Life Is A Highway - formerly Hopps Express

by GhostWolf88

Summary

A/U-Judy's dreams of being a cop are shattered when there's no Mammal Inclusion Initiative so she can't join the ZPD. She's forced to help run one of the family's gas stations in Zootopia, anything to get out of Bunnyburrow. There's NO chance for excitement or love in a gas station…unless a certain fox can entice her away. I own no rights to Zootopia or any songs mentioned in the story.

Notes

This story was actually supposed to be a one to two chapter story, but took on a life of it's own. The title came about because there is actually a chain of gas stations in my town that are known as Hopps Express. No, bunnies don't actually own them.
For anyone concerned about Judy beating up on Nick not only in this story, but in a lot of other stories as well (punching him on the shoulder, etc.) it is a common practice among real rabbits to box (hit) mates or prospective mates. In fact, Judy actually punches Nick on the shoulder just after he saves the Night Howler serum from the wrecked train car...

See the end of the work for more notes.
Hopps Express

As the fully restored Midnight Blue '65 GTO convertible pulled into the local Hopps Express gas station, Nick heard Finnick grumble "Mammal, why yu' gotta stop here for? We ain't never gonna make the car show in time to register this beauty if ya keep stoppin' alla time!"

"Fin, you know the ONLY place I can find that certain brand of Herrs Cicada chips is these Hopps stations. Nobody else has the blueberry flavored ones."

"Yea, well I think you just want to check out Josh and Duane's sister. You been wantin' to stop since you heard she was workin' here."

"Personally, I don't know what the hell you see in a bunny chick anyways. Especially since this particular bunny wanted to be a cop. How'd you let those two bunnies talk you inta checkin' her out anyways? If they're tryin' to hook you up, you KNOW something must be wrong with her. I tell ya Nick, this idea has bad written all over it."

"Dude ease up. First off, it's your turn to gas up the GTO, I told you I was going to check and see if she was interested in the mechanic spot we so desperately need to fill. Not to mention the fact that Skye is getting tired of having to model with the cars every weekend, she seems to want to spend time with some new boy toy of hers. And for your information, I am NOT looking to get hooked up with anyone, ESPECIALLY since Skye just dumped me…Don’t tell me your memory is as short as you are” sad Nick with a toothy smirk. “You fill the car and I'll get my chips, check out the Hopps chick and we can be on our way, ok?"

"Yea, yea, yea, hurry the hell up or we'll miss the damned deadline."

As Nick enters the store, he waves at the two Hopps brothers, who nod towards the storeroom, indicating that their sister Judy is back there getting ready to restock some of the almost sold out items, including Nick's favorite chips. Just as Nick reaches for the last in stock bag of chips, Judy backs out of the store room with both arms full of stock. Instead of grabbing the aforementioned chips, Nick ends up with a pawful of grey and white cottontail, which just happens to be attached to Judy.

"Just what" SMACK "in the hell do you think you're doing" yells Judy as she sends Nick flying into a display stand, scattering chips and candy bars all over the store. "What makes you think you can come in here a just grab me by the ass? I'm calling the cops you damned pervert"

"But…but…wait. What the hell just happened?"

As Judy reaches for her phone to call the ZPD Nick tries to explain "I was reaching for the last bag of chips and you backed up into my paw…I swear…"

"A likely story you da…….yes, ZPD, this is Judy Hopps…yes again, what the hell difference does that make? Listen Clawhauser, I want to report a molestation...yes me, who the hell else would I be calling about? Will you just…send someone to the store please? Thanks."

"Judy" calls out Duane "what Nick said is true, he was just going to grab a bag of chips, NOT your tail. You backed into him, it's more your fault than his. How many times have we told you to not back out of the storeroom?"
"And I'm just supposed to believe you two asshats? After all of the crap you pull on me every day, just to make me more miserable than I already am? Really?"

Just then, Fangmeyer and Delgado pull up to the front of the store. "Ok Judy, what's the problem this time? This is the third time this month you've had us called in, and it's getting' kinda old…"

“How did you guys get here so quick?” asks Josh.

“With the amount of calls we’ve had to answer here since Judy came, we tend to swing by a little more often so we don’t have to drive halfway across the district just get here for another half-baked complaint” says Delgado, leveling a frown at the very unhappy bunny.

"Yea, well this pervert grabbed me by the butt when I came out of the storeroom and I want to press sexual assault charges” says Judy. While Fangmeyer tries to calm Judy down, Delgado goes over to Nick "Mr….."

"Wilde, Nick Wilde, with an e."

"Mr. Wilde, can you explain what's going on here, and is there any truth to Ms. Hopps allegation?"

"Well, it's actually kinda difficult to explain, but I'll try. Umm, yes I guess I did, kind of accidentally grab the lady by the tail but there are extenuating circumstances."

"Really? This should be interesting."

"Tell me about it. Anyways, I was reaching to grab the last bag of blueberry Cicada chips and the young lady backed out of the storeroom with her paws full of chips and stuff and sorta kinda backed into my paw. I swear it's true, ask her brothers, they saw the whole thing."

Just then, Finnick came in through the door "Nick, what the hell did you do now? We gotta get to the show or we'll lose our deposit” as Delgado and Nick both shoot Finnick a ‘get lost’ look “never mind, I'll wait in the car" and quickly heads back out of the door.

As Delgado turns to the brothers, Josh speaks up "If it's any help, we just got the new security cameras installed last week and they're up and running. You can check out the footage in the office if that'll help."

As Josh and Delgado go into the office, Judy yells at Nick "Your sorry ass is headed to jail if I have anything to say about it fox."

"Pipe down Judy" says Fangmeyer, "you aren't making matters any better."

After about ten minutes Nick and Delgado exit the office "Mr. Wilde" says Delgado, loud enough for Judy and Fangmeyer to hear "do you want to press charges against Ms. Hopps for felony assault?"

"WHAT?" yells Judy "What are you talking about? He grabbed my butt and you want to know if HE wants to press charges against ME?"

"Judy" says Delgado "I just saw the recordings from the security cameras. Everything Mr. Wilde and your brothers have told us is true. If you want to press charges against Mr. Wilde, there IS evidence enough to support your claim of sexual assault. However, I must warn you, according to the footage it was unintentional. What IS intentional is you striking Mr. Wilde with intent to do bodily harm, which I'm sure you of all mammals know is a Class A felony. IF Mr. Wilde decides to press charges you will go to jail."
"Look Judy, I know you’re upset because you’d planned your life around joining the ZPD, but you can’t keep this up. Every time some little thing happens you go off the deep end. I would strongly suggest that you two get together and work something out mutually beneficial to the both of you. We'll give you a few minutes to think about what you want to do and get back with you for a decision."

As Josh and Duane started picking up the display and its contents that were scattered all over the floor, Nick stared intently at Judy, who was suddenly very nervous. As Judy contemplated her fate, Nick started the conversation "Look, I know we got off to a bad start, how about a simple introduction? I'm Nick, Nick Wilde."

"Judy, Judy Hopps. Umm, I guess I may have sorta overreacted, but a bunny's tail is really sensitive, OK? I've had a bit of a hard time lately. I had planned to join the ZPD ever since I was little, or littler, only to find out they won't take small mammals, so my dreams and future have kinda gone down the in flames. Long story short, I've been kinda been taking out my frustrations on anyone and everyone who really haven't deserved it. Ummm….and I apologize for hitting you, it was just a kind of automatic reaction, what with having 275 siblings and all."

"Wait, what? You have that many brothers and sisters? Really?"

"Well, yea, we bunnies are really good at multiplying ya know, what can I say? Is there anything I can say or do to make it up to you? I really don't want to go to jail, and-and…"

"Look" says Nick "I don't want you to go to jail over a misunderstanding, but I can't just pass it off as if nothing happened either. Let me ask you something, are you happy here. I mean working in the store?"

Judy looks up at hopefully Nick "NO, not really, it's just better than being stuck in Bunnyburrow growing carrots for the rest of my life, why?"

"Well to be perfectly honest, the real reason I stopped today was to talk to you…"

"To me, why on earth would you want to do that?"

"Two reasons, truth be told. First, your brothers said you were really hot…"

"I'm going to kill those two…"

"Aaaand the second is that they said that you are a better than average mechanic, working on the farm and all" interrupted Nick.

"What does one have to do with the other?" asked Judy.

"Ok, please hear me out, second reason first." Nick hands Judy one of his business cards 'Wilde Times Classic Muscle Cars' "I'm in great need of a good mechanic at my shop. The pay's good and tools are furnished. The shop is top notch because we restore all of the classic muscle cars along with some motorcycles and some classic luxury cars. Some are in pretty good shape but a lot are basket cases. We sell them to the very cream of Zootopia elite. The '65 GTO convertible outside is one of our cars."

"Hmmm, ok, sounds interesting. So, what is the other reason you wanted to talk to me?"

"Well" says Nick, blushing slightly "Your brothers said you were extremely good looking so I wanted to check you out to see if they were telling the truth."

Judy's mouth hung open for a few seconds in shock "Wait….do you mean to tell me… that my..."
brothers...were trying to set me up...for a date...with you?"

"Umm, well...not really" grins Nick “Actually, I was hoping you might want to go the car show with us, more as a job interview than a date, particularly because we also need...or at least can use another attractive model to help show off the cars."

Now it was Judy's turn to be embarrassed "Now I'm really going to kill those two, just wait 'till I get my paws on them..."

"Look, my business partner Fin and I were on our way to the car show when all of...this...went down, to show the car parked outside. Since we missed the deadline to get the car entered, at least we can show up, if you're interested in the job, and check out the competition. And as an added bonus, I promise not to press assault charges. So, are you interested...or not?"

"Let's say I am, would I be your date or your employee?"

"Either or both, whatever trips your trigger."

"Both? Really? What would mammals think if I were to go as your date?"

"First off, I for one could give a rat’s ass less what they, or anyone for that matter, thinks about who I'm with. It's my, or our, business and not theirs. Second, almost everyone will be there for the cars first and foremost. The better quality and rarity of the cars, the more they’re worth. Third, how better to sell a classic muscle car, than to show it off with an intelligent, beautiful model who is also a top-notch mechanic?"

As Judy mulled over Nick's offer, she realized that he was being totally honest about the entire conversation. "Ok, just for giggles, let's say I accept your offer. I'm currently staying with my brothers, how am I supposed to get to work? I don't have a car and according to the address on your business card it would take me an hour and a half to get to work every day using public transportation, not to mention the ride back."

"Well, there's a vacant room above the shop I'll let you use, rent free, until you can get on your feet."

As Judy studies Nick as he talks, she finds the job offer appealing, as it gets her out of the station and farther from Bunnyburrow.

As Fangmeyer and Delgado approach the pair, Judy quickly tells Nick "Ok, it's a deal. Do I have time to change into something a little less that looks like I work in a gas station?"

"Sure, no problem, I can give you a lift to wherever you need to go. After the show you can either wait and get your stuff to move to the shop or do it over the weekend, preferably before Monday morning, your choice."

"Well, have you two hashed things out?" asked Delgado.

"As a matter of fact we have officers" said Nick, "Ms. Hopps has not only agreed to not press charges against me, I will not be pursuing charges against her. We have not only agreed that this is all a big misunderstanding, she has graciously accepted a job offer as a mechanic at my shop."

"Is this true Judy?" asked Delgado.

"Absolutely" replied a very relieved and smiling Judy. "Hopefully, this will be the last you hear from me, at least as far as the complaints go. I may have found something to funnel my energy to and keep my attitude in check."
"Well, that's great" said Delgado "I hope everything works out for you Judy, you seem like you might actually be happy for a change."

"Yea, I hope so too" says Judy.

As Fangmeyer and Delgado drive off, Judy casually walks over to her brothers. "Josh, Duane"

"Yes?" says Josh.

First Judy punches each of her brothers on the arm "That's for not telling me about trying to get me a better job." Then she kisses each on the cheek "And that's for hooking me up with a job with Nick."

As Nick and Judy approach the classic muscle car, Judy stops dead in her track and exclaims “This is what I’ll be working on? It’s absolutely beautiful!”

Actually, remember, I told you that most of the cars I get aren’t even close to looking like this. They require a lot of mechanical and body work, that’s where you come in, at least for the mechanical stuff. I have staff that do the upholstery and Fin is a marvel in the paint booth."

Then they hear Finnick "What the hell took so damned long? And are you serious about the bunny? I mean what the hell Nick?"

"Fin, shut the fuck up for a while will ya? First off, meet our new mechanic. Secondly, meet the hot model that's going to help us sell more cars. And yes, they are all the same mammal."

As Nick started the car and listened to the throaty roar of the big block motor "What do you think of that Fluff?"

"VERY nice. Let's go get me something really nice to get changed into and head for the show…. then we'll see where things go from there."

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As the three pull up to the apartment building that Judy lives in with her brothers, Nick is less than impressed with the living conditions. “Wow, you guys actually live here? I thought this place was condemned a while back.”

“Yea, it was, but somehow the landlord actually got it up to codes, but just barely. Give me about fifteen minutes and I’ll be back down, I can have all of my stuff ready to go if you don’t mind me putting it in your trunk.”

“No problem, the show doesn’t even open ‘till around noon so we got some time.”

After Judy disappears inside Fin asks Nick “Mammal, are you sure about this? I mean a bunny, really? You offer her a job without checking her creds? A bunny?”

“Since when have creds ever been a problem? Most of the crew at the shop wouldn’t get hired as janitors at most places, us included. Lighten up, ok?”

Just then the front door of the apartment building opens and Judy emerges with two large suitcases in paw. Nick and Fin are in awe of the change in Judy’s appearance. Her outfit consists of a pale blue V-neck top that just shows a peek of her cleavage, a lavender skirt that matches her eyes and a very nice amethyst and emerald necklace that happens to match Nick and Judy’s eyes.

“Well, are you going to help me with these or are you just going to sit there gawking?” asks Judy.
“Your brothers said you were good looking, but they never said you were drop dead gorgeous!” said Nick.

“Nice of you to notice” says Judy with a bit of a smirk.

“Uhhh, you got any sisters that are half as good looking as you?” asks Finnick.

“I think I might be able to scrounge up one or two if I look hard enough, why? You acted like you didn’t want to be around a bunny not too long ago, what changed your mind?”

“N-nutin’ special, really…ok, I’ll admit it you look….ok.”

Judy giggles “I don’t know, besides, there are only one or two who might actually be able to tolerate your smart attitude. And they are at least as mean as you try to act, so do you really want to check and of them out or not?”

“Hell yea, they sound like they might be my kind of girls. Let’s get goin’ to the show, we can talk on the way.”

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As our trio enters the car show, Judy gazes around in awe at the vast assortment of classic cars on display. Everything from XKE Jaguars to Bentleys to Corvettes to Lincolns. There is even a section devoted to motorcycles.

“Like what ya see Fluff?” asks Nick.

“Oh…my…God…. how could I not? The is the most awesome collection of cars I have ever seen in my life, not that I have actually seen any in person, but even the ones in magazines don’t do justice to seeing them in person. And I’ll actually get to help create some of these wonderful machines?”

“Is that what I’ll be paying you to do? Yes-yes, it is.”

Judy stops for a second and takes Nick’s paw in hers. As Nick turns to face her she gives him a tight hug and whispers in his ear “Thank you, for everything. For not sending me to jail, for offering me the job and for bringing me here to see this amazing sight. But I’m NOT going to thank you for grabbing my tail, at least not yet. We’ll see how everything works out, then I might, just might thank you for that as well.”

As they continue to circulate through the displays, Nick looks at the beaming bunny and thinks I never dreamed that things could go from the exceptionally bad start to where they may lead in the future. From being the lonely owner of a successful shop, to actually looking forward to seeing someone special every day. One step at a time I guess…… And I never did get those damned chips…”
Revelations

Chapter Summary

Nick and Judy get acquainted. Of course thing don't go smoothly with Judy's parents as well, especially her mother.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Revelations

XxX

After the car show, Nick, Judy and Finnick take a slow ride in Nick’s ‘65 GTO convertible towards Nick’s shop where Judy now has gainful employment and a temporary home.

On the way Nick asks “Is anyone else hungry? All we ate at the show was junk food and I really need something decent to eat.”

“Not me mammal, I got’s someplace to be, drop me off at the shop” Says Finnick, growling slightly.

“OK, no problem. How about you Judy, you hungry?”

“Yea, I guess, what do you have in mind? I really don’t have a lot of money saved up so…”

“No problem, I think I can spare a good meal for my newest employee.”

…

After dropping Finnick off at the shop Nick asks “Well, what do you have a taste for? There’s everything from fast food like BugaBurger to lightly fancy like the Gaslight. Considering the fact that we’re already dressed up a bit, I think the Gaslight would be the best choice. It’s nice without being overly expensive, besides more than a few of my regular customers tend to eat there.”

“I-I guess that would be ok” said Judy, more than a little nervous at the suggestion.

Once at the restaurant “Good evening Mr. Wilde” greeted the female lynx owner “Would you like your usual table?”

“Yes please.” replied Nick “That would be fine, thank you Mellisa.”

As Nick and Judy were seated “Would you care for a drink while you are waiting for your server?”

“I’ll have a frozen Margareta” replied Nick “Judy would you like something?”

Nick noticed Judy suddenly become very uncomfortable, with emotions from fear to dread to sadness play quickly across her muzzle, then quickly disappear “No thank you, water with lemon will be fine, thanks.”

“Well then, I’ll have your server bring your drinks, have a look at the menus while you’re waiting.”
After a short wait, their server, a stunning female deer arrived with their drinks. Nick noticed that although Judy was still slightly upset, she had calmed considerably. ‘I wonder what set that off’ thought Nick, but he decided that he wouldn’t press the issue.

“Hi, I’m Jannette and I’ll be your server tonight. Have you decided on your order yet or do you need a few minutes?”

“I’ll have a Cobb salad with grilled chicken” said Nick.

“I guess a chef’s salad with the house dressing will be fine” indicated Judy a bit shyly.

After their server took their order and left them “Nick” started Judy hesitantly “what’s Finnick’s problem with me? I know he tried to act like he might be interested in one of my sisters, but I could tell there was actually more than a trace of animosity there.”

Nick thought for long minute before answering “I guess you might as well know up front. The last two mechanics I hired were both buck rabbits. Each did fairly good work, but the first one I had to fire because we caught him stealing parts. The other missed so much work that he was gone more than he was at the shop. So…I’m guessing that Fin figures that you will most likely be a stereotypical bunny doe and will be pregnant more often than not. You’d have to ask him to be sure, but that’s probably not a great idea either.’

‘Here’s the deal, Fin and I built this shop from pretty much the ground up. In fact, we got it on a default loan from my first customer. Shop, tools, cars everything. The customer in question had broken down literally in front of the van that Fin and I were actually living in at the time. When we managed to get the car up and running, the customer was impressed enough to make us an offer we couldn’t refuse. He gave us the opportunity to purchase the shop at a very low interest rate with very reasonable payments. Within a few years we’d paid off the loan and we now own the shop free and clear. It wasn’t easy, with the general public having such a dim view of foxes in general. That being the case, it took quite a while to build a reputation for being honest and trustworthy. The bunny mechanics put several projects in jeopardy, which might have cost us the reputation, which means it could have cost us the business.”

As Nick explained, Judy watched Nick’s eyes, those gorgeous emerald eyes, ‘wait…what? Where did that come from?’ as he spoke and got the impression that there was a lot more to it than what he was telling her.

“So…with all of that, why did you see fit to take a chance with me?”

After Nick thought for a few seconds he answered “To be quite honest, from what I’ve seen you definitely don’t exactly fit the bunny stereotype. You seem to be intelligent, ambitious, hardworking and beautiful to boot.’

‘I know that you’re in your mid-twenties, thanks to a bit of information from your brothers. You’ve never been married, and as far as I can tell, have no kits.”

“Really? What gives you the impression that I have no kits?”

Nick gives Judy a knowing smile “Single females, regardless of species, that don’t have kits have a difference about them that really stands out if a mammal takes the time to observe.”

“Really, like what?” asks Judy, slightly intrigued.

“The way they walk, the way they talk, and the way they dress. Females that have been pregnant have a certain way they walk than one who hasn’t been. When they talk they usually let slip little details about the kits, or constantly check the time because they’re worried about getting home or
want to know how the sitters’ doing. As far as the dressing part, two females can wear the same outfit, even if it’s just jeans and a button up shirt and the entire difference in attitude gives it away.”

“You really think so?” asks Judy obviously doubting Nick’s remarks.

“Absolutely” Remarks Nick. “I know you don’t believe that so let’s do this. You already know that you can make a pair of jeans or shorts and a simple button up top look great. Now picture one of your sisters in the same outfit, one that has had a couple of litters. Can you sit there and honestly tell me that there is no difference in the way you each would look, the way you would present yourselves? Besides, how many bunnies do you know that have had kits, can wear an outfit like you have on and make it looks so good? And how many would even think about wearing it?”

Judy thought about Nick’s question for a while “I guess you’re probably right, I hadn’t really thought about it like that.”

As their food arrived, the conversation again turned towards Judy.

“While we’re on the subject, let me ask YOU a question” says Nick. Even though you’ve accepted the job, I’ve noticed that you’re at the very least, a bit apprehensive. Any particular reason, other than the fact that we’re supposed to be natural enemies and all?”

Judy’s ears drooped, lying flat against her back. “Well” she started in a very low and sad voice “I-I guess it all started when I was nine. I had always wanted to be a cop since I was little, well littler. Some friends and I were doing a skit during the Bunnyburrow fair, and I was in my police uniform. After the skit I noticed that some of my other friends were being bullied…. the bully in this case was a…. red fox” which garnered Nick’s total attention.

“He had stolen my friends’ tickets so I attempted to intervene. He pushed me down, I kicked him in the muzzle and then he gave me these” as Judy shyly showed Nick the scars on her cheek “to remember him by. He told me that I would never be anything more than a stupid carrot farming dumb bunny.’

‘It was another reason that I wanted, needed, so much to succeed. To show him and everyone else that I wasn’t just a dumb bunny, that I could actually be a cop and not just another carrot farmer. Even though I can’t be a cop, there is no way I can go back home, I have to make something else out of my life.”

As Nicks gaze turned from her scars, to her beautiful amethyst eyes filled with tears ‘a mammal could get lost in those eyes’ Nick thought, he began to understand. He also saw more pain and sadness behind them than what she was revealing right now but decided not to push for more information at this time. ‘Wait a minute, what the hell am I thinking, this is just another employee…… right?’

“Judy, I understand that you’ve had a tough time with foxes, but I would never do anything like that to hurt you. “We’ve both had some rough times in our past, but let’s not dwell on that for now. Let’s finish up here, I’ll pay the bill and we’ll head for the shop. Is that ok with you?”

“Yea, I guess so, it’s at least worth a shot. It’s got to be better than working in a gas station or going back home a complete failure.”

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“So” says Judy trying to be a little more upbeat as they head towards the shop, “tell me a bit more about this shop of yours and what all I’ve gotten myself into.”
“Well” begins Nick “on the surface it’s fairly simple. I have mammals that go around Zootopia and the surrounding countryside looking for old muscle cars, classic luxury cars and motorcycles. Stuff that can either be fully restored or turned into hotrods or the like. On occasion, a customer will bring us a special project that he or she wants to be restored, upgraded or just hopped up. It really doesn’t matter as long as the project is doable and will make me, and in the long run, shop, money. Then there is the rare instance when some mammal just needs to get rid of something we can use, even if it’s just a junker we can use for parts.’

‘There will be times when there are no parts to be had, new or used, so we have to make do. We have a full machine shop so we can make a lot of our own parts if the need arises. I don’t know if you’ve ever operated a lot of the equipment we have at the shop, but I’m sure you can manage, am I right? I won’t kid you, the hours will be long and the work will be hard, but you’ll be treated fairly, I will personally see to that.”

“Yes, I believe I can learn just about anything if given the proper instruction. The hours and hard work shouldn’t be a problem, I grew up working on a farm after all.” says Judy. “OK, subject change. Tell me about this ‘room’ you have above the shop…”

“Well, it’s not much. Fin and I used to crash there before the shop really took off and we could afford our own places. Now it’s pretty much used for storage. The bed, fridge and stove are still there and in working order I think. There is also a shower in the bathroom and there is only one way in and out of the room. You can rearrange the space anyway you want, we can get you some curtains and anything else you might need so you can have your privacy.’

‘While I’m thinking about it, maybe I should go after a new mattress and sheets, the ones that are there have been here for a long time and are …ummmm…well not in great shape” said Nick in a slightly embarrassed tone. “There’s a store just up the street that stays open late, I can at least get you a new set to start with. Does that sound ok to you?”

As Judy slowly began to understand the cause of Nick’s embarrassment and began to be a bit embarrassed herself, “Y-yea, I guess that might be a good idea. If you want to go get the mattress and stuff, I can do a little rearranging and start putting what little I own away.”

After Nick pulls up to the curb in front of the shop, Judy is impressed with how clean and well organized the shop looks from the outside and is even more impressed as they enter the main bay.

“Right this way” begins Nick as he indicates the stairs leading to the old ‘office’. When Nick opens the office door and turns on the lights they’re greeted by a larger mess than even Nick had anticipated. There were only a couple of small pathways, one to the fridge and one to the bathroom.

When she looked at the jumbled mass of accumulated junk Judy gasped, she was suddenly not so sure this was such a great idea.

“Well crap” was all he could say “I apologize, I had no idea it was this much of a freaking mess… Ok, how about this” continued Nick “We’ll clean enough to make it through until tomorrow. The bed is over there on the other side of the desk, if you want to head that way, I’ll call the Beds and More store up the street and have a mattress set delivered, then I’ll start on cleaning the bathroom.”

Nick looked up the number of the bedding store and called “Hello, yes is this is Nick at the car shop, is Jimmy Q there tonight? He is, great put him on please…Listen Jimmy, I need a big favor. I need you to get a good queen-sized mattress and spring set, along with anything else that would go along with them and have them delivered to the shop as soon as you can get them here ok? Yea, I’ll pay in cash just like always…. thirty minutes? Great, see you then.”

While Nick was on the phone, Judy started cleaning a path towards the bed, and with that accomplished she moved to the sink, stove and fridge. Since the sink was empty but in a bad need of
cleaning, she figured that was as good a place to start as any. There were a few dishes and glasses above the sink, as well as a small drawer with some mixed designs of silverware beside the sink. By the time she got the sink cleaned up she moved on to the fridge. While it wasn’t nasty it did need a good cleaning. She figured she wouldn’t be doing any cooking tonight so she bypassed the stove until tomorrow.

While Judy was making her way towards the bed, Nick had the unenviable task of cleaning the disaster of a bathroom. Luckily (if you could call it that) all of the needed cleaning supplies were at hand on shelves above the sink. By the time Judy was finished with the fridge, the delivery van pulled out with the new mattress, sheets and pillows. While the mammals from the bedding store delivered and set up the new mattress and springs and carted off the old set, they left the sheets and other items on top of the mattress so Judy could at least have a comfortable bed to sleep in her first night in her new home.

As Nick paid the bill, Jimmy told him “There’s a nice comforter there, I threw it in since you’re such a good customer. If you need anything else, you know you can call anytime right?”
After another hour or so of cleaning, Nick finally finished with the bathroom and it was spotless, while Judy spent the time cleaning a larger area around the bed and the desk that was next to it.

As Nick was getting ready to leave, Nick handed Judy the key to the door of the ‘apartment’ he told her “This is the key to the door, you have my word that it is the only one. There are some business cards on that desk over there with the shop number, and I’ve put my personal cell number on the back of this one. I’ll stop by tomorrow to help you clean up this mess some more and to show you the shop if you want, or you can just look around on your own, whatever you choose.”

“If you don’t mind, please come by and show me where I’ll be working, where my tools are and anything else I might need to know so I’ll be ready to go on Monday, ok?”

Nick smiled “That’ll be ok, I really have nothing else to do. How about I stop by around seven and pick you up for breakfast? Then if you like we can get you go shopping for some groceries and anything else you might need, before we clean up some more of this mess and the ‘grand tour’.

“That’d be great. Are you sure I’m not putting you out too much? You’re doing an awful lot for someone you barely know.”

“Look, I know what it’s like to have pretty much nothing other than what you’re wearing, I’ve been there. You seem like a pretty good gal who’s dealing with some bad luck, and I would really just like to help. If things work out great, if not, at least we both tried to give it our best shot.”

“I guess it’s kind of late to be asking, but…what are we talking about for wages? Whatever it is, it has to be better than the station…I was just kind of wondering”

“Actually, I figured I’d start you out at around fifteen dollars an hour with time and a half after 8 hours, and full medical benefits from day one. Once you get more experience and I know how well you’re doing, it’ll get better. Your expenses should be minimal with no rent or utilities. As far as a vehicle, I know you’ll need something, we can work that out as well.”

Judy looked at Nick and tried not to tear up “I don’t know how to thank you, except to just do the best job I can.” She then gave Nick a quick hug, blushing slightly “I guess I’ll see you in the morning then…”

As Nick left Judy to her thoughts, her cell phone began to ring. ‘Oh great’ she groaned “Oh, hey, it’s my parents. Hi mom, I wasn’t expecting a call from you guys until tomorrow” she said in a slightly
upbeat voice.

“Judy, what’s this that your brothers told us about you getting another job?”

“Well, yea, I got a good offer and….”

“That’s not the issue here young lady and you know it. Josh told us that it was a fox that hired you! What were you thinking? After what happened with Gideon and all, I would have thought that you would have enough sense to steer clear of foxes.”

“What was I supposed to do mom? Work at the station forever? Stay home and work on the farm. You know that’s never been what I wanted. And after what happened with that damned Johnny Whinters, you know why I couldn’t stay around the Tri-Burrows. I know you and dad probably don’t approve of what I’m doing, but at some point in my life I still have to do things my own way. I-I can’t go back to the burrows, I’d rather live under a bridge and be destitute than go back.’ ‘Did you really think I’d be happy working in a gas station for the rest of my life? At least here I have a shot at making something of my life with this job. It may not be what I grew up wanting, but I have to try. My new boss seems like a nice mammal. He hasn’t done or said anything untoward and is doing everything he can to live down the fox stereotype, just like I’m fighting the bunny stereotype. I have to at least give it a chance to work, please understand mom, please. You and dad have never supported me in anything I’ve attempted in the past, will you please either support me in this…or j-just don’t bother to call … goodbye.”

After Judy terminated the call, she collapsed on her bed and cried herself to sleep, hoping that tomorrow would bring at least some peace and normalcy to her life.

As Nick returned to the GTO and started it, he noticed that it looked like rain so he put the top up. The radio, tuned to a ‘60s rock station, blared out an old CCR tune called “Who’ll Stop the Rain”. He briefly wondered what untold secrets Judy had, and why the connection, which really made no sense at all, was so strong. He hoped he could make at least some small difference in her life, to ease some of her pain. No one should have to go through life being as miserable as the bunny seemed to be.

If he only knew then how fortuitous the song would be.

XxX

Chapter End Notes

A/N: chapters will tend to be a bit longer that they were for ‘Road Trip’ as I intend to add more scenarios and more detail, it should make for a better story. Chapters will most likely be sporadic, as I am not going to hold myself to a specific timeline to put out chapters for the same reason.

A/N2: there will tend to be a bit more back story for not only Judy and Nick, but some of the other characters as well to begin within the next few chapters, but it just helps set up the fluff, and there will be plenty of fluff, so please be patient.
Sunday Drama

Chapter Summary

Our couple begins to open up about their pasts, some good, some bad.

Chapter Notes

To start with there’s more drama and backstory ahead, with a bit of fluff at the end, so please hang with me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CHAPTER 4 ~ Sunday Drama

XxX

Judy awoke with a start, in an absolute panic! ‘Where am I, what happened?’ she thought.

Then she remembered that she was in the bed provided to her by Nick above her new place of employment. The slow calm she had begun to get was quickly replaced by a sense of dread when she remembered the phone conversation with her mother. She glanced around in the dim light for her phone, only to find that it wouldn’t power up because the battery had gone dead. After looking around in the dim light, and finally finding a light switch Judy turned on the lights and looked around ‘Well damn, this is all going well’ she thought as she searched through her purse for her charger.

After hooking her charger to her phone Judy figured she might as well acquaint herself with her new living arrangements.

As she began to work her way through what seemed like years of accumulated mess again, she found the usual stuff.

Old advertising, parts catalogues and junk mail were piled in one spot beside a couple of filing cabinets marked ‘invoices’, ‘paid bills’, ‘taxes’ and the like. Office furniture, mostly broken, was loosely piled in one corner of the room, but what she found next to the empty water cooler in an unmarked box stopped her short. It was an assortment of old ‘girlie’ magazines, which included pretty much any species she could think of. The most recent were of bunny does and fox vixens… ‘Nick and Finnick’s I’ll bet, yeesh’ thought Judy.

As Judy was moving the box to the pile of furniture that she was going to have Nick throw out, the bottom fell out of the box. There, to her surprise, was a small pile of magazines featuring male models in ‘compromising’ poses.

‘What in the world is going on here?’ she wondered. ‘What have I gotten myself into?’ Then she remembered that Nick had said something earlier about needing another model for the car shows. ‘I certainly hope that that’s the explanation for these’ she thought. I’m going to have to ask about this...’
As Judy made it back around to the desk, she noticed that the phone had a sufficient charge to at least turn on and use. Much to her dismay there were 5 missed calls and an equal amount of missed texts, all from her parents.

Dreading where this was going to go, Judy dialed her parents. It was still early, 6:15, but she knew her parents would be up. The phone barely rang once as her dad picked up “Bon, it’s Judy, she finally called” sounding relieved and in a mild panic at the same time.

“Give me that phone” said Bonnie to Stu. “What do you think you’re doing not answering your phone? We were frantic wondering what could be happening to you, being there with a fox and all. You need to get your tail out of there and get back to the station, and I mean right now!”

The more Bonnie railed, the madder Judy got “You listen to me mom, I told you last night how I felt and nothing has happened to change my mind. To begin with, after crying myself to sleep after your rant last night, the battery on my phone went dead and I didn’t get it charged enough to use until just now. Nick had already left by the time you called last night so you need to leave that alone. I told you that he’s been nothing but kind to me since we met. Besides, IF I had wanted to do anything with him, it’s my choice to make, not yours. It’s my life and you don’t get to run it anymore. I’m twenty four years old and my life is my own, regardless of what you think, I can handle myself quite well with or without your approval. In fact probably better. Don’t forget it was you who hooked me up with that damned Johnny Whinters in the first place, so that disaster belongs to you, not to me. Why do you hate the thought that I want to do more with my life than to raise carrots or work in a gas station? What the hell is your problem with me anyway?”

“Judith Laverne Hopps, how dare you talk to me that way? Your father and I have done everything we could to raise you right, gave you everything you needed, and yet you have the nerve to act like this?”

“Bullshit” Judy yelled, tears of frustration rolling down her cheeks "you raised me to be like your other 275 other kits, which was to further the family business. You never gave a damn about what I truly wanted or needed. When did you ever support me? You didn’t want me to be in the Carrot Days skit. You never supported my decision to go to college to get a Criminal Justice degree, I even had to pay for that with my own money. Money I earned doing part time jobs on and off campus. You never supported my decision to be a police officer. The only thing you actually gave me was the ambition to get the hell out. When will you learn that I don’t want to be a farmer? I could care less about the farm, and I could care even less about the station.”

As Judy listened to the stunned silence she continued “Remember what I told you last night about not bothering to call? Well I’m going one step better, starting now, I’m blocking you. If you need to communicate with me, you’ll need to do it through Josh or Duane. This isn’t farewell mother, it’s GOODBYE!”

With that, Judy terminated the call and proceeded to block her parent’s number.

“My god, I hope the rest of the day goes better than it has so far.” says Judy out loud.

Just then, Judy sensitive hearing picks up the sound of the side door open and close and the main lights to the shop area came on. As her eyes shot to the clock on her phone she realised that it was already nearly 7 am, and that had to be Nick stopping to pick her up for breakfast. “SHIT!”

Noticing that the lights were on upstairs Nick calls up “Judy, are you up and decent?” inquires Nick.
Judy opens the ‘office’ door and yells down “Yes, come on up. You could’ve called and let me know, just in case.”

“I tried, but first I got a busy signal, then it kind of half rang once and I got a message that the number was no longer in service…are you having problem with your phone?”

“As if things couldn’t get any worse” moaned Judy as she sat on the edge of the bed and looked dejectedly at the floor.
“Care to share?” asked Nick in a concerned voice.

“Ugh, where to start” began a dejected Judy “What the hell, here goes. Mmm let's see…after you left last night, I got a call from my parents, my mom mostly. She read me the usual riot act about taking off from the store and getting a different job without telling them. I guess that part is understandable. Then she went on to give me hell about being with a fox, mainly because of the fight I got into with one when I was a kit, the one I told you about last night. After I…umm fell asleep the battery died on the phone so I missed a bunch of calls and texts which didn’t help matters. When I woke up I noticed the dead battery and put it on the charger while I started working with this” as she indicated the start she had gotten cleaning the office area to be more livable.

"When I decided to take a quick break and call them back, it just started all over and quickly got worse. My mom tried to tell me how great a job they did raising and supporting me, so I let her have it. I told her that I thought that only reason they wanted me around was to help with the family business, how they had never actually supported anything I had tried to do when I was young. I told her that I didn't care about the farm or the station, and I told her that if she couldn't support me that she never needed to call again. Then I told her I was going to block her number and hung up….So I guess right after that she turned off my phone… now I've got no one, and no place to go…” With that Judy broke down and started crying.

"You know that's not true Carrots, you've got…"

Suddenly Judy stood and gave Nick a look of pure hatred in her eyes and on her muzzle "What did you call me Johnny? If you ever use that name again, I swear I'll-I'll….Oh my god, what did I just say?” Judy’s paws flew to her face, stopping in the sudden realization and horror of the present situation.

As Nick recoiled in shock "I don't know who this Johnny is, but I can assure you it's NOT me!" Judy gaped in horror "Oh Nick, I-I'm SO sorry. But that name, it-it's a name that I had hoped I'd never hear again… there are just so many bad….." and she started crying again. "I-I can't do this, I'll just gather my things and leave. I can still stay with my brothers for a while I guess a-and….

"No” said Nick in a firm but nonthreatening voice, grasping Judy gently but firmly by the shoulders “you aren't going anywhere.”

"Wha-what do you mean? I just went off on you, for something that you had no idea was upsetting for me. How can you even want me to stay? I-I…"

"Let me guess, you think you're broken, and there’s no way to fix you, right?"

