating on roller skates, Nick. But I'll do my best to contain my excitement."

Nick shook his head, that confident smirk still plastered on his muzzle. "It's no different than roller skating. In fact, I bet I can—" Whatever he was going to say next, it never came out. At that moment, his skates decided to go in two different directions. With a yelp, the fox went down, face planting into the ice. He slid to a stop at his doe's feet, his tail arched over his back, and resting on his head.

"You were saying?" Judy quipped, standing there with a smirk on her muzzle and her arms behind her back. Nick knew that smirk all too well.

"I feel as though you hustled me somehow."

The smirk grew wider. "Well... You're not wrong." She pushed off, gliding away from the fox as Nick struggled to get to his feet, swearing that the little ball of gray and white fluff was going to be the end of him someday.

He didn't get very far. The moment he was back on the skates, the left one decided to take a sudden excursion, and he twisted to the right, landing hard on his hip. And shoulder. That's gonna bruise.

Again, he struggled to get up. Looking over at his bunny, he wasn't surprised to see her fighting giggles as she glided effortlessly around him. It was almost like she was born on skates, though he knew she hadn't been.
I'll show that crazy bunny. Of course, so far, his showing her had ended in disaster. Maybe he'd have more luck if he…

He finally got to his feet again, and pushed off with one foot, trying to mimic the rabbit's actions. Unfortunately, going forward is one thing. Stopping is something else. He'd pushed himself off in the direction of a snowbank. The snowbank did all the work of stopping him as he flipped forward to land head down in the powder.

Suppressing a growl, he lay there for a moment before digging his way out of the cursed substance, and scrambling first to his knees, then back to his feet. In his mind's eye, he could see an old cartoon of a talking duck screaming out in a rage after being subjected to the same humiliation.

Shaking his head, he pushed off again, moving in the direction of his gray doe, standing a few feet away, seemingly wanting to say something. Unfortunately, when he tried to move in her direction, the skates had other ideas. They went a different direction. Stumbling, wind-milling, he was barely able to regain his balance in time to see a light pole coming at him with no chance to avoid it. He just had enough time to turn his head to the side before impact, which left him lying on the ice, a little stunned.

Staring up at the midday sky, he promised himself he would never go skating again.

Judy came sliding up next to him. "Oh, my God, Nick, are you OK?"

He grunted an affirmative, shooting a glare at the doe.

"Ice skating's a little bit different than roller skating, isn't it, Nick?"

The fox sighed and nodded.

"Come on, Nick." She extended her paw out to him. After a moment, he took it, and she helped pull him back upright. How she managed to do that without losing her balance herself, he couldn't understand.

As soon as he was on his feet again, she took his other paw, and started skating backward. "I'll show you how to skate, Slick. Just let me do all the work."

She pulled him slowly around the edge of the pond. The few times Nick stumbled, she tightened her grip on his paws and let him use her for balance. She showed him how to move forward, pushing off with first one foot, then the other.

Stopping, though, was another matter, and it took multiple tries with him flopping forward into Judy's arms to get the hang of what she called the pizza stop. "Because you point your toes inward, like a slice of pizza," she explained.

As he suspected, turning was harder. She left him standing in one spot for a moment to show him. She would lean in the direction she wanted to go, staggering her feet, so that one was in front of the other. For faster turns, she would lean more or kick her outer foot out, pushing her in the direction she wanted to go.

It took most of the afternoon, but the fox began feeling more comfortable on the metal blades. He supposed that may have had more to do with the bunny that never strayed more than ten feet from his side. Even now, when he felt like he could at least hold his own, she still held his paws, guiding him around the pond.

Maybe ice skating isn't so bad after all. It even felt like they were dancing. As the minutes wore on,
they slowly found themselves moving closer and closer together.

"So, Carrots, where did you learn to skate?" Nick asked as the doe led them around the pond again.

Judy got a bit of a far off look in her eyes. "We have a few ponds in the north fields on the farm. They froze over every winter, and we'd set up a few logs for benches around the pond and turn it into a family ice rink. We even have an ice resurfacers that some of the mechanics in the family built to hook to one of the smaller tractors. Nothing like you would see in the Olympics or in a hockey league, but it did the job, and it was fun to drive."

Nick chuckled, holding on to his bunny's paws. "Did you ever drive it?"

The doe shook her head. "Not much. Usually, when I went out to go skating, it was after school and before homework, and later, when I got old enough, I was either in one of the gyms, reading everything I could about the job of a police officer, or volunteering at the sheriff's office."

A smile graced the fox's features. "I remember you telling me about that."

Judy's smile mirrored Nick's own. "Anyway, there wasn't any way mom and dad could afford to send all 300 or so of us to all the after-school activities we wanted. We got some skating lessons in school, but that was just an hour every couple of weeks for a season. Those of us that did learn, we learned from some of the more accomplished ones in the older litters. My brother Alan plays hockey in the Tri-Borough League, and my sister Ashlyn is a figure skater in the local club, but besides that, most of us just skate for fun."

Nick cocked his head. "So, you didn't do much skating when you got older?"

Judy shrugged. "Not much. Always did some each winter, usually because the kits wanted to, and they needed supervision."

The fox nodded. "I remember you were on the caregiver team."

The doe shuddered. "Those 'field trips' to the ponds were organized chaos. If you weren't lacing up someone's skates, you were breaking up fights or prying your brother's paws from your sister's ears while she was trying to skate away. It was like that with playground visits, too. Minus the ice and snow."

"So, if you had such a bad experience skating when you were younger, why bring us here?"

The doe paused. "I wanted to do something with you and thought maybe this could be a way for us to make some happy memories."

Nick's grin turned to a heartwarming smile. "I think we already made some happy memories here, Fluff."

The doe smiled, drawing the fox's arms around her back, and then reaching out to wrap her own around his waist. "I agree."

The two glided around the pond, gazing into each other's eyes.

Elsewhere in the city, Damian Hornby watched in satisfaction as the two kit foxes in the cage began tearing at each other, yelping and growling, doing whatever they could to win the fight at the cost of their mate's life.
It seemed as though the latest modifications to the formula had been a success. By amping up the fear and aggression components, lacing the formula with some street drugs – Rage and Psyche – they'd hoped to bypass the mammal's mate instincts.

Blood began to fly. It seemed likely that, given enough time, the two filth would fight until one or both of them were dead.

The Texas longhorn sat back and watched. Felicity Stang had called him late yesterday, saying she wouldn't be available for a few days, as she had sick family in her hometown of Podunk to visit. So much the better. She hadn't toed the line since he'd told her about his wife and son, but she didn't need to be involved in the planning of the second public test.

The longhorn had recruited the mustang mare when he'd found her at an anti-predator rally. A few cups of coffee, and he'd learned that she was a neurologist at Zootopia General who had been fired for discrimination against predators, just because she refused to see or treat them. Digging a little deeper, he'd found out she'd held a dislike for predators as long as she could remember, but couldn't really explain why, passing it off as their being built to murder.

She was right, of course. They were built only to murder. And that made them monsters and not mammals.

The noises from the two foxes died out, with one the victor over the other, if only by a narrow margin. The male of the pair was clearly bleeding from a lacerated artery in his neck. He staggered a few steps away from his victim and collapsed, his breathing slowly coming to a halt.

Perfect. Now they just needed to find a way to block the street drugs from affecting the emotions of prey mammals.

It was late in the evening when Nick and Judy finally decided to call it a day. Having turned in their skates, earning a glare and a muttered comment about predophiles and prey chasers from the shopkeeper, the two had made their way down Athabasca Avenue, not in any particular rush to get home.

The two only had one day off this week, and both of them thought it had been well spent, though Judy wouldn't have minded a little forward progress on their case, either. She knew they couldn't rush things, not if they wanted to catch Wolford's killer without having the case dropped on some technicality, but the slow forward pace was certainly frustrating.

They'd be back at work tomorrow, though, and hopefully, they'd be able to start following up on the evidence gathered in Tundratown. In the meantime, nothing said she couldn't have a little fun with her fox.

Speaking of fun, the doe thought as she paused for a second as Nick kept walking. Keeping an eye on him, she quickly scooped up some snow and packed it into a ball, hiding it behind her back just as the fox turned to see where she'd gone.

The two walked in companionable silence for a while, Nick enjoying the presence of his doe and Judy waiting for the opportune moment to strike. Something must have caught the fox's eye, though, because he looked over at Judy with a curious expression.

"What do you have behind your back, Carrots?"

"Nothing." Her response was as nonchalant and deadpan as possible.
Nick regarded her for a long moment, debating on what to say next before something else caught his eye. "Hey, look, Carrots! It's snowing!"

The fox's look towards the sky was the perfect opportunity. "Why, yes, Nick. Yes, it is." She flipped the snowball in the air once.

She had to give the fox credit. He had a great reaction time. Just not fast enough. And rather than try and grab the snowball from the rabbit, he scrambled off to the side, desperate to put some distance between him and the projectile.

It didn't work. The doe heaved the snowball with the practice and accuracy of 15 years of snowball fights on the farm, the cold, frozen weapon splattering all over the back of the fox's head. He lost his balance and toppled muzzle first into the snowbank at the edge of the sidewalk.

The doe whooped at her wildly successful first attack, unable to hold back the laughter at the fox so ingloriously sprawled out in the snowbank. For his part, Nick was picking himself out of the snow, and an evil smile crossed his muzzle. A quick glance over his shoulder, and he saw Judy nearly doubling over. He took a second to sculpt his own weapon, turned, and threw it at her.

The laughter stopped as soon as the weapon hit her shoulder and exploded, showering the right side of her face in snow. The doe blinked her purple eyes owlishly for a moment, seemingly stunned.

"Hah! Gotcha back, Carrots!"

Maybe that was the wrong thing to say, or maybe Nick should have pressed the attack while he had the advantage. The doe squinted at the fox, a fire in her amethysts. *Uh-oh…*

The fox backpedaled a few steps as the rabbit bent to scoop up some more snow of her own, packing and shaping it, as her eyes drilled holes in the canid. Nick began backing away, slowly, turning to run at the last second, only to feel the cold, stinging *smack* of the projectile finding its target. The snow began to seep through under his collar to his fur, and he shuddered at the slightly uncomfortable sensation.

That was followed quickly by another *smack*, and another. Nick bolted, running down the street as more snowballs hit him in the back or went flying past his head. The sound of laughter from Judy rang in the air, and mammals turned to take in the decidedly odd spectacle of a bunny chasing a fox down the boulevard, scooping up snow and winging it at the hapless canid.

Spying a copse of trees, the fox veered off the sidewalk, barrelling through them and disappearing from the bunny's sight. He hoped that the darker cover of the trees combined with the fact that he was downwind would cause her to lose track of him, if only for a moment.

It did. The doe slowed to a stop, glancing left, right, as she cautiously made her way into the trees. Her ears twitched, straining to hear every sound, any sound that he might make. He held his breath, and slowly moved behind the bunny, moving as quietly as he—

*Snap.*

Not quietly enough. The twig he'd stepped on gave way, and the bunny's ears immediately snapped around, followed by her head, and an instant later, her snowy weapon. The snowball exploded all over his muzzle, blinding him for a second. Realizing she was at a disadvantage, the doe took off, trying to put some distance between them. Growling playfully, Nick gave chase, running on all fours after the fleeing, laughing rabbit.

She didn't get very far.
With a leap, the fox pounced, catching the rabbit around the waist and sending them both tumbling. When they finally rolled to a halt, Nick was on top, with Judy somehow on her back beneath him. She grinned up at him, mischief in her eyes.

"You caught me, Officer Slick. Now what are you going to do to this poor, innocent bunny?"

The fox smirked. "Miss Hopps, I'm placing you under arrest for assault of a police officer with snow, resisting arrest, and illegal possession of a snow weapon."

Judy feigned a horrified look. "Oh, please, no, officer, don't arrest me!"

Nick's smirk returned, and he lowered his nose so it was almost touching Judy's. The doe reached up to touch his muzzle with one paw and his shoulder with the other. "Then I think your bail is one kiss, Miss Hopps."

He closed the distance between the two, capturing her mouth with his. The gentle pressure of her lips on his gave way to a more passionate kiss, the doe grabbing his coat's lapels and pulling him closer, her tiny tongue expertly exploring his mouth, teasing his fangs.

Nick was about to reciprocate, when a voice caught his attention. "Oh, my God, that's disgusting!"

The two broke their kiss and looked over. They spotted a female Siberian musk deer standing there, pointing at them. Judy scrambled up, standing tall and facing the deer down, ears swept back. "Something the matter, ma'am?"

The musk deer looked a little green. "I'm not sure which I find more disgusting—that that fox was taking advantage of you, or that you seemed to be enjoying it!"

Judy snorted. "Was I enjoying it? Yes, yes, I was. Was I being taken advantage of?" She grinned. "Most certainly. In all of the best ways."

Nick's ears went flat about the same time the musk deer's eyes flew open wide. The female ungulate spluttered. "You… you…"

"—don't care that he's a fox and not a rabbit? Darn straight. He's my best friend, and I love him. Is that what you find disturbing? That the one I love just happens to not be a rabbit? That right?"

A nod from the musk deer was her only answer. The doe cocked her head.

"Is that how you feel about mammals who are homosexual, too? Or transgender mammals? Do you treat them with the same disdain?"

Another spluttered response from the musk deer. "That's… It's…"

"—no different. What I have with my fox is no different than those who love a mammal of the same gender. So, unless you are that closed-minded, you might want to think things over next time. Have a nice night." Judy marched over to Nick, who was still seated in the snow, and offered out her paw, pulling him to his feet, despite her smaller stature. She then made a point to wrap her arm around his, holding it close to her chest as she walked away from that deer, who was still trying to form a coherent sentence.

Nick nudged the bunny. "That was pretty harsh, sly bunny."

Judy scoffed, pulling Nick's arm even tighter to her chest. "That deer was small-minded. Besides, her opinion doesn't matter to me." She rubbed her cheek against his sleeve. "Your opinion is the one that
matters to me."

"Awww, you're gonna make me blush, Fluff Butt!"

The doe elbowed the fox. "Just telling the truth, Slick."

Both mammals missed the disgusted look the musk deer continued to shoot their way until they were out of sight.

Chief Bogo was still in his office well past the time when he normally would have gone home. Between the latest evidence reports from Wilde and Hopps, Rivers and Longtooth, and the recent infiltration of the precinct, he was up to his eyeballs in work. At least both of the external investigations had been making some forward progress.

He suspected that the precinct attack may have been related to the fox and rabbit pair's case as well, and Judy had also drawn the same conclusion. For that reason, he'd pulled even more strings and had the evidence for that transferred over to their stewardship earlier today and had assigned them the case. He'd inform them about it tomorrow when they were back on shift.

A knock at his door had him looking up from the report he'd been reading for probably the hundredth time in a row. "Enter."

The door opened, and the large cape buffalo was surprised to see an old friend step into his office. Major Ursula Friedkin closed the door behind her, carrying a pizza box in one paw.

"Ursula, how can I help?"

The polar bear shut the door behind her. "Can't a friend visit once in a while?"

The cape buffalo grunted and nodded. "Sorry. With all that's happening, it's hard to get time away."

Friedkin nodded and sat down on the sofa in the police chief's office, while the large Bovidae gathered a couple of his files and moved to sit next to her. He laid out the papers while the polar bear cracked open the pizza box and grabbed a few of the napkins she'd brought along.

The two ate in silence for a while, skimming over the case files, before Friedkin spoke. "I heard you assigned Wilde and Hopps the case for the attack here."

The nod from the police chief was the only answer she got.

"Kind of against protocol. How come?"

Chief Bogo sighed. Technically, he shouldn't talk about an ongoing case with anyone outside the precinct, but he'd known Friedkin since she was in training and he a rookie. There wasn't anyone outside the precinct that he trusted with police intel more than her.

"It ties in to their existing case. Woolter and Jesse Bighorn were the targets, and both of them were involved in the Night Howler case, and Hopps and Wilde both suspect their involvement in their current case."

Friedkin hummed as she looked over the case file. "And I assume the other precincts were conveniently 'too busy' to pick up the case?"

Bogo shook his head. "Not 'conveniently', they WERE too busy. The anti-pred and pro-pred riots that have been springing up all over the place has us stretched to our limit. Every time we open an
Friedkin thought for a moment. "I have a few cadets whose technical scores are outstanding, but they need practice with the clerical stuff. Maybe I could send them over to you?"

Bogo thought for a moment. "That might help. Records and Deep Archives have been begging for a break since the Grand Palm incident. Even if we just have the cadets digitizing old files, that would free up the senior officers to focus more on the cases at the forefront." One of the things the from which ZPD suffered, along with almost every other police department, was a disconnect between the old paper filing systems and the new computerized ones.

Old cases, solved or not, often got overlooked until a new piece of evidence specifically for that case turned up, or a new case necessitated the review of old ones, in which case some poor mammal had to spend days plugging information into the computer systems. Occasionally, they'd get a double hit when evidence from an old case matched with evidence from new ones, leading to the cases being combined.

Lately, he'd had all the old cases of predator discrimination crimes pulled from deep archive to be reviewed and digitized in hopes of giving his detectives a little more evidence to work with. He'd been stunned by the number of them. Compared to the discriminatory crimes perpetrated against each side of the issue, crimes against predators were the overwhelming majority.

"I read about the new development between your two valedictorians."

The cape buffalo huffed. "I'd suspected something was up for a while, but it never affected their work, so it never gave me cause for concern. That newspaper clipping just threw it all into the spotlight. They owned up to it, I gave them a warning, and let them go. That was after the mayor called me and asked me to do what I could to keep them together."

The polar bear beside him grunted her understanding. She hated political agendas almost as much as Bogo did, and when Hopps had shown up on her proverbial doorstep thanks to Lionheart's Mammal Inclusion Initiative, she had been ready to call the lion up herself and offer him a piece of her mind, certain the rabbit was going to get killed on her first shift… if she made it that far.

But the rabbit had surprised her. Shocked the hell out of her, actually. When she'd seen the rapid improvement in the doe, her tenacity and never-give-up attitude, not to mention her ability to solve problems on the fly and excel in anything to which she put her mind, the polar bear instructor had been absolutely thrilled.

"When Hopps was in the academy, she had no one to support her. Oh, her parents called, or she called them, but she wasn't always careful about being private. The times I overheard, they seemed to be suggesting she come home. She always refused. When Wilde was in training, Hopps was always the one to call him or visit. Almost every day. His mom didn't come into the picture until later." She paused. "How far back did they say they'd been an item?"

Bogo dropped another page of the file onto the table. "The night of Eric's murder."

The polar bear went silent, as it was a touchy subject with her, too. She'd trained Wolford and had seen him off and on throughout the years. It always hit her hard when one of her trainees died in the line of duty, and every time, she followed up to see how she could train her cadets better. Most of her death calls were, unfortunately, based on real life experience.

"I'd actually suspected something back when Wilde was in training. They always seemed so
comfortable around each other when Hopps visited, and Wilde seemed to perk up even more on those days." Friedkin laughed. "When was the last time you saw a rabbit as comfortable around a fox as Hopps is with Wilde?"

Bogo let out a snorting laugh. "Never. If you'd have asked me beforehand, I'd have told you Clawhauser would be more comfortable eating Styrofoam than donuts."

The two continued talking and looking over the cases late into the night.

The door to the apartment opened and Nick and Judy walked in, both with big smiles on their faces. It had been an incredible day, even if the afternoon hadn't started in the fox's favour, and they'd gotten to spend a little time just having fun.

The deer speciesist had been a bit of a downer, but not much.

The two moved to the couch, silently agreeing that a movie night was in order. Nick fired up Pawflix and picked a movie at random. It turned out to be *Wrangled*, but neither mammal cared. Snuggling up to each other, they watched for a while.

Judy was a little startled when Nick began to make a sighing, purring sound, only then realizing she'd been absentmindedly running her paw through his tail, which he'd draped over her lap.

"I'm sorry, Nick! I didn't mean…" The look of bliss on his face stopped her words, and she cocked her head.

"Judy, if I wanted you to stop, I would have said so."

The doe looked confused.

"Carrots, what is grooming like for rabbits?"

Judy was a bit taken aback by the question, but pushed ahead anyway. "We grow up with large families, so contact and petting and even grooming are fairly common among siblings. Nothing inappropriate, of course, but it isn't uncommon to have your brother or sister brush your back or something."

Nick hummed. "Foxes are a little different, I guess. Typically, a fox allows only three mammals to groom them in his life—his parents and his mate. No one else. I know I told you before that there are foxes who don't adhere to the old traditions…" He looked into Judy's eyes. "But I also told you that I do follow the old traditions."

Before Judy could say anything or apologize further, he gave her a warm smile. "Besides, you didn't hear me complaining, did you?"

The doe sheepishly shook her head. "It's kind of weird that it's taken us this long for the topic to come up. We've been sharing a bed for three weeks now."

Nick chuckled. "Well, are there any other deep topics we should be thinking of and talking about?"

"How about what to have for breakfast tomorrow? We forgot to go grocery shopping."

The fox laughed. "I say we just hit Snarlbucks tomorrow. We can worry about the groceries after work."

Judy nodded and snuggled deeper into Nick's side, sighing as Rapunzel on the screen watched the
lanterns start to float up above the kingdom.

Chapter End Notes

FLUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUF! How'd you like THAT!

So. News. These past couple weeks, I've been fighting a severe case of depression. Like, "thoughts of suicide" depression. It's not been fun, and I've fallen behind on my writing again. I'm now in counselling, but it's not fun. So yeah.

By the way, if the scenes in this chapter sound familiar, it's because I had TheWinterBunny create a comic of it! Look up Let's Go Skating on her DeviantArt!

Can anyone find the references in this chapter? I'll give you a hint: Disney.

Coming up on January 25: Putting Puzzle Pieces Together!

The next morning dawned bright and early for the ZPD's smallest officers, with the smallest of the two almost literally dragging the larger one out of the bed they both shared. After two showers, one quick one for the small mammal and a longer one for the larger one, the two set out for the subway and their commute to Precinct One in the heart of the city, making a quick stop at the Snarlbucks on the way.

The two sat next to each other on the subway, eating their muffins and enjoying their morning hot beverage – a coffee for Nick, and a green tea for Judy. It being a Sunday, the subway car wasn't nearly as full as it was on a weekday, just a handful of mammals coming and going at this hour.

It didn't escape the two that more than a few of the mammals on the train shot them some dirty looks. Both of them knew why. Interspecies relationships tended to stay within the same order. Donkeys occasionally formed relationships with horses, lions with tigers, and such. For a pair as biologically different as a rabbit and a fox, it was unheard of.

The two knew there were likely other pairs in the closet, but society had made it pretty clear that it wasn't very tolerant of the idea. Judy wondered if Gazelle would say anything when she got back from the tour she'd left on not long after her concert in the city. In the meantime, the only thing she could do was suck it up, along with Nick, and deal with whatever was thrown their way.

Arriving at Zootopia Central Station, the two made their way across the massive plaza to the ZPD building. The lobby of the police station wasn't its usual bustle of activity today, with many of the familiar faces off-duty for the weekend. Even Clawhauser was enjoying the day off. The two clocked in and headed to their cubicle, passing a few members of the usual weekend shift in the process.

As police officers, they didn't get to enjoy regular days off, like the suits with nine-to-fives, but instead had to work a regular weekend and night shift rotation. Today was their first week of working Sunday to Thursday.
The first thing the two noticed when they got to their cubicle was the blinking light indicating a voicemail on Judy's desk phone, along with a folder of papers in their inbox. The doe wandered over to her workstation and picked up the phone, holding it to her ear with one paw and punching the voicemail button with the other while Nick picked up the folder and opened it.

"Officer Hopps, Kagioso Omiata from Lab Services here. Listen, we need to talk about that delivery van you hauled in on Friday from Tundratown. Come see me as soon as you get in today – Sunday, that is. Sorry, sometimes forget what day it is. Anyway, come see me as soon as you can!"

Judy hung up. "Huh. That's odd."

Nick looked up. "What's odd, Fluff?"

She shook her head. "Lab services. One of the lab techs wants us to come see him." She frowned. "Why didn't they just deliver the results to us, like they usually do?"

The fox shrugged and handed Judy the folder he'd been looking at. "The casefile for the fake-lawyer break-in two days ago."

The doe's eyebrows went up and she took the folder from her fox partner, opening and examining it on the way back to her desk. "I still can't believe Bogo is giving that to us." She stared at the file for a while, before closing it up and putting it back on their shared desk. "Let's go see what the guys in lab services want."

The two traversed the hallways, heading to the lab services level. They were barely out of the elevator when they were almost tackled by a male hyrax. "Oh! Officers! I was just coming to get you!" Judy recognized the voice as the mammal that had left the voicemail message.

"Mr. Omiata?"

A rapid nod of the head. "Yes, that's me! Kagioso Omiata. Sorry, I'm a bit hyper. Had to drink a lot of coffee to keep me going, but I got something you should see. Come on! Rivers and Longtooth are already here."

That threw the doe for a loop. "Wait, why are Rivers and Longtooth here?"

The hyrax took off at a pace that seemed uncomfortably fast for a mammal his size and had the two officers jogging to keep up. They walked into what could only be the mammal's office and were greeted immediately by the elk and lioness.

"Nice to see you two again, officers." Rivers extended his hoof, which Judy shook.

"Likewise, detectives." She looked around, noticing that the small lab tech had disappeared. "Any idea why we're all here?"

Longtooth shook her head and sighed. "I wish I knew. It took me long enough to understand the message he left on my cell phone this mornin'. Rivers here couldn't even make out the first word."

"Hey, when you get woken up after a long night by a mammal that is talking six words a minute and making no sense at all, let me know and I'll buy you a beer." The elk rolled his eyes. "Apparently, I was the first one he called, and I got the worst of the caffeine and sugar rush."

Longtooth crossed her arms and smirked. "You're just mad that I had to call you to get you to come in."
Rivers rolled his eyes. "Not my fault he was talking so fast I couldn't understand him! I didn't even know who it was at first!"

Nick nudged the doe next to him. "Think we should introduce them to Flash?"

Judy snorted and covered her muzzle, while the other two mammals gave a quizzical expression. "Who's Flash?"

The doe shook her head. "Flash Slothmore. About the fastest sloth around, but that's not saying much. Used to work at the DMV."

Longtooth put her paws over her ears. "God, I can't even stand that place. That's why I mail my car registration renewal in every year and go there first thing in the mornin' to renew my license."

Nick gave a half grin at the lioness. "Does it work?"

"Sometimes. If I'm lucky, I get out of there in an hour."

Now Rivers joined in. "And if you're unlucky?"

"Then it takes three hours, and I'm late for work, mad, and take it out on Rivers here."

"So THAT's why you were so short-tempered a few weeks ago."

"Yep."

Their conversation was cut short as Omiata and another lab tech walked back into the room. "Sorry that took so long, detectives. It took me a while to find ol' Linds," he said, indicating the sand cat he'd dragged in with him. "She's our DNA analyst."

Paws were shaken, and the mammals settled into what seats there were available. Rivers ended up just standing, though.

"Well, I'm sure you're wondering why we all brought you here." The hyrax turned to the two smallest officers. "It's about the delivery van you seized last week."

Judy frowned. "What's wrong? We filled out all the paperwork, and last we heard, the Tundratown precinct had it."

Kagioso nodded his head. "They do. We had to go there to do our examination. It's what we found that concerns all of you."

The sand cat DNA analyst scrambled to pull some papers from the folder she'd been carrying. "The bleach they used destroyed all of the usable DNA evidence, but we were able to determine that there were donors from at least thirty different mammals in that van."

Judy nearly fell over at the revelation. Thirty mammals? Thirty mammals hurt or dead in that van? "But you weren't able to know for certain who they were."

Lindsay shook her head. "Bleach destroys DNA. The only way we were able to determine that there were indeed thirty mammals is because we had just enough intact to be able to tell different species and sexes, but not enough for any full profiles."

The room went silent for a minute. Three mammals were enough to call one a serial killer. Thirty was almost unheard of.
"That's not all we found, though." The hyrax lab tech pulled out some of his own files. "That brings us to why you are here, detectives," he remarked, addressing Longtooth and Rivers.

"Once the DNA and trace techs were done, we noticed some sticky residue on parts of the van, inside and out. I took a look at it, and it seems to be the same or similar formula to what was found at the Grand Palm."

THAT got the two Detectives' attention. They glanced at each other, then turned back to the Hyrax. "The engineered Night Howlers?"

The hyrax nodded. "There were a few additions to the residue we found on the van, but the same basic compound was there."

Longtooth cocked her head. "Additions, like what?"

Omiata pulled out a page full of notes. "One sample had elevated levels of the fear and aggression portions of the original compound. That could have been due to sample degradation or something, though. We don't know what the shelf life of this stuff is. Another one had some hallucinogen street drugs. Pink Elephant, we think."

All four of the mammals in front of him shuddered. Pink Elephant was a powerful hallucinogen that came from crushing and baking the seeds of certain plants and lacing them with other ingredients for a more powerful hit. The result was usually a pinkish brown powder. Mammals that took it were often violent, resistant to arrest, and even smaller animals under its influence were dangerous to larger police officers.

"Anyway. There was some variation in the samples, but the compound from the Grand Palm was present in all of them."

There was a further silence in the room that extended for several seconds.

"Could this van have been used for drug running beforehand? Or could it have been used for the Night Howler formula first, and then used for drug running?" Judy tapped her carrot pen on her notepad, two and a half pages already full of her writing.

Omiata shrugged. "Possible, but unlikely. Some of the samples overlaid others, and the Night Howler formula was everywhere. I'd say the chances are pretty remote that the two are unrelated."

The rabbit doe squinted. "How remote?"

With a shrug, the hyrax turned back to his files. "I'd say you have a better chance of winning the grand prize in RichBillions lottery. And I don't normally say that."

The doe hummed and looked back down at her notepad, the fox next to her looking contemplative while both detectives looked troubled. After a while, Judy turned to look at the two senior ZPD members. "I guess this means our case is now your case."

"I'll leave you four to discuss this. I have to go over the rest of the equipment you brought in, Hopps! I still wish things were like those crime shows. Everything gets done so fast there…" Omiata kept mumbling as he and the DNA tech left the office.

Silence reigned for a moment. "I guess we should report this to Bogo." Judy stood, gathering her notes to head to their superior's office.

Rivers stood too. "We need to be there as well. If he reassigns the case, it'd be faster if we found out
Nick frowned and thought for a moment. He'd been silent for most of the meeting, quite unlike him. "How could this be the first real connection we have? If these cases are connected, shouldn't we have found the connection sooner?"

Rivers and Longtooth shrugged, with the elk offering a possible solution. "Maybe after we talk to Bogo, we can go over the evidence with you guys and see if there was anything that either of us missed that could have connected our two cases."

"That's assumin' Buffalo Butt doesn't strip the case from you guys outright," Longtooth remarked, crossing her arms.

Despite the circumstances, Nick burst out laughing at that. At the two detectives' confused expressions, Judy rolled her eyes. "That's been Nick's… nickname for the chief ever since my second day, when that jaguar went savage."

The detective pair looked a little horrified. "He didn't say that to the chief's face, did he?" Longtooth looked in awe at the fox as she tried to envision that.

Nick, just getting over his laughing fit, shook his head. "Nope. Unlike Carrots here, I have a healthy sense of self-preservation."

The punch to the arm was inevitable. So was the dull pain that immediately followed.

Bogo was fighting exhaustion when a knock came at his office door. He hadn't gone home last night, even after Ursula had left to return to the academy, and he had eventually fallen asleep on his office couch. His wife had given him an earful that morning when he'd called to apologize, and he was sure he had tinnitus as a result of the yelling. He'd be sleeping on couches for a while.

"Enter."

The door opened, and the chief was surprised to find four mammals walking in. He'd expected to see at least Hopps this morning, thanks to the extra case assignment, and Wilde would no doubt have accompanied her, but the two detectives from Sahara Square, he wasn't expecting. The two smaller officers clambered up onto one of the chairs across from him while the two detectives each took a chair of their own.

"This had better be good. I'm busy," he said, looking over at the mountains of old cases by his coffee table.

The rabbit doe in front of him cringed a bit. "I'm not sure that it is, sir." She took a breath, looking longingly at the case file in her paws and then continued. "We… Nick and I… have to recuse ourselves from these cases, sir." She hopped up onto the chief's desk and passed him the files, before returning to her chair beside her partner.

Bogo took a moment to read over the notes the doe had written—this morning, according to the date she'd written on the top of the sheet. The connection between the two cases, she'd conveniently underlined.

After a long while, the chief sighed. Keeping them on the case, with as many personal connections as they had to it, was risky. On the other hand, maybe they could benefit by being grouped with the more senior detectives. If the link was indeed factual, this was far bigger than a single murdered cop and a seemingly unrelated terrorist attack. He put the file back down and stared hard at the two small
mammals, his decision made.

"You were right to come to me with this." The doe nodded. Wilde…

"Oh, come on, Chief, you know we're always right." There it was. The fox's blasted sarcasm and wit. He turned a glare at the russet-furred canid.

"Unless you want to be the reason you and Hopps are assigned to parking duty for a month, I would strongly suggest you keep your mouth shut, Wilde."

The chuckles from the two detectives and the glare from his bunny, along with the glare from his boss, shut Nick up. Bogo turned back to the rabbit doe.

"As I was saying before your partner interrupted, you were right to come to me with this. You were also right to offer to recuse yourself from the case. However, it seems we are shortstaffed everywhere, and with this case being as high priority as it is, I think the best thing to do would be to assign you two to work under Rivers and Longtooth."

The surprise was evident on Hopps' face. Even Wilde seemed to have trouble finding words. Good. It would do him well to hold his tongue for a while. Eventually, the doe found her voice. "Sir, is that…allowed? I mean, we were directly involved in the Grand Palm attack, and Wolford was my partner and friend."

The chief nodded. That's why you will be working under Rivers and Longtooth. They will keep your objective, and they will have the final say."

A smile had been steadily growing on Hopps' face, and her right foot was twitching, like she wanted to leap in joy. He handed the file back to the doe. "And now I believe you need to catch the detectives up in your case, and I have work to do. Dismissed."

The doe jumped up and grabbed her fox partner, scampering out the door, while the two larger detectives followed at a more sedate pace. Bogo sighed. He hoped the two senior mammals would be able to keep the two smaller ones in line. He'd keep an eye on them.

The four mammals managed to secure one of the smaller conference rooms, and each of them loaded up the table with piles of papers and evidence. Judy had taken control of the computer, and had pulled the case they had for retracing Wolford's steps up on the room's large screen.

Nick had even managed to convince Clawhauser to part with one of his untouched boxes of donuts, though it had taken the promise of two free boxes later to do it. The fox had conceded to the deal and later admitted to a laughing Judy that he'd let the cheetah get one over on him.

Shawn Dancing Rivers looked over the mounds of stuff the other two had brought. "So, let's see what we have so far. Why don't you two go first?"

The fox and rabbit glanced at each other, before Judy picked up her written notes and case files. "Well, the best we have been able to figure, two weeks before he was killed, he got a tip from his CI, one Spencer Callahan." She pulled up the mountain goat's DMV photo. "He tipped Wolford off about some sort of delivery happening at Zootopia Coast Distributors. We all saw the photos Wolford was able to take of that delivery, but Callahan didn't leave any indication that he knew what the delivery was, and none of the exchanges between the two that we've been able to trace have suggested that Wolford knew either."

"Wolford was killed not long after Callahan sent him a message saying, 'Don't let them catch you'."
Rivers scratched his head. "That seems to suggest that this Callahan knew what was going to happen."

Judy shook her head. "We can't be sure. It's the last thing either of them said to each other. We haven't had the chance to go over the rest of his text messages yet."

Longtooth regarded the pair. "You haven't been able to find this Callahan?"

Nick shrugged. "We've been on that. It's kinda been complicated by the fact that Callahan may have contracted a severe case of dead after we started asking around, though."

The doe sitting next to him gave him a light elbow. "We tracked Wolford back to the warehouses at the Savannah Central docks. We caught him on several cameras talking to Callahan, but none of them admitted to knowing Callahan, so we had to identify him by DMV records. We went to visit him the day of the Grand Palm attack, but he wasn't there."

Nick snorted. "Hard to be there when you're chased out of your apartment by a psycho ram with a silenced pawgun. The apartment manager there tipped us off a couple weeks later that Callahan had gone missing, and gave us access to the security recordings."

With a nod, Judy continued. "We followed the two by traffic camera to the Canyonlands Targoat, and he disappeared there. We were able to identify the chaser as a ram we know goes by Doug. He was part of the Night Howler case. One of the three rams we never caught."

"Anyway, about fifteen minutes after we lost sight of Callahan, a delivery truck pulled up, stayed there for a few minutes, then pulled away. We didn't get a look at the driver, or the passenger, but we suspect that it might have been two of Doug's accomplices from the Night Howler case."

Rivers cocked his head. "Suspect? You don't know for certain?"

Judy shook her head. "Not for certain. We do have some strong evidence in favour of that, though." She shuffled her papers. "Last week, I'm sure you heard about that car chase between the Meadowlands and Tundratown."

The fox snorted. "Carrots, I think everyone and their cousin heard about that car chase. Three civilian cars wrecked, thousands of dollars in public damage, and two wanted mammals arrested."

Even Rivers and Longtooth got a chuckle out of that. "Yeah, we heard about it. Clawhauser wouldn't stop talking about it, and it was on the news as well."

The doe sighed. "My point was, when we searched the car, we found evidence of Night Howlers, and a search of their apartment later turned up a receipt for an illegal purchase of MH. Out of town but in the county, and after the laws came into effect."

Nick continued. "We were finishing up there and got word that my old pal had found Doug and followed him to that Tundratown warehouse. By the time we got there, Doug was shredding evidence and trying to destroy computers. We chased him down, but he escaped."

"And you were called back to the precinct not long after."

"Right. And that mammal attempted to kill Woolter and Jesse."

Nick frowned. "He may also have had a hand in killing Callahan's boss. Same method – poison. Trouble is, Callahan's boss was in prison, and not here."
The two detectives and his partner looked at him. "How do you mean?" Rivers was busy taking notes.

"Well, we know he didn't go anywhere after he visited our humble abode. Kinda hard to when you're lying dead on the pavement outside. But somehow, Jesse, Woolter, and Taylor Blackford were all poisoned in similar ways."

Judy nodded. "That's true. We haven't seen Jesse's autopsy yet, and Woolter's blood toxicology tests haven't been sent our way yet, but he showed similar symptoms when we saw them. Chances are, Jesse's autopsy will probably show the same thing."

Rivers was quiet a moment as he looked over his notes. "You guys are pretty thorough."

The doe beamed at the praise.

"You still don't have any clue what it was that this… Callahan… tipped Wolford off about, though?"

Both of the tiny officers shook their heads. "The records at the shipping company and the customs declarations were fudged." Judy flipped through her case file, looking for the information. "Agriculture equipment."

Rivers snorted. "So, was someone short on combine harvester parts or something?"

Nick laughed. "That's what Carrots said. Almost word for word, too."

Longtooth thought for a moment, a grin on her face. "I assume you two haven't had the chance to follow up on this."

Both of the tiny officers shook their heads. "We never had time. It's been one thing after another out there lately. We need to follow up on the shipments, that receipt, the blood tests, prison surveillance for Taylor Blackford, and the mammal that tried a double assassination here in the precinct." Judy sighed. "We never should have taken yesterday off."

The elk detective shook his head. "You wouldn't have had a choice, even if yesterday wasn't one of your scheduled days off. Precinct One was a crime scene, and you were directly involved. I.A. would have turned you around if you'd shown up, and Bogo probably would have freaked out at having to authorize the overtime."

Judy had to concede the point.

"One thing that bothers me, though. There were thirty mammals in that van you two grabbed. If thirty mammals were killed, and that van was used to haul them away, why haven't we heard of them yet?" Rivers frowned at the notes he'd been taking.

The silence stretched. "Maybe they were from out of town?" Judy's suggestion was a little hesitant, and Nick could tell even she didn't believe it.

After even more silence, Nick spoke up. "The only thing I can think of is that maybe they were mammals that no one would notice missing."

Judy gave her fox a concerned but inquisitive look. "What do you mean?"

He took a breath and let it out. "Well, when I was... working the streets... there was a certain demographic that the average mammal wouldn't notice if they suddenly disappeared. The homeless. Vagrants. Mammals with no home or regular job, and whose friends may not have the means -- or
inclination – to report them missing."

Judy's eyes flew open wide at that.

"Of course, we are assuming they were killed and not thrown into some gruesome fighting arena to be beaten within an inch of their life for money." The fox in the room pulled a disgusted face at that. There hadn't been an illegal mammal fighting ring in the city in several years, but the last one had been so brutal that it had left several of the participants permanently disabled. The mammals in charge had been caught and were still serving time in a medium security prison, unlikely to ever be released.