Looking dejectedly at the floor Judy softly replied "Y-you have no idea how broken I am. W-would you care to hear the sad story of Judy Hopps? And why I can't be fixed? I guess I owe you that much at least.”

Nick gently sat Judy on the bed, pulled up the chair from the desk "Lay it on me. When you're finished, I'll share a bit with you. Deal?”
As she let out a long sigh Judy dejectedly began "It all began when my mom set me up with a date for a spring formal, about a month before my junior prom. The buck's name was Johnny Whinters."

'I've heard that name somewhere' thought Nick.

Tearfully Judy continued “Johnny Whinters was a star athlete at Bunnyburrow High, handsome, well liked, you know the story. I was the nerdy doe what wasn't really popular so I was thrilled to say the least. Sometime during the dance someone spiked the punch, which was actually expected, but Johnny added a little something 'extra' to my drink. I don't remember a lot of what happened to this day, but I do remember that I was brutally raped several times, then dumped off in front of my parent's burrow. 'You need to stick to carrot farming...Carrots!' was all he said as he drove off." Her tiny body shaking with sobs Judy continued "Mom and dad took me to the ER, even though they didn't really believe me, there they did a rape kit and a blood draw, then gave me one of those 'morning after' pills. I called the police to report the rape but guess what...no one believed me. You see Johnny was the son of the mayor, and the mayor's brother was the chief of the entire Tri-burrow area police departments."

After a short pause to wipe the tears a bit she went on "So I decided to take matters into my own paws. Two days later I decided to sneak out and caught Johnny in the gym and beat him up, really badly. I knocked out one of his incisors, bent an ear and broke three of his ribs. THEN the mayor wanted to press charges, on me no less. When we got the evidence of the rape kit and blood results, Ketamine was later found in my blood sample along with Johnny's DNA from the rape kit. So then they decided to just drop the entire matter. Nothing ever made its way to my official record so I thought I still had a legit chance of making the ZPD, which had been my lifelong dream. That is until I found out about the 'minimum height' rule. Good academics in school and a criminal justice degree from Zoo U were worth exactly nothing."

Looking for all the world like a totally defeated bunny she finished "So, here I am with another blown opportunity before I even get started. If you'll be kind enough to give me a lift to my brothers’ place, it would be appreciated."

"Do you really think you're the only one who's broken?" Nick asked “Sit there for a minute and give a listen. When I was around nine, I had already lost my dad a year earlier, killed in a drive by shooting. Yea, I know real guns are illegal, but it doesn't mean they're not around. Anyways, I'd joined the Junior Ranger Scouts, glad to be accepted as the only predator in the pack. When the time came for initiation, the rest of the pack led by a beaver kit named Larry Forrest, decided to beat me up and muzzle me. They beat me until I lost consciousness, then carried me to within three blocks of my home and threw me naked into a dumpster. Naturally, when I finally I made it home, mom called the cops and they just laughed. The said that another fox just got what he deserved and then they just...left.'

'After a couple of years I just said screw it and left home, hooked up with Fin and hustled just to make a make ends meet, giving up hope of ever being able to earn an honest living. Then Mr. Bigg's limo broke down in front of Fin's van. When we managed to get it running, opportunity knocked. We grabbed it by the ass and never let go.'

'I'm going to let you in on the worst kept secret in Zootopia. Every member of this shop is or has been broken in some shape, form or fashion. EVERY. SINGLE. ONE. Physically, mentally or both, everyone working here so far has a history of being broken. The shop started out to be just a place to fix or restore cars and such, but it has turned into so much more. There are mammals here who've been homeless through no fault of their own. Mammals who were mentally or physically abused or both, vets with PTSD issues, you name it we've seen it. Maybe I saw something else in you from the get go, I don't know, but one thing is sure. You need to be here, Judy, I need you to be here. I don't know why, but Karma has brought you to this place, and I'm not going to let you walk out. This is the place that can help you heal."
Even though she knew there was a lot more to Nick than he was letting on, Judy sat in stunned silence, the two looked into each other's eyes. Nothing was said, no words were exchanged, but an instant understanding and a fragile bond was developed.

Sighing heavily, Judy made a decision, the only one that made sense. "Nick, can we go to breakfast now? All of this …this crap has gotten me hungry. I guess this means I'll staying, at least for the time being."

"Ok…umm… Judy let's go. I hafta tell ya though, we've GOT to get you a nickname. Everyone here has a nickname. Judy is too personal, Hopps is too formal, and I already know that the C-word is off limits, both of them come to think of it" which caused Judy to at least break a tiny smile. "Would something like Fluff work? I called you that yesterday and didn't get cussed out or beat up, so maybe that'll work, at least for now?"

"Silly fox" Judy said with a tired smile “I guess it'll do. So what's your nickname” Now that I seem to have one, it's only fair to know yours."
“Well as you can imagine, I’ve been called a lot of things, some good, some not so much. But two that have seemed to hang with me are ‘Slick’, mainly because of my less than stellar past, and ‘Red’.”

Judy giggled “I’m guessing that ’Red’ is due to your fur color?”

Nick smirked “Nope, not at all. It’s actually because I have a tendency to use quips and quotes from an old comedian I used to admire as a kit. His name was Redd Foxx.”

“Really? You have got to be kidding me.”

“Nope, as you work through this mess you’ll probably stumble on some old tapes, records or CDs with his stuff on them. Tell you what, while I put the GOAT in the finished projects part of the warehouse and find something else to drive, why don’t you get a quick shower. I hate to tell you, but you look like you could use one.”

As Judy looked in the mirror on the wall next to the bathroom door, she had to agree “Ok, just a quick one because I’m really hungry. I’ll meet you downstairs when I’m ready.”

As Judy showered, Nick rolled the GTO into the warehouse and parked it. As Nicked looked around, he tried to decide what to take Judy in for breakfast. Something nice but not too flashy….then a recently purchased lime green ’68 Road Runner caught his eye. The car was bought as a shop project and was in good running shape, it just needed that something special. ‘This should do nicely’ he thought ‘classy but not over the top.’

As Nick rolled the ‘Runner to the overhead door, Judy was headed down the steps from her ‘apartment’. Her outfit was simple, jeans and a pale blue tank top.

“My, don’t you look stunning” said Nick in a cheery voice.

“Well, thank you kind sir. I take it I’m not underdressed?”

“Nope, not at all, that will do just fine” as Nick got out and walked around the car to open the door for Judy.
Judy was impressed “Aren’t you quite the gentleman mammal!”

“If my mother taught me nothing else, she made a point of making sure I was well mannered.”

“Well, I must be sure to thank her….is that…umm…ok?”
Nick smiled as he slid behind the driver’s seat “Yea, no worries, she usually visits the shop a couple of times a week. You two will get along quite well I’m sure.”

Before Nick could put the car in gear, Judy leaned over and gave him another hug, this one tighter than yesterday’s ‘I could definitely get used to this, wait…what am I thinking? But then again…’ thought Nick.

As a slightly tearful Judy sat back in her seat “I’m so glad we met yesterday. I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t come into my life. I’m still terribly sorry about snapping on you this morning and I still can’t get over the fact that you still want me around, thank you.”

“You’re more than welcome, let’s eat.”

…

As our pair takes the short cruise towards breakfast, “It’s a Beautiful Morning” by the Rascals comes over the radio.

“Are all of your radios tuned to the same station?” asks Judy curiously.

“All of the ones that work are” replied Nick “it helps remind everyone of the era that most of these cars are from, and sort of sets the mood at the shop. You don’t approve?”

“No, it’s not that, I’ve actually never heard most of it before. I kind of like the music, it’s just unfamiliar is all.”

As Nick pulls into a parking spot, Judy notices the sign ‘Mel’s Diner’. “I think I’ve heard of this place before. Didn’t there used to be a TV show a long time ago by that name?”

With a toothy grin Nick replied “Actually, the name of the show was ‘Alice’. But to answer your question, this is the actual diner. And the owner and one of the waitresses are the real mammals that the characters on the show were named after.”

As Nick and Judy enter the diner, they are greeted by the owner, a male brown bear. “Hey Nick, what’s going on here? You finally decide to start dating good lookers for a change?”

As Judy blushed and started to answer, Nick laughed and spoke up “Sorry to disappoint Mel, but this is my new mechanic and model Judy Hopps. Judy, this is Mel Sharples, the owner of this so called diner.”

“Pleased ta’ meet ya” replied Mel.

“You too good to say ‘HI’ to you mother’s best friend now?” came a loud but playful remark from behind the counter.

“Never” remarked Nick "give me a break Alice. Alice, this is Judy Hopps, my newest addition to the Wilde bunch. Judy meet Alice Hyatt, one of the best waitresses to ever work a greasy spoon."

“What do you mean ‘one of the best’ Nick?” Alice, an older red fox vixen, scolded playfully.

“Well after all, mom used to work here, and she had you beat by a county mile.”

“You’ll never forget that will you Nickey?”

Judy couldn’t help but smile while watching the interaction between Nick and everyone. ‘It’s no wonder his shop is successful if he’s like this all of the time. It seems like he knows just about
“If you don’t mind, I’ll order for us both, ok?” asked Nick as he looked first from Judy, then to Alice.

“I guess that’ll be ok, you seem to know best.”

“Two specials comin’ up. Mel, move your ass, Nick and his lady friend need two specials.”

“Quit bustin’ my chops woman, they’ll have ‘em out there in a couple of minutes.”

“Well kiss my grits Mel, you say that all the time and you’re always wrong…”

As Nick and Judy laugh at the constant banter between the two, Nick remarks “I guess I might need to warn you ahead of time, it’s pretty much just like this at the shop every day. Do you think you can handle it?”

Judy shot Nick a slightly dubious look “I’m not sure but I’ll give it my best shot.”

As they begin to eat, Nick replies “I’m sure you will. I usually give the group a little speech when we get a ‘newbie’ in the shop not to harass you too much or prank you for the first week or so, but I might need to give Snowflake a little extra reminder.”

“WOW, this is great what is it? Umm, what is a ‘newbie’ and just who is Snowflake?”

“Ok, first, it’s basically hash brown potatoes, mushroom soup, cheese and Mel’s special added ingredient. Don’t ask, because he won’t tell anyone, not even me. Next, a ‘newbie’ is a new hire to the shop. Last but not least, Snowflake, whose real name is Skye Winter, is an Artic fox, a vixen. She’s one of my best mechanics as well as my other …model. She’s a real looker and can get jealous like you can’t believe.”

“So, I’m guessing that she’s your latest ‘ex’ as well?”

Hehe… yea, you ummmm caught that did you?”

“You said yourself you thought I was intelligent. Besides, we females catch on to stuff like that pretty quickly. Anyway, I was hoping that was the case when I moved that box of…fur mags I found in my room”

With a slightly taken aback look, which he quickly hid “I…umm…I wondered where those had gotten to. I was afraid that mom had found them and tossed them out.”

“Well as long as they’re out of my room, I don’t care what you do with them” stated Judy with a mischievous look in her eyes.

As they finished their meal and were ready to head out, Mel yelled from the kitchen “Did you ever find that ’55 Bel Air for me?”

“Not yet, but I’ve got a lead or two I’m going to check out as soon as I can. Don’t worry, I’ll find you a good one, I promise.”

“You really seem to have this custom car thing pretty much locked up around here” stated Judy.

“Not really, there’s lots of competition, I just try to stay on top by finding the right cars and by doing the best work. That’s why I hire the best workers for the shop, pay the best wages and give them the best benefits.”
“Sounds better all of the time. Ok, what’s the plan now?”

“Well, I guess first we need to head to Walrus-mart to get some more furniture for your little world. Then off to Electronics World to get you a new phone, you have got to have a phone. Sometime in the next couple of weeks we’ll need to get you some more fancy duds, so you can dress to impress at the car shows and auctions. Beautiful cars and gorgeous women are a lethal combination for staying ahead in this business.”

Noticing the slightly concerned look on the bunny’s muzzle Nick asked “What?”

“Nick, I can’t possibly accept all of this stuff.”

“Look, I think I understand you concern about all of this, but let me explain. First, you have to have a phone because emergencies happen, and I have always provided phones for my employees that need them. I get them at a fair price and the data and voice is all included on my business plan.’
‘The furniture is needed and can be written off as a legitimate business expense, as well as the fancy clothes. Along with the shows, there are various dinners and other functions that require a certain, attitude that can only be accomplished with a beautiful woman on my arm. I also noticed that you don’t seem to have a computer of your own. Even though there are laptops at every work station, I try to be sure everyone at least has their own laptop for personal use. If you wish to pay for that, I’ll allow it, but only a little bit at a time so it doesn’t cause you any financial hardship. Will that work so you don’t feel like you’re taking advantage of me, and that you’re going to be deep in debt to me?”

“Yes, I guess so, since you put it all that way.”

“Ok then, back to the shop to pick up the shop truck, then over the river and through the woods a shopping we will go...”

... 

During the nearly half hour ride from the shop to Walrus-Mart, the radio on the beautiful jet black ’64 Fleetside pick-up blared out “In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida” by Iron Butterfly. Even though Judy had never heard the song, she was both amused and amazed as Nick would sing along with the song, actually being almost in key some of the time. She had to actually laugh as he would do imaginary guitar riffs when stopped at a red light.

“Are you always this crazy, or is this some sort of special day for you?” she asked, smiling.

“Yes, absolutely” was the only answer she got, as they pulled into the parking lot of the Walrus-Mart.

“Got your list?” asked Nick as they headed into the store.

“Yea, I think so, I’ll try to make this as painless as I can for you.”

“Absolutely not” insisted Nick “I’ve found through experience that it’s actually cheaper in the long run to get something that’s a bit more expensive and of better quality. That way you don’t have to replace it nearly as often. Anything you like, within reason, is perfectly acceptable. Get what you want within reason. Shades and curtains for the windows, new pillows if you want and maybe a different bedspread, extra sheets and pillowcases whatever, it doesn’t matter. That also goes for personal stuff you may need as well until you can afford what you want on your own. Whatever you want to pick up for food we’ll get at a little family market close to the shop. I like to support the local family independent businesses when I can.”

As a more than slightly amazed Judy looks at her new boss while admiring his profile, she can’t help
but wonder why it took so long to finally meet a mammal like him. ‘Wait, a mammal like him? Am I being to be attracted to him as more than just a boss? Surely not, but still…”

“You ok there Car..err, I mean Fluff?”

Judy gave Nick a knowing smile and a light punch on the arm “It’s ok Nick, I know you meant no harm when you first called me that. You had no idea how it would hurt me, we’re good.”

A relived Nick steered Judy to the window covering isle, where she fussed over the right color and style of curtains while he found the perfect dresser that she agreed with. The blinds were no problem since Nick remembered what the dimensions of the windows. The next trip was to where the comforters and pillows were, so that took a bit of time. Then to the bathroom towels and things were, finally to the personal items that Judy would need.

After they got checked out and the stuff was loaded into the back of the pick-up they headed to Electronics World, a store owned by an interesting couple. When Nick and Judy entered the store they were greeted by a friendly young mammal of a species that Judy didn’t recognize.

“Hey Nick” called the mammal behind the counter.

“Hey Junior, how business?”

“Slow as usual for a Sunday, but the folks like to stay open, just in case.”

Noting the slightly confused look on Judy’s muzzle, Nick did the introductions. “Judy Hopps, this is Dale Elkhart Junior. Junior, meet my newest employee Judy Hopps.”

With a short laugh, Dale said “Pleased to meet you Judy, and to answer your unspoken question I happen to be a ‘Deelk’. Dad is a deer and mom is an elk.”

“I-I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to stare” stammered Judy more than slightly embarrassed.

It’s ok, I get it all the time” replied Junior ”and since I know it wasn’t being done in a mean way, so there’s no problem. What can I help you with today Nick?”

“I need to get Judy here a good phone. You know the drill; put the phone and the plan on my business account. Then you need to set her up with a good laptop, the usual stuff on it, plus anything extra that Judy might want or need.”

“Ok, will do. Judy, if you’ll just step this way, the phones are on your left, and the laptops are on the right. The phones with the little red stickers in the corner are the ones that Nick has tied to his account, just pick any one you like. When you get done with that, just look over the laptops and we’ll get you set up.”

While Judy looked over the selection of phones and laptops, Nick asked Junior “So is your dad racing today? I see that he’s not here, and since it’s the last weekend of the month he must be at the track.”

“Yea, he finally got the Monte Carlo tuned up and running the way he likes it, so he and mom left around six this morning to try to beat the crowd for tech inspection.”

“Well tell him ‘hey’ for me when you talk to him, ok?”

“Will do. Looks like Judy had already picked out a phone, the usual I-Carrot, this one in Electric Blue of all colors, never would have figured that.”
“Remind me about it sometime and I’ll give you the lowdown, ok?”

“Looks like you’ve made up your mind on the phone already, that didn’t take long” says Junior.

“Yep, the blue phone will do, and I think the Ikon 24/7 laptop will be just what I need. Do you have an advanced music editing program available? Also, I would like to have you add a good Photoshop suite if you happen to have a really good one in stock.”

“Bit of a musician, are you?” asked Dale.

“I’ve been known to play an instrument or two in my days” answered Judy. “mostly guitar, piano and a little sax. Never got really good, but I enjoyed it as a stress relief from time to time.”

At this, Nick’s ears perked up. ‘I wonder what she’ll think when she finally finds my dad's old electric guitar amid the clutter while she cleans the apartment. Maybe I’ll clue her in about the impromptu jam sessions we have from time to time at the shop.’

The last stop of the day was at Clawson’s Market, a local grocery store owned by a cougar family. Judy was amazed that they catered to prey as well as predators.

After buying a few staples such as lettuce and other vegetables as well as a variety of fruits and fruit drinks they headed back to Nick’s shop. Keeping in mind his little misstep calling her ‘Carrots’ earlier, Nick noticed that Judy purposely avoided buying anything related to carrots, of course except for her phone. He knew better than to mention it so he let it go.

…

When they got back to the shop and began to unload Judy’s stuff, Nick began the conversation

“Before I leave, I’ll put the dresser together and put up the blinds and curtains while you unpack the rest of the stuff. Let me know when you get your computer set up and I’ll give you the password to the shop’s Wi-Fi. I have an unlimited plan, so don’t worry about using too much data, ok?”

Somewhat timidly, Judy nodded “Ok.”

“What is it Judy” asked Nick as he finished with the blinds and curtains.

“I-I guess I’m still a little uncomfortable with all of this” she stated somewhat shyly, gesturing around the room. “I’ve had to fight tooth and claw to get what little I already have, and all of this…it’s a bit much to take in all at once. It’s overwhelming to say the least.”

Nick walks over and leaned down to look Judy straight in her captivating amethyst eyes ‘wait, what, again?’ he thought. “I’ve been perfectly honest with you all day Judy, I don’t know what else to tell you. We fix cars here. And the mammals, well they sorta fix themselves, it kinda comes with the job as an unexpected benefit. I you want me to sign some sort of agreement that relieves you of any burden, financial or otherwise, I’ll gladly do it, right here and right now. I have absolutely nothing to gain by doing all of this for you, except for having another great employee and possibly a wonderful friend.”

As Nick finished, Judy could tell he was being completely honest, and the words held no animosity and no trace of anger, just simple spoken truth.

“Nick, I’m so sorry, it’s just so…so…generous and unexpected. I’ve never been so happy in my life, thank you…”

With that, Nick was again treated to yet another unexpected hug, this one almost being bone
crushing. As her tears soaked into his fur, he gently stroked the bunny’s ears. ‘Yes, I could definitely get used to this’.

“There, there, you bunny's, so emotional” Nick said, smoothing Judy’s ears as he hugged her back. “Everything will be ok, what say we just take everything one day at a time. Tomorrow is the start of another day, and I guess for you, the start of another chapter of your life. How about we start it on a positive note and leave the past behind, at least for now? I guess we’ll need to postpone the ‘grand tour’ for tomorrow morning, you look like you could use the rest. Are you going to be ok?”

"I-I guess so, thanks for being so concerned." ‘This feels sooo good…. damn, again?’ thought Judy.

As Judy slowly let loose, Nick dried her tears and remarked “I remember that you told Junior that you played some guitar. Somewhere in all of this mess, there’s an old Epiphone Dot guitar and amp. I’m sure it needs to be restrung and tuned, but there should be strings and a tuner in the case. You’re more than welcome to use it anytime you wish. Every once in a while several of us get together and have a jam session after work down in the main bay. Just a casual get together, you know to drink some beer, swap some lies and play…you’re welcome to join in if you want. No one plays in a band or a group of any kind. It’s all in fun, and if someone need help playing or anything, it’s always there, all you need to do is ask. With that, I’ll leave you to set up housekeeping; we’ll see you bright and early at eight for the Monday morning briefing and work assignments. Good night Judy.”

“Good night Nick, I’m looking forward to meeting everyone, even Snowflake.”

With a hearty laugh, Nick headed down the stairs and out of the building.

As Judy began to set up her laptop, her phone pinged. “Who in the world can that be?” she thought. Then she recognized Nick’s number from the business card he had given her earlier.

‘Fluff, I forgot to give you the Wi-Fi password… WilDTimeS16’.

‘You silly fox’ thought Judy with a rueful smile as she entered the password into her new computer.

As Judy opened her Muzzlebook page, she was startled to see a lot of PM entries, mostly from siblings offering support, especially from Josh and Duane. Of course there were a few entries, mainly from her mother basically demeaning her. But the last one was the most hurtful. Her mother had publicly disowned her and banned her from ever stepping paw in the family burrow ever again. As the tears began forming, she thought about Nick. How supportive he was of her, asking for nothing in return except for her to be a good employee.

‘Well screw it’ she thought ‘I have new friends to make and a new family to meet, starting tomorrow.’

With that in mind, she took a long hot shower, washing herself of her previous troubles and dressing in a pair of loose shorts and an old worn out Zoo U sweat shirt, headed to bed.

XX

Chapter End Notes

I made a couple of small changes to the story, shout out to USA Patriot, I neglected to include Mel and Alice’s species.
Monday Morning Blues

Chapter Summary

Does the first day at a new job EVER go smoothly? I didn't think so.... plus, more problems with Bonnie.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Monday Morning Blues
XxX

Judy woke up shortly before her alarm went off at six am.

After her morning ‘constitutional’, she went to the fridge to get a bit of breakfast. ‘Well crap, I never thought to get something for breakfast. I guess it’ll be just juice for today.’

As Judy was drinking her juice, she opened her Muzzlebook page to see if there was anything positive left in her old world. More PMs, again getting plenty of support from siblings and more bad news about her mother. As if disowning her wasn’t enough, Josh had sent word that the few things Judy had left in her old room at the burrow had been loaded up and was on its way to the station. The brothers had orders to dump it all in the trash if Judy didn’t pick her stuff up before the end of the week.

Just as Judy began to tear up in despair again, her phone pinged.

Another text from Nick! ‘Remembered that you didn’t pick up anything for breakfast, Blueberry muffins and coco on the way Nick ;)’

‘Well just, damn’ thought Judy. ‘Is there anything this fox doesn’t pick up on?’

As Judy opened the door to her new apartment she heard Nick come in through the side door. “Come on up, the door’s open” she called down.

When Nick entered the room, he noticed that Judy had been crying, again “What’s the problem now?” he asked.

“I-I’m sorry Nick, it’s just more shit on top of everything else. Mom has disowned me, and my brother Josh PM’d me on Muzzlebook and said that mom has had all of my stuff that I had back at the burrow sent to the station. If I don’t pick it up by the end of the week they’re supposed to dump it all in the trash.” And with that she broke down completely.

Totally stunned, Nick wasn’t sure what to say or do, so he gently took a sobbing Judy into his arms. After a few minutes, again gently stroking her ears, a plan began to form. Softly he asked “Judy, do you trust me?”

“W-what?”

“Do you trust me, it’s a simple question.”
After a long moment she answered “After everything that’s happened…yes, yes I do.”

“OK then” he replied with a smirk at the edges of his muzzle “Dry your tears, take a moment to gather yourself and get something to eat. I’m going back downstairs to organize a few things. Do you have your brothers’ phone numbers?”

“Yes, I think so, why?”

“I want you to call them and tell them that I’ll be there in a bit with some of the gang to pick up your stuff and bring it back here. After our Monday morning meeting, which you will attend, I’m going to organize some of the crew and go get your stuff. While some of us are gone to get your things, I want you to take some of the rest of the guys and have them help you to clean this room out. The stuff that’s not needed in here can either be dumped or moved to the warehouse. Fin can help you sort out what’s needed and what’s not.”

As Judy leaned back a bit and looked Nick in the eyes “Why are you doing this? You hardly know me and you don’t owe me a thing.”

“I told you before that everyone who works here is or has been broken, right? This is the most understanding support group of mammals in the city. There’s nothing, and I mean nothing that any of us won’t do for family. And right now, you are a member of that family, like it or not!”

“How am I ever going to repay you for all of this?” Judy asked, almost dreading the answer that she thought was sure to come.

Taking Judy's paws in his Nick replied with a soft smile “It's simple…. get yourself unbroken. You’ve got plenty of support from mammals who’ve already been down that road, all you need to do is ask…and they’re all going to be just down those steps.”

As Judy gathered Nick into another heartfelt hug, they each thought ‘I could really get used to this’ but neither said a word, not sure of what the other was thinking, and neither wanting to push the issue.

As Nick headed down the stairs to the shop, Judy called her brothers at the station. When Josh didn’t pick up right away, she called Duane who amazingly picked up on the first ring.

Being uncertain who was calling, especially since he didn’t recognize the number “Hello? Who is this, and how’d you get this number?”

“Waynie, this is your sister, Judy. Listen, I know that mom has sent my stuff to the station, Josh PM’d me on Muzzlebook a while ago. I’m sending Nick and some of his crew to pick it all up ok? Please save this number, you can give it to Josh, but please don’t let mom get it…please.”

”Ok, no problem. Sis, you’ve got the entire burrow in an uproar. You already know how pissed mom is, but you don’t know the half of it. Dad’s more or less on your side, so mom’s mad at him as well. Most of the kits are heavily on your side, with at least a dozen or more coming out of the woodwork admitting that they have preds for either boyfriends or girlfriends, Josh and I included.”

“WHAT? You have got to be kidding me! I feel terrible, what have I done?” cried Judy, again in a mild state of panic.

“Judy listen, you’ve always been the only one strong willed enough to stand up to mom, ever since you were little. There are even nine of the kits who have admitted that they’re gay. I thought mom was gonna come unglued! Don’t you dare back down from this. Whatever you’re doing, you damned well need to keep doing it. Mom needs to get her head out of the burrow and see what the
sun looks like. Whatever Josh and I can do to help, just know that we’re behind you all the way.”

XxX

0755 ~ Main bay of Wilde Times Classic Muscle Cars

Nick was ready to begin the usual Monday morning meeting "All right, is everybody here….? Wait, where the hell is Snowflake? Who knows where she is??"

Jerry M'bai, aka 'Midnight' a jet-black panther, spoke up "I saw her and her new boyfriend at 'Tommie's' late Saturday night, they were both pretty much wasted when I left around one in the morning."

"Great, that buck is going to get her ass fired if sh.." and with that the shop door slammed open, announcing the arrival of one very angry Artic fox vixen.

"If I ever get my hands on that slimy little buck toothed bastard I'll rip his cotton tail off and shove it so far up his ass that…….oh shit" the sentence remained unfinished as Sky suddenly noticed Judy. "Umm, have I missed something here?"

"Oh, you mean other than being late for work AND showing up half drunk from the smell of it, no, I think you've pretty much got it all covered…” pointed out Nick impatiently.

As her ire quickly faded to an embarrassed frown "Umm, yea, I kinda need to talk to you about that a bit later when you can find the time…"

"Ok you guys," says Nick ignoring the vixen for the moment "everyone listen up. To start off with, as you can see we have a new member of the crew. Everybody say hey to Judy Hopps, our new mechanic and Skye's best competition as most beautiful member. Sorry Lefty, but you're out of the running now."

"Well damn" said an old desert coyote good naturedly "and here I just picked up some fancy new dresses for the next show."

As everyone laughed and threw crunched up paper cups at the coyote, Nick interrupted the ribbing. "I know we all have projects that need finishing fairly soon, but today there's a new priority. Thanks in part to my managing to screw up her life, Judy is now staying in the old office upstairs so you perverts need to know that that part of the building is off limits unless invited there by Judy personally..." As Nick glanced at Judy, she gave a sad smile and a short nod. "Like the rest of us, she has…issues that she needs to work through” continued Nick. "so, the usual hazing rules apply, no pranks for at least one or two weeks." which drew groans and more wadded up paper cups being thrown, this time at Nick. "In addition, you all know not to use the usual C-word around her, but there is one additional C-word that is to never be used under any circumstance…” Judy nodded again, and held up one finger “and that word, believe it or not, is…carrot, and any derivative thereof! I will immediately terminate any mammal on the spot who uses this particular word, no questions asked. When you speak to her it's either Judy or you may call her 'Fluff', at least until something even better or equally offensive comes along. Does everyone understand? If not, now is the time to ask questions…”

"No questions? Ok, good. Here's what's happening today. Midnight, you, Tiny and George will come with me to the Hopps Express on Savanna Boulevard, we'll need to use the van today. Lefty, you along with Sneezy and Bolo will help Judy clean up the old office. Fin, you need to tell everyone what goes to the trash and what goes to the warehouse. We'll organize the stuff in the warehouse later, just get it moved for now. Questions? As soon as I talk to Snowflake and Fin, my
bunch’ll head out, get moving. Everyone else, back to your regular duties.”

As they entered the office, Nick started the conversation with Skye "Ok, what's got you tail in a twist?"

Dejectedly Sky began "That slimy little shit of a FORMER boyfriend got me drunk Saturday night and slipped some kind of drug into my last drink. It made me woozy and hot as hell, but not hot enough to have sex with him. Then he got really pissed and stormed out of the bar and left me stranded. The sneaky little bastard even took off with my purse. No phone, no money, no credit cards, nothing left, so I had to walk halfway across Zootopia to get here. I tried to borrow a phone a couple of times and even tried to bum a ride but no such luck…I guess I came across as too drunk, too mean or both. Sorry Nick, I should've known better."

"Ok, since this is the first time we'll let it go. There is one thing I need to ask, and yes, it's actually important, it's not me just meddling in your personal business. What was this bunny's name? If it's who I think it is, you might want to get together with Judy sometime, because I think he's one of the reason's she's broken. You might be able to help fix her. OK?"

Warily Skye answered "His name is Johnny Whinters. I guess I figured that with a name so close to mine, what could go wrong, 'ya know?"

"It's ok, I get it. If you wouldn't mind, would you go upstairs and help with Judy? Right now, we're pretty much all she has for family. Maybe you could share some notes about this Johnny character later on sometime, she actually knows him better than you do, but, please, be…careful, ok?"

Skye looked questionably at Nick "You've got feelings for the bunny, don't you?"

Nick hesitated "Honestly, I'm not exactly sure. I haven't done any more for her than I have for any of the rest of you, but yea, I guess there might be something there. I just don't really know right now. Now, get the hell out of here and head upstairs, I know Fin wants to bend my ear for a while, and he ain't going to like what I have to tell him."

As Skye exits the office, Fin saunters in "I already know what you're going to say” says Nick “and I don't care. Yes, I know she's a bunny. Yes, she's a beautiful female. Yes, I know the stereotype. Still don't care. Did I miss anything?"

A very upset fennec fox gets to the heart of the matter "You gots the hots fer the bunny don't ya? Don't deny it, I can see it all over ya, and I don' like it a bit."

"Maybe I do, maybe I don't, I'm just not sure yet, and you're the second mammal in as many minutes to bring it up. And if I do, so what? We've both dated employees before. And in case you haven't noticed, everyone here is an inter. What's really your problem with her anyway?"

"Yea, we've both dated employees, and look what it's got us. Shitloads of trouble more times than not. I ain't sure I wanna be around if sump'n really bad comes down again."

Nick looks intently at Finnick "Name your price Fin."

"Price, what price? What the hell is you talkin' about Nick?"

"I'll buy you out, here and now, what's your price?"

"You're serious ain't ya?"

"Serious as a heart attack. The way I see it you can get with the program or get the hell out, your
choice. We've got a shop full of mammals, mammals that are or were broken out there. We were broken. You never had a problem with any of the rest of them, why is Judy the exception? Why?"

Through a pregnant silence, Nick gets it "You're jealous."

"W-What? What the hell is you talkin’ about? You'se crazy Nick!"

"No, no I'm not. You're afraid that Judy will replace you as my best friend or whatever. She's a threat to you, isn't she? Nothing else makes any sense. Even when I was dating Skye, she was never considered a threat because you knew damned well there was no real chemistry there since we're both foxes. Tell me I'm wrong Fin."

"I ain't takin' this shit no more, I'm gone. Have da lawyers figure out what my half's worth…dat's my price. Good luck mammal, you'se goin ta need it."

And with that, Fin was gone.

'Shit, shit, shit, this day is so screwed, it has to get better from here on' thinks Nick.

…

As Nick enters the shop area, all eyes are on him "We'll talk about all of this tomorrow morning during our postponed Monday meeting. Fin's gone, period. Skye, you're now in charge of clearing out the upstairs. Trash goes to the dumpster, saved stuff goes to the warehouse, anything you're not sure about goes in a separate pile in the warehouse...any questions? NO? Then why is everybody standing around, let's get moving. If we get done at a reasonable time we'll have a jam session tonight, I get the feeling we're going to need it. NOW MOVE EVERYBODY…"

…

As Nick and his crew head to the station, Skye, along with the rest of the shop, heads upstairs to help Judy sort out and clean up the mess that will be her new home.

"Nick" starts Midnight "what the hell's goin' on with you and Fin? You two've been pissed at each other lots of times, but never this bad!" Tiny and George nodded in agreement.

"Look, I told you guys at the shop that we'll discuss it tomorrow, and I meant it. The main reason I want to wait is because frankly it's going to take me a while to wrap my head around all of it as well. So, let's just drop it for now and get this stuff picked up and get it back to the shop, ok?"

"So, what's up with the bunny?" asked George "I know you said you hired her as a wrench, but what's with all of the hubbub?"

Nick sighed heavily "Long story short, it started out that I hired her as a mechanic and model for the shows, but I guess she has some sort of bad history with another fox back from when she was a kit. Seems like she's mostly over it but her mom isn't and went absolutely ballistic. If she wants to share more, that's on her. I'm sure you guys remember how you felt when you started, right? Doesn't she deserve the same respect that you got?"

As the rest of the crew looked at each other and nodded in agreement, they pulled into the station.

"Hang tight, I'll go in and talk to her brothers, just to be sure Judy called and told them we were coming."

"Hey Nick, we've been expecting you" says Josh as Nick enters the store. "We've got Judy's stuff over here in the storeroom. There's not a lot there, mainly photos and stuff from when she was a kit."
Anyhow, thanks for picking it up, and thanks for taking Judy in and taking care of her. Just so you
know, Duane and I are behind you one hundred percent. I doubt if Judy knows you guys are all
inters, and I have no idea if it would matter or not. I know you take care of your mammals, but keep
a close eye on Judy please. She's got a lot goin' on and we worry about her, ya know?"

Nick gave the bucks a sly smile "No problem guys, I think we've got it covered. I've got Skye
looking after her, I think she'll be fine. "Hey Midnight" Nick yelled out of the front door "you guys
come in and get this stuff, then we can head back to the shop. There's not as much as I figured
there'd be so it'll be quick and easy. We can make a quick stop at Wally-world and pick up some
beer and stuff on the way back."

When the crew got Judy's things loaded into the van Nick told the brothers "You guys know you're
always welcome at the shop anytime, right? Whether it's just to stop and say hey, or if you need a
job. I'm sure Judy would love to see you both every once and a while. Don't be strangers...."

While Nick and his posse were gone to get Judy's few belongings from the station, Skye was busy
organizing the rest of the gang to make quick work of making Judy's new place a lot more livable.
Broken furniture and old magazines (less the fur mags of course) as well as an assortment of other
accumulated trash, was taken to the dumpsters. The extra water cooler was moved down to the shop
floor, filing cabinets and boxes of stuff that no one was sure of went to the warehouse.

As the pile of junk was gradually being removed, Judy spied a well-worn guitar case. 'This must
have been the old Epiphone Nick mentioned earlier.' she thought.

"Wow" said Skye "that's Nick's dad's old guitar and amp from when Nick was a kid. We knew it was
around here somewhere but had no idea where for sure."

"He said there was an old guitar up here, but he never mentioned that it was his dads. He told me I
could use it if I wanted to, but now I'm not so sure I should."

Skye looked at Judy "If Nick said you could play it, then by all means please do. Nick plays when
we jam, but he plays rhythm. You must really be special to him, he's never let anyone else play it
before. We have got to get some 'girl time' and have a talk."

As the 'apartment crew' got down to the last piles to be considered, they uncovered a sofa. "Oh,
HELL NO" remarked a thoroughly disgusted Skye. "This thing has GOT to go. From the looks of it,
it's too nasty to even put in the dumpster. And where did the TV and stuff go? There's a stand...but
everything else is...gone. Those damned bunnie...ummm, sorry Judy..."

“It’s ok, I understand, and I’m just as upset as you are” said Judy angrily, staring at the empty
component stand “Nothing like screwing it up for someone else trying to get a job....”

Skye dials Nick “Nick, where are you guys at?”

“Just about to stop at Wally-world to get beer and snacks. I've decided that today needs to have a jam
session for sure, why?”

“Just so you know, Jack and Peter took all of the video and stereo gear you had up here, the only
thing they left is the stand. If you have room, pick up a TV, Blu-ray player, speakers and anything
else that Judy might need. And while you’re doing that, I’ll call around and see if I can find a decent
couch or futon. The health department would have shut you down if they'd have seen this nasty
thing. I think a good fire behind the shop is probably the best way to get rid of it..."
“Just…. damn. Well, ok, give us an hour or so to get everything except the couch. If you’ve got everythi

ging else pretty well in hand, call Steve at Furniture World and see if he’s got anything good

on sale. Have him send the bill along with the couch and tell him I want it delivered today, whatever

it takes. Got it?”

“Will do boss. Do you want us to go ahead and set up the chairs, mics and the rest of the stuff while

we’re waiting?”

“Might as well. Get everyone who’s not helping you clean up the apartment to get that stuff set up.

How’re things looking up there?”

“Pretty good, nothing some elbow grease and some fresh paint won’t cure. Since it shouldn’t take

too long to drag stuff out of the back room, we should have plenty of time to clean the floor and at

least start on the walls before you get here. Hurry your ass up, I’m hungry…”

Skye could almost hear Nick smirk through the phone “I’m sure you are after your fun weekend.

Hang tight, we’ll be back soon.”

…

While Lefty and Sneezy, (a male cougar aptly named because he seemed to be allergic to almost

everything) moved the couch out to the back of the shop, Skye, Judy and Bolo (an undersized Bison

bull who's past was still a bit of a mystery) started making quick work of wiping down the walls and

then everyone joined in finishing the walls and sweeping and mopping the floor.

"Ok guys" said Skye "take a couple of minutes, then go help get the sound equipment out of the

back room and get it set up, Nick decided that we're jammin' today. Judy and I are going to spend

some girl time together.'

When the guys were down stairs and out of earshot Skye spoke up ‘Listen Judy, we’ve got a few

minutes before Nick and the guys get back here and things heat up. I have to ask, do yo have a thing

for Nick? Before you answer…yes-Nick and I used to date, but it was basically over before it started,

it’s kind of a fox thing so I have no grief with it if you do, ok?’

“Well…I…umm…guess so? I’m really not sure. Nick’s nice and all, and he has such dreamy green

eyes, but…even if I did, which I’m not even sure of, why did you guys break up and besides, what

would everyone in the shop think?”

“Ok, two things…first, I don’t have much of an idea about bunny courting stuff unfortunately, but I
do know that with foxes it’s vastly different. Clarify bunny dating and marriage for me, the

condensed version please.”

Judy looked at the ceiling, looking for a good way to begin “Ummm, let’s see, for starters, most of

the bunny stereotype stuff is basically correct. Most of us get curious and adventuresome about our

bodies and sex at an early age, but it actually helps us to be able to figure out who our best mate

would be as we get older. Even though sex is almost regarded as just an athletic event, most bunnies

stay married for life with very few divorces. Since I was never really interested in all of that early on

I was, and kind of still am, a bit of an anomaly.”

“Here’s where the difference is with foxes” begins Skye “With a fox, love and sex are closely

intertwined. We don’t have sex with another mammal unless we truly love them first. Once

committed, we are pretty much mated for life. There is no real ‘interaction’ if you will, before

marriage. Nick and I knew that before we started dating. We pretty much knew that the relationship

would go nowhere, but if nothing else it presented a good opportunity for publicity for the shop.”
“But…. IF Nick and I would date” asked Judy “how would the rest of the shop react? In Bunnyburrow, that sort of thing is absolutely forbidden. That’s pretty much what set my mom off. Even though I’m not even dating a fox, because of a fight I got into with one as a kit, mom hates them with a passion. She even disowned me just for taking this job, just because Nick owns the shop and is my boss.”

"Well good holy shit" exclaimed Skye. When Judy started to tear up, Skye pulled her into a gentle hug “Honey, that’s the absolutely last thing you need to worry about in this shop. Everyone in this shop, and I mean everyone, is an inter.”

Judy's head jerked up and she stared aghast at Skye, eye to eye “Wait…what? Do you mean to tell me, in all seriousness, that everyone in this shop, is dating or married to someone of a different species? Really? For real?”

“Judy” says Skye laughing “by the time this little jam session gets cranked up, every mammal’s mate, boyfriend or girlfriend, husband, wife or significant other, will most likely be here. And some of their kits…well you’ve got to see ’em to believe ’em. And just between you and me, if you think that you might be interested in dating Nick sometime, no one will bat an eye. I can tell you right now lady to lady, Nick is definitely interested in you, even though he may not know it yet. You know how slow males can be sometimes.’

'Now, you and I have one other thing that we really need to talk about, just between us, but it can wait for now. I hear Nick and the guys coming in with the rest of your stuff, let’s provide some direction so they don’t screw everything up from now ‘till Sunday. I’ll go downstairs and send them up, and you let them know where you want stuff put for now. Make sure they get the TV and stuff set up and working before you turn ’em loose, otherwise it’ll take ’em forever and a day to get anything done, ok? And that box of…fur mags…ummm…just so you know, the ones with guys on them…ehhh…those were mine” she added, slightly embarrassed.

“Well, at least that’s one less thing to worry about” commented a relieved Judy. “How can I ever thank you guys for all of this?” Judy asks, tearing up again, this time from happiness.

“Just be yourself and don’t take anything that anybody says or does too seriously and you’ll be fine. We’ve all been down the same road that you’re traveling to some extreme or another, we’re all family here, and that’s what family does.”

As Skye sends the guys up with the rest of Judy's things, Judy has them put her old things in a (sort of) semi-neat pile beside the new dresser that she gotten the day before, she could deal with it all later. When the video and audio components were brought up, the gang immediately began to set it all up and tested it to be sure it all worked. The TV and audio setups were synched to Judy's laptop and phone so she could control everything from each of them without worrying where she had left the remotes.

When all of that was finally finished, the most of the crew headed downstairs to the shop floor, where instruments were being set up. Guitars and amps, drums a couple of saxes, some trumpets and even an electronic keyboard adorned the bay. Almost all of the mammals had microphones hooked up to separate amps as well. Several coolers of beer and a couple of coolers full of sodas were placed at strategic points as well as several tables full of snacks for everyone, adults and kits as well. Judy was absolutely amazed at the entire scene.

With a little help from Bolo, Judy got the guitar restrung and tuned. "Can I ask you something Bolo?" asked Judy.

"Umm, sure, I guess so."
"If you don't mind my asking, why do they call you Bolo?"

Slightly embarrassed Bolo answered "Well, when I was about 19 or 20, I was playing guitar in a blues club in Tundratown to make ends meet; I even got to sit in with blues legend B. B. King a few times. One night one of the customers got a bit too drunk and threw a beer bottle and hit me so I got down and punched him out. Someone called the cops, I ran, and they put out a BOLO on me. When I got hired on here, Nick found out about it and started calling me Bolo and it just stuck."

"Really? That's terrible!" remarked Judy, horrified.

"No, not really" said a smiling Bolo “it kind of helps remind me to control my temper, keeps me grounded so to speak. That wasn't the worst thing I've done in my life, but it was a defining moment in helping me to turn myself around, to be a better mammal."

...

When everything was ready and everyone was gathered around "All right everyone, listen up" announced Nick. "Since Judy is the newbie, and this is her first day on the job, as well as her first impromptu gig, such as it is" which drew laughter from everyone "she gets to play the first song…if anybody doesn't know it, just fake it or sit it out, ok?

Judy, do you have anything specific you want to try?"

Her ears turning a light shade of pink, Judy answered "I think I'd like to try a song I picked up when I went to college, just after I started playing." With a steely look in her eyes, Judy concluded "I would like to dedicate the song, if I may, to my mother. I know it's probably wrong to feel like this, and it may change in the future, but it's how I really feel right now."

Flashing a knowing smile at Nick and Skye, Judy continued "I think some of you probably know it already, it's called "This Girl is Gone" by B. B. Kingdom (sung to The Thrill Is Gone by B.B. King).

Much to everyone's surprise, Judy looked apprehensively at Bolo "Bolo, I would be honored if you would join me in a duet" and of course Bolo wholeheartedly agreed with a slight nod of his head, somehow having guessed what song Judy would be playing.

When Judy started the song with the opening riffs on her newly acquired guitar, the rest of the group joined in… As Judy began to sing and Bolo joined in, her heart filled with joy. THIS was the family she had always longed for….

...

"This Girl Is Gone"

This girl is gone
The girl is gone away
This girl is gone momma
This girl is gone away
You know you done me wrong momma
And you'll be sorry someday

This girl is gone
I's gone away from thee
This girl is gone momma
This girl is gone away from thee
Although, I'll still live on
But lonely I'll no longer be

This girl is gone
I's gone away for good
This girl is gone momma
I’s gone away for good
Someday I know I'll be an open armed baby
Just like I know a good mammal should

You know I'm free, free now momma
I'm free from your hell
Oh I'm free, free, free now
I'm free from your hell
And now that it's all over
All I can do is wish you well

As the song concluded, Judy's heart was heavy, but at the same time felt much lighter. The healing had begun.

Next, Skye did a stirring rendition of "Set It all Free" by the 'Zootopia Can Sing' winner Ash.

Then Nick joined Skye at the mic and began “I’m Still Standin’” by Elton John. It wasn’t meant to be a duet, but somehow the duo pulled it of marvelously.

Next up was Midnight. His version of the old Animals ballad “Paint It Black” got Judy to finally realize that everyone was doing more than just singing and playing, they were putting their pain on display, much like she did.

As the night wore on, Judy felt her heartache lessen just a bit. Sure, she still missed her mom. She could never not love her, but now was the time to put the past behind and concentrate on the future. The past was history and the future was beckoning.

After the show was over and everyone was putting stuff back into the storeroom, Lefty helped Judy carry her guitar and amp up to her little apartment.

“I noticed you didn’t play or sing tonight, and I guess I’m meddling a bit, but do you mind if I ask why?”

With a bit of sad smile Lefty answered “No, it’s ok, some stuff needs to be shared, no matter how much it hurts. Long story short, when I was in the military I was exposed to some really nasty chemicals. They really messed up my lungs and nervous system so I can’t exert myself much without having a coughing fit that would last a good long while.”

“That’s terrible, isn’t there something that the VA can do? Aren’t they supposed to help you vets?”

With a slight shrug of his shoulders Lefty replied “Yea, well, there’s a huge difference between what the VA is supposed to do and what actually gets done. If it weren’t for Nick, I would have probably died a long time ago.’

‘When I met Nick I was basically homeless. He found me on a park bench covered with a newspaper. I was amazed when he stopped and asked how I was. I just told him to go the hell away and mind his own damned business. Of course he wouldn’t. Instead he went and got me some food from a takeout place that was open late, a good meal and some hot coffee. When I thanked him and
told him that I had no way to repay him, he simply asked if I wanted a job. No one had ever offered me a job before, especially after I got out of the military. It seems no-one wants trained killers around. I wasn't even infantry, I was a mechanic in the motor-pool. Naturally I told him I was interested, and here I am.

'He helps vets like me, Midnight and Tiny with the cost of meds, psych sessions and rehab, a lot of it out of his own pocket. It's what he does. I know you probably feel like you're taking advantage of Nick's generosity, but trust me, you aren't, we've all been there. Judy, no-one here is going to ask you about your past. You're past is your business. If and when you want to share is up to you, no one is going to pry.'

Hugging the old coyote tightly Judy replied “I-I had no idea, thanks for sharing Lefty, it’s great to know.”

With a parting smile Lefty adds “Nick is great at helping anyone and everyone, truth be told it seems like he’s taken a special liking to you. But don’t fret, no one here thinks any less of you for it. In fact, everyone I’ve talked to is happy for you. We’re all family here, and for some of us, it’s the only family we have left in the world. So welcome to the family.’

‘G’nite Judy.”

“Night Lefty, and thanks again.”

As Judy takes a quick shower and heads for bed she realizes that Nick was right, she needed to be here. Now she was looking forward to work in the morning, knowing that it will be difficult, but is also looking ahead with great anticipation to the challenge.

…

Chapter End Notes

A/N: BOLO ~ police jargon for Be On the Look Out.
Yea, I know, headed to bed again. Take heart everyone, there IS fluff ahead.
Before I get a bunch of flack for bashing the VA a bit, I, like millions of other vets, have dealt with the ineptitude of various VAs across the country. Therefore I feel I have the right to be a bit harsh from time to time. To those vets who DON'T have a difficult time with the VA system, I salute you.
Back To Work?

Chapter Summary

Judy's first official day at work continues to be a bit of an ongoing nightmare. Along with some matchmaking by Skye, things really get interesting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 5: Back To Work?

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Tuesday morning, the normally scheduled Monday morning briefings went pretty much normally (well normally for the ‘Wilde Bunch’).

“Ok” starts off Nick “everybody pretty much knows what they need to do, but here are some updates; Tick and Tock are going to be here around ten to work on the wiring of a of couple cars.”

Noticing Judy’s slightly confused look Nick grins “For those not in the know” continues Nick, winking at Judy “Tick and Tock are Mike and Mark Klock, a set of ferret twins that I have do pretty much all of our under dash and under hood wiring jobs. Since they're small and very flexible it takes them very little time to do any wiring job that they're contracted to do. Chip and Dale, they’ll start on your’69 Camaro dash wiring, then they’ll finish the complete electrical redo of the ’70 Mach One restore that Ben and Jerrie are working on.’

‘After I show Judy around the shop and get her acquainted with her work area, I’ll pair her up with Midnight to help him get the mods finished on Flash’s Torino. Any questions…….? No? Great, get at it.”

As everyone heads towards their assigned areas, Nick takes Judy on a quick tour of the shop.

"So, how are things with your mom, if it's ok to ask." asked Nick as they headed towards the machine shop area.

"I really have no idea" began Judy dejectedly. "When I talked to Duane yesterday he told me that the entire burrow is in an uproar. My dad and most of my siblings are rooting for me, several have come out as inters, including Josh and Duane of all mammals, and there are even a few that have come out as gay." Judy stopped and looked at Nick with a sorrowful expression on her muzzle "Nick, what have I done? How do I justify ANY of this?"

"Look Judy" implored Nick "The world is changing, and your mother is stuck in the past. Old fears, prejudices and traditions need to fade, but they will never do that unless some mammal or something helps give them a push down the right path. Like it or not, you seem to be the catalyst of change for your family. To misquote an old saying 'Behind every dark cloud there's a silver lining.' and it seems like what you're looking for now is the silver lining. I'm sorry, I apologize for bringing it up….."

"No, no, it's ok. I guess you're right, considering the support I'm getting both at home and right here in the shop. Let's get going or I won't get any work done, I'm not being paid to screw off…"
suddenly she turned and gave Nick another tight, albeit slightly tearful, hug "How can you be so helpful and understanding? I feel more loved here than I ever did at home… I mean the burrows. I know it may seem petty, but I consider this my home now…is that ok?"

Returning the hug and running one paw gently down the bunny's lowered ears "Of course it is Fluff, you know you're among family here." as he thought 'why does this feel so natural? What the hell is going on anyway?'

Judy shuddered gently enjoying the sensation ‘How is he affecting me this way?’ she wondered ‘Can this even be right? Where is all of this coming from? I've only known him for a couple of days, yet this all feels so… comfortable! Is he even and inter….? Am I an inter…. Is this even right? I'm so confused right now…’

Unbeknownst to the pair, every eye in the shop was on them, and every mammal wore a smile of varying degree of intensity. 'I have got to get this and send it to Laverne' thought Skye as she snapped a quick photo. 'I haven't played matchmaker in some time, but these two just seem like the perfect pair, especially for this bunch of misfits.'

Without thinking of Nick's warning about Judy's hated nickname, Skye sent the photo of Nick and Judy hugging to Laverne Wilde, Nick's mother.

After the two slowly release from the hug, Nick shows Judy around the various areas contained in Nick's very large shop. As he does so, he discovers that Judy, having grown up on a farm, had already used a great deal of the equipment. Machines like a drill press and the hydraulic press were no strangers to Judy. She also seemed well versed in the use of the cutoff and band saws as well as cutting torches, including the plasma torch, and various welding rigs. Although Judy wasn't as familiar with equipment like the CNC machine or any of the body equipment, she did show an interest in at least becoming familiar with them.

"Ok" concluded Nick as they approached Judy's bay "here's your work station. The WIFI is already set up on the laptop, all you need to do is change your password. There are icons for all of the parts houses and junkyards that we use on the desktop, all you have to do is order what you need and it'll be delivered. It's all tied to a bookkeeping program set up in the main office. There's a master list of the tools that you'll need inside the lid of the top toolbox. Inventory the tools and order what you need from the icon marked 'Tool Krib'. When the tools get here, you can inventory what you receive against what you ordered and sign the receipt. Go ahead and check your tools, order what you need against the list and anything extra that you feel you will need to do your job. Then go over to bay six and get with Midnight and help him finish the red Torino's tune-up. Any questions?"

"No, I think I've got it, thanks again" says a very grateful Judy.

As Nick turns to head to the main office, he notices every eye in the building looking quickly away from him and Judy, and every muzzle contained a smile of some sort.
"What?" Nick asks everyone and no one at the same time. 'Oh hell, what else can possibly happen this week?' he thinks.

Later on in the day, as the shop settles into a more or less 'normal' routine, Nick receives a pair of unexpected but welcome visitors…at least that’s how it started out. When Nick’s mother Laverne and her sister Shirley show up he greeted them warmly. However, he quickly smells something that throws everything off kilter……carrot muffins!

“Mom, aunt Shirley, it’s nice to see you, but what’s with the muffins…carrot of all things?”

“Well" began his mom with a mischievous smile "we heard that you have a new employee, a very
good-looking bunny doe, so we thought bring some muffins and….”

“Wait-wait-wait…. I-I think I know who your informant is, but maybe you didn’t get enough information. Carrots and anything to do with them is strictly off limits in the shop because of some… very bad experiences that Judy has had in her past. I really appreciate that you’ve gone to the trouble and all but…”

Just about that time, Judy opens the office door “Nick, I need to…”

And with that Judy gets a good whiff of the carrot muffins, turns a very unbecoming shade of green and quickly heads for the nearest trash can, which happened to be just around the corner in the shop area, where she proceeds to lose her breakfast.

As Nick shoots his mother and aunt a very angry look and hurriedly heads for the shop to check on Judy. Laverne and Shirly look at each other in shock “Well damn” remarks Laverne, “this is not going like we had hoped.”

“Judy, I am so sorry, I had no idea that mom and my aunt Shirley would show up today, let alone that they would show up with those car…those muffins.”

“I-It’s ok Nick” began Judy in a shaky voice “I understand. They ha-had good intentions. If you don’t mind, I-I’d like to at least try to stay in the room long enough to thank them for the effort. There’s no way I can start to start to heal if I can’t at least try to deal with the past. I’m tired of dragging this crap around with me…please…I let’s go back in the office, at least for a short bit… ok?”

Nick looks questionably at Judy “You’re sure about this?” he asked.

“No, not really, but I have to start somewhere…right?”

“Ok, you’re right, but maybe a quick trip to the ladies’ room first to…ummm…freshen up a bit?”

Blushing a bit Judy replied “Y-yea, I guess you’re right. Give me a few minutes and I’ll join you, I need to ask a question about my tool request while I’m there…”

Nick nods and heads to the office where his mom and aunt are waiting nervously. “Judy ‘ll be along in a couple of minutes…she understands that you were just being polite, so she’s not mad or anything. Like everyone in the shop she has some issues that she needs to work through, and I guess this is her idea of a first step…just…please be patient with her, ok?”

“Nickie, we understand” replies Laverne “We should’ve remembered that you like to take in troubled mammals to help rehab them. But in all honesty, where did you ever find such an adorable bunny?”

A slightly embarrassed Nick replies “Well, truth be told, I actually got a call from a couple of her brothers and she just sort of fell into my lap…ummm so to speak…” stammered a very embarrassed Nick “Dang it mom, you know what I mean…”

“Yes Nick, I do” smirked Laverne as she exchanged knowing glances with her sister. “Would you like to see a little something I received earlier this morning?”

“What would that be?” asked Nick with a puzzled expression.

As Laverne showed Nick the text that she had gotten earlier that morning from Skye, Nick gaped…
“Oh, come on mom, it’s not like that….” Muttered Nick.

“Not like what Nick?” asked Judy as she shyly entered the office.

“Dang it, don’t do that” said Nick as he jumped, startled by Judy’s sudden entrance into the office. And how’d you even hear that anyway?”

“You do know we bunnies have great hearing right? Anyways, I need to talk to you about the tool order and …”

“Ok, but first, let me introduce you to my mother Laverne Wilde and my aunt Shirley. Someone managed to tell mom that you had started working here so they wanted to welcome you personally. Mom, aunt Shirley, meet Judy Hopps, my new mechanic.”

“Pleased to meet you both” said Judy as she acknowledged the vixens.

“Wonderful to meet you” replied Laverne “We want to apologize for the muffins, we didn’t know that you had an…issue with a-a certain vegetable. If we had known we would have brought some blueberry ones, those are Nick’s favorite.”

“Mom, really?” said Nick, blushing slightly.

Judy giggled lightly “Blueberry would be fine, thanks. But in the meantime, I appreciate the gesture, and I’ll try to deal with the …ummm…c-carrot thing. Excuse me please. Nick when you get a minute, please come to my work station… see you later, and thanks again ladies.”

‘So, he likes blueberries huh, I wonder why she would mention that…unless…ohhh. She’s actually trying to hook me up with her son… well I’ll be…’

With a concerned look Nick asked his mother “Mom, why on earth would you mention that I like blueberries? I mean really?”

“Don’t worry son” she told her son with a wry smile “you’ll figure it out sooner or later. Come on Shirl, we’ve got some shopping to do”

As the vixens left the office Nick saw them both look at him, smirks on both of their muzzles ‘What in the hell are those two up to now?’ he wondered.

As he shrugged his shoulders, Nick went to Judy’s work station to find out what her issue with the tools is.

“Ok, what’s up with the tools?” asked Nick.

“Well, there are a few things that I could use that are either broken or aren’t on the list, and I wanted to check with you before I sent the order in.”

“Really, like what?”

“To start with, both torque wrenches seem to be broken so they’ll need to be replaced, I could really use a good volt/amp multi-meter as well as a circuit tester, a quarter inch socket set, a micrometer and an extra screwdriver set so I can make a few special tools that I always seemed to need when I was on the farm. And if you don’t mind, I could really use some work uniforms like everyone else so I don’t have to ruin the few clothes that I have.”
“Go ahead and order anything you think you’ll need as far as tools. There are several sets of uniforms left over from the last bunnies that worked here over in the storage room. They’ve already been cleaned so you don’t need to worry about that, all we need to do is change the name tags. Anything else?”

“…Now that you mention it, yes.” Says Judy, curious but slightly annoyed “What the hell is going on around here Nick? I saw the looks we got when I hugged you earlier. Not to mention the smirk and information from your mom. And by the way, I actually saw the picture she showed you, I was just too polite to ask about it. And you never did answer my question…”

“Which question Fluff?”

“The one about ‘It’s not like that’. It's not like what Nick?”

Embarrassed Nick answered “I’m not sure, but it seems like everyone, including my mom, seem to think we need to get together. Someone, most likely Skye took a picture of us hugging yesterday and apparently sent it to mom.” Plus, the guys actually thought I was into you yesterday when we went to pick up your stuff from the station."

Judy thought about his answer for a few long seconds “Well, are you?” she asked.

“Wait, what? What kind of question is that?”

“You dumb fox” said Judy very softly.

“Excuse me, I didn’t quite hear yo…” started Nick as he leaned in closer.

Judy suddenly reached and grabbed Nick by both cheeks and pulled him into a deep kiss, not knowing that Skye had been waiting for the moment taking a quick picture of the event with her phone. “How’s that for an answer Slick? I told you I’ve never been accused of being shy!”

As the two looked deeply into each other’s eyes, the entire shop erupted into loud cheers, hoots and whistles.

The two quickly pulled apart, startled by the sudden uproar. Judy jumped about a foot into the air and let out an unexpected squeak, which caused Nick and the rest of the shop to laugh wholeheartedly.

“I guess we now have an official nickname for Judy” loudly exclaimed Sky as she sent a text to Laverne of Nick and Judy kissing.

“And what might that be?” asked Judy horrified of what the answer could be.

“Why, ‘Squeak’ of course” answered Skye.

“What?” exclaimed Judy in amazement.
“Trust me, it could have been much worse knowing this bunch” advised Nick softly “You might just want to go with that.”

Judy sighed loudly “You know, your mother and I share more than just a casual affection for her son don’t you?”

“Really? What would that be?” Nick asked curious as to what her answer might be.

“My middle name is…Laverne” she answered with a bunny version of Nick’s smirk on her muzzle.

“Well just…damn” was all a dumbfounded Nick had to say.

“Anyways” began Judy “I’ll finish ordering my tools and go help Midnight while I’m waiting for them to be delivered. And just so you know up front, if we’re going to be together I’m more than just a ‘friend with benefits’. I expect to be treated properly. Normal dates, movies, dinner, the whole nine yards…’ya got that Slick? And please remember, I’m still dealing with…with certain issues, ok? And by the way, the kiss was almost as big a shock to me as it seemed to be with you, but…only almost....” She added.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way Fluff. In the shop, you’re just another employee. No special privileges, ok? After work is another story. Don’t worry, I won’t do or try anything that you’re uncomfortable with.”

Nick gave Judy another quick hug and a peck on the cheek “Ok you bunch of perverts, the floor show’s over, get your asses back to work. I guess I need to deal with a certain matchmaker” looking directly at Skye “then try to get my mom off my back about dating a certain bunny, since I have finally figured that little item out…. Skye, a minute if you please…”

…

In the office Skye started “I’m sorry Nick, but you two just seemed to be such a perfect fit and all, so I just wanted to…”

“It’s ok Skye, I just wanted to thank you is all. This is one of the times that you meddling actually did some good. You’re a great friend, I just wanted you to know that I appreciate what you did, ok? I guess Judy and I both needed that little extra push.”

Skye smiled and gave Nick a quick hug “Thanks Nick, I’m going back to work, and thanks for being such a good sport. I really hope things work out between you and Judy, ok?”

Just as Skye left the office Nick got a text from his mom. It was the pic that Skye took of he and Judy kissing, surrounded by emoji hearts. ‘I think I’ll keep this’ thought Nick as he quickly set the picture as the avatar on Judy’s number.

…

When the tool supplier arrived with Judy’s tools, she asked Midnight if it was ok for her to go ahead and inventory and sign for them. “Of course, we’ve pretty much got the modifications finished, all I have to do is clean everything up and turn in the ticket. And by the way just so you know, everybody in the shop is happy for you and Nick, especially Skye believe it or not. You might not think it, but Nick has issues like everybody else in the shop, and he deserves to be happy just like the rest of us.”

“Ok, and thanks Midnight…for everything.” Says Judy blushing fiercely.
As Judy was finishing inventorying her new tools and signed the vendor ticket Nick came by.

“When you finished putting your tools away, come out to the warehouse, I’ve got a couple of things to show you.”

“Ok, see you in a few minutes” Judy remarked ‘I wonder what he’s got going on now’ she thought.

Walking out into the large warehouse, Judy noticed Nick standing at the far end in front of a large group of vehicles.

“What’s up boss, err Nick…or what do I call you, I’m not really sure at this point.”

Nick smirks a bit “I guess boss or Nick is good at work, we’ll figure the rest out as we go along, ok?”

‘Anyhow, for your first project, I received a call from a customer who wants this Shelby AC Cobra restored to original condition. I won’t kid you, original parts for this beauty are going to be hard to come by, especially engine parts, and the most difficult to locate will be a correct carburetor. I’ll get Lefty to pull it to your work area when he gets back from lunch.’

‘Secondly, over here” as Nick points to a group of cars to his left that look to be almost drivable “are some cars that are either barn finds or donated cars. Almost every single one is fair game except for the ’70 Superbird. I want you to look them over and decide which one you would like to have as your personal vehicle. You’ll be expected to pay shop cost for the parts and you’ll need to work on it after clocking out for the day. Are you good with that?”

Judy’s mouth hung open for a few seconds “Are you kidding me? You’re actually giving me a car?”

“Ok, let’s get something straight. I always give a new employee a personal car to work on if they need one and I figure they’re going to be a permanent hire, so there’s nothing special there just because you’re my girlfriend. Ask around, everybody will tell you that it’s true. Another reason is simple as well, I want to see what kind of attention to detail you put into your car. I understand that the first thing is to get it running and roadworthy. That aside, since we are a ‘thing’ ” Nick using air quotes ”you can use any of my personal cars you want to go somewhere in the meantime. You’re free to go where you want, when you want as long as it’s not on shop time. Believe me, no one will judge you for it, it’s actually kind of expected.’

‘Look, I know this is really sudden and unexpected, and it’s a lot to deal with all at once, but it’s who I am. All things said and done, I still expect you to put in an honest day’s work, just like everyone else here. Take your time, look around and let me know which car you want. I’ll be in the office, when you’ve made up your mind let me know.”

“N-Nick” started Judy.

“Ye..” was as far as he got, because he suddenly had Judy’s muzzle glued to his, hugging him tightly.

With tears in her eyes Judy continued “I have never had anyone be this kind to me in my entire life. PLEASE tell me that this isn’t a prank or a sick joke of some kind. I don’t think I could stand it if it was.”

As Nick returned the hug and gazed into her tear filled amethyst eyes “It’s no joke or prank Judy. To be honest, I don’t know how things will work out, or even IF they’ll work out, but I do feel that we have to try. Now, dry those tears before someone in the shop sees them and I get my ass beat by someone for me making my new sweetheart cry, mainly Skye or my mom… or both…”

Judy slowly release her hold on Nick, gazing into his emerald eyes and a thought crossed her mind.
“You know” she states smiling a slightly devious smile "I just thought of something.”

“Really? What would that be?” asked Nick curiously.

“Do you remember the outfit I wore to the car show on Saturday?”

“I definitely do yes.”

“Do you remember the necklace I wore…? Or were you too busy gawking at my bust?”

“Ummm…he-he, I noticed it but really didn’t pay a lot of attention to the bust…umm…I mean the necklace, I mean…I’ll just shut up now. Why?”

Laughing Judy commented “Because it, the necklace, happened to be amethyst and emerald, the same color as our eyes…”

Nicked blinked in amazement “You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope, coincidence? Maybe, who really knows. Anyway, thanks again. I’ll see you in the office when I figure out what I want to work on, ok?”

…

As Judy worked her way through the many older cars a couple caught her eye, most notable were a ’65 Barracuda, a ’64 Chevy II and a ’66 Mustang fastback. All were smaller cars, easy for her to adapt to her smaller body size for ease of driving. The bodies were all in fairly good shape, even though they all had minor dents and some cracked glass. The interiors were in fair shape but the only one that seemed to be mostly complete was the Barracuda, so Judy decided that that was the one she wanted.

As she made her way to the office, she noticed that Finnick was already there, seemingly in a heated argument with Nick. Not wanting to interrupt, especially since Fin didn’t really like her, she decided to sidetrack as she noticed Lefty enter through a side door. Definitely not wanting to get in on the office conversation, she intercepted him.

“Hey Lefty” she greeted the elderly coyote “Nick wants you to move the Cobra to my bay so I can get started on it. Ummm, you wouldn’t happen to know what’s going on in the office would you? Nick and Finnick really seem to be going at it.”

“Well, rumor central has it that Nick and Fin finally had it out yesterday, something about Nick buying Fin’s interest in the shop. Those two have been going at it for years and it finally came to a head yesterday. The word I got is that Nick is offering to buy Fin out.”

While Judy was listening to Lefty she was eyeing the action in the office at the same time. “Do you think it’s because of me? I know Fin doesn’t like me and makes no bones about it.”

Lefty looked straight at Judy “If you’re asking if you’re the direct cause I’d have to say no. You may have been the tipping point, but like I said, they’ve been going at it for years.”

“Do you have any idea why?”

“Nothing for sure, but there were rumors that Fin was trying to get the shop involved in some, shall we say, less than legal activities. I’ve got no way of knowing for sure, but I do know Nick has tried real hard to stay away from the bad reputation that foxes have. All I know for sure is that this was bound to happen sooner or later, so rest assured, it’s NOT your fault, whatever happens. Anyway,
I'll move the Cobra for you, is there anything else I need to do that you know of?"

“Actually yes, there is. Nick told me that I could pick out a car to work on for my own use. There’s a '65 Barracuda that I think I’d like for you to dig out if it’s ok, but I have no idea where you’d put it!”

Smiling Lefty told Judy “If you’ll notice, there’s always a space or two open on the other side of those welding curtains. That’s where we put our personal project cars to work on. When you work on it, just put the tools you think you need on one of those wheeled carts, and when you’re done for the day, wheel them back to your bay. Simple. I’ll stick the ‘Cuda in one of those empty spaces after I move the Cobra. By the way, everybody in the shop is happy for you and Nick, just so you know.”

"How'd you hear about us, you were at lunch!"

Smiling Lefty told Judy "A small shop is like a small town, news travels fast, be it good or bad. Don't sweat it, just get used to it. I told you before, everybody here is family, and it's what family does."

With that, Lefty headed to get the dolly that was used to pull cars around in the shop.

With the car securely in her bay, Judy started getting her list together on her whiteboard to list needed parts as she started disassembling the Cobra. After a bit, she observed Finnick stalk out of the office and out of the front door of the building.

Then Nick’s slightly agitated voice come out over the shop intercom “Will all employees please come to the main floor, I have an important announcement. Everyone to main bay please.”

XxX

As the crew gathered in the main bay of 'Wilde Times Classic Muscle Cars' everyone noticed how irritated Nick was, frown on his muzzle and his tail switching nervously from side to side.

"Ok, everybody listen up. Anybody that's been here for any length of time knows that Finnick and I have been at odds about the direction the shop needs to go for a long time. As of noon tomorrow, I will be the sole owner and operator of the shop. Fin is out, permanently, I just bought him out, lock stock and barrel.'

'Not only that, we are going to undergo a name change. There is going to be a contest to rename the shop, and it's open to all current employees.'

'Here's how it's going to work, submit your entries on a form that mom is going to work up. All you need to put down is your idea for new shop name and your name. After 3 weeks, a list of potential shop names and shop names only will be posted and suggestions will be closed. No one but mom will know who submitted what suggestions. After a week for you to think the suggestions over, YOU will vote on what you think the shop should be named. Just so it'll be fair I'll have no input on the name. The winner will get a bonus of two weeks' pay and the '36 Harley EL in the warehouse.'

'I know it's only three pm, but since there are no urgent deadlines to be met, everyone gets to take the rest of the day off. I called the 'Icehouse' and reserved the 'Chill Room' for anyone who wants free beer and popcorn. Now, clean up, put your shit away and get the hell out of here."

As Nick heads to the office he's met by a curious Judy. "Do we have any plans for the rest of today?" she asks shyly. "I know we've only been 'together' for less than a day, but since I've never really dated, let alone had a steady boyfriend before, I was just wondering."

"Wait, you mean to tell me that you’ve really never dat… umm, never mind, I remember what you told me before, I'm sorry I brought it up."
Blushing Judy replied "No, it's ok, I understand. I have to be able to work through it all, I'm...we're just going to have to take it slow if you don't mind."

Nick takes Judy's paws in his and looks into those beautiful amethyst eyes "No, whatever you feel like is ok, we have plenty of options. We can go to the Icehouse with the crew, we can get supper somewhere, or we can just stay here and talk. It's totally up to you."

After several minutes thought Judy decides "How about if we go to this 'Icehouse' place at least for a little bit and socialize. I need to bond with the rest of the crew if for no other reason than to show them that I'm not just the boss's girlfriend. Then we can come back here and just talk. You don't mind do you?"

"Of course not" replied Nick with a gentile smile "hanging with the crew is probably a good idea, I really wanted it to be your idea. It'll give you a chance to get the feel of everyone. None of them know anything more than the info I gave them yesterday and it'll stay that way unless you want to share."

Giving Judy hug and a quick kiss on the top of her head, just between her ears causing her to give a small purr, Nick slowly released the hug and escorted her out of the door, locking it behind them. "When we get back, I have a key to the shop for you, so you can come and go as you please in case I'm not around. Since you are staying here, it's only right that you have a key to the front door."

XxX

Chapter End Notes

To those who may or may not have noticed, I have deliberately chosen to keep the overused 'Carrots' nickname for Judy out of the story and made it derogatory to boot. I think it's time to move on from some of the overused nicknames and come up with something a bit different.
Chapter Summary

Judy has a night on the town with her new boyfriend and the crew, and suffers the consequences. Then her brothers show up and add more drama to the mix.

The Icehouse is basically a pub that serves beer and quick comfort food like burgers (made from crickets, fish or chicken but reportedly has the taste and consistency of real meat) pizza, popcorn and the like. In the days before modern refrigeration, the place was an actual ice house used for storing large quantities of ice for the summer months. The 'Chill Room' used to be one of several individual sections used for ice storage, but is now one of the many separate rooms used for conference rooms and private parties, a place to ‘chill’ as it were.

As Nick and Judy enter the Icehouse paw in paw, Judy is amazed at the rustic charm that the business exudes; noticing items hanging from the walls and ceiling that were used in days gone by. Mammals of all types, pred and prey alike, are for the most part quietly enjoying each other’s company. There certainly seems to be no animosity amongst any of the mammals, so it’s easy to see why it’s such a favorite hangout, especially considering the diversity of Nick’s employees.

As the new couple enters one of the private rooms, this one aptly named the 'Chill Room' they are greeted by hoots and hollers of the assembled company, and have to suddenly duck the barrage of popcorn being tossed their way!

“All HAIL THE KING AND QUEEN” yells Midnight!

“Hail King Nick and Queen Judy” intones Skye.

“All right, all right you bunch of perverts, quiet down” hollers Nick as loud as he can over the din.

“Glad you could make it Judy” Skye tells Judy “some of the gang were wondering if you would even show up.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world” replies Judy. “I need to get to know everybody and let them know that I’m still one of the gang, not just Nick’s newest girlfriend.”

“Well, from what I can tell from here, you may well be the last, and I mean that in the best possible way.” says Skye smiling “I’m actually very happy for you both. As odd as it may seem to some mammals, especially being a pred/prey couple, I think you’re actually a good fit. You actually seem to belong together.”

“Thanks” says Judy blushing fiercely “You don’t know how much it means to me after some of the times I’ve had in the past.”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that, let’s excuse ourselves from this bunch of misfits for a bit and have a little girl to girl talk ok?”

“Really” “asked Judy "why?”

“Well, you remember when I came in yesterday, late and really pissed off?”
"Yea, so?"

"It just so happens that the buck I was dating was none other than one Johnny Whinters."

"You have got to be shitting me" says a suddenly angry Judy.

"Easy there Squeak’" says Skye, "I'd be willing to bet he'll never show up around here again so just chill. Please. Let’s go someplace a little more private a talk this out...please?"

“Oh…ok” says Judy, calming somewhat, “if you really think it’ll help, let’s go.”

“Nick” yells Skye over the rising noise “Squeak and I are going to the Ladies Room for a bit, don’t you dare eat all of the BBQ Chicken Pizza…”

“You’d better be sure to bring her back in good working order” remarks Nick, which brings a chorus of laughter from the rest of the gang.

“Yea, yea, yea, don’t worry, you just worry about not getting so sloshed you can’t walk back to the shop smart ass!”

…

As the girls head off for their little meeting, the rest of the guys from the shop are busy giving Nick a hard time.

“Nick” begins Lefty “you got yerself a nice bunny there, you’d better take care of this girl, and I ain’t playin’.”