Judy shuddered. "I really hope that's not what this is. But with the Night Howlers and the amount of blood, I wouldn't be surprised."

"Anyway, on our side of things, I'm sorry to say we haven't really gotten much of anywhere with Wolford's case. We found some questionable graffiti at the scene that said 'More than a Zoocide', and the bullet that killed him was from a small mammal calibre gun." Rivers shook his head. "A few of the mammals in the subdivision came forth claiming that the assailant was on the small to medium size, but couldn't get details. They couldn't tell species or anything, and the security cameras around there didn't catch the mammals, or they knew how to avoid them."

Longtooth slapped another folder onto the table. "The fun you had at the Grand Palm… Well, there wasn't much to go on. Security tapes were erased there, one of the security guards is in a coma, and the other is AWOL."

Judy's ears drooped at the news. That security guard had probably saved her and Nick's lives, and he might not recover.

The lioness continued. "The equipment that delivered the toxin was likely installed by the four water buffalos you mentioned the guard was searching for, but they seem to have disappeared into the wind as well." She sighed. "Unfortunately, we don't have a good visual reference, since the only two mammals to have seen them are either a vegetable or missing as well."

Judy was scribbling notes in her notebook. "What about the delivery itself? Equipment or the drug? Anything stand out?"

Rivers shifted his own papers, pulling one out of the stack. "Nothing. Nondescript, unmarked, couldn't get a plate. Could be the same one that you guys found."

Tapping his chin, Nick frowned. "Where did it come from?"

The elk grinned. "We took a page out of your books, Wilde. Traffic cameras caught them as far back as Falls Street off Vapor Road on the edge of the Meadowlands."

That got both the newer officer's attention.

"Falls Street?"

Rivers and Longtooth looked at the other two mammals. "Yeah, why?"

Judy hesitated before looking over her notes. "Falls Street was where we lost track of our delivery van when Callahan went missing."

"Right, no traffic cameras down that road, and mostly houses, so few businesses that have security cameras, and even fewer that have ones outside watching the street," Rivers groused. The
disappointment of having lost the van was evident on his face. "Finnick also said that someone had mentioned a delivery van that stopped for some reason over the Susani Canal," Nick remarked, reading over Judy's notes.

"Finnick?" Longtooth had a confused expression.

"Old friend from back in the day. He's the guy who spotted the van and led us to Doug's hideout in Tundratown. Anyway, he mentioned a delivery van that stopped there, and just left. Didn't know what day or what they did there, though."

Rivers stared off into the distance, deep in thought. "The Falls Street Bridge over the Susani Canal isn't that high up. It's a single lane both ways. Kind of an odd place to stop."

Judy's ears shot up. "Unless…"

"… that's where Doug and his cronies were dumping the evidence," Nick finished his doe's thought, much to the surprise of the two detectives.

"I wish we'd connected the dots sooner," Judy sighed as she made a note in her book.

Rivers shrugged. "Sometimes you need context to understand a clue."

The doe perked up. "That's true. We thought Night Howlers were wolves until one of my friends back home called them that instead of Midnicampum Holicithias."

Longtooth nodded as she shifted through her own papers. "That's certainly a fair assumption. They are mostly nocturnal, and they do like to howl."

The fox in the room snorted, earning odd looks from two of the mammals present. "You got that right. You ever hear about how Carrots here got us into Cliffside Asylum?" At the shake of the head from both of the detectives, Nick grinned. "The guards were all wolves. So she howled. Got every wolf on the island involved. The way I hear it, they didn't stop until the alarm went off."

That got a laugh from the other three. "Yes, I heard you and Hopps can be quite resourceful when things don't go your way. How did you get out of there, anyway?"

Judy smirked. "I flushed us down a toilet. The horrified look on the other mammal's faces was priceless. "It ejected us out over the waterfall, so we didn't take the Sewer Tour," she said, referring to the tongue-in-cheek name for the journey some small animals took if they slipped and fell into a large flushing toilet or storm drain. There were escape tunnels and hatches for that sort of thing, but it was never a pleasant experience, and there were occasionally deaths as a result."

Rivers and Longtooth just stared, before shaking their heads and looking down at their own notes. "We've been chasing down some corporate espionage cases with Furston, since they got the contract for the antidote. We figure that one of them might have a connection to the Grand Palm attack. What's next on the list for you?" Rivers looked across the table at the two tiny mammals.

"We need to follow up on that receipt for Night Howlers, and maybe we should see about getting someone over to check out the canal," Judy thought, going over their task list in her head.

Rivers nodded and stood, Longtooth following. "Sounds good. Keep us in the loop, will you?"
So, a lot of this chapter serves mostly as a recap to the rest of the story. Some new stuff, a lot of old stuff, and finally, the cases are combined. Progress is progress, yeah?

Thank you to everyone who offered a shoulder of support to me. It's honestly been heartwarming, and has helped me a lot. Thank you to each and every one of you. I'm still struggling, but things are getting better every day.

A couple of people caught the Donald Duck reference in the chapter! Cookies for you! No references in this chapter, but there should be some in the next one!

Coming up on February 8: Out Of Town Again!

Questions? Critiques? Is the Genie turning your living room into a three ring circus? Leave a comment!
"Didn't expect to be heading out of town so soon," a russet-furred fox commented as he sat in the passenger seat of the oversized cruiser.

"Yeah, but this time, it's not time off. It's a good thing the ZPD has jurisdiction way out here," the rabbit doe in the driver's seat commented, her thumb tapping on the steering wheel to the beat of the Gazelle song playing on the radio. It was one of her newer singles, so Nick didn't know the words.

Judy did, though, and she quietly sang along as she drove. It didn't surprise Nick that she actually had a good singing voice when they'd been at the concert, and now, the fox was just happy to listen to her. After a while, he took out the photo printout of the single piece of evidence they had for this task, the receipt, and looked at it again.

"So, Carrots, you ever heard of this… Fantastic Four Florists?"

The doe hummed, still bobbing her head in time to the music. "My parents never did anything with flowers beyond using Night Howlers for pest control and prettying up the burrow. Flowers take as much care and attention as regular crops do, sometimes even more for the more exotic varieties. Everyone from my dad's side and most of those from my mom's side were produce farmers, so that's what we ended up doing. One of the families a few miles farther down the road from us, the Browns, they cultivated flowers for the local florists."

Nick cocked his head. "Did you know them well?"
The doe gave a brief shake of her head. "Not really. Their oldest litter was in Madison's year."

"Did they grow Night Howlers, per chance?"

"Yeah. Most of the farms around Bunnyburrow got their Midnicampum Holicithias flowers from them. Though mom told me their bottom line took a hit when the new laws governing their cultivation and distribution came into play."

The fox humphed and settled back into his seat. "Why use Night Howlers for pest control anyway? Why not normal pesticides?"

"Well, you know I didn't do any of the farm work when I was growing up. But it has to do with the end product. I don't know about you, but I find that veggies grown with some unpronounceable chemical sprayed all over them don't taste as good as stuff we had on our farm, even with said unpronounceable chemical washed off."

He couldn't disagree with her there. Besides the fact that the veggies and fruits were fresh out of their own farm, Bonnie and her kitchen crew had shown to be very creative with them, producing a staggering array of delicious meals and desserts during his stay there, and even taught him a thing or two.

A few miles up the road, about an hour out of the city, the doe turned left off the highway onto a narrow secondary. "About half an hour more, and we'll be in Prairie Den," she commented, glancing at the in-dash GPS.

Prairie Den was a small village about two thirds of the way between Zootopia and the police academy, or it would have been, if it had been on the main rail line. It seemed like an odd choice for the purchase of an illegal quantity of Night Howler plants, but the two officers hoped that talking with the staff and the owner might provide some insight. At least before someone got arrested. And unless the store owner flipped on an employee, he'd be the one going to prison.

Fifteen minutes from their destination, Nick called ahead for some backup from the county sheriff's detachment. If it was just the shop owner or an employee making an honest mistake, they wouldn't have anything to worry about, but if this was a front, or the owner or employee was complicit, things could get hairy, and backup was always a bonus.

The mule deer on the other end was none too pleased with a pair of ZPD officers in his area, but agreed to the backup request, not having much of a choice. While the local sheriff's offices in the areas surrounding Zootopia were largely autonomous, the ZPD had overall jurisdiction, so when backup was requested, the detachment had no choice but to accede to it like it was one of their own officers asking.

The rest of the trip was spent chatting, since the two really didn't have anything else to do. The road was empty, the skies clear, and nothing was coming in over the radio.

Prairie Den itself was blink-and-you'll-miss-it, it was so small. A single main drag with a selection of shops, a bank, a grocer with a gas station, a school, and a few streets with houses on them branching off. There weren't even any traffic lights. Most of the residents worked for local farm supply companies or remotely for companies in Zootopia. The village's one claim to fame, the turkey jerky factory, was located on the southern edge, and was favoured by predators all over the Zootopia area.

Not wanting to risk possibly spooking the florists, the two officers pulled to a stop and got out of their cruiser a block from the shop, taking extra time to ensure they had everything they would need. On their way in, they met up with a local constable, another mule deer named Pritchard, and had him
move around to cover the back of the shop before continuing on their journey.

Pushing the door to the flower shop open to the sound of a small brass bell, Nick's nose was assaulted with the scents of hundreds of flowers, so potent it nearly made him swoon. Covering his nose for a moment and clearing the door so Judy could enter, he waited until he'd become accustomed to the scents and had had time to sort them out in his head before moving further into the shop. The explosion of colours was just as dazzling, with pinks, purples, blues, reds, yellows, and dozens of other colours combining to make the place look like a kit's LEGO bin spilled all over.

Picking out the telltale smell of the Night Howler plant had been relatively easy after a moment, and his nose led him to a locked glass cabinet with a big red sign reading, "Special license and ID required." Inside, the violet-blue flower stared back at him, seemingly innocent looking, yet dangerous.

"Welcome to—can I help you, officers?" The two ZPD members turned to see a beaver clad in casual clothes with an apron at least as colourful as the shop around them. "Wait. He can't be in here." The beaver turned a hard look at the fox. "No predators allowed."

The rabbit officer's gaze immediately hardened. "You can't bar an officer access to a public building in the execution of their duties, sir. And if you continue down that line, we'll gladly throw an obstruction charge at you. So, I suggest you drop the attitude and help us out. I assume you are Mr. Tremblay?"

The beaver scowled and let out a scornful sound. "Yes, that's me. Make it quick, I have work to do."

The gray lapin's ears set themselves straight back, a sure sign to Nick that she was growing angry. She pulled out the photocopy she'd made of the receipt found in Bighorn's apartment. "We're here investigating a series of Night Howler related crimes, and we found a receipt from your shop."

The beaver glanced at the printout and then back at the rabbit, his expression hostile. "We are a licensed distributor of Midnicampum Holicithias." He pointed to the framed license certificate hanging on the wall. The date was about a month prior to the date on the receipt. Nick took note of the certificate number and quietly radioed a certification check to the local dispatch.

Judy was tapping her foot. "No one is suggesting you aren't a licensed distributor." The fox noted her choice of words. She didn't say anything about lawful or imply anything about her suspicions. "We'll need you to open up your sales records from that day, and give us access to your security cameras from the same."

A laugh. "You guys will need a warrant for that, and I'm busy. Come back when you have a warrant, and leave the fox at home." He turned to leave.

"Actually sir, you might want to reread the contract you signed in order to get that fancy seller's certificate," Nick remarked, gesturing to the item in question. "Says right in the terms and conditions that an officer can request, without warrant, any information related to sales and distribution of the plant, and the store owner is required to comply." The fox folded his arms.

"I wasn't ta—" Judy cut the beaver off before he could continue what was likely to end in an insulting remark.

"SO, sir, there are two ways you can do this. The first is that you get us what we ask for, willingly, and we might let you off with a warning. Or we can have a team out here to look at everything your business has done in the time since those laws came into effect, and you get arrested for obstruction of justice. Chances are they'll find something amiss. Unpaid fine, late renewal of your business
The beaver glared at the rabbit and fox, the latter of whom had moved to stand beside his partner. "Fine. But when you don't find anything, you can bet that I'm going to sue you for police harassment." He stood aside, and pointed to the office in the back.

The two officers gestured that the beaver should lead them, and the stocky mammal stormed into said office in a huff. He didn't even offer the two a seat in the guest chair and dropped into the chair in front of the lone computer. "What was the date?"

Judy gave him the date, crossing her arms as she watched the beaver begin his search. As slowly as possible. After several moments of obvious stalling on the beaver's part, Judy pulled out her phone, tapped something out, and showed Nick the screen. 'I'm about ready to arrest him for obstruction anyways. He's being slower than Flash.'

The fox smirked and winked at the doe, who offered him a smirk of her own, before turning to continue to stare daggers into the back of the blatantly belligerent beaver's head.

A few clicks and keystrokes, and the beaver turned to face Judy. "Nope. No records. Looks like you two have to look somewhere else. Now leave and stop wasting my time."

Being the tallest of the three mammals, Nick peeked over the beaver's shoulder, and noticed the wrong day in the search field. He pointed that out to the storeowner, who turned and looked back at the screen. With another huff, he put in the right day. After a moment he turned back to them.

"I'd tell you that that sale didn't happen, but since that pred pet of yours is looking at my screen, I'll just tell you that yes, that sale did happen here." He clicked a button, and the small printer on his desk hummed, whirred, and spat out a piece of paper. "Here. Now get out."

Judy took the paper. "Not so fast. You still need to show us the security footage, and this printout seems to be missing a valid buyer's license." She pointed to the blank area where the license scan was supposed to be.

"Yeah, that. Said he left his buyer's ID at home. Happens all the time, doesn't it? Nothin' you can do about it." He moved to try to usher the two officers out of the office.

Both officers' paws immediately went to their TQs, the holster snaps loud in the confined space, and Judy dropped the sheet of paper on the floor as her other paw went to her radio to call the local constable waiting outside for backup in the store. Nick, meanwhile, had his other paw up in a halt gesture, as both of them cleared their holsters and took up a ready stance.

"Stop right there, sir. Don't come any closer," the fox said in a warning tone of voice.

"Fuck you, pred. I didn't even want you in here in the first place. You might just go savage and kill me. Surprised you haven't done that to your dim-witted partner of yours."

"You mean like how every mammal can go savage if they are exposed to the Night Howler toxin? You DO know that it's not just predators that go savage, don't you, that prey can also go savage from the Night Howler?" Judy was rubbing her temple with one paw, while holding the tranquilizer gun in the other.

"Just a myth circulated by those who opposed Bellwether. A conspiracy theory cooked up to frame her. If prey could go savage, why didn't they at the Grand Palm Hotel a few weeks ago? That was more Night Howler, right?"
Neither officer said anything, instead simply staring down the beaver, until Judy broke the silence. "We can't comment on an active case. We can, however, place you under arrest if you don't pull up that security footage, right now."

Surprisingly, the beaver complied. Once they'd found the correct date and time, the unmistakable forms of Woolter and Jesse filled the security monitor, along with the shop owner standing in the very room with them. It took a few more minutes to extract the footage to a flash drive and secure the evidence.

"Alright, my next question," Judy said as she stowed the evidence bag with the flash drive in it in a pouch on her belt. "Where did all these Night Howler plants come from? Two hundred and twelve is over and above any normal order, and you certainly didn't keep them in the store."

Nick nodded. "Right. So, this had to be a special order. How did they contact you? How did you contact them?"

The beaver stood there, stubbornly silent.

"Answer the question, sir." Judy's voice had a dangerous edge.

With an exaggerated eyeroll, the beaver pointed to the office phone. "They called me."

Nick and Judy stared the beaver down. "From…"

"From a phone!"

"Naturally." It was Nick's turn to roll his eyes. "So maybe we should try this question. How did you contact them back?"

"By phone!"

Nick held back a growl, and he could tell that Judy was doing the same. Instead, he took a breath and let it out. "What number did you call?"

The beaver let out a frustrated noise and dropped back into the computer chair. A few clicks, keystrokes, and a whirring printer later, he stood back up. "There you are." He pointed to the paper the printer spat out, but made no move to hand it to them. Judy struggled to keep her face as expressionless as possible as she marched over to the printer and grabbed the sheet in question.

"Right, so are we done here?!" The beaver was even more irate and belligerent than before.

The doe shook her head. "Not quite." She turned and gave a wink to her partner, tipping her head in the beaver's direction. The fox returned the smirk as he grabbed his flexicuffs from his belt pouch. "Mr. Tremblay," the doe announced as Nick made his way towards the beaver. "You are under arrest for distributing a controlled substance in an unlawful manner."

"Pritchard here will take you back to his station. You'll be held there until our special shuttle bus comes to pick you up for transport back to Zootopia. Thing is, it's Sunday, and the shuttle only runs on weekdays. Have a good night. Might want to use your phone call to get another of your business partners to mind the shop. You'll be away from work for a while."
Judy almost literally hopped as they walked back to their cruiser, the screeching sound of the beaver's voice suddenly cut off as the constable slammed his own cruiser's door after putting him in the backseat. Both of the officers breathed a sigh of relief at the silence, climbing into their own cruiser and radioing for a scheduled transport for tomorrow morning.

The ride back started out as a quiet affair before Judy broke the silence.

"I can't believe how speciesist that beaver was." Nick looked at her. "I mean, I've seen the signs around Zootopia, and honestly, I wish we could do something about it, but that guy had me just LOOKING for a reason to arrest him!"

The fox smiled. "Good thing he gave you a reason to, eh?"

Judy looked over at her fox and returned the smile. "Yes. Yes, indeed. Multiple reasons, actually. Almost makes up for the things he said about you."

Nick eyed the doe sitting beside him. "That's what you're upset about?"

Judy gave a silent nod, concentrating on the road ahead of her.

"Why? He didn't get to me."

Judy sighed and was silent for a long moment. "Besides the outright speciesism, I hate the idea that he was just trying to hurt you. I mean, it's one thing when it's just another mammal on the street. We can warn off the mammal harassing, but when it's you…" She trailed off.

Nick nodded. "I feel the same way, Fluff. Foxes are protective of those they consider family. You know that."

Judy nodded, thinking back to the Grand Palm attack. Even in his savage state, he'd recognized her and had taken on a tiger for her.

Before she could say anything else, though, their radio crackled. "Dispatch to Zulu 240. Hopps, Wilde, you there?" The sound of the Precinct One dispatcher filtered through the speakers. Clawhauser had the day off, so instead, they had Officer Antlerson, a rookie white tail deer with an impressive antler rack, whom Nick had given the name Prongs, much to the deer's chagrin.

Nick grabbed the microphone. "Wilde-Hopps here, Prongs, what's up?"

"240, I told you not to call me that. We got a call from the canal district precinct. Apparently, the guys you had checking out the Susani Canal found something, and they need you over at the Falls Street bridge ASAP."

The two small officers looked at each other. An instant later, both reacted. Judy pushed on the accelerator, and Nick keyed the sirens, before responding to the deer. "10-4, Prongs, Wilde-Hopps enroute. ETA… "He looked at his partner, who held up all four digits on her paw. "… 40 minutes."

Traffic was light on the highway, and the weather was good, so Judy was able to push the cruiser a little higher than she normally would in the city, in comparison to the posted speed limits. Those that were on the road were thankfully attentive enough to get out of her way when they saw her coming. Half an hour later, they blew past Zootopia's welcome sign, heading for the Rainforest and Canal District turnoffs.

Judy stared in horror at the scene that lay before her. Dozens of body bags, all laid out in a row,
ranging in size from a fairly small one just large enough for a mammal her size to a few easily large enough to fit a grizzly bear. The coroner's vans were all over the place, and at least a dozen other officers were securing the scene.

And the stench. Part of academy training had been learning to identify different scents, including drugs, alcohol, and decomp, but this was beyond anything they'd 'sampled' at the academy. The sticky sweet-putrid scent of decomposing bodies was heavy, and it was everywhere.

Part of her was glad that they'd already bagged the bodies by the time they'd arrived. She was barely holding down her breakfast as it was, and Nick wasn't so lucky. He'd been overcome within a few minutes and had had to retreat to the perimeter for a few moments. She could have sworn he looked a little green even with his red fur colouring.

Glancing at her fox, she resolved to try and make it up to him later. She wasn't sure how yet. In the meantime, she had a job to do. The lead diver was a jaguar, rather large for his species, and instead of a tan coat with black spots, he had a pale coat with somewhat faded spots, and it was in his direction that she headed, catching Nick's attention and letting him know with a paw gesture what she intended to do.

"Officer Hopps," the jaguar intoned as the rabbit approached, his attention on putting his scuba gear away in the trunk of his car.

"So, what happened here, Officer Tamson?"

Letting out a breath and slamming the trunk shut, the midsized cat turned to the smaller officer. "We were acting on that tip you got about this bridge. Didn't see anything from the bridge deck, so we went for a dive..." He trailed off. "We counted forty-six bodies. All in biodegradable garbage bags, all tied down with cinder blocks. And all fish bait."

Judy's ears dropped like they had their own cinder blocks attached to them. *Forty-six mammals, dead? And desecrated in such a way?* She knew the body count would be high, but that was almost… she shook her head, trying to center herself. Sensing a presence beside her, she turned to see Nick standing there, his own face a mask of shock and horror. She turned back to the jaguar.

"Could you tell how they died?"

The feline shook his head. "I'm not a coroner, or a lab tech. Just work the SAR diving team. We've still got a few mammals down there collecting some of the other stuff we found, but I don't know if any of it's related to your case. You'd be surprised how much trash gets tossed into the canals, especially off bridges."

Even Nick didn't have anything to say to that.

"We didn't see anything that may have been the murder weapon, but that may change." Judy nodded and wrote that down on her notepad. "Sorry I couldn't be more help, officers."

The doe looked up an held up a paw in a placating gesture. "No, that's OK, Tamson. We just... We weren't expecting this."

The cat shook his head again. "No one ever is, Hopps. But if I hear right, you two are probably the best ones for the case."

Judy gave the cougar a smile and a wave, as he signed off the scene to her, and got in his car. The doe turned to her fox partner.
"You up for this, Nick?" He still looked a little on the green side. He gave her a slightly shakey smile and a thumb's up.

The doe tapped her pen to her lips. "We need to call Bogo and Rivers. Update Rivers on this investigation, and inform the chief that we've found a mass dump site. Surprised Tamson didn't do that."

The fox thought for a moment. "I'll call Rivers. I don't fancy having my ear yelled off by Buffalo Butt."

With an eyeroll and a jump-punch to the fox's shoulder, Judy pulled out her phone and dialed.

Bogo was sitting at his desk going over the copies of Rivers and Longtooth's case notes on the Grand Palm attack once again when his desk phone rang. He glared at it for a moment, as though willing the caller to just give up, then sighed as Hopps' name and number popped up on the caller ID. At least it wasn't Wilde. The buffalo picked up the receiver.

"What is it, Hopps?"

The cape buffalo's expression went from his usual glare to shock as the doe on the other end explained the find. Forty-six bodies?! How had this gone unnoticed?

"Hold on, Hopps, I'll be right there. You have enough units on perimeter patrol? Is the scene secure?"

"Yes, sir. I'll call more in if we need them, but for now, things are secure."

The cape buffalo ended the call, then punched the button for the reception desk. "Antlerson, have Records bring me all the unsolved missing mammals cases for the last six months, and have the other precincts courier over any open ones they have as well. Now!"

The white-tail deer's "Yes, sir" was all the confirmation the police chief needed. He grabbed his raincoat as he headed out of his office and down to the motor pool. Five minutes later, he was racing to the scene in his unmarked chief's vehicle, full lights and sirens.

Judy lowered her phone and looked around. So far, the relative obscurity of the area had kept the lookie loos to a minimum, and she supposed that that may have been why their quarry had chosen this as a dumping site in the first place. The lack of usable security cameras and dearth of footpaw and vehicular traffic meant that the area didn't have a lot of passersby. Even the small apartment buildings nearby had their windows obscured by trees.

Once Bogo was here, she and Nick could start canvassing the area, but for now, they were stuck here. A small part of her was shocked that this could have happened. A year ago, fifteen missing mammals was cause for concern, and now here, forty-six mammals were lying in body bags, and no one had called in to report anyone missing, that she'd heard.

"Could these all have been unreported?" Even to her ears, her voice sounded a little small. Nick, who had just gotten off the phone with Rivers, looked over at the rows of body bags.

"If they were vetted and taken from the homeless population, possibly. A lot of the people they'd be in close contact with don't have the means to report a mammal missing, or possibly even know how. Those that do have the means and know-how may not because of prejudices against their species, or against cops."
The doe shook her head. "That's true, I guess." She'd encountered a few cop-haters before. "Still, even if they didn't like cops, why wouldn't they tell someone that someone they knew was missing?"

The fox next to her shrugged. "Maybe they did tell someone and that someone didn't do anything about it? Or maybe they did tell a police officer and the officer never opened a case for whatever reason. Or maybe a case was opened but went cold from lack of leads."

With a nod, and a sigh, Judy had to concede the point. Cop-haters usually came in two varieties. One was the "I'll do it myself" mammal, who would take justice into their own paws, while the other was the type to spew hatred at cops over every little thing, but still expected cops to jump at their every whim. Things had gotten worse lately with the perception that the department wasn't doing anything to catch the perpetrators of the Grand Palm attack or stem the increasing demonstrations and anti-predator sentiment.

"I guess the first order of business is to identify all of these poor mammals and see if our suspicions are correct… And if they are indeed related to our case." The doe pondered, tapping her lower lip with the green plastic "stem" of her carrot pen. "Though it would be an awfully big coincidence, if our vehicle just HAPPENS to stop on a bridge over the site of a mass grave."

"Too coincidental for my liking. I asked around. Most of the views of the bridge are blocked, but a few mammals did mention unmarked delivery vans stopping. One even mentioned two rams that match Woolter and Jesse. He couldn't see what they were doing, though." The fox started walking to the bridge, Judy following him.

They kept walking until they were right at the center of the bridge. The concrete lip obscured Judy's vision off either side, and was up to Nick's forehead. It wasn't as tall as such a feature would normally be, with the bridge restricted to small and medium sized mammals.

"Hey, Carrots, hop on my shoulders."

The doe snorted and crossed her arms, her eyes teasing and muzzle pulled into a grin. It took a few seconds for it to click, at which point, Nick amended his statement. "OK, maybe, 'CLIMB' on my shoulders would be better?"

Judy shook her head, and marched up to Nick, who didn't even have time to lace his fingers together or even brace himself before the rabbit leapt up, landing both feepaws on his shoulders—without the force she would normally use in a take down, fortunately. Contrary to what he was expecting, the landing was rather light. The fox grabbed her ankles while she used her paws on his head to balance herself.

"Great idea, Slick. Now we can see what those rams saw," Judy commented after a moment of shuffling around.

"And…?"

There was a pause. "And I think I see something, just over to the left, about two feet."

The fox took a few steps in that direction, closing the distance for the doe, so she could get a better look at whatever it was she saw. He'd just made it there when he felt a tickling sensation on his right ear, then again on his left. The instinctive flick of both, though, made it starkly evident exactly WHAT it was that was causing the tickle. And it was from that moment on that Nick had to pin his ears back, lest he come into inappropriate contact with a very personal part of his bunny doe… her tail. Specifically, the underside of it.
Part of him was relieved when he heard heavy hoofsteps behind him, followed by a deep, accented voice. "Hopps. Wilde."

"Hey, Chief. I'd turn to shake your paw, but if I do that, I'm afraid miss High-and-Mighty here will give me a walloping for disturbing whatever it is she's doing up there."

Judy was apparently eager to get on with briefing her boss, and spoke up after letting out a low growl and giving Nick a light slap to the top of his head. "I found some blood and what looks like a chunk of wool up here, caught between the concrete sections. Also, look over there. Those look like claw marks. Like some mammal was trying to avoid being pushed or dragged over the edge."

The cape buffalo moved to inspect what Judy was indicating, with Nick following, the doe still on his shoulders. "Indeed it does, Hopps."

"Nick, put your paw up here."

The fox hesitated. "You sure, Carrots? Can you keep your balance?"

He felt her legs tightening around his head. "I'll be fine Nick. Just put your right paw up here."

He did as he was told. The doe leaned over and moved his paw around a bit, then spread his fingers. "About the right size for a red fox. Could be a cat, too."

There was a heavy sigh from the cape buffalo. "This is a damn disaster. You've called lab services in?"

"Actually, the SAR team called them before we got here."

Bogo nodded. "Good. Let them do their job. See if there are any other mammals that may have seen something. Or security footage, I don't care. Just get me someone to answer for this."

Nick felt Judy nodding. "Yes, sir!" The cape buffalo headed off to do his own scene analysis, leaving the two tiny officers on the bridge. In the meantime, Judy climbed down from Nick's shoulders, having bagged her evidence and photographed and documented the scratch marks in her notepad.

"Hey, Carrots, sorry about earlier."

The doe gave him a funny look. "For what?"

Nick hesitated. "For when I kinda…" He gestured with a paw to his ears, then to her, hoping he wouldn't have to explain it. Thankfully, he didn't, and he relaxed a little when Judy gave him a soft smile.

"Don't worry about it, Nick. It was an accident." She regarded him for a moment. The doe must have picked something up in his face, because she reached out and squeezed his arm. "Is this something we need to talk about?" At the fox's nod, she continued. "OK, we can talk about it when we get home tonight. But I'm not mad, OK?" The fox gave her a small smile and a nod. He wasn't looking forward to telling Judy why it was an issue with him, but he knew she'd be understanding of it.

"Let's get to work, Slick." The doe headed back in the direction of the recovered bodies, where the coroners were finally loading them into their vans.
Chapter End Notes

Prairie Den is inspired heavily by a small village called Longview in Alberta, Canada.

Everyone here continues to be a huge help in my recovery from my depression. I'm certainly not out of the woods yet, but I can't say thank you enough already. Just more proof that joining this fandom was one of the best decisions of my life.

Back to references! two in this chapter! Can you find them?

Coming up on February 22: Pressed for Answers!

Questions? Critiques? Did that spoonful of sugar turn out to be 5 grams of salt? Leave a comment!
Chapter Summary

Press conferences, politics and visits to the morgue.

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: I was writing my bid to own Zootopia again, when I heard a commotion outside. Turns out a parade was going by my window, extolling someone named Prince Ali. When I got back to my desk, my bid was gone, so I still don't own Zootopia.

Thanks to TheoreticallyEva for editing this chapter and keeping me sane!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was well into the wee hours of the morning when a tired and run-down pair of ZPD officers stumbled bleary-eyed into the welcoming comfort of what they'd started calling their apartment. They were sore, tired, and dirty, and even the usually chipper, energetic bunny couldn't hide the need for sleep.

They each took separate showers, the apartment conveniently equipped with two, and the two having come to an agreement that neither was ready for that. Climbing into bed, the two settled into one of their two favourite sleeping positions, with Judy curled up tight to Nick's chest, and Nick wrapped around the small bunny.

After a few moments of getting comfortable, Nick spoke, the first time either one had said a word since they got home.

"Carrots, you remember I said we needed to talk about what happened on the bridge?" He felt the nod and heard the rabbit's hum of affirmation. "What does it mean for a rabbit if you touch another's tail?"

Judy pulled back and gave the fox a funny look, before relaxing. "It's... pretty normal, actually. When you live in a family as big as ours, that kind of thing is to be expected. I mean, we don't go purposefully grabbing tails or anything, but incidental contact and bumping into each other are a part of everyday life."

When Nick hesitated, it was all the information she needed to know that it meant something different for foxes, a fact he confirmed when he finally spoke.

"For foxes, it's like grooming. We only let our family touch our tails. Ideally, it would only be our parents or our mate, but try telling that to a sibling with grabby paws."

Judy snorted. With over three hundred siblings, grabby paws were a routine part of growing up. Ears, mostly, but tails as well. Worse, though, were the pranksters that would tie ears in knots or to
objects like a bed frame while a bunny slept.

"So, when your ear brushed my tail on the bridge..."

"... it was something we foxes would consider intimate contact."

The doe frowned for a moment. She hadn't considered the possibility that something like that would be considered intimate contact for someone like Nick. It made sense, though, and she felt her heart warm when she realized that every time, they'd gone to bed together since Wolford's death, he'd wrapped his tail around her. "Well, even knowing that, Nick, I'm not upset. It's OK, Slick. Just... you know... don't make a habit of it, especially out in public," she commented with a grin.

The fox let out a tired chuckle. "Yeah it wouldn't do to let people think that just any mammal can touch you there."

Judy hummed as she felt her eyelids close of their own accord, and she could fight sleep no longer.

The four hours of sleep that the two did manage to get wasn't nearly enough, and it was two tired mammals that dragged themselves through the doors of Precinct One at 8 AM. Even Judy couldn't hide the bags under her eyes, though she did her best.

"Boy, you guys look beat. What happened last night?" Clawhauser was back at the reception desk, as chipper as ever, and apparently working on his second box of donuts already. Unfortunately for him, the energy he had wasn't contagious.

The fox turned a tired glare at the cheetah, while Judy sighed. "We were up most of the night handling a crime scene in the Canals, Ben."

The gasp that the cheetah let out might have seemed overly dramatic from anyone else, but from him, it was completely normal. "You were on that mass grave scene? I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

The rabbit doe gave the cheetah a wan smile. "It's fine, Clawhauser. We just need a little time to wake up."

"... And maybe a little more coffee," the fox next to her intoned. They'd stopped at Snarlbucks on the way, Judy getting her usual carrot latte, while Nick had opted for a wolf's size espresso, and he still felt like he'd been hit by a bus.

The two made their way to their cubicle, with Judy peeling off partway there and heading to the break room. Logging on to his computer, the fox made a cursory check of his email before reviewing the evidence they and lab services had collected last night. Almost 100 fur and wool samples. Bits of garbage bags. Blood droplets. A claw caught in a crevice where it shouldn't have been. And that was just on the bridge. Nothing had come in yet regarding the bodies pulled from the canal. No doubt the coroner was backlogged. Forty-six bodies was no small number.

Usually, they only had to deal with a couple new bodies a day. Two a day for a year was the most they'd ever had, and the largest single incident had been 34 bodies after the Drake Street Apartment fire 12 years ago, an act of arson by a disgruntled tenant.

"Anything interesting in the case files?" Judy's voice roused him from his thoughts. He shook his head.

"Nope. Nothing so far. Lab services hasn't gotten any results, and the coroner hasn't called or emailed. Well, he hasn't emailed me, at least."
The doe pawed him the coffee she'd been carrying and turned to her own computer, punching in the password and loading up her email. The lack of new messages was a disappointment. "Nothing on my end, either."

A knock on their cubicle wall drew their attention to Liz Fangmeyer.

"Hey, if you two have a moment, you might want to pull up the ZNN livestream. Bogo's about to have a press conference at city hall."

"Press conference? This I have to see." Nick pulled the ZNN website up on his computer and clicked the live stream link.

Judy hopped from her chair to Nick's and plopped herself down next to him, the chair being more than big enough. "At least I'm not in this one." She shuddered at the memories of her last press appearance.

"Relax, Judy, none of us here hold that against you. And it's obvious Nick doesn't." The tigress gave the two a wink, causing the smaller female to blush. "Heck, I've been here for four years, and I still haven't had to deal with the press beyond the usual 'No comment, ongoing investigation, please talk to the press department' spiel."

Liz pulled a spare chair from the hallway as she talked, sitting herself down next to the fox and the rabbit.

"Police are still on the scene in the canals district, but we're about to take you live to city hall, where Police Chief Adrian Bogo is going to be making an official statement." Fabienne Growley's voice was steady, as if she was talking about the weather, and not a mass grave in a city waterway.

The scene switched to the lobby of city hall, where the mayor and several members of city council stood beside a podium occupied by none other than the chief of police.

"Ladies and gentlemammals. Last night, our teams found a mass grave of mammals in the Susani canal. The remains of dozens of mammals were recovered, though we are still waiting for an accurate count from our forensics teams. Until further notice, all access to and over the canal is restricted, and we are asking mammals to use an alternate means to get into and out of the area."

"Questions, please."

The reporters began clamouring for his attention, all speaking out at once, many also waving their paws. After a few seconds, the chief pointed to a musk ox. "You there."

"Thank you, Chief. Edward Bullsmore, Zootopia Daily News. Have these bodies from the mass grave been connected to any open missing mammal cases or known murderer profiles?"

The chief's expression didn't waver at all, remaining as stoic as before. "I'm afraid I cannot comment on an ongoing investigation. We have, however, identified a mammal of interest. Next question, please."

More reporters clamouring. The chief picked out another. "Does this have anything to do with the assault on your precinct a few days ago? And how is the officer that was injured?"

The cape buffalo shook his head. "Again, I cannot comment on an ongoing investigation. Suffice it to say, Officer Delgato is fine."

The chief picked out a third mammal. "Yes, you."
The lynx reporter stared up at the cape buffalo. "What is the position of the ZPD regarding the very public information that two of its members are openly engaged in a predator-prey relationship, given the recent anti-predator sentiment that is surfacing throughout the city?"

The cape buffalo stared at the reporter, while, back in the precinct, Nick and Judy let out a collective groan of exasperation.

"I fail to see how that's relevant to this announcement."

The reporter shrugged. "The populace wants to know. It's common knowledge that the two are investigating at least the death of your own officer, months ago, and they were involved in both the Grand Palm attack and were seen at the scene of both the assault on your precinct and the mass grave last night."

That was when the mayor stepped up. "Actually, I'd like to say something regarding that. In these difficult times, it's important to remember that we are all mammals, and we have to all work together. They represent what we should all strive to be. That's why I requested that they remain partners."

The mayor then pulled out some of his own papers. "I'm also instituting a bill in city council that, if passed, will make it illegal to bar mammals access to businesses based solely on their order, unless there is a verifiably legitimate reason to do so."

THAT got the reporters fired up again.

"Isn't this a violation of business owners' rights to refuse service?"

"How will this affect investment opportunities?"

"What kind of opposition to the bill do you expect?"

"What will the consequences be for refusing access to predator or prey?"

The bear raised his paws in a silence gesture. "Ladies and gentlemammals, I'm sorry, but I can't go into details about the bill itself, but I will say that we expect that investment opportunities will be improved by it, as it is a step that shows that we don't tolerate prejudice."

Judy snorted. "I wonder if FoxAway is going to find it hard to market their products."

The fox next to her shrugged. "They might have to rebrand their Badger Be Banished, too."

"Shhhh!" Liz Fangmeyer shushed them.

"How likely do you think it is that a bill like this is going to get passed?"

The mayor paused a moment. "What do I think? I think everyone wants to see this resolved."

Nick whistled. "Nice way to respond. He didn't answer the question directly, but still answered it indirectly."

The reporters on the screen were still demanding answers to questions shouted in a cacophony of noise, when the mayor spoke again. "No more questions at this time, thank you."

The mayor left the podium to be replaced by a city hall press secretary. The feed switched back to the news room just before Nick closed the livestream down.

There was silence for a few moments. "Wow. I'm surprised Bogo's announcement was so quick,"
Liz remarked as she scratched her cheek. 

The small rabbit shook her head. "I'm not. He did the same thing with the missing mammals case. Nick and I literally just got into the precinct on something like 6 hours of sleep. And then Bellwether got him to put me on the podium."

The tigress frowned. "Not one of the press corps? That's strange."

Judy nodded. "She said it was so that people could see the face of the hero. But honestly, I think it was a chess move. If I had stuck to Nick's crash course, I'd have not done any more damage to the city, and Bellwether would move on to plan B." The rabbit's ears drooped. "As it was, I did screw up and handed the city to her."

The tigress scoffed. "And that's why I hate politicians. There's a reason we have a press corps. I bet you Bogo's never going to listen to that idea ever again. Political crocshit." Both of the smaller mammals rolled their eyes and smirked, giving a brief nod of agreement, and Liz couldn't help but chuckle internally at how in sync the two were.

"Well," she said, pushing herself out of the chair. "I gotta get outta here before Chief Grumpy gets back. He gave me patrol duty, so I shouldn't be here when he gets back. Grizzoli should be back with his lunch by now. I swear that bear can eat as much as an elephant."

The tigress' timing couldn't have been worse, or better, depending on how you looked at it, since Francine Pennington chose that moment to walk by the cubicle. "Hey! I don't eat that much!" The scene of the tigress' embarrassment was accompanied by a laugh track from the fox and bunny.

"Sorry, Francine, I didn't mean it that way. But have you seen how much food Grizzoli puts away?"

The elephant rolled her eyes. "Fangmeyer, I was his partner for two years before you joined the force. Yes, I'm aware." She continued down the row of cubicles.

The tigress also made her farewells and bolted for the motor pool, just slipping by the front door as her cape buffalo boss was walking up to it.

Across the city, another mammal was watching the press conference with vested interest. As the conference concluded, he, too, switched off the feed.

"How did those garbage runs get discovered, Walker?"