“Don’t worry mammal” counters Nick with a slightly forlorn look on his muzzle “I haven’t felt this way about anyone since Amanda….. a-and that’s been a long while ago. I don’t intend to let anything bad to happen to Judy.”

“Did you ever find out who the mammal was that ran over her that night?” asks Tiny.

“No, I never did. Jason Wolford offered to track the mammal down for me, but I decided that it was better not to know. I told him that even if they did find out, I’d be better off not knowing, because I’d just hunt him or her down afterwards, bad things would happen and I’d just end up in jail.”

“You mean Wolford the cop?” asks Georgie, a spotted Hyena.

“Of course. He’s the one that bought that Ice Blue ’66 Chevelle SS we did last year, remember?”

“Ok, yea, now I remember. It’s good to actually have friends on the force for a change, isn’t it?” Nick smiled “Yea, instead of looking over my shoulder hoping NOT to see them.”

“For real tho’ boss, everybody in the shop really digs you and Squeak, so you'd damned well better be good to her…. ” threatens Bolo good naturedly.

“That’s the plan. I just hope she feels about me like I do about her, ya know??”

“From what I hear from Snowflake, that’s not a problem. Anywho, there’s another fresh pitcher of beer and a hot fried cricket pizza ready, let’s dig in.”

…
“Look” began Skye as the girls entered what used to be a small office, which is generally used for little private talks such as they were now having “before you get your fur ruffled and get all pissed off, I want to tell you beforehand that the only thing that Nick told me was that you and I have something in common with Johnny Whinters. He didn’t say anything past that, just that maybe we needed to talk amongst ourselves and get some things sorted out. Let me tell you about my little encounter, then if you care to share anything, fine. If not, fine too, ok?”

With a very sour look on her muzzle Judy grudgingly agreed. “Ok, we’ll take this a step at a time. I know everybody is trying to help me, but I’m still going to be a bit pissed at Nick for even bringing it up to anyone.”

“Your choice, but you might change your mind by the time we’re done. Anyway, here goes.’

‘I started dating Johnny a couple of months ago, just coffee, meeting for lunch to start off with, that sort of thing. Then it was supper and a movie and maybe a little make-out session, never anything more serious. Then, Saturday night we went to this little bar we both knew of, not a dive, but not classy either. Anyway, after a few drinks he must have put something in my last drink, because I got a bit dizzy and hot as hell, if you know what I mean, but definitely not hot enough to have sex with him. Then he got really pissed and stormed out of the bar and left me stranded. The sneaky little bastard even took off with my purse. No phone, no money, no credit cards, nothing left, so I had to walk halfway across Zootopia to get to the shop. I tried to borrow a phone a couple of times and even tried to bum a ride but no such luck…I guess I came across as too drunk, too mean or both.”

“Unfortunately, I understand completely” said Judy softly, her ears lying flat against her back, eyes staring dejectedly at the floor. “It all started just before my junior prom…”

The more of her devastating experience that Judy shared with Skye, the angrier Skye got. Her unfortunate encounter with the buck paled in comparison to what Judy had been forced to deal with so many years ago, and was still haunted by.

“Since then, I’ve never had a boyfriend up until today” continued Judy, sobbing, tears rolling down her cheeks. “I-I’ve never even dated for fear of something like that happening again. I can’t touch any kind of alcohol, I can’t handle anything to do with a…c-carrot…I’m just so messed up…”

‘I have n-no idea how I could have become so close to Nick in such a short period of time. All he’s done for me, especially after the struggle I’ve had to endure, even with my own parents. It’s just so much happening all at once…it’s just really hard to deal with you know?’

Taking a deep breath, Judy continued “That’s the main reason behind the whole ‘c-carrots’ thing. Every time I hear the word, or see one or even smell one, it just…reminds me of that night. I-it’s like a death grip on my very soul, and it just won’t let go.”

“My god Judy, I don’t know how you’ve been able to handle all of this for so long by yourself. Anyone who thinks that all bunnies are just cute, weak mammals are just wrong on so many levels. I don’t know if I could handle any of that, especially for so long. I know Nick would never treat anyone like that. I’ve known him since we were kits, and I’m actually the first mammal he hired to work here, and I know for a fact that I’m the first mammal that he helped fix.”

Skye smiled a sad, soft smile as Judy gave her a questioning look “I’ve actually known Nick practically since we were born, we lived just down the street from each other. When I was only four, my dad started coming home either drunk or high, I was really too young to know for sure, and mom would never tell me which. Anyway, he started to beat my mom for no apparent reason, I guess because he knew that she wouldn’t fight back. After several months of this, she got fed up and called the cops, and…and much like when Nick’s dad got killed, they just…left. The beatings got worse until finally mom…just…killed herself.” Tears streaming down her face Skye continued, body
shaking from huge sobs “After that, dad just disappeared and protective services put me in an orphanage. Things there weren’t all the best either, being a fox and all. All the while unknown to me, Nick had been keeping an eye out for me and when he ran away from home, he yanked me out of the orphanage and helped find me a good foster home. Years later when he opened the shop, I was literally the first mammal he hired, even though he really couldn’t afford to pay me much, he made it work.’

‘The fact that he hired you should say something about his character. His taking a shine to you personally might surprise a lot of mammals, and all things considered it’s actually pretty astounding that he got so close to you, especially this quickly. You already know that every mammal in the shop has a depressing history of some sort, and most of us are either healed or on the way to being healed. Everyone except Nick. He’s always been so busy helping other mammals that he that he forgot about looking for that one instance, or one mammal to help him heal. Judy, you are that one mammal. You can help each other heal, much better than the rest of us put together. Karma has brought you together for a reason. He has issues that he’s dealing with as well, and maybe you can get him to share with you. I know a lot of his past, as do several other mammals here in the shop, but you need to get him to share it with you, it’s the only way to really help him get over a few of his darker times. I think that you’re the best mammal to help him heal, just like I believe he’s the best mammal to help you heal.’

‘I know you said you don’t want or like to do alcohol, but let’s go and get you a beer, or a soda if you absolutely can’t, and some popcorn or pizza, and let the healing and the good times begin. I see a lot of both in your future as well as Nick’s. You’ll both have the rest of us for back-up, no one is going to let anything bad happen to you, I can promise you that. So, let’s go let loose a little, ok?”

Giving each other a quick hug, the girls head out arm in arm to encounter the madness that would soon become a normal part of Judy’s life.

…

When Bolo notices the girls approaching the crowd, he immediately lets out a loud bellow and throws an entire bowl of popcorn at them, showering the girls!

“It’s about damned time” he yells “we thought you two had run off and eloped or something!”

“Bolo, what the hell is wrong with you” yells Skye in mock anger “wasting perfectly good popcorn like that?”

Laughing at the exchange Judy heads over to sit with Nick and quips “Sorry to disappoint Bolo, I’m more of a todd type of bunny” giving Nick a quick wink and a shy smile, which earns an appreciative roar from the crowd.

“Wh-a-at’ll ya have Fluff” asked a slightly inebriated Nick “There’s w-water, and soda pop, a-and, let’s see, more water…”

“I guess I’ll have…a…beer?” she replied cautiously, surprising almost everyone, especially Nick and Skye. “New life, new things” she smirked.

When Judy took her first sip of beer she got concerned looks from both Nick and Skye, both of whom understood the implications of her action, and that change was the order of the night.

“Agh, it’s bitter as hell” she said, choking and almost gagging, which drew another round of laughs and some guffaws as well as a bit of another popcorn shower from the group.

“Let’s give this a try” said Joe-Bob, the springbok bartender as he poured a bit of tomato juice into the mug of beer.
“What the hell?” a slightly concerned Judy asked.

“Just try it and let me know what you think. If you don’t like it we can always pour it out, no problem” continued Joe-Bob.

“Not too bad” commented Judy after another small sip. “But do you have something with a bit of a kick to it?” she asked.

“Here ya go, try it now” the spingbok answered as he put a bit of pepper sauce into the mug and stirred it with a straw.

“Oh, hell yea, now you’re talkin” replied the doe, with a large smile on her muzzle after taking another small sip.

“Judy, you know y-you had better eat something so y-you don’t get sick, right?” interjected Nick.

“Ok, ok.” replied Judy in a mock annoyed voice “Hand me a slice of that pizza Slick, then I’ll be fin…”

“But it has chi…”

“I don’t care, just hand me some pizza…pleeeeesee!”

‘Wow, a carnivorous bunny, who’d a thunk it’ thought Nick. ‘This’ll be great fun when she finally finds out that she ate chicken of all things.’

Skye had to laugh as she snapped a picture of Judy with a red beer in one paw while taking a bite of BBQ chicken pizza from the other, then of course texting it to Laverne.

After her third beer (bunny sized of course) and second slice of chicken pizza, Nick decided that Judy had probably had at least a little bit more than she probably should have for her first night of carousing with the crew.

Saying their goodbyes, Nick and Judy headed out of the door of the Icehouse and began their short walk back to the shop.

“Y-you know, I reeeally had a good time tonight, I-I’m glad we decided to go out” stammered Judy, slightly inebriated, hugging Nick’s arm tightly.

With the short walk sobering Nick up somewhat, he agreed “Me too. It gave both of us a chance to unwind a bit, and you a chance to bond with the crew. Would you mind greatly if I walked you to your door young lady?”

“I would be honored kind sir.”

“W-would you like to come in for a little while?” asked Judy in a sultry but slightly tipsy voice as the couple entered the shop.

Looking at Judy in concern Nick answered “Judy, under normal circumstances, I would love to. But right now, I think it would be better if you just got a good shower and hit the sack…”

"But I only wanted to…"

"I know, I know, but tomorrow is another day and I need you to be ready to go. No second thoughts, no regrets of where this could possibly lead too. I don’t want to have our relationship ruined because we did something stupid while we weren’t in our right minds. Please don’t be angry, you’re the best
thing I’ve had happen to me in a very long time and I don’t want to mess it up, OK? This will all work out, we both just need a little more time to get it right…."

Judy mulled Nick’s reply over for a few seconds, then began to tear up “I-I’m sorry Nick, I don’t know what I was thinking. A new job, a new family, a new relationship, my drinking” she sobbed “It’s all so...so...”

With that she buried her muzzle in Nick’s chest, hugging him tightly “Please don’t hate me, please understand.”

Stroking Judy’s ears and holding her tightly “Shhh, there, there. You bunnies, so emotional. It’s ok Judy, I understand, I truly do. We both have our burdens, remember when I told you that everyone here is or was broken? Well, I guess I’m no exception. We’ll talk about it soon, I promise. In the meantime, get a good shower, get some sleep, and I’ll see you in the morning. Are blueberry muffins and coco ok? I’ll pick some up on my way in in the morning if you don’t mind.”

Sniffling a bit Judy slowly released her hug “Yea, I guess so, but only if you get enough for the shop, I’m sure the rest of the gang will appreciate the gesture.”

Laughing, Nick kissed his doe lightly between her ears “No problem, but unless I miss my guess, mom will have heard about everything, courtesy of a certain Artic vixen, and will have doughnuts and coffee for the Wilde bunch before I even get here.”

“Wilde bunch? I’ve heard you use that term before…”

“It’s a term that a couple of the other shops have used in the past. It’s supposed to be derogatory, but we proudly use it when we kick everyone else’s asses in the shows and at the auction block. Now, I’m off. See you in the morning…sweetheart.”

Smiling, Judy kissed Nick lightly on the nose “See you, sweet dreams.”

With that, Judy caught a quick shower and went straight to bed, asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

...

As Nick drove the twenty minutes to his home, he couldn't believe how much his life had changed in past few days. What had originally started out as a quick stop to hire another mechanic and possibly extra model, had quickly turned into a budding relationship and a parting of the ways with Fin. Not that buying Fin out bothered him in the least, it was bound to happen sooner or later, it just happened sooner. But with Fin gone, it presented two entirely different problems. Now he was short and experienced painter and a good IT mammal. With a couple of important projects due in just a couple of months, he had to find another painter, and quick. The IT mammal could wait a short bit, but the painter was a must.

Then he thought about Judy. Everything had seemed to turn for the better since he had met her. Maybe his and the shops good luck would continue with her in his life and at the shop. Things were happening to him that gave him pause, maybe there was room for someone in his heart besides Amanda after all. He knew that he would need to talk to Judy about Amanda fairly soon, but right now was not the time. Hopefully everything would sort itself out in due time, a lot of good mammals were depending on him keeping the shop being the best in the city.

After Nick had taken a quick shower and headed to bed, he got a text from his mom. Included with the picture of Judy with a red beer in one paw while taking a bite of a piece of BBQ chicken pizza
were the words 'You finally found someone as weird as you are. Best of luck and take good care of my future daughter-in-law.'

With a quick eye roll and a chuckle, Nick set the picture as his phones wallpaper and climbed wearily into bed, knowing tomorrow would bring more challenges.

...

BEEP-BEEP-BEEP-BEEP

As Judy’s alarm went off at exactly six am, she looked at the offending clock with absolute hatred which was highly unusual for her. “Ugh, next time I do something like that….wait, did I actually DRINK last night? Good god, why…. oh shit, now I remember, talked with Skye, had some beer with…juice in it, and some sort of weird pizza… shit! So, this is a dreaded hangover…crap. And what is this really strange taste…? This can NOT be good…”

After some aspirin and a really long, hot shower, Judy dried off and got dressed. As she looked out of her window she heard a door open to the shop area. When she saw Nick’s mom and her sister enter with some boxes of what must be muffins or doughnuts and pots of coffee and some coco, she headed down the steps to help.

Laverne and Shirley were slightly startled as they heard “Good morning ladies, need some help?” coming from the top of the steps.

“My lands” remarked Shirley startling slightly “I totally forgot that you were living up in that old office. No thanks I believe we’ve got it pretty much under control. Tell me dear, did you sleep well?”

“Yea, I slept well enough I guess, but when I went out with Nick and the gang to the Icehouse, I may have overindulged a bit… I’m not used to drinking so I guess I’m not quite feeling the best this morning.”

“You wait until I get my paws on that son of mine…” started Laverne.

“NO-no, please don’t say anything, it’s all on me, trying to fit in with the rest of the crew and all…”

“I guess that’s would explain this picture I got from Skye last night” said Laverne with a huge grin on her muzzle.

“Really? What picture would that be?” asked Judy.

When Laverne showed Judy the picture that Skye sent her last night, Judy turned beet red as her paws flew to her muzzle and gasped “Is that…chicken? My god, so that’s got to be the weird taste in my mouth this morning… holy shit, what everyone must think” as she tried to hide her face behind her ears.

“Judy dear” began Shirley “don’t be so alarmed, it’s just chicken, it won’t kill you.”

“B-but I feel like a….a….cannibal or something” lamented Judy, not sure whether to throw up, tear up, or perhaps both….”

“Oh posh” replied Shirley laughing.

“Well, did you enjoy it?” asked Laverne.

“Enjoy what…exactly?” asked a distraught Judy.
“The beer, the pizza, the night out, all of it.”

“Yea, I guess so. I mean, I remember it all, I wasn’t totally bombed at least. Hell, I guess I’m just a bit freaked out that I actually ate meat…”

“I’ll grant you one thing for sure, you’re the second carnivorous rabbit I know” interjected Nick, who had entered the shop unbeknownst to the three ladies.

“Second? What do you mean second? Who on earth would be the first” an astonished Judy asked.

“We’d kind of like to know as well” remarked Laverne and Shirley at the same time.

Grinning, Nick reminded his mother “Do you remember a while back we did a custom van conversion for the Dewclaw family?”

Looking at Judy, Nick continued “Kevin and Kell Dewclaw are an inter couple that you absolutely have got to meet. Kevin is a rather large hare, and he’s married to Kell who is a grey wolf. They have the most…diverse…I guess is the best word I can think of, family I think I have ever met.’

‘Kevin has an adopted daughter Lindisfarne, who is a porcupine who grew up thinking she was a hedgehog, Kell has a son Rudy, who is a wolf/fox hybrid, and together they have a biological daughter Coney, who is a…hybrid for lack of a better term. She can and will eat anything, and I mean anything. Bugs, veggies, meat, literally anything. Plus, she is cute as a button. And yes, I can call her cute since she isn’t a true bunny” he added with a smirk.

Judy glances at Nick’s mom “He’s kidding, right?”

Grinning from ear to ear, Laverne says “Nope, now that he reminded me, it all comes back. Nick, the next time you have a jam session or a customer appreciation get together, you’ve got to invite them.”

“Of course, wouldn’t miss getting my two favorite carnivorous rabbits together for all the world…”

As the rest of the crew begins to filter in, not too many look the worse for wear, except of course, for Skye.

“What’s up with you?” Judy asks.

Giving the bunny a baleful look Skye hesitated a bit, then admitted “after you guys left, Midnight bet me that he could drink me under the table…”

“And?” Judy asked.

“I not only got drunk under the table, I slept under the table, plus I had to pay his tab as well as mine.”

“You mean to tell me you actually tried to drink a vet under the table, and panther twice your size at that? Really?” asked Nick “I thought you had more sense than that!”

“Yea, well, at least I still feel better than I did Monday morning…”

“Ok, well, get something to eat and drink. Mom brought pastries and coffee and coco. Then everybody get out there and get to work.”
Later, as Judy began disassembling the Cobra, she began to notice that several things seemed to be really off about the car. She already knew that the carb was probably wrong, but the serial numbers on the motor weren’t right. Then the transmission didn’t match with the body mounts correctly, and the rear end was entirely wrong.

“Lefty” she called out “can you help me out a minute, something’s really screwy with this thing.”

“Really, what would that be?” he asked.

“I’m not exactly sure just yet. Show me how to research this car to match what parts are supposed to be on it, I think this thing’s a knock-off.”

As Lefty helped Judy navigate through the maze that was the wonderful world of ‘Concours d'Elegance’ or restoring a car to its exact brand-new showroom condition. The deeper Judy got into the research a single thought crossed her mind ‘Nick is not going to like this…at all.’

“Thanks Lefty, I guess I’d better go give Nick the bad news” she said as she headed towards the office. However, as she opened the office door, she was slightly shocked to see her brothers Josh and Duane in the office, talking to Nick.

“Hey guys” she said, giving them each a big hug “what are you two doing here this time of day?”

“Well, to be honest” began Duane “we’re here to get jobs.”

“What?” exclaimed Judy rather loudly “what the hell is going on? Did something happen at the station, is everyone ok? Say something….”

“Judy calm down, everybody’s ok, well, sort of…. Mom found out that Josh and I are both inters and she fired us.”

As Judy’s mouth hung open in amazement, Nick leaned over and gently put a finger under her chin and closed it for her.

“Guys, what the hell is going on? Has mom lost her mind? If she dumps all of the inters, and there are as many as you guys have told me there are, how are she and dad going to keep the farm and stations going? And why didn’t I know you were inters?”

“Well” said Duane “the only station that’s open now is the one off of Rain Forest Drive, and those left on the farm are working double shifts just to try to keep the place in any semblance of operating. As far as being inters, I guess the subject never really came up.”

“Well shit, the folks are going to kill themselves trying to keep everything going. This is all my fault, I never should have let…”

“NO, listen to me Judy” interjected Josh “you aren’t the one who caused all of this, mom is. We told you before you were the only one strong enough to stand up to mom, you just gave everyone else the courage to do the same, Duane and I included. We’ve got a few of the kits keeping an eye on the folks, sort of undercover, and if things get too far out of hand we’ll step in and do what it takes to make things right. In the meantime we still need jobs, and since Nick told us to stop by even if we needed jobs, here we are. Now, if we can just get our little sister to give us a good character reference, maybe we can get to work.”

Still a bit aghast by the unfolding events, Judy’s muzzle slowly evolved from grave concern into a mischievous smile looking straight at Nick “I don’t know, I never did really like these two, especially
when they stood up for that danged fox that grabbed me by tail a few days ago…”

Smiling, Josh dug out his phone and pulled up a picture and showed it to Judy “You mean the fox that got our little sister to kiss him?” and as he swiped the screen to bring up another picture “Or maybe the fox who got the same sister to drink red beer and eat a chicken pizza? You mean that fox?”

Whirling around, Judy faked an angry look at Nick “Y-you sent those to these two? Really?”

Giving Judy a slightly nervous grin Nick answered “Wеееell, they were concerned that you were ok, so I figured umm...you know...this would show them that you were…”

Grabbing Nick by the tie and pulling his muzzle close to hers, with a serious look she narrowed her eyes to slits “Yea, well…you did good Slick” then smiled, kissing him lightly on the nose “so, what cha gonna be hav’n these two deadbeat bucks doing anyways?”

“Umm, well come to find out, Duane is a much better than the average mammal in the paint booth as well as fair mechanic, and Josh is good at IT, which will be very helpful in programming the CNC machine as well as keeping the computers for the shop up to specs. So Karma has smiled on the shop one again because I really needed them both. I don’t know if the shop can handle this much cu... I mean fluff all at once, but I guess we’ll get by.”

“Good save Nick” said Judy smiling and patted him on the cheek. “There’s one other problem that comes to mind though” she continues with a serious look on her muzzle.

Nick and her brothers all give her a questioning look “And what might that be?” asks Nick.

As Judy put both paws on her hips she asks “Where the hell are these two going to sleep? They aren’t going to be able to drive from where they live now to here and back round trip every day. They sure as hell aren’t staying with me…and before you get any big bright ideas, I’m not staying with you either…at least not yet…. We still need to figure out where this is all going to go.”

“Ummmm” Nick began, with a blank look on his muzzle. “Let me talk to Skye, she has a nice place with a spare bedroom, maybe you can stay with her and the boys can have the old office until they can afford something better…”

Wearing one of Nick’s usual smirks “Good call Slick” says Judy. How about I talk to Skye and see if we can set something up?”

“Ok, we’ve got that worked out…sort of, what brought you to the office in the first place?” questioned Nick.

“Damn, I almost forgot. I really hope you didn’t pay a lot for that Cobra.”

A look of quiet desperation came over Nick’s muzzle “Umm, I hate to ask but why?”

“After a bit of research which Lefty helped me with, it looks like the only thing that’s original on it is the VIN plate. The entire thing is cobbled together with junk parts. You’re going to have a hell of a time getting a legit title for it”

Well shit, that’s just great. At least now I know why I got it so damned cheap. That being said, there’s a certain ZPD customer who’s going to be really disappointed. I guess you need to put it back together as best you can, then get Lefty to put it back in the warehouse, I’ll find something else for you to work on…..’

‘On second thought, finish tearing down the Cobra. Figure out what you’ll need to get it back up and running as a proper kit car, including a new body if need be, just in case we have problems with the
‘I’ll show your brothers around the shop and get them settled with their new jobs. If everything’s ok with Skye, we can move you to her place and the boys upstairs this weekend.”
Chapter Summary

Judy's brothers are hired at the shop, so Judy moves in with Skye. A first official date turns disastrous.

Chapter Notes

A/N: the reference to ‘real meat’ was to harken back to the ‘savage’ days before the ‘Great Agreement’.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

7: A Family Affair Pt. II

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As Nick shows the brothers around the shop before explaining their new jobs to them, Judy grabs Skye and wants to talk to her about new living arrangements.

“Snow” says Judy “You got a minute?”

“Sure Squeak, what’s up?”

“Nick just hired two of my brothers. My mom fired them from the station when she found out they were inters. They’ll need a place to stay and I made it clear that they weren’t going to stay with me, and I damned sure ain’t going to stay with Nick, at least until we get our boyfriend-girlfriend thing figured out and some hard and fast rules set down. Nick wants to give them the apartment above the shop to stay in and mentioned that you might have plenty of space at your place, so… I was kinda wondering if you would be ok with me staying with you for a bit…I’d be happy to split the rent or whatever, I don’t want to be a burden…”

Giving Judy a big grin, Skye replied “Judy, I’d love to have you stay. I have an entire house to myself… thanks in part to a good for nothing ‘sperm donor’ I used to have for a father. The house that he and mom had went into a sort of receivership when he disappeared, it being fully paid for and all. When I turned of legal age it automatically became mine, free and clear and I’ve been living there more or less alone since then. There’s a spare bedroom that’s just sits empty, and even a spare bathroom so we won’t get in each other’s way. Besides all of that, think of the fun we’ll have when Nick stops by to be with you… we can screw with him so bad he won’t know whether he’s coming or going.”

Judy gapes in mock horror “You’re kidding…right?”

“Well, maybe…just a little” replies Skye with a mischievous grin and a wink. “When is this all supposed to take place anyway?”
“This weekend I think, sooner if we can. We could start moving my stuff anytime so the boys can move in with as little trouble as possible. I still don’t really have a lot to move yet so it won’t take too long on my part. Some clothes, stuff that my mom (as Judy makes a sour face) sent from the burrow that I really haven’t gone through yet, plus my laptop and the guitar should be about it. Everything else like the bed, couch and TV and the like stays at the shop. You’re sure I won’t be a bother?”

“Like I told you before, as did everyone else I can think of, we’re family. Just think of me as a big, well bigger sister and…oofff” she grunts as she gets collected in a tight hug.

After catching her breath, Skye continues “We can start moving your stuff and get you set up after work today, or maybe tomorrow at the latest. Then we can go to ‘La Petite’ and get you some really nice stuff to wear, on Nick’s dime of course.”

“Wait, what?” exclaimed Judy “Why would we do that? Won’t Nick get mad?”

“Look, first off, if you’re going out with Nick you need to get some really nice casual stuff to wear. If we don’t get it, Nick will just get you something that he thinks is nice…but usually really isn’t. Plus, it’ll never be the right size and you’ll just have to return it anyway, so let’s just bypass that step.’
‘Anyways, you’ll still need some really nice, sexy dresses to wear to the custom car shows and auctions. Trust me, sex sells cars as much as anything else, and since we’re both gearheads, we can answer any questions that prospective buyers might have about the cars. It’s hard to beat brains and beauty.’
‘And to top it all off, when Nick takes you someplace really fancy, and he will, you won’t have to stress about not having anything appropriate to wear.”

…

As the girls talk about living arrangements, Nick gives Judy’s brothers a quick tour of the shop and explains what’s expected to each of them.

“Duane, here’s the paint booth, it’s the latest Standard design booth. There are plenty of colors at hand and we have accounts with all of the paint distributors in the city so paint is never a problem. Disposable paint suits and respirators are in the cabinet along with all of the newest paint guns I can get my paws on. There are several other body mammals in the shop, but none are very good in the booth, so you’re the mammal in charge. Do you have any questions or have anything to add?’

“Actually” began Duane “Josh is very good with an airbrush and does a decent job pin stripping in case the need arises. Right Josh?”

“Yea, I guess so” says Josh “but just to be sure, if you’ve some old scrap stuff lying around I’d like to do some work to show you before you get too worked up about my abilities, if that’s ok.”

“That’s great, sure, there’s plenty of stuff lying around for you to practice on, so after I get you acquainted with the CNC machine and get you logged into the computer system, just make yourself at home wherever you’re needed, ok?”

“Cool beans, let’s go see the CNC machine and the server room and I’ll get busy. I’ve read up on a CNC machine but never got the chance to operate one before. I think the difficult part will be getting used to the virtual programming, but I think I can handle it ok.”

“Duane, do a quick check of the booth and other equipment you think you’ll need as well as the tool set. If you need anything, anything at all, the laptop at your desk has every vendor we use on the desktop, feel free to order what you need and sign the ticket when it’s delivered. If you have any
questions, just ask, ok? Do your best to get acquainted with the equipment, I have several projects that are going to need paint in the next couple of weeks.”

As Duane got busy inventorying the booth and equipment, Nick led Josh to the CNC machine. “This Xomety 5 axis model is the latest and greatest on the market. Like everything else I try to keep the best equipment in the shop. The only way to put out quality work is to have the best equipment and the best operators. That’s the only way to stay ahead of the competition in this business.’
‘Let’s head to the office where the server and the rest of the computer stuff is so you can get started updating all of the software and anything else that needs doing.’

…

After Nick gets Josh busy updating the office IT systems, Skye and Judy enter.

“Nick, after work, Judy and I are going to move her things to my place, then go spend some of your money on clothes so she can wow ‘em at the show coming up in a couple of months. Plus, we need to get her some casual stuff for every day after work and for your dates. You good with that?”

“Sure am. We’re going to take the Midnight Blue ’67 GTO, the Candy Apple Red ‘49 Merc with the suicide doors, and the Candy Blue and Artic White ’57 Nomad to the ‘Zootopia Open’ show in a couple of months, so get something that’ll go with the cars colors. As far as the casual stuff, whatever you two think is nice will be fine with me.’
‘Now back to work, both of you…”

…

After the girls clock out at around 5 pm, Skye helps Judy load her few personal belongings into Skye’s orange and white ’56 Mercury Montclair.

As they head out from the shop Judy asks “Snow, this is beautiful, where did you ever find this?”

Not bothering to hide a large grin Skye replied “This was actually one of the cars that were here when Nick and Fin first got the shop. It took a while to get the title cleared up, but while Nick and Fin took care of that, I worked on it in my spare time and fully restored it. The only upgrade I did was installing a dual master cylinder for the brakes. Safety is always first for our stuff, just like it is with customer or restoration jobs. The only time we don’t upgrade stuff like that is for a specific show car that will be used for show only and has to be one hundred percent authentic.’
‘Speaking of which, have you figured out what you wanted for a personal vehicle yet? I know Nick took you back to the warehouse to find one…among other things.”

Blushing fiercely Judy nodded “Umm…yea, I think so. I found a ’65 Barracuda that’s in pretty fair shape. I’ll check the motor and be sure it’s ok, but the rest looks to be pretty decent. There doesn’t seem to be any rust or major body damage, and the interior is complete so it shouldn’t take a lot to get it at least drivable. Besides that, it’s a bit more my size so I won’t have to do any major modifications to the seats so they’ll fit me.”

“That sounds like a plan. Well, here we are” as Skye pulls into a parking space in front of a very exclusive looking shop. “‘La Petite’…the very best ladies’ wear boutique in all of Zootopia. Nothing but the best, just like everything else at the shop. I’ve got some things that’ll look great with the cars, but girl, we have got to get you set up with at least three or four great outfits for the shows, and several sets of casual wear to blow Nick’s mind…what?” noticing the look of concern on Judy’s muzzle.

“I don’t know, I think I’m still a bit… I don’t know in shock I guess…by…everything that’s
happened to me in the last week. The new job, Nick, all of the stuff, you guys being so nice and all. Not to mention my parents, my mom especially, freaking out. It’s still a lot to take in to be quite honest…”

“Look, I understand that this is a bit hard to handle all at once, but get a grip because it’s all for real. We’ve got to get you some fancy clothes for the upcoming shows, it’s all part of what we were hired to do. Believe it or not, Nick and a couple of the guys dress to the nines so they can show off the cars to ladies as well, so how about we make a friendly competition out of the next show?”

“How in the world would we make a competition out of something like selling some cars?”

“Nick is a sucker for a bet when it comes to selling cars, so we can bet him that the two of us can sell more cars at the show than he and the guys can.”

“Ok, just for argument’s sake, just what would we bet to make it interesting, and who are the other guys we’d be working against?”

“Well, a lot of times on Saturday after work if we don’t jam we have a sort of movie night at the shop, and we can say that whoever wins gets to pick the movies. Usually it’s Nick, Midnight, Bolo and Charlie. Charlie was the grey wolf that pretty much kept to himself the other night at the Icehouse. Since Nick and Midnight are the only two we really need to worry about, I think we’ve got the upper hand. I’ll have to tell ya though, knowing Nick he’s liable to throw at least one if not both of your brothers into the mix, they’re kinda cute…err I mean…umm handsome for bunnies.” Noticing the odd look that Judy was giving her “What?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me, my brothers have gotten to you…already? Especially after Johnny?”

“Well, you already know everyone in the shop’s an inter, and you just told me that they were fired by your mom because they were inters so…I kinda figured they’re fair game…so to speak. And if they’re your brothers, they can’t be that bad, just saying…”

“All I can say is good luck with that pair, they’re both crazy as a pair of loons with Josh being the worst by far. He’s liable to show up looking like he’s headed for a Halloween party or something equally as crazy. He even goes to anime conventions dressed as like some cartoon girl sometimes, just so you know. Besides, they may already have girlfriends, but who am I to judge? After all, I seem to be hooked up with the craziest one of the bunch.”

“That’s the spirit, now let’s go get you some fancy duds.”

…

After the girls leave the office, Nick tells Josh “since Judy is moving in with Skye today, you and Duane should be able to at least start to move upstairs tomorrow if you want, so bring what you can along with you to work in the morning. Do you guys still have phone service or do I need to get you each a phone?”

“No, we’re good on phones, we figured mom would go bat shit crazy if she found out we were inters, so we got our own phones quite a while ago.”

“Ok, great, how about laptops? Do either of you have a good laptop? I really like for all of my employees to have a good laptop. I got Judy one but she wants to pay for that herself, which is cool. If you or Duane need one I can do the same for each of you.

“Duane already has a good laptop, but I could use one. I’m kinda like Judy in that I’ll pay for my own if you don’t mind.”
“Ok, no problem. Just like I did with Judy, I’ll pay for the laptop and you can pay me back a bit at a time so it doesn’t hurt you financially all at one. I have an account at Electronics World so I get a really good price on anything I or my employees buy there. Plus, the data package goes on my commercial account so you never have to worry about going over on data usage. You good with that?”

“Damn mammal, how could I not be?”

"Since we’re on the subject of computers, I’ve already noticed something strange in the system and I figured I needed to mention it to you when I got the time.”

“Really, what would that be?”

“Well, it seems like there is a sort of mole program that feeds all financial transactions to a remote server, which means someone knows EXACTLY what you spend, how you spend it and all income that comes into the shop.”

“You have got to be shitting me!”

“Nope, I wish I was. What do you want me to do? I can dump the program, I can send a virus that will either wipe the other users hard drive or I can install a ransomware program so you can get even with the other user that way.”

Nick thought about it for a minute “How about this…can you set something up that will send a message to whoever the other user is letting them know that we know what he or she is up to, and that the next time they try to access our system they will NOT like what happens? Then after the initial hit the program will delete?”

“Yea, I think I can do that, shouldn’t take too long, I’ll get on it right away”

“Thanks Josh, you’ve earned your pay right away. Since neither of you asked, I’ll be giving you the same pay and benefits I give every new mammal starting out. Fifteen bucks and hour and full insurance benefits from day one. Does that sound ok to you?”

“Gee, I don’t know Nick, it’s only double what we made at the station with the folks picking up the insurance.”

“Ok, if we’re cool, I’ll go let Duane know what I need to have painted first so he can get started on that.

…

“Hey Duane, how’s the inventory going?”

“Just finished, I just need to know what you need painted and what color so I can get everything together that I need.”

“The body guys should be about finished with a ’56 Crown Victoria before too long. I’m thinking Hot Rod Red on the lower half beneath the side chrome, and an eggshell white or cream on the top half and hood and trunk lid, with the top being red. The interior will be red and white leather tuck and roll. Take a look at the car and let me know what you think. If you come up with a better idea, I’m always willing to listen. We good?”

“Sure are, I’ll get right on it.
“Go ahead and knock off at five, then you and Josh can go back to where you’re staying and get ready to move upstairs. Squeak is going to be staying with Snowflake so you two will have the office upstairs to yourselves, no charge. You can get you own place when two get financially able ok?”

“Wait, I get who Snowflake is I think, but who the hell is Squeak?”

“Um, that’s the nickname that the guys in the shop, Skye to be more precise, gave to Judy. I’m sure you two will end up with something equally as offensive before long.”

“Well, I’m sure anything will be better than what mom called us when she fired us…”

With a shocked but thoughtful expression Nick answered “I can assure you that nothing like whatever you mother called you will ever be said here. If it is, the first time will definitely be the last…”

‘Anyway, get over and take a look at the ‘Vick and let me know what you think about the colors tomorrow. We good?’

“Sure thing boss, see you tomorrow.”

As Judy and Skye enter Skye’s home, Judy is amazed at the place. The home is a ranch style structure, with a sizeable front yard and a large back yard, which includes a covered deck and fire pit. Perfect for chilling after a hard day’s work.

Inside there is a large living room, large modern kitchen, with a good-sized dining room, a spacious den, two bedrooms and one bathroom.

“I thought you said there were two bathrooms” commented Judy after she caught her breath.

Laughing Skye commented “There are, the master bath is just off of my bedroom. Let me show you where you’ll be staying” as she led Judy through the house.

“Here you go, your new home.”

“Oh…my…god… I’ve never seen anything so gorgeous in my life! This is mine…for real?” as she looks around the room Judy takes note of everything.

There’s a fox sized bed, three times the size that she’s used to, a huge dresser, and spacious desk for her laptop and such, and, for her, an enormous walk in closet.

“Sure is, go ahead and start putting your stuff away, I’ll fix us something to eat, is a nice salad ok? If not, I can fix something else.”

“No, a salad will be fine, with some croutons and blue cheese dressing if you’ve got some.”

“No problem, when you’re done, head out to the kitchen and grab a bite.”

As Judy begins to store all of her new and old clothes in the dresser and closet she can’t help but reflect on the happenings of the past week. How it’s been such a roller coaster ride, from meeting Nick at the station, since the tail grabbing incident seemed now to be hilarious, to being hired into a new and better job. Then from her fight with her mother, to being totally accepted by the crew at the shop. All of the little things that had been thrust her way like the phone, laptop, car, new clothes and now such a great place to stay, it was just hard to imagine how things could get any better.

She paused and thought as it suddenly hit her, ‘How could I so quickly have a new boyfriend, especially after what had happened in high school? How can I have changed so much so quickly? How is that even possible? Does it even matter as long as I have a chance to have a better life, and
“even be happy for the first time in so many years?”

“Squeak, are you ok in there?” came Skye’s slightly worried voice from the kitchen.

“Yea, I’m good, just lost in thought for a bit. I’ll be right there, I still need to bring in the guitar and my laptop from your car so I don’t forget.”

“Well ok, but hurry your ass up, we both need a shower before Kounting Kars and Monkey Man Garage come on, they’re my favorite shows that I use to unwind from work every day. Everything’s so fake I always get a good laugh.”

“Really? I’ve never seen the shows, sounds like fun. Give me a few to bring in the rest of my stuff and eat. And yea, I’m pretty sure I need a shower after actually working for the first time in a long time.”

After hurriedly retrieving the guitar, amp and laptop from Skye’s car, Judy sat down to eat.

“Wow, this is really good, thanks.”

“It’s all good it’s pretty much the same thing I eat all of the time. Although I’ll have to admit, I do like meat and eggs once and a while. Speaking of which… how did you handle finding out about eating that pizza with chicken on it the other night?”

With a slightly embarrassed look on her muzzle Judy admitted “I…umm…kinda freaked out for minute when I first found out, I felt like a cannibal. But I guess it didn’t kill me so…just how much did I eat anyway?”

Giggling Skye told her “Two slices, and were begging for more. If Nick hadn’t pushed you out the door, you probably would’ve eaten the whole damned pizza.”

Blushing fiercely “God I feel like a freak of some kind…what the hell was I thinking eating chicken anyway?”

“If you remember, we had just finished talking about Johnny, you were bound and determined to at least try to drink a beer, then Nick reminded you that you needed to eat something. You grabbed the first thing handy, which just happened to be that BBQ chicken pizza, and the rest as they say is history. I guess the three red beers you had didn’t exactly help matters either.”

“Wait, what? I had three beers? No wonder I felt like crap. Holy shit, why didn’t someone stop me? You and Nick both knew I didn’t drink… it’s …”

“Whoa, whoa, slow down a minute Squeak, Nick grabbed your furry grey butt and hauled you out of the door after your third beer, don’t you remember?”

Looking first a bit dejected slowly changing to horrified Judy admitted “Well, no, not exactly. There are few things that are a bit fuzzy yet, but I think I…shit…hell…crap. Of all of the stupid…”

Noting the horrified look on Judy’s muzzle “What…what is it Squeak, what happened?”

“How could Nick not mention what happened when we got to the shop?”

“JUDY, what the hell is it?”

“Just kill me now and get it over with, please.”

“JUDY!!!!”
Tearing up, Judy came clean “I think I was so out of it I actually tried to seduce Nick when we got back to the shop. My god I’m so embarrassed.”

Her mouth hanging open slightly all Skye could do was stare. “And Nick never did anything? Do you realize how close you came to something actually happening?”

“Wh-whatever do you mean…?”

“Judy, you’re about to start your heat cycle aren’t you?”

Mouth agape Judy answered “Y-yes I am, how in the world did you know?”

Pointing at her snout for effect, Skye went on “Have you forgotten that foxes have some of the best olfactory senses in the predator world? I thought I could smell something earlier today, but in the car you were almost overpowering. And if I could notice, it’s a sure bet that Nick noticed that night.”

Slowly a small smile spread over Skye’s muzzle. “Judy, if you ever wondered what kind of mammal Nick was, you just got your answer. Nick will do and say just about anything to embarrass a mammal, but he would never, and I mean never mention something like that, and he would never take advantage of the situation. That’s the kind of mammal he is, caring and loving to a fault. There are other issues with Nick as well, but those are for Nick to work out with you in due time. There will be times when things will surface that you might not understand in the future, but hang in there, I know that you two can work things out. Just please be patient and don’t push things, ok?’

‘Anyhow, there’s Musk Mask shampoo in a cabinet in the bathroom, use plenty tonight. We’ll call Nick in the morning and tell him we have some girl stuff we need to take care of, I’m sure he’ll understand. I know a good doctor that will see you right away in the morning so we can get you some hormone suppressant or you’ll distract the entire shop.”

Letting a soft smile break through the tears as Skye hugged her, Judy began to understand what Nick was all about. He was always about doing the right thing, doing what needed to be done, or said or not said in this case.

“If you don’t mind, I think I’ll get that shower now and probably just go to bed, it’s been a long day.”

“Sure sweetie, get some rest, tomorrow it’s back to the grind. ‘G’night.”

“G’night Snow, see you in the morning. By the way, what time do you get up, I’m pretty sure I’m going to be really hungry in the morning”

“Wake up is around six so we can get a bite, call Nick, get to the doctors and back, and be to the shop as soon as we can.”

“Ok, thanks…”

As Judy showers she wonders how things got so complicated so fast. The last few days were almost like a dream, or was it a nightmare, perhaps a bit of both. As she dried her fur, she decided that Karma must be trying to even the score somehow, the nightmare that was Johnny and the godsend that is Nick, to balance all of the bad with a healthy dose of good. As she wearily lay down, she wondered what Nick was doing, thinking of. Was he thinking of her like was thinking of him? What other issues could Skye have been talking about?

As sleep took her, her last thoughts were of Nick, and how he had changed her life, hopefully for the better.
The next morning, as Judy eats a quick breakfast of toast and juice, Skye phones Nick.

“Hey Snow, what’s up? Kinda early to be callin’ ain’t it?”

“Nick, I just wanted to let you know, I’m going to take Squeak to a doctor I know for some…girl stuff, ok? We’ll be back as soon as we can, we shouldn’t be too long.”

“Umm, yea, that’s probably a good idea, never mind explaining, I think I get your drift. Thanks for letting me know. Is Squeak handy, I’d like to tell her good morning”

“Sure thing hold on a sec…Squeak, phone…”

“Hello?”

“Mornin’ sunshine, how ya holdin’ up?”

“Mornin’ Slick, I’m doin’ ok, just need to get a few…umm things worked out. We’ll be in as soon as we can. Would you like something for breakfast like maybe, a blueberry muffin and coffee, I’ll buy.” she said with a mischievous grin.

“You’re picking up some bad habits from my mother already Squeak… sure a muffin and coffee would be nice. Be safe and see you soon.”

As Judy and Skye enter the shop, Judy drops Nick’s muffin and coffee of in the office, receiving a quick kiss in return for her effort.

“Thanks Squeak, I’ll get breakfast tomo…wait, what did you do to my coffee... it tastes…”

“Like it has a hint of Blueberry?” interjects Judy.

“Sly bunny…”

“Slow fox.”

“Anyways, keep going on the Cobra. If you need help disassembling it, get one of the shop guys to help you. Keep the parts you can use and have someone throw the junk in the scrap pile. Use the whiteboard to keep track of the items you’ll need to put it back together. I’m not sure yet, but since the parts won’t be so expensive I think I can talk to buyer into reconsidering the car at a much lower price. Not as big a haul for the shop, but if the customer’s happy, it’s still a good thing. Have you figured out what car you want to work on for yourself yet?”

“Yea, I think the ’65 Barracuda will work perfectly for me. Small, but powerful just like me” she adds with a wink.

Grinning, Nick agrees “Ya got a point there Squeak, and I’m sure it’ll be almost as beautiful as you when it’s finished”.

“Oh, go on you…” remarks Judy, blushing slightly punching Nick lightly on the arm, as she heads out of the office towards her work area.

As the rest of week goes by, things seem to settle into a quiet routine.
With Saturday drawing to a close and almost everyone bowing out of the usual Saturday night movie/jam night at the shop, Nick asks Judy “Since everyone seems to be beat, how about a nice quiet evening going out for supper then just hanging out at Snow’s?”

“It’s ok with me if Snow doesn’t mind. Just a sec and I’ll ask her. “HEY SNOW!”

“Shit Squeak, what’re ya holler’n’ for, I’m just right here…”

“Err, yea, sorry, I guess my hearing was a bit deadened by the noise in the shop all day.”

With a stern voice, Skye slightly scolded Judy “I told you to get some ear plugs or muffs so that wouldn’t happen…”

“Yea, yea, I know, but we’ve been so busy I haven’t had an opportunity to get out and get some.”

“So, I’ll make it a point to stop by the sporting goods store and get you something on the way home tonight, ok? Now, what did you want in the first place?”

“Oh, yea, Nick wants to take me out for supper, then just hang at your, I mean our place afterwards. Is that ok, do you mind?”

“Not a bit, you two need to have a bit of alone together time. With the nights starting to cool off a bit, I’ll get a nice fire going in the fire pit while you two are out. We can pick up some beer and juice at the store on the way home and have a beer or two after you guys get done with supper…and two is your limit Squeak, ya got that?”

“…Umm, yes ma’am…”

“Well there ya go” says Nick “you two take off and do what ya need to do, I’ll swing by around seven and pick you up, Ok?”

Giving Nick a quick peck on the nose “Ok, see you around seven. Is casual ok, or do I need to dress up?”

“Casual is fine for tonight Fluff, we’ll save the good stuff for a night on the town. See you sevenish.”

On the way to pick up some hearing protection, Skye asked Judy “Squeak, to you listen to much music?”

“I used to at home and at the store, but not so much recently, why?”

“Well, you can get Pawndora with an app on your phone. With Nick’s unlimited data plan, you can listen to whatever you want all day long and not have to worry about extra charges. If you want to do that, all we need to get you is a good set of earbuds. What do ya think?”

“Now that sounds like a plan, I’m still not too sure about the beer and juice thing, but I guess if I take it easy it won’t be too bad. I really did enjoy the time at the Icehouse the other night, I just need to learn my limits…right?”

“That’s the spirit, let’s get moving so we can get back in time for you to get a good shower and get dressed…”
When Nick arrived to pick Judy up for their dinner date, he was wearing tan slacks and a grey long sleeved turtle necked pullover. After knocking at the front door, he was greeted by Skye.

“Squeak will be along in a minute, she’s just finishing gettin’ ready. Sit down and chill for a minute.”

After a few minutes, Judy exits her room “Hey Slick, you ready?”

“Ye…holy mother…Damn Judy, as if you couldn’t be any more beautiful, you just out did yourself.”

Wearing black stretch pants under a sunflower yellow skirt and a white long-sleeved turtle neck sweater Judy does a slow turn “I take it you approve?”

“Absolutely… I’ve made reservations at ‘Le Guarde’ for the evening, the finest P&P (pred and prey) restaurant in the city. Nothing but the best for our first official date.”

“I’m glad you approve; shall we go then?”

“Absolutely, right this way m’lady.”

As Nick pulls up to the front entrance of Le Guarde, a valet opens the door for Judy and retrieves the keys from Nick.

“Reservations for two… for Wilde” Nick tells the maître d’.

“Of course Monsieur, right this way.”

As the couple are escorted to their table, a secluded spot with a rose decorating Judy’s plate, and a single candle to set a romantic atmosphere “Oh…wow…” was all Judy could say.

With a slight smirk Nick responded “Yea, I know kinda cramped, but I guess we’ll have to make do” he adds with a wink.

“I’ll bet you do this for all of your girlfriends” intones Judy.

“Only the most beautiful” replies Nick. “I’ve take the initiative to order if you don’t mind.”

“As long as it’s not chicken for me, no problem” answered Judy with a small grin.

“Well darn, now I’ve got to reorder your meal” replies Nick with a playful smile “joking of course.”

As they share a quick laugh, a waiter stops by their table with a bottle of strawberry wine, and pours each a glass.

“Firstly, taking kind of a chance ordering wine aren’t you? And second, how did you know I liked strawberry?” asked Judy. “More of my brother’s doing?”

“No, actually the wine was more of a lucky guess, especially since they don’t serve beer here” he added with a smirk. “Secondly, I knew that …umm the ‘C’ word was out, and blueberry has been kind of overdone lately, so I took a chance on strawberry. I’m glad you approve.”

“You did good Nick, thanks.”

When their meals arrive, Judy is again stunned. For her, glazed veggies comprised of green beans, asparagus and parsnips with a small side boat of seasoned milk gravy.
For Nick, chicken parmesan with side of asparagus and fried spring potatoes.

Small talk of no real importance was the order of the evening, with the only thing mattering was the enjoyment of each other’s company.

As Nick signed the check for the evening’s meal (a generous tip included) and they headed for the car, the topic of the rest of the evening came up.

“I think a few quiet hours of just sitting and enjoying a definite lack of stress sounds like a great way to finish the evening, what do you think Squeak?”

“Sounds wonderful, let’s get going. It’s been wonderful, but I can’t wait to just sit and relax for a while, especially with all of tomorrow off. Do we have any plans for tomorrow yet?”

“Nope, let’s just wait and see what happens. Something interesting is bound to pop up….err, forget I said that please” said Nick becoming more than slightly embarrassed.

“Why you dirty old fox” kidded Judy giggling, knowing full well it was just an expression, but seizing the opportunity to turn the tables on Nick for a change. “Don’t worry, I knew what you meant.”

…

As Nick and Judy return to Skye’s home after a fantastic dinner date (their first real date), Judy takes Nick’s paw and leads him to the back yard where Skye has a nice fire going in the firepit.

Judy is startled and very much surprised when Nick stops short and a brief whine escapes his mouth.

“Nick, what is it?” she asks, very much concerned.

“Oh my god, Nick I’m so sorry” exclaims Skye “I never even thought about that.”

Looking back and forth between Nick and Skye, a very confused Judy asks “What’s going on, will someone PLEASE talk to me?”

With tears forming in his eyes Nick began “I knew that this day would come, but not now, not like this…”

“It’s ok Nick, whatever it is, it can wait I’m sure” says Judy softly.

Looking at Skye for emotional support, Nick continues “No, I guess now’s as good a time as any to talk this out. You’ve shared what is probably your worst life changing moment, I guess it’s only right I share my worst.’

‘It was about this time four years ago, I was dating a vixen named Amanda. We were fairly serious, going everywhere, doing everything together, and no she didn’t work for me. We had been friends for years and had gotten serious about six months before the ‘incident’. We had spent several hours right here, drinking and just enjoying the evening. We had a brief argument over something silly, I don’t even remember what it was about now. She had decided to walk down the street to cool off when someone jumped the curb and ran over her, killing her instantly. The cops at least tried to find out what happened, but I don’t think they ever found out for sure who ran over her or why. I’m friends with a bunch of the cops, and actually have a few for customers, so I’m sure if they had found out they would’ve let me know.’

‘At any rate, I was severely depressed for a long time, started drinking heavily, even briefly considered suicide. If it hadn’t been for close friends like Skye, Lefty, Midnight, and even Fin, I probably would have. After a couple of years I finally started to come around, even tried dating Skye
for a bit. Since we’re both foxes we knew it wouldn’t amount to anything, but it helped bring me a bit farther out of my funk.’

‘Then I got word of a very good-looking bunny doe who was an excellent mechanic that I needed to work in my shop, and the rest, as they say, is history. How I fell for you so hard and so fast I’ll never know. Maybe Karma, maybe blind luck, I don’t know and don’t really care. All I know for sure is that I care for you very much, and if you think you can be happy with this part of my past, I would like very much to at least try to share as much of my…our future as I can.’

Tears running down her face, she gathered he fox in a tight hug “You silly fox, of course I’ll be happy to be part of your life. You’re responsible to helping me to start to heal, the least I can do is stick by you and help you heal as well.”

“I’ll just leave you two alone for a bit” Skye said softly as she entered the house.

As Nick and Judy hold each other tightly and look intently into each other’s eyes, Judy’s phone rings and breaks the mood.

Judy rolls her eyes and begrudgingly slowly breaks her embrace with Nick to answer phone “Duane what the hell is so important that you have to call at this time of night?”

“Judy, if you’re close to a tv, turn on ZTV, there’s trouble back at the burrow, and it’s serious…”

“What the hell? Nick, we need to turn on the tv…now. Tune it to ZTV.”

“…in Bunnyburrow. Although there seems to be extensive damage to structures and equipment, there are no reported deaths. I repeat, there has been a tornado touch down in Bunnyburrow tonight, with extensive structure damage but no reported deaths. There are reports of several injuries, first responders from Podunk, Leapers Fork and as far away as Zootopia are reported to be headed to assist with any injured residents. This is Fabine Growley reporting.”

“Nick, I need to borrow one of your cars and get to get to the burrow, I know I’ve had it out with my mom, but I have to go and help…”

“No.”

“Wh…what the hell do you mean ‘NO’?” shouts Judy with an absolutely furious look on her muzzle. Even Skye can’t believe what she’s hearing from Nick.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: There’s drama in the works. Why won’t Nick loan Judy a vehicle? Afraid to lose her already? Or could it be something else…?

Sorry for the loooong time between posts. Life and the formatting for AO3 sucking, having to go through and add spacing between comments and such, I’ll try to be more diligent with both stories.

More up-to-date postings are on fan fiction under the same author name, and the title was recently changed to ‘Life is a Highway, formerly known as Hopps Express.’
Chapter Summary

Nick and company head to twister torn Bunnyburrow to render aid. Even though he's not sure of the reception he'll get, it makes no difference. Judy is his (even though neither really know it for sure yet) and her family is by default.

Chapter Notes

A/N: ok, this was going to be a really long chapter, mainly because I wasn’t really sure where to break it off, but I decided that over 13,000 words was just too much. I’ll post the second part as soon as I can find the time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

8: Tragedy And Triumph

XxX

“…in Bunnyburrow. Although there seems to be extensive damage to structures and equipment, there are no reported deaths. I repeat, there has been a tornado touch down in Bunnyburrow tonight, with extensive structure damage, there are reports of several injuries but no reported deaths. First responders from Podunk, Leapers Fork and as far away as Zootopia are reported to be headed to the scene to assist with any injured residents. This is Fabine Growley reporting.”

“Nick, I need to borrow one of your cars and get to get to the burrow, I know I’ve had it out with my mom, but I have to go and help…”

“No.”

“Wh…what the hell do you mean ‘NO’?” shouts Judy with an absolutely furious look on her muzzle. Even Skye can’t believe what she’s hearing from Nick.

…”

“If you two will just calm down for two seconds and let me finish… Judy, you are NOT going to the burrows ALONE. Absolutely not, and that’s final. And before you get started, I already figured that your brothers would be going as well, but that’s not what I was talking about at all. If you go, I’m going with you, and I doubt if I could keep Skye from going along, even if I wanted to.’

‘To start with, it’s going to be a hell of a mess and disorganized as all get out. If we just show up all of a sudden, especially in the middle of the night, all we’ll do is get in the way of emergency crews and create more chaos. You two start packing for a three to five day stay and let me make a few phone calls to mammals that I know, to let them know we are ready, willing and able to help, ok?’

‘Times like this are why I demand that all employees have a cell phone. I have everyone on a group emergency call list. I’m going to send a mass text to everyone who works at the shop and let them know that there’s a mandatory emergency meeting at the shop in…” looking at his watch “about one
hour from now.”

With her mouth slightly agape, Judy asked “You would do this, knowing how my mother feels about foxes in general and you in particular?”

“Judy, this is what I’m all about. Helping broken mammals. All I can do is try, if your mom still feels the same after we’re done, I can’t help that, but I …we…have to try. When you’re ready, we’ll head to the shop so get moving.”

As Nick, Judy and Skye arrive at the shop, there are already several members of the crew waiting inside including Laverne and Shirley, who brought coffee and some store-bought pastries.

“Judy” yells down Josh “we’ll be down in a few minutes to update you all on how things are going at the burrow.”

As more of the shop’s crew gradually filters in, Josh and Duane head down to the main floor of the shop. Heading straight for Nick and Judy, Duane begins “Ok, here’s what we know for sure…like they said on tv a bit ago, there’s a lot of property damage and some injuries, but thankfully no one was killed. According to Dianna, about a dozen or so kits were injured along with mom and dad. As far as the kits are concerned, it’s mainly small cuts, a few small bruises and some major messing of their pants” which got nervous laughs from pretty much all of those listening.

“Dad has a broken arm along with a few cuts and bruises, but mom’s in the hospital with a concussion, a broken arm, several broken ribs, strained muscles in both legs and a bent ear. Nothing life threatening, but still fairly serious.’

‘As far as damage to the burrow, it’s still too early to tell for sure, but the way Dianna tells it, the front of the burrow sustained a lot of damage, a couple of the equipment sheds are either badly damaged or gone completely, one of the tractors is completely destroyed and several others badly damaged. As far as the rest of the equipment, we’ll just have to wait and find out tomorrow. It’s still too dark to tell if any of the other storage sheds or crops were torn up, she’ll let us know more when it gets light out enough to see.’

‘There are emergency crews at the burrow right now, Dianna said if or when we come to hold off until it gets light so we won’t get in their way. That give us enough time to get some sort of plan together so we can help but not be in the way. If we find out more between now and then we’ll let you know…ok?’

Looking totally stunned, Judy could only nod.

“Ok everybody, listen up” shouts Nick “the family of some of our crew needs help so I expect everyone to pitch in as best they can. Skye, Mom and aunt Shirley, set up a table and get a list of everyone, who can do what, and prioritize needs versus what mammals can get or do. I know everyone has limitations, so just do the best you can given the circumstances. Judy and her brothers haven’t been with us long, but they’re still part of this family. Contact anyone who you think might be able to help. There’ll be a lot of stuff that’ll be needed at the Hopps farm…lumber, hardware, tools, clothing, emergency food and water and the like, so give your suggestions of who to contact to mom and aunt Shirley.’

‘Those who don’t have pressing commitments and are able to make the trip to Bunnyburrow please make the trip, we leave at first light. It will absolutely NOT be held against you if you can’t or won’t go, but remember…Judy and her brothers are part of this family now, and any help will be appreciated. Now get moving and contact ANYONE you think can help in any way, shape, form or fashion or with either goods, services or both…NOW MAMMALS…!”
As Judy numbly watches the (semi) controlled chaos going on around her, she can’t help but be amazed at the activity…the effort being put out by every mammal, especially those she had either barely met, or hadn’t met yet. Now she began to understand the bond that Nick had with each and every mammal in the shop. They care because HE genuinely cares for each and every one of them and their families. And now, she and her brothers were a part of that family. Nothing else could begin to explain the activity going on around her.

Within the hour, trucks began arriving at the shop from everywhere in Zootopia. Trucks with building supplies, power tools, generators, food and water donated by food chains all over the city, clothes from major clothing stores, even off-duty police and medical mammals heeded the call.

Judy was surprised to see officers Fangmeyer, Wolford and Delgado from ZPD among the volunteers.

“Hey there you guys” she begins as she approaches the trio of off duty officers.

“Well if it isn’t Judy Hopps” greets Fangmeyer “you’re bound and determined to be a pain in the butt no matter what ain’t ya?”

“Trust me, I’d be a lot happier if it wasn’t so serious a matter.”

“So would we, yet here we are anyway. We got Bogo to grant us some emergency leave so we could make the trip. We kinda figured we could help with directing traffic and personnel if nothing else.”

“Gee you guys, I don’t know what to say except…thanks” as she hugs each in turn.

“Ok Squeak, stop harassing the nice officers” interrupts Nick.

“You know these guys?” asks Judy.

“I should, they’re all customers of mine. Glad to see you could make it, are you three all that could come?”

“Yea, sorry” says Delgado “we’re all Bogo could spare considering the circumstances.”

“Hey, no problem I’m not complaining at all, any help is appreciated. Umm, are you in an official capacity or as helpful civilians, if I can ask.”

”Any particular reason for asking?” asks Fangmeyer.

“…Well, another, shall we say, less reputable customer of mine has agreed to send some of his employees and I would hate to see any professional disagreements breakout in the middle of all of this.”

“As long as we don’t see anything illegal going on, you’ll have no problems with us bothering anyone. So long as that’s understood, so I guess we’re in an ‘unofficial’ status” remarks Fangmeyer.

“Great, since you’re here, grab some coffee and donuts or whatever and help get things a bit more organized please, do your best with what we’ve got, ok? We’re planning on leaving around sun-up which is about four or five hours from now and I’d like to see everything go as smoothly as possible. Questions?”

“Nope, give us about five or ten minutes and we’ll start getting the convoy read for the trip. We’ll rearrange things as more stuff comes in. Don’t worry, you can count on us.”
“Speak of the devil, here come Raymond and Kevin now. Let me go talk to them and let them know that everything is cool” says Nick.

“Raymond, Kevin, good to see ya” says Nick, noticing the pair eyeballing the three ZPD officers. “I’ve been assured by three of ZPD’s finest that they’re here in an UNOFFICIAL capacity only and have no interest in bothering anyone unless given just cause. Are you guys good with that?”

When the two large polar bears nod, Nick continues “There’s coffee and donuts where mom and aunt Shirley are if you’d like some. When you’re through with that, there are several large bundles of food and water that’ll be headed for the burrows, if you’d help load them it would be appreciated. If there’s anything else that needs to be moved, just ask the off-duty cops, they’ll guide you. Look, I know you’ll be uncomfortable working with cops, but maybe it’ll help put you in their good graces somewhere on down the road, ok?”

As the preparations start to wind down, Nick gets everyone together for a short pep talk.

“Ok, everyone gather ‘round for a minute please.”

As the crowd of volunteers gathers Nick continues “I got a call from Chief Bogo a few minutes ago, he’s going to provide one cruiser as a police escort to help clear the way so we can make it to Bunnyburrow with as little trouble as possible. Clawhauser should show up just before five thirty which is when I want to leave. The trip should take just under four hours with luck.”

Looking at Judy he remarks, giving her a smirk and a quick wink “Judy, it looks like you’ll finally get to meet the dispatcher whose life you made so miserable not that long ago” which brought a chorus of laughs from the crowd, especially the three off-duty cops.

“Shut up you” replied Judy, trying to hide behind her ears, slightly embarrassed but wearing a lopsided grin nonetheless.

“Mom, aunt Shirley, please load the coffee and stuff into the shop van and serve out of the back of it so we’re not pushed for time when we’re ready to leave in the morning. It should be gassed up and ready to go, if you don’t mind driving it, it would be appreciated. Besides mom, I know you’ve been itching for an excuse to drive it anyway…”

To which he received a middle fingered salute from Laverne.

“Skye, if you want to ride with Squeak’s brothers, help yourself, I know ya got the hots for at least one of them so now is not the time to be shy…” “Damn it Nick…” started a totally embarrassed Skye, but as she looks around for the brothers, she notices both of them looking like kits that’ve been caught with their paws in the cookie jar (or in their case, looking at fur magazines). “Oh, what the hell…why not?”

“Judy, we’ll take the black Fleetside, it’s the most comfortable without taking something that isn’t appropriate for where we’re going. In the meantime, if you want you can go rest on the futon upstairs with your brothers and I’ll just crash in the office down here.”

“No way Nick” she says “where you go, I go. You can either lay with me upstairs or we can both crash in chairs in the office, your choice. You’re not gonna to wimp out on me at this stage of the game. Make up your mind, I’m tired and we both need the rest. And NO funny business…”

With a soft smile, Nick gives in “Ok, you win, let’s put the children to bed and go upstairs and get some sleep. I have the feeling it’ll be in short supply for the next few days.”

“Ok, everybody get some rest, we’ll be heading out in about four hours and it’s going to be a very
long day tomorrow.” Nick tells the multitude of animals in the shop.

…

Dawn arrives with the flashing red and blue lights of a ZPD cruiser.

As Judy slowly wakens, she is greeted with a smell that’s familiar, but extra strong, which of course is Nick. But what causes her to go into a mild panic is the fact that she seems paralyzed…until she realizes that she is being held tightly in Nick’s arms, with his fluffy tail covering her.

“Nick…NICK…it’s time to get up.”

“Just five more minutes mom, ok?…” Nick mumbles, nowhere near awake.

Turning slightly and lightly kissing his nose, Judy smiles “Sorry Nick but I gotta pee, plus we gotta go meet my parents…” which brings Nick from mostly asleep to almost wide awake in seconds.

“Oh crap, I was really hoping that that was just a bad drea-”

“Nope, sorry Slick” says Judy giggling “it’s something we’re both going to have to deal with soon. I’m hoping for the best, but I’m prepared to deal with whatever happens. Like you said, all we can do is try.”

With a bit of a smirk, Nick says “Ok Squeak, let’s go meet the infamous Clawhauser…”

With a slightly worried look Judy asks “Do I really have to?”

“No. not really, but I think you should meet the tough cop you’ve caused so much grief for.”

“Well, ok…”

Walking out of the front door of the shop ten minutes later, Nick leads Judy to the lone squad car and the pudgy officer inside “Hey Spots, I’ve got someone who’s been dying to meet you.”

“Oh, hey Nick… so who’s the cute bunny?” which of course didn’t set well with Judy at all.

She stomps up to the lone officer “My name is Judy Hopps, Officer Clawhauser and DON’T CALL ME CUTE!”

“Y-you’re Judy Hopps? THE Judy Hopps? I had no idea…and ummm, sorry about the cute thing?”

“Calm down Squeak, Spots probably didn’t know about the ‘C’ word, I doubt if they get many bunnies at ZPD. Cut him a break this time ok? We need all the help we can get if we want to get to the burrows and get there asap. Please…”

Shooting Clawhauser a dirty look, Judy reluctantly agreed “Ok, just this once… let’s get going before I change my mind.”

“Ok mammals, load up, we leave in five minutes” shouts Nick.

As everyone gets ready to either head towards Bunnyburrow or to their respective homes, Nick walks towards a despondent looking Lefty. “Lefty, I know you’re bummed because you’re not going due to your health. But if you think you’re up to it, I’d like to leave you in charge of the shop until the rest of us get back. There probably won’t be much going on in the shop in relation to projects, but I need someone here I can trust to keep stuff organized. That and to act as liaison between me at Bunnyburrow and anyone that I might need to get in contact with in case we need something that we
haven’t anticipated, or if we run out of something, especially food or clothes. No one, and I mean no one, is never not useful in this shop… understand?”

A slightly teared up Lefty replies with the only answer that was needed “You can count on me boss, and…thanks.”

“Thank me later, I’ll need you here at all times until the rest of us get back, so use the apartment upstairs in the old office. Take your cell phone and laptop with you so if or when the need arises you can order anything and have it delivered directly to the shop or to Bunnyburrow. Order anything you want from Mel’s and tell him to deliver it and put it on my tab, he’ll understand ok?”

…

As the hastily assembled relief convoy heads towards Bunnyburrow with Clawhauser in the lead, lights and siren going, Judy can’t help but be amazed at the response of her new family. Mammals she hardly knows, some she doesn’t know at all and some mammals that seem to be on opposite sides of the law, all banding together to aid a family that none of them knew in the slightest. A family that includes her mother. A mother who had disowned her, just for being with the fox at her side. The fox leading the very aid to help salvage the very family farm that she had run away from. And yet the attitude of everyone headed to Bunnyburrow is one of caring. She knows that not everyone in Zootopia can be this caring, or there wouldn’t be a need for a police force, but right now that doesn’t seem to matter.

Looking at Nick, seeing the grim determination on his muzzle, she can’t help but have a sense of pride. Pride in having the good fortune of meeting Nick. Of accepting his job offer, his friendship, and most of all of being his girlfriend. No matter how the trip turns out, whether her mother accepts Nick and his crew or not, whether she accepts Judy back into the kerfluffle or not, she knows she’ll be happier being with Nick than she ever was at the burrow.

As Nick glances over at Judy he notices the thoughtful look on her muzzle “What…?”

“Just thinking, thinking that no matter how this turns out, I’m happy to be with you. I’m glad that you stopped by the station. I’m still working on the grabbing my tail thing though…” as she offers her bunny version of a smirk and gives him a quick wink.

“And I’m so glad that you and everyone are at least trying to do the right thing by helping my family.”

“You aren’t going to let me live that grabbing your tail part down, are you?”

“Not a chance Slick.”

“Not even after we’re married and have kits of our own?”

“Wait…WHAT?”

“Relax Squeak, this NOT a proposal, I just needed to see what your reaction would be” says Nick, grinning from ear to ear.

“Damn it Nick…” as she punched his arm, half in frustration, half wondering if he actually meant it. No way, they hadn’t even been going together a week yet. Still, it was something to think about. ‘What would the future hold if they stayed together? Would he actually consider marrying her? Would she marry him? Could they actually even have kits of their own if they did get married? If they could, what would they look like? Shit.’
To take her mind off of that train of thought, she turned on the radio, and just stared as ‘On the Road
Again’ by Willie Nelson came through the sound system.

“You really have the best timing Squeak” laughed Nick.

“Yea, well what can I say? When you’ve got it, flaunt it” she shot back.

Several hours later, as the convoy neared Bunnyburrow, Judy begins to notice signs that the twister had done a bit more damage than they were led to believe. There was evidence of uprooted trees, leaves and branches everywhere, along with pieces of farm equipment and broken lumber. With the high winds blowing down the antenna, the local radio station had been knocked out, and with the Zootopia radio channel being out of range, updated news was in short supply. None of her siblings had her new cell number so she hadn’t gotten any calls from them, and her brothers were probably so busy trying to keep up on their phones that they hadn’t had the time or forethought to call and update her.

As they got nearer to the burrow entrance, Judy gasped. The front of the burrow was almost completely gone. Two tractor sheds were totally destroyed while one was almost untouched. Farm equipment was scattered around the compound, as well as tools, tree branches and a lot of broken wood from the outbuildings.

The really strange thing was the fact that almost none of the crops seemed to be damaged.

When the aid convoy pulled to a stop, Nick thanked Clawhauser “Thanks Spots, tell Buffalo Butt that I’m still trying to find the H1 Hummer he wants. I’ll let him know as soon as I find one and fast track it to get it finished.”

“Will do Nick, and please tell Judy I’m sorry for calling her cut…ummm, never mind, just tell her to take care, ok?”

“Ok, have a safe trip back to the Zoo crew.”

As Nick looks around, the crew stars to assemble.

“Ok, everybody listen up. Fangmeyer, Wolford, Delgado…take Kevin and Raymond and set up a perimeter and keep the lookie-loos out of the area. If they don’t live here, they don’t need to be here, and that especially includes news crews. Josh, Duane, grab a few of your sibs and help the cops with crowd control since. Nobody gets in that doesn’t belong here and you’d be the best judge of that.

‘Midnight, start getting the trucks unloaded and prioritize what needs to go where and what needs to get done first. A sort of battlefield triage if you will. Skye…you, mom and aunt Shirley get with some of Judy’s sisters and get some fresh food and water to anyone who needs it, I’m sure there are still cooking facilities up and running in the burrow.”

Seeing the question and concern in Judy’s eyes and on her muzzle, he addresses her next. “Judy, I know you’re concerned about your parents and the kits, so that’s where we’re going now. Your brothers told me that they’re all at Burrow Medical Center, so you direct me and I’ll drive. We don’t need to get in an accident on the way there, you’re stressed enough as it is, OK? If you want, I’ll wait outside in the truck so I don’t create anymore drama than need be.”

“No, absolutely not” she replies firmly as she guides Nick to the hospital. “When I go in, you’re coming with me. I want mom to see and meet the mammal that’s behind all of this effort. If she can’t accept who you are, then it’s her loss. I only ask that you stay outside the door so I can introduce you
to her properly. The rest is up to her…please!”

“If that’s what you want, then that’s what’ll happen.”

As she kisses Nick lightly on the cheek she adds “I only hope she can see the mammal I see…”

…

“Well, here we are, and the moment of truth has finally arrived” comments Nick as he pulls the truck into a parking spot.

Setting a stern look on her muzzle and with Nick’s paw in hers, Judy leads Nick to the front desk.

“Renelda” gasps Judy in surprise addressing her sister. With ice blue eyes and dark grey fur accentuated by snow white ear tips, she is an almost negative copy of Judy. “I didn’t know you were working here, I thought you were in Podunk!”

“I was, but I volunteered so I could keep an eye on mom, dad and the kits. So, this is the handsome fox that mom got so pissed about! I ummm, don’t suppose he has any brothers?” giving Nick a seductive, quick, once over glance.

“Sorry, he’s an only kit, and no you can’t borrow him…”

“Pity…Oh well, mom’s in room 213 and dad’s sitting there with her. You know how superstitious mom is about anything with the number thirteen in it, so I put her there just to piss her off.” smirked Renelda.

‘Do you want me to buzz the room, or do you just want to go up and surprise her?”

“Don’t bother, we’ll just go on up. Don’t worry, I know the way. And if you hear an explosion, it’s probably just mom blowing a gasket, so don’t bother calling the cops, ok?”

“I’m sure you do, with all of the times you were here as a kit.” which got Judy a curious look from Nick.

“Stories for another time Slick, let’s go get this over with.”

As they approach Bonnie’s room Nick asks nervously “Are you sure about this?”

“Well no, not entirely, but we’re here, and it’s something that needs to be done eventually, so…”

“Yea, I understand, I was just checking.”

Judy takes a deep breath and enters the room “Mom, dad?”

Stu looks up and takes Judy into a tight (albeit one armed) hug.

“Jude, it’s so good to see you, I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too dad” she replies.

“Hey mom, how’re you feeling?” all the while noticing the less than pleased look on her mother’s muzzle.

“Don’t tell me you’ve come back to the burrow just to gloat” Bonnie answers glibly.
“Mom, how could you even think that?” said Judy angrily, tears streaming down her face. “I came back because I was concerned about you, dad, and the kits. There’s an entire crew of mammals that came along to help rebuild the burrow and repair the equipment. We brought supplies, food, water, clothes. Anything and everything we could think of to help make the burrow and the farm right again. And besides all of that, do you want know who organized all of that? Who wouldn’t allow me to come here alone because he was concerned with MY wellbeing as well as yours, dads and the kits? It’s Nick mom. It’s that fox that you hate so much. He’s the one behind all of the aid that’s going into fixing the burrow, the equipment. He’s the one responsible for feeding and clothing your kits, making sure they’re safe and taken care of. And what wasn’t donated by mammals that he knows, is all coming out of his own pocket. That fox is doing all for that for someone who disowned her own daughter and hates him. THAT’S the kind of mammal he is. And just so you know, I’m proud to call him my boyfriend now.’
‘I want you to see the face of the mammal who’s doing all of this for someone who seems to hate him, just because of something that happened to me fifteen years ago. Nick, will you come in here please?’

As Nick steps hesitantly into the room, Judy takes his paw and does an overly formal introduction “Nicholas Wilde, I would like you to meet my mother Bonnie and father Stuart Hopps.’
‘Mother, father, I would like you to meet my boyfriend, Nicholas Wilde.”

“Mister and Missus Hopps” Nick says briefly.

Stu steps forward with a genuine smile and shakes Nick’s paw. “Pleased to meet you mister Wilde, call me Stu.”

“Stu, if you don’t mind, mister Wilde was my dad, Nick will do.”

With a totally stunned look, Bonnie asks Nick “Mister Wilde, is everything my daughter telling us true?”

“Yes ma’am it is. There’s an entire crew of mammals working to repair and rebuild your damaged home, outbuildings and equipment as we speak. Truckloads of food, water, clothing and other supplies are being distributed to your family My shop employees, my mother, aunt, several off-duty ZPD officers and other volunteers are included in the mix as well.’
‘It is my intent to have your home back as close to normal as it was before the twister hit as we can make it before any of us leave.’

Looking confused, Bonnie asked “But…why would you do that for us? You don’t even know us!”

With a light smile on his muzzle, Nick answered honestly “Because regardless of everything else, you’re still Judy’s family, and we always take care of family. And because when it’s all said and done, sometimes family is all we have.”

As understanding slowly permeates Bonnie’s mind, her perception of what was begins to morph into what is. Her expression changes from disbelief to amazement, then to sorrow and regret.