The deer in the room shook his head. "We aren't entirely sure. Doug Ramses swears he wasn't followed from his last drop to the safe house, and he's certain that he destroyed all the relevant evidence. Woolter and Jesse were taken care of, as was Taylor Blackford, so there weren't any loose ends there."

The zebra that had spoken first sighed and rubbed the bridge of his long nose. "Is it possible that the ram was followed and didn't know it?"

A shrug from the deer. "It's possible, but unlikely. Ramses spent months hiding from the cops after Bellwether got caught. He knew what to look for."

"What about Janus?"

"Couldn't be him. He wasn't in on that dump site, just the one in the desert. Besides, he expired before he had the chance to say anything."
A grumble from the zebra. "So, either someone followed Ramses and he never noticed, or we have a mole. Who all knew of that dump site?"

"Just Ramses and his flunkies, Hornsby, and us."

"Hornsby, where was he in all this?"

The pig elder spoke up. "He was at home on the phone with me. He'd asked for Janus to take care of the other two rams when the safehouse perimeter alarm went off. Since then, we've had contact with every cell constantly."

The beaver, the fourth and final mammal in the room, finally spoke. "One of the other cells was telling me that the police showed up at the Susani canal unexpectedly yesterday afternoon and started scouring it. None of the locals seemed to know what was going on."

A frown from the zebra. "Did they search any other canals?" At the shake of the beaver's head, the zebra let out another sigh. "So, they knew, somehow, that this specific bridge over this specific canal was the dump site."

"One of our guys questioned some of the mammals in the area. Sort of a 'what's going on' type thing. The only thing substantial was the delivery van Ramses used. A few had seen it but didn't know what it was doing," Dade Walker said, scratching his chin. "The delivery van must have been our connection. Somehow, they traced it back to that canal and that bridge."

"And no police scouting."

"None, Mr. McStripeson."

Silence reigned as the zebra thought. "Well, we'll table that issue for now, but we must find out how they knew of that dump site. There's a leak, and it must be fixed. Find it."

There was a round of nods from the three elders.

"On to the issue of this new bill city hall is introducing. The predator councillors and the mayor will most likely vote in favour of it, but there's only five total of them. That leaves eight prey councillors able to stop it. We'd need seven of them to vote against."

City hall had one councillor for each district, and each councillor was voted in by residents of that district. Most of them had both predator and prey advisors, but not all, some sticking to members of the opposite order either for publicity or genuine advice. Others had only advisors from their order, either predator or prey. They'd managed to get their own mammals into those positions, but there were still only three of them. They needed four more.

"I think Councillor Elkson from the Tundratown district would vote in our favour." Elkson was one of the councillors with two advisors, but he had well-known anti-predator leanings. He'd been an upset at the last election, the position traditionally dominated by polar bears. Most suspected that it had been a sympathy response for having been mauled by a polar bear months earlier during the Bellwether era.

"Any others?"

"The councillor from the Rainforest District seems to listen to his prey advisor more than his predator advisor," the beaver offered, shuffling through his notes.

The pig nodded. The Sahara Square and Savannah Central councillors are similar. Sahara Square
James McStripeson nodded. "Lean on them as much as possible, or have your contacts do the same. We need those votes. And see if the Outback Island councillor would be amenable as well. It'll make things easier when we introduce our own bill after the second public test."

The zebra looked at his three elders. "We want to begin the isolation and segregation of predators once we confirm that the test is successful. As a 'safety precaution' against the threat. Once we get this in place, we'll be in a position to start removing the filth from society."

Nick and Judy hadn't expected to be back at the Savannah Central morgue so soon, just days after last being here, but it was par for the course, and both knew that this wouldn't be the last time they'd be here.

The discovery the night before meant the building was overfull, and several of the bodies had had to be shipped to morgues in other districts. Nick in particular wasn't looking forward to that, and he could tell Judy wasn't too thrilled, either. He shook his head to clear his thoughts and focused on the raccoon coroner who had just walked into the room from one of the offices.

"Officer Hopps, Officer Wilde, didn't expect to see you here again so soon. But given last night's discovery, I suppose I shouldn't be so surprised. You two seem to be in the middle of most of the big discoveries lately."

"Dr. Mamusson! I hope you weren't up all night!" Judy reached up and shook the coroner's paw.

Nick smirked when the raccoon turned to shake his. "We really should stop meeting under these circumstances, doc. What would my bunny doe think?"

That earned a slug on the shoulder from said bunny, though the fox could tell she was fighting a grin.

"Well, Officer Wilde, that's OK, because I don't swing your way. And my wife would skin me." Judy burst out laughing at the coroner. "As for being up all night, Officer Hopps, I feel like I have been. I've just barely started on the John and Jane Does from last night, and I've been here for four hours already. It's going to be a long day for me."

The doe made a sound of sympathy. She knew Nick was feeling the effects of the long working days already, and she wasn't sure how to make it up to him yet.

"If you would follow me, detectives, I have the results from Taylor Blackford's and Jesse Bighorn's autopsy," the mask-furred mammal said as he led the two back into his office. "I also have a few preliminary findings from last night's mass grave that may interest you."

Judy's ears perked up at that. They'd been making some great headway in their case already, but this was big. Bigger than the Bellwether incident, if the evidence was correct.

The raccoon sat at his desk and pulled out two folders. "First, Jesse Bighorn. You were right, Officer Wilde, he was poisoned. Fast-acting cyanide, just like his brother, but Jesse wasn't as fortunate, from what I hear—though I suspect his brother will wish for death when he wakes up. He took it orally, likely slipped into a drink."

"Bingo, Nick thought.

"Taylor Blackford—I was able to confirm that his cause of death was also cyanide poisoning, but I found the remains of a slow-release capsule in his stomach. It likely delayed his initial symptoms,
though it would certainly have prolonged his agony. I can't say how long, though."

The raccoon shuffled through some of the papers on his desk and pulled out another folder. "These are the preliminary findings of the bodies here. None of them have been fully autopsied yet, and the trace evidence has already been delivered to the lab in P1."

Judy flipped open the folder and started browsing through. After a few pages, she noticed something. "All of the mammals had torn, stained clothing?"

The coroner nodded. "Really, it looked like they'd not been washed for quite some time. Even being down in that canal. The water did destroy a lot of evidence, too."

The rabbit doe flipped backwards, then went forwards again. "Patchy fur, no wallets or any personal items. Looks like DNA or dental records are going to be needed to identify them."

Nick couldn't help the frown. "Patchy fur and torn clothes? Sounds like they were homeless. If they were, that would sort of fit our demographic of mammals that didn't or couldn't get reported missing."

"All were tied with cinderblocks and encased in standard garbage bags."

Nick grimaced. "Not biodegradable, I assume?"

"Nope. Far as I can tell, it was just cheap off-the-shelf hardware store garbage bags."

The doe continued flipping through the folder. There were only about ten preliminary examinations of the actual bodies, only external observations and recovery team notes for the rest, but one caught Judy's eye. "Wait a second. Blue died wool? A mountain goat?" She showed Nick the page and turned to the coroner. "Body 26, can we see it?"

The raccoon's eyebrows shot up. "I guess if you want to. He's in the freezer." The coroner got up from his desk and led them to the freezer room, where the huge cooling unit rumbled away. Dozens and dozens of drawers were arranged and sized for almost any type of mammal. Nick didn't know the specifics, but he knew that the base compartments were sized for elephants, and "inserts" could break those compartments down into smaller ones.

Dr. Mamusson walked over to one of the panels and reached up to press a button before hesitating. "This is going to be pretty nasty. If you want to back out now, just say so." At the nod from both mammals, he pressed the appropriate button.

There was a hiss of air, and one of the drawers closest to the wall they'd come in on slid open, powered by compressed air. A wave of cold air followed it, along with the pungent scent of decomp. Nick's paws immediately went to his nose, and Judy could have sworn he turned green. She reached up and squeezed his elbow in a show of support, before they walked over to the cadaver on the table.

The coroner hadn't been kidding when he'd warned them it would be nasty, and Judy had to fight to keep what little breakfast she'd eaten in her stomach. The time underwater had not been kind to the body, but what was immediately evident was what she'd been hoping and dreading—the distinct blue-dyed fur they'd seen on what footage of Spencer Callahan they'd been able to find. Judy nudged her companion. The nod from the fox was all she needed.

"OK, doctor. We'll need the autopsy done on this one, top priority."

The doctor pressed the button to close the drawer and scribbled something in his notepad. "Got it. Suspect of yours?"
The doe shook her head. "Mammal of interest."

More notes jotting. "I'll bump that up the priority list, Hopps."

The doe nodded her thanks and made to leave, every instinct in her screaming to get the hell out of that place of death. At least her common sense overrode that instinct. Once outside, the doe took a few moments to breathe in the relatively fresh air, Nick beside her doing the same. She turned to her companion, reached over, grasped his arm in her paw, and gave it a squeeze. "That wasn't too bad for you, was it?"

The fox shook his head. "I don't know about you, Carrots, but I think we should skip lunch today."

Judy let out a light chuckle. Only Nick could make a joke, albeit a bad one, in their current situation. "Don't worry, Slick, I agree with you." She took his paw and led him to their cruiser.

The rest of the five morgues they had to visit were not nearly as grotesque, though they didn't have to view any more bodies. At some level, both of them dreaded the moment that they did. Dead bodies were one thing. Dead bodies in the advanced stages of decomposition were another thing entirely.

Later in the afternoon, the two were called to the DNA lab, and were surprised to see Bogo there when they arrived.

"Don't tell me you're here for the inspiring sounds of too little evidence and too big a case, too, boss," the inevitable quip from the snarky fox and the obligatory order to shut up were pretty much routine by now, and Judy wondered if it was some sort of "male speak" that she was missing out on, or if the two genuinely enjoyed getting on each other's nerves. She gave Nick an elbow in the ribs anyways, much to the gratitude of her superior.

It was about fifteen minutes before the sand cat DNA tech arrived, to the chagrin of the chief and two officers. To say that there was a ton of other stuff they had to do was understating things, and 15 minutes was time better spent doing other tasks.

"Sorry about the wait. I had to confirm our findings with another tech. It concerns the mammal involved in the raid last week. The albino reindeer."

That got everyone's attention.

"Once we got all the prosthetics off, he matched his mugshot pretty closely."

The rap sheet wasn't long, but it was telling. Years earlier, he'd been suspected as a hitman and fixer for a crime boss in the Meadowlands and Savannah Central area, but when the crime gang was taken out, it seemed that this mammal had gone under the radar, and never been arrested for or convicted of anything.

The five mammals stared for a moment.

"Was the gang he was a part of before an all-prey gang?" Judy's voice couldn't hide her curiosity.

Bogo shook his head and grunted. "They were. From their formation to their breakup, the 29th Street..."
gang were all prey. They didn’t accept any predators into their group, but they also didn’t
discriminate on their targets. Almost all of their hits were prey, with some predators thrown in."

The doe beside him thought for a moment. "So, a hitman from a pro-prey gang goes on the wind and
turns up in a case involving a murdered police officer and mammals with ties to a mass grave and
Bellwether, a modified night howler formula tailored to predators, and a terrorist attack on the Grand
Palm hotel." Judy began tapping her lips with her carrot pen.

"Some terrorist group with a dislike for predators it sounds like." Nick was similarly deep in thought.

Judy turned back to the DNA tech. "Thank you, Lindsey. Is that all?"

The sand cat looked at her notes. "For now, yeah."

Bogo waved his hoof. "Then you can go."

The DNA tech left, leaving the police chief and two smallest officers in the room. Bogo was the first
to speak. "Well, Hopps, looks like you landed a bigger case than you expected."

The doe didn’t say anything, which unfortunately left Nick to his own devices. "Oh, you know her,
Chief. She’d take on and solve every case in the city if you let her." The fox gave the chief his
signature smirk.

The cape buffalo sighed and gave the fox his signature glare. "Wilde, I swear, one of these days not
even your partner is going to be able to stop me from forcibly taping your muzzle shut."

The lack of the inevitable punch from the doe confused the fox, and he turned to see her deep in
thought.

"I’ll expect you to submit a full report to Rivers and myself on this by the end of the day." The cape
buffalo got up and left the room.

That broke Judy out from wherever she had gone, and she subsequently dragged the fox, almost
literally, back to their cubicle.

"Alright, Carrots, what’s going through that mind of yours?"

"Just trying to get my head around all this." She pulled out a pad of paper much too big for herself and
dropped it on her desk.

"OK, so we have Eric’s murder. He’s the first that we know for sure." She wrote their colleague's
name down in one corner.

"We also have Spencer Callahan. Also murdered, connected to Wolford. Spencer Callahan is
somehow connected to whatever went through Zootopia Coast Distribution." She added two more
names to the pad and drew lines connecting the three.

"Taylor Blackford is connected to Zootopia Coast and Spencer Callahan. Woolter, Jesse and Doug,
along with their delivery van, are connected to Callahan and 45 other mammals, as far as we know.
Next, we have Jackson Redfohn. He’s connected to Doug, Woolter, and Jesse." Judy's page was
starting to look like a spider web gone amok, or a game of twister on paper. "We also have an
unknown third party that killed Taylor Blackford." Another line and note.

"And somewhere in here we have the Grand Palm attack, modified night howlers, and the original
night howlers that the Bighorns purchased but are still unaccounted for." More scribbling.
The two stared at the page for a long while.

"Any idea how these all fit?"

Another long moment of staring, before Nick finally spoke up. "Honestly, the Grand Palm attack feels more… broad, but at the same time more targeted than the last time we came across the Night Howlers. I mean, it's somehow engineered to affect only predators, but at the same time, instead of hitting single mammals with a pellet, they gassed an entire skyscraper."

"Doug could be behind the new engineered version, or at least involved in it. He made the original formula, after all." Nick drew a dotted line between Doug, the Night Howlers, and the "New Formula" as Judy had termed it. "Honestly though, unless he got some serious upgrades, that little chemistry set of his wouldn't do the trick."

"Right. So there needs to be new equipment involved." The word 'equipment' made it on to the page and connected to Doug. "Maybe the delivery Callahan tipped Wolford off about was that new equipment?"

Nick was nodding, and a grin formed on his face. "Think we can get a judge to go with having us turn that business upside down for a shake, see what comes loose?"

The doe stared at the mess in front of her before the grin spread across her muzzle as well. "I think we just might be able to."

Chapter End Notes

Can't be Zootopia without a press conference going off the rails! Sorry this one is so late. I was literally so tired after work today that I couldn't concentrate on the simple task of posting a chapter! So I took a nap and woke up around midnight my time and I'm now eating a bowl of Shreddies while posting the chapter.

As far as my depression goes, in counselling and slowly getting over it. Thanks to everyone who has lent a hand (or paw/hoof) in support! You guys are the best.

Quite a few got the Harry Potter reference in the last chapter, and a couple also got my shout out to the Fantastic Four. Cookies for all that did!

Hidden Reference to another Zootopia work in this chapter! Can you find it?

Coming up on March 8: Chess Pieces!

Questions? Critiques? Did Abu steal your midnight snack? Leave a comment!
"It's not very flattering, that's for sure."

It was the day after their citywide tour of the morgues, and Nick was standing in the requisitions office staring at the ugly contraption in his paws. A gas mask. Since the new strain of Night Howlers was targeted only for predators, all predator first responders were required to keep one in their squad car, and all prey first responders were required to keep a supply of Night Howler antidote for their partner, should they be caught in or need to respond to another attack such as at the Grand Palm.

That morning, Bogo had also rearranged several officers out of concern for safety. While there were still pairs of prey partners, the pairs that were both predators had been broken up, and each paired with a prey mammal. Francine Pennington had been paired with Grizzoli, while Liz Fangmeyer had been paired with Rhinowitz. James Siberius had been paired with McHorn, much to both officers' dismay.

Officially, it was to show unity between predator and prey. Unofficially, most knew it was so that if the predator went savage due to unexpected exposure, the prey mammal would be able to subdue them. This wasn't universal, though, and a text message from Nick's academy friend confirmed that he was still paired with a fellow predator.

Nick and Judy had also submitted the warrant for their search of the Zootopia Coast warehouse, but that was expected to take a few days, so in the meantime, they had other leads to follow. The judge handling the warrant hadn't been too pleased to see a fox in a position of authority, and hadn't been very cooperative until he'd gotten a somewhat irate phonecall from the police chief a few minutes later. Nick and Judy couldn't wipe the smirk off their faces for the rest of the day.

Judy shook herself out of her thoughts and turned to look at her fox. "I know it's bad. But at least you don't have to wear it all the time." The doe standing in front of him looked a bit put out herself, though. She wasn't particularly keen on the idea of having to equip him with an item that, in her view, made it seem like he was a threat without it.
She'd even asked for one for herself, just to keep herself on even footing with her partner, but had been told that there weren't any plans to equip the prey officers with such devices. When she pointed out that Night Howler – in its original form – could affect both sides the same way, the requisitions officer had simply shrugged and told her that's the way it was.

_Might as well put a stupid pet collar on_, she fumed. _How different is it from muzzling him?_ At that thought, she walked over to the russet canid and wrapped her arms around him in a hug.

Nick was puzzled, but let his trademark grin take over a second later. "I know I'm pretty irresistible, but what's this for?"

Judy was quiet for a second. "I just don't like the fact that they're treating you – and other predators – this way. It's like they're muzzling you."

The fox's expression softened. "I'll be OK, Carrots. I don't like it, but I'll deal with it. Maybe we won't even have to use it." He scratched the top of the doe's head lightly. "Now how about we go see what the lab boys wanted?"

Judy sighed and let go, before nodding and smiling up at the male vulpine. She could tell that the mask was bothering him still, and she was pretty sure she knew why, but she didn't feel like now was the best time to press him on it.

They'd gotten in that morning to requests from three different directions, so this was just the first stop they had to make. Next, there was the ballistics lab, and then the Savannah Central coroner again. All three were top priority requests, and they couldn't afford delays. The gas mask and antidote pickup done, the two left the requisitions office in the back of the building, dropped the items off in the trunk of their cruiser in the motor pool, then headed up to the lab level to meet with the ballistics tech.

Navigating the warren of passageways on the lab level was becoming easier, now that they were spending a lot more time there. There were over 20 individual labs covering various specialties, as well as several general purpose labs and offices, and finding the right one was sometimes difficult, even with the signage on the walls.

They managed to find their way to the ballistics office and were greeted by a capybara lab tech.

"Hector Cavida. Good morning, Officer Hopps, Wilde." He acknowledged each of them in turn. His tone of voice sounded a little beat down. "Thanks for coming on such short notice."

Judy, her usual cheerful self, nodded. "Of course! What can we do for you?"

The smaller mammal shuffled his papers. "Actually, it's what I can do for you. It concerns an interesting piece of evidence that was passed to us from the Savannah Central coroner yesterday evening." He pulled out a small clear plastic container. Inside, deformed and warped, was a bullet.

"Your victim, Spencer Callahan, was shot."

The two officers looked at each other for a moment, then turned back to the capybara. "Yeah, we kind of figured that," Nick intoned with a raised eyebrow. "The big cleaned up blood stain on the back wall of the canyonlands Targoat a couple weeks ago hinted at that."

With a sigh, the capybara pushed a photo in front of the two. The photo was of the bullet, but close-up, showing it laid on its side next to a small ruler. "This is the ballistic fingerprint of the bullet recovered from your victim." He handed them another photo. "This is the fingerprint recovered from the bullet that killed Officer Wolford."
The two stared at the two images side by side. While there were some differences in the bullet's shape, the markings on the side of the bullet were all the same. The two looked up at the capybara, astonished. "The same gun?" Judy asked, whipping out her ever-present notepad and carrot pen.

"Same barrel, same ammunition. I don't suppose you found any shell casings at either scene?"

"If we did, I think you'd be in possession of them," Nick snarked, staring at the photos over Judy's shoulder.

"What can you tell us about the gun, just from these?"

Cavida flipped through his pages before pulling out one. "MS.380 auto ammunition. The same size you would carry in your lethal, Wilde. Able to stop anything up to and including a large cat. Regarding the gun, or the mammal that held it, I couldn't tell you. There weren't any hoof or pawprints on the one from Officer Wolford, and the one from your mammal was underwater way too long to recover any of that."

Judy tapped the carrot pen to her lips. "So, we have a bullet from Wolford, and from Callahan, both apparently fired from the same gun, but so far, no way to put it in any one mammal's paws, or hooves."

"For now, that seems to be the case, officers." The capybara pulled his file together and handed it over to them. "I'll email you anything else."

Both Nick and Judy got the feeling that the conversation had just ended, so Judy grabbed the file, and the two left the office. As they headed back to the cubicle, Judy broke the silence. "We only saw Doug near Callahan when we think he died. That doesn't mean that there wasn't another mammal present, but it does put a lot of suspicion on him. And the fact that the same gun was used on Wolford… If we can put Doug at that scene, that's a pretty solid case, there."

When they reached their cubicle, Judy called up Rivers and Longtooth, while Nick pulled up the photos of Wolford's crime scene. While Judy explained what they'd found, the fox separated out the area shots from the detail ones and started clicking through them.

Hanging up the phone, Judy wandered over to Nick's desk and watched over his shoulder for a moment before speaking. "Whatcha looking for, Slick?"

"Something that would help us put Doug at the scene."

"Like what?"

Finally, he found the photo that he'd been looking for. "This one."

The photo was taken down one of the side streets, facing the main street through Kalahari Heights. Based on the orientation, Judy knew that the convenience store in the subdivision would be just off the left-hand frame of the photo, and Wolford's car a on a side street the next block over. The alleyway where Wolford had been found was just in-frame on the righthand side.

The photo had been taken at night, and an identical one taken later the next day, but Nick stuck with one at night. "What did the one mammal say they saw around the time Wolford was killed?"

The rabbit doe ran to her computer and opened the case file. It took several minutes of searching to find the witness statements taken from the night of the murder, but eventually, she found them. "Let's see. A Mrs. Mary Jackson and her husband described 'a mammal in dark clothes, fairly big around compared to its height.' They couldn't determine the species, though." Judy frowned. "That's not
Nick chuckled. "That's about as useful as saying it was a mammal. Every overweight mammal could fit that description," he said, unknowingly echoing Rivers' statement from several months prior.

Judy frowned again for a moment and went clicking through their own case file for Callahan, pulling up a still from Doug chasing Callahan through the streets of the Canyonlands. "He is fairly big around compared to his height. And if he's in silhouette…"

"… he might just look like two round nerf balls stuck on top of each other." Nick finished her thought with a grin. "He doesn't have any horns or anything to distinguish him."

Turning back to his photo of the crime area, he pointed to a street lamp on the side of the road furthest from the camera. "That street lamp. It's the only source of light in the area. If Doug ran past it, we'd only see a black blob."

Scratching her chin, Judy thought for a moment. "I wonder if we can borrow a ram officer from the meadowlands precinct tonight? It'd be a good test. We might not be able to prove it's Doug, but we might be able to say for sure it's a ram."

Judy picked up the phone to call the Meadowlands precinct to see if they had a ram officer to spare that evening, preferably one without horns. Nick, on the other hand, called the witness to set up a time that evening to see if they could reenact what they had seen. They were just finishing up when they heard a knock at their cubicle entrance. They turned to see Rivers and Longtooth standing there, the former with a grin on his face.

"So, you two managed a break in Wolford's case, huh? Let's see the bullet."

Judy jumped down from her chair and handed over the dual photo of the bullets recovered from Callahan and Wolford, before hopping back up to her desk.

After a few moments of examining the two, Longtooth snorted. "Figures. We spend month on this, an' it's the rookies that make a connection." There was no malice in her words, only a gentle teasing. The grin on the muzzle of the elk beside her grew into a full-on smile. "You didn't think that Bellwether just handed over a signed confession, do you?"

"Well actually, it was a recorded confession. On a carrot." The two detectives turned incredulous looks at the fox, who winked at the doe next to him. Nolwazi Longtooth was the first to speak.

"… How do ya record a confession on a carrot? Or do I wanna know?"

The sound of electronic gibberish filled the small space.

"How do ya record a confession on a carrot? Or do I wanna know?"

More electronic gibberish.

"How do ya record a confession on a carrot? Or do I wanna know?"

The two detectives looked at the bunny and the fox, confused.

"More specifically, it's Judy's carrot-shaped pen." Nick smirked as the doe next to him produced the orange plastic carrot-shaped device. "I swear, she never goes anywhere without it. When we went to Bunnyburrow she used it to get some speciesist coyote."
Longtooth reached over and took the pen in her paws. "Looks handy. Definitely good for recordin' things on the fly."

"You have no idea. If Nick hadn't kept that pen, we might not have been able to get Bellwether's confession. I order them online. Haven't seen them in any stores, not even in Woolmart, Targoat, or Clawsco."

Rivers turned his attention back to the two small officers. "I assume you two are going to continue filling in the blanks as to who held the gun and where the gun is now?"

"That's a lot of blanks, Antlers," Nick snarked. The elk rolled his eyes at the nickname.

"Well, we have a strong suspicion that Doug was the gunman for Callahan, sir. Take a look." Judy turned to her desk and clicked on the video file that had been compiled of the street cameras of Doug's chase of Callahan through the Canyonlands.

The four watched the video for a while, before Longtooth interrupted them. "Wait, hold on a sec. Back up a bit."

Judy backed up the footage a few seconds until the lioness stopped her. Doug was in the frame, running around a corner, black gun visible.

"Do you have any better footage that shows the gun?"

The doe thought for a moment, before Nick spoke up. "What about the security footage from the apartment?"

Judy perked up and pulled up the file, fast forwarding to the point at which Doug ran past a camera. She paused the frame.

"That's a Ramington RAM380 minipistol. With a silencer on it."

"Silencers are illegal in Zootopia," Judy remarked, making a note in her pad.

"That they are. Unless you risk the black market."

Nick sat back in thought.

"Well, we'll leave you two to find the connections here. Seems you don't need our help. We have to sit through another 'supervised' interview with a member of Furston's antidote test group." Rivers made the universal mocking quotes sign for emphasis.

Longtooth groaned. "I don't know how many more of those I can take. It's all the same. 'I volunteered.' 'They put me under the influence of the Night Howlers and they tested their antidote.' 'Yes, they paid me.' 'No, I wasn't coerced.' 'No, I haven't talked to anyone about it.' And the best one: 'I'm not sure I'm allowed to answer that.' Even with the Furston lawyer sitting next to them."

"They almost sound like robots," Nick chuckled, imagining various mammals sitting in the interrogation room, answering each question posed in monotone with a pre-programmed response. "Maybe you should ask them a paradoxical question first next time to make sure they aren't. You know, something like, 'if a liar tells you he's lying, is he telling the truth?' Movies out there have robots and AIs getting stuck on paradoxes."

All three of the other mammals snickered at that mental image.
"We'll keep that in mind, Wilde. And if the suspect starts smoking or bursts into flame, we'll know who to blame for the prisoner abuse." Rivers winked at the fox as the two larger mammals left.

Judy and Nick sat in silence for a few seconds before the doe smiled and nudged the fox. "You really can't stay serious, can you?"

"Only when I need to be, Carrots. Only when I need to be. What's next on the agenda?"

Judy flipped through her notes. "Well, some of the coroners are bound to have looked over the bodies by now, and there has to be some evidence that's been analyzed. How about you and I head back to lab services and see if they have anything else, and then head to the coroner's office?"

"Sounds like a plan, Carrots, although I'm not really looking forward to another coroner visit before lunch."

Yesterday's visit had been an appetite spoiler for both of them. Neither had been able to eat anything for the rest of the day, and the evening had been a low-key meal of some deli counter soup, and even then, they hadn't been able to finish it all. Fortunately, that morning, they'd managed a stop at a Tim Howlton's and picked up a breakfast sandwich for Nick and a bagel with cream cheese for Judy.

"Maybe we can get some lunch beforehand. We'll see how things go with lab services."

The fox nodded his agreement to the plan, and the two set off for the lab for the second time that day.

It turned out that they didn't have to look long for some results, either. Their first visit was to Kagioso Omiata, the precinct's day shift forensic toxicologist.

"Oh, yes! I was just about to call you, in fact. We had a chance to look at some of the samples sent to us by the coroners! I haven't been able to run a full analysis yet, but I checked for Night Howler residue on a hunch. EVERY sample, except one, came back positive so far! But I'm still running tests. I wish our machines worked as fast as the ones on TV shows."

"How many different mammals have you tested so far?" Judy was writing in her notebook again.

"So far, only ten. The one you asked Rocky Mamusson to prioritize yesterday and nine others. The priority one was the only one that came back negative. He didn't have a trace of Night Howler on him."

"None of that modified stuff either?" Nick's interest was piqued.

"Nope. Nothing. Either it was a very clean van at the time, or he was in a garbage bag or something. Nothing in his tissue either. Clean as a whistle."

Nick fell silent, thinking about the implications, so Judy picked up the questioning. "And the others?"

"They all had high concentrations of the Night Howlers in their livers, or at least the breakdown products. We're still trying to understand what happens to the compounds in the decomp process, but we were able to find the breakdown products. We were also able to pull traces of it from the lining of the lungs. I'd guess that was from a device like the one that was used to gas the Grand Palm. Some sort of aerosol device."

"So they were gassed with the Night Howlers, but were dumped after their livers had had the chance to start filtering the toxins from the blood and breaking it down."
"The thing is, it takes months to fully metabolize the toxin without the antidote, depending on the dose. I can't be sure how long ago they've been subjected to the toxin. Not with any amount of certainty."

Judy's shoulders slumped. "Carrot sticks. Is there any way for us to find out?"

The hyrax shook his head. "Not without a lot of testing. Furston might have done some research in that field when they were developing the antidote. Not to mention that all mammals metabolize things at different speeds."

Nick snickered. "I can say that. Look at Officer Fluff here. She's half my size and puts away food like you wouldn't believe."

The punch from the doe was slightly harder than normal.

"Anyway, the point is, all nine of the other bodies had high concentrations of Night Howler toxin in their livers. A lot of them also had it in their fur and remains of their clothes. The stuff is sticky, and it seems marine life doesn't like it."

Nick's eyebrows shot up at that. "Even if it was sticky, it's plant-based. Eventually, it's going to wash off. Could we use the concentrations on each body to establish any sort of order in which the bodies went in the water?"

Judy's eyebrows shot up at that, and she turned a questioning gaze at the lab mammal.

"We'd need some sort of baseline, but that's certainly possible." Omiata pulled out his smartphone and tapped out a note. "If we can figure out the concentrations remaining on the fur samples, we might be able to figure out how long each mammal was in the canal."

Both of the small officers nodded, before Nick's attention was drawn by the dinging of his own phone.

"Sounds like you two have your own schedule to keep. I have about a hundred more samples to test already, so I'd better get back to work!" The small lab mammal walked off, muttering about needing faster equipment like on TV shows, while Nick pulled out his cell phone.

"Huh. Message from Mom. She wants to meet us for dinner Friday night."

Marian Wilde hadn't been able to look deeper into her boss's dealings with the unknown charities since she'd found the suspicious destroy orders. It seemed that every time she wanted to, someone came by to chat, her boss had another task for her to do, or he wanted more coffee, or lunch, or something else. Honestly, the amount the zebra put away, she was shocked he wasn't a heart disease patient.

The vixen had been frustrated in every attempt on her own time to research the charities involved. They seemed to be legitimate charities, from the outside, anyways. She didn't have the access or resources to check them out from the inside. She didn't have any contacts in the government she could use to check the records, and she hadn't wanted to bother her son just yet on what could have ended up being a simple mistake on her boss's part.

However, when she asked a few of the other accountants about the charities in question, none of them had ever heard of the organizations.

*If Nick and Judy can maybe look into this on the side, maybe I can get some answers.* She was
booked solid through the week, and if she asked for a schedule change now, it might look suspicious
to her boss, especially if he WAS embezzling money.

With that in mind, she'd picked up her phone and sent her son a message to invite him, and hopefully
Judy as well, to dinner at her next available time, on Friday. In the meantime, she would continue to
try to gather what information she could without stepping on any toes.

Rivers and Longtooth stared at their notes. All of the mammals they'd interviewed that had been part
of the test groups for the Night Howler antidote had said pretty much the same thing. Early test
groups had to go through multiple iterations of the antidote before one was found that worked. These
ones were compensated the highest, as it meant more time away from friends, family, and jobs. Some
test groups had complained about headaches and sickness for weeks after receiving their dose,
despite full cognitive function. Others had to endure weeks of partial degradation of cognitive ability.

None of them had received any information other than the basics, along with a contract and waiver.
All came from lower and middle class lifestyles. All had mammals with whom they were in relatively
constant contact, and who would report them missing. None were homeless or destitute.

All had been tested on of their own free will – Furston had provided access to the video recordings –
and all had had their tests performed by the project lead at the time, Dr. Perry Devorak, the same
lynx they'd met earlier the week before.

"What are we missin'"?

"Well, the leak couldn't have been a test subject. They were never given any meaningful information
about the compound. We have copies of their contracts, and video recordings. And we are no closer
to finding out how the Night Howler could have been re-engineered so quickly."

"So, we are back to corporate espionage. Has Records brought in any of those cases from Furston?"

The elk shook his head. "Nothing. Either Furston didn't report them, or no file was opened."

The lioness cursed under her breath. The two sat in silence for a few moments before Longtooth
perked up. "What about the doctor? You said all of the tests were administered by him, and when we
met him at the research campus, he seemed nervous about somethin'."

The elk thought back. "Yeah, I remember that. Thing is, I doubt we'll be able to get him without also
getting one of his corporate lawyer stooges."

"What if we got 'im in here and implied we knew and gave 'im an opportunity to talk to us?"

Rivers shook his head. "Assuming he doesn't clam up, his lawyer will probably bottle him up. And
slap us with a privacy violation. We need to figure out a different approach. Maybe talk to some of
the other mammals there and see if we can get any ideas." He sighed, crumpling up a napkin and
tossing it in the general direction of the wastebasket. "At least Wilde and Hopps are having better
luck than we are."

"Well, they did crack a case in 48 hours that the entirety of the ZPD couldn't crack. And on nothing
but a 'last seen' photo, too."

Rivers scratched his chin. "So, what did they do differently?

"Well, for one, Wilde was just a civilian. He ended up bein' Hopps' first lead."
"She didn't have any police resources, if I recall. She had to think outside the box."

"Well, I ain't goin' to no Mystic Springs. If you're thinkin' we should go interview mammals there, you're doin' it alone." The lioness crossed her arms and glared at the elk.

Rivers let out a short laugh. "I'll keep that in mind, although I honestly don't feel comfortable there, either."

You couldn't have had two more shocked small police officers if you had tried.

"What do you mean, eaten?!" The voice of one fox and one rabbit were both abnormally high pitched.

Rocky Mamusson winced. "We found remains of some mammals in the stomachs of others. And those whose remains were found in the stomachs of the others…most of them were prey mammals. And all of those that did the… consuming… were predators."

Both Judy and Nick felt sick. Mammal consumption had been both a felony and a social taboo for millenia.

"Was it voluntary? Or was it forced?" The idea that any mammal would volunteer to participate in such deplorable acts was almost alien to the bunny. Nick was having trouble even formulating words.

"Well, there wasn't any sign of restraint on the prey mammals. What was left of them, anyways. It's entirely possible that that evidence got… destroyed." Mamusson looked as green as the fox and the rabbit. "The predators did show signs of restraint. Very few, however, were… consumed. A few were, mostly small canines. They were among the… freshest. I'd estimate no more than a week or two old." The raccoon shook his head. "A few of the bodies were so old and badly decomposed that we can only guess on cause of death."

Taking a deep breath and letting it partway out, Mamusson continued. "Of the ones we've managed to process, preliminary findings are sharp force trauma or exsanguination, wounds consistent with those caused by teeth of various predators for the prey mammals. The predators, most were drowning or a bullet to the head. The thing is, we've only managed to process half of the bodies."

Though impressive for twenty-four hours of work, Mamusson and his staff, along with the other coroners around the city, were not miracle workers.

For Judy and Nick, though, they had to somehow tie all this… barbarism and atrocity together. They knew that everything was all connected, but they also knew they were missing several crucial puzzle pieces. "Any idea on what might be the motivation?"

Rocky Mamusson shook his head. "Haven't the foggiest. You probably heard from your lab about the trace evidence we pulled, and we sent DNA samples and dental impressions to your lab. Maybe you can get a match there."

"It'd be nice to get a little bit more than more dead-end leads." Judy looked at her fox, who looked pale, despite his russet and brown fur. "You OK, Nick?"

The fox in question shook his head, and put his mask on. "Just fine, Carrots." He gave her a lopsided grin.

Despite his reassurances, Judy knew that something more was bothering her fox, and given the
gruesomeness of their discovery, she had a feeling she knew what it was. She also knew there was no way he would say anything about it with the doctor present. "What else do we know?"

The coroner shrugged. "I don't know if this is indicative of the life style, but most of the mammal's clothes, what was left of them anyways, were... well-worn. I have no way to be certain, not without seeing trace results from your labs, but they looked like they hadn't seen a real wash in... ever."

Nick frowned. "That fits with our theory that the test subjects might have been mammals whose social circles don't encourage reporting missing mammals. Homeless, that sort of thing."

The coroner's eyebrows went up. "That would complicate things. If they were, there isn't likely to be a DNA profile on record unless they were picked up for something, or they had their DNA profile registered as a kit."

"I'd like to hope that at least some will get a match," Judy said, deep in thought.

"Well, that'll be up to your labs, not me. I just determine cause of death. Will that be everything, officers?" The raccoon coroner needed to start tackling the proverbial mountain of bodies he still had to examine.

"I think so, doctor. Call us as soon as you learn anything more." Judy put her notepad and pen away and gave a wave.

"Have a good day, you two." The raccoon disappeared out of the office, and headed down the hall to the examination rooms.

Now finally able to talk in private, Judy turned to her partner. "You OK, Nick?"

The fox turned his smirk on the doe. After a few seconds of looking into her concerned eyes, though, he crumbled and the mask fell. Judy reached out and squeezed his arm.

"The whole idea of this makes me sick, Carrots. I don't even want to know why someone would do this. Even Mr. Big doesn't have his goons eat mammals. The idea that someone out there is forcing mammals to do this..." He trailed off, sighing. "Promise me if I'm ever affected by this stuff again, you'll protect yourself. From me."

Anger flashed across the doe's face. "You stop that, RIGHT NOW, Nick! We both know what will happen if you get hit. You'll still be the sweetest fox in the world." Her face softened. "I might have to train you not to lick me in public though," she added with a wink and a smirk.

Nick blinked, eyes wide, before bursting into laughter at the rabbit's statement. "Oh, I'll be the best savage fox you've ever trained, Carrots! Won't be long before you have me saying things like, 'Polly wanna cracker!'"

Judy tapped her lips with one paw as she pulled open the door of the office with the other. "Hmmm, no, Slick, I think I'll have you saying things like 'You're the best mammal in the world' and 'I love you, Carrots."

Nick's face went from jovial to serious in a heartbeat. "I don't need to be trained to say things like that, Judy."

The doe gave the fox a huge smile as the two walked out of the morgue and headed back for their cruiser.
So! The masks are going to come up again, I think. After all, Nick still has a fear of them that he needs to deal with. I wonder how our duo will conquer that? And I wonder what sort of tricks Judy will train Nick to do?

Thank you to everyone that has left me positive encouragement as I continue to deal with this depression. It helps immensely!

Can anyone find any references in this chapter?

Coming up on March 22: Filling Things In!

Questions? Critiques? Loki trick you into letting the Hulk loose in Downtown Seattle? Leave a comment!
Filling Things In

Chapter Summary

Pissed-off detectives have finally had enough, the baddies meet in the evil secret lair of doom, and our duo visit a prison

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: I traveled back in time to talk to King Arthur, who insisted that people call him Wart, to get the rights to Zootopia in perpetuity. Unfortunately, Mad Madam Mim and Merlin were still duking it out, and a stray spell sent me back to the present time before Arthur could help me. So not only do I still not own Zootopia, but my skin is now green with orange polka dots.

Special thanks to TheoreticallyEva for editing this chapter!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rocky Mamusson was exhausted. His morgue had gotten 30 of the 46 mammals pulled from the Susani Canal, and he'd spent the last three days working 12 hour shifts to try and get the deluge under control, and they'd only managed 24 of them so far.

The results, though, from the bodies they'd been able to examine, had shown a surprising amount of consistency. For prey, death caused by exsanguination and heart failure due to massive soft tissue injury.

When he'd rattled that off to the two small ZPD officers, they'd both looked at each other for a moment with blank expressions, before turning back to him and saying in unison, "English, please?"

Of course, it meant 'death by being eaten.'

For predators, the cause of death was usually a fatal gunshot wound to the head, though some of the more recent bodies had been the same as the prey.

The oldest bodies they'd found were still up in the air. Some were far too decomposed to get an accurate cause of death, such as the remains of a squirrel that, from what they could determine based on the state of the body, was one of the first that had been dumped there.