“Mister Wilde, it seems I’ve made a grave mistake in judging you on past experiences. I would like to genuinely apologize for my past actions and comments, and hope that you will take my apology to heart and try to forgive me. And please, call me Bonnie.”

“As you wish Bonnie, and please call me Nick. If I may be so bold, I once told Judy not long after we first met, that everyone is broken in some way. If I may say so, it looks like you’ve already taken a huge step towards healing by dealing with the past. Now, if you all don’t mind, I’d like to step out for a moment and check on how things are going at the burrow. Excuse me for a bit everyone.”
As Nick exits the room, Bonnie gestures for Judy to step closer “Judy, I’m so sorry about earlier. I don’t know if you’ll ever be able to forgive me, but I truly hope you will. You’ve always been a bit of a rebel, and I guess your comment about us...and by that I mean mainly me, being so selfish hit too close to home for comfort. Nick truly seems to be a genuine, caring mammal. As long as he treats you well, and you’re happy...then I’m happy for you. Now, you go be with him, your dad and I have a few things to talk over—we’ll be fine, but please stop back and visit, both of you.”

“We will mom, we’ll be back tomorrow I promise, ok?”

Giving her mom and dad each a quick hug, Judy joins Nick in the hallway just as he’s finishing a call.

…

“Ugh, I feel like such an idiot sometimes” says Nick sourly as they head towards the truck.

“Why, what’s wrong?” noting a concerned/angry look on Nick’s face.

“All of these mammals and all of the supplies and equipment we brought along... I never thought about where they’re going to clean up and sleep for the next few days. I’m pretty sure there aren’t enough rooms in the burrow large enough to fit them. So I called Lefty to see if he could get ahold of the owner of ‘Sarge’s Surplus’ just off of Sahara Square and see if they have some large tents, cots, blankets and maybe even some portable showers we can buy for the duration of our stay here. If so, I’m hoping to get them here and set up before dark. He’s supposed to call and let me know as soon as possible.”

“Nick, stop beating yourself up, you couldn’t possibly think of everything. I’m sure that the crew can use the showers in the burrow until we can get something else worked out. They’ll be kinda cramped, but at least they’ll work in a pinch. In the meantime, let’s go back to the burrow and see how things are going, I’m sure Lefty ‘ll figure something out.”

As Judy drives back towards the burrow, Nick’s phone rings “Yea, Lefty, whatcha got? Ok...ok...wait, say that again...you’re kid’n me, right? NO mammal I believe you, it’s just a bit much to grasp right now is all. Tell him ok, no hard feelings, and we really appreciate it. Thanks, bye.”

Noticing Judy’s questioning look, Nick begins “That, of course, was Lefty. It seems like Sarge has several military surplus tents, a bunch of cots, blankets, portable showers and the like but has no way to get them here. However, Fin, of all mammals has taken it upon himself to personally deliver whatever we need as soon as he can get it here. I guess the little shit has a heart after all.”

“This has certainly brought together some strange allies” remarks Judy. “You and Fin, the cops and Mr. Bigg’s ‘employees’ not to mention my mom and myself…”

“Don’t ask me to explain it” says Nick “because there may never be a logical reason, we’ll just have to go with it and make the best of a bad situation.”

…

Getting closer to the burrow, Judy hardly recognizes the scene from the one presented barely two hours ago. A construction crew of several dozen beavers (no one knows for sure where they came from) has make significant progress on rebuilding the above ground part of the main burrow entrance. The tractor shed that was damaged was completely finished, only lacking a coat of paint, and the two sheds that were destroyed were already at least one-third rebuilt, while damaged equipment was in various stages of being repaired.
Kits of all ages were gathered around Skye as she sat telling stories to the young ones, while the slightly older kits were amazed by the vixen’s snow-white coat and her fluffy tail. Older kits, those around Judy’s age, were gathered around the back of the van helping Laverne and Shirley set up and distribute the freshly cooked food for everyone.

When kits started noticing Nick and Judy as they drove up, confused looks were exchanged.

As the pair exits the truck, they are surrounded by a sea of small kits and bombarded with questions.
“Why are you with a fox?”
“You smell like him, is he your boyfriend?”
“Does he bite?” were some of the questions that Judy was faced with.

…

“Why are you with my sister?”
“Do you Love her?”
“Are you going to marry Judy?”
“Can I touch your tail?” were all questions that Nick had to deal with.

…

After dealing with several overly curious kits, Nick and Judy headed towards Midnight, who looked almost exhausted already.

“How ya holdin’ up big guy?” asked Nick as they approached.

“With so much damage, it’s been a challenge getting everything half-assed coordinated. The only upside is the fact that the majority of the damage seems to be concentrated in a relatively small area. Most of the mechanics are working on repairing equipment, while the rest are helping with putting the sheds up. I have no idea who the builders are or where they came from, but I wasn’t about to turn them down. The only thing we seems to be missing is somewhere to clean up and to crash at the end of the day.”

“Yea, umm…sorry about that. That seems to be the one thing I forgot about. However, believe it or not, we’ve got some tents, cots and portable showers on the way, and Fin is actually bringing them here.”

“Really? After the throw down you two had, he’s actually bringing that stuff here?”

“I know, I know, but that’s the word I got from Lefty, so let’s just hope for the best ok? If he’s on schedule he should be here in about an hour and a half or so. In the meantime, make sure everyone gets breaks and gets fed. We don’t need any casualties from exhaustion, ok? When Fin gets here with the tents, take enough of the crew and get everything set up and functional as quick as you can. Lefty told me that they are military surplus GP tents, so I’m sure you’re familiar with setting them up, right?”

“Let’s just say I saw more than my fair share while deployed and let it go at that, ok?”

“Good enough for me. We’re going to see how the cops are doing, keep up the good work, I’ll check back with you later.”

…

“Hey guys, how’s it going” which earns a dirty look from Fangmeyer. “Sorry Fangs, no disrespect intended.”
“I’ll just consider the source. If you need to be straightened out, I’ll let the bunny take care of it” Fangmeyer says, smiling and winking at Judy.
Rolling his eyes, Nick continued, “Anyway, if things are under control, go ahead and rotate taking breaks. There are tents and showers on the way so everybody will have a place to clean up and sleep until we’re through here.”

Addressing Judy’s brothers, Nick continues “It seems like we may have straightened things out with your mom, so another potential crisis has been avoided, at least temporarily. We’ll just have to play things by ear, no pun intended, until we know for sure.”

“If you don’t mind” looking at Judy “how about a quick tour of the rest of the farm so we can figure out how much damage the rest of the place has gotten! That’s one reason I wanted to bring the truck, it’s much better suited to drive around the countryside than any of the cars.”

“I’d love to show you the farm, it’s just sad that it has to be under these circumstances.”

Gazing into Judy’s amethyst eyes Nick says “I’m sure there’ll be better days ahead when we can spend time here and just enjoy the scenery, but for now, let’s just concentrate on the task at hand. The way things are progressing, I have every reason to believe that by the time it’s all said and done, things will be fine with you mom.”

“You really believe that, don’t you?”

“Yes, yes I do. The conflicting emotions I saw when we were at the hospital were true emotions, not fake. I believe that she has truly come around. Now, let’s get that tour done so we can figure out how much damage the rest of the farm has. You’re going to have to give me the rundown on the condition of everything, after all we city foxes aren’t up on the local crop conditions ya know.”

Giggling, Judy agreed, kissing Nick lightly on the cheek “Come on silly fox, let’s go.”

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Chapter End Notes

Sorry about being sooooooooo late with this, I'll try to do better in the future. Life, as well as a few other things has conspired against me lately, but (hopefully) I'm back. I'll be changing the name of the story, to Life Is A Highway, and soon I'll be adding another story to the mix. Like the rest of my stories, it'll be more than a little off the beaten path.
Chapter Summary

Repairs to the Hopps burrow continue, Nick and Judy’s relationship deepens.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

9: Tragedy And Triumph pt. II

XxX

As the pair drove slowly around the countryside, Judy noticed that the vast majority of the damage seemed to be concentrated at the burrow itself.

“Nick, this may seem like a strange question, but do you think Karma had a paw in this?”

Stopping the truck, Nick gazed at Judy “Yes, I do, why do you ask?”

“Well, doesn’t it seem a bit strange that most of the storm damage is right at the burrow? That my mom was the one mammal who is the most severely injured? That most of the damage to the burrow, buildings and equipment can easily be repaired in a few days at most? That for the most part, the crops are almost totally undamaged?”

“After the last few weeks, I’d have to say that even though I believed in Karma before, this has only reinforced what I already believe.

‘Everything bad that has happened to each of us in the past, seems to be in the process of balancing out. Even though we still don’t know a lot about each other before we met, it seems that the worst may be behind us, with the future looking nothing but great. But the only way to find out for sure is to travel that road and see what’s around the next corner. Speaking of which, unless you think there may be more damage that we haven’t seen, we need to head back to see if Fin got here with the tents and the rest of the stuff.’

…

Pulling into the still very busy Hopps compound, Nick and Judy are greeted by the sight of three large military green tents, two medium tents and one small tent, all six being fully set up and seemingly ready for use.

Parking the truck, Nick and Judy spot Midnight making sure that preparations are being finished for housing the many mammals that are in the area.

“Wow, that didn’t take long” remarked Judy.

With a tired smile, Midnight brought the couple up to speed “Fin showed up not long after you two left and dropped off everything we needed. There are the three large tents for the guys, a small one for the gals, one medium is for the showers and the other medium is for the latrine. Male on one side, female on the other, just like the shower tent.”
Noticing the slightly confused look on Judy’s face Midnight laughed and informed her “Latrine is military jargon for bathroom” giving her a quick wink.

“I knew that” said a slightly embarrassed Judy, knowing everybody could see that she really didn’t.

“I’m going to have everybody knock off in about an hour or so, so we can get them fed and cleaned up before dark” continued Midnight. “At the rate everybody is going, I don’t think we’ll be here any more than another day, two at the most.”

“Good to know. You’ve done a hell of a job keeping everybody on task. I’m going to make one more phone call tonight, then I think everyone including us has earned the right for some downtime.’ ‘Is there any place around here that sells beer that might be open? And how about some snacks for a bit later…” Nick asks Judy.

After a moment’s thought “I think ‘Big Dummies’ in the Burrow will be open if it wasn’t torn up by the twister” she answers. “I’ll have one of the boys call and find out.’ ‘Josh, will you call Jason at Big Dummies and find out if they’re open? Nick wants to get some beer for everybody. And call Gideon and see if he’ll bring some of his baked goods out for us…”

“Wait, you mean the same Gideon that gave you those scars on your cheek when you were just a kit?” asks a concerned Nick.

“Yes Nick, that Gideon. We made up years ago, even though mom couldn’t let go I did. He’s actually one of the top pastry chefs in the Tri-burrows. His specialty is…blueberry muffins and pies” she adds with a grin. Noting the still concerned look he was giving her she quickly adds “not to worry silly, there’s no competition for my affections here. When he shows up you’ll see why, so just…chill, please…”

Grudgingly, Nick acquiesces to Judy’s request. “Ok, but I’m not quite convinced…Owww, what’s that for?”

“Nicholas Wilde, are you hinting that I’m lying?” she asks, half seriously.

“Ummm, no, not really. But you’ve got to remember, guys pick on girls a lot of times because we really like them…it’s complicated, ok?”

Still giving Nick a bit of an evil eye she asks “So what other calls do you need to make…if I may ask?”

“Actually, I’m going to call Lefty and have the rest of the guys in the shop load up all of the instruments, amps and other equipment back at the shop and have it all sent here, even the spare ones since yours is still at Skye’s. I figured we can have a bit of a jam session here when we’re through tomorrow night, just to let everyone have some downtime before we pack up and head back to the big ‘Zoo’.”

“Why, that’s a marvelous idea, I guess that’s why I love you as much as I do…” with that Judy’s paws flew to her face “Did I just say that…out loud?”

“Ummm…yes…if you said what I thought I heard…”

“Well, there it is…how could I not? With everything you’ve done for me, and are doing for my family? If this is moving too fast, please let me know…like you earlier, I don’t want to rush thing and screw up what we ha-”

Whatever Judy was going to finish saying we may never know, because Nick grabbed the bunny
and pulled her into a tight hug, coupled with a VERY passionate kiss, which was wholeheartedly returned as she melted into his arms.

Which was, of course, given immediate attention by Skye, Laverne and the rest of the shop crew, along with a multitude of bunnies.

Everyone seemed genuinely happy for the couple with one possible exception…

“JUDITH LAVERNE HOPPS” just what do you think you’re doing?”

Giving a loud squeak (truly earning her latest nickname) “Mom? I thought you weren’t supposed to be released from the hospital for another day or two!”

“Well, your mother got so grumpy they practically shoved her out of the front doo…Oofff!” came the remark from Stu.

Giving her husband the best stink eye she could muster, Bonnie continued. “If you think you carry on like that with this fox in front of everyone, you’ve got another think coming…”

‘At least have the decency to have a bit of privacy. This’ll still take a bit of getting used to for me…please.” she added softly, giving Nick and Judy a small, but genuine smile.

“Nick, I can’t begin to tell you how much all of this” motioning to the entire compound “is appreciated by Stu and myself. You’ve accomplished so much in such a short amount of time, it just…takes my breath away.”

Motioning for Nick to come closer, she gathered him into a tight hug (well as tight as could be expected with her arm in a cast and broken ribs) and whispered “Treat my kit right Nick, I can tell she truly loves you…”

“And I love her just as much” Nick tells Bonnie quietly enough so that that only she can hear, “but don’t let her know, at least not just yet. I have something special planned for tomorrow night, ok?”

Taking Judy’s paw, Bonnie tells them both “I’m not sure how far you two have gone in this relationship, but if you want to share Judy’s old room, I’ll allow it as long as you…behave. Lots of young ears and all…”

Gathering her mother into a gentle (she has broken ribs remember) hug “No problem mom, we’re not ready to try for kits just yet. We’ll behave, I promise.”

“Ok then, off with you. I see Gideon headed up the drive, did you order some of his pastries? And what is that strange vehicle doing behind him?”

Giving her best imitation of Nick’s patented smirk Judy tells her mom “Yup, we ordered everything he had left in this shop. And the truck behind him is a delivery from Big Dummies. I’m not sure how much beer the boys ordered, but I’m sure there won’t be much left by morning, knowing this bunch.’

Turning to Nick as Gideon exits his delivery truck “I told you there was no cause for jealousy.”

“Ok, point taken, I sincerely apologize.”

Showing his own smirk an pointing at the truck from ‘Big Dummies Nick added “however, I took the liberty of having the boys order a few…BBQ chicken pizzas, for a certain carnivorous bunny I happen to know…”

“NICK, you didn’t…” yelled Judy, but by then it was far too late…especially seeing the curious look on Bonnies face.
Pulling up the picture on his phone, he showed it to Bonnie.

“Oh my lands Nick, what have you done to my kit?”

“Sorry Bonnie, I can’t take either credit or blame for this, it’s all Skye’s doing…”

“And just who is this Skye character…I need to have a word or two with him” huffed Bonnie.

“Actually, let me introduce you to Skye, she’s over there helping my mother and aunt with the food. When she’s not telling stories to the kits that is.”

Taking charge of pushing Bonnie’s wheelchair, much to Stu’s relief, Nick rolls Bonnie over to where the three vixens are serving food.

“I believe introductions are in order” begins Nick with Stu and Judy in tow “Bonnie and Stu Hopps, I would like to introduce my mother, Laverne Wilde, my aunt Shirley and Miss Skye Winter.’ ‘Mom, Aunt Shirley, Skye, these are our hosts, Stu and Bonnie Hopps.”

With a bit of smirk gracing his muzzle Nick continued “Skye, Bonnie was just admiring a certain picture you took of Judy at the Icehouse that night.”

“Oh, good lord no…please tell me it wasn’t…the one…with the…beer …and the…pizza …” said a totally horrified Skye

“Yea, I’m afraid that that’s the one…”

Fixing a motherly gaze on Skye, Bonnie asked “How in the world did you ever get Judy to drink beer?”

Before Skye even got a chance to answer, Nick piped in “Bonnie, I’m afraid that isn’t even the best part” steering her away from Skye’s conversation with Judy about a certain event from Judy’s past. “No, please…” began both Judy and Skye at the same time, but to no avail.

Answering Bonnie’s questioning look Nick continued “The best part is that the pizza is…BBQ chicken.”

“Nick, I’m absolutely going to kill you when no one is looking” grumbled Skye.

“You’re definitely going to have to stand in line for that one” interrupted Judy acting peeved, but not quite doing her best at hiding a toothy grin.

Absolutely stunned, Bonnie and Stu could only stare at one another. “Bon, I-I think it’s time to get something to eat and head inside for the night” stammers Stu.

Still stunned Bonnie agrees “I think that would be for the best hun. Ummm, get some of the kits to bring us a couple of plates dear, I don’t think we can manage by ourselves considering the shape we’re in.”

As Stu gathers up some of the older kits to carry their plates to the burrow, and to push Bonnie’s wheelchair Judy punches Nick on the arm…again.

“Owww, what was that for?”

“Damn it Nick, why did you have to tell mom about that night and show her THAT picture anyway?”
“I don’t know, I guess it seemed like a good idea at the time…?” shrugging his shoulders.

Rolling her eyes, Judy gave in. “Ok smartass; let’s just get something to eat and find a nice quiet spot to sit. We’ve been going all day and even I’m getting tired. Then I can show you where we’ll be sleeping tonight. I’m sure there’s nothing left but the bed and dresser since mom had everything else sent to Zootopia, but it’s comfortable and I really don’t feel like being alone tonight. Seems like cuddling with you could get to be a habit.”

“You’re sure you’re ok with this, I mean since you just got back in your mom’s good graces and all…”

“Trust me, if mom wasn’t good with it, she never would have brought it up in the first place,”

“Well, ok then, let’s eat.”

…

After eating, Judy takes Nick into the burrow. “And we’re going to be where, exactly?” Nick asks.

“Well, since I was in one of the first litters, we’ll be on the upper level, which means we’ll actually have a window to look out of.”

“So, we’ll be above ground?”

“Well, sort of, but not really?” said Judy, not being sure about how to describe it.

“What kind answer is that? Yes or no, are we above ground?”

“Ummm, the first level is ‘sort of’ above ground. It’s the first level of the main burrow. It’s a burrow for sh*t’s sake Nick, what do you expect? Think of it as a basement apartment…sort of. I don’t know how to explain it any better than that.”

“Ok, ok, sorry. I was just wondering, foxes used to have underground dens too remember?”

“Yea, well don’t worry my big brave fox, I’ll protect you if anything bad happens.”

“Har, har, very funny. So, this is it huh? Your old room” as Nick noticed a plaque on the door. “I guess your mom hadn’t given up on you completely, your name is still here…”

Tearing up, Judy gently ran her paw over the small piece of wood with her name on it that adorned the door to her old room “Mom…you never did truly give up on me, did you?”

Stepping into the room, Judy noticed her old bedspread, pillow and some of her old stuffed toy bunnies, just where she left them not that long ago.

“Mom…”

“Judy…let’s get some rest, we can work this out tomorrow.”

While Nick stripped down to his boxers, Judy went to the girls shower room and returned wearing a borrowed tank top and gym shorts.

“This’ll have to do for the time being…what? You didn’t actually think we’d be naked?”

“Not really, but I can always dream, can’t I?”
“Silly fox, if all goes well in the future, you’ll get your chance. Now, let’s get some sleep.”

…

Early the next morning, another of Judy’s sisters Jolene taps on the door to their room “Are you two up and decent?”

“Mfff” was all Jolene could hear for a second.

“No, we’re not up, but yes we’re decent, come on in…” answered Judy finally.

Peeking in cautiously (just in case) Jolene slowly entered the room, not being able to see Judy at first she asks “Where are you Judy, all I can see is fox.”

“Can you see a big fluffy tail?” comes the muffled reply.

“Yes, I…oh never mind” seeing a small grey paw waving at her from over the top of Nick’s tail.

“I don’t know if you two have been…ummm… ‘busy’ or not, but it sure smells like it.”

“NOOOOO, we haven’t been doing anything, but the smell is the least of my problems right now.” says Judy in a mild panic.

Seeing Jolene’s puzzled expression, Judy continues “First and foremost I need to pee, but I’m afraid that Nick has a death grip on me. Secondly, if that’s not bad enough, I have a very turned on fox I need to get away from soon before something really DOES happen.”

“Ooooookkkkk, I’ll just leave now. Oh, I almost forgot, breakfast is ready outside when you guys decide to join the rest of us…bye.” and slams the door behind her.

For the second time in as many days Judy has to bring her fox around to the world of the living “Nick, wake up… Nick, please, I have to go the bathroom, among other things…”

“Yea, yea, I know. But you’re so comfortable…”

“Besides that, I seem to have something poking me in the butt, and I don’t think either of us are ready for … extracurricular activities just yet…”

“Well damn, sorry Squeak, this is getting a bit out of paw” as he flipped his tail and slackened his grip on his favorite bunny “If we keep this up, I can’t promise to behave much longer, just so you know.”

“I know, I feel the same way. We’ll just need to figure out some stuff once we get back home…and just so you know, home is where my heart is. And that my dear fox is with you, wherever that may be.’

‘Now, let me up so I can pee, or we’ll have a lot of explaining to do, even more so than what might have happened in relation the smell that seems to have invaded the room, which means we should both catch a quick shower…separately of course. And yes, I’ll be sure to use plenty of Musk Mask” ‘as well as another large dose of hormone suppressant’ Judy adds to herself.

…

As the pair finally arrives for breakfast, Judy notices her mother eyeing them.

“Judy, after you finish eating, I’d like to talk to you for a couple of minutes if you don’t mind. please.”
“Sure thing, be there in a bit.”

After they finished eating, Nick and Judy head paw in paw over to where her folks are sitting.

“Ok mom, what’s up?”

“If you don’t mind. I’d like to talk to just you…”

“Anything you can say to me, you can say to Nick as well. The only way we can make this relationship is to have no secrets. There are a lot of things we don’t know about each other yet, but we both feel that the worst times are behind us, so even though things won’t be easy for us, there’s no point in making things more difficult than we need to. Now, what’s on your mind?”

“Believe it or not, it’s nothing serious. I simply wanted to apologize, again for being such a pain in the ass while you were little. And I want you to know, after talking with your dad last night, I take full responsibility for what happened with Johnny that night, and I’m appalled that we didn’t believe you when you told us what happened. We’ve decided that your father is going to enlarge your old room so it’s big enough for the two of you, and hopefully some kits in the future, so you can stay comfortably anytime you want.”

Looking at Nick Bonnie continued “And Nick, I know you’ll take care of our daughter, and we want you to feel like you’re a member of the family, so please visit as often as you like…”

“Nothing would make me happier Bonnie, thanks, it really means a lot” replies an emotional Nick.

“Judy, if you want, you can stay and visit with your folks” says Nick “I need to see how things are progressing. From the looks of things, there’s a strong possibility that everything’ll be finished by late this afternoon. If so, we can get most of the stuff packed up late today be and ready to head back to Zootopia by noon tomorrow.”

Giving Nick a big hug “Sure thing, just be safe and get your butt back here, I get lonely without my favorite fox around.”

As Judy turns to address her folks, she misses the quick wink that Nick gives Bonnie and the slight nod he receives in return.

Touring the bustling activity in the compound, Nick catches up with Midnight.

“I see things are moving right along. What kind of timeline are we looking at for finishing?”

“If things keep going at this pace, we’ll probably be finished just before supper tonight, say eighteen hundred hours (6 pm for all of you nonmilitary folks).”

“Great. There should be one more load of stuff come in before noon, which is all of the sound gear from the shop. As things wind down I’ll need you to have it unloaded and get things set up. Have Josh and Duane spread the word to any of the Hopps that want to join in that we’re going to have beer and treats along with a jam session tonight. I want to wrap this up in style, got it?”

“Boss, I think sometimes you’re a mind reader. If the bunnies are anywhere near as talented as I think they are, this’s gonna be epic.”

“That’s all well and good, but there are two special songs that I wanna do tonight. I’ll give you the numbers, so everyone, including the Hopps’s can get it right the first time. These are really special…”
When Midnight sees the songs he nods “Boss, if this doesn’t create a flood of tears, I don’t know what will. Don’t worry, we’ll pull these off without a hitch, I guarantee it.”

…

When Nick rejoins Judy and her folks, he breathes a sigh of relief seeing the three carrying on like pretty much nothing serious has happened in the last month or so.

“Well, what have I missed? Nothing juicy I hope.”

“Naw” said Stu “we’re saving the good stuff for when you got back. Like the time we had just started potty training Judy and…”

“Oh my gawd…DAD, pleeeease not that one…” begged a seriously panicked Judy.

Grinning, Bonnie picked up where Stu was interrupted “well, as you might guess, nudity is kind of a common thing amongst bunnies, especially in the burrow when they’re young. It seems like Judy had been watching her brothers when they went to the bathroom and….”

“Mom…please…no…aarg”

“Well she stood in front of the toilet, pulled on her bellybutton and peed on the floor. We decided it was time for a bit more privacy” finished Bonnie.

“Nick, if you ever, and I mean EVER tell anyone about this, I’ll…I’ll.”

“Yes? You’ll what?” replied a smirking Nick.

Grabbing Nick by his tie and bringing his face to her level, while wearing her version of a smirk, Judy finished “What you smelled in my room this morning, is as close as you will ever get to the real thing if you ever breathe a word of what you just heard to anyone… and no mother, nothing happened. Almost, but not quite.”

“Judy, you’re a grown doe now” said Bonnie, with a very serious look on her face “What you do in the privacy of your own room, whatever and wherever that may be, is none of my business. I’ve come to realize that now thanks to this wonderful fox of yours. Just please be at least a little discrete for a bit, I’m still trying to get used to…all of this, ok?”

“Moving on” as Nick finally finds his voice “everything should be finished up by dinnertime tonight. There’s another truckload of stuff coming that should be arriving anytime. Stu, would you mind showing me where we could set it all up?”

“More stuff” asked Stu, “what else could be coming this late?”

“Well I thought a jam session would be a nice finish to the events, so I had Lefty get all of the instruments and sound gear, including a spare guitar since Judy’s is still at Skye’s, loaded up and sent here. I figured it would be a good way to put everyone in good spirits before we leave. Big Dummies is going to supply free beer, and Gideon’s going to bring more of his baked goods for everyone. Think you’ll be up to playing a few songs Judy? I told Midnight to have Josh and Duane tell the rest of your family that everyone’s invited to play as well.”

“You know, I play a mean banjo and Bon rattles some mean spoons” interjected Stu “but I guess it’ll be kinda hard with just one paw, dang it.”
“That’s ok Stu, we can play the next time Judy and I come out.”

Turning to Judy “How about we take a leisurely ride while everyone finishes up around here? We haven’t had a lot of ‘us’ time the past few days.”

“Nick, you didn’t need to do that…”

“Yea, I know, but there are a lot of mammals, us included, that can use the opportunity to just unwind a bit.”

Grabbing Nick in a tight hug, Judy kisses her fox on the cheek “You’re really something Nick, thanks. Now let’s go on that ride…”

…

“Any place special you might want to go?” asks Nick as they head out of the driveway “I just wanted to get away from the crowd for a bit, so wherever you feel like heading is fine with me.”

“Now that you mention it, there is one place I’d kind of like to go if you don’t mind”

“No problem, just point me in the right direction…..”

After about a leisurely forty-five-minute ride, they stop on a slight hilltop, with several large trees providing plenty of shade.

“Some of us used to ride our bikes out here to try to get out of working in the fields when I was little. I’m pretty sure dad knew where we were, but with so many kits, there was always more than enough help, so he never bothered us.’
‘From the condition of the rope on the swing, it doesn’t look like anyone has been out here in a long time.”

Checking out the largest tree, Nick noticed initials carved into the trunk “I don’t suppose there’s anyone else in your past I need to be jealous of is there?”

With a puzzled look on her face Judy answered “Not that I can think of, why?”

“Well, I see a heart with the initials ‘JH and BC inside of a heart…Wouldn’t happen to be anyone you know, would it?”

“Shit, I forgot about that!”

Noticing the concerned look on Nick’s muzzle, Judy explained. “When I was I think nine, I was infatuated with Bobby Catmull. He was a male cougar a year older that I was at the time. In fact, he was a part of the skit I was in during the Carrot Days Festival where I was a cop. That was the same time that Gideon and I had our fight. He had to move when his folks got a job in Podunk and I never saw or heard from him again. I really don’t think that you need to worry about any competition from him. I’m happy with the fox I have now. Thinking back on everything, I never realized that I’ve always been an inter until just lately…”

“Another mystery of the beautiful Judy Hopps is cleared up. What say we just chill here for a bit and enjoy the peace and quiet before we head back.”

“Sounds great, let’s get some rest and just cuddle for a bit.”

After a brief two-hour nap, the pair stretch and look at each other.
“I guess we need to start heading back” complains Judy.

“I guess, but we don’t need to be in a hurry, right?”

“Nope, let’s just enjoy the scenery on the way back.”

Returning from their cruise around the countryside and quiet nap, Nick and Judy noticed that repairs were being wrapped up for the day and the improvised stage was already set up, instruments and all. Somehow there was even a jury-rigged lighting system set up. That’s when Nick noticed a certain addition to the crew.

“Well, look what the coyote dragged in… how’s it goin’ Lefty? I see you made the trip as well.”

“If you thought I was gonna miss this shindig, you’ve lost you flippin’ mind boss!” Lefty shot back.

“Can’t say as I blame ya, welcome. You goin’ to be workin’ the keyboards then?”

“Yes, seein’ as how it’s about the only thing I can play without tuckerin’ myself out too much.”

“Anyways, welcome to the lunacy. Get with Midnight, he’ll go over the few songs we’ve got planned out, one in particular will require your skills. You’ll be a welcome addition to the group.”

Getting back to Judy “Let’s go see how things are going for the jam session and where our instruments are” suggested Nick.

Walking paw in paw, Nick and Judy approached the makeshift soundstage. “Not too bad, I think this’ll work” said Nick “What do you think Squeak?”

“Looks great, wanna do a few riffs just to check the sound?”

Giving a snarky grin, Nick headed for his guitar “Plug in and let’s give it a whirl… you up to ‘Ghost Riders’?”

“No problem Slick I’ll play lead, you can try and keep up….”

Gathering a small crowd, Nick and Judy do an extended version of ‘Ghost Riders in the Sky’ as done by Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings. When the pace finally became too fast for either to maintain, they called it quits, laughing.

“I guess that’ll do” commented Judy panting slightly “I think we’re ready for tonight, wadda ya think Slick?”

“I think we need to get something to eat and take a quick nap before the night’s festivities.”

“You know you’re NOT back in my good graces just yet, right?”

“What? All I did was listen, your folks told the story… c’mon…” began Nick “Look, I understand that there are some things that are best kept between us. I have no doubt that someone, probably mom, or Aunt Shirley, or both is going to totally embarrass me with stories about my kit hood. The last thing I want is for some of those stories to get out, so we’ll be even as far as the blackmail is concerned. I promise to keep things like the story your folks told between us if you’ll do the same with whatever you hear from mom or Shirley… deal?”

Seeing the logic in Nick’s argument, Judy agreed “Deal. Now, let’s go get at least a short nap. I’ve
got the feeling that tonight will be a night to remember at the burrow.”

‘You have NO idea’ Nick thought to himself.

…

Hearing the sound of many paw steps outside of her room, Judy awoke in a mild panic to find she was alone. “What the hell…?”

Then she noticed a note on her dresser ‘Judy, couldn’t sleep, so I took a short shower and changed, went to supervise the gig for tonite. Please shower and change into the outfit I left in the top dresser drawer. Love, Nick’

‘What in the world has gotten into him?’ she thought.

When she opened the drawer, Judy was awestruck by the outfit that Nick had left. What she found was a pale blue dress, with spaghetti straps. It had a neckline that dipped and showed just a peek of her bust, while the skirt’s hemline reached down to just above her knees and had a slit up the right leg that ends at the hip. Her amethyst and emerald necklace was on top of the dress along with a beautiful Calla Lily, which she remembered was traditionally to be worn on one ear… right ear if single, and left if taken.

‘What in the world is that sneaky fox up to, and how did he find out about the lily…unless… MOTHER! This has to be some of her doing …’

As Judy takes a quick shower, she can’t help but wonder what everyone is up to. She could just blow it off if it was just Nick acting like Nick. But the dress, her necklace, the lily…
‘I guess there’s only one way to find out’ she thought as she quickly dresses and heads out to check up on the evening’s activities, lily in paw.

While finishing preparations for the evening’s entertainment, Nick notices Judy exit the burrow, at first slightly concerned that Judy isn’t wearing the lily he left. Then he remembered that according to Hopps tradition, Bonnie as matriarch of the burrow, is the one who is responsible for placing the lily on her daughter. ‘Ye gods, what a beautiful sight’ he thinks.

Seeing Nick on the stage, Judy is impressed with Nick’s attire, from the light blue button-up shirt that matches her dress perfectly, to the tan slacks. “Well Slick, you certainly seem to clean up well” Judy remarks.

“And if you aren’t the most gorgeous female here, I’ll eat your dads hat” quips Nick.

Smiling, Bonnie interrupted the mutual appreciation session. Taking Nick and Judy in paw, she led them to the center of the makeshift stage. “Listen up everyone please” she announced into the live mic ‘I have a brief announcement’
‘…there’s an old custom in the Hopps family that hasn’t been used much lately, one that I’m proud and honored to revive here tonight. To those not familiar with the custom, it goes something like this; normally at a social function, an unmarried doe will wear a lily on her right ear to denote that she is single or on her left ear to denote that she is ‘taken’. This can either mean that she is dating or engaged. When a male asks for permission to court a female of this family, it is required that he ask the parents, usually the mother, for that permission. Nicholas, Judith, please step forward.”

As the pair step towards Bonnie, both are a bit apprehensive. “Nicholas Wilde, you have formally asked permission to court Judith Hopps, and to have her be your sole partner, is this true?”

“Yes, it is” answers Nick recognizing the solemnness of the occasion.
“Judith Hopps, do you consent to be courted by Nicholas Wilde and none other?”

“Yes, I do” responds Judy in kind.

“As matriarch of the Hopps kerfluffle, I hereby publicly approve of this courtship!” and places the lily at the base of Judy’s left ear.

Giving them each a hug as best she can with her arm in a cast, Bonnie adds “Let the festivities begin.”

Taking the microphone, Nick temporarily acts as MC. “Alright everyone, let’s get this party started. To kick things off tonight, I would like to call to the stage the members of the newly formed group ‘WildeHopps’ to perform a special number honoring our hosts, Stu and Bonnie Hopps. That song is called appropriately enough ‘We Are Family’ by Sister Sledge.”

As the song played, hugging Nick tightly, Judy asked him “You planned all of this didn’t you? How did you ever find out about the tradition? I hadn’t thought about it until I saw the lily in the drawer. And how did you ever manage to figure out the correct outfit and the right size? And what about my necklace? How on earth did you get that?”

Grinning from ear to ear Nick admitted “Actually, it was you mom who came up with the idea, pretty neat huh? As for the dress, Skye picked it up in Bunnyburrow and got your size from one of your sisters, I have NO idea which one. The necklace was already in your travel bag, I noticed it peeking out of one of the pockets when I got up.”

As the song finishes, Nick steps back up to the mic. “There is one more special request on tap to start the evening. I would like to personally dedicate this song to the love of my life, Judith Laverne Hopps. That song is ‘When a Mammal Loves A Bunny’ as recorded by Fercy Sledge.”

As Judy stands open mouthed at a total loss for words, Nick leads the group into the song, with Lefty playing the electronic keyboard.

“When a mammal loves a bunny
He can’t keep his mind on nothin’ else
He’d trade the world
For the good bunny he found
……………….

As Nick finishes the song, he is greeted with a hug so tight he was afraid Judy would crush him.

“Damn it Nick…” was all the tearful bunny could choke out.

“I know, sweetheart, I know” was all he could say.

While the band carried on with various tunes, Bonnie and Stu approached the newly acknowledged couple.

“Nick, we really don’t know how to properly thank you for all of this” began Bonnie “especially for the dedications, both of them. You have no idea what it means to this family, and to us personally.”

“Maybe not but I can guess. Over my lifetime, I’ve had very few family members that I was ever close to and even fewer friends. When I started my shop, I had one small friend and one small family. Now I have a lot of close friends and three loving families, how can a mammal do any better than that? It has been an honor and a privilege to be here helping you recover from both a physical and personal disaster, if I may be so bold.”
“No, it’s ok Nick, you’re right on both counts. The burrow is one thing, but I know I’ll never be able to thank you enough for saving our Judy and for the healing you’ve provided for me personally. On my honor, I will try to repay you until my dying day. But while we’re all together, there are a couple of things I’m curious about Judy… would you mind if I tried that…umm…red beer that you seemed to like? And about that…pizza!”

“MOM!!! Really?”

“Oh, don’t be such a stick in the mud Judes” says Stu “we figured if the beer and pizza didn’t kill ya, we might give it a try ourselves. You’ve really opened up our eyes into trying new and different things, although we’re not too sure about the pizza, but the beer really sounds good for a change. Plus, we’ve worked out a deal with Gideon to sell him some of our produce at a discount to use at his bakery.”

“Ok, who are you two really, and where are my real parents?” jokes Judy. “Come with me and I’ll at least hook you up with the beer. The pizza even I’m not sure about yet…” as she leads them to where the beer is being served.

As the night winds down, Nick and Judy find themselves again snuggled in her old room.

“Nick.”

“Hmmm?”

“Do you think we could actually be married one day? I mean actually married?”

Looking deeply into Judy’s beautiful amethyst eyes “Of course I do. Don’t you?” he asked with a slight hint of worry in his voice.

“I truly do, yes. You know we may not be widely accepted back in Zootopia, right? What do we do if some mammals don’t accept us? And what about kits? I would truly love to have your kits, but is that even possible?”

Kissing her lightly between her ears, Nick answers “Honestly, anyone who doesn’t like it can go to hell. Besides if things get too rough in the city, I see no problem with moving the shop to Bunnyburrow, lock, stock and barrel.”

“You would do that? Move the shop out here?”

“Sure, why not? You can see for yourself how your family gets along with the guys, especially with Skye eyeing at least one of your brothers and vice-versa. It wouldn’t be a problem at all. I’m actually considering moving out here anyway. Property taxes and insurance would be low enough to make building a brand-new shop feasible. Besides all of that, I’ve got a loyal customer base that would follow the shop no matter where I move it to.’
‘And as far as having kits of our own go, we won’t know unless we try…” he adds with an evil grin.