The coroner shook his head. The idea that someone out there could sink to this level sickened him, and he'd become withdrawn at home, when he was there. His wife had noticed and commented on it, and he'd felt bad that he'd had to essentially lie to her and tell her he'd be OK. He couldn't tell her the details, but he knew she understood. She was a doctor at the Zootopia General Hospital's emergency room, after all.

Rubbing away another oncoming headache, the raccoon reached for his desk's supply of aspirin. One tablet and a gulp of water later, and he would be ready to go back to work in half an hour. In the
meantime, he pulled out his lunch and started on that.

The job wasn't for the faint of heart or stomach, and you still had to eat at some point. Not eating means you could make a mistake, and if you make a mistake, crucial evidence may be lost. The same was true with sleep. Having only two hours before and after his shift meant he had seen little of his family in the last three days.

One thing that hadn't been missed was the sheer amount of trace evidence they'd been able to pull from the bodies. Much of it was the same organic Night Howler compound they'd found elsewhere, though some of it couldn't be so easily explained.

The raccoon ate his chicken sandwich somewhat absentmindedly, staring off into space. He'd hoped that the Night Howler craze would have run its course after Bellwether had been arrested, but it seemed to be back and more rampant than before.

*This is why I got out of the trauma unit,* the mask-furred mammal grumbled. In a previous career, he'd been a trauma surgeon at the same hospital where his wife worked, which was how he'd met her, but had decided that the stress of the job wasn't worth it, and had moved to the coroner's office. After all, if someone was already dead, you didn't have to rush to save their life, but you could find out why they died, and maybe bring some closure to the mammal's family.

Finishing up his meal, the raccoon put his lunch kit away, washed his paws, and headed back to the autopsy room. He had work to do.

Rivers and Longtooth stared at the mammal across from them. Of course, the Furston researcher was accompanied by the accursed Furston lawyer, who was giving the two the run-around. Again.

"Dr. Perry Devorak, I'm sure that you are aware that lying to the police is an arrestable offence, correct?" Rivers eyed the lynx in the white shirt and dress pants.

"Yes, we are aware," the lawyer answered for the two.

The elk turned his attention to the lawyer. "And I'm sure you are also aware that corporate bullying in this case could also be intimidating a witness, which is also an arrestable offence, Mr. Ramshorn. So, I'd suggest you answer our questions to the best of your ability."

"Furston has a right to protect its assets, Detective." The lawyer directed a dangerous look towards the two detectives.

"But not if it impedes a police investigation, sir."

The lawyer crossed his arms but stayed silent.

"Now, then. We'll start with the easy questions. You've mentioned that your company has been a victim of corporate espionage. However, no cases have been reported to the police. What was stolen and when?"

The lawyer scoffed. "I highly doubt that anything that may or may not have been stolen would have any bearing on your investigation, detectives."

Longtooth glowered, standing off to the sidelines. "You might be better off lettin' us decide what has any bearing on our investigation, sir."

Rivers nodded in agreement. "You are already on shaky ground, and you did waive your right to
have a non-affiliated attorney present. So, what was stolen?"

The bighorn sheep sighed and turned to the lynx doctor, giving the mammal a small nod.

The lynx's eyes flicked between the two much larger detectives. "Just some preliminary formulas, results, and a couple of the base components."

Rivers jotted the information down. "What base components? And what were the preliminary formulas?"

"The preliminary formulas were a few attempts at combining a few commercially available drugs into an antidote. None of them worked, or even offered any useful results. As for the base components, that's just what your own lab discovered, nothing more."

Rivers jotted down the information on his notepad. "What about internal leaks? Any chance the formulas, research data, results, or any other useful information could have gotten out from an internal source?"

The lynx flinched while the lawyer scoffed. "All of our project leaders are vetted and thoroughly background checked before we hire them. All have signed confidentiality agreements that levy heavy fines for selling corporate secrets. And since the only project leader you've brought in is Perry here, it sounds to me that you are accusing him of having some sort of hand in your case. Where's your evidence?"

Rivers turned a scathing glare at the bighorn sheep lawyer. "I haven't accused him of anything. Nor do I plan to until we can get to the bottom of this. As for evidence, I'm not allowed to divulge that. You should know the rules. Evidence is never disseminated in the middle of an active case."

The lawyer sneered. "So, what, are you hoping to intimidate my client into confessing to something he didn't do?"

The lynx scientist blinked, looked panicked for a moment, but stayed quiet. Bingo, the elk detective thought as he sat back in his chair. Longtooth suppressed a grin.

Turning to the lawyer, Rivers regarded him a moment. "In case you didn't notice, sir, we have had a terrorist attack on the Grand Palm, involving a variant of Night Howlers that's been specifically refined to target only predators. The elk deliberately obfuscated the fact that the formula was, in fact, engineered. "And since your company is the only one that has done any announced research into the Night Howlers, that does put your company under a spotlight. And since Mr. Devorak here was—"

"Doctor," the bighorn lawyer interrupted.

"Excuse me?" Longtooth stepped forward, arms crossed.

"It's Doctor Devorak." The ugly look on the lawyer's face as he emphasized the correction made Rivers want to wipe it off his muzzle, but the detective reined himself in.

"Fine, then. Since Doctor Devorak was the team lead, it's logical that we'd want to talk to him, as well as your test groups."

"Fine. Ask your questions." The bighorn sheep crossed his arms and continued to glare.

"Now, then. Dr. Devorak, are you aware of any corporate espionage cases that may have gone beyond what we discussed earlier?"
The lynx doctor paused for a moment. "Not that I can think of."

"How about any other leaks? Any other ways the research could have gotten out?"

The lynx fiddled with his thumbs.

"Doctor?" Rivers cocked his head and stared at the small cat.

"Well, there was—"

The lawyer reached over and laid a hoof on the lynx' shoulder. "Be careful what you say. You don't want this to cost you your job, do you?"

Longtooth's response was immediate. "All right, sir, that's it. I'm placin' you under arrest for intimidation of a material witness, pissin' me off, and anythin' else I can find to throw at you. Get up, turn around, and put your hooves behind your back."

The lawyer just sat and stared at the lioness.

"You deaf? I gave you a lawful order." The lioness advanced on the bighorn sheep, and Rivers moved to assist his partner.

"You stay put," the elk detective said, indicating the lynx that was now watching the drama unfold. "We'll get you a city attorney to represent you. Not another corporate lawyer."

"I… Thanks. I guess."

Longtooth, having wrestled a pair of cuffs on to the bighorn, marched the shouting lawyer out of the room and into the holding cells down the hall. The elk followed, promising to return in a bit. The door closed behind him, leaving the lynx alone in his thoughts.

Ever since he'd first met them and they'd mentioned corporate espionage, the lynx had had a flash of memory. It wasn't much, just a beer stein and a couple of oddly-worded phrases, maybe a question, all related to his work. But every time he'd wanted to say something, that bighorn lawyer had been there to remind him that his job was on the line.

Maybe now, he'd actually be able to tell them. Maybe it would mean something to them.

"The police are looking at Furston for the Grand Palm attack." Damian Hornby stood in front of the council of the elders.

"Do they suspect your involvement?" the pig elder inquired.

"No. They've been focusing on the antidote team and all of the test filth. They haven't questioned me. Or any of my people."

The three elders sat quiet for a moment before the deer, Dade Walker, spoke. "Do you know what it is they are looking for?"

The Texas longhorn shook his head. "Not totally. Office gossip tells me they are looking into the cases of external corporate espionage, as well as the test subject mammals, to see if there were any leaks that way."

The beaver elder leaned forward. "And what have they found?"
Hornby gave a shrug of his shoulders. "Nothing, as far as I can tell. I certainly didn't leave any tracks. Devorak shouldn't remember anything. The drug I put in his drink the night I got his access credentials should wipe that."

"Is this something we need to be concerned about?" The deer pressed the issue.

The longhorn shook his head. "No, I don't think so. I'm not related to the Night Howler antidote project. They have no reason to suspect me."

"Perhaps Devorak will need to be dealt with, though," the pig elder said, looking pointedly at his fellow mammals.

The deer disagreed. "That would just cause more suspicion. We have four deaths already tied to the ZPD's activities, and they just found the Susani canal dump site the other night. If Devorak turns up missing or dead, they might look further into Furston."

The murmured agreement from the other two mammals finalized that conversation.

"What else do we have?" The beaver elder looked at his colleagues for the next topic of discussion.

"Well, my brother was picked up by the filth and vermin cop duo when he was caught demonstrating outside the precinct one building. Officially, he was charged with disorderly conduct interfering with a police officer. He's the first of our 'crowd workers' that has gotten picked up."

"Does he know anything?"

The pig shook his head. "No. I kept him out of the loop." Internally, the pig was hoping that by keeping his brother out of the loop, he'd be protected from any legal repercussions that would result from this cleansing. He'd get the lighter things and stay as far away from trouble as possible.

"Glad to hear it. I'd hate to have to silence him." The deer elder turned to the Texas longhorn. "Where are we on synthesizing the next public test?"

Damian Hornby shifted. "We'll have enough product synthesized by the end of next week. It's just a matter of picking targets and getting set up."

Walker nodded. "You needn't worry about the target. The boss has that all picked out. It'll be a little more expansive than the Grand Palm attack."

Hornby gave a nod and a slight grin. "That explains why you need so much. What's the target?"

Walker returned the grin. "All in good time. Now! Finances!"

The beaver elder pulled out a file of his own. "The extra millions from our false charities from our benefactor were received and processed. Most of it went towards investing in more equipment and supplies. The rest went towards paying various assets. We're good on that front."

Walker nodded. "Good to hear. And the propaganda?"

This time it was the pig elder. "Demonstrations are getting more frequent. There's a definite divide between predators and prey, and a few have turned violent. The PD is stretched thin dealing with the problem and can't do much more than give mammals a slap on the wrist."

Walker nodded and closed his folder. "I think we should incite a few extra riots the day of our second public test."
"Agreed." The pig also closed his folder. "In addition, Mayor Clawheed's bill to make it illegal to bar service to predators failed to pass, seven against and six in favour. We had enough support, but only just. Our mammal on the council is currently drafting a safety act that will hopefully limit movement of predators in prey-populated areas. So far, public opinion seems to favor the idea."

Leaning forward, the pig put his hooves on the table. "There's also a noticeable increase in mammals that favour even closer relations between prey and filth. They seem to be using that police couple and infernal singer as figureheads."

Walker and Hornby groaned. The singer had been a thorn in their side since the days of Bellwether, and recently had become an outspoken proponent of peaceful relations between mammals and filth and had taken the opportunity to preach that support at virtually every date on her international tour. She'd even hinted that she wanted to cancel her remaining tour dates and return home to help, but she had only announced this morning that the rest had been cancelled or postponed, and she was heading home.

"Maybe the singer needs to have an accident. An appropriate incident that will prevent her from accomplishing her intended mission of spreading filth and lies." The beaver seemed gung-ho on that idea.

"How would we manage that? Neither of the assets that we had are available. Doug's at the safehouse, and Janus is taking a big dirt nap."

The deer elder nodded. His ill-conceived plan to deal with the loose ends in police custody had them all walking on eggshells. Fortunately, he'd gotten himself killed, so they wouldn't have that loose end to deal with as well.

The pig, though, had other ideas. "I think we should avoid doing anything of that nature right now. She's almost constantly around her dancers, and she's a very public figure. Any attempt on her life without Doug would likely go badly. Perhaps, though, she can be a casualty of our second test, if we plan and organize it correctly."

"Agreed."

"I concur." The deer and the beaver's responses were simultaneous. Dade Walker pulled together his papers. "That concludes our meeting, though. For purity."

"Purity we shall have," was the response from the other three mammals in the room.

"So, what do we know for certain, Carrots?"

The two were in their cruiser, heading for Zootopia's minimum security prison for medium sized mammals. Over the last couple days, they'd been making phone calls, and collecting the evidence notes from the lab teams for Taylor Blackford's death.

"Well, we know that four days ago, around 9:00 in the evening, Taylor Blackford died of cyanide poisoning. The poison was likely on some sort of time delay somehow, so it was likely slipped into his meal at dinnertime, or his evening medications, if any. The prison itself has been in lockdown since, with only guards allowed to roam about."

Nick made a face. "I honestly hope we don't have to interview any inmates, then. Four days without musk mask and a shower. Ugh. Let's see. The responding officers were... Hello... Meagan Moon and Arnie Pawson."
Judy perked up a bit. "Isn't that your friend from the academy?"

The fox in the passenger seat nodded. "Yeah. That crude, loudmouth cheetah. I kind of feel sorry for this Meagan Moon, if she's been assigned as his partner. Thought himself a female's male, if you know what I mean. Was always hitting on the females in the class, even though he had a girlfriend, or at least he said he did. I don't think they were really getting along. Anyway, it usually ended with him getting socked, or a plate of food thrown in his face, or something. One of the females accepted his… invitation, only to trick him into falling into the swimming pool fully clothed." Nick grinned. "I heard the only reason he didn't hit on the major was the promise of certain death."

Judy burst out laughing. "I can see it now! 'Inappropriate conduct! You're dead, Streak!'"

Nick snorted and then let loose with gales of laughter. The mental image was too much, and both mammals were thankful that they were stopped at a red light, so they didn't have to worry about an accident. They managed to calm themselves down just in time for the light to turn green, and they resumed their journey.

Pausing to let a mongoose parallel park in front of them, Judy turned to the fox in the passenger seat. "I assume your pal is going to meet us at the prison?"

Nick nodded as the doe maneuvered around the other vehicle once she had a clear lane to do so. "I called him this morning, as soon as I saw the report. He and his partner are going to be there."

"You don't seem to talk to him much," the doe observed as she made yet another turn in the endless maze of the city.

"I send him a text message now and again. He's not real thrilled with being assigned to the Rainforest District. Too wet for him, he says. He prefers Savannah Central."

Judy chuckled. "Well, we can't all be assigned to precinct one. He might have gotten into Precinct two if he was lucky, but you gotta go where you are assigned, or requested, in your case." Most of the city districts had two or three precincts. The only exceptions were the Nocturnal District and Outback island, both of which only had one, and Sahara Square, which had four, though one was specifically dedicated to the airport. That one had earned the nickname the "bad guy hotel," since wanted criminals and prison escapees would often try to book a flight out of the city, only to get caught in the terminal and taken into custody.

The minimum-security prison was at the end of a long winding road northeast of the Meadowlands, and it was on to this road that Judy turned. Nick sat in the passenger seat, gazing out at the grasslands on the outskirts of the city, silent for a few minutes.

The doe glanced over at the fox beside her. "Something on your mind, Slick?"

"Just something bothering me. With Blackford in the prison at the time of his death, that doesn't leave a lot of possibilities. Either a visitor got something past screening, an inmate gave it to him, or a guard did. And if it's the guard…" Nick trailed off.

Judy didn't need to hear what the rest of his thought was. Years ago, he'd taken an oath to be brave, loyal, helpful, and trustworthy. Unfortunately, the world had decided to kick him in the pants, and he'd largely given up on that ideal until he met her. But he was still a kind mammal at heart, and had jumped at the chance to finally fulfill his oath and pledge a similar one when he received his badge. The idea that a mammal would willingly betray the oath was hitting a little too close to home.

"You gonna be OK? It's probably nothing like that," Judy commented as the prison's security gate.
came into view.

The fox beside her nodded and straightened just as they pulled up to the gate and the guard house.

"Names, IDs, and reason for your visit," the ibex guard requested in a monotone that told the two officers he'd said the same thing a thousand times before.

"Officers Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde. We're here to see about an inmate murder that happened last week." Judy pulled out her badge as she spoke, with Nick following suit.

The ibex glanced at their badges and typed something up on his computer. A few seconds later, the computer came back with what Judy assumed was their ZPD file, since neither she nor Nick could actually see the screen, and the guard pulled out a clipboard, noted the names and time in, as well as their cruiser number and license plate, before handing the clipboard to the doe. "Sign here, please, both of you."

A few seconds later, and the visitor's log had two new signatures on it. The guard handed them two visitor ID tags, which the two officers clipped to their uniforms, and opened the gate and waved them through. Judy maneuvered the vehicle to the spots reserved for ZPD officers and climbed out, Nick following suit soon after.

"You know, Carrots, I may have only toed the line in my old life, but there are plenty of judges and prosecutors that would have made sure my first visit to this place was as an inmate," he said with a sigh.

Judy stayed silent, knowing that those types of mammals still existed today, mammals who would throw Nick under the bus just because he was a fox. She'd been a little worried that he wouldn't be accepted among the rest of the ZPD officers for that reason, but it had turned out to be the opposite, for the most part. Nick had an easier time with acceptance than she did and generally got along with their colleagues. The only exception, of course, was the chief. Their little ongoing tit for tat was already legendary in the department.

The two officers walked through the automatic outer door to the administration offices before being buzzed through the inner door. They were met on the other side by the prison's warden, a tall, lanky zebra with a close-cut mane dressed in a nice suit.

"Good afternoon, officers. I'm Warden Herdson. I understand you are here about the unfortunate passing of one of our guests?"

Nick had to hold in the snort. Guests was not the word he would use to describe the mammals here. Guests got plush beds, lots of hot water, privacy, Wifi access, and a nice flat screen TV. Here, cells made Judy's old shoebox look big, and only had the minimum of conveniences. The medium- and maximum-security prisons were even worse. He'd seen enough of the maxsec when they'd visited Bellwether two weeks ago. The idea of living there was appalling at best.

The fox shook those thoughts out of his head as the warden lead them into his office, a lavishly decorated room that seemed at odds with the dreariness of the rest of the facility.

"We're already rounding up the guards that were on duty at the time of the incident, and I am certain you'll want to see the security footage as well." At the two officers' nods, he turned and typed out a quick message on his computer.

Judy was, of course, scribbling in her notepad. Nick made a point to see if he could source a tablet for her for Christmas or something. Something a bit more modern than the old pen and paper. The
department had an app for note-taking that was supposed to be more secure than pen and paper, and better than using a phone, but the department didn't supply tablets as standard equipment.

The doe paused in her writing. "What other kinds of evidence can you provide us? Anything that might tell us what Mr. Blackford did all day, who he spoke to, if he had any visitors? Something that might give us a starting point?"

The warden grinned. "You're lucky, officer. Our prison tracking system was recently upgraded and tied in with our door security system and video camera system. We can use it to track and watch the movements of any inmate, literally anywhere in the complex, as well as any staff member that passes through any secured door or gate. We can't track them to the same extent as the inmates, but it's still pretty thorough."

Nick rolled his eyes. "That'll be a refreshing change… Not having to sift through days' worth of footage to catch a glimpse of our mammal."

At the zebra's confused look, Judy elaborated. "Some other aspects of our cases… haven't been as straightforward. Lots of time going nowhere fast."

The understanding on the zebra's face was immediate. "I worked in law enforcement for ten years before moving to prison administration. Back when I was part of the ZPD, we didn't have a lot of the high-tech tools you guys do. We were lucky if a store had security cameras. New tech has made it both easier and, at the same time, more difficult."

The doe latched onto that. "You were in the ZPD? What precinct?"

The warden nodded. "I was in Sahara Square, back when there were only two stations in the district. I was at the one on the strip. Quit to work in the corrections department after some budget cuts by the city council. The same budget cuts that gave Big the window to grow his empire, if I recall. Your chief was also there, just starting out as a fresh, green rookie."

Nick's eyes lit up. "You knew the chief?"

"Only in passing. We were at the same precinct, but we weren't partners or anything. We usually worked the same shifts, but I was a detective and he was a patrolmammal. The few times I met him, he seemed a bit stoic, but otherwise handled himself well."

The fox's expression fell upon realizing that the warden probably didn't have any useful ammunition to use against the chief in their verbal sparring matches.

"I know what you're thinking, Nick," Judy said to his left, a smirk on her face.

Nick huffed and put on an indignant expression. "Why, Officer Hopps, I have no idea what you are talking about! I couldn't possibly use anything against our esteemed chief!" The doe's snort and paw covering her muzzle got a grin from the fox.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Officer Wilde," The warden remarked. "I hear he's become a bit of a hard-driving chief, though. At least he's not as bad as Chief Alan Hendricksen when I first started. He wouldn't promote any prey beyond the rank of detective or sergeant. Partly why I left."

The two ZPD officers couldn't help but look at each other, both thinking back to their first impressions of Bogo. He had taken a hard line against Judy, trying to do what he could to push her out of the force, until she'd surprised everyone by solving fourteen dead-end cases in one fell swoop.

The chief had admitted to Judy later that, in addition to him not thinking she'd be physically up to the
task, it was also a kneejerk reaction to the political machinations of former mayor Lionheart. The doe had forgiven the chief long before, and, with the exception of the constant thorn in Bogo's side that was the her partner, the two got along well.

"If you two follow me, I'll take you to the security center. We can take a look and see what our mammal was up to leading up to his death." The warden stood, brushing off his suit, and led them out the door.

The maze of corridors and security checkpoints seemed a little excessive for a minimum-security prison, but the warden assured them it was all necessary to keep the administration offices and secure areas safe in the event of a riot. The security center itself was a massive wall of computer screens. Several showed the individual floors of the complex, with red dots representing each inmate, a security door log, and a vast selection of CCTV monitors, each camera a high-definition device that left no portion of the prison, save for individual cells and the public and administrative bathrooms. Even the warden's office.

"Mr. Lightmane, can we see the footage for prisoner number 357841 from Friday last week?"

The lion security guard at the control board nodded. "Sure thing, boss. Been itching to see how the prisoner follow function works on this new setup!"

"Prisoner follow function?" Judy's interest was piqued.

"The computer tracks the prisoner's location and automatically switches the camera view to the one where the prisoner should be."

Nick's eyebrows went up. "Handy."

The guard punched a few commands into the console, and two of the larger monitors went blank, before being replaced by a camera view of a cell block, and a map of one prison floor with a single red dot. The lion fast forwarded the footage, and at 6:00 AM, they saw the wood bison emerge from his cell.

"Wake-up is at 5:30, and mammals must be showered and have eaten breakfast by 6:30. 7:00, they head to job duties. All prisoners work either within the prison kitchen, laundry, or janitorial duty, or are farmed out to do work in the community. Fixing roads, infrastructure, that kind of thing. Job duties last until 5:00 PM, with a half hour lunch break. One hour for off-duty time, one hour for dinner, and then inmates get an hour for specialized programs – religious services, anger management classes, drug addiction classes, education. Between 8:00 and 10:00, they are free to do what they want in their dorms. After that, it's lights out."

Both officers processed that information as the footage began playing back at high speed. The two watched as Blackford ate a light breakfast, then joined the janitorial crew, and spent the day cleaning the prison common area, before spending an hour outside, seemingly gazing at the world beyond the fence.

Judy pointed to the melancholic wood bison on the screen. "Do inmates do that often?"

"Some of the new ones do, especially those who believe they aren't guilty of a crime committed," the warden said. "It's not that unusual."

Blackford sat there for an hour until suppertime, and the mammals followed him into the cafeteria, where he lined up to get his food tray, then moved down the buffet line. Most of the fare was the same as all the other inmates, with one exception.
"What is that?" Nick asked, pointing to a small object that was being handed to Blackford.

The warden frowned and looked closer at the screen. After a while, he stepped back. "It's not unusual for inmates to have prescription medications. But they are NEVER handed out in the cafeteria."

Chapter End Notes

Whoohoo! another visit to a jail and a look at the bad guy's evil plotting! What other dastardly deeds are the nefarious nemesis's of Nick and Judy planning?

Everyone out there who continues to read and review this, you have my sincerest gratitude! I can't believe how long this has become so far! In response to one readers' question (he used an anonymous comment on FFN, so I couldn't reply), we're looking at between 45 and 50 chapters, tops.

A couple people caught my Portal reference in the last chapter! Can you find the reference to another Zootopia WildeHopps work in this chapter?

Coming up on April 5: Money Talks!

Questions? Critiques? Did Maleficent turn into a dragon and burn your prize pumpkin with her fire breath? Leave a comment!
'Money Talks'

Chapter Summary

Prison, lawyers, drugs, and welfare checks

Chapter Notes

**DISCLAIMER:**

Be... our... bun! Be our bun!
Take the fox and have some fun!
Sign this bid with this here pen, cherie,
And out the door we'll run!

Mammal cops, a secret lair-
Why, we'll only live in there!
And the gray one-she's fantastic!
Don't believe me? Just ask Nick!

They don't sing, they don't dance,
Still, it's Disney-give it a chance,
For the movies here are second to none!
Go on and sign right here-
Ow! Don't burn me, Lumiere!
Off I run, but that bun- Be our buuuuuun!

Ow! Seriously, stop burning me Lumiere! Wait! Crap, now the bid's on fire! Ow Ow!
No! My bid to own Zootopia!

Special thanks to TheoreticallyEva for helping me with this chapter and for her little ditty in the disclaimer!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"It's not unusual for inmates to have prescription medications. But they are NEVER handed out in the cafeteria."

The warden's words set alarm bells ringing in the heads of the two ZPD officers. Somehow, someone had gotten something into the prison, and had given it to their suspect. Furthermore, based on the relative lack of hesitation the wood bison had in ingesting the medications, it was clear he was none the wiser that this was a serious breach in protocol. Judy turned to the warden.

"What is the standard method for getting prescription medications to inmates?"
The warden looked down at the small officer. "Prescriptions are issued by the prison doctor, and are delivered directly to the inmate's cell by prison staff, if the inmate isn't given the prescription directly."

The doe's pen flew across her notepad. "Would Blackford have known this?"

A shake of the zebra's head gave the two ZPD officers their answer, but the warden elaborated on it as well. "Prisoners are given an orientation upon integration, and we do cover some basic items. Prescription meds are not emphasized, though the inmates are told that all prescriptions are handled by the prison doctor."

Nick frowned at this, his hustler's mind looking for and finding the loopholes in that setup. "Is this something that's decided on by the prison itself, or is there a standardized curriculum?"

The warden thought for a moment. "There is a standard curriculum, but every prison is unique, so the orientations are all different."

With a sigh, the fox shook his head. "So, Blackford would have had no idea that his prescription medications shouldn't be given to him at the cafeteria buffet line."

The zebra's eyes widened at the implication, but he nodded silently.

Judy had also picked up on the shortcoming. "Sounds like some changes need to be made." She felt a little bad that this would have to go in her report, and thus damage or destroy another mammal's reputation, but she didn't have a choice, especially if it ended up being a loophole that led to the death of an inmate.

The rest of Blackford's day seemed average, with nothing unusual standing out. Free time came and went, cell time came and went, lights out came and went. Nothing happened.

Judy tapped her pen on her notepad. "Let's go back to dinner. Can we see the mammal that gave him that little extra something with his meal?"

The guard that had been sitting silently all this time nodded and reversed the footage to the appropriate time. He then switched the perspective slightly to the camera mounted behind the buffet area. The serving mammal was an overweight wildebeest inmate with the number 249733 printed on his shirt.

Judy pointed to the monitor. "Who is 249733?"

The guard turned to a different computer console and typed in the number. A few seconds later, it came up with the inmate's profile, including his arrest mugshot and his prison photo, driver's license, rap sheet, family information, personal history, and other personal statistics.

"Jason Pelter, age 34, male wildebeest, rap sheet for theft, fencing stolen goods, and failing to pay traffic fines."

Nick let out a loud snort. "Failing to pay traffic fines? On a rap sheet with theft and fencing? Why not put jaywalking on there too?"

His partner shook her head, grinning. "It does seem to be a bit out of place. Did Pelter have any visitors that day?"

The guard turned back to the console and clicked open another window. "One visitor. Brown reindeer. Went by the name of 'Theoren McDonald'."
That got the two officers’ attention.

"Did you say ‘reindeer’?"

The guard nodded and pulled up the visitor entrance security cameras, skipping to the correct time, and pausing when the ungulate in question came onto the screen.

The four mammals stared for a while at the reindeer, with two of them pulling up a different photo on their phones.

"It seriously looks like him, Carrots. Look at this." Nick pointed to something on his phone. "See how the main part of his left antler curves like this? Sort of around and then across?" He traced the photo on his phone. "And see here, it does the same thing on this mammal's. In fact, besides a few added bits and pieces here and there, the basic structure of both antlers is the same."

Judy nodded and pointed at something else. "Look at his muzzle structure. It's obvious he bleached and died his fur and put on some prosthetics and a fat suit, but the muzzle length, eyes, and nostrils all look the same." She turned to the two prison staff members. "You took a hoofprint and got his photo ID, right?"

The guard nodded. "Right here"

Another window popped up, this one of the mammal's driver's license and a hoofprint. The two police officers didn't have access to the hoof and pawprints database on their phones, but they could send the information to the lab at the precinct to have it checked out.

The driver's license photo, however, was a lot clearer than the security camera footage. Nick let out a whistle. "Yep. Ninety-nine percent sure. And if my memory is correct... Let's see if our friendly neighborhood coroner sent over an ID photo of the reindeer..." He flipped through the app on his phone, pulling up another photo, just as Judy did the same. "Yep. Rocket Raccoon sent us an ID photo. And look at this. He was nice enough to get rid of all the prosthetics and stuff."

"It's him." Judy was elated. They'd managed to link the reindeer to Blackford's murder. "Let's see what he did inside."

The footage advanced again, and the four mammals sat quietly, observing the actions of the reindeer. He checked into security, was patted down, had a flashlight shined into his mouth and both nostrils, and had his pockets turned out, which forced him to surrender his phone, car keys and wallet.

Judy sent a questioning look to the guard. "Nothing out of the ordinary, I take it?"

The guard clicked through his screen. "Screening staff didn't find anything unusual. I can bring them in, if you like." At the two police officer's nods, the mammal picked up the phone and made the call.

Sitting next to his new attorney, Perry Devorak sighed. Part of him was happy that that cursed ram was no longer a factor. The other part was worried that he wouldn't be able to help. Lost in his thoughts, the lynx barely noticed when the two detectives returned.

He'd been given time to bring the new lawyer up to speed, and had been assured that, as long as he stuck to what he knew, he had nothing to worry about, except perhaps his job. There was always that gnawing suspicion in the back of your head, though, that you would be signing your own arrest warrant.

"Now then, Mr. Devorak. Now that the nuisance has been removed, I get the feeling there was
something you wanted to tell us?" The elk detective's eyes bored into his.

Devorak shifted for a moment, collecting his thoughts.

"A few months ago, I was feeling a bit down on the job. Went on for a couple weeks before we finally made a breakthrough in the formula."

Rivers cocked his head. "Breakthrough?"

The doctor made a sound of confirmation. "The first successful test where a mammal that was under the influence of a Night Howler was brought back." He took a breath and let it out.

Longtooth stepped forward. "Do you remember the date for that?"

The smaller cat shook his head. "I'd have to get back to you on that. Anyway, most of us went out to a bar to celebrate. You know, a little bit of alcohol, some dancing, bad karaoke… I started feeling fuzzy partway through. Someone took me aside, offered to drive me home, and… I don't know what happened. I don't remember much. Just the mammal asking questions. Some weird ones, and then… nothing. I woke up in my bed with a splitting headache and my boss calling wondering why the hell I wasn't at work yet."

The two detectives' attention was laser-focused on him. "Were you raped? Assaulted?"

The lynx shook his head. "I don't think so. I didn't have any bruises, or anything. I figured I just blacked out from the alcohol. I don't drink much, you know? Just the occasional beer now and then, but nothing like that little party."

The lioness detective hummed. "Can you remember anythin' about this mammal? Fur colour, markin's, species?"

Devorak squinted. "He… definitely a he… was tall… Hoofed… Brown fur… Wearing jeans and a green shirt… And he had horns…"

Longtooth was scribbling in her notepad. OK, were they horns like… well, horns, or antlers?"

The smaller cat shook his head. "They didn't have individual prongs. They were just horns."

"Eye colour, unique markings, anything?"

The lynx shook his head. "No, sorry. It's all fuzzy. Almost like he was a dream, but wasn't."

The lioness nodded. "We understand, doctor. Have you needed any counselling? Spoken to anyone?"

Another shake of the head. "I haven't felt the need to. And if it got out that I let out a secret, I'd lose my job."

"Well, your testimony is evidence now. Unless you tell your bosses, they won't find out."

The lynx nodded.

"I think we're done here, then. Please, though, let us know if you remember anything else, Dr. Devorak. Anything, even if you don't think it's important, or even if you don't think it's real." Rivers offered both mammals his card.

As the small cat and his new lawyer made their way out of the building, Longtooth turned to her elk
partner. "I'm thinkin' date rape drug. Race, maybe Mindflood?"

Rivers nodded, looking over his own notes. "Not enough to cause a full blackout but enough that, mixed with the alcohol, it impaired his memories."

Longtooth sighed. "Still. A brown-furred mammal with horns and hooves doesn't give us much to go on, even with the jeans and green shirt."

The elk tapped his pen to his lips, deep in thought. "Perhaps we can contact his superior, see what day or days he was late, and see if we can retrace his steps. Maybe we'll get lucky."

Nolwazi Longtooth nodded in agreement. "He said it was in celebration of a breakthrough. First successful mammal cured. Maybe we can use that date to corroborate his story. Talk to some of the mammals on his team to see if they remember anything."

Rivers hummed. "We'll have to be careful. If Furston thinks we're sniffing around in the wrong place, they'll throw lawyers at us like calves playing a game of softball."

The lioness snorted as they made their way back to their office. After the deal with the last Furston lawyer, she wouldn't be surprised.

It wasn't long before they had the entire screening team that had been on duty at the time that the reindeer had been let though was present in the security camera room.

Judy pointed to the image of the reindeer on the screen.

"Do all of you remember this mammal?" At the chorus of yeses, she continued. "OK, did anyone find anything unusual?" A chorus of no.

"Was the mammal allowed to carry any items in with him?" Another round of noes.

She turned to one of the correctional officers. "You performed the patdown, correct?" At the lion's nod of confirmation, the rabbit doe pressed forward. "Did you find anything unusual? Anything that he wasn't supposed to carry?"

"Nothing at all, ma'am. He had his phone, wallet, car keys, and an ID badge issued by the gate guard. We held the wallet, phone, and keys and sent him ahead with the ID badge. He stopped in the washroom after the checkpoint and then headed out to the visitor's area. The only time he wasn't under surveillance was in the washroom."


The guard shook his head, and the others in the room followed suit. "Nothing. Not even an inner liner pocket on his jacket. And we even kept that in lockup, too."

"What I'd like to know," the doe said as she skewered the two prison staff members with a dangerous look, "is how he managed to get a lethal substance past security, if you guys were so thorough."

"He couldn't have," the lead guard said simply.

"Unless it was hidden somewhere on his person." Nick's eyes lit up.

Judy looked at her fox questioningly.
"I assume you guys didn't do a full cavity search?" Nick asked. At the shake of the heads from all of the other mammals present, Nick snapped his fingers and sat back with an air of smug satisfaction. "You said he went to the washroom right after he got through screening. My guess is he was in there for a couple of minutes. Plenty of time to pull something from… somewhere."

"Nothing showed up on the x-ray scanner. Not even a stray paperclip in his pocket."

"And if it was masked by something? Say, his antlers?" The fox prodded. "Can the X-ray see through those?"

The guards all looked at each other, shifting nervously. There was a moment of silence before one of them spoke.

"The X-rays can't penetrate antlers very well. They're bone," one said.

Nick turned to the guard and asked him to continue playing the tape from the point at which the reindeer left the washroom. "So, he was in the washroom about five minutes," the fox commented, looking at the time stamp.

The reindeer on the screen headed to the visitor's area and sat down with the mammal they'd seen handing the unidentified package to Blackford in a previous video.

"What was this reindeer's relation to Jason Pelter?"

The security mammal that had been operating the cameras looked at another screen. "He said he was an old friend and wanted to come make amends."

Judy scribbled something in her notepad. "We'll need to talk to Mr. Pelter. Right away."

The guard team nodded and scrambled out the door, with the warden following close behind at a more sedate pace, leaving the two officers on their own to head down the hall to the visitation area.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking, Carrots?"

Judy nodded. "Jackson Redfohn, otherwise known as Janus, fakes his ID to get into the prison, hiding cyanide on his person somewhere, possibly in a hollowed-out area in his antlers. Once he's through security, he takes a bathroom break and retrieves the items, then heads to the visitation area, meets with this Jason Pelter, and somehow convinces him to give Blackford this cyanide poison."

Her fox companion nodded. "That's about it. The only question is, how did Redfohn know Jason Pelter, and how did he convince Pelter to do this?"

The doe nodded. "He'd have to be pretty desperate to add murder to a rap sheet that only goes as far as theft."

Off to the side of the visitation area was a small room set aside for private conversations, and it was to this room that the two officers headed. Like the interrogation rooms at the ZPD, it was equipped with a bolted-down steel table, a two-way mirror, and a set of chairs. Unlike the ZPD, however, the chairs were also bolted down, and made of the same steel as the table. Everything was painted a dull gray, as though to reinforce the oppressive atmosphere of a prison.

Taking a seat on one side of the table, the ZPD duo spent a few minutes going over their notes, suspicions, and theories before one of the guards, a cheetah, and one far slimmer than they were used to seeing came back in.
"We are bringing Pelter up now, but he's already requested a lawyer. We've called the law firm we have on retainer, and they are sending someone up."

Judy nodded, but frowned, recalling what she'd heard from Rivers and Longtooth about the roadblocking Furston lawyer that seemed to pop up whenever they had a Furston contact to question. She hoped they'd be able to at least get some information from their persistence. In the meantime, though, the only thing she and Nick could do was sit and wait.

In another part of the city, another fox was doing her own investigating.

Over the last couple days, Marian had pored over the records of her boss's authorized donations, looking for any other anomalies. His previous executive assistant hadn't been nearly as thorough as she was, and it showed. Four trips to accounting to collate the records hadn't helped, either. As far as she could tell, her boss had been donating to the same charities for over a year.

Research online had shown them to be a medical research charity, a homeless charity, and a 'tech for teens' charity that supposedly focused on getting computers and software for teen mammals whose families had limited funds. There were reviews posted online, application forms, non-profit organization numbers, everything one needed to be a charity.

Except that she'd never heard of any of them before. She knew there was no way she'd be able to memorize all of the charities in the city. New ones popped up every day, but often fizzled out before making any sort of impact. When the Night Howlers were exposed, over 1000 new applications were received by the city from various mammals applying for NPO status in a gold rush attempt to be the first one to find the cure. The city had shut most of the applications down when they'd announced Furston as the contract winner, though the applications still trickled in. A friend in the city's records department recently told her that the number of applications had gone on an uptick following the Grand Palm attack.

She'd emailed the friend asking about the three charities, only to get confirmation that they were NPOs. She hadn't been able to get any publicly disclosable details beyond that, though, which left Marian back at square one. She didn't want to risk calling the charities from any of her personal numbers, in case it somehow got back to her boss, and she didn't know if tracing emails was easy or not, so she'd elected to play it safe.

And it was for this reason that she was making her way from accounting to her friend Sofia Lopez's office on the same floor she worked. The spectacled bear was one of the only friends she'd been able to make in her short time up here – almost two months now, and was the only one she trusted to keep a lid on what she was looking into.

Sofia had been the first one to welcome her into the circle of mammals that were the C-suite PAs, and the two had bonded quickly.

The elevator dinged, and Marian stepped out, mindful of the larger mammals that boarded the elevator without bothering to look down. She had to resist the urge to bark at one elephant that came a little too close but was able to hold herself back.

You'd think that they'd be more mindful of small mammals, since I'm not the only one my size around here.

Of course, it could be they just ignored her because she was a fox. Even as McStripeson's personal assistant, few mammals took her seriously, and she often had to fight to get her job done on top of the constant coffee runs her boss had her doing and her regular day-to-day tasks. The vixen sighed.
Being a PA for a high-level executive was an exhausting job, and she'd barely gotten to see her son and his bunny at all in a month.

Sofia was busy organizing a stack of papers when Marian arrived and didn't notice the vixen at first until the latter quietly knocked on her desk. Unfortunately for both, the glasses-wearing spectacled bear wearing glasses was so caught up in her own world that the unexpected noise startled her. Papers went flying.

"Oh, gosh, sorry, Sofia!" Marian scrambled to help the panting mammal gather up the documents. Sofia on the other hand held a paw to her heart and took a few deep breaths to calm herself. "Geez, Mari, you trying to give me a heart attack? Warn me or something next time!"

"I didn't mean to startle you." The red vixen looked a bit chastised as she picked up the scattered papers, checking the footnotes to see what page went with what document and where. It wasn't long before she had six different stacks of pages.

"So what can I do for you, Mari? I assume you didn't come over here just to send papers flying around my office." The bear pushed her glasses up her muzzle a bit as she bent down to help her friend clean up the mess.

"Just trying to figure something out. Thought maybe you'd have some answers."

Marian's fellow personal assistant continued picking up and sorting papers. "Help with what?"