“Now hold on a second there Slick…”

“No, I’m not suggesting that we start trying tonight, just food for thought for the future. And don’t forget about the Dewclaw family, so I’m guessing that kits of our own are more than a little bit possible”

“I had almost forgotten about them.. Now let’s get some sleep, it’s been a very long day, and we still have to get things loaded up tomorrow morning for the trip back to the city.”

“So true my lovely bunny, so true. G’nite Judy.”
‘G’nite Nick.”

...

Chapter End Notes

A/N: When a Man Loves a Woman - by Percy Sledge was the song.
Chapter Summary

Nick and Judy head home from Bunnyburrow, and Judy can’t handle the isolation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

10: Life Choices

XxX

As the crew packs up the tents, tools and other stuff and gets ready to head back to Zootopia, Nick and Judy are saying their goodbyes to Bonnie and Stu.

“You two be careful “begins Bonnie “don’t drive too fast, if you get tired stop and rest, after all…”

“Mom, we’ll be fine, it’s only four hours or so, and yes, we’ll stop if we get tired. Nick and I both know how to drive and…”

“Well at least one of us does” interrupted Nick, which earns him a good natured punch on the arm “Oww, dang it…that’s it, spousal abuse…”

“Nick, we aren’t even married yet and…”

“So, when are you going to propose? You know you want to after all ... OWW!”

“NICK, damn it…”

Continuing on, much to Stu and Bonnie’s amusement “You know that according to vulpine traditions, the female is the one that’s expected to make all of the moves, including the proposal…”

“Nick, I’m NOT a vixen so…”

“Yea, well I did the bunny thing last night with the lily and all, so it’s your turn and …OWW, will you STOP that?”

Giving Nick a genuine (?) dirty look, Judy gives her parents a hug, then waits as Nick does the same.

“Just wait until I get your furry red tail into the truck” Judy starts sternly as she herds Nick towards the idling pick-up “you might want to rethink the married part” but reassures her parents with a quick smirk and a wink of one of her lavender eyes.

“I can’t wait to hear how this turns out” remarks Stu to Bonnie “they’re just like us when we first got engaged” which earned Stu the stink eye from Bonnie “Did I say that out loud? DAMN.”

…”

“Well, considering everything that’s happened over the past few weeks” began Nick as they head down the road, “I’d say things worked out fairly well, wouldn’t you?”
Leaning on Nick, Judy answers tiredly “Yea, I guess so. It’s been such a roller coaster ride, I get
tired just thinking about it all. But seriously, pillow talk aside, are you serious about getting married
and having kits? I mean really serious?”

Stopping the truck, Nick stares into Judy’s eyes with the most serious demeanor Judy has ever seen
on her fox. “Of course I am, or I never would have mentioned it! This is one thing I would never
joke about. I love you Judy, more than life itself. There’s absolutely nothing I won’t do for you, and I
mean that from the bottom of my heart. If you don’t feel the same way, I need to know.”

“Of course I do, it’s just that…I don’t know, I guess I’m still a bit spooked about the suddenness of it
all. I know I’m still a bit nervous because of what happened with Johnny and all, even though it’s
been so long ago. It’s more than a bit overwhelming. Please tell me you understand!”

“Absolutely. However long it takes you to get comfortable with everything, I’ll be right here waiting
for you. I’ve waited this long to be happy, another day, or week, or month or however long it takes is
fine with me. As long as I know that as long as you’ll be at the end of the wait, it’ll be worth it.”

“Damn it Nick, why are you so good to me? What have I done to deserve you?”

“I guess I could ask you the same question. Karma has seen fit to bring us together, and to put tests in
front of us to see how we handle things, let’s just see how things play out shall we?” Nick remarks as
he dries the single tear from the corner of Judy’s eye.

Giving her fox a quick peck on the nose “Onward faithful fox, to the grindstone we travel.”

The rest of the trip was uneventful, with Judy dozing most of the way, leaning against Nick or lying
with her head in his lap. She woke when they reached the city limits, although with traffic being light
on a Sunday evening, there wasn’t much jostling.

“Back already?” she asked sleepily.

“Yea, ‘fraid so.”

“Why didn’t you wake me up, I could’ve driven part of the way.”

“You were a lot more tired than I was, being so stressed about you parents, the burrow and all, so I
decided to let you sleep. And before you get your ears in a twist, if I’d have gotten tired, I would’ve
stopped and rested or let you drive for a bit.”

“Dang it Nick, this is supposed to be a partnership, I can do my share…”

“I know, but being the great partner that I am, I made the decision to let you sleep. Decisions like that
are just being cognizant of your partner’s needs and putting them above your own. There’s no harm
done Judy…”

“Yea, I know, it’s just … I guess I’m just not used to it is all. Besides, I really wanted to spend more
time awake and just be with you.”

“You were, and still are, with me Fluff, you were just sleeping is all. Even if we were together
twenty-four seven, you’d still need to sleep.”

“I know, but it’s…complicated, ok?”

“I understand, or at least I think I do.’
‘Well, we’re here. I’ll help you get your stuff in the house, then we need to get some rest, you especially. Back to the shop tomorrow, and there’s plenty to do, since we managed to get behind on a few projects. Before you start, I’m not complaining in the least, I’d do it again tomorrow if the need arose, I’m just stating facts.’

“I know… that doesn’t mean I have to like it though, not the getting sleep or the work parts, I just didn’t get to spend much real time with you with all of this going on.”

“Well, hopefully things will get back to a reasonable state of normal for the shop and we can spend time together after work. I missed having alone time with you as well.”

…

As Nick pulled off after carrying Judy’s things into the house and giving her a very nice good-bye kiss, a funk began settling over Judy. Even though the two had spent most of the past few days together, there was a sense of completeness that seemed to be missing. She missed being close to her fox, and the unease seemed to get more intense as the late afternoon turned into early evening. Doing her little bit of laundry and unpacking didn’t help, especially when she pulled the dress out of her bag that she had worn the previous night. Then when she removed the sturdy box that her lily and necklace were in, she couldn’t stand it anymore.

With shaking paws, she grabbed her phone and dials Nick…

When Nick’s phone rang, he was only mildly surprised that it was Judy “Hey there beautiful, how’s my fav…” was as far as he got, hearing Judy’s heart wrenching sobs.

“Judy, what’s wrong, what’s happened? Are you ok? Please, talk to me.”

“Nick, I-I can’t do this, not anymore.”

“Can’t do what Judy, I don’t understand…”

“I can’t be alone anymore. I’ve shut everyone and everything out for so long… and now that I finally have someone, I can’t … I can’t be alone anymore. Please Nick, can I stay with you. I’ll do anything, just please, DON’T LEAVE ME, PLEASE!”

“Judy, calm down, I’ll be back there as fast as I can get there, I promise, just, please calm down.”

As Nick breaks nearly every traffic law possible heading back to Skye and Judy’s, he wonders how he could have missed the signs of her seeming panic attack. ‘It doesn’t really matter right now’ he thinks to himself ‘I just need to get to her and make sure she’s ok. We can work out whatever needs to be done once I get there.’

As Nick slides to a stop in front of the house, he notices that Skye along with Judy’s brothers have only just arrived as well.

“Nick” says a concerned Skye “what’re you doing here alone? Where’s Judy?”

“Judy’s already inside…, I’ll explain later but I think she’s had a panic attack. Will you guys please take off…right now, please. Go back to the shop, anywhere, I don’t care. I really need to be with Judy alone for a bit, or rather she needs to be alone with me. I promise to let you all know what’s going on as soon as I can.”

Grudgingly and with concerned looks, Skye and the brothers leave, headed to the shop to at least crash for a bit and wait for Nick to call.
Nick bursts in the front door to see Judy collapsed in a small grey heap on the living room floor.

“Judy, sweetheart, I’m here” taking the sobbing bunny into his arms.

“Oh god, Nick, I’m so sorry to be such a bother” she sobs uncontrollably, tears streaking down her face “but I just can’t take being alone anymore. So many years of being along, hiding the pain, pretending that it didn’t matter, that I was ok. Then you came along and everything changed, you put purpose in my life … I just can’t… go on…alone… anym…”

“Shhh, shhh, shhh…It’s ok, I’m not going anywhere. I’ve got plenty of room at my place if you really want to move in with me, I understand and I’m perfectly fine with it. We can work out sleeping arrangements when we get you calmed down, whatever you decide is ok with me. I’m never going to let you go, never going to let anything bad happen to you ever again, no matter what it takes or what I have to do. That’s my promise to you. I’ll marry you tonight if you want, or I’ll wait forever, I don’t really care. I need you as much as you need me Judy.”

As Judy’s sobs slow, she looks up into his emerald eyes “Do you really mean it Nick? If I wanted you to marry me tonight, you would really do that…and mean it? With no reservations? No second thoughts? You’d put up with my sorry self forever? Really?”

“Yes sweetheart I would. I’ve always felt there’s been something missing in my life, like a hole in my heart. YOU are the one mammal that I’ve been searching for my entire life, I see that now. I have no intention of letting you go, not now or ever. Please, let’s gather up whatever you need for a few days and go to my place. We’ll get you settled in and spend the entire day tomorrow figuring out what we can for the near future, and work out the rest as we go. I’ll call Skye while we get you home… my god I love the sound of that. We’ll be home, the same home, our home, together.’ ‘My only concern right now is for you and you alone. Between Skye and Midnight, the shop can take care of itself for a while.’ ‘Here” he indicates “you sit here on the couch, I’ll get some things for you, let me know if there is anything specific you need or want and I’ll pack it for you.”

“Nick…” she starts with a weak smile.

“I know Judy, I really do. Now, what do you want me to pack?”

“You can start with my clothes in the laundry room, they should be dry by now, especially the dress I wore last night if you don’t mind. I’ll get my personal things from the bathroom, like my meds and the Musk Mask, I wouldn’t want you to get any bright ideas before we sort out a few things. And don’t go sniffing my underwear you pervert” she quipped, at least trying to interject a little humor into the situation.

“That’s the Judy I know and love” says Nick “always a smart assed remark handy.”

…

As Nick and Judy head towards Nick’s home, Nick quickly dials Skye “Hey, it’s me. Judy’s going to be staying with me for the foreseeable future, due to her panic attack. When you get home, gather up Judy’s things that we’ve left, put them in her room, and we’ll pick them up tomorrow or whenever we get the time.’ ‘We won’t be coming in to the shop tomorrow, so you and Midnight will be in charge. You both pretty much know how I think, so whatever decisions need to be made, make them. If something really super important comes up, just call. Tell the crew that something’s come up but not to worry,
you can post updates as we let you know how thing are going, I know they’ll all be concerned.’
‘Have one of the boys call Stu and Bonnie and let them know that something’s happened with Judy
but she’s ok, she’s with me at my place and that she’ll call them when we get things sorted out. Ask
them not to call in the meantime, the fewer interruptions we get the better. We don’t want them to
worry, but we want them to be informed.’
‘While you’re at it, please call mom and let her know that Judy’s with me as well. I’ll call and update
her when I get a chance. Can you guys handle all that?”

“Sure Nick, whatever it takes. I’ve had the phone on speaker so they didn’t miss anything, I figured
you wouldn’t mind.”

“No, no problem, it’s a good idea actually, they didn’t miss anything and I don’t have to repeat the
whole thing. We’re about to pull up to my place now so I’m going to hang up. I’ll give you a call if I…if we need anything ok? It may be at an odd hour, and I’ll owe you big time, but I really hope you
won’t mind if…”

“Nick, no problem, anything for you and Squeak, ok?”

…

As Nick nears his home, he presses the remote for the garage door and drives inside. He gently picks
up a mentally exhausted Judy and carries her inside, placing her gently on the couch. “If you don’t
mind” he begins “we’ll do the grand tour tomorrow, ok?” I need to get your bag out of the truck, is it
ok to be gone that long or do you want to tag along?”

Seeing the fear come back into Judy’s tear filled amethyst eyes, he rethinks “Or not…ok, plan B,
let’s discuss sleeping arrangements instead. I know you aren’t going to want to be alone so the guest
bedroom is out. Since I really don’t have anything bunny sized to fit you, and all of my shirts are all
way too big for you to wear and even one of us being naked is not going to work…”
‘How about this, what if I call Skye and ask her to pick us up something to wear to sleep in?
Pajamas, boxers, trunks onesies, whatever. We’re both exhausted and we won’t be able to have a
coherent conversation with both of us worn out. Would that work?”

Nodding slowly “Ye-yea, I guess so. I just can’t be alone right now, so I don’t really care at this
point, just…just so I’m with you. that’s all that matters.”

Picking up his phone again “Snow, I…we need a favor…yea I know, we want something already,
but you’ll get over it. Wally-world is on your way home right? We need you to stop by and pick up
something for my bunny and I to sleep in please….. no damn it, no baby dolls or anything like that…
do they even have anything like that there? I didn’t think so. Just something nice that’ll be
appropriate for the … situation. Just make sure it’s comfortable ok? Just let yourself in through the
front door, it’ll be unlocked and you won’t interrupt anything serious.”

“She’ll be about a half-hour or so, would you like something to drink? Water, tea, juice?”

“No, it’s ok, we both have things we need to work through, it’s for the best that we can work
through them together. We have each other for support, and together we can do anything.”

After a short while they hear a light tapping at the front door “It’s open, come on in Snow.”

Seeing the pair on the couch Skye asks “How goes it you two?”

“I think we’ve both seen better days, but don’t worry, we’ll be ok. We have each other and that’s what truly matters. Let’s see what ‘cha got for us….”

Pulling the first outfit out the bag, Nick is less than impressed “…Really Snow? What the hell ever possessed you to get these ridiculous outfits?” says Nick as he holds up the boxers that Skye purchased for him.

With a bit of a sheepish grin, Judy remarks “I think they’re rather nice Nick. You’ll look great in bunny themed boxers, and the foxes on mine are darling, thanks Snow” as she holds up her rabbit sized boxers and tank top. “What else ya got in the bag sis?”

Skye pulls out two more outfits identical to what Nick and Judy are already holding, then a set of matching navy blue and gold sweat pants and hoodies for each of them “Just in case you want to go for a short walk or drive but don’t feel like getting dressed. Is there anything else you guys need as long as I’m out and about?”

Looking at his bunny Nick asks “You hungry? I know I haven’t eaten since lunch so I’m sure you haven’t either.”

“I could eat, but I have no idea what I’m hungry for, but definitely not chicken pizza” she adds ruefully.

“There’s a Panda-go-Panda restaurant just down the street, how about some steamed rice and veggies?” Nick suggests.

“You sure you wouldn’t mind bunny food again?”

“As long as I’m with my favorite bunny, it really doesn’t matter.”

“Ok you two, unless you need something else, I’ll go get the food before I end up with diabetes from all of the sweetness floating around here. Keep your paws to yourselves and I’ll be back in a short.”

“While we’re waiting, how about the short tour, just so you know where the important rooms are for tonight? Then you can call your folks, I’m sure they’re plenty worried by now.”

“That sounds ok, lead the way.”

Taking Judy’s paw in his, Nick leads the way around what is now their home. While Nick’s home was similar to Skye’s, it was different enough to warrant the brief tour. The kitchen was on the opposite side of the living room of Skye’s, with the master bedroom just down a short hallway on the left rather than on the right like Skye’s. Of course, there was a full bathroom with a shower just off of the bedroom that seemed larger than one a fox would normally have. It then dawned on Judy that all of the rooms seemed unnaturally large “Nick, are the rooms a bit bigger than normal or is it just me?”

“Actually, the house was originally owned by a wolf couple, so yea, they’re a bit larger than they should be for a fox…and a bunny. Owww!”

Naturally the gentle half-hearted punch to the shoulder didn’t actually hurt at all, but the remark got the desired effect, which was, of course, to get a small grin out of Judy.
“Smart ass.”
“Yea, but at least I’m your smart ass, and it looks like you’re stuck with me.”

“Good thing I don’t mind then huh?”

Gathering Judy up in a strong hug, Nick admits “yea, a very good thing…”

…

“Alright you two, I thought I told you to keep your paws to yourselves…” Nick and Judy both gave a slight jump as Skye entered with their food. “I got some extra so you wouldn’t need to go out right away if there isn’t anything here to cook, you know you let your fridge get too low on eats sometimes Nick.”

“Yea, yea, yea, I know mom, thanks for the reminder. Seriously though, thanks for the food run.”

As Judy gently releases Nick from a tight hug, she pads over and latches on the Skye “Thanks sis, you mean a lot to me, ya know?”

Choking back a tear or two, Skye replies “I know, ya troublesome little grey furball, and I love you too. You two get things sorted out, take whatever time you need, just get it right…ok?”

“We will…”

After Skye leaves, Nick and Judy settle down to eat “Before we get started, you need to call your folks, we can eat while you talk to them, ok?”

Rolling her eyes, knowing he’s right “Yes dad” mimicking Nick “I’ll call them right now…”

After about a half of a ring, Bonnie picks up “Judy, are you alright? Duane called and said you had a problem, what’s wrong, do we need to co-”

“All is…well going to be ok I think. I guess I had a bit of a panic attack after Nick left me off at Skye’s. Nick came and got me as soon as he could get to me, got me calmed down and now I’m at his place.’
Mom, I’m going to move in with Nick, and I really don’t care what anyone thinks or says. I just know I can’t be alone right now, and I’m only comfortable when I’m around him, so that’s the way it has to be. We’ve both pretty much agreed that there won’t be anything…serious going on in the bedroom, so don’t worry about that. I’m sorry to make everyone worry so much…”

“No, Judy, it’s alright. I told you before that you’re grown and that whatever you do in private is none of my business. I do want you to know that I trust you and I trust Nick to do whatever you each believe to do is right. As long as you’re safe with Nick, your father and I aren’t going to worry…well not as much anyway… Will you put Nick on the phone for a minute please, I’d like to thank him for watching out for my kit.”

When Judy hands the phone to Nick, she nods gently with a soft smile on her face, allaying any fear that Nick might have had talking to Bonnie considering the circumstances.

“Yes?”

“Nick, I just wanted to thank you for taking care of my kit. She may be a grown doe, but she has a lot of issues that I unknowingly caused so many years ago. It means a lot to her father and I that you’re there for her and being so supportive of her. If things get really serious between you two, and I actually hope they do, I would be proud to call you my son-in-law.”
“Ummm, thanks Bonnie, I really appreciate the trust that you have in me, I’ll try my hardest to live up to that trust. Now, I don’t mean to be short, but we’re going to get a bite to eat, catch a quick shower and get some sleep, we really need all of those things, especially the sleep. I promise we’ll give you a call sometime tomorrow, just so you know things are ok, deal?”

“That sounds fine Nick, please put Judy back on for a second.”

As Judy takes the phone back, Bonnie continues “Judes, just so you know, your dad and I are fine with you being with Nick. We just have one small request…please name a kit from your first litter after us, ok?”

“MOM… just…what the hell?” intones Judy, slightly aghast.

“G’nite Judy, we love you.” laughs Bonnie as she hangs up.

Looking helplessly at the phone, she notices Nick trying to suppress a laugh “I suppose you think it’s funny too… you…you damned perv…”

Unable to finish the sentence due to having a large mouthful of Nick, Judy has no choice but to wrap her arms around her fox and make the best of the situation. “Let’s finish eating and get those showers, I’m totally worn out” she says, defeated.

Wearing a large grin, Nick picks up a good-sized piece of broccoli and offers it to his bunny “Here ya go Squeak, eat up. And before you say anything, I know we’ll be showering separately, at least for now.”

As Judy chews her food, she offers Nick a soft smile, knowing that he would respect whatever she decided to do “Yea, at least for now” she answers quietly, giving Nick pause.

Puzzled a bit as to why Judy insists that he take the first shower, Nick gives in and takes a quick shower, and waits patiently sitting on the edge of the bed in his new bunny boxers, not exactly sure how things will progress once Judy finishes.

As Judy emerges from the bathroom, Nicks jaw drops open and his eyes bug out slightly “What’s the matter Nick, bunny got your tongue?”

Clad only in her new fox print boxers and with her petite breasts in clear view, Judy pads slowly to the bed. “I know this is bit unexpected, and probably a bit over the top, so to speak, but at least for the time being, I’m going to need to be more comfortable being at least partially undressed around you. Yes, I’ve taken my meds, and lightly used some Musk Mask, and to answer any unspoken questions you may have, this is as far as things are going for at least the time being. We still have a lot of things to work out, but this is my way of getting things started…you don’t mind…do you?”

“…Ummm, no, not a bit. You know, you look even more beautiful half naked than you do fully dressed, even in your dress last night.” as he lay down opening his arms to his fiercely blushing bunny, offering her a brief cuddle before they drift off quickly to sleep.

…

“Nick….”

“Mmmm, let me guess, you need to pee.”

“Gee, you’re really getting to know me…” she giggles lightly “what’s next, breakfast in bed?”
“Sure, as long as you don’t mind scrambled eggs, toast with strawberry jam and orange juice. It’s about all I’ve got until we go shopping”

“You’d really make me breakfast in bed?”

“Why not? While you go use the bathroom, I’ll start cooking. Think you can stay away from me long enough for that?”

As a slow smile plays across her lips “Yea, I think the worst has past. But please, at least make enough noise so I know where you are…ok?”

“Your wish is my command, oh exalted one. Oh, and by the way, you know you’re just adding to the cannibal persona eating eggs, right?”

“You are absolutely insufferable, you know that right?”

“Flattery will get you absolutely everywhere my dear.”

Giggling quietly “Go on you big goof, get started, I’m hungry…”

After a leisurely breakfast in bed, the pair opt for a bit more cuddle time and a brief nap before getting down to some serious discussions.

“So” begins Nick as they sit beside each other at the kitchen table, clad in their new sweats “how do you think we should approach all of this? Do we need to detail everything, or kind of play it by ear? We’ve already agreed that things our parents share is off limits in front of friends, and certain things are off limits unless we want to personally bring them up. Agreed so far?”

“I guess that playing it by ear sounds reasonable. There’s no telling what’ll come up as far as our pasts are concerned. I know I’m still not comfortable talking about…Johnny. I promise not to pry about you and Amanda. We can share more when we think it’s time.”

“I think we know each other well enough by now, a simple look or word will suffice if something awkward comes up” says Nick.

“And if a family member or close friend brings something up?”

Replying with his best smirk “Simple, we just tell them, whoever it is, that we’re uncomfortable with whatever they’re talking about and we ain’t gonna go there. Our friends and parents included.’ ‘How about we get dressed in something comfortable, or just stay in our sweats, pick up the rest of your things at Skye’s and then do some shopping since the fridge is about cleaned out. Nothing left except for the leftovers from last night.”

“As long as we’re together, it really doesn’t matter. But, I really need to talk to you about something important when we get back, ok? Now, let’s go.”

…

After picking up the rest of Judy’s things from Skye’s home, the pair headed to the local grocery store to pick up some much-needed groceries. As they worked their way down the aisles, Nick casts a questioning look as Judy puts some baby carrots into the cart. Noting his concern “I’ve got to try to get some of this crap out of my head, and maybe steaming or caramelizing them will help as a start.”

“As long as you’re comfortable with it…”

“I’m really not…but I can’t think of another way right now to at least try to get some of this crap out
of my system, so it’s a start. We can always throw them out, even though it’d be a waste of good money.”

“Fluff, a few pennies for some … veggies won’t break me.”

“It’s ok Nick, you can use the word… when appropriate, ok?”

“If you say so, ok. Is there anything else we need to get while we’re out and about?”

“Not that I can think of right now, but how about we stop by the shop real quick, just to let everyone know I’m ok? I’ll call mom and dad while we’re there, then I need to talk to you about something important when we get back home remember… .”

... The second that Nick and Judy step into the busy shop, work comes to a standstill, with everyone crowding around asking about how she’s feeling.

As she reassures everyone that she’s at least reasonably fine, the shop gradually returns to its normal hustle and bustle. With only Midnight, Skye and her brothers still clustered around her “I’m telling you, everything’s mostly ok. I’m know I’m getting better. I’m not back to my usual self yet, but I’m getting better, thanks to Nick” she adds holding Nick’s paw and giving everyone a nervous smile.

“While I’m here with you guys, let me call mom and dad, just so they don’t think I’m putting on a front.’
‘Hey dad, is mom handy? .... Hey guys, I’m here at the shop with Skye and the boys and… yes of course Nick’s here, how in the hell do you think I got here? You remember that I’m staying with him and I still don’t have a car right?’
‘Look, I really don’t want to get started about any of that right now, I’m not totally fine but Nick and I are working through my episode. Just… I know you’re worried about me, but I’ve got Nick now, and he’s worried at least as much or more than you are and...’
‘What’s that? A letter from Zootopia city hall? Probably just another rejection letter for my last application to the ZPD. No, don’t shred it, just send it to the sho… what, you’re coming up in a couple of weeks for a visit? Hold on a sec and I’ll see if it’s ok with Nick… yes I really need to ask him mom, I’m with him remember?’

“Nick, mom and dad are planning on coming to the city for a visit, is that ok?”

“Sure, I’d be happy to have them here, we even have a spare bedroom for them if they want to stay with us. They do know we’re sleeping together right? Especially after spending the last few nights together at the burrow. Errr, I mean not sleeping together, just sleeping together… you know what I mean damn it.”

Giggling lightly she answered “Yea, I do ya big dummy.”

“Nick said he’d be happy to have you come up, we have a spare bedroom for you if you’re interested. As far as the letter, just bring it with you and give it to me when you get here, it can’t be all that important after all this time.’
‘Well, I guess that’s it for now then, we’ve got groceries in the car that need to be put away before they go bad. See you in a couple of weeks or so… love you both, bye.”

Taking her fox by the paw, Judy bid everyone in the shop, especially Skye and her brothers, good bye and they loaded up and headed home.

...
Putting the groceries away, Nick asks “Ok Squeak, what’s so important that you wanted to be back home before you could talk about it?”

“Come sit with me” says Judy, patting a spot on the couch. “this is very important to me…to us, so I want us to be close when I bring it up.”

Noting how serious his bunny is, Nick complied “Ok, what’s up sweetheart.”

Taking a deep breath, Judy begins “Do you remember when you asked me when I was going to propose the other night? Did you mean it?”

Searching Judy’s face carefully to make sure she was serious Nick answered “Yes, yes I did, one hundred percent… why are you bringing that up now?”

“Well, I’m taking you up on your tradition, literally. I want you to scent mark me…right here, right now.”

Searching Judy’s face for any indication that this wasn’t some spur of the moment thing, but was in fact well thought out “You realize what it means if I do mark you right? It’s basically means that you’re mine, kind of like being engaged. There is not much chance of turning back once this happens.”

“Look, I know that you’ve noticed how I’ve been a bit preoccupied for most of the day, this is why. I’ve debated with myself and this is exactly what I want, and I believe, with all of my heart, what we in fact need. I’m willing to do whatever it takes to do this.”

“In order for this to be done properly, you’ll need to mark me back, you know that as well right? If we do this, I can’t promise to behave, and we’ll probably end up having sex before it’s all over. With that being said, I need to tell you that the scent mark really only lets other mammals know that you’re taken. If we have sex, which is very likely, then we’ll truly be mated for life. There are no takebacks or do overs… You’ll have to be prepared for whatever comes up, no pun intended. When that happens, we vulpine tend to get a bit…well primal I guess is the best way to put it.”

“It’s ok Nick, I’m prepared to stay the course. We’ve both been putting this off for long enough anyway, so what’s the best way to go about it?”

“Well, we can just sit here and mark each other like you’d do with your kits, or we can get… creative” suggests Nick, with both a serious and playful expression at the same time.

“Really? And what does your perverted mind suggest there mister Wilde?”

“How about a nice warm shower to start with, yes together this time. Then we can mark each other from ears to tail if you so desire, after all this’ll be your show since you’ll be the matriarch of this family. You’ll have the lead from start to finish, and this’ll be a far deeper connection than any piece of paper or wedding vow ever devised by mammal. We’ll be formally mated for the rest of both of our natural lives, so please make sure that you’re absolutely sure you want to do this before we get started. There’ll be no turning back once we begin. And before you ask, no Amanda and I didn’t mark each other, we hadn’t gotten that far along in our relationship at that time.’
‘There’s one other thing we need to consider as well…neither of us has any… ‘protection’. If we do in fact have sex, which is more than a distinct possibility at this point, you may very well end up pregnant, remember the Dewclaws. Are you prepared for that? There’ll be no trip to the ER for a ‘morning after’ pill, whatever happens, happens. Even though we’re different species, there’s always a chance you could get pregnant, slim as it would be.”
“I’m aware of the possible consequences, and I’m willing to that the chance. I truly want to be with you for the rest of our natural lives, so let’s get this show on the road Nick…”

“In that case” states Nick standing “there’s one thing that I’ve been wanting to do on purpose for the longest time, and now seems to be the time.”

“And what might that be?” asked Judy standing as well, letting out a loud “Eeppp!” as Nick reached and first ran a claw gently across her very sensitive tail before grasping the tender member firmly.

“Damn Nick…that was…” as far as she got before being kissed soundly by her soon to be mate.

“Just so you know ahead of time” began Judy “I took my hormone suppressant meds this morning, a double dose actually. But since they haven’t done a thing for me, so I figured it was about time…” she warned “so I might be the one who needs to warn you about tonight. Remember, I am a bunny after all…..”

“Sly bunny.”

“My fox” leading Nick towards the bathroom, with the song ‘Hot Stuff’ sung by Donna Summers playing ‘On The Radio’…..

…

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Yea, I know, a double dose of song reference…get over it already.
At this point, a few reviews would be greatly appreciated….
A Life Together

Chapter Summary

After their first 'night' together, Nick and Judy face up to informing everyone of their commitment. Nick gets some startling news from his mom and Judy gets some unexpected news from the city.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

11: A Life Together

XxX

“Nick…”

“Let me guess, bathroom?”

“Well, yea, that too” giggling as she turns to face him “I love you, you know that don’t you?”

“Yea, but not as much as I love you though…” he replies with a playful grin.

“Really? How do you figure that?”

“I’m much larger than you, so that means I can love you more…” kissing her lightly on the nose.

“You know how dumb that sounds, right?”

“And I should care why?”

“…Ummm. Ok, ya got me there Slick. Now, let me up, I promise I’ll be back.”

After her not quite so quick trip to answer nature’s call, Judy slips back into bed with her fox.

“Damn, I didn’t think I’d be quite so shitin’ sore…”

“Yea, well, in this case I’d have to guess that size actually does make a difference…” he snarked.

“Smart ass. Do you think my virginity actually grew back? It sure as hell feels like it did” she said giggling softly.

“Sure, why not. After all, it’s the first time you actually wanted to have sex isn’t it?”

Gazing quietly at her mate “Yes, it really is…”

“You know we need to make a few calls today right?” he asks.

“Yea, I know. Mom and dad, your mom, probably Skye?”

“I think it would be for the best, yea. You call your folks and I’ll call mom. You want to call Skye or
do you want me to?”

“Let me. It’s more of a sister-to-sister kind of thing if you don’t mind.’
‘Then, I guess a quick trip to my doctor for possibly some new meds might be a good idea as well, don’t you think? If I’m actually pregnant it won’t matter, because I know the kit or kits’ll be loved. But if I’m not, some prevention might be in order. Besides, if I’m not we can better plan when we want the kits…OK?’

“Yes ma’am. How about you call your doctor and get something set up as soon as you can see her. If you can visit her now, fine, if not then as soon as you can get in.’
‘Then we can have a late lunch and then start calling folks.”

…

“Doctor Clawson, this is Judy Hopps. I know it’s getting to be a bit late in the day, but I’d really like to see you as soon as I can. I’m in a serious relationship, engaged actually, and I really need to get checked out and get some sort of protection since things got a bit… carried away, ok? Forty five minutes?” as she looks expectantly at Nick, who just smiles and nods slightly “We’ll be there, thanks’
‘Her office is only about ten minutes from here, so we can either get a bite to eat or we can call our folks…”

“Let’s get a bite to eat first, since calls to our folks might take a while. While I really think they’ll be happy for us, I’m sure that the conversations will really get drug out. Everyone’s going to be nosey about the particulars, so you can either fill them in and satisfy their curiosity” noting the horrified look on Judy’s face “or just tell them in a polite manner that that’s really none of their business, your choice.’
‘That, plus you know everyone’s going to want input into when and where the wedding will be and…what?” noticing that the horrified look on her face is just getting worse and worse. “Squeak, the folks, yours and mine, are going to pretty much demand a formal wedding at some point in time, you know that right? Somehow we’re going to need to figure out how to appease them all with one ceremony.”

“Crap, I guess I hadn’t considered any of that. I just wanted us to, I don’t know, live happily ever after?”

“I know, me too, but sometimes real life is messy. Let’s get dressed and head out. After your appointment, we can eat and then we can call our folks, and finally stop by Skye’s and let her know. I’m sure the shop ’ll be closed and she’ll be at home by the time we’re finished at your doctors.”

Letting out a deep sigh, “Ok then Nick, let’s get going before I lose my nerve.”

“Your wish is my command…Missus Wilde” he says with a very large smirk on his face, which causes Judy to stop dead in her tracks.

When Judy suddenly turns and looks straight into Nick’s eyes, he can’t help but think that maybe he’d really put his paw in it this time.

“Ya know Slick, I really kinda like the sound of that” and gives him a huge hug and a deeply passionate kiss.

“Squeak, if we do anymore of that, we won’t make it to the doctors by this time next week” was all he could say…
“I know, but you can’t blame a girl for trying…”

…

When Nick and Judy enter Doctor Clawson’s office, the receptionist, an undersized Ocelot, was a bit startled “Umm, Miss Hopps, the doctor will see you now. Your…friend will need to stay in the reception area.”

Noticing his reluctance to leave her side “It’s ok Nick, I’ll be fine.”

After what should have been a short consultation of around ten minutes stretched to just over a half hour, Judy exited the exam area with a slightly disappointed look on her face.

Taking his bunny into his arms he asked “A-are you ok sweetheart? Are you….?”

Looking directly into his concerned emerald eyes and hugging him back “No Nick, I’m not. And just so you know, I was actually kinda hoping I was, just for a second…is that wrong of me?”

Breathing a sigh of relief “No, it’s not. Truth be told, I was actually kinda hoping you were as well.”

“Were you really?” she asked, not able to keep the awe from her face.

“Yes Fluff, I was. Let’s get something to eat, then we can call the folks and head to Skye’s. What do ye feel like…for food?”

Wearing her best imitation of Nick’s smirk “Let’s go to the Icehouse, suddenly I’m in the mood for red beer and BBQ chicken pizza!”

“You’re sure you’re not pregnant?” asked Nick in amazement.

“Yea, ya dumb fox. The reason I took so long was the doctor told me she could do a quick test while I was there to find out if I was or not. When it turned out negative, I didn’t know if I was happy or sad. I guess I wasn’t supposed to be just yet, so… I guess we’ll just have to keep trying, unless of course you don’t want to…”

As he headed towards the Icehouse “Well, they say that practice makes perfect, and we’ve got plenty of time and now plenty of opportunities” kissing her lightly while bouncing his eyebrows.

“Well you dirty old fox, we’ll just have to make the most of those opportunities then won’t we?” kissing him back.

…

As they entered the Icehouse Nick asked Joe-Bob if the conference room was free. When Joe-Bob indicated it was, Nick asked “Can you bring us some beer, juice and a BBQ chicken pizza there please? And don’t forget the tomato juice and hot sauce for Judy if you don’t mind.”

After a brief wait, Joe-Bob brought the food and drinks, then our couple called their respective parents to give them the (happy?) news as they eat.

…

NICK: “Hey mom how’re things?”

Laverne: “Everything’s fine here Nick, how’s Judy. Is everything ok with her?”
N: “Yea, things are better with Judy, a lot better in fact. Actually that’s more or less the purpose of the call. It seems like we…kinda…umm…scent marked each other this morning and…ummmm mated.’

‘…. mom … MOM…., are you still there?’

L: “Nicky…you’re serious? Really? You actually scent marked and mated with Judy? You realize the lifelong commitment that goes along with it don’t you?”

N: “Yes mom, you know I do. Following the vulpine tradition, she asked me if it was ok, and I was happy to accept. And yes, I told her that it all was an actual ‘til death do us part’ thing, and that in order for it to be official she had to mark me as well. It’s like she completes me. It’s almost like she’s healed a hole in my heart, I don’t know how else to explain it.’

‘Mom, we both wanted and actually need this. I’m really hoping you’re happy for us, and I ….”

L: “Nick, I couldn’t be happier for you both if I tried. You and Judy belong together…I know it’s getting late today, but if you could spare the time to stop by tomorrow, I have something that I really need to share with you both. And yes Nick, it’s actually important.”

N: “In that case, we’ll be sure to make the time to come by tomorrow say around noon or so. I’ll let you know when for sure. Judy’s calling her folks as we speak to give them the news, we’re hoping they’ll be as happy for us as you are. We’ll tell Skye tonight of course, then we’ll probably stop by the shop first thing in the morning and share with the crew, but you and her folks are the first, well besides us that is, to know.

L: “Well, you be sure to give me a call before you stop by, I need to prepare for you two…” she said, sounding glad and sad at the same time.

N: “Will do mom, love you, bye” wondering how she could sound so sad at such joyous news.

…

JUDY: “Hey dad, is mom handy? … Hey mom…”

BONNIE: “Judy, is everything ok? We really thought you’d be calling before this, so we were starting to worry a bit.”

J: “Yea, I know I should’ve called earlier but I’m hoping you’ll understand when I tell you why.”

B: “If everything’s ok, what on earth would we need to understand?”

J: “….Well, I sort of …asked Nick to…scent mark me earlier.”

B: “……. You. Did. What???”

J: “I know you heard me mom, I asked Nick to scent mark me, and yes I marked him back. Before you ask, yes we did have sex, and no I’m not pregnant, I’ve already been to the doctor to find out. I know that by both of our traditions we’re mated for life, and we’re both ok with it. I’ve got a prescription so there shouldn’t be any kits in the immediate future.”

B: “Judy, your dad and I are perfectly alright with you and Nick being together, I’ve already told you that. It’s just a bit of a shock is all. Were you two planning a wedding of any sort? If so, will it be a bunny wedding or a fox wedding?”

J: “We haven’t gotten that far yet mom, we can all talk about this with you guys and Laverne when you come for your visit ok?”

B: “Ok sweetie, we’re just so glad that you seem to have gotten your life together. We’ll see you in a week or so.”

J: “Ok mom, love you both…bye.”

…

“I guess our next stop is Skye’s…right?” begins Nick.

“Yea, just as soon as I’m finished eating this pizza, it’s actually pretty good. And the beer…since I’d promised Skye to limit myself to two, two is all I’ll have. After all, I wouldn’t want to get drunk
and…lose control” she said with a large smile and wink that almost drove Nick primal on the spot.

As they were leaving, Judy called Skye “Hey sis, you at home? Nick and I are planning on stopping by if you are.”

“Yea, just got home a few minutes ago and was ready to step in the shower. Come on over, I know you’ve still got a key so you can just let yourselves in. I’ll be out as soon as I’m finished.

“’K, see you in a few, bye.”

“That part went well, I wonder how she’ll act when she finds out” said Nick. “I’ll bet we won’t even get a word out before she hugs you to death” winking at his new mate while tapping his snout.

“Shit, I never even thought about that.”

“That was the whole purpose of scent marking back in the day” he reminded her “It just seems to have sort of gone out of style lately, especially with more and more inters in the city.”

“I wonder why” she wonders out loud.

“Most likely to keep the speciest hate from screwing up their lives, I would guess.”

“Well, no matter, I’m guessing we can get through anything…”

“As long as we’re together” he finishes for her.

“We really are lucky to have friends and family like we have, aren’t we?” she asks as they pull up in front of Skye’s home.

“We sure are…now brace yourself for the second or third happiest fox you’ll ever see in your life, the happiest would be me of course.”

…

After entering through the front door, Judy hadn’t even made it to the couch when “What. In. The. Hell……..JUDY! Oh no you didn’t…” shouted Skye just before gathering the diminutive doe into a bone crushing hug.

‘All right, ‘fess up, who’s brilliant idea was this anyway? And it had damned well better not be Nick’s.’
‘You’ve got to tell me everything, all the gory details…” setting the doe on the couch and staring at her intently.

More than slightly embarrassed, Judy began “Well, after thinking about all that’s happened lately, especially the last few days at the burrows, I knew that there was no way I could go on without Nick. When I thought back to how Nick followed our tradition of asking my parents to date me, I decided to return the favor by asking him to mark me. Yes he reminded me that this is a lifetime thing for both of us, and he told me that he was good with it so….”

“So…what happened then?”

“Skye…really?”

“Yes, really…damn it Judy you can’t just, just quit there!”

“Oh, we didn’t…”
Gasping, Skye gazed in amazement at her small adopted sister “And you…”

“Yes we did.”

“And did he…”

“Yes, of course.”

“Are you…”?

“No, I’m not. We made a quick trip to doctor Clawson’s this afternoon and confirmed it, no kits… yet.”

“I’m so happy for the both of you…have you told your parents yet?”

“Of course. After we finished at Clawson’s. I had Nick take me to the Icehouse for lunch, and had… red beer and BBQ chicken pizza! Then we told them.”

“Oh no you didn’t”

“Yes, BBQ chicken pizza and red beer.”

“And you’re sure you’re not pregnant?”

“Strange that Nick asked the same thing isn’t it?” said Judy laughing. “No I’m not a preggo… not yet any way, we’ll get there eventually I’m sure, but it’s way too soon just now. We would’ve been fine with it if I was, but now we’re really kinda glad I’m not, ya know?”

“Anywho, I’m just so happy for the two of ya. Are you gonna stop by the shop and let everyone know tomorrow?”

Yea, we’ll stop by there first, maybe nineish, after sleeping in first of course” she added with a mischievous grin. “Nick’s mom wants us to stop by tomorrow, she said she’s got something important she wants to share with us, so we thought we’d stop by her place probably around lunch time.”

“Nick, you’re being uncharacteristically quiet, you ok?” asked Skye.

With the largest grin on his muzzle that either female had ever seen “Yup, sure am. Just enjoying listening to two of my favorite ladies carry on.”

“Ya big jerk, ya coulda said somethin’” remarked Skye.

“And ruin such a lovely conversation? Not on your life” he shot back.

“Yea, well, you two had damned well better stop by the shop tomorrow, you know the gang is going to want to hear how you’re doing.”

“Sure thing, let’s make it around nine like I said before. Wouldn’t want to break the routine since you’re just barely up and running after the Bunnyburrow trip.”

“Yea, yea, no problem. We’ll see you then. Now get out of here and take a cold shower or somethin’, you’re stinkin’ up my house…out with ya” she said, giving them both a quick hug.

...
“I wonder what mom has to talk about that’s so important” muses Nick as the pair head home after a seemingly busy and relatively event filled day.

“I really have no idea, but how important can it be if it can wait one more day?”

“Hard to tell, mom sounded like it’s really serious, I guess we’ll find out tomorrow. In the meantime, what kind of plans do we have for this evening. We’ve already been shopping, eaten, called everyone close and told them of our commitment and most of all found out that you’re not pregnant…. any suggestions?” using his best smirk.

“Yea, I’ve got a few, but before we get back to that subject, how about a really dopey movie complete with some really buttery popcorn and just cuddling for a bit?”

“Yea, I guess that sounds ok. Don’t want to wear out a good thing…”

“Slick, you ain’t wearin’ out nuthin’ of mine…”

“Oh, you naughty bunny, you didn’t really go there.”

“Yea, I kinda did, and before the night’s over, I expect you to go there… again.”

Pulling into the garage, Nick gave Judy a quick kiss “I’ll get the popcorn going, you get the movie picked out, we’ll change into something a bit more comfortable, and get the evening started…”

“Now that sounds like a plan.”

When Nick gets to the couch with the popcorn and drinks in paw, he notices that Judy’s ‘comfortable’ clothing consists of only a pair of black lace panties.

“What? You don’t approve?”

“Rabbit, you’re going to be the death of me wearing that…”

“I guess I could go put my sweats on if you really want me to” she says with a small pout on her muzzle.

“That’s ok, stay right there” Nick said with a very snarky expression on his muzzle “I’ll be right back.”

“Oh. My. Gawd…” was all she could say laughing, as Nick reemerges from their bedroom wearing nothing but a neon green thong “Where the hell did you ever get that thing?”

“You do realize” grins Nick “that they’re edible, and lemon-lime flavored…right?”

“You sneaky shit… I guess there’s only one thing left to do, and it doesn’t include a movie…”

…

Stretching to every bit of her three-foot frame the next morning, Judy smiled at her sleeping fox. ‘I don’t know how I got lucky enough to have this mammal in my life, but I’ll certainly take it.’ She thought.

“Nick…Nick honey wake up.”

“Mmmmmmm?”

“Nick, I’m going to get a quick shower and start breakfast so we can make a quick trip to the shop
before we head over to your mom’s”

“But I don’t wanna…”

“Get up ya lazy fox. You drug me to my folks’s, now it’s my turn to drag you to the shop and then your mom’s. Get up or eat cold food” she says as she slips out of bed and heads to the shower, flicking her tail to get his attention.

“Damn if you don’t have a way with…words” he says, all the while thinking ‘I’d much rather be eating a hot bunny…’

After a quick breakfast of eggs, toast and rhubarb jam, with coffee for Nick and tea for Judy, the couple heads out for the shop, arriving just before nine am.

…

Arriving at the shop, they’re greeted by Midnight and Skye who are having a minor disagreement in the office.

“All right, what’s the debate about?” asks Nick.

“Shit Nick, don’t sneak up on a mammal like that” scolds Skye.

“Who’s sneaky, we just got here. If you weren’t being so loud you’d have heard us.”

“Well if you must know, we were trying to figure out when and where to have Judy’s bridal shower” continued Skye.

“Is that all…” is as far as Nick got, as Judy squealed and jumped at Skye, wrapping her up in a tearful but tight hug.

“Damn if you ain’t my favorite big sister” intones Judy.

“Well, that’s no surprise considering that I’m the biggest big sister ya got” returns Skye.

“You know we haven’t even set a date for the wedding yet, right?”

“Don’t care…”

“Ok, enough of the mushy stuff” says Nick, which earns him a punch on each arm courtesy of both females “Owww, damn, come on you two… as I was saying, Midnight, call everyone to the main bay, so I can let every mammal know what’s up.”

“ATTENTION, ALL EMPLOYEES TO THE MAIN BAY PLEASE. ALL EMPLOYEES TO THE MAIN BAY”

After all of the shop employees were gathered, Nick begins.

“Ok everybody listen up. I know this is going to be a huge surprise to most of you” to which almost everyone in attendance either snickered, rolled their eyes or both “but Judy and I are officially sort of engaged.”

“What the hell do you mean sort of ya big dummy?” asked Skye before Judy got a chance to.

“Well, if you must know” continued Nick “Yesterday we scent marked each other… from ears to tail” intentionally leaving out the mating part.
“NICK, damnitwhatthehell…” yells Judy, blushing fiercely.

“So today” Nick continued wearing his very best smirk “we are formally announcing our engagement. No, I haven’t gotten my lovely bride-to-be a ring yet, but that’s our next stop when we leave here on our way to my mom’s.”

“Wh-what?” stammered Judy “you never said anything about a ring.”

“I didn’t? My, how odd of m-” was all he got out before receiving a muzzle full of a very happy and tearful bunny.

“Damn it Nick…” was all she could choke out past her joyful tears.

“… Surprise…?”

Setting Judy back on the floor “Ok, show’s over everybody, back to work. We should be back tomorrow or Friday at the latest.’

‘Skye, Midnight, hold down the fort, we’ll keep you updated on everything, ok?’

“You can count on us boss” assures Midnight.

…

As Nick and Judy head out, Nick makes a quick call to his mother “Hey mom, we’re headed your way, but we have a quick stop to make first. We’ll see you in a short bit. Bye.”

“You didn’t tell her where we were going to stop?”

“Nope, I want to surprise her, unless you don’t want a proper ring…”

“Nick, you know I don’t need a ring, I’m happy just to have you.”

“That’s not really the point Squeak, I want to do this right. That means you get a proper engagement ring and wedding bands to match…unless you absolutely insist NOT to.”

“Damn it Nick… ok, fine then, but nothing fancy?”

“No promises, we’ll see what they have and you get to make the final decision, deal?”

“Deal.”

Then Judy notices the name of the store that Nick stops in front of.

“Really Nick? ‘The Rock’ is just the most exclusive jeweler in the city…”

“Yea, well, it’s the only one I use, so I guess you’re just going to have to deal with it.”

“If I didn’t love you, I’d probably strangle you right now, you know that right?”

Again wearing his best smirk, Nick opens the door for Judy “Let’s see what they’ve got, shall we?”

“Good day Mister Wilde, how may we help you today?” asks the attractive female pronghorn sales mammal.

“Hello Adella, we’re interested in engagement rings and matching wedding bands.”

Looking only mildly intrigued by the odd pair, Adella herds them to the display case where the
engagement and wedding band ring sets are “Here we have our usual assortment of ring sets, or were you looking for something a bit more…unique?”

“You know me, let’s see what you have that’s truly different.”

“One moment please” as she disappears into the back and returns a short time later with a tray of very special ring sets.

As Judy looks over the sets, one particular set catches her eyes immediately “Nick, you did this on purpose, didn’t you? Don’t try to deny it, because it’s classic you.”

“Guilty as charged, do you really like it?”

Looking at the matched set of rings, Judy is almost speechless. The engagement ring is platinum silver and has a large diamond set in the middle with a slightly smaller amethyst stone on one side and a matching emerald on the other, the gems the same color as their eyes. The matching wedding bands were platinum as well with small stones set in each ring to match the engagement ring.

“Why would you get something this expensive for me?”

“Mainly because I can. Look, I know you’d be happy with nothing more than a simple wedding band. If that’s truly all you want, I’ll be glad to go with it. But know this, I would give everything I own to make you happy. And I would literally die to make sure you’re safe.”

Crying tears of joy, Judy grabs Nick in the tightest hug imaginable “You’re the biggest, dumbest, sweetest mammal I know. From the bottom of my heart, thank you Nicholas Wilde.”

“I take it you want to keep them then?” he asks, knowing she would never let them go back onto the tray.

Gazing into Judy’s tear-filled eyes “I’ll take that as a yes” he smirked, nodding to the sales mammal “we’ll take them, don’t bother to wrap ’em. Just put them on my account.”

...

Pulling into the driveway of Laverne’s home, Judy is again impressed. The house has two stories with spacious front and back yards, and plenty of flowers adorning the walkway and along the front of the house.

“Oh, let’s get this over with” says Nick “I can’t imagine what could be so important but I guess we’re about to find out.”

“Hey mom, we’re home” calls out Nick.

“In the kitchen dears, just take a seat at the table, lunch will be ready in a couple of minutes.”

“This is kind of a big house for just your mom isn’t it?” asks Judy.

“Yea, it’s the house I grew up in. Mom managed to keep it while I was, ummm being less than a stellar citizen, even though it got kinda run-down. Once Fin and I got the business going strong, I had it completely remodeled. Mom didn’t want to leave, even though I offered to get her a smaller place.”

Bringing out a veggie lasagna casserole and setting it in the middle of the table Laverne asked Nick “Ok, everyone sit and Nick, please say grace while everyone holds paws and…. wait…. Judy,
“WHAT is that on your paw?”

Giggling Judy answered “This is what Nick wanted to stop for on the way here. He wouldn’t take no for an answer, so how could I turn him down? All I really wanted was a simple band, but you know Nick.”

“It’s absolutely gorgeous… Nick, ya did good.”

After saying grace, everyone dug in and the meal was finished in no time, with very little small talk.

“You two sit on the couch, I need to go get something after I clear the table. And no Judy you can’t help, just sit.”

Giving each other a ‘What the hell?’ look, they both shrugged and headed for the couch and got comfortable.

Returning with two albums that looked very much like baby books, one blue and one pink. Laverne set both books on the coffee table and sat between the two “First, I want to share Nick’s baby book with you Judy, and no Nick, you may not be excused. You’ve got to suffer through it all, and there’s a special reason for it.”

Going through Nick’s baby book was hilarious for Judy, not so much for Nick… Starting with pictures of him only days old being bathed in the kitchen sink, right up to the time he was dressed to go to his Junior Ranger Scouts ‘initiation’.

“That’s the end of it?” asked Judy.

“Well, after that, Nick started acting up and there wasn’t anything really good to put in it” admitted Laverne sadly.

Turning her attention to the pink album, Laverne continued “Nick, will you please open the pink book, this is the real reason why I wanted you to come by here today…”

Hesitantly, Nick reached for the album and slowly opened it. There were only two pages with documents contained in the entire book.

“Mom, what the hell is this?”

“Tell me Nick, what do you see?”

“A birth certificate and a death certificate, both dated the same day.”

“What’s the date on them Nick?”

“January 14…wait, that’s my birthday.”

“What’s the name on them Nick?”

“Nicholle…Patricia…Wilde” returned Nick in a soft, pained voice.

“That’s right Nick, you had a twin sister” continued Laverne tearing up slightly “you never knew her because she was stillborn. We never told you when you were little because we knew you wouldn’t understand. After your dad died, I tried to get you to come to the cemetery with me remember? I tried so many times to get you to come with me when I visited your father and Nicholle so I could explain things to you, but you would never come along. Nick, you needed to know this long before now, but
when you told me that Judy completed you, that she healed a hole in your heart, I knew that this is why you felt that way. I knew I couldn’t put off telling you any longer. Judy will never take the place of your sister, but she can help heal a hurt you never knew you had.”

“I’m so sorry mom, I’m going to visit them both, I promise… Judy, what’s wrong? I know I’ve really been hard headed but…”

“Th-that’s not it at all Nick” said Judy through her tears “Of all of the hundreds of kits that mom and dad have… Josh and I are the only two ‘J’ s.”

With both Nick and his mom giving her a questioning look Judy continued “You already know I was in one of the first litters, but what you don’t know that I’m the only one that survived that particular litter. There were six of us. Three were stillborn, one died of pneumonia, and one they never did know why, probably an infection of some kind. I guess that’s why mom and dad ’ve been so protective of me all these years. They named Josh, who was the firstborn in the next litter, as the only other ‘J’ so there’d be at least one more ‘J’ in the family, especially a buck.”

Gathering both kits into a tight hug, Laverne spoke quietly “I’m reminded of a verse I heard somewhere, I can’t remember where or when, but it goes something like this: ‘as their paths converge, the two shall become one’. I can’t think of anyone that that fits better than you two.”

“Mom” starts Nick, tears in his eyes “Can we go to the cemetery now? I think I’d like to talk to dad and Nicholle. I know it’s long overdue, but…”

“Of course Nicky, now would be perfect, all things considered. You think you’re up for it Judy?”

“Now’s as good a time as any. Looks like family share time, huh?”

“That’s my brave bunny” quips Nick, which earns him a good punch on the shoulder, to which he answers with a quick kiss on Judy’s twitching nose.

“Well, that’s not exactly what I expected” she remarks, blinking rapidly.

“Let’s go, I think Nick’s more than ready to face this now” remarks Laverne.

“Yea, I guess I am. It’s either that or a certain bunny will probably kick my ass.”

“Probably so” quips Judy “let’s go. I really want to meet your dad and sister Nick.”

…

Approaching two graves near an old oak tree, Laverne leads the pair to a set of four headstones. Nick read the headstones from left to right – ‘Johnathan Edmund Wilde, Nicholle Patricia Wilde, Nicholas Piberius Wilde, Laverne Elizabeth Wilde’.

“That’s strange” quips Judy “there seems to be one missing.”

“What in the world are you talking about?” asks a puzzled Laverne.

“Where’s mine?”

“You crazy bunny” remarks Nick “We aren’t even married yet and you’re worried about a gravesite?”
“Well, you obviously aren’t worth a shit about planning something like this, so I figured I’d better get a head start on things.”

“Only you would come up with something like that at a time like this” laughed Laverne “you fit this family like a glove. Let’s go.”

Kneeling in front of his dad’s grave Nick began “Hey dad, sorry it took so long for me to visit. It took mom and a pissed off bunny to get me to realize what a jerk I’ve been. I won’t bother you with any of the details, because I know you’ve been watching, and I know that you’re probably not too proud of a lot of my life. That being said, you must also know that I’ve been trying really hard to straighten my life out by helping other mammals to the best of my ability. It took this crazy bunny that I love with all my heart to get me to listen to mom about Nicholle and to visit you both. You’d like Judy dad, she’s crazy, she’s loud, and she’s as hardheaded as I am. But she’s compassionate and loving as well. I promise to visit more often, but right now I really need to say hi to Nicholle for a bit. I love you and I miss you dad…”

Scooting over a bit to his right, Nick addressed his sister “Hey sis…what can I say to someone I never got the chance to know? I never got the chance to play with you, to tease you, to defend your honor from all of the boys that wanted to harass my sister. I guess that’s why Karma saw fit to send Judy my way. I tease her, harass her, and call her names, sort of like the sister I never had the chance to bully or defend. But I love her and will do anything for her, so I guess it sort of evens things out a bit in the long run. You and dad will always hold a special place in my heart, just like Judy. There’s nothing I can do from here but live for the future, the future I plan to have with Judy and our kits…eventually. The eventually part is for the kits…just to be clear” which earned a short giggle from both Judy and Laverne.

Standing, Nick left a parting message “I’ll…we’ll be back from time to time to visit, now that I’ve learned to face another of my issues head on. I love you both, we’ll catch you later…”

The ride back to Laverne’s was unnaturally quiet, with each mammal lost in their own thoughts.

Pulling into his mom’s driveway, Nick began “Mom, I’m sorry for being such an ass all of these years about visiting dad… and” he paused in thought for a moment, trying to think of what he might have nicknamed his sister if she had survived “Trish. I think the next time we go to Bunnyburrow, if Judy doesn’t mind, I’d like to visit her littermates for a short time, just to try to set things straight, at least in my mind.”

“I don’t mind at all you silly fox. I think mom and dad would really appreciate the gesture as well” kissing him lightly on the cheek.

“That’s a wonderful idea Nicky, I know it’d make everyone happy, whether they understand your motives or not. Now, off with you two, go do something to get out of this funky mood that we all seem to have. I’ll be fine, actually, I feel better than I have in some time…now…go, or I’ll chase you off with a broom.”

Giving his mom a quick hug, then giving Judy her turn “Sure thing ma, we’ll see you. I know you’ll be by the shop at some time so until then… thanks for today.”

“…”

“Well” asks Judy “What are we gonna do for the rest of the day? It’s really too early to go home and NO we aren’t going to just go home and make love for the rest of the day.”

Noticing a bit of an evil grin on Nick’s muzzle that started small and grew as he drove, Judy couldn’t help but ask “Nick…just what in the hell are you planning? I just told you that we are not going to spend the rest of the day in bed, and…”

“That’s not at all sweetheart, I have something entirely different in mind.”
Picking up his phone and pressing a certain contact number “Hello Kevin? Yea, this is Nick Wilde. Listen are you and Kell really busy right now? I’d like to stop by and visit for a short bit if you don’t mind, I want to introduce you to someone special. What’s that? The kits are all home visiting? It’s no problem for us if you don’t mind. I actually wanted her to meet as many of you all as possible, this just saves a couple of trips. Who is she? Well you’ll meet her soon enough, then you’ll find out who she is. Yea, I suppose it’ll be about an hour until we get there so we’ll see ya then, ok? Yea, Bye.”

“Let me guess, this is that wolf-rabbit couple you told me about before right?”

“Technically, it was a wolf-hare couple, but yea, that’s them. I thought it’d be a good way to kill the rest of the day and be …entertaining at the same time.”

“As if this day couldn’t any stranger…” says Judy, shaking her head in disbelief.

The almost hour long trip was spent just listening to the radio and cuddling.

Pulling up to the Dewclaw residence just outside of the Forest district, the first thing Judy notices is the home seems to be a … tree.

“What?” asks Nick, noting the puzzled look on Judy’s muzzle “Kevin’s a hare for crying out loud, what did you expect?”

“I guess I’m not really sure.” replied Judy “His wife, her names Kell right? I figured maybe a house, since you told me that she’s a grey wolf. So, is this a burrow, or a tree, or what?”

“Both really. Kevin runs an IT service out of the ‘basement’ or burrow, while Kell… ummm, well that’s a bit more difficult. She actually owns and operates a facility that…slaughters and processes… chickens and turkeys as meat for preds. And for carnivorous bunnies, OWWW! The tree is pretty much hollowed out for the rest of the family to live in.”

“Nick, come on, really?”

“I swear it’s true. Come on, let’s go meet the only family I can think of that’s got a chance at being even more strange than ours.”

Approaching the front door, they’re greeted by what Judy can classify as a huge hare buck. Standing at least a foot taller than Nick, Kevin greets them, with Kell an average sized, and very attractive, female grey wolf just behind him.

‘Good lord’ Judy thinks ‘He’s every bit as big as Nick described. And Kell is gorgeous.’

“Hey guys” says Kevin as he greets the pair “we were just talking about you. Nick, come on in and let’s get introductions out of the way.”

Upon entering the home, Judy is amazed at how spacious it is.

“Ok” begins Nick “introductions. Kevin, you’re going to have to help a bit since I’m not familiar with a few of the mammals I’m seeing here, but I’ll start.’

‘Dewclaw family, I’m proud to introduce my fiancé Judy Hopps. Judy, this is Kevin Dewclaw and his wife Kell, Rudy here is Kell’s son, Lindisfarne is Kevin’s daughter while Coney is their mutual kit. Kevin, the rest is up to you mammal.”

Grinning like only Kevin can, noticing the confused look that Judy is wearing “First off, Rudy is a wolf/fox mix, and the beautiful vixen beside him is his girlfriend Fiona Fennec, obviously a fennec fox.”
“Next we have my adopted daughter Lindisfarne who is, as you can see is a porcupine and her husband Fenton, who’s a bat.”
“Last but not least we have Coney, our biological daughter, obviously a hare/wolf mix.”

When Judy notices Coney gazing at her rather intently she asks “Is there something I can help you with dear?” Judy asks.

“You’re really pretty” Coney begins “Will I be that pretty when I grow up?”

When Judy’s mouth drops open and no words come out, Nick reaches over and gently closes it for her “Ummm, I’m sure you will sweetie, but with your blonde fur, you’ll probably be even prettier than me.”

When everybody gets done laughing at the exchange, Kevin goes on to explain one other detail “I’m sure you’re at least a bit curious about the last name. I was actually born Kevin Kindle. I took Kell’s family name because I was more accepted by her family than I was by mine when we were first married. Everything turned out ok, and that’s about it.”

“Wait, hold on a second” remarked Judy “Kindle… I know that name. Isn’t Kindle the family name of the Easter bunnies of legend?”

“Yes, it is. However, that’s another story for another time. We’re actually going to head out for a family outing in a bit, but we can all get together sometime and give you a lowdown on everything that’s transpired during the last few years. It’s actually quite interesting, especially for Rudy here…”

“Dad, please don’t go into that.”

”Ok Rudy, I won’t” giving Nick and Judy a wink “at least not today” which earned aloud groan from Rudy and a smirk from Fiona.

“Well, we’ll let you head for your get together, we’ll catch you all another time. Maybe you and Kell can make the jam session at the shop next Saturday night.”

“That sounds doable.” remarks Kevin “We’ll probably see you then.”

…”

“Well” began Judy “that was interesting. I can see now why you were concerned that first night. I actually wondered if having kits with you was even possible. Now that I can see for myself that it’s actually probable…”

“What, getting cold feet already?”

“No, not really, just trying to picture what our kits might look and act like. And what on earth species would they be considered as? Boxes? Funnies? Shit…”

“They’d be beautiful like their mother, and handsome like me. And best of all, they’d be called….Wildes!”

“Stop already, you’re giving me a headache” giggled Judy “Let’s go home and get some rest, we really need to go back to the shop and get some work done. The car shows will be here before we know it, and we’ve got a ton of work to do, if I remember correctly.”

“Yea, I guess you’re right. As much as I hate to admit it, we do need the rest. Or at least we will after we get a good shower and a bit of…snuggling.”
“Do you ever stop thinking about that?”

“Well yea, usually when I’m eating, and even then I’m th…”

“Enough already, I get the idea you overly horny fox.”

…

The rest of that week and through the next, it was pretty much twelve to fourteen hour days for our couple. Dragging themselves home, showering, catching a quick bite and then nothing but sleep was pretty much the order of the day every day.

Friday afternoon Judy gets a text from her mom “Nick, mom just reminded me that she and dad are going to stop by this weekend. Can we knock off a bit early so we can get the place ready? We need to do laundry and clean up the guest room a bit.”

“I don’t see why not, we’ve pretty much got most of the stuff caught up so we can be ready for the show in a couple of weeks. I’ll tell Snow that we’re going to leave early, and to get everything ready for a jam tomorrow night for your folks.

“I think they’d like that, home James.”

“Ok, just who in the hell is this James character? I’m going to have to put a chastity belt on your furry grey butt at this rate” snarked Nick, which of course got a laugh out of Judy.

…

As Saturday afternoon rolls around, Bonnie and Stu arrive at Nick and Judy’s home. After stashing their belongings in the spare bedroom, Bonnie gushes over Judy’s ring and everyone grabs a quick snack, the entire gang is ready to head towards the shop where the jam session was scheduled to begin in an hour or so.

“Before we head out and I forget it completely” began Stu “here’s the letter you got from the mayor’s office.”

Rolling her eyes, Judy figured she might as well open it and read it before throwing it in the trash.

…

From the Office of the Mayor of Zootopia, Leodore Lionheart, Mayor

‘Dear Ms. Hopps, it is my pleasure to inform you that the Mammal Inclusion Initiative was recently passed with an almost unanimous vote by the Zootopia city council.
You have been nominated as the very first candidate to be accepted into the next upcoming class due to begin as of June first of this year.
Please respond with your intent to either accept or to decline this offer by no later than May first.
Congratulations, we are looking forward to hearing from you.
Leodore Lionheart
Leodore Lionheart, Mayor

XxX

Chapter End Notes
A/N: I used Jason Bateman’s birthdate as Nick and Nicholle’s birthdates. Yes, a bit of ‘artistic license’ was used in dealing with the Dewclaw family…no harm was done to any characters, with the possible exception of Rudy’s pride.
Real Life IS Messy

Chapter Summary

When Judy gets a letter from the City of Zootopia, she has some hard choices to make. And maybe their little 'marking' session might not have been such a good idea...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

12: Real Life IS Messy

XxX

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Leodore Lionheart, Mayor

…

“What’s wrong Judy?” asked Nick “You look like you’ve seen a ghost or something.”

“I-I-I’ve been accepted to join the ZPD. They finally passed the Mammal Inclusion Initiative. If I want to go to the academy I’ve got” looking at a nearby calendar “just three weeks to accept so I can be there in time to make the next class.”

“Are you going? I know it’s always been your dream, but… what about Nick and…” began Bonnie.

Looking at Nick and her parents Judy was stunned, not knowing for sure what to do. For the first time in her short life, Judy was totally at a loss for any kind of a decision.

Nick approached Judy because he could sense another panic attack, but before he could reach her, she bolted for the bathroom, slammed the door and locked it. Suddenly nauseous, she nosily emptied her stomach into the toilet.

“Judy….Judy, please answer me… what’s wrong, are you ok?” Nick pleaded.

“Ju-just leave me alone for a bit…please. I just need a little time to work things out in my head… please.”

“Well, take your time, but I’m not going anywhere until you come out” he said firmly, sitting in front of the door.

Addressing Stu and Bonnie “You guys can go to the shop if you want, but I’m not going anywhere
until Judy comes out and we talk out what’s going on.”

“If you think we’re leaving when Judy’s in this state of affairs, you’re crazy” huffed Stu.

“Actually, I would’ve been surprised if you had, but I had to at least make the offer” intoned Nick. “Go ahead and get comfortable, there’s no telling how long this is going to take. There’s another bathroom just down the hall from your room, plus food and drinks in the fridge if you’re hungry. I’m sure this will take a while.’

‘I’m going to call mom and Skye to let them know that Judy’s had another attack, so they don’t get to wondering why we aren’t going to show up.’

Selecting Skye and Laverne’s numbers set up for a conference call, he wasn’t surprised when the phones rang several times before either picked up “Mom, Skye, you both on the line?”

“Yes, I’m here” they answered in unison.

“Just so you know, Judy’s had another panic attack and she’s locked herself in the bathroom. Skye, I think you should.”

“Nick” interrupted Skye “I was literally talking to Judy when you called, that’s what took so long for me to answer. Your mom and I will be there in a bit, we just need to make a quick stop on the way. We should be there in twenty minutes, tops. Try to keep her calm in the meantime, ok?”

“I’ll do my best. Stu and Bonnie are here, and we’re all worried sick. It’s going to be a job trying to keep everyone, myself included, even halfway calm.”

“I know it’ll be tough, but just do it, ok? This is Judy we’re talking about here, do it for her if for no one else…got it?”

Taking a deep breath “Yea, I got it, just…hurry ok?”

Eighteen minutes later (which seemed like hours to everyone in the house) Skye and Laverne hurry in through the front door.

Tapping gently on the bathroom door Skye speaks softly, just loud enough for Judy to hear “Squeak…sis…Laverne and I are here, open the door for us, or at least me…please.”

Hearing the door unlock Skye looks at Nick eye to eye but addresses everyone in the room before entering “Just chill for a bit. Everything’ll be ok, we’ll get things sorted out, I promise” and closes and locks the door behind her.

…

After what seems an eternity, Skye exits the bathroom “Nick, go ahead and go in, the rest of us will wait until you two have talked things out, ok?”

Giving a quick nod, Nick enters and sees Judy sitting on the edge of the bathtub wearing a look similar to the one he saw not that long ago, but with a much sadder expression around her eyes.

Kneeling on the floor directly in front of his deeply distressed bunny “Judy, honey, what is it? Whatever it is, we can get through it…together. Whether it’s the ZPD or …”

“Nick, it’s not the ZPD thing, well, maybe a little but… I’m … pregnant” showing him three different brands of in-home pregnancy tests, all positive.
With a totally astonished look on his muzzle Nick responded “W-what? I thought the test at the doctors’ office last week said you weren’t!”

“I know, but I guess it was just too early to tell for sure. I’ve felt a bit off all week, but I thought it was just nerves about getting engaged and everything.”

‘Nick, what are we gonna do? We’re not ready for kits yet. We’re not married, your place isn’t set up for kits, I mean…”

Taking the depressed doe into his arms “Judy listen to me. Why are you so upset sweetheart? We wanted kits eventually, it’s just a bit sooner than we wanted is all. We were prepared for this eventuality just days ago, and it was fine, remember? If you truly are pregnant, I couldn’t be happier.

I know you’ve wanted kits at some point, I’d never considered having kits of my own, mainly due to my less than stellar escapades in my youth, but I’m absolutely thrilled to know that you…YOU would be having my kits, OUR kits. You can schedule an appointment with your doctor on Monday to confirm everything one way or the other and try to figure out why the prescription didn’t work if you are, ok?”

“You’re not angry? Really?”

“My gods no…this is one of the happiest days of my life. We love each other, we’re already engaged and everyone wants to know when the wedding is going to be, this just moves the date up a bit. I want us legally married before the kits arrive so there is NO doubt about who or where their father is.”

‘As far as the house, we’ll be fine until the kits arrive, so we have time to find something better suited to having kits around. Once we find out how many we’re having, we can decide how much bigger we need to go. Sweetheart there is no problem we can’t solve, as long as we do it together…ok?’

“O-ok, I guess so.”

“You ready to announce our pregnancy to the rest of the families, or do you want me to?”

“Will you do it please? I’m not sure I have the energy or the nerves to right now.”

Gathering his physically and mentally exhausted bunny in his arms again, he gives her a tight hug and quick a peck between her ears, then sets her carefully on the floor, opening the door and sees four very concerned faces.

…

“Ok” begins Nick “Now that the drama is over” which earns him a light punch on the arm and a weak smile from Judy “we are proud to announce that we’re…pregnant!” adding “we think. We’ll know for sure on Monday after we go to the doctor’s and do additional tests.”

Totally stunned (except for Skye, who already knew of course and Laverne who suspected as much) the gathered family members looked at one another in amazement for a few moments before gathering the couple in a large (to say the least) group hug.

As everyone offered their congratulations, Laverne spoke up just loud enough for everyone to hear “Everyone, a moment of your time please” she began.

“Nick, you always gave me grief about keeping the house you grew up in rather than sell it and move to something smaller. This is the reason I wouldn’t sell or move.

You, Judy and the kits are going to move into my house and I’m moving to your place. I’ve waited a long time for you to have kits of your own, for me to have grandkits, and I won’t take no for an answer.”

“Mom” started a tearfully grateful Nick “just...damnit.”
“If I might interject here for a minute” interrupts Skye “How about we all go the jam session? Kevin and Kell are already there, so maybe Kell can give Judy some pointers. I know the situations are a bit reversed, but what can it hurt? And I know that Judy can certainly use some cheering up!”

“That’s an excellent idea” replies Laverne “I’m sure Stu and Bonnie would much rather be there enjoying themselves than sitting here mopping…”

With the mood lightened considerably and everyone in agreement, they all set out for the jam session.

…

When everyone arrived at the shop, the party was going full blast, music could be heard quite clearly from at least a block away.

After entering the shop, it was clear that the session was in full swing, with Kevin actually doing a good job on drums. While Nick and Stu headed towards the guys, especially Midnight, to fill them in on a few things that needed to be accomplished at the shop, Judy and the girls found Kell talking with the few other females that Nick employed at the shop.

“Hey Kell” greeted Judy “How goes it?”

“Hey, I was beginning to think you two weren’t going to make it. And who are these fine mammals with you?”

“I guess I figured you already knew Skye, but anyway…” says Judy gesturing to Bonnie “Kell Dewclaw, this is my mother Bonnie and my dad Stu Hopps and this” gesturing to Skye “is Skye Winter, a very close friend and adopted sister.’

‘Mom, Skye, this is Kell Dewclaw, one of Nick’s customers and hopefully a friend of mine.”

After the ladies gave each other hugs, Judy asked Kell “Kell, if you have a minute, we’d like to talk to you in private about something important…”

“Of course, no problem, anything I can do to help.”

“Let’s step into the office for a bit then, where it’s not quite so loud” suggested Skye.

Kell listened carefully as Judy informed about her situation “I hate to tell you, but with our situations being directly opposite, me being pred and you being prey, there’s not really much advice I can give you, although I would if I could. You know I’m thrilled to for you and all, have you contacted your ob/gyn yet? Maybe she can help.”

“No, not yet, we just found out for sure a short while ago this evening. I’m going to make a doctors’ appointment first thing Monday morning to be sure. I can’t understand it, I’ve been taking my pills faithfully, and haven’t missed a day. This shouldn’t have happened. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not disappointed or even really upset … well maybe a little, it’s just a bit of a shock is all. Add to that the fact that I just got a letter of acceptance to the ZPD, something I’ve wanted practically my entire life, the stress of not knowing what to do for sure is killing me. I don’t know whether to be happy, sad or what…”

“Judy, I get all that” says Kell “but what does your heart tell you? That should be what you need to go with now. Which is more important … Nick and the kits or being a cop? What does Nick think? And how about the kits? Are you going to raise them or is Nick and everyone else while you’re out on patrol? You know you won’t be able to see Nick or the kits while you’re at the academy training, which is nine months long by the way……unless you’re thinking…about…”
“Oh my god no, I’d NEVER do that, not ever” as Judy gasped in horror what Kell was implying sunk in. “I could never have an abortion, I’d rather die myself than go through something like that or put Nick, mom, dad and everyone else through it…”

“Then it seems like you’ve stressed yourself out over a decision that was never that difficult in the first place” commented a softly smiling Kell.

Giving Kell and the rest of the ladies a rueful smile and a big hug “I guess you’re right, thanks so much Kell, you’ve helped more that you think.”

“That’s what friends are for, remember?”

Just then, the girls jumped slightly as Nick tapped rather loudly on the office door before entering (there’s a jam session going on remember, it’s loud out there).

“Am I interrupting anything?” he asked.

Glancing around at the rest of the assembled ladies Judy answered “No Slick, I think we’re good here, Kell has been a great help clearing everything up for me. Remind me tomorrow to send a thank you letter to the mayor’s office” pausing a bit for effect but quickly finishing her reply noting Nick’s worried expression “informing them that I’m no longer interested in joining the ZPD. I have a responsibility to my husband to be and unborn kits that mean more to me now than anything the ZPD has to offer. I can make the world a better place with my family more than I ever could being a cop.’

‘Now, I know I can’t drink, but I can still play guitar and I can still dance. Now, let’s go enjoy the rest of the evening, we’ve got some serious planning to do when we get home if in fact I really am pregnant. If you’re nice, I might even let you sleep in a bit tomorrow …. or maybe not…” with a mischievous gleam in her eye.

With a slight blush, Nick looks at Laverne and comments “Well, I guess