The vixen shrugged. "I'm not sure. It might be nothing. But have you heard of Hearts for Hearing, the DreamFlight homeless shelter, or Help4Students?"

Sofia paused, then shook her head. "Can't say that I have, no."

"They aren't on the approved charities list?"

The larger mammal paused in the process of her paper-sorting and thought. "Not that I can recall, no. I have the current list over in the top drawer of my desk, if you want to take a look." She gathered up the last of the pages and began sorting them in with Marian's piles.

Marian nodded and stood up, making her way to Sofia's desk, before grabbing and pulling open the drawer. It took some effort, the drawer being as big as she was, but the vixen managed. Once this was accomplished, she climbed up onto the desk itself and sat on the edge, rifling through the pages she could see. When she found what she was looking for, she pulled it out and sat back, reading. It didn't take long for her to confirm her suspicions: There hadn't been any recent revisions that she'd somehow missed. The three charities weren't there.

Putting the paper back, the vixen apologized to her colleague again for the mess she'd caused and headed back to her desk, deep in thought. Who were these charities? Why was McStripeson sending money their way when they weren't on the list? The charities had been decided by nominations and votes by the board of directors, with recommendations from employees. She had no access to the board members directly, only through Sofia, so she couldn't very well ask them. Plus, if it got out that she was poking around where she shouldn't be, they'd just replace her.

The vixen sighed as she sat down at her desk. At this point, the best thing to do was what she'd been planning to do for a few days now—talk to her son and Judy. See if they had any insight. For now, though, she had to look like she was working, since her boss was due to show up any minute.

She had a feeling it went far deeper than sending money to some obscure charity, though.
After an hour of waiting, Jason Pelter's lawyer finally showed up. The uncomfortable metal furniture and relatively cold atmosphere hadn't helped, and by the time the female ground squirrel arrived, neither Nick nor Judy were in sunny moods. That it took even longer while the lawyer reviewed Pelter's file and spoke in private to the inmate didn't help matters. So, it was with a sigh of both relief and annoyance from the two ZPD officers that they were introduced to the large mammal.

Judy was the one who spoke first. "Thank you for seeing us, Mr. Pelter."

The wildebeest huffed. "Not like I have much of a choice."

Judy frowned as the two other mammals sat down. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Mr. Pelter. But we need to ask you some questions about a mammal that recently came to visit you. He probably identified himself as Theoren MacDonald."

The wildebeest inmate gave a harrumph. "Never heard of him."

"Does Thursday last week ring a bell?" Nick crossed his arms and stared the larger mammal down, along with his partner.

The wildebeest looked at the small ground squirrel standing on the table next to him, who nodded.

"I did have a visitor that day, but not anyone named Theoren MacDonald. His name was Jackson."

"Jackson Redfohn?" Judy couldn't help the note of surprise in his voice.

Pelter nodded. "We ran with the Meadowland Kings gang back in the day, before the ZPD shut them down. He was an enforcer, hitman, generally not a nice mammal. After you blues rolled through, I never saw him again, until last week."

The rabbit doe officer cocked her head. "You don't seem like the kind of mammal that would join a gang."

The much larger ungulate shrugged. "I was a kid from a bad family, didn't have a lot of options. Some of the Kings took me under their wing, and I felt like I belonged."

Out of the corner of her eye, Judy noticed Nick nodding, a stoic expression on his face. Under the mask, though, she could tell he was thinking about his own struggles that led him to skirt a similar path. She turned back to the wildebeest.

"So, you knew him only through the Kings? How long was that?"

The wildebeest thought for a moment. "About two years give or take. I was sixteen when I was recruited… And the gang was taken out a couple years later. He was already doing the leader's dirty work when I joined. I didn't have to do much. Just some errands here and there. Moving packages and stuff."

The ground squirrel stopped the wildebeest there. "Before my client continues, I'd like to remind you officers that the statute of limitations for any crimes my client may or may not have committed, while a minor and a member of this gang, have long since passed."

The rabbit doe officer nodded. "We understand. We aren't concerned about those, anyway. We're just trying to understand how Mr. Pelter here knew Mr. Redfohn."

The squirrel nodded and stepped back a bit, while the doe turned to Jason Pelter. "Ok, so you knew
Mr. Redfohn from the Kings. Fair enough. What about the package he gave you on Thursday? You do know that smuggling items into prisons is against the law, correct?"

The large mammal's head jerked toward the squirrel, who nodded again in response.

"He told me that it was an Ipicad or something."

Judy frowned in confusion, as did Nick. It was the ground squirrel that supplied the answer to the as yet unasked question. "Ipecac?"

Pelter nodded. "Yeah, that. He told me I had to give it to that wood bison at dinner time and not tell anyone, or…"

Nick cocked his head. "Or?"

The wildebeest's expression grew panicked. "Or my wife and daughter would pay the price!"

Judy was instantly on her feet. "Where do they live, Mr. Pelter?"

"At her mom's house! 1306 Great Plains Way!"

The doe grabbed her microphone. "Dispatch, this is Zulu 240."

Clawhauser's voice was thankfully prompt and to the point. "Dispatch reads you, 240, what can I do for you, Hopps?"

Judy keyed her microphone again. "Clawhauser, listen carefully. We need an immediate 10-43 at 1306 Great Plains Way. That's one-three-oh-six Great Plains Way. At least three females, one a minor."

This time the response took a little longer. "10-4, Hopps, Fangmeyer and Rhinowitz are enroute in 221. They were headed out for patrol, anyway."

The doe turned back to the wildebeest, who still had a panicked expression. "What's a 10-43?" The fear in his voice was evident.

"A 10-43 is a welfare check. They are going to make sure everyone is OK and get them out of danger if necessary." Part of Judy wished she could be out there helping, but for now, her purpose was here.

"A welfare check? Is that where they knock on your door and ask if everything's OK?"

Nick nodded. "Yep. We might take a look around too."

Judy returned to the table. "That's true, Mr. Pelter. We'll make sure they are safe and sound. I am curious, though. How did you end up in jail?"

The ground squirrel stood up. "I object to that. The question is unrelated to the case."

The wildebeest shook his head. "It's OK, counsellor. I got caught selling some electronics I lifted from a store. I needed money to pay for my daughter's medical care. She has pediatrics CLD… chronic lung disease. I… couldn't afford to pay for her medical bills, so…"

Judy sighed, but refrained from shaking her head. Sometimes mammals made bad choices in a moment of desperation, and it invariably landed them on the wrong side of the law. It was something she was starting to see all too often.
The wildebeest visibly slumped in relief, and Judy couldn't help but give a small smile. Before her was a mammal who had been trapped in a bad situation and, in all likelihood, never knew what he was being forced to do.

Ipecac made a mammal vomit, but in small doses, it was just messy. While illegal for sale in Zootopia, not many mammals knew about them.

Judy stood to the side of the chair and gathered her files. "I do appreciate your time, Mr. Pelter. We'll let you know if we need anything else."

As both Nick and Judy turned to go, the wildebeest raised one last question. "Will I be charged with murder now?"

His ground squirrel lawyer jumped in at that. "I must remind you, officers, that my client was unaware of the contents of the package, and only did so under duress."

Judy shook her head. "That's up to the district attorney. It does fall under negligent mammicide, but honestly, you are right. The fact that it happened under duress does complicate matters. We do have to put this in our report and advise the DA's office. After that, it's up to them. Unfortunately, I can't say the same about the fact that you broke prison rules."

The mammal looked somewhat placated, but still very worried about his future. The guards in the room moved to secure him and bring him back to his living area while the two officers were escorted back to the administration area.

Rhinowitz and Fangmeyer knocked on the door for the second time. The neighborhood was one of the seedier locations in Savannah Central, but better than some places. The lawns were unkempt and most of the buildings had peeling paint, but it was a well-lived neighborhood, regardless.

After a couple of minutes, an older female wildebeest unlocked and opened the door. "Yes?"

Fangmeyer pulled out her badge and showed it to her. "Good afternoon, ma'am. Everything OK here?"

The female ungulate frowned. "Of course, why wouldn't it be?"

"Just checking, ma'am. We received a call for a welfare check here. Are you at all related to a Jason Pelter?"

The wildebeest snorted. "Is that what this is all about? He's my son-in-law. And whatever screwup he did now, we didn't have anything to do with it. I told Kaycee that he'd be a bad influence on her!"

"Is your daughter and grandchild here, ma'am?"

"Yes, and you two are disturbing their rest. Good DAY, officers." The door slammed in the two officers' muzzles.

They stared for a moment at the door and then turned to each other. "Nice mammal," Fangmeyer remarked as the two turned back to their cruiser.

Beside her, Rhinowitz grunted. "About as nice as my ex. I swear, that cow was made of pure acid. Did everythin' she could to make you feel bad about yourself."

Fangmeyer was about to respond when something caught her eye. A black SUV parked across the
street, windows rolled up, a mammal inside just sitting there, but she couldn't tell what they were up to, though they seemed to be looking in their direction. She nudged her partner.

"Hey, isn't that the same SUV that passed by twice while we were standing at the door?"

Eduard Rhinowitz looked up. "Looks like it. Wonder what they are doin'?"

"Maybe we should go and find out?"

The two crossed the street behind the large vehicle, keeping to the blind spot as much as possible. Fangmeyer put a paw on her sidearm as she approached the vehicle's driver's side, Rhinowitz doing the same thing on the passenger's side. The tigress reached out and tapped the window with her knuckle.

A second or two later, the window rolled down to reveal a male reindeer sitting in the front.

"Afternoon, sir. Everything going OK?"

The reindeer glared. "Other than you botherin' me for no reason, yeah. Everythin's fine."

Fangmeyer kept one paw out of sight on her weapon. "Mind if I ask what you're up to?"

"Yeah. I do mind, 'cuz it's none of yer bidness. So why you all up in my face, pred? I got rights and one of them is goin' wherever I want to and doin' whatever I want without the likes of you interferin'," the reindeer spat as he continued to glare.

The tigress arched an eyebrow. "Well, sir, we saw you circling the block a few times, and you've been stopped here for the last five minutes."

The reindeer scoffed. "What, is that a crime now?"

Fangmeyer bit her tongue. "No, sir, it isn't a crime, but in a neighborhood like this one, it does raise some suspicions, you understand."

"So, what, you think you can muscle in on the rights and freedoms of hard-workin' mammals like me jus' cuz you a pred? Go back to sittin' in your car eatin' donuts and shit and leave me alone! And stop shinin' your flashlight in the back of my car! You need a warrant for that!" The last sentences were directed at Rhinowitz, who was using his torch through the window to illuminate the back seat and cargo area.

"It's perfectly legal to look in a vehicle at anythin' in plain view, sir. No warrant is required for that." The reindeer let a hoof drop in between the seats, where the tigress had no line of sight. "Sir, please keep your hooves where I can see them."

"Well, you can just—"

"Gun!" Rhinowitz's voice cut off the reindeer's as the ungulate in the SUV pulled the hoof that Fangmeyer couldn't see from in between the passenger and driver's seats. The tigress reacted in a nanosecond, the years of training and walking the beat honing her movements. She ducked out of the way, twisting out of the path of the gunshot, then reached up and grabbed the other mammal's hoof at the wrist, bracing her arm against the doorframe so the reindeer couldn't pull his back. With her other paw, she grabbed the gun along the slide and barrel, pulling the business end up and twisting it at the same time, forcibly removing the weapon from the other mammal's hoof.

In any other situation, the bewildered look on the other mammal's face would have been comical, but
Liz Fangmeyer had no time to reflect on that. She kept a tight hold on the reindeer's wrist as the latter mammal struggled to free himself from her grip. Rhinowitz, meanwhile, first tried the door on the passenger side, finding it locked, then pulled out his baton and swung it at the base of the passenger's side door window, smashing it. A few seconds later and he'd cleared the glass and hit the electronic door lock switch. The rhino opened his door and pulled his weapon at the same moment, taking a single armed shooter's stance and using his other hoof to unclip his flexicuffs from his belt.

"Don't move! Hooves where we can see them!"

The reindeer stilled, a look of fear overcoming him. Fangmeyer's grip on the other mammal's wrist tightened slightly as she gave her next orders. "Now, you are going to do exactly as we say. One hoof, behind your head. Do it now. Slowly."

The antlered mammal complied. No sooner had he done that than Rhinowitz, who had reholstered his weapon, grabbed that wrist and twisted it down behind the attempted shooter's back, slipping one side of the flexicuffs on in a single fluid motion.

"Now the other hoof, same deal. Behind your head, slowly." The process repeated itself, and in just a few seconds, the reindeer had both hooves bound behind his back.

Fangmeyer transferred the suspect's weapon to her other paw, then keyed her microphone. "Dispatch, 221, we've had a 10-13 at our 10-43, suspect in custody, backup requested."

Clawhausser's response was immediate. "10-4, 221, backup request received. Everyone OK, Fangmeyer?"

"Affirmative, dispatch. Just need the backup here."

Chapter End Notes

Police nomenclature used in this chapter – 10 codes:

10-43: Welfare check
10-4: Message received and understood
10-13: Shots fired

SO! Another mammal on the field, but not for very long! Looks like he got a penalty before he got very far!

A note about Sophia. I had a note from one of my editors about the redundancy in the line "glasses-wearing spectacled bear". A spectacled bear is an actual species, native to South America. It’s also known less commonly as the Andean bear or the Andean short-faced bear. The fact that she wears glasses is somewhat of an irony and a bit of a joke on my part.

So! No one found the reference to The Savage Dark by Kulkum in the last chapter! Can anyone find a reference to a real-world sports team in this chapter? Honestly, I don’t expect anybody to get it.
Just a note too, about some retcons of inconsistencies in previous chapters, brought to my attention by my astute readers. The first, from way back in Chapter 13, concerns the group of mammals sent to deploy the device in the Grand Palm attack. In Chapter 13 onward they are water buffalo. In Chapter 11 however, they were incorrectly stated as being Wildebeest. Thanks to Matri on AO3 for pointing this out

Also, in regards to the round recovered from Spencer Callahan, ProximaCentauri, also on AO3, pointed out that a single round that lodged in the head would not cause blood spatter. This has been retconned as Callahan having been shot with TWO rounds, one was a through and through.

Both errors will be edited in the coming days and weeks. Thanks you two for pointing those out!

Coming up on April 19: Arrests and Progress!

Questions? Critiques? Did Lumiere give you third degree burns? Leave a comment!
"Affirmative, dispatch. Just need the backup here."

With Rhinowitz patting down the suspect, Fangmeyer let the microphone go and turned her attention to the firearm. It was a standard M1911 clone, nothing particularly remarkable about it, except that the serial number had been ground off with some sort of filing or rotary tool. Hopefully, the lab could get an idea on the history of this weapon.

Ejecting the magazine and pulling the slide to eject the chambered round, which she then picked up, the tigress made her way back towards the police cruiser. Her partner, having finished searching their attempted shooter for other weapons and contraband, was already there, mammalhandling the reindeer into the rear seat. Seeing that the rhino had that well in paw, she moved around back and popped the trunk, grabbing a set of evidence bags and dropping the pistol, the unfired round, and the magazine each in separate bags, then sealing them.

Slamming the door on the would-be shooter reindeer, her rhino partner rejoined her behind the vehicle. "What do ya think? Toss the vehicle, see what we can find?"

The tigress nodded. "You know Judy's going to be asking about it as soon as she gets back to the shop. If she's not driving Wilde up the wall already." She frowned. "We'll have to wait for our backup, though." Standard ZPD policy was to never leave a suspect unattended in a police vehicle, lest they attempt escape, be assisted in doing the same, or attempt to injure themselves in order to claim police brutality.

In the meantime, with Rhinowitz watching over the reindeer, the tigress moved to contain the gathering crowd of onlookers, all the while biting her tongue. Lookie-loos were an unfortunate part
of their job, and containing them was often a struggle in and of itself.

Fortunately for them, backup didn't take very long to arrive, with Sergeant Higgins showing up about five minutes later, followed immediately by Delgado and his Siberian tiger partner.

Fangmeyer shuddered. James Siberius had been a thorn in her side for too long, having hit on her multiple times despite her clear messages that she wasn't interested. The male was a decent cop, but often had an overinflated sense of importance and an ego to match.

It didn't take long to secure the area, with Delgado and Siberius coralling the public while Higgins kept an eye on the suspect. That left Rhinowitz and Fangmeyer to look over the reindeer's SUV, which they attacked with a gusto.

The tigress' nose, while not as sensitive as a canid's, told her that there wasn't anything in the way of drugs in the vehicle, but it did smell of tobacco, gun oil, and smokeless powder. Whatever this mammal was into, it involved guns.

They found the car's registration and insurance in the glove box and set it aside to run later, as well as a large gun carrying case in the rear storage area and another firearm in the center console. The shell casing from the fired round had fallen to the carpet and rolled under the driver's seat.

"Geez, how many guns does this guy need? The whole vehicle reeks of them." Liz wrinkled her nose at the medicinal, chemical smell of the gunpowder, and the muted but still evident smell of the oil.

"I dunno, but I'm guessin' that we're gonna be findin' out soon enough," Rhinowitz remarked as he pulled up the carpeting in the cargo area, revealing the spare tire, tools, and a silencer, the latter of which he picked up after donning gloves. "Kinda an odd place for one of these, don't you think?"

"What, a silencer in the spare tire stowage?" The tigress came around to look.

Eduard Rhinowitz nodded as he bagged the item. "If you're going to use a silencer, you keep it up front in the glove box or the center console or something. Not in the tire stowage in the rear of the vehicle."

"I didn't find anything in the passenger area other than that extra firearm and the shell casing. No keys to that gun case or anything, either. Maybe he has that stashed somewhere else." The only keys on the ring they'd found in the ignition were the car keys and what was clearly an apartment or house key. He hadn't had any other keys on him. Fangmeyer's shoulders slumped a little. "If we had been an hour later, would this guy have done what he came to do?"

The rhino officer nodded. "If we had left, or not shown up, or shown up too late, chances are, we'd be investigatin' a body tomorrow."

The two made their way back to the cruiser, with Sergeant Higgins standing next to it writing something on his scratch pad. "So, what of our attempted shooter? Maybe he's wanted for escaping death row, so we can just take him back to MaxSec and call it good?"

The large hippo laughed. "'fraid not, Fangmeyer. No record at all. We'll need lab services to run his DNA to see if there's any other links, but as far as we are concerned now, this guy's a nobody."

Rhinowitz snorted. "He ain't gonna be a nobody for long. Cruiser camera and body cameras were all on. We got him clear as day takin' a shot at Liz here."

"Always nice to get a would-be cop-killer off the streets. I suppose it's gonna be too much to ask that
this guy be Eric's killer, too," Fangmeyer groused, her words casting a dark cloud on the trio.

Higgins was the one that broke the ensuing silence. "If that turns out to be the case, Hopps, Rivers, Wilde, and Longtooth will make the connection. And Hopps with probably be bouncing off the walls."

Fangmeyer grinned despite the mood. "Don't you mean WildeHopps, Rivers, and Longtooth? Seriously, you can't get one without the other now. They are joined at the hip. I heard a rumour that they actually live together now."

The hippo sergeant huffed. "As much as I would like to continue to speculate on the personal lives of our fellow officers, we have a suspect to take downtown, a vehicle to tow, and mammals to interview. Looks like Delgato and Siberius are on the last part. So how about you guys take Olive the Other Reindeer here back to the shop and book him?"

The tigress snorted in laughter at that.

Nick and Judy had just gotten into the main prison block and were being escorted to Blackford's cell when the radio call came in.

"240, this is 221, got a possible suspect for you. We even do delivery, as long as the delivery is to the cooler at Precinct One."

Nick barked out a laugh, then grabbed his microphone. "Aw, come on, Liz, we're still at Meadowlands Correctional! By the time we get back to home base, your delivery will be frozen!"

"Tough jerky, foxy. That's where we're taking him. See you back at base. 221 out."

"Must you antagonize all of our colleagues, Nick?" Judy's scolding tone was completely undermined by her slight giggle, and the grin on her face that matched his told him she was just ribbing him.

"It's a talent, Carrots. Gotta keep it sharp! You know if you don't practice, you lose your touch."

Judy shook her head, still grinning, as the guard rounded a corner and Blackford's cell came into view. Standing outside chatting were Officers Arnie Pawson and Meagan Moon, apparently a white she-wolf.

Stopping Judy with a paw on her shoulder, Nick pointed at the other two officers. "Hold on a sec, fluff, this was unheard of in the academy… Arnie talking to a female, and she's seemingly enjoying the conversation!"

The fox stood there watching for a moment until Judy tugged on his arm. "Come on, Slick, let's go see what they are up to."

They'd barely made it another pawstep when the white shewolf took notice of them. "Well, well. I'll be. Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde, I take it?"

Arnie Pawson turned to greet them. "Hey, Red, there you are! Long time, no see! Way I hear it, you been keeping busy!" The wink he shot Nick's way left no room for speculation that the double entendre was fully intended on the part of the cheetah.

The fox shook his head, as well as the cheetah's paw. "Not the way you are thinking, Don Pawan. But yes, we've been keeping busy. The Energizer Bunny over there doesn't let things slow down. Always has to take on the big cases and run at full throttle everywhere she goes. 'Course, I'm the
only one that can keep up with her."

"Hah! I outran you in our training runs. I could catch her easily."

"You beat everyone, Arnie," Nick remarked as he rubbed his temple.

"Yep, cheetahs do that. Fastest mammal in the world, you know. Nothing outruns us."

The fox in the group shook his head. "So you said every time you beat the class in the sprints. You wouldn't let us forget. And then you complained about the endurance runs. 'Cheetahs aren't built for this,' you would say."

The cheetah let out a harrumph.

The two newly arrived officers turned to the fourth mammal in the group. Judy extended her paw. "You must be Meagan Moon?"

The white she-wolf nodded.

Of course, Nick had to put his two cents in as well. "How'd you get saddled with Mini-Spots there? I was the only one that could put up with him in the academy, and he was my dormie!"

The white she-wolf shrugged. "Didn't really have a choice. Precinct captain decided I needed a partner, and Arnie was the only other one that didn't have one. He was a bit... annoying at first, but we... we figured out a way to get along."

The fox shuddered. "I'm almost afraid to ask."

Moon laughed. "You needn't worry. Once I made it clear that his pickup lines wouldn't work on me, we've actually been able to hold a civil conversation. Couple days after he visited you guys in the hospital, though, he stopped the pickup lines entirely. I was sure Mandy Sharpe was going to throw a party when she made it through the first day without a comment from him."

"Hey! Stop with the character assassination!"

The larger canid rolled her eyes. "I'm not assassinating your character. I'm just filling our two colleagues here in on your antics, since you seem to have neglected to do so."

The now grumpy cheetah just harrumphed again.

Judy, on the other hand, wanted to get things back on track. "So, what did you guys turn up when you first visited? Anything useful?"

"The lab mammals checked the cell, but unless you guys have gotten a call, they didn't find anything. Why? You think you got some other ideas?" The white she-wolf gave the two smaller officers a quizzical look.

Judy looked at her notes. "Well, after dinner, he visited the outdoor exercise area and the showers. Did the lab mammals visit those areas?"

The white-furred canid shook her head. "Not that I know of," she said, and glanced at her partner, who also shook his head.

Judy closed her notebook and put her carrot pen away. "Then I think that's where we should start. Meagan, you and I can't go in the shower rooms, so why don't we visit the exercise area, and the boys take the showers?"
This wasn't technically true, Nick thought, and when he turned to point that out to Judy, he saw the
look in her eyes. She was trying to buy him some time to chat with his friend. He smiled at her,
giving her a wink before turning to Arnie. "She's right. We'll cover more ground that way anyways.
Let's go, Arnie." He led the cheetah out and down the hall towards the showers.

The walk to the outdoor exercise area was a quiet one for the two females, and the doe wondered if
they would find anything. In an outdoor environment with multiple users, evidence disappeared very
quickly, and you had to be quick to arrive to get ahold of it. Since four days had passed, the chance
of them finding anything was slim to none, but they had to check.

The silence between the two was broken by the white she-wolf. "So…"

"So?" The doe's response was somewhat laid back, as she surveyed the area. The outdoor area held
a basketball court, baseball diamond, combination gridiron/soccer field surrounded by a running
track, and several outdoor weight stations and sitting areas with some steel benches.

The white she-wolf, however, was more interested in talking to the bunny officer. "So… A rabbit
and a fox… How does that work?"

"What do you mean?" Judy was only half paying attention as she made her way to the sitting areas
with the benches, where she'd seen Blackford spending his outside time.

"Like, you two? How does it work? I mean, I don't think I've ever seen a predator-prey couple
before. Don't you have different customs and cultures and all that?"

Judy nodded as she reached the bench that Blackford had been using. "There have been differences.
But communication is important. We talk. About everything. Even the uncomfortable stuff. How else
would we know if we were doing something wrong?"

"What sort of differences have you run into? Cultural, I mean."

Judy dropped to the ground and began picking through the grass, looking for any dropped items or
clues, while the white she-wolf began using her nose to try and find anything with Blackford's scent.
Moon had gotten a good enough profile of the wood bison from his pillow before they left the cell,
and she was able to determine where he'd sat at the bench, but not much else.

As she searched, Judy kept talking. "A few. The vixen takes the lead in fox relationships, so that was
a bit new for me. With bunnies, it's almost always the bucks."

The white she-wolf nodded. "I'd heard that. Wolves are a bit different. Who we are allowed to date
depends on our rank in society… Or wolf society, that is. We still have loose 'packs', with a
hierarchy, usually a couple in each district, but it's a lot more of a traditional familial thing than it
used to be. Most of us don't even go to the pack meetings."

Judy nodded in understanding and continued to search through the grass. "Most of the bunnies I
know still live in burrows. It's different here in the city than where I grew up. Large families were
normal there. Here, I don't think I've seen a bunny family with more than five kits."

Moon started following a scent trail she picked up. "How many in your family?"

The doe got up and dusted herself off, turning to follow the she-wolf. "Over three hundred. That's
not including extended family like my aunts, uncles, in-laws, nieces, and nephews."

The she-wolf nearly fell over at that. "Three hundred?! How… What… Why…"
The doe rolled her eyes. "Let's just say that my family is one of the big ones in the Tri-burrow area."

"But three hundred?!"

"Considering that in ancient times, a doe could have over a thousand kits in her lifetime, yeah… Not many rabbit families are that big anymore, though. I only know of two others besides my own that are that big. One hit four hundred, the other was around three-hundred-and-fifty, last I heard."

Moon just stared, then shook her head and turned back to what she was doing, following the scent trail she'd picked up. Judy followed up behind her, keeping an eye out for anything the she-wolf might miss.

After about fifty more feet, Moon got down on all fours and started sniffing lower to the ground, moving her head this way and that, before she stopped, got out a pair of gloves from her utility belt, and picked something up off the ground.

"What you got there?" the doe enquired.

"I'm not sure. Pill capsule of some kind. Faint smell of your suspect, and that awful vegetable gel smell that these time-dissolving capsules have."

Judy produced a zipper-seal bag from her own utility belt, opened it, and held it out for the wolf, who dropped the capsule in.

Moon shook her head. "Thank heaven it hasn't rained here this week and the prison's been on lockdown. Who knows what would have happened to that, otherwise."

Judy nodded as she secured the piece of evidence in her belt. "We wouldn't have a pill, that's for sure. Anything else out here?"

The she-wolf shook her head. "I haven't picked up anything else."

Judy nodded. "I haven't found anything at all. Besides this pill, him being out here may not even be relevant. We'll see. Think we should go check on our crazy partners?"

Moon scoffed. "I doubt Nick's crazier than Arnie."

The doe couldn't help the sudden laughter. "Trust me, Moon, if you spend five minutes with Nick, you'll definitely be questioning your sanity."

"And yet you spend, from what I hear, virtually every waking moment with him. Is the sex that good?"

Judy nearly tripped over her own feet at that. She spluttered and stuttered a moment before turning to the white she-wolf, aghast. "What?!"

"Oh, come on, Hopps, there has to be a reason why you stick around him, and if his personality is as annoying as I've heard, then the sex must be amazing!"

The doe growled, and her ears set straight backward. "OK, first off, that's personal. It's not something you share with anyone, much less someone you just met, and second, it's crude and offensive. You think that I only keep him around for that reason? Are you that shallow?"

The white-furred canid held up her paws to placate the clearly angry rabbit. "Hey, relax, Hopps, I was just joking."
Judy glared at the larger female. "I didn't find it funny at all. Honestly, it sounds like something Arnie would say to Nick." The fox had told Judy of his conversations with the cheetah about her, and while Judy had felt mildly upset at Arnie, she had pushed past it for Nick's sake, knowing he didn't have many real friends. *Males will be males,* she'd thought.

Now, though, she felt a lot more irritated, even with the white wolf's explanation. The doe marched back towards the entrance to the outdoor area with her ears set. This wasn't a conversation she wanted to continue.

"Hey, Hopps, listen, I'm sorry. Sometimes my mouth gets the better of me, you know? If it makes you feel any better, Arnie didn't know what to make of me when we were first partnered up. He thought I was nuts."

Judy relaxed a bit, somewhat placated by the she-wolf's words. "And yet, I bet he was just as crude and blunt as you."

Moon nodded. "Yeah, he was. He'd go on and on about things that I'm sure would have gotten him in trouble with anyone else. I didn't report him because I was just as bad, I guess."

The doe scoffed. "You got that right. Now I know we should get back to the males before Arnie pushes my fox too far!" Too late, Judy realized what she'd said.

The white she-wolf raised her eyebrow. "Your fox? That's a bit possessive, Hopps."

The doe shook her head and took a breath. "Yeah, he's my fox. And I'm his doe. He supports me, and I support him. We're a team."

The two pulled open the door to the prison and started down the long hall to the showers. "I can understand that, Hopps. As... odd as it is for a feline and a canid to be paired, we work well together."

"Foxes and bunnies aren't really well known for getting along, either."

Moon nodded as she followed the smaller officer, turning the corner to the shower stalls. "That's right. Natural enemies. Different for canids and felines, but I get your drift."

They were almost back to the showers when Judy overheard the radio call. *Dispatch, Zulu 240..."

"So, Arnie, I couldn't help but notice you seemed a bit... friendly with Officer Moon over there. Don't you already have a girlfriend?"

The cheetah shook his head. "Nah. Broke it off after I graduated. Just after I saw you in the hospital, actually. We weren't working out well beforehand, either. That was just the nail in the coffin."

"Damn. Sorry to hear that. What went wrong?"

With a shrug, the cheetah started searching the shower stalls. "It was really more about the sex than anything else. Friends with benefits. But she wanted more, and I didn't. Just wasn't my type for a permanent partner, and I... Well, you know I was always hitting on the chicks at the academy. Was hoping to start up something real, you know?"

The fox nodded as he began sniffing through another one. A bad idea in retrospect, as he covered his nose. "God! It smells like this place hasn't been cleaned in weeks!"
The cheetah shrugged. "It probably hasn't. Had a cousin who was in for a few months, said the
showers didn't get cleaned very often."

Nick shuddered at the thought. "That's disgusting!"

Arnie Pawson couldn't help but shudder as well. "Agreed, Red. But a prison ain't no five-star hotel.
They are lucky to get six bucks worth of food in their belly a day. And everything else is dirt cheap
as well. Inmates provide most of the labour, and that which isn't is outsourced to the cheapest
qualified contractor."

Nick shook his head. In his time on the streets, he'd never really bothered to research the living and
working conditions of inmates, just the laws necessary for him to avoid becoming one, and he
thought he'd done pretty well, until a certain rabbit showed up with the one law to which he hadn't
bothered to pay attention.

He'd been lucky that the Zootopia Tax and Revenue Agency hadn't asked too many questions and
only levied him late fines for the last 7 years when he'd called to admit his "mistake", and his actual
income had been overall pretty low, despite what he'd told Judy the day she'd recorded him. It had
taken everything he had, plus a payment plan for the remainder that would take him another two
years to pay off.

When Judy had got him back in contact with his mother, however, he'd learned of an inheritance
from his father that was supposed to have been given to him when he went to college, but having
been on the streets before that, he never got it, and his mother had held it in trust. She'd decided that
he deserved it when he graduated from the academy, and had given it to him as a graduation gift.
He'd used it to pay off the rest of the amount owing and put the security deposit on his, and now
Judy's as well, apartment.

At least he didn't have that spectre hovering over him anymore, mostly thanks to the rabbit to whom
he'd found his life inextricably tied. Not that he would have it any other way. He hadn't told Judy
yet, but every morning before work, ever since they'd admitted their feelings to each other, he'd
repeated three things in his head: the oath he'd taken years ago for the ranger scouts, to be brave,
loyal, helpful, and trustworthy, and the one he'd taken at his graduation, to serve and protect the
mammals of Zootopia, as well as his personal promise to Judy to try to make the world a better place.

"... that bunny yet, Red?" Arnie's voice finally penetrated the smaller predator's thoughts, and Nick
shook his head, refocusing on the current situation, and using his nose, despite the stench, to see if he
could locate any sign of Blackford.

"Sorry, I wasn't listening, Arnie. What was that?"

The feline was at the other end of the row of shower stalls and turned back to repeat the question to
the fox. "I asked if you'd banged that bunny yet! You must be going deaf in your old age!"

Nick scoffed. "I'm hardly older than you, Mini-Spots, and as for whether or not I've 'banged that
bunny'... Sure I have. I banged into her last night when I was leaving the kitchen and she was
coming in to get the ketchup. We both landed on our asses on the kitchen floor."

Arnie Pawson stared for a moment, then let out a short laugh. "Not what I meant, and you know it,
Red!"

The fox snickered "Oh, I know EXACTLY what you meant, Mini-Spots. And you know I wouldn't
tell you even if I had or had not. What Judy and I do off the clock is our business and no one else's.
Except when the damn newspapers make it their business." The fox finally picked up the scent of the
"wood bison he'd been looking for."

"Hey, relax, Red, no offense intended."

Nick rolled his eyes. "None taken, but be careful. Those ears on Judy's head aren't just for show. She hears you talking about that stuff, and you're in for a world of hurt." Following his nose, and blocking out the other unwanted smells, he found himself staring at a pill container. Donning a pair of gloves, he bent down and picked it up. "Well, would you look at this?"

The cheetah officer looked over at the smaller predator. "What's up?"

Nick held out his new prize. "It's a pill container. Looks like the ones you get from a pharmacy, except no label at all."

He popped open the lid and looked inside. "Residue inside, too. Willing to bet that had something to do with Blackford's death."

Nick bagged the pill container and sealed it, looking at it again through the clear plastic. So, Redfohn sneaks this past security, gives it to Pelter, who gives it to Blackford. Then... what? When did Blackford take the pills? Obviously before bedtime, but when? And how did he not suspect? Or was he forced to do this to himself?

Arnies's voice shook the fox out of his thoughts. "So, Red, what do you think? Me and Moon?"

"You and Moon?" Nick continued to stare at the pill container as though it would give him the answers he sought.

"Yeah! Me and Moon! What do you think? She be a good match for me?" Arnies came over and looked over the fox's shoulder at the item he was holding.

"Well, considering I have only met her for five minutes, if that, and have exchanged barely twenty words with her, I MUST be qualified to make a judgement call, thanks to my superior powers of mind reading? That right?" Nick's voice was full of snark as he turned to face the cheetah.

"I just thought since you bagged yourself that hot bunny, you might be able to give me some tips." Arnies crossed his arms and smirked.

Nick continued to stare at the pill container in his paw. "No amount of tips from me will help you there, Mini-Spots. I only know what works for Judy. You just have to be yourself, and if she doesn't like that, then it probably won't work." The fox's thoughts continued to drift, puzzling out the pill container, when a thought occurred to him. He keyed his radio. "Dispatch, Zulu 240, need a welfare check on the residence of Taylor Blackford. Address should be in the system."

There was a pause before Clawhauser's voice came back.

"10-4, Nick, something the matter? This is your second welfare check today!"

"Possible family issue, Spots. May be related to the earlier one."

"10-4, Z-240, will have units on the way."

His doe's voice was the next thing he heard as she walked into the shower room, ears erect. "What's the trouble, Nick?"

The fox showed her the pill container. "Just a hunch, Carrots. But if these guys sent someone after Pelter's family, there's a good chance someone got sent after Blackford's family as well."
Judy nodded, deep in thought. "Good call, Nick." She took the pill container from the fox, rather large in her paws, and looked it over. "Anything inside?"

Nick shook his head. "Just some residue. Didn't look too closely beyond that. I don't have any particular desire to be another mammal on Dr. Mamusson's tables."

Judy sniffed, and pulled out a small evidence packet and handed it to the fox. "We found this outside. Could be related."

With the outdoor area and shower room search done, at least for the moment, the four left the prison and headed off in their squad cars to their individual precincts. Nick and Judy were halfway back to their own when Clawhauser's voice called them over the radio.

"Zulu 240, dispatch, Blackford's address checks out clean, no suspicious activity."

Nick keyed the radio. "10-4, Spots. Thanks for the check. WildeHopps out."

Judy shook her head and sighed as she drove. "I wonder how deep this goes. Every time we find something, it just keeps getting bigger."

Nick glanced over at the bunny and smirked. "Too much for you, Carrots? You know, there's no shame in giving up."

The doe rolled her eyes. "Not on your life, Slick."

The fox grinned. "That's the spirit!"

Judy slapped Nick on the arm as they continued to head into the police station.

Alone in his room in his family's Savannah Central townhome, a young rabbit buck took a deep breath and let it out. His parents needed to know, he'd decided. That much was true. But how do you tell your ultra-conservative, religious parents that the female you're falling in love with is a bat?

The young male had long known that his own species didn't attract him in the slightest. For years, he'd been raised to believe that to be attracted to another biological family was unhealthy, unnatural, disgusting, depraved. There were many other words he'd heard as well, most of them about as polite as the insults thrown at mammals attracted to the same sex or mammals who didn't identify as their own sex.

In an effort to please his parents, he'd repressed this side of him, hidden it, tried to ignore it. He'd gone on dates with other bunnies, and even a few hares. Nothing had clicked, even though a few of them were great females. Since then, he'd been seeing a bat in his class, but had kept his parents in the dark. Cindy was bouncy, fun, smart, and a true joy to be around. She liked video games, art, and music, and wasn't one to judge you if you disagreed with her tastes.

But he knew his parents would never approve of her.

Then, a news article a week or so ago got his parents talking, and not in a good way. For the last year, he'd listened to his parents and their praise of the rabbit cop, Judy Hopps, and what she'd accomplished for lagomorphs everywhere, showing what rabbits could do. Suddenly, that praise turned into disgust, disbelief that she would sully herself with a different species, and a fox of all things.

It was a kick in the gut. He'd read the article later on and been surprised to learn that the fox she'd
been connected with was her own partner at the police department. The press conference given by the chief and the mayor a couple of days ago had solidified that rumour.

The buck had talked to Cindy, and both had agreed that the time had come to tell their parents the truth, even if it meant the worst.

With a deep breath, Chuck Bunson got up from his bed and padded down the hall. Pausing outside the kitchen, he took another breath and let it out. With what courage he had, he walked into the kitchen, one he had shared with his parents and littermates for 19 years, until all four of his brothers and sisters had moved out.

"Mom? Dad? I… We need to talk."

His dad turned to regard him. "What is it, son?"

The next fifteen minutes started out pleasantly enough, but they quickly devolved into shouting and tears.

While his mother cried, his father glared at him with an expression that was a mix of disgust and contempt. "If you know what's good for you, Charles, you'll go see Father Leaps right now and have him pray for you. We won't tolerate this kind of debauchery in our house!"

Tears in his eyes, the bunny buck straightened and looked his father in the eye. "No, Dad. I won't. This is who I am, Dad."

The look in his father's eyes turned from disgust to rage. "You are a RABBIT, Charles. This… whore… is not. And if I ever hear you spouting this… crazy talk again, you will no longer be welcome in this home."

Chuck Bunson exploded. "She's not a whore, Dad! Don't you dare call her that! She's the most wonderful female I've ever met! And if you can't accept that… then I guess I don't belong here!"

"THEN GET OUT! I NEVER WANT TO SEE YOUR MUZZLE AGAIN," his father roared, cradling his now-hysterical mother and glaring daggers at the younger buck.

"YEAAH, I'LL GO! I'LL PACK MY THINGS AND GO! AND I WON'T EVEN LOOK BACK!"

"GET OUT!"

The young rabbit stomped away, pulling out his cell phone and calling a friend. An hour later he had all the stuff he wanted to keep in his suitcase, a few changes in clothes, and whatever money wasn't in his bank account, and was standing out by the curb, his back to his parent's house. He refused to turn and look at the front window, knowing his father and mother would be standing there.

A moment later, his friend pulled up in his car and helped him load his items. Two minutes later, the two were driving away.

Chuck Bunson hoped that he was making the right decision with his life.
So, it seems Nick and Judy aren’t the only ones who have fallen in love with someone of a different order. Time will tell how many of these mammals come out of the woodwork.

It’s unfortunate though that not everyone will be as accepting of inter-order as Nick and Judy’s parents.

No one found the reference to the Calgary Flames in this last chapter. Theoren McDonald is named after two Flames players from 1989: Theoren Fleury and Lanny McDonald. How ironic too that I post this new chapter on the night the Flames are yet again eliminated from playoff contention.

Can you find any references in this chapter?

We’re starting to close in on the final showdown here, and I suspect that it will be a big one!

Coming up on May 3: Interrogations!

Questions? Critiques? Did a naked rabbit carrying eggs run through your house throwing the things everywhere? Leave a comment!
Nick and Judy had barely gotten back to the precinct before they were accosted by their fellow officers—specifically, Benjamin Clawhauser, who raced across the lobby to meet them the moment he saw the two tiny officers.

"You two have two interviewees waiting for you."

That stopped both mammals short, and Judy couldn't help the questioning look she gave the cheetah, who was rarely seen away from his desk with its stash of donuts and Gazelle paraphernalia.

Nick's expression was no less curious. "You OK, Spots? You look a little out of breath."

The cheetah took a deep breath and let it out. "You didn't hear, did you? About Rhinowitz and Fangmeyer?"

The two small officers shook their heads, Judy looking regretful. "We didn't hear anything. We were on the Meadowlands channel." Throughout the city, different channels were used in different regions and situations to prevent possible crosstalk. Savannah Central actually had two different groups of channels, as more police were on duty there at any given time than anywhere else.

There was also a citywide channel, and twelve different dispatch offices. Most local requests were handled by the responding precinct's dispatcher, while citywide dispatches were routed through the Precinct One dispatcher. The segregation served to help streamline the use of the limited radio channels, but also added increased frustration for officers at times.

At the expectant stare from the two small cops, Clawhauser shook his head. "Rhinowitz and Fangmeyer were shot at."

Judy's ears dropped. "Are they OK?"
The portly cheetah nodded. "They're both fine. They disarmed and arrested their attacker. Actually, he's your second interviewee."

The fox officer in their little group scoffed. "Yeah, shouldn't that be Rhinowitz and Stripes? We weren't there, obviously. Unless you skipped out on searching the courtyards and didn't tell me, Carrots?"

Judy snorted and rolled her eyes. "It's more likely that you took our cruiser for a joy ride instead of searching the showers, Slick. What's the interview about, Benny?"

"Liz wouldn't say, only said that you should come talk to her beforehand. She's in her cubicle." Clawhauser pointed behind him to the entrance to the cubicle farm.

Judy brightened up, silently hoping that whatever Fangmeyer had, it would be good for their case. "OK, thanks, Benny. We'll see what's up. See ya!"

Nick gave his customary two fingered salute and a wink as he turned to follow the rabbit. "Thanks, Spots! You're the best!"

Clawhauser sighed as he watched the two go, doing his best to suppress the squeal that threatened to well up inside him.

Nick and Judy navigated their way through the cluster of cubicles in the farm to the one they knew Fangmeyer used. One benefit of being the smallest meant that, unlike the rest of the officers who had to share cubicles with similar-sized officers, they had one to call their own, though they suspected that, when other similar-sized mammals joined, they'd end up sharing the space, too.

Arriving at the tigress' assigned cubicle, the bunny doe knocked on the corner of the partition before she walked in. "You wanted to see us, Liz?"

The tigress in question looked up from her report. "Yeah, Judy. The mammal we brought in had this in his truck." She handed Judy an evidence bag with a slip of paper in it. On the paper, there were two addresses—one for Pelter's family, and another one. "I ran the second address on that paper, and it came back red-flagged to your case. I assume it's important?"

Judy nodded. "It is. It's Taylor Blackford's home address. The other one that Nick called a welfare check on."

The tigress officer made a sound of understanding. "In that case, it's all yours."

"Really? A whole slip of paper, just for us? You shouldn't have, Fangmeyer!" Two groans emanated from two females, much to the delight of the smirking fox who said that.

"How in the world do you put up with that all day, Judy?" Fangmeyer stared hard at Nick as though he were somewhere between an annoying bee buzzing around her head and a puzzle to figure out.

Judy chuckled as she signed off on the evidence transfer form and gave the slip of paper to the snarky fox. "It takes practice. Thanks, Liz." She took a breath. "How are you doing? It's good that Bogo has you back on the beat, but how are you, really?"

The tigress sighed and was silent for a long moment. "I'm trying, Judy. I miss Eric, a lot. He was like a brother to me. You know, I was really looking forward to being partnered with him again once you had Nick here. It's tearing me up inside that we still don't know who killed him, not for sure, anyway. I know you're working as hard as you can, though. And I gotta keep doing the work that we both enjoyed. Make the world a better place, right?"
Judy nodded, and reached up to squeeze the much larger mammal's paw in a show of support. "That's right. And if you ever need a friend, we're here for you."

The tigress smirked. "We, huh? So, is it true? Are you two sharing an apartment?"

Nick began choking on the coffee he'd grabbed on the way past the break room, to which Judy rolled her eyes and began thumping Nick's back while she spoke. "Why is everyone so interested in our personal lives today?"

Fangmeyer grinned. "Oh, come on, Judy. You can't tell me you don't know why. You are the first high profile predator and prey couple I've ever heard of, and you are natural enemies to boot! Why do you think mammals are interested?"

Nick snorted. "Maybe because they see us as a blight on society? Or they think we're doing it to earn bunny scout points for an unfeeling government that wants to use us as a paragon of inter-order cooperation?"

Fangmeyer couldn't help but laugh at that. "Well, I don't know how 'unfeeling' Clawheed's government is, but at least you're not being the poster mammal for Bellwether!"

Both Nick and Judy gave an uneasy chuckle at that, having been reminded, perhaps unintentionally, of the ewe's plans to have Judy represent the face of the ZPD. They'd found out later that there had been plans to move that forward despite her resignation, and contrary to Bogo's wishes. The plans had been cancelled when the corrupt mayor had been arrested, though, much to Judy's relief.

For Nick, he was also reminded of the painful three months he'd spent apart from Judy. There had been times where he'd thought about seeing if he could find her and patch things up, but his pride and stubbornness had prevented him.

Now though, he wouldn't want to go back and change that. When you start meddling in the past, it changes the future, and he honestly wouldn't change anything about his life right now.

Shaking himself out of his thoughts, the fox looked to see that Judy had hopped up into the tigress' lap and was giving her a big bunny hug. After a second, Judy let go and hopped down, then turned back to the tiger and held up her fist, which the much larger female gladly bumped.

"Let us know if you need anything, okay, Liz? Nick and I will be here for ya."

Nick shook his head. "Absolutely. Just ask. You know, after we're done with this mindscrew of a case. Fifty-two dead bodies connected to it, plus the ones from the Grand Palm attack. Frankly, I think we're all gonna need a shrink after this."

Of course, Judy couldn't help but deliver a slight nudge to Nick's arm before admonishing him with a "Be nice!"

The tigress smiled anyways, and gave the fox a wink. "Thanks for being honest, Nick."

Nick winked and gave the larger predator a finger pistol salute. Judy just shook her head before taking Nick by the arm and leading him away. "Come on, Nick. We have two mammals to interview now."

The two made their way down from the cubicles to the cooler, passing through the beefed-up security that included two badge and ID checks and one signed form for both of them. Once they finally made it to the holding cells, Judy turned to her fox companion. "Any preferences on who we chat with first?"
The fox scratched his chin, then grinned. "I think the beaver from Prairie Den. Be nice to see him again!" Nick gave Judy a wink.

Judy rolled her eyes. "If he mouths off again, we can just let McHorn interview him. He's about as subtle as a cinderblock to the face."

The fox couldn't help the chuckle. McHorn was well known in the precinct for being a bit intimidating and very blunt. Detainees tended to try the "Officer abused me" card more often with him, despite being recorded. It never worked and usually just ended up with them having a nosebleed, a few stitches, and a massive headache on top of whatever they were being charged with.

The two entered the interview room, not surprisingly, to see the beaver and his city-appointed lawyer, a buck snowshoe hare, sitting on the other side of the steel table. The two officers sat themselves down on the other side, with Judy ensuring that the session video recorder was on and running, before turning back to the table and opening one of the file folders and pulling out a few files.

Nick was the one who decided to start the dialogue, though. "Verne Tremblay. So nice to see you again. How has your stay been?"

The beaver glared at the fox as though the predator were a bit of dirt stuck in his fur.

The fox cocked his head. "Nothing? No suggestions on how we can improve hospitality? No quips about how good the food is? No requests for a warmer blanket? We must be doing pretty good!"

The beaver just sat and glared. It was at this moment that the hare spoke up. "Henry Baxter. I am Mr. Tremblay's legal counsel. Can we get on with this, please?"

Judy nodded. "Verne Tremblay, we just want to ask some questions about the mammals you sold the two hundred midnicampum holicithias plants to on February 25th."

The beaver turned his attention to the rabbit doe.

Judy laid out the file photos they had of Woolter and Jesse Bighorn, as well as a screenshot from the florist's security footage. "Can you confirm that these were the two mammals you sold the plants to, Mr. Tremblay?"

The beaver looked at the photos, then at his lawyer, who nodded. "Yes, that's them."

The doe nodded. "Fair enough. Now, we need to know a couple of things about these mammals. First, when did they first contact you about this particular order?"

Tremblay scowled and stared at the steel table for a moment before he responded. "About a month before."

Judy nodded. "Can you tell me exactly what they said?"

At that, the beaver scoffed. "Oh, yeah, like you'd remember a phone conversation from six months ago. Last I checked, that's not a requirement to live in the area."

Nick smirked. "No, but it might come in handy when faced with a felony distribution charge. Funny how that works."

The hare interrupted. "I fail to see how this is relevant to the discussion."
Nick shrugged and changed tactics. "So, you don't remember the whole conversation, but I'm sure you remember some details. I mean… Two hundred Night Howler plants. That's enough that you'd have to track down other suppliers, right?"

The beaver scoffed and, for once, actually gave Nick a straight answer. "You'd be surprised how many flower farms were looking to get rid of their supply of the things. A few were offering a pretty steep discount."

"So, there was extra money to be made." Nick scratched his chin.

"Of course. I'm a businessman. And businessmen make money. Unlike you plebs that just live off us hard-working taxpayers."

Nick heard a slight intake of breath to his left and knew that Judy was centering herself so she wouldn't lose her temper. He didn't blame her.

Judy spoke out next, her voice even and measured. "Was there anything about the conversations that seemed abnormal?"

The beaver looked a bit more relaxed at having been spoken to by the rabbit officer rather than the fox. "Besides the big order and massive payout? No. Nothing out of the ordinary."

Judy scribbled something in her notebook, then thought for a second before speaking. "Anything else you can recall about the conversation? Did they mention any names, places, dates?"

The beaver thought a moment. "Yeah, one. Ramsy or Ramses or something. Something with Ram in it. I assumed he or she was their friend or something."

Judy's ears shot up at that, and she quickly wrote that down on her notepad, then stood up. "Thank you, Mr. Tremblay, you were much more helpful this time around."

The two mammals and the hare attorney stood, with the attorney following Judy and Nick out of the room. "I hope you two see that my client is more than willing to cooperate with you. We'd like you to drop the charges in exchange for his continued assistance."

Nick barked out a laugh. "'fraid that's not possible, my friend. He knowingly sold a controlled substance without obtaining a valid ID and buyer's license. That's the same as selling any other illegal street drug."

"Surely with the grace period—"

"The one that expired a month before the sale?" Nick interrupted.

"—you could see that this is a simple case of getting used to the new law."

Nick let out a bark of laughter, while Judy had to fight to control her grin. "Getting used to the new law? No, I'm sorry, but that law allowed for a thirty-day grace period before it came into effect."

The lawyer hare grinned. "But the onus is on you to prove that it wasn't a simple mistake. And that you rookies didn't make one yourself."

Judy's foot tapped on the ground. "Sir, if you are just going to continue to threaten us, then I believe the conversation is over." She attempted to step past the buck, only to be stopped in her tracks by a paw on her shoulder.
Her ears snapped straight back as she turned to glare at the buck.

"A moment, Officer Hopps. I wonder if you'd like to catch lunch sometime?" The lawyer gave the doe a suggestive look and a self-confident smirk, completely ignoring the daggers sent his way by both officers, and the growl emanating from one.

The question was so blatant and out of left field that Judy couldn't help but stare at the buck for a moment, before bursting out laughing.

The buck's grin faltered at the doe's laughter.

"Listen, bucko, not only is that extremely unprofessional for you to even ASK that, but it's also a conflict of interest. Even if it wasn't, I'm already spoken for, and you aren't even close to being my type, so I'd suggest you walk away, and I won't charge YOU with harassing an officer!" As she was saying this, she reached up and gripped the hare's wrist, forcibly removing the offending paw from her shoulder. The wince of pain on the other lagomorph's face told both of the officers that the doe's grip may have been a little tighter than normal.

The buck pulled his arm away from Judy's grip and let it drop to his side.

Judy smirked. "I mean it, Mr. Baxter. Walk away."

The lawyer shot a disgusted look at Judy but did as he was told.

The fox and rabbit watched the hare walk off. Nick turned and gave Judy a sidelong smirk. "Sure you don't want to arrest him?"

The doe shook her head. "Nah. He'll be in hot enough water when we submit our report on that little incident." She smirked.

Nick immediately caught her drift, and the smirk was mirrored on his own face. "Sly bunny."

The doe winked and nudged the fox playfully with her elbow. "Dumb fox."

Felicity Stang had finally returned to the city after visiting her family in Deerbrooke County. And in a way she wished she had stayed out there. As it was, she was back, and she couldn't change that.

Over the last week, she'd thought long and hard about what she'd been doing, and had pored over numerous behavioral studies of various predator species, comparing them to what she knew about prey species. Her research had been humbling, to say the least, and she'd been sent into a spiral of remorse and regret, wondering how she'd been so blind and stupid.

She'd even found a few more videos that had shown up online of the fox and rabbit cop pair, including leaked security footage of the arrest of the former mayor, with the bunny leaning on the fox for support as though it were the most natural thing in the world, and another done by a bystander at a frozen pond somewhere in Tundratown, of the two apparently skating, and the fox having a hard time of it.

And she had been trying to think of a way out that wouldn't land her on death row. But now, it might be too late. She'd returned to the cell's lab that morning to gather what data she could under the guise of trying to work out a way to shut down monogamy instincts inherent to certain predators.

She'd thought about her moves. She'd gather what she could onto a USB drive and try to sneak out with it. Take it to the police. What she should have done from the beginning. She knew there was no
way she could avoid prison, but maybe she'd get off easier.

That was, until Damian had told her that the next public test had been moved up by the higher-ups. Even though she didn't know what they'd had planned, she had a hard time masking her worry as she stared at the Texas longhorn bull in front of her.

"If you have any friends or family in the Rainforest District or the canals, you'll want to get them out. Within a week."

She took a second to gather her thoughts, and asked, in as level and even a tone as possible, "Why is that?"

"The bosses decided we were ready for the next test. Can't say much more. We've already had the production cells synthesizing the product."

The mustang mare frowned. "I haven't been around for the last week. Are you sure you have the formula right? Only predators are affected? Monogamy instincts suppressed?"

"We tested it several times on several canid species after you left. Only the first pair resisted. We changed the mixture up, and the pairs after that were much more... amenable to our desires."

Felicity plastered a curious expression on her face, one that she hoped looked real. "You said they were canids? What species?"

"We had to be careful. Without the delivery van, and with so much heat in Zootopia, we had to look elsewhere. Our... target demographic... isn't as numerous outside the city, but we were able to pick up some smaller species of canids in Bunnyburrow, Stony Mountain House, and Harvest Moon Hollow. Kit foxes, mostly. They don't like to live in the city. A few other larger species too. I'd personally like to have tested this on a few red foxes, but that upstart filth in the department seems to have made them think that they can be seen as something useful."

The mare didn't say anything, but instead put on an air of thoughtfulness. "Guess you don't need me for a few more days. Mind if I head home... and tell my friends to get out of town?"

The bull longhorn nodded. "We'll call you when we're ready to analyze the results of the test."

It took everything in Felicity to not run out of that room like her mane was on fire. Instead, she walked out and back to her car. It would take a while to get from the makeshift lab on the outskirts of the Meadowlands to her home in Sahara Square. The lab was in a pharmacy that had been up for sale for years, without any buyers. Not surprising, either. Ever since the gang war years ago, no one had wanted anything to do with the area if they could help it. She always felt like she needed to keep extra cans of pepper spray and move as quickly as she could.

Fortunately, her car was parked right outside, and it seemed that most mammals were either away or in their houses. No one was around, and she couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief as she got into her car.

Back in the lab, a ram walked up next to the Texas longhorn. Doug's voice was its usual monotone when he spoke. "She seemed a bit off."

The larger mammal nodded. "Follow her. And if she goes anywhere or does anything besides what she says she's going to do... you know what to do."

Doug nodded, leaving out the back door and taking his nondescript car out of the rear loading dock, turning to follow the slightly flashier car of the mustang mare.
"So how do you want to do this one? Good fox, bad bunny? Funny cop, boring cop?" Nick's smirk, then wince at Judy's none-too-subtle punch to the arm was so typical of their behavior that none of the other officers that witnessed the interaction batted an eyelash.

"That stuff only works in movies, Nick, but if you want, I'll be good cop, and you be bad cop." Judy gave her fox a half-lidded smirk.

Nick put on an expression of being affronted. "Hey, why do you get to be good cop? Are you saying I'm not a good cop?"

The doe rolled her eyes as she gestured to the duty guard to unlock the appropriate cell. "Of the two of us, which one spent two-thirds of her life training for this job?"

"Touché."

Before heading to their second interview, the two had stopped to make a quick photocopy of the slip of paper Liz had given them earlier, before securing the original with the rest of their case evidence. The new reindeer, one Heath Jones, didn't appear to have a criminal record, either, or at least, he'd never been identified in any cases, his only official identifications being his DMV record and a membership to a gun club in a town about a half hour east of the city.

They didn't have a lot of time to dig any deeper, though, as the reindeer in question was waiting for them. Somewhat bizarrely, he'd waived the right to an attorney, leaving them free to question him.

The door was opened for them, and the two mammals walked inside. The reindeer was chained to the table in the middle of the room, and it was onto this table that Judy jumped, tossing the photocopy of the slip of paper in front of the buck deer.

Jones looked at the paper with a disinterested expression, then at the rabbit doe standing on the table in front of him. Just out of headbutting and antler reach, he noted.

"What's this?"

The rabbit in front of him gave him an insipid smirk. "It's a piece of paper found in your wallet. Two addresses on it. Addresses that are very interesting to us. Care to explain them?"

"Never seen them before in my life."

The wretched red furred beast that had entered the room with the rabbit doe rolled his eyes. "That's what they all say. Look, pal. You're going away for assault with a deadly weapon on a police officer. Why not make it easier on yourself and tell us what you were doing there and why you had that piece of paper in your wallet?"

The reindeer let out a snorting laugh. "Yeah, like you can prove that you didn't just plant that in there. Or that you didn't just fabricate it and throw it in front of me thinking I'd cop to whatever harebrained trumped-up charge you want to stick on me. Get real. You guys aren't even real cops."

Nick made a mock gasp and turned to stare at the doe beside him, his muzzle an expression of fake hurt. "Carrots, you're not a real cop? When? Why? How could you not tell me?"

The rabbit smirked. "I thought I was a real cop. This nice brass badge says I'm a real cop. I had no idea that changed!"
Nick looked down at his own shirt and touched a claw to the brass badge on his own chest. "Hey, I have one too! Do you suppose these are fake?"

While the two were bantering, the reindeer's attention bounced between them, then came to rest on the piece of paper in front of him. In a split second, before either cop could react, he lunged forward, catching the paper between his teeth, and scarfed it down, smirking at the shocked stares of the two smaller mammals. "And now you have no evidence," The reindeer remarked with a smirk of his own.

After a few more seconds of silence, both cops broke out in near identical smirks of their own, before the rabbit spoke up. "Well, cellulose is good for you, but I'm not sure that printer toner is."

The fox spoke up next. "If you were hungry, we could have brought you some food, not that worthless photocopy you just ate."

The ungulate blanched. He'd underestimated them. The rabbit spoke again. "Now that you've tried to destroy our evidence, perhaps you can tell us how you might have come across those addresses. Pretty specific addresses, too. Both of them on our watch list. Tell us what's going on, and maybe we can help you out."

The reindeer stared at them for a second. "I ain't saying nothin'!"

The rabbit and her wretched beast looked at each other. "OK, well, how about Jackson Redfohn? How do you know him?"

*How the hell did they figure that out?! Jackson said that they wouldn't be able to connect him with the two in jail!*

Heath Jones realized though that the two popos across from him had been standing there staring at him with insipid smirks growing on their faces.

"I have no idea who this Jackson Redfohn is," he spat at them, deliberately mispronouncing his name.

The fox shrugged, turning to his companion. "Oh. Well, then, I guess we're done here, aren't we, Officer Hopps?"

The doe's smirk only grew. "I think you are right, Officer Wilde. No sense wasting time here if he doesn't know anything at all. Let's go."

A self-satisfied smirk crossed the reindeer's face as the two members of the fuzz left the room.

Outside, Nick and Judy turned to each other.

"He's lying." The statement left both of their mouths at the same time. They both stared at each other before breaking out in grins.

Judy gestured to Nick. "You go first."

The fox nodded. "Well, if he really didn't know about those addresses, I don't think there would be any real reason for him to destroy the evidence by eating it. Especially since copier paper doesn't taste all that good."

Judy made a noise of agreement. "Did you see how he jerked and looked surprised when we mentioned Redfohn's name? Not very good at hiding body language."
"So, the question is, HOW did he know Redfohn and how are these two connected with everyone else?"

Judy thought for a moment as she started walking back to their cubicle, her fox trailing behind her. "Well, what do we know about Heath Jones?"

"Well, we know that he's a reindeer named Heath Jones," Nick smirked.

Judy rolled her eyes and couldn't help the groan of exasperation that escaped her lips. "I meant what ELSE do we know?"

With a shrug, Nick thought back to their findings less than an hour ago. "Just his home address and that he belongs to a gun club."

Judy let out a sigh. "For someone who was clearly ready to kill another mammal, there sure isn't much on him. No parking violations or speeding tickets. It's like he never existed until this morning."

The fox thought for a moment. "Think someone is helping him?"

"Either that, or he was laying low."

They reached their cubicle and Judy sat herself heavily into her chair. "There has to be something we're missing."

Across from her, Nick leaned against his desk and crossed his arms, deep in thought.

Judy mentally retraced the entire conversation, and the one before that, all the way back to the ID lookup on Heath Jones. "Wait… The gun club. We've… Someone else was a member of a gun club! Doug! Remember what Bellwether said?"

Nick's head snapped up, along with his ears. "That's right! She said that Doug was a member of a gun club!"

They'd checked the local gun clubs after Bellwether had dropped the hint, and none of them had any rams as members, much less ones named Doug. They hadn't had time to expand their search into the surrounding boroughs and counties, though.

Judy grinned. "If Doug's a member of this gun club…"

Nick couldn't help but mirror the grin on the doe's face. "… It could explain how they could be connected to all this!"

Judy pulled the gun club membership card up from the evidence catalog on her computer "Mountain View Gun Club. Let's give them a call," Judy commented, picking up her desk phone.

Nick watched with an easy smile on his face as Judy conversed with the mammal on the other end. "Hello? Yes… This is Officer Judy Hopps with the ZPD. We have a… a mammal of interest that may have identified a member of your club in connection to an active case. We're looking for a ram named Doug. Last name? Possibly Ramsey or Ramses. Yes, thank you."

After a few moments, Judy's eyes opened wide. "Doug Ramses is an active member? Yes… Yes, thank you. Have a great day!" She hung up and turned to her computer, pulling up the DMV database and typing in the name and species. Three hits came back, not surprising, but three was better than the several hundred they'd gotten when they had searched for him after the Night Howler
incident. The first was an elderly black ram whose license hadn't been renewed in 10 years. The second was a teenager who had just gotten his license 6 months prior.

The third was the jackpot.

"That's him! Look, no horns, same colour fur—well, wool, everything!"

Judy's muzzle-splitting grin was mirrored by her fox partner.

Chapter End Notes

YEEEEEESSSSSSSSSSSSS!!! They finally have Doug's full identification! Things are really moving forward! And they put that hare lawyer in his place too XD.

So, I'm going to be out of the country for a couple days next week. Kind of a whirlwind trip south of the US Canada border...Wish me luck!

A couple people found the two references in the last chapter. Can you find any in this one?

Coming up on May 17: The Evils Among Us!

Questions? Critiques? Did you get sick from too much Easter chocolate? Leave a comment!
The Evils Among Us

Chapter Summary

Warrants Served, ugly discoveries made.

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: I was in Utah observing the sesquicentennial celebrations of the completion of the transcontinental railroad when I decided to try sending in my bid to own Zootopia. Maybe sending it in the US to a US destination would be better, right? Wrong. Casey Junior's engineer thought the bid was kindling and threw it in the fire, after he saw a flying elephant with a mouse in it's hat. So I still don't own Zootopia.

Thanks to TheoreticallyEva for editing this chapter and providing some suggestions...and feedback!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Excited didn't even begin to describe Nick and Judy's mood that Friday morning, as the warrant for the distribution warehouse had finally gone through, along with the expedited warrant for Doug Ramses' home in the Meadowlands. They also had a lunch date with Nick's mom, though she'd seemed a bit on edge when they'd talked to her the night before.

They'd decided to serve Doug's warrant first, since he was wanted in connection with two high-profile cases. The ram had been employed at the Zootopia Department of Water and Irrigation until about six months prior to Bellwether becoming mayor, after which he'd dropped off the grid, though his bank statements showed that he continued to make payments to the same landlord he had previously. His last one had been just a couple weeks ago, and a phone call to the landlord confirmed that as far as he knew, the ram still lived in the unit.

"I have to say, Carrots, it'll be nice to give that ram a dose of justice, after all this time."

The doe driving the car nodded her head in agreement. "He's been on the run all this time. If he's even still there, he'll probably be watching for us."

Nick nodded. "We'll need to park where he can't see us coming."

"What side of the building is he on?"

The fox shuffled the papers in front of him. "West side, facing the parking lot and the front entrance, if these floor plans are anything to go by."

The doe sighed. They didn't want to bring the landlord in on their plan, so it looked like they would have to try to sneak in and hope the ram wasn't watching through a window. "What about the other
More shuffling of papers. "Well, there's one on the north end of the building. That's just a regular door. There's also the garage door on the south end."

Judy thought for a moment, thumb tapping on the steering wheel as she drove. "Got a plan, Slick?"

Nick stared at the floor plans. "An officer at each of the doors. We've got Higgins, Rhinowitz, and Fangmeyer. Maybe a cruiser at the garage door, so he can't drive away. You and I do the breach."

Judy nodded. "Let's put Rhinowitz and his cruiser on the garage door. Higgins can cover the other side exit. We'll go in through the main entrance, and Fangmeyer can cover that entrance behind us."

Another thought occurred to her. "What about balconies?"

Her fox companion frowned. "He's on the fifth floor, so if he does decide to leave that way, he'll have to scale the outside of the building. Or take the express route down, but that might end up with us scraping him off the sidewalk."

Judy groaned. "I don't think I'm quite ready for that."

"Can't disagree with you there, Fluff. Especially not if we want any appetite at Yun Quan's."

Yun Quan's was a popular Chinese and western cuisine restaurant in a jungle biome area of the Rainforest district, and it was there that Marian had invited the two for lunch. Neither mammal wanted to miss that, given how difficult it was to find a break in their own schedule that lined up with Marian's. The fox hadn't seen his mom since they'd gotten back from Bunnyburrow, and she had been "up to her eyeballs in work," too.

They'd gotten to the precinct bright and early that morning, and had been pleasantly surprised to see the two delivered warrants. There hadn't been any word from the morgue or the lab, and a phone call to each had gone unanswered—not surprising if they were overwhelmed with work. They'd check again when they got back to the precinct, but for now, they had an apartment to search.

Judy pulled into the Apartment's parking lot and found a spot outside the line of sight of Doug's balcony. Higgins pulled up on one side, with Fangmeyer and Rhinowitz on the other. The hippo sergeant rolled down his window. "So, what's the plan, Hopps?"

After the doe explained the duo's plan to her superior, Higgins frowned. "Not sure I like that, Hopps. You aren't exactly the best mammals to be doing the breaching. And don't bother pulling the 'it's personal' card on me because of your involvement with the Night Howler's case. I think it's better if Rhinowitz does the breach."

The rhino in question shook his head. "You obviously didn't see what she did to my brother when she was in the academy. She's the only one who's ever knocked him out cold."

The hippo sergeant processed that. "I still don't like it, Hopps, but I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. Let's move out."

Higgins and Rhinowitz moved to cover their exits, while Fangmeyer followed the smaller two officers to the front door. They had to use the first responder key to gain access to the building, but once they were in, the two smallest officers proceeded up to the fifth floor. The signs on the walls allowed them to quickly locate the apartment in question.

The two officers stood to either side of the door, each pulling out their lethals and checking them. At the nod from her fox, the doe reached out and rapped on the door, orienting her ears so that she could
pick up on any sounds coming from the apartment. "ZPD, OPEN UP!"

The doe's sensitive ears could hear all manner of activity coming from the other units on the floor. A TV, video games, music, an argument a few doors down, and the one across the hall... She fought the blush and tuned that one out.

But there were no sounds coming from the unit they wanted. She rapped on the door again. "ZPD! OPEN THE DOOR OR WE WILL DO IT OURSELVES!"

Still nothing. The doe keyed her radio. "Hopps to Fangmeyer, you all clear?"

"Nothing out here, short stuff. I'm watching grass grow."

"Higgins clear."

"Rhinowitz. Ain't got nothin' on my side. Just some angry beaver that came over to yell at me about her tenant being a slob."

Judy nodded at Nick, who shifted his position to face the door. "Copy that. Hopps and Wilde are breaching."

The doe backed up a few paces down the hall, turning to face one wall. She coiled her powerful legs and pushed off, twisting to meet the wall and bounce off of it, adding to her momentum. Three more bounces later, and she let the full force of her legs slam into the door, right beside the deadbolt lock. The sound of splintering wood was heard, and the door burst open. Judy dropped to the floor in a roll, coming up on one knee to scan the area, pulling her lethal from its holster in the process.

Nothing.

"What the…?" Judy looked around, perplexed.

The apartment looked lived in, that was for sure. It was well-furnished, and the walls had plenty of personal decorations. Judy gestured to Nick that he should follow her as she got to her feet and moved deeper into the apartment.

This particular unit had two bedrooms, a study, a living room, a kitchenette, and two bathrooms, and it was through each of these that the duo searched.

No one was home. Judy keyed her mic. "Hopps to all units. Code four here. Suspect not in the unit."

"Fangmeyer here. He didn't come out the front exit or shimmy down the front of the building."

Rhinowitz called in next. "He didn't come through me, either. Now can we please wrap this up? This beaver is grinding my last nerve." The big mammal sounded annoyed.

"Higgins here on the north side. He didn't come out this way, or down this side of the building. I'm coming in. Rhinowitz, you and Fangmeyer are dismissed."

Nick ran his finger over the kitchen countertop, then looked at it. "Hey Carrots, check this out." He showed her his fingerpad, a fine layer of dust on it.

The doe frowned and went to look at some of the other furniture and surfaces.

All of them had a very fine, almost invisible layer of dust on them. Her eyebrows went up. "Looks like Doug hasn't been here in a couple weeks." Putting on a pair of gloves, she picked up a bill from the coffee table, clearly addressed to Douglas Ramses, and unfolded it. "He even payed his Internet
The sound of coughing and gagging came from the kitchenette, and Judy looked over to see Nick slamming the refrigerator shut with one paw, holding his nose with the other. "You OK, Nick?"

The fox fanned the air in front of him, looking green. "Yeah. But I think his milk was a few weeks expired."

Judy winced. Back home, you barely had to worry about expired milk. Most jugs of the stuff didn't last for one meal, much less for the whole week or two before their expiry date. Even when she moved to the city, she didn't have to worry about it much, since she barely had room enough in the tiny refrigerator/freezer combo for a few microwave meals. The one time she did buy a jug of milk, she'd let it go bad, and the resulting stench had forced her to buy several cans of air freshener and keep the window open for a week.

The doe moved to the kitchen and peered into the refrigerator. Most of the stuff was still OK, it looked like, but the milk was definitely bad, the expiry date about a week ago.

"OK, so we know he was here within the last two weeks." She moved back to the coffee table and examined one of the envelopes on it. "This was postmarked on Monday last week, so someone was here sometime after that."

Nick left the kitchen and moved into the bedroom, just as Higgins showed up at the door. "Find anything so far?" the hippo asked, his eyes roaming the unit.

Judy shrugged as she finished going through the mail. "Just some expired milk and last week's bills."

"And one messy bedroom!" Nick's voice didn't sound too pleased, and Judy had to suppress a snicker, remembering the disaster of a bedroom he'd had to search at the last apartment, Woolter and Jesse's.

The doe got up and made her way to the bedroom. While the rest of the apartment was relatively tidy, the bedroom was fairly cluttered. Mostly boxes and clothes strewn about. Nick was rummaging through one of those boxes, looking for anything out of the ordinary. After a moment he shoved it aside and moved on to another.

"Books in that one… Mostly Robert Pawdlum novels… This one's chemistry books… Looks like something from a high school or university." He held up one that looked to be several years old, at least. Judy took it and flipped open the cover. On the inside, above the copyright information and bylines, the words 'Property of Douglas Ramses' were printed on the corner of the page in red pen.

"Well, at least we know this was Doug's." She showed Nick and Higgins the signature. "And now we also have a sample of his pawwriting."

"Hello…" Nick pulled a small piece of paper from the bottom of the box he'd been searching.

Judy moved to stand beside the fox and eyed the paper. "A record of employment. For Zootopia Power and Water. Nice job, Slick!" She gave him a light punch on the shoulder.

"Again with the punches, Judy! Anyway, says here he was let go a couple years ago. Doesn't say why or what his position was. If he worked there, though, he'd have information on what buildings are used by the city, and which ones are available to bunker down in."

Judy nodded as she pulled out a small zippered baggie from her belt and opened it for Nick to drop the sheet of paper into. "He probably made some friends that could continue to feed him up-to-date
information, or even cover his tracks after he was let go."

The two continued to rummage through the bedroom, with Judy crawling under the bed again to peer into the stash of boxes hidden there. Unlike the last time she'd had to do this, though, she was able to resist the urge to sneeze. Two of the boxes looked like random junk, but behind them, she found a long hardshell case, and it was this that she pulled out, backing out the way she came.

Despite how large and bulky it was, the doe pulled the case up and onto the bed and tried to open it.

Locked.

"Lima beans," she cursed under her breath, looking around for anything that looked like a key.

Nick, on the other hand, was looking through the closet and poked his head out from between two suits. "You what now?"

She gestured to the case on the bed. "I found that. It's locked and takes a key."

The fox scoffed. "I guess it would have been too much to ask that it be a combination like 12345678."

Judy grinned. "You mean the kind of thing an idiot would have on their luggage?"

The fox's grin mirrored her own. "Precisely." He thought for a moment. "If it was something important, you'd want the key nearby in case you needed to get it out. Or at least in a logical place."

He walked over to the nightstand and pulled open the drawer. After a few moments of digging through it, he closed it and moved to the dresser.

While he was doing that, Judy moved into the attached bathroom and started looking through the medicine cabinet. Mostly aspirin and acetaminophen, some topical ointments, and… Judy almost dropped the last one when she read the words 'personal lubricant' on the tube, thanking the heavens she'd been wearing gloves. Setting the item aside, she took off the gloves and dumped them in an evidence bag before putting some new ones on.

The next several pill bottles only held their expected contents, what at least looked to be over-the-counter medications. The lab would be able to confirm that. The last bottle gave her pause when she shook it, though. The others were filled and sounded like a weird kit rattle. This one had a single item in it, and the prescription label was one that had been filled years ago.

The doe popped the cap off and peered inside.

Rather than the medication she expected to see, a small brass key gleamed in the bottom of the bottle. "Bingo." She carried the key back out to the case she'd found earlier.

Nick looked up as she walked past. "Find something, Carrots?"

Judy nodded as she poured the key out of the bottle into her paw. "Possibly. A key in a pill bottle. Looks about the right size."

Nick slammed the dresser drawer he'd been digging through. "I hope so. I'm a bit tired of digging through Doug's unmentionables. At least you didn't have to do that!"

The doe shook her head. "No, I had to find his tube of personal lubricant."

Judy slipped the key into the case's lock, sparing a sideways glance at her fox. His expression was
priceless, a mixture of confusion, horror, and disgust, and snorted, trying to suppress the laughter threatening to well up within her. She imagined that her face had looked the same way when she'd made the discovery.

Her fox shook his head. "Just make sure you wash your paws."

The doe nodded as she fitted the key into the slot and turned it. "I was wearing gloves, Slick. NOT the same ones I'm wearing now. The ones I was wearing went into evidence."

The lock clicked and the latch on the case popped open. The two lifted the lid, both making a noise of shock at the same time. There in front of them was a high-powered dart rifle, like the small dart pistol they'd confiscated from Bellwether almost a year ago, scaled up multiple times. In a separate compartment's foam cradle was a detachable scope, and a large compressed air cartridge in yet another compartment. The weapon was a granite gray in colour, except for two violet stains near the muzzle.

Nick was the first to break the silence. "Call me crazy, but I don't think that looks like a Zerf gun."

Judy shook her head. "Obviously not. It looks like a higher-powered version of the pellet gun we confiscated from Bellwether."

The fox nodded. "That little pellet shooter of Bellwether's was short-range, at best. This thing is... quite a bit more. And that stain on the end... It looks like Night Howlers..."

The doe couldn't help but agree. "Colours in flower petals, especially the dark ones, stain. It's a pain enough to get off of floors, sinks, or tubs... You know, smooth surfaces... But on porous things like sheets or this metal, it would almost never come out."

Nick thought a moment. "What was it that Doug said about Otterton on the phone before we took off with his subway car?"

Judy frowned. "Something about hitting him through the window of a moving car."

The fox nodded. "Right. With Bellwether's pellet gun, you wouldn't be able to hit a target like that unless you were incredibly lucky or a very good shooter, and chances are, the driver would have seen you by the side of the road."

The doe scratched her chin. "A lot of the other savage cases seemed to happen out of nowhere too. Some were in wide open spaces, and some in crowded streets. But no one ever reported hearing a gas discharge or saw a gun of any sort. And Manchas went savage, and the only thing near HIM was a tree a hundred feet from his kitchen window."

Nick stared at the air rifle. "You'd need something like this to be able to hit your target and not be detected or worry about splash. You saw how much of a mess of my neck fur that blueberry made. Point blank, some of that is gonna splash back on the shooter."

"This is definitely coming back to the station with us." The doe photographed the contents of the case and then slammed it shut and moved it by the door. She looked around. "I don't think there's anything else we need to look for here right now. We'll have someone watch the place in case he comes back, but from the looks of things, it's been a couple weeks since he was last here."

Nick nodded. He was a bit disappointed that the ram hadn't been home at the time so they could actually make the arrest, but they'd grabbed a couple nice pieces of evidence in the meantime. Can't go wrong with that.
The two made a brief check of the other two rooms, both of which were completely empty, before turning to leave. The fox was about to walk through the front door when he paused and looked around, frowning.

Judy had gone ahead of him several paces but paused when she sensed Nick had stopped, turning back towards her fox. "Something the matter, Nick?"

Nick was quiet for a second. "Does something seem missing to you, Carrots?"

Judy stepped up next to him and looked around. "Not really." The TV was on its TV stand, with the blu-ray player and Pawstation right underneath it. "What are you thinking?"

The fox frowned. "When was the last time you saw an apartment without a computer?"

Judy snorted. "Last night. At home. Neither of us have computers, Nick."

Nick had to concede the point.

The doe looked around again. "Still, it does seem kind of odd. He has a Pawstation and a TV, and he pays for Internet, but no computer. Maybe we can get a warrant for his Internet usage, see what he's been up to."

"Good idea, Fluff."

The two informed Sergeant Higgins of their plan and headed off for their second appointment of the day… One for which they would need lab services and a lot more officers.

It was a normal day in a normal shipping yard in one of Zootopia's normal shipyard areas. At least that's what everyone wanted you to think. And in fact, that's what most people thought until four police cruisers rolled up in front of Zootopia Coast Distributors, disgorging eight officers, followed by a number of Zootopia customs vehicles. The small army that then descended onto the warehouse certainly turned a few heads.

The officers all marched into the office area, and the small rabbit spoke up with a surprisingly authoritative voice. "All right, everyone, I need you all to stop what you're doing immediately and come out to the lobby. No exceptions. This is an official police and customs investigation."

In addition to the warrant, they'd brought the customs agency in on the discrepancies they'd found in the shipping manifests. Customs hadn't been too pleased and had requested full jurisdiction, but Judy and later Bogo had been firm that the connection to a murder made that impossible. Customs had reluctantly agreed to share the jurisdiction.

Half of the ZPD officers fanned out into the various offices, rounding up the employees, while the other half pulled the employees out of the warehouse and container yard areas.

Of course, the ZPD interrupting a work day never occurs without anger from the owners of the business you interrupted, and the mammals of Zootopia Coast Distributors were certainly not a cheerful bunch when they were all gathered in the lobby.

"Hey! I hope you know that you're costing us hundreds of thousands of dollars every hour you're wasting of our time!"

"Who do you think you are to barge into our workplace!"
"I want to talk to your superior!"

"I pay your wages! You work for me!"

The twenty or so mammals in the lobby at the time were all talking, then yelling over each other, and it wasn't until Pennington trumpeted that they all shut up.

Everyone turned to look at the elephant officer, who was pointing at Judy. The doe in question cleared her throat. "Now that we have your attention," she began, holding up a piece of paper. "This is a search and seizure warrant. I'm not going into the details, but certain discrepancies have come to the attention of the ZPD and Zootopia Customs. Sit tight. We'll call on you if we need you."

Pennington and Fangmeyer stayed in the lobby to keep an eye on the staff while the customs and ZPD officers fanned out to start digging for evidence with their lab services counterparts. Customs was more focused on the containers in the shipping yard, lab services on the computers, and the ZPD on digging up any other evidence of malpractice on the company's part.

For Nick and Judy, they also had reason to question a specific employee. Judy looked at the crowd of mammals in front of her. "We're looking for Lisa Jones."

The crowd shifted and murmured, before a mid-sized musk deer stepped forward. "That's me."

The doe gestured to an empty office. They'd use that as their makeshift interrogation room. "Come with us. We need to ask you some questions."

The ungulate cautiously followed the two smaller animals. "Will I need a lawyer?"

Nick shook his head. "We just need to ask you some questions about Taylor Blackford and Spencer Callahan, if you don't mind."

The musk deer was a little wary. "Questions like what?"

Judy gestured to the chair on the guest's side of the desk in the office. "We just want to know a bit about them. Relationships with co-workers, behaviour, that kind of thing."

Their ulterior motive was, of course, to try and see who all they may have conspired with, but past personal and professional relationships was a good cover story for the latter.

The musk deer shrugged as she sat down. "I'm not sure I can tell you much about Spencer. He worked in Taylor's division. I've only been the Mammal Resources director for a couple of years. I came over from one of the oil companies downtown. Step up from MR administrator, you know?"

Nick nodded. "I can understand that. Were you hit with a glass ceiling?"

Lisa Jones shook her head. "After Bellwether, a lot of corporations, including the oil company I worked for, gave their predator employees… Well, I guess a nice way of putting it is sympathy raises and promotions. Supposedly to show that they supported predators. Not that I have anything against you," she commented, glancing at Nick. "But when you're passed over for someone with half your skillset and a quarter the competence, who happens to also be your underling, just because they want to show that they support predators, it tends to sting, you know?" Nick nodded at that.

"Anyway, back to your question. Spencer almost always worked the evening and night shifts, so I never met him in person. I just knew him from what was in his file. No disciplinary action whatsoever until someone filed a complaint against him a couple of weeks before he was let go. Said he would disappear for extended periods of time, and no one could find him."
The two officers looked at each other. A couple weeks before he got fired would have put it about the same time that he would have been slipping out to talk to Wolford. Judy turned to the musk deer. "Who filed the complaint?"

Jones thought for a moment. "I honestly don't remember. You guys are searching my office, though. I suspect you'll find the complaint in Callahan's file."

Nick cocked his head. "Blackford didn't have that?" Judy was busily scribbling in her notebook.

"No, he took that out of a different file cabinet. I didn't even know he'd stolen it until the day you guys arrested him. When you started asking around about Spencer, that name sounded familiar, so I looked for his employment record, and it wasn't there."

"You didn't mention the complaint, though, when we were last here."

The mammal resources director frowned. "I didn't think about it at the time, honestly."

"How well did you know Blackford?"

The musk deer sat back. "Him, I knew a lot better, or at least I thought I did. He struck me as a little driven if not exactly the most educated mammal. He could run the container yard just fine, but he wouldn't be able to run the company, so my colleagues say. Thing is, I saw him change in the last couple of months. He seemed a bit more jumpy, like he was expecting a bogeymammal to get him at some point. Like he was always looking over his shoulder. I asked him about it, and he said something about personal issues."

Judy was about to ask something more when a knock at the door came. The doe looked up to see one of the customs mammals standing in the entrance to the small office.

"Excuse me for interrupting, Officer Hopps, but there's something you need to see."

Judy frowned and looked at Nick, who shrugged with an equally perplexed expression on his face. She turned and looked back at the customs officer. "What's this about?"

The customs mammal, a lean oryx, shook his head and tilted it at the musk deer. "Not here."

Understanding the other mammal's meaning, the two ZPD officers got up and followed the customs agent out into the shipping yard.

"After your tip about the ambiguities of that suspect shipment, we reviewed that particular approving agent's history, and found a couple of similar ones, all through this shipping facility," the oryx, whose nametag identified him as Meers, explained as he walked. "Of course, those containers were long gone, and the drop addresses were all vacant lots, so we ran out of leads."

Nick cocked his head. "And you were on the lookout for new ones today?"

The oryx grinned at the fox officer and nodded. "And we found one. Came in a couple days ago on a containership from Paiwan. A 53-foot container only labelled as 'Agriculture Products' and destined for a suspicious address."

Judy's expression was curious. "What address?"

"One for a water pump station in Sahara Square," At the two small officer's expressions, the oryx rolled his eyes. "We thought it was crazy, too."
"Don't you rotate out the officers that inspect incoming shipments?" Nick inquired, an eyebrow raised.

Meers sighed. "Normally, yes, but this particular officer pulled some strings to be on the crew for this particular container yard, several times. All of them seemed to coincide with a suspicious shipment."

Judy's ears perked at that. "Where's the officer now?"

The oryx shook his head. "He quit, I guess. I'm not really up on the status of the Internal Affairs investigation. Just what I was told."

The fox ZPD officer nodded. "Need-to-know basis."

The customs agent made a grunt of agreement and led the two smaller mammals deeper into the yard. Nick and Judy, however, exchanged glances. Whoever this customs agent was, they needed to talk to him.

Eventually, the oryx stopped in front of a large container that had been set aside by a loader operator for inspection. Even in smaller container yards like this one, it was impossible to inspect all of them, so most were usually only spot-checked. That brought an interesting question, and Judy turned to the oryx.

"Most of these containers probably weren't checked. Why would your guy have forced himself onto the team and then signed off on these containers? Wouldn't that draw suspicion to him?"

Meers winked at the bunny. "I can see why you're the first rabbit officer. Good thinking. Best I can figure, there were two possibilities. One is so that he can eliminate the chance that some other agent will find the container and turn it back to its country of origin. The other is that he was under pressure from someone else. I don't much like either possibility."

Judy and Nick both nodded, incensed at the idea that a mammal would throw away the oath they took.

As the oryx opened the door to the container, the rabbit and her partner turned to peer inside. And the stainless steel contraptions with pipes and tubes running willy-nilly was unlike anything they'd ever seen.

Judy was the first to speak up. "OK, I grew up on a farm. So, unless I'm totally off my rocker, that doesn't look like any 'agricultural products' I've ever seen."

Chapter End Notes

In terms of individual scenes, I think that's the single simplest chapter in the story. Two scenes, though I hope they were still entertaining.

My trip to the states went well, although now I need to deal with the extra work that has piled up. Yay.

No one caught any references in the last chapter! So sad! Can you find any in this one?
Coming up on May 31: Subdued Lunch!

Questions? Critiques? Did a flying elephant shoot you with peanuts? Leave a comment!
Subdued Lunch

Chapter Summary

Lunch...everyone loves lunch, right?

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: I was just finishing my bid to own Zootopia, when a white rabbit got me to follow him down a hole where I was attacked by a mad hatter, a weird disappearing grinning cat, and card men. I then had to trade the bid to a heartless queen so that I wouldn't be beheaded. Joke's on her, though. I never signed the bid, so while I still don't own Zootopia, neither does she.

Thanks to the awesome TheoreticallyEva for editing this and keeping me sane!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time Nick and Judy had wrapped up at Zootopia Coast Distribution, it was one in the afternoon, and they had to hustle to meet with Nick's mom for lunch. The little restaurant was on the other side of the Rainforest District from where they were, and a riot on one of the main roads had traffic backed up onto the highway. When they asked if help was needed, they were told that other units had that covered and to continue on with their break. A welcome response in this case, since both mammals were hungry.

The rest of the time at the warehouse had gone smoothly, though not without a few loudmouthed yardworkers. Zootopia Customs had suggested that the container they'd found should be used as bait for a sting to draw out some of the smugglers, and Nick and Judy couldn't see any reason to disagree. They'd managed to gain a little more insight into the workings of the night crew as well. For most, it almost seemed to function like a clique. You were either in or out, and if you were out, you didn't get in unless invited.

Judy had likened it to her days in high school where you belonged to one group or another, and if you didn't want to stay in your box, you were considered an outcast. She'd been one of those, having the dream of being a cop and nothing else, while her school mates, who were mostly bunnies, but with a few other small animal species mixed in, thought the idea to be ludicrous at best, and insane at worst. In any case, she'd ended up in the "Nerdy Teacher's Pet Intellectual" group, but her dream had made her the outcast.

She did see a bit of that in the ZPD, and certainly in the academy as well, where she also found herself the outcast, but for different reasons. In the department itself, friendly rivalries tended to form within precincts, but they were more pronounced between different precincts. Precinct One was occasionally regarded as the elite's station, since only the best got picked to work there, unless political machinations put you in its walls. It was also the service's headquarters in the city.
Shaking her head, Judy tried to clear her thoughts and focus. The fact that the night crew had been seen as a sort of a clique meant they didn't get a whole lot of details, except names and the fact that the crew seemed to be all prey mammals of various species. That had been a red flag for both officers, and they'd made a note to look into the backgrounds of those they knew for any past connections or criminal records.

For now, though, they needed to eat, and Marian wanted to meet them and had told them there was something urgent she needed to talk about, and she could only do it in person. The two had brought along a civilian sweatshirt each, since it generally was frowned upon to appear as though they were on-duty while at lunch.

Nick had been similarly quiet throughout the drive, a fact not lost on Judy. She looked over at Nick, who was staring back at her.

"Everything OK, Fluff?"

"You doing all right, Slick?"

The two blinked, then burst into laughter at the simultaneous questions of essentially identical nature.

"You go first, Carrots."

The doe took a breath. "Just thinking of the whole situation at Zootopia Coast. Someone is smuggling in some sort of machinery, disguising the import under a fake customs form. If this is Doug and his lackies, what does it do? What's it for? And why do they still need more of it?"

The fox next to her made a sound of agreement as he turned to watch out the window. "As much as I'd like to play the smart, wise, all-knowing fox here, I don't have any answers for you. I'm guessing it has something to do with Night Howlers, but what it does, I couldn't tell you. What bugs me is that someone in Customs was in on this."

"That, too," Judy agreed. "We need to find out who that mammal was and bring him in. I'm a bit surprised that Customs didn't turn his information over to us."

The fox shrugged. "Maybe they just wanted to handle the case internally. Or maybe they were waiting until their own investigation was complete. Who knows."

The doe frowned. "Yeah, but how many more missed shipments would there have been? How many more of those… whatever they were… would have been imported? And who knows what else that agent has let through! Drugs? Lethals?" Nick didn't have an answer to that, and Judy sighed before continuing. "I just hope Customs doesn't wait too long before they turn that case over to us."

Her fox partner nodded. "If I were him, I would have already skipped town, but the longer they wait, the better the chance of him never being caught."

The idea that a mammal could escape justice for breaking the law incensed Judy, and part of her wanted to march down to the Customs bureau and take the case for herself, before hunting whoever it was to the ends of the earth. Two problems with that, though. One was that she'd likely cause an inter-agency disaster, and the second was the fact that last time she… volunteered for a new case without permission from her superior, she'd almost been fired. It was a bit of irony, Judy supposed, that by saving Judy's job, Bellwether played a part in her own arrest.

The two pulled up to the small Chinese restaurant, Nick pointing out a stall next to the car he recognized to be his mother's. They slipped into their civilian sweatshirts and walked into the restaurant, Nick holding the door and giving a corny sweep of his arms for an eye-rolling doe.
The restaurant was a quaint little place with a homey atmosphere and bright East Asia décor, complete with beige walls and dark wood tables, counters, chairs, and trimming. One of the local radio stations played softly in the background. A family of pandas waved to them from the kitchen and bar area.

It didn't take Nick and Judy long to spot Marian, the vixen seated in the furthest corner from the door, waving the two over.

Nick and Judy made their way over to the vixen, who stood to embrace both, though it got a little awkward with her having to bend down to Judy's height for the smaller female. The two newly arrived mammals both elected to partake in the buffet, since they had a limited time for lunch before they had to get back to work. Marian followed suit and ordered the buffet as well, keeping things simple. Soda was ordered, and the three mammals sat down to eat.

"So, Mom. You said there was something you needed to talk about?" Nick glanced over at Judy, who had a concerned look in her eyes. "You sounded a bit... stressed last night."

For a long moment, no one spoke. The young panda waitress came and quietly refilled their water, then, sensing the seriousness of the moment, excused herself. When Marian finally broke the silence, it was to take a deep breath and let it out.

"I think my boss is stealing from the company."

That shocked both of the officers. They looked at each other, then returned their attention to the vixen. Judy was the one who spoke next. "Why do you think that?"

Marian glanced around, as though to make sure no one was watching. "He's authorized some massive donations to charities I don't know about..."

That confused the two officers, and Nick said as much. "Why would that make you suspicious?"

Marian let out another sigh. "Furston has a list of charities that have been vetted by the board as approved for large donations. Usually, when the company needs to clean their image, they drop a huge cash donation to one of them. You know, usual corporate sleaziness." Nick and Judy both nodded at that. It was almost standard procedure. Corporations would make some big blunder, and then they'd make a big donation to some charity as though to say, 'See? Look! We're the good guys.'

Marian shook her head. "Anyways, he authorized some large cash donations to some charities I don't recognize. Never heard of them before. I didn't even notice until he tried to have me destroy the donation authorizations."

Judy cocked her head. "Donation authorizations?"

The vixen across from her nodded. "The company has a form that allows executives to authorize large cash donations to charities, and they have to be filled out and filed with accounting, then kept for seven years. The thing is, he only made these donations a month or two ago, and I found the authorizations in a stack of documents to destroy."

Judy thought about that. "Could they have just gotten in there by mistake?"

The older vixen shook her head. "They were rubber stamped and signed by my boss."

Judy pondered this information as she continued to eat. "Does anyone else know or suspect?"

Another shake of the head. "I don't think so. Maybe the mammals down in accounting, but none of
them have said anything. I've been keeping my head down, though."

Nick nodded his approval. "If you're wrong and you speak up, you'd lose your job. If you're right, you lose your job."

"That's right. And you know foxes have it tough enough already."

The doe in the group thought for a moment. "What were the names of the charities?"

Marian reached into her purse and pulled out a slip of paper. "I figured you'd ask that. These are the charities, along with the amount of money my boss signed for each of them."

Judy took the paper and looked at it. Names and numbers, and while the names didn't mean a whole lot to Judy, since there was no way she could memorize the thousands of non-profit organizations in Zootopia, the numbers were staggering. Over $4,000,000.

Marian nodded when Judy gave her another shocked look.

Judy sat back and stared at the paper for a bit, then looked around. Technically, she wasn't allowed to talk about an open case, especially not to someone not in the police force, but Marian was family as far as she was concerned, and she knew how to keep a secret.

"A couple of our colleagues have been looking into Furston for a while now, and the question of funding's come up a few times. Maybe this can help them."

The vixen cocked her head. "I guess you can't look into it yourselves, can you? Conflict of interest?"

Judy nodded. "Any evidence we present would be thrown out and deemed inadmissible. We can turn evidence over to our colleagues and have them look at it, as long as the chain of custody is intact, but we can't handle the case ourselves."

Marian nodded. "That makes sense. I just don't want you or Nicky to get in trouble for this. Especially if it turns out to be a wild goose chase."

The fox tod in question reached out and squeezed his mom's paw. "We'll be fine. I'll keep Carrots in check."

Judy glared at her fox. "We both know you can't keep me in check even if you wanted to."

Nick laughed. "That's true. You're the only one of us that's stolen and crashed a train for a briefcase of evidence." He elbowed Judy lightly in the ribs as he said that.

Judy's glare lasted for all of two seconds before she broke out giggling. "All right, I admit, that may not have been one of my finer moves."

"Nope. Your finest moves all involved this fox," Nick smirked.

Marian's head was on a swivel as she looked back and forth between the two. Finally, she gave up, let out an exasperated sigh and shook her head lightly. "You two are…"


The vixen rolled her eyes. "… Ridiculous," she finished with a deadpan.
"Aww, Mom, that's mean." Nick gave his mother the most adorable kit eyes.

"Nick, you know those eyes don't work on me. They didn't when you were a kit, and they don't now."

That piqued Judy's curiosity. "What sort of things did Nick try those eyes on?"

Marian let out a sharp bark of laughter. "You name it, he tried it, on anything that he wanted or thought he needed. It was probably his earliest attempts at hustling. Ice cream, new toys, video games, candy, donuts, sugary cereal." The older female stopped. "I think the only time he asked for something and didn't give me the kit-eyes for was to join the Junior Ranger Scouts."

A dark pall fell over the trio as memories surfaced. For Judy, it was more the memory of how he'd told her what happened that night, but, of course, the memory for the two foxes at the table was much more detailed. Nick remembered the pain and disappointment of the day, coupled with his disillusionment with the world and subsequent isolation from it.

For Marian's part, the sight of her little kit showing up at the front door with clear tear streaks in his fur, scrapes on his ears from where he'd pulled the muzzle strap over them, bruises on his arms from being held down, and looking completely and utterly destroyed, had broken her heart. No matter how much she'd tried, she hadn't been able to get him to tell her what had happened. She'd only found out later when she'd called the scoutmaster to inquire. The anti-fox tirade that had been yelled at her had forced her to hold the phone away from her ear for several seconds. She'd ended the conversation with some choice words, likely not helping matters, despite how they made her feel better, and gone to try and comfort her little fox.

It hadn't taken long for her to notice the change. No more did she see the happy, hopeful, brave, and confident little kit she'd raised. Instead, Nick was quiet, withdrawn, and sulky, even angry. Everything she'd tried to do to help had pushed him further away. She hadn't been able to afford any kit psychologists, so she'd done her best on her own. As a teenager, he'd gotten more unpredictable, angry, and withdrawn.

In an act of frustration, she'd told him to get out when she found out he'd been hustling, but from the minute he was out of sight, having been picked up with his only suitcase by Finnick, she'd regretted her actions, tried calling him, texting, even talking to the police, but the lion desk sergeant at the time hadn't been inclined to open a police report for something "so trivial as an adult legally exercising his right to freedom", and going so far as to imply that she'd forced him away, despite not knowing the circumstances behind it all.

She hadn't given up, though, eventually running into a kind-hearted cheetah rookie in a small Savannah Central precinct who promised her he'd look into it. He'd called back a day later to tell her that they'd found Nick and that he was OK but didn't want to talk to her. It had broken her heart to hear that, but she'd done her best to give him his space and let him come back on his own. Days had turned into months, then years, then a decade, and still, he hadn't come home.

She'd been shocked to see the news one day not long ago, the headlines screaming, "Undercover Judy Hopps and civilian fox expose conspiracy!" It was the first glimmer of hope for her kit that she'd had in years.

Shaking herself from her thoughts, she returned her attention to the duo in front of her, both looking at her with an expression of worry. Marian blushed, looking sheepish. "Sorry, I spaced. What did you say?"

"She asked you if your boss has done anything else suspicious, Mom."
The vixen shrugged. "He spends a lot of time on the phone when he is at the office. Always on his cell phone, never on the company landline. He also asks me to block out more and more time from his schedule for 'personal reasons'. He never tells me what he's up to or why. No pattern, as far as I can tell, and always at the last minute. It's never with clients, either, to my knowledge." She shook her head. "I've lost count of the number of times I've had to cover his absence with the other executives."

Judy sat back and thought. A regular schedule, or even a sporadic one planned in advance, would suggest something like a yoga class, a medical appointment, or something of that nature. Skipping out on meetings, scheduling things at the last minute, all personal, suggested something else, but the doe wasn't sure what. She didn't know the corporate world well enough and didn't have the evidence to form a hypothesis. There was one thing she could do, though.

She looked Marian in the eye. "We'll give this to Rivers and Longtooth. They're the ones looking into Furston. We can't be involved, but we can observe and pass along tips."

Marian nodded. "I'm a bit out of my depth. I have the feeling, though, that this—whatever this is—isn't going to do me any favours at Furston. You know the world isn't kind to whistleblowers."

It was true. Whistleblowers were treated as pariahs in the corporate world, and because she was a fox, this would likely ruin any chance she would ever have of getting a decent job in the future. But Nick and Judy both knew that she was an honest fox and wouldn't let the injustice slip by.

"You'll be fine, Mom."

Marian gave Nick a small smile. "I hope so, Nicky. But you know that that may be the price you have to pay to be an honest mammal."

The younger fox nodded, conceding the point. None of the mammals particularly wanted Marian to be right, but at the same time, they couldn't afford to assume all was well and good only for Marian to be blindsided, and, knowing the city's prejudice against foxes, have all the blame levelled on her, to the point of manufacturing evidence against her.

The three mammals ate the rest of their meals in relative peace, punctuated by conversation involving some happier topics, such as Nick and Judy's recent dates in Tundratown and Crescent Beach. Marian laughed at Judy's description of the snowball fight, Nick's insistence that he "won", and the fox's description of the rabbits' dealing with the speciesist mammal afterward.

When asked about her own work, Marian's ears drooped slightly, and she said in a defeated tone that it wasn't what she was hoping for. The money was good, but the long hours and the constant rushing to and fro within the building was wearing her thin. The coffee runs, too, always at the most inconvenient of times, and always needed 'now'. Added to that, the fact that her boss may be a criminal weighed heavily on her.

A thought occurred to Judy. "If this boss of yours is committing embezzlement through these charities, could he have tried to frame you, with those documents destroyed?"

Marian thought for a moment. "Accounting is supposed to keep a copy of the authorization for seven years as well, but if they were in on the scam, they might have destroyed theirs, too. In that case, the only evidence would be that I delivered the authorization."

The doe frowned. "So, by having you destroy the documents, he could be trying to frame you."

Nick's expression was one of thoughtfulness too. "We don't know anything about these charities,
though. For all we know, they could be dedicated to ensuring that every pet iguana in Zootopia has a ball to play with in their glass enclosures. What would be your motive?"

"Well, in that case, I would think my motive would be giving balls to iguanas, no?"

Nick blinked, not expecting an actual answer to his rhetorical question. His mind stalled, unable to come up with an immediate response to the quip, and his mouth dropped open slightly. Judy let out a loud and unfemalelike snort as she covered her muzzle with her paw, struggling to contain her laughter at the remark from the older vixen and the expression on Nick's face.

Nick turned to the doe next to him and glared at her. "Laugh it up, fuzzball."

That did it. Judy burst into gales of laughter, much to Nick's irritation and Marian's amusement. This continued for a moment before the doe calmed down.

"I'm sorry… Sorry… But you should have seen the look on your face, Slick!" Judy wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Yes, I am sure it was the absolute epitome of hilarious expressions," the fox deadpanned, still glaring at the doe.

Judy slowly regained her composure but couldn't help the little giggles that escaped now and then, and the smile wouldn't leave her face. Nick decided they needed to address the more serious topic. "Moving on here. If this is embezzlement, it's also fraud if these charities turn out to be shells for something else."

Judy nodded. "Embezzlement and fraud, even grand larceny."

Marian looked worried. "If this is what we think, will I be charged?"

Nick and Judy both shook their heads, and Judy spoke up. "If this is true, you're protected. You turned over suspected evidence to law enforcement, and as far as you're concerned, you haven't committed any crime."

Marian slumped, looking relieved.

"Carrots and I will make sure it's taken care of. We'll turn it over to some mammals we trust in the department."

Judy nodded her agreement. "We might need you to keep an eye out for anything else suspicious, though. We weren't really supposed to tell you about our looking into Furston."

The vixen nodded. "My lips are sealed. And I'll keep my ear to the ground, as it were. A couple of the other executive assistants love to gossip, so I might listen in to some of that. Hmph. Never was one to listen to the old rumour mill, and here I am."

Nick thought a moment. "It's too bad you don't have our friend, Clawhauser. He's about as gossipy as you can get. He even had a bet going on how long it would take Carrots and me to get together."

Marian looked shocked. "That's unprofessional!"

Nick and Judy both shrugged. "It was all in jest. We made them give half the winnings to charity when we found out."

The older canid couldn't help the grin that crossed her muzzle. "I bet the winner wasn't too thrilled
Judy cocked her head. "Actually, they were more amenable than we expected. The alternative was to have Bogo find out, and I don't think anyone really wanted that."

Nick shuddered at the thought. "He'd have everyone on parking duty for a month if he'd found out."

Judy rolled her eyes. "I don't know what you're complaining about, Nick. You have yet to do ANY parking duty."

The fox cop grinned. "You know I'd rock that meter mammal cap and high-vis vest."

"... And you'd still not be able to match my ticket record for a day," Judy shot back, just as her phone chirped. "Looks like we have to get back on duty."

Marian nodded. "I need to get back to it, too. If my boss finds out I'm gone for longer than my scheduled time, he'll yell so loud I'll need hearing aids."

Nick looked at his rabbit partner. "Jeez, even Chief Hardass's not THAT bad."

The doe elbowed Nick lightly. "He will be if we don't get our tails in gear!"

The Rainforest District itself was built on multiple levels in a semi-artificial wetland, with each level catered to different biomes. The uppermost level, the canopy, was used mostly for transportation but also housed some species that preferred the higher elevations, like sloths. The understory layer was home to other mammals of traditionally tree-dwelling heritage, including cats, and bats. The forest floor was by far the most populous area, housing all manner of different animals, along with the majority of the district's commercial and industrial zones.

It was in a large government-owned building that Doug was currently supervising the unloading of some "upgrades" for the building's primary purpose. It helped to have been a public works employee, with a friend keeping your badge active in the system. It made accessing this place so much easier, Doug thought as he watched the delivery mammals unload the crates. Without Jesse and Woolter, he had little help. Hornby was keeping an eye on Stang, who had stayed in her apartment, as far as they could tell.

It was unfortunate that they didn't have any contacts in the landline or cell phone companies, or they might have been able to monitor her phone calls and text messages. They also didn't want to risk tipping her off by trying to bribe her neighbors, either. They had no idea how well she knew them. For all they knew, they could be her lifelong friends.

For the sixth time in an hour, the ram cursed at Hornby for not fully vetting the mustang. They only had a basic idea of her, thanks to her being fired from her previous job for refusing to see filth. She was also exactly the type of specialist they'd needed to work on the first version of the new formula, identifying the correct proteins the formula would need to affect filth but ignore prey.

Now though, she was a liability, though how MUCH of a liability remained to be seen. Perhaps after the next test, they should arrange a suitable accident for her. She needed to disappear, though. Perhaps a swim in the Polar Strait or some other waterway that led out to sea. I should buy a boat, the ram thought.

Stang was hardly the only issue on the Ram's mind, though. The latest delivery of equipment was late arriving, delayed somewhere. Hornby suspected it was due to Zootopia Coast being under scrutiny after the arrest and elimination of Blackford. It meant that the group wouldn't have as much
product to distribute. The bosses wanted the test to proceed anyways, so, as they say in show biz, the show must go on.

Once the unloading was complete, the ram began to integrate the new equipment with the existing piping, chemical tanks, and systems. There was no need to rush. As far as the mammals here were concerned, the upgrades would facilitate more efficient purification of their end product. They were both right and wrong on several levels, though the ram didn't particularly care what they thought.

In less than a week, however, the equipment would be needed for the new public test. He had until then to get this all set up. Failure wasn't an option at this point.

It was late in the evening when a certain fox and rabbit duo spilled through the front door of their apartment. After the lunch with Marian, they'd returned to the police station and sought out Rivers and Longtooth. The elk and lioness had been in the middle of yet another interview, so they'd had to wait. Fortunately, the wait wasn't long, and they'd been able to get a few moments with the other two detectives before they'd been called away. Rivers had assured them that, while he couldn't promise to keep them in the loop, they'd look into it as part of the larger investigation into Furston.

With no other pressing tasks, Nick and Judy had spent the rest of the day updating their case board with the new leads and links they'd uncovered in the last few days. Lab services had called late in the day and confirmed that the pill and pill bottle they'd found at the correctional facility was indeed a time-release form of cyanide, powerful enough that even one would have put a mammal Blackford's size in the ground. The coroner had found the remains of at least two time release capsules in the stomach of the victim, however.

Shucking their duty belts and, in Judy's case, her ballistic vest, the two retired to their individual bedrooms to shower and change, both intent on having a PJs and movie night after the long week. Even the movie they'd picked out – an old favourite of both of theirs, *Aladdin*, the one with Robin Williams as a big blue shapeshifting genie.

Judy had just finished pulling on her PJs after her shower when she heard Nick calling her. "Hey, Carrots, can you come here for a sec?"

Judy left her bedroom and padded down the hall to Nick's room, knocking before she entered. Nick was in his pajama pants and was sitting on the bed, his police-issue gas mask sitting beside him. At Judy's questioning look, Nick took a deep breath and let it out.

"Carrots, you know, the last time something went on my face like this thing does, it was at that junior ranger scout meeting."

Judy made a noise of understanding, rubbing her fox's arm soothingly. "So, you want to try this out here at home?"

The fox turned to look into Judy's eyes. "And I want you to be the one to put it on me."

Judy took a breath, immediately understanding his reason. The last time anyone put anything like this on him, it was for malicious purposes. Judy was someone he trusted, so it might help keep his panic attack down. The doe crawled around to his other side and picked up the ugly contraption, giving it a
Nick shifted so that he was facing Judy and stared worriedly at the device in her paws. Reaching out, she squeezed his arm again. "You ready, Nick? Just slap the mattress if you need me to take it off or stop, OK?"

The fox took a deep breath and nodded. Judy stood up on the mattress, the springs throwing her balance off for a moment before she steadied herself and brought the gas mask up and slowly toward his muzzle.

The fox shivered as the silicone rubber of the mask's seal came in contact with his muzzle and fought to steady his breathing as the doe fastened the plastic straps around the back of his head. All the while, Judy stared into her fox's eyes, alert for any sign of discomfort or fear. As the muzzlepiece tightened around his mouth, impeding his ability to speak, an icy cold shard of panic sprang up. Judy immediately stopped what she was doing and hugged her fox, running her paws over his cheeks until the panic subsided.

"You OK, Nick?" The fox nodded. "Do you want me to get that thing off you?" This time, a shake of the head. "Should I continue?" Another nod.

The doe resumed tightening the straps on the mask, mindful of the fox's triangular ears, and watched for any further panic. When she saw none, she finished securing the gas mask to the Nick's face and sat back, staring into his eyes.

The fox's ears were pinned back, and the doe could tell that he was aggravated, but not truly panicked at this point. Judy reached out and rubbed the fluff on Nick's cheek. "You doing OK, Nick?" The fox nodded. "How does it feel?"

Nick gave her a cockeyed look that, combined with the unruly, weird looking mask on his face, was decidedly funny. "Right... You can't talk with that thing on." Nick rolled his eyes and nodded. That was all Judy needed to know what he was thinking: Dumb bunny. She reached around and opened the clasp on the back of his neck, loosening the mask before carefully pulling the rest of the mask off the fox's face.

Tossing the ugly thing aside, Judy looked up at Nick.

"So?"

The fox shook his head. "It felt like the muzzle, Carrots. A lot like it. You can't talk, and it feels like your nose is stuffed up, too, like your lungs have to work extra hard to pull in the air." He opened and closed his mouth a few times and licked his lips. "It also smells bad. It smells like... like..." He paused to think. "Rubber and salt."

Judy snorted. "Salt?"

Nick nodded in affirmation. "Salt. That's the best I can describe it."

The doe stared into the fox's eyes. "What about..." she didn't finish the question. She didn't need to.

Nick sighed. "I won't deny it. It felt a lot like that muzzle. For a moment I had a flash back to that night."

Judy reached out and squeezed Nick's arm. "I'm sorry, Nick."

Her fox smiled. "It's fine Carrots. I asked you to do this remember?" Judy nodded, looking a little
better. "Now how about you and I go watch that movie?"

With a smile, Judy grabbed Nick's paw and practically dragged him out to the living room.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaand there you have it! Finally, a lunch with Marian! I wonder what they are gonna be able to get from Marian's notes and evidence?

Still trying to get fully caught up on work, though I'm glad I took that little vacation. Tough to make the bills when you're a single guy, and still be able to take time off!

A few people caught my Spaceballs reference in the last chapter! Yay! Cookies for you! Can you find any in this chapter?

Coming up on June 14: Calm Before the Storm!

Questions? Critiques? Did Thanos try to snap you out of existence? Leave a comment!
It was a conspiracy. She was sure of it. A conspiracy to lay her low by bothering her with all manner of computer-related issues. She was a neurologist, not an IT technician, damnit! In frustration, Felicity Stang whacked the side of her computer monitor with her hoof. It didn't fix the issue, but at least she felt better.

Over the last several days, she'd spent the time compiling notes and personal recollections of what all had been going on with Doug, Woolter, Jesse, Hornby, and whatever she could discern about the mysterious mammal or mammals to whom Hornby reported.

She'd just wrapped up a lengthy report on the experiments and observations made during the tests of the formula when her computer had decided to give her a big blue bird and reboot, and much to her chagrin—and neglect—she'd not been very diligent about saving her data lately. One of many recent failures on her part. Maybe her computer was just mocking her. They do that now and then, right?

That, along with their unknown and seemingly never-ending source of funding, supplies, equipment, and test subjects, represented another current source of frustration for her. They were all massive gaps in what she knew. If she said she needed something, it arrived, sometimes days, sometimes weeks or a month later. She never asked where it came from or how, something she was regretting now.

Her original plan was to go straight to the police, but when she had been ready to leave her apartment to do so, she'd noticed a familiar van parked outside, and though she couldn't see inside it, she had a good idea of who was inside, and she didn't want to tip their hand. She could call the police here, but that carried a risk, too. She knew Doug listened to police scanners from some of her few, albeit brief, conversations with him, so if he got word of a unit headed her way, he'd be able to quiet her before the cops arrived.
As such, she had decided to spend a few days organizing her thoughts, and cursing at her computer, while formulating a plan to escape the watchful eyes of her former ram colleague. She knew she wouldn't avoid jail time, but she figured turning herself in with as big a mountain of evidence as she could, would certainly help her to see the light of day again.

With a sigh, the mustang rebooted her computer again, not all that eager to see how much of her document she'd lost. Four hours later, satisfied she'd managed to catch herself up, she hit the save button again, as she'd done diligently every couple of minutes since the last crash, only to cry out in dismay, when, once again, her computer gave her an ugly blue screen with a sad face.

Forty-six bodies. It had taken a week and a half, but he'd finished them. Wednesday evening never felt so good.

Or so bad. Forty-six bodies of mammals ranging in size from squirrels to bears and even larger. Of course, he'd had help from the other shifts and coroners throughout the city, but everything for this mass grave ultimately came through him. It helped to identify similarities and trends, as well as highlight outliers with different or missing details. Like the one hyena they'd found, badly decomposed, with a ton of paint on what remained of his paw fur.

Or the body that Officers Hopps and Wilde requested priority on. That one didn't have any sign of the Night Howler formula, unlike so many others. Many of the mammals, particularly the herbivorous species, had signs of struggle and often violent, grisly ends. As a seasoned medical examiner, he was usually accustomed to death, and decay, and even violent deaths didn't faze him much, though he always tried to spare a thought and a prayer to whoever would listen for the families of those who crossed his tables.

This was something next-level, though. Whoever this was, if it was indeed one mammal, had gone on and committed the worst mass murder in Zootopian history.

"What happened to this city?" the raccoon asked the juice glass in front of him. Despite the horrors at work, he tried to stick to his promise to his wife to avoid alcohol. Grape juice would have to do, but it wouldn't dull the thoughts running through his head.

Of course, the juice glass didn't answer his question.

"Everything OK, dear?"

The raccoon looked up to see his wife standing there in her bathrobe, one he had given her a few years ago for no other reason than he saw it and thought she would like it. She had a concerned look in her eyes.

A glance at the clock told him it was in fact not Wednesday anymore, but Thursday instead. She must have come downstairs wondering why he hadn't come to bed yet.

"Sorry, Delilah, sweetheart. I must have gotten lost in thought."

His wife moved to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair, sitting down. "Is this about work?"

Rocky nodded. It was pointless to try to lie or skew the truth with her. She'd get it out of him eventually.

"The mass grave from the canals?"

That didn't surprise him in the least, and he nodded. Delilah Mamusson-Davis was as sharp as a tack.
You had to be to work as a doctor in the emergency ward of the city's largest hospital and trauma center, after all. She must have seen the news and put two and two together. Really, though, it would have been hard not to. Between the riots and the mass grave, very little else got news time these days. Even the Grand Palm attack from a month ago was old news.

"Want to talk about it?"

The male raccoon sighed. "The last time anyone did anything like this, it was a serial killer. Mustang Sally. And her body count was just eight. What bothers me is that, from what I can tell, most of them were victims of some sort of sadistic test or game. Most of them had Night Howler residue on them. All over them, like they were sprayed or gassed or something."

His wife sat back in thought. "We haven't had any new patients with Night Howler exposure recently. Not after the Grand Palm attack. Lots of false reports and mammals coming in complaining of Night Howler symptoms despite being physically and mentally fine. But for legitimate cases… None."

The coroner nodded. Drug addicts often tried to handle things on their own, but there were always a few that visited the emergency room, so it was a reasonable unofficial indicator of whether or not a specific drug was making the rounds on the street. The fact that there hadn't been any emergency room visits or ambulance callouts for Night Howler-exposed mammals hinted that whatever was going on, it was being done in such a way that the exposure was being controlled and contained, out of public eye.

"Anything else that might tie the bodies together?" his wife inquired.

Rocky mentally compiled a list of all the facts he'd been able to sift from the bodies.

"All sunk with cinder blocks. Those that didn't die from sharp force trauma were executed. All the same calibre bullet."

"Species? Biological order?"

"Scattering of different species. Older bodies were mostly half-herbivore and half-omni- or carnivore, all kinds of different species. The newer ones were mostly foxes, but with coyotes, wolves, and beavers in there, too," Rocky said with a slightly faraway look in his eyes.

His wife leaned over the table. "Any thoughts as to why the sudden change in victims?"

A long period of silence followed. "Nothing that stands out. I can't really date anything very accurately. The water of the canal accelerated decomp. But my best guess is that the change happened around the time of the Night Howler attack on the Grand Palm."

More silence, this time broken by Delilah. "Assuming the two events are related… What happened at the Grand Palm that prompted the sudden change in targets? And why these specific species?"

With a shake of his head, Rocky downed the last of his grape juice. "I don't know. Nothing stood out in my examinations."

"Maybe you should sleep on it, sweetheart. You aren't any use to anyone if you're overtired. You'll figure it out. I'll help all I can, too. Now come to bed, babe." She took the now empty glass from her mate and put it in the sink, then took his paw and led him upstairs. She pushed him in the direction of the bathroom before retiring to their shared bed. A few minutes later, she was joined by her husband and the two snuggled in close before drifting off, Rocky with images of canids and beavers in his head, and one last thought. "What do you all have in common?"
In another part of town, Nick's coffee table was piled high with autopsy reports. DNA results from most of the mammals from the canal mass grave had come back, and a few of them had been identified. A few remained anonymous, however.

The ones that did get identified, however, showed a disturbing trend, one that Nick and Judy had suspected before the discovery of the dump site was even made. None of the identified mammals had any sort of recent work history, permanent residence, recent tax record, or contact method.

A few had been picked up on public intoxication or vagrancy, but the cases for those hadn't shown up until DNA testing had gone through. The precincts that had processed them in the past had sent over the case files, adding more paper to that stack on the coffee table.

Further investigation had also uncovered a number of missing mammals cases that had been open and then shelved due to lack of leads. The majority of these reports only had a name, and sometimes not even a full one, and a general location that they frequented. When Judy asked Nick about that, he explained that sometimes, homeless mammals would follow a routine that could be identified by other homeless mammals, but the latter would only know them as hanging out in that general area. It was a phenomenon similar to a "subway friend", someone whom mammals would meet and chat with every day on their morning and evening commute but didn't have any contact with beyond that.

Nothing so far had helped them identify the other mystery mammals, though. Efforts had been made to expand the search to the surrounding counties, hoping that someone somewhere had filed a missing mammal report or DNA sample. Until then, the DNA techs at Lab Services had been trying to find any immediate blood relatives that may have been put into a DNA database somewhere. It was a long shot at best, though.

In the meantime, Nick and Judy had spent much of their time tracking down the homeless mammals that had reported their friends missing and interviewing them. Those they could find weren't able to provide them with much information, though one mammal reported seeing three rams talking to his friend and had noticed a van with a logo on it in the area.

It ruled out the unmarked van seen near Callahan's murder and on the bridge of the Susani Canal, but the one that the two had caught on their cruiser dash camera DID have a logo on the side, though the homeless mammal couldn't be sure it was the same one. The van was too far away to make out the logo on the side in the camera footage. With no contact method, though, the homeless mammal could only offer his routine as a way to get ahold of him, which they accepted. Any lead was better than no lead.

And so, it was with mixed emotions that Nick and Judy arrived at the precinct on Wednesday morning. Hope that they'd be able to confirm their suspicions that Doug, Jesse, and Woolter were involved in Wolford's murder, mixed with the feeling that they were in for a very long day of staring at traffic cam video footage, especially having identified twenty-seven possible cameras that Wolford, and hopefully their quarry, may have passed by.

It had taken some time to retrieve the footage from archives, but nothing too serious. Normally, the footage would have been erased and recorded over by now, due to limited storage space, but Bogo had ordered a freeze on that procedure after the Grand Palm, an action that cost the city thousands every day, but was necessary, as all of it could be evidence.

"So, where do you want to start, Carrots? Twenty-seven cameras, about four hours of footage each. That's going to be a lot of TV-watching, even sped up."

Judy rolled her eyes. "It's evidence-gathering, dumb fox. We should start in Savannah Central and
cover those cameras first. That's where Wolford seems to have spent most of his time."

The fox nodded. "I still want to know why the others didn't find anything."

Judy thought for a moment as she loaded up the traffic camera program on her workstation. "We lacked context. We knew Wolford was in Kalahari Heights. We knew he was likely following someone. We didn't know who or what. Now we have a possible who and what, we know where he likely came from. We just need details. And a good shot of that van."

Nick harrumphed. "Maybe the city will actually invest in some real HD cameras for our cruisers. The ones they have are pathetic. You'd think that for all the money they spent modifying that thing for us, they'd have put in a decent camera."

The rabbit doe shrugged. "Most of the time, the cameras are for the things happening right in front of the cruiser. They probably figured they didn't need a fancy camera for long distance shots."

Her canid companion nodded. "They have to skimp somewhere, I guess. It wouldn't do to put a lawnmower engine in there."

Judy grinned. "Guess that would depend on what that lawnmower was built for, wouldn't it? I mean, a lawnmower for a bunny or a fox wouldn't need to be very big and powerful, but a lawnmower for an elephant is a whole different ballpark."

Nick conceded the point with a light chuckle at the mental image of Francine Pennington trying to ride one of the Hopps family's ride-on mowers. Being a city fox who grew up in a low-rent apartment with his mom, he hadn't had to mow a single lawn in his life, at least until he'd gone with Judy to visit her family. Stu had had him learn to operate one of the larger tractor mowers as one of his chores around the farm.

The two settled into a comfortable routine of watching the traffic camera footage at high speed, each keeping an eye on different cameras, and noting which cameras they cleared. Watching in high speed meant a few instances of backing up and reviewing at normal speed, but it was better than slogging through more than fifty hours of footage.

"I still can't believe NO ONE seems to remember seeing Perry Devorak and another mammal at a bar. We must have shown his face to a hundred different places." Rivers was frustrated as he walked up the steps to Precinct One alongside his partner. More than that, though, it seemed that the information Devorak had given them was either a red herring, misleading, or someone other than the lynx researcher had a bad memory. Or none of the staff in any of the bars they'd visited were on duty at the time Devorak and the mystery mammal were visiting.

They'd talked to a few other members of the team, who'd given them the name of the establishment – The Poison Apple, on the outskirts of Savannah Central, near the border with the Rainforest District. But when the staff of the establishment hadn't remembered anything untoward with the crowd of Furston researchers, one she-wolf waitress noting that they'd all left together, they'd expanded their search.

"One hundred twenty-one," his lioness companion intoned.

"What?"

"One hundred twenty-one bars. We visited every bar an' pub in the Rainforest District an' most of those outside of downtown in Savannah Central, too." Nolwazi Longtooth shook her head, while Shawn Dancing Rivers hung his.
"No wonder I feel so tired," the elk commented. They'd been at this for almost a week now, even though they'd taken some time out on Friday to look into a request from Hopps. They hadn't had a lot of time to address that, but it seemed that Wilde's mom was right. Something was fishy. None of the charities had been answering their calls, just letting it go to voicemail, and then never calling back.

That was small potatoes though. It may not even be connected to the case they were actually assigned. Still, with an official file opened, it would be something they would be revisiting.

The elk harrumphed as they made their way through the lobby of the police station. "And what of this little message? 'Evidence for you, Lab Services, Trace.' Is Trace the name of the lab tech, or trace evidence?"

Longtooth rolled her eyes. "I hope that was sarcasm. They mean trace evidence."

Rivers sighed. "Sorry. Yeah, I know it means trace evidence. Ancestors, this has been a long week."

The lioness rolled her eyes. "On that, we can agree."

The two were silent on the rest of the trip up to the lab, both pondering what the mammals in white might have for them today.

It didn't take them long to find out. Trace evidence was indeed the answer to the question, and the large brown bear lab tech was already waiting. He greeted them with a gruff nod and pushed a folder of papers across the table to them. "We found something interesting on one of the bodies pulled from the canal. Take a look."

Rivers gave the large bear a quirked eyebrow and opened the folder.

The evidence in question was recovered from the claw root of a hyena. Mass spectrometer analysis had revealed it to be paint. Though contaminated, the sample had been enough. To Rivers, though, the sample looked familiar. "I've seen that somewhere before." He looked up to the bear.

"The sample was similar to one connected to one of your cases, so we rang you."

Rivers' eyes widened, as did Nolwazi Longtooth's. The only case that they had where paint had any involvement was Wolford's murder. They both looked at the bear, who nodded.

"It came back a 94% match to one of the paint samples you recovered and logged with the case of Eric Wolford."

Rivers and Longtooth stared at the sheet for a moment. "How did it survive underwater for so long?"

The bear gestured that they should look at the next sheet in the folder

"The paint is a hardware store brand of automotive spray paint. That stuff is an oil-based paint that's meant to be waterproof. Nasty-smelling stuff, though. The scent hangs in the air."

Rivers nodded. "I remember smelling something chemical when we showed up on the scene. Didn't think too much of it. I thought it was some sort of industrial cleaner."

The bear trace technician nodded. "You're not far wrong. The solvent used is similar to industrial cleaners and paint removers. That's most of what you smell in paint."

Rivers made a thoughtful noise. "Wilde and Hopps never mentioned any scent like that. Maybe they
thought the same thing."

The bear nodded. "That's possible."

The elk and lioness turned back to the folder in front of them. "So, who was the mammal with the paint on him?" Rivers' question was more rhetorical than anything, as the ungulate flipped the pages in the folder, mostly detailing the compounds found in the new sample, to a printout of the mammal in question.

The photo was years old, a DMV shot from over a decade past. The record showed that the license had expired in 2005 and hadn't been renewed, surprisingly enough. The file didn't detail much. The hyena's last place of employment had been a convenience store in a residential area of Sahara square, not far from Kalahari Heights. That had ended about a month before Wolford's murder, if the application for unemployment was anything to go by. They'd have to confirm that. The hyena, a shaggy-looking mammal named Akida Zanzibar, had a registered address in Kalahari Heights.

"That might explain why he was in the area, if he still lived there. I wonder why no one reported him missing? And why, if he is our tagger, he resorted to that, and not calling it in?"

Longtooth scratched her chin. "Maybe he couldn't for some reason? No one reported seein' a hyena in the area when we asked around."

Rivers pondered that for a moment. "Then the question becomes: What happened to him between the time that Wolford was killed, and Hopps and Wilde showed up? He obviously had time to paint the graffiti, and the perps obviously had time to deal with him, so why did they leave Wolford behind for Hopps and Wilde to find?"

The bear trace analyst stood up. "That'll be for you guys to figure out. I have evidence from twenty-seven other bodies to process, and you guys just keep piling more on. See ya."

Both detectives bade the bear farewell, then turned back to the folder.

Longtooth offered a possible answer to her elk partner's question. "Maybe Hopps and Wilde spooked 'em? That isn't a big subdivision. You saw how Wolford's car looked like it had been searched. And we also never found his scratchpad, emergency radio, or the voice recorder Hopps said he carried around after he saw hers."

The Elk nodded. "We didn't find any evidence that could have led us to even the mammal species that searched the car. Like they knew what to avoid, or where to find what they were looking for. I wonder, though. Hopps and Wilde have been chasing a trio of rams. Two of them were caught, and one's still on the lam."

Rivers didn't even realize his choice of words until he heard Longtooth's snort.

"Ok, pun not intended there. And you know damn well, I meant lam, without the B," the elk remarked as he rolled his eyes.

Longtooth pulled out a pad. "All right, so a few things had to happen between the time that Wolford died and Hopps and Wilde showed up. They had to search Wolford's car, Akida had to have time to paint the graffiti, and they had to find him, kill him, and somehow get rid of HIS body, but not Wolford's. And they had to have a reason to leave Wolford behind."

Rivers nodded. "Maybe the vehicle they were driving didn't have room for Wolford and this hyena."

"But if it didn't, why take the hyena and not the cop?"
"Maybe they didn't know he was a cop?" Rivers didn't have a lot of faith in that being the case, and his tone of voice betrayed that.

"They took his voice recorder, notepad, and searched his car. I'm pretty sure they knew. Or at least strongly suspected."

Rivers slumped in his chair. "Yeah. I know. I'm just frustrated. We've got a dead cop with an equally dead lead on one hoof and a terrorist attack with no useful leads on the other hand. It seems like Hopps and Wilde are having all the luck."

Longtooth racked her brain for something else. "Well, what about Wilde's tip about the funds?"

"The bank's been served. We subpoenaed the records for all three, but unfortunately, the judge that issued it wasn't all that keen on trusting evidence submitted by a fox, especially against one of the biggest companies in the city," Rivers said as he rubbed his temple. "We do this wrong, and not only will Wilde's mom lose her job, but the company will bury the city and the ZPD in lawsuits and court cases."

Longtooth sighed and sat down next to Rivers. "Not to mention Officer Wilde would probably be blacklisted or even fired if Furston found out he was Marian Wilde's point of contact. It's shaky, but even with the chain of evidence intact, they could appeal to the distrust most mammals still have of foxes and have him thrown off the force. Hopps, too. Even if Bogo tries to block it, public pressure would force their paw. The lioness didn't like it, and if what she knew of Bogo was true, he wouldn't cave easily, but eventually, public opinion could back even the intimidating buffalo into a corner.

After a moment, Rivers gestured to Longtooth that the two should head back to their office, taking the folder with them. The two were silent all the way to their temporary office, a silence that was finally broken when Longtooth turned to look at their case board.

"So, let's see what we know. Random mammals, probably involving Wilde and Hopps' ram trio and Wolford's informant. They are smuggling in some sort of equipment, likely similar to the stuff Hopps and Wilde found in their raid on the warehouse. Equipment that is conveniently in Customs custody, and a Customs agent in the wind."

Longtooth moved to a different section of the board. "Then, Wolford ends up dead from a round similar in size to the one that was used on Callahan and our tagger. Then Callahan himself. And then the Grand Palm attack right afterward. Then nothing for a few weeks, a landslide of progress for Hopps and Wilde, and we are still in the water, with a possible drugging victim and corporate espionage case that's going nowhere."

Rivers joined the lioness at the board. "Maybe we need to look at this from a different angle. We have two cases involving Furston at the same time, and if Mrs. Wilde is correct, about the same time period. Wilde did say that she cottoned on to something when her boss had her try to destroy documents for a donation made just a week or so prior. That's about the time the city increased the Night Howler antidote budget. Furston would have seen a huge profit in the increased demand."

The lioness was scribbling in her notebook. "If that's the case, then the connection to Furston is a lot higher up than we thought. We've been on the ground squishing roaches. If this goes up to the C-suite, then the roaches are the least of our problems."

The elk shivered. "Roaches. Why did you have to choose roaches?"

The lioness gave the larger mammal a smirk. "Would you rather it be butterflies?"
Rivers shook his head. "Not particularly."

Longtooth smirked. Rivers was a bit squeamish when it came to anything with more than four limbs, and it showed. He didn't squeal like a mouse when a spider ran in front of him, fortunately. Or unfortunately for Longtooth, since that would have given her some good teasing material. She looked back at her notes. "So, we can't go anywhere with their finances until we hear back from the bank. What about activities? And when did they show up?"

Rivers flipped through some of his own notes. "All three registered as NPOs around the same time last year. Over the span of about a month. The one that gives school laptops to teens, they have a bunch of photos on their website of some of their members presenting those things to kits. Seems they do one a month or so."

Longtooth's eyebrows shot up. "One a month? What are they, made of solid gold or somethin'? There's no way they'd be doing just one a month with donations like the one Marian found."

The elk nodded. "I'm no expert on the street value of these laptops, but I doubt any of them were over $1,000 retail. And certainly not gold, solid or plating. At best, it was cheap plastic 'chrome'."

Longtooth snorted. "So, at the very least that tech charity is hidin' funds. Or they are just not publishin' all their donated items on their website, although the fact that they haven't returned our calls doesn't lend them much credibility."

More page-flipping from the Elk. "The other ones didn't have as much on their sites to go after. A few pictures of some smiling street mammals on one, and a lot of stock pictures of hearing aid-wearing mammals on the other. The reviews on all three were pretty generic, too. 'Helped me do better at my job with my new hearing aide.' 'Got me off the streets, and I'm now working for good money.' 'Helped my boy realize his dream when I couldn't afford what he needed.' 'Best charity ever.' That type of thing."

Glancing at her own notes, the lioness sighed. "Street canvassin' hasn't turned up any information among the homeless population about that shelter, either. Usually, people like that would know where to find a free meal or warm bed, at least within the district. Word on those things travels from mammal to mammal, so the fact that it's an unknown raises some questions."

Rivers scratched his head. "I guess when the bank statements come through, we might get some answers. For now, I guess we start going through the rest of this."

Friday morning. The end of the week for most mammals. Indeed, in her former profession, it would certainly be the day whose evening would mean the next two days would be days of freedom, to catch up on reading, cleaning, visiting friends, and watching TV. Now, though, as she stood outside the front doors of the Zootopia Police Department's Precinct One, Felicity Stang knew that the coming weekend held no freedom for her.

The building in front of her had never looked so imposing. Frightening, even. For most, the building itself wasn't anything to worry about. Once she walked through those doors, though, she knew that the chances of her leaving in anything but a prison transport were slim to none.

Taking a deep breath, clutching her papers to her chest, she looked around, swallowed, and, gathering what courage she had, pushed through the doors into the police station.

As she walked toward the reception desk, it felt like every mammal's eyes were on her. The cheetah at the desk glanced her way, and, in a voice that she was sure was accusing her, asked if he could
help.

"I… I need to talk to someone…"

Chapter End Notes

Whoooooo! Are we at the endgame now? What will happen next? And How many treats does Felicity have for our gang?

Things have been pretty busy around here, work wise, and I ended up pulling a couple all-nighters this week. Yuck.

Last chapter's reference was probably the easiest yet. Star Wars. This chapter has not one, not two, but THREE references. Can you find them all?

Coming up on June 28: But It's My Day Off!

Questions? Critiques? Did Wall-E knock on your door looking for EVE? Leave a comment!
But It's My Day Off!

Chapter Summary

The ZPD gets more than they bargained for. In more ways than one.

Chapter Notes

DISCLAIMER: Hades tried to trick me into giving him my bid to own Zootopia. I refused and we had a scuffle over it. Unfortunately, I dropped it into the River of Death, so now the bid is lost to the underworld.

Thanks to TheoreticallyEva for editing this chapter - and for the cameo in her own story, "The Tale of Crossfire and the Hustler"! Seriously, go read it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I... I need to talk to someone..."

Benjamin Clawhauser hesitated. The mare mustang standing in front of the jolly precinct one desk sergeant looked like she was either going to faint, be sick, bolt, or some combination of the three. He had to put the poor mammal at ease.

"Take it easy. Can I get you something to drink? Eat?" He got out from behind the desk and approached the mare, pausing when she flinched away.

The mare shook her head. "No. I need to talk to someone. I have... information."

Clawhauser nodded. "What about? Are you hurt? Do you need medical assistance?"

The mare shook her head. "No, but... I've hurt mammals. A lot of them. I need... I need to do this..."

The portly cheetah frowned. "Hurt? Hurt how?"

The mare was quiet for a long moment, and the cheetah was just about to gently nudge her when the mustang finally spoke again. "I know who was behind the attack on the Grand Palm."

All movement in the lobby ceased. A part of Clawhauser's brain played the stock record-scratching sound you heard in comedy movies. But this was no comedy movie. Everyone was standing there staring at the mare as if she'd grown two heads.

The cheetah shook himself out of his stupor. "I'd better... I'll need to call the detectives on the case for that... May I?" At the mare's nod, Clawhauser paged the two detectives. He'd seen them walk in an hour beforehand, and they hadn't signed out, so he knew they were still there. At that moment, though, he looked up to see the mare fidgeting and glancing at the door, as though she expected an
express train to come through it at any moment.

It was an action that he knew well, from mammals who knew they'd be punished for what they were doing. "Do you want to move somewhere else, ma'am?"

At the mare's nod, Clawhauser came back around, and, seeing the mare's discomfort with him, he gestured that she should follow. The hefty feline made a point to let Nolwazi Longtooth know about the mare's discomfort, in case it had something to do with cats or predators. If she'd been there, Judy might be able to spot for the lioness, but today was her day off, along with Nick's, so they'd have to play it by ear.

Knowing that mammals coming in as witnesses felt uncomfortable in the interrogation room, he instead led her to the conference room. The large table and padded chairs there would make it feel less like a movies interrogation and more like a business meeting. The room was already equipped with a video recorder, just in case any case meetings took place in it, so they'd have to use that instead of the ones in the basement.

Leading the mare into the conference room, he pulled out a chair for her, and then, at her request, went around and closed all the blinds. An odd request, but if it made her more comfortable, she'd be more likely to share her information.

The cheetah poked his head out the door, and, spotting Fangmeyer, he waved her over, then asked her to go get Rivers and Longtooth. It was against policy to leave any civilian, be it a witness, suspect, or detainee, unaccompanied anywhere in the station except the lobby and, in family and attorney cases, the holding cells and interview rooms in the basement.

After a while, the two detectives showed up, and the donut-loving feline gave them a brief rundown of what she'd said, emphasizing to the lioness the mare's seeming aversion to him. The two nodded and squeezed past him into the room. Clawhauser let the door close behind them and returned to his desk, idly wondering what the mare had on the Grand Palm attacks.

Felicity Stang felt herself getting more and more nervous as time went by. The trek up here, short as it may have been, felt like a million miles, with mammals, civilians and officers alike, staring at her, judging her. It certainly felt that way.

Then the elk detective finally entered the room after a short, muted conversation with the cheetah that escorted her, leading a much smaller lioness. From the feathers tied to his antlers and the subtle tribal paint he wore on them, she could tell the elk was of native descent.

The two detectives – they had their badges on display – introduced themselves as Shawn Dancing Rivers and Nolwazi Longtooth. The elk seemed to be the senior officer, and he took a seat along the side of the table, facing her. The lioness stood at the other end of the room, off to one side.

I understand you wish to talk to us about some information you might have, Ms...

"… Stang. Felicity Stang."

The elk nodded. "My apologies, Ms. Stang. Before we begin, would you like to have an attorney present? I know you came to us, but we still gotta ask the question."

The mare shook her head. "I know some of what I have to say… well… It won't do me any good. But I need to say this. I need to tell someone."

The elk put his hooves up in a placating gesture. "That's fine, Ms. Stang. We will need you to sign a form that shows that you refused an attorney. Even if you sign, though, you have the right to request
one at any time, and you don't have to answer any question you don't want to. OK?"

At the mare's nod, the elk gestured to his colleague, who hurried out of the room and returned a moment later with a written paper contract and a pen. The mare scanned over the paper, noting that it gave permission to the department to create a video record of her statement, but also gave her the power to stop everything and call for an attorney. She signed it, and the elk quickly looked it over and nodded in satisfaction, gesturing to the lioness to start the video recorder.

"Now then, Ms. Stang, what did you need to tell us?"

Damian Hornby looked on as Doug tapped through the options on his computer. Today was the day.

Over the last week, Doug's group had been discreetly installing some new hardware in a large building at the ground level of the rainforest district. New piping, tanks, and regulator systems, as well as several large tanks of their product. Their contacts had allowed them to work under the auspices of a faked city contract, avoiding any questioning.

The added capacity afforded to them by the new imported manufacturing equipment allowed them to just make their needed quantity of the formula, even with the delays in getting the last shipment. According to their contact at the shipping yard, the place had been raided by the ZPD and customs agents a week ago, and their shipment had been seized. Doug expected the customs officials to attempt to set up a sting at some point in an attempt to entrap someone, and the Texas longhorn agreed, writing the shipment off.

There wasn't anything to realistically tie them down as the importer anyways. Fake names and blind drop addresses were used, and the customs agent who cleared the shipments had been pulled out and sent to a safe house as soon as word of the raid had reached his ears.

It wasn't the only wrench the ZPD had thrown at them in the last several weeks, though. The surprise visit of the two most hated officers to the minimum security prison, along with the subsequent capture of their asset, further complicated things. But with Janus already dead, there wasn't anyone to tie that asset to their organization.

The warden's administrative assistant at the prison, however, had been a concern. She had been pulled off her role after she'd done her job alerting the group to the presence of the rabbit and filth officers, and had, as far as the bovine knew, been reassigned to the group that organized the riots and demonstrations. Civil unrest, the city had been calling it. The groups had a few extra targets today, along with the usual demonstrations. A few filth-run businesses wouldn't be opening again, even if their owners and staff somehow made it through today.

Hornby took a moment to lament the high casualty rate of mammals that would likely be the result of the day. Sometimes drastic measures had to be taken. The filth, he spared no thought or remorse for. They didn't belong on the planet, tarnishing it with their hated presence.

Felicity Stang was another loose cog in the machine. She hadn't left her apartment all week, and she'd been acting strange the last time he'd seen her. The bovine had sent Doug to watch her as much as he could, and the equine hadn't done anything subversive, so they had decided to put the matter on the back burner for a while in order to focus on the current task. After today, everyone would think twice about getting near a predator.

As Doug finished what he was doing, deep in their target building in the heart of the rainforest district, a computer ordered multiple valves to be opened. The seemingly small change went unnoticed by the workers, and product began to flow into the pipes, mixing with the water that ran
"So, this Damian Hornby, he's been engineering this for how long?" Shawn Dancing Rivers rubbed his temple. If what this mustang was saying was true, they had some HUGE holes in their case and hadn't even known it. How had they missed all this?

"At least six months. I'm not certain, but I think at least a few of these mammals were involved with Bellwether."

"What I wanna know is how in tarnation he's gettin' all the fundin' for this. That stuff you're talkin' about ain't cheap."

"I really don't know. I never thought to ask. I assumed that the mammal or mammals he answered to was just some big rich guy or rather group of mammals-he uses the term 'higher-ups'-and they were financing it." Felicity Stang thought for a moment. "The only other thing I can think of is something he said a while back about 'donations'. It was just after our first… test."

That got the two detectives' attention. "What exactly did he say about donations?" the elk

The sudden scrutiny unnerved the equine, and she recoiled a bit. "I… I don't remember exactly. He just said something about donations!"

"Right after the attack on the Grand Palm." Rivers stared at the mustang mare. He had a suspicion, but he wanted confirmation.

"It was a couple days, maybe a week after. We received new equipment that day. I just remember I overheard donations being mentioned on his call with the 'higher-ups'."

"How often did you get paid?"

"We didn't get paid, at least not conventionally. Every once in a while, we'd get an email money transfer. The address always changed, though. It was enough to live off of, and Hornby always told us that once the mission was complete, we'd be paid in full for our contributions."

Rivers pulled out another one of the folders he'd been carrying around, flipped through it for a moment, then pulled out a sheet, closed the folder, and picked everything up, gesturing to Longtooth to meet him outside the conference room. Rhinowitz was just outside the door, talking with his partner, and the two detectives tagged him to babysit the mare.

Once they were out of earshot of the equine, he pointed to the sheet. It was one of Marian Wilde's transaction notes, a donation to the teen tech charity for over a million, placed only days after the Grand Palm attack.

The lioness looked at the sheet, then grinned. "You thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?"

Rivers nodded. "Seems like it. This Damian Hornby fellow worked, or works, for Furston. He organized his team, including Stang, or so she says, about six months ago. That's about the same time that Perry Devorak told us they made the breakthrough with the Night Howler antidote. He's also a large mammal and horned, just like Perry described.

"And then we've got Doug in the mix, and you know Hopps and Wilde have been looking for him since the Bellwether incident, along with his two ram buddies. Woolter and Jesse. Stang in there said that they were asked to move all of their equipment the night Wolford was murdered. From a warehouse in Savannah Central. Kalahari Heights is right next to one of the less-known routes to get
between the two districts. It's also a dark area. Perfect way to go, if you're looking to avoid being caught on camera."

Longtooth nodded. "She gave us the address of their warehouse that they were using at the time. We'll run the address by Hopps and Wilde. They were trying to use the traffic cameras to locate Wolford, so maybe the address will match with what they found, if anything."

"As for the funding, the fact that she mentioned a donation happening right around the time of Marian Wilde's discovery, that makes things a bit suspicious. And the email money transfers… We'll need to figure out the dates for those, and where they came from. You can't use offshore accounts for those for bank accounts outside the Zootopia banking system in most cases. You have to use Zootopia Union or PayPaw or something."

Longtooth shuddered. "I really hope that doesn't lead to a dead end at Zootopia Union."

Rivers nodded. Zootopia Union was a notorious vector for criminals to transfer money anonymously, and many scams took advantage of it, when they weren't using gullible mammals and having them buy pawTunes or Zoogle Play cards. "Me, too. But I think she's given us reasonable evidence to request her bank records. We can start there. The thing is, even with a signed confession from her, we can't go after this Hornby fellow without more evidence. Until we have that, all we have is her word."

The lioness nodded. "We need more."

Rivers thought about it. "Or maybe we just need to augment what we already know. She's given us a lot of information she couldn't possibly know. That raid on the Tundratown warehouse that Hopps and Wilde initiated? That never went public, as far as I know."

With a nod, Longtooth updated her notes. "Same with the particulars of the formula. And now we also know that they are trying to circumvent the instincts that kept mammals from attacking their mates."

Rivers grew contemplative. "I wonder if that's why all of the more recent bodies that Hopps and Wilde's efforts uncovered in the canal were canids and beavers? Beavers are one of the few traditionally monogamous prey species, and many canids are, too, particularly foxes and wolves."

Scratching her chin, the lioness thought for a moment. "I can sort of see why they would want to do that. If you want to paint something as, say, a bloodthirsty savage, you don't want anything that invokes some sort of emotion. You remember that video that went around? The security footage from the Grand Palm of Hopps and Wilde?"

The elk let out a noise of amusement. "I think that video is still circulating. It gets bumped in my Furbook feed every few days."

"Right, but if you look at the comments, there seems to be three basic camps… Those that support them, those that don't, and a small camp of mammals admitting they feel similarly about other species."

Rivers was about to say more when a general summons for all officers came over the loudspeaker, calling everyone to the briefing room. 

Thomas Hogsmeed stood outside the 64th street apartments, a look of disdain on his face. His brother had told him to stir up trouble for the residents here, and that was exactly what he intended to do. He'd done his homework. The residents were 80% filth, and there were a few couples that were
prey sickos consorting with filth living in the building as well. The pig gagged at the thought. So much the better.

It would be the perfect target for today’s demonstration, along with the other events planned. One of his colleagues was going to deal with the Felix building downtown. That ancient eyesore was built by some famous filth architect, and mammals heralded it as the first real skyscraper. It had to go.

He'd spent the last week organizing the event on a private Furbook group he ran, and, as he looked around, the turnout wasn't so bad. Not as many mammals as he'd hoped – a hundred at best, but more than enough.

At 8:00 in the morning, late enough that they wouldn't break any noise bylaws, he and his assembled group stepped out of their cars and assembled at the edge of the property. At first, they started just by holding up signs and shouting at filth or mammals that dared to question them, but then, with a little crowd prodding, they got a bit noisier. Perfect. They'd be so focused on the demonstration that they wouldn't notice the mammal sneaking into the building until it was too late.

Once the crowd was sufficiently riled up, Tom slipped away and entered the building, heading for the utility closet. Using a screwdriver and a wrench, he broke the cheap doorknob lock and slipped inside. A trained alarm technician, it didn't take him long to disable the building alarm’s external line. He also made sure that the security recorder was also in the room. Perfect. He unhooked that and grabbed it.

The pig looked around for something to help with the second part of the plan. He found a few drain cleaners that looked promising and dumped them all over the floor.

Checking the hallway and seeing no one there, he slipped out of the closet, turned, and struck a match, tossing it onto the cleaner-soaked floor. The product lit instantly. Another check for witnesses, and, not seeing any, he shut the door and left the building.

His work here was done.

Judy Hopps sighed. The week had been exhausting for both herself and her fox, currently wrapped around her like some sort of living blanket, with his muzzle pressed in between her ears.

Some might have thought that the position they were in would have been uncomfortable and, for Judy, scary. The doe never felt that way. Contrary to presumed opinion, it was Nick who said he felt safer holding Judy close. He never really explained why, though, and Judy knew that he'd tell her whenever he felt ready, but she suspected it was something to do with fox culture. She couldn't find anything about it online, much to her frustration.

They only got one day off this week. The case was too important, and if it hadn't been for Bogo giving her and Nick an order to rest up, she would have been in uniform and at the precinct with her fox in tow. Maybe the two could go over what they knew and see if there was anything they missed.

The doe felt the fox around her stir and shift slightly, his mind struggling to surface from the peaceful slumber. In a few seconds, he would open his eyes and undoubtedly give her a kiss on the top of her head.

It turns out that time wasn't on their side today. At that moment, both of their phones erupted in a cacophony of ringing, loud enough to startle the two into a fully awake state.

Nick let out a curse, and Judy couldn't help but blurt out a vegetable-laden expletive of her own as
the two scrambled to grab their phones and silence the infernal noise. Unfortunately for both, the phones were on opposite sides of the bed from each other, which resulted in both of them trying to climb over the other to get to the cursed devices.

Nick missed his before the ringing stopped, but Judy was able to grab hers and answer it, noting the caller ID was Fangmeyer.

"Hopps here. What's up, Liz?"

"Hopps, you need to get in to the precinct right away. The chief's calling in a code red, everyone on deck. Something's happening in the Rainforest District."

"Something?"

"He wouldn't say for sure. Just to call everyone and get them in. He wants all paws on deck, even the night shift and evening shift guys. Something big's going on, and he wants everyone there."

Judy frowned, and Nick gave her a questioning look and mouthed the words 'what's up'?

"OK, Liz, Nick and I will be there as soon as we can." She looked at the clock. "Might take us a bit. The subway is going to be busy."

"Don't worry about that, Hopps. Clawhauser's sending Grizzoli over in a squad car. I assume you both are at Nick's address?"

Judy blushed. "Yeah, we are."

"All right, Grizzoli should be there in…" The tigress paused for a second, likely consulting with their portly cheetah dispatcher. "… Fifteen minutes. Think you can be ready?"

"Yeah, we'll be ready, Liz. See you in a few."

Judy put the phone down and turned to Nick, who was giving her a curious look. "Got to go into work. Chief called a code red and needs everyone in."

Nick's shoulders slumped. "So much for our day off. Bogo say what it was about?"

The doe shook her head. "No. Whatever it is, it's gotta be big, though. He didn't even call a code red when the Grand Palm was attacked. Grizzoli's on his way to pick us up. He should be here in about fifteen minutes."

The fox glanced at the clock. "So much for morning coffee, a morning shower, AND our day off. This just keeps getting better and better."

Judy socked her fox on the shoulder. "Lighten up, Nick. We can spend another day playing video games or something. For now, we have to work. If we're lucky, we can use the showers at the precinct."

The fox shuddered as he pulled his uniform out. "I can't stand those things. I feel like I'm being blasted by a very warm fire truck. Maybe elephants and rhinos can stand it, but I'd rather not feel like I'm drowning taking a shower."

The doe rolled her eyes as she headed for her own bedroom. "I know. You'd think that the city would spring for some small-mammal showers in that place. Costs too much, I guess."

"Hey, they have to save money for their gold-plated toilet seats somehow!" Nick called after her,
earning a snicker just as she closed her door.

Smiling and shaking his head, the fox went through the routine of getting dressed, putting a rush on it, since they had to be out the door in short order. He met back up with Judy in the entryway, grabbing the coat and hi-visibility safety vest they were issued. Judy's phone went off just as they were locking the door.

Grizzoli met them at the door, and the two climbed into the squad car. The back was a locked area for criminals, so Nick and Judy both climbed into the passenger seat, since it was sized for mammals much larger than them. At least the shoulder belts could be lowered to their stature.

Nick glanced over at the large bear as he climbed into the driver's side. "So, where's the fire, big guy?"

Bert Grizzoli shrugged. "Don't know, exactly. I heard some chatter about something happening in the rainforest district, and no one has been able to reach the squad cars or dispatchers over there. My guess is that has something to do with it." He flipped on the lights and sirens and sped off.

Judy cocked her head. "Shouldn't we be going over there to investigate?"

The bear shook his head. "Bogo wants a powwow for some reason. Either it's to brief us all on what's going on or to defend the rest of the city from an alien invasion."

Nick snorted. "If it's an alien invasion, I hope our future selves at least sent us a robot to help us defend."

Judy frowned, looking at the police radio, then reached over and turned it up.

The cacophony of calls nearly blasted her out of her seat, and the crosstalk squelch was almost unbearable.

"And that's why I turned it down. Chief tried to impose radio silence, but there are so many emergency calls right now that the radio is chaos."

The doe turned the police radio back down and instead turned on the car radio, tuning to a news station.

"...s of 20 minutes ago, ZBC has been getting unconfirmed reports of savage mammals in the Rainforest District, and the Canals District. No word yet on the identities of the mammals, the number, or the lack of response from the ZPD, fire, and EMS. We're trying to get a news crew out there to see what's going on. If you are able to share any information, please call us at 555-ZBC-LSTN. That's 555-922-5872."

Nick turned the radio off. "Typical. If you have information, call the news, not the police or emergency workers! We'll thank you for the tip, broadcast it like it's one of our own, and not bother to tell the people actually doing the footwork when all hell breaks loose!"

Grizzoli and Judy both managed a bit of a morbid laugh. It was true. In the middle of an unfolding event, the news tended to ask that you call them instead of emergency services. The bear in the car sighed as he pulled into the ZPD motor pool lot. "That's been a thorn in the chief's side for years. A few years ago, there was a fire at that old amusement park that used to be on the highway south of Sahara Square. You know, just outside the city. The news crews were all over that and were interfering with the fire department and the EMS. We tried to keep them under control, but it was like taming a riot."
Judy nodded, remembering seeing that on TV in Bunnyburrow. A few officers had been injured trying to keep some of the news crews at bay. The fire had started in an old building that was used to cook some of the food served at the park, and had engulfed an entire half of the place. Further investigations showed that building codes hadn't been adhered to when constructing the park, and subsequent inspections had failed to detect the shortcomings. Twelve mammals had died in the firestorm, and the place had remained closed ever since.

The three mammals piled out of the cruiser and hurried into the building, bypassing the usual punch clock, and headed straight for the briefing room.

It became apparent as they walked into the room, spotting and waving a greeting to Rivers and Longtooth in the process, that it was a good thing they shared a seat anyways. The room was packed with mammals of all sizes, much more than the usual, and everyone was clamouring for information.

"What's going on?"

"Why are we here?"

"You think you had it rough. I got pulled away from a very…promising day with my wife for this!"

Those were just some of the snippets the doe's large ears picked up, and she cringed at the last one, whose voice she didn't recognize. She glanced over, noticing it came from a third-shift rookie wolf. The third shift worked nights more often than not, which explained why Judy didn't recognize the voice.

Judy and her fox hopped up onto the lone seat at the front of the room, gave McHorn a fistbump, which he returned halfheartedly, and focused their attention forward, only now noticing that Bogo was already waiting for them at the podium.

"Nice of you two to show up."

Nick smirked. "Oh, you know we can't go through a day without seeing your shining face, sir! In fact, I think it does more to get our rabbit here going every day than coffee!"

Judy snorted but tried to hide it by punching Nick's arm, while Bogo fumed. "If it wasn't for the fact that I need every available officer right now, I might just send you home and pair Hopps with McHorn for the day."

The room chuckled at the chief's comeback. Everyone except for McHorn, of course, who had a reputation for being a no-nonsense, somewhat humourless mammal. While Judy liked the big rhino and got along with him, she didn't relish the idea of spending the day with him, and without Nick.

"Now then, if we are done with the smart remarks, we can get to the point." The cape buffalo shuffled the papers in front of him. "A little over an hour ago, we started getting reports of savage mammals in the Rainforest and Canal Districts.

"This normally wouldn't trigger a code red, except the number of reports has jammed up the emergency lines. Worse yet, we've lost contact with the precincts in those districts, and the radios are flooded with savage mammal calls. We don't know what's going on over there. The few civilians we've managed to get any information out of tell us 'all hell broke loose, and such-and-such attacked me'."

Judy raised her paw. "What about the traffic cameras, sir?"

Bogo shook his head. "The system went down about a half hour before the incident began, and the
tech company responsible hasn't been able to get to the Rainforest District to start that area back up again."

Nick frowned. "That's awfully convenient."

"Much as it pains me to agree with you, Wilde, you're right. The tech company called us about fifteen minutes ago to say they'd sent two teams, and neither one has reported in yet. We can't rely on the traffic cameras. Our in-house techs are trying to establish a connection to the precinct security cameras to get a feel for what's going on there, but I'm told the systems were isolated, so those will take time as well."

Bogo turned back to his papers. "HAWC1 and HAWC2 choppers are in the air, but they can't see much through the canopy. They have, however, reported long streams of vehicles leaving the district, and have, and I quote, 'a fuckton of IR imagery that doesn't make sense'."

From the back of the room, Rivers spoke up. "Any pattern for the savage mammals, Chief?"

Bogo turned to regard the other ungulate. "So far, they seem to be only predators, from what limited information we have. So, all predator officers going into the affected area, you'll need to stick with your partners like glue, and wear your gas masks. This is an order. For now, all third-shift officers will be taking patrol duty here in Savannah Central. Talk to Corporal Grizzoli for your specific assignments. Keep everything under control here. Second shift, you get to the Canals district. Talk to Sergeant Higgins. Go now."

Rivers and Longtooth were also excused at their request. Both looked like they had some urgent business to attend to, and Judy wished she'd had the chance to chat with them before coming in here. Maybe later.

The second- and third-shift mammals filed out the doors. Soon, only the first shift remained in the room. "First shift, you'll be taking the Rainforest District. I have specific patrol routes for each of you, but a few of you will need to wait until the other districts get some spare cruisers over here. They're sending a few officers as well to cover your usual positions."

The chief began handing out files to each of the mammals left, telling them they were dismissed as soon as he did so. Judy glanced at the overly large – well to her, anyways – file in her paw. She and Nick would be investigating the heart of the district, including some of the district's largest commercial and industrial areas. Standing up, she gestured to her fox to follow her, wondering what was going on. As she got to the cruiser she shared with Nick, her cell phone chimed.

"Keep on your toes, you two. Possible second attack by Grand Palm group. More in a bit. - Longtooth."

Chapter End Notes

Uh-oh! What have our mammals gotten into now?

Sorry this chapter was a little late, work's been kicking my butt lately. But hey, at least it's up, right?
Last chapter had FIVE references! I forgot about two of them. Shrek, Star Trek, Harry Potter, and two songs were all alluded to. A couple of you got them :D

Can you find the hidden references in THIS chapter?

Coming up on July 12: It Hits the Fan!

Questions? Critiques? Did Hades burn your 300-page college thesis before you could hand it in? Leave a comment!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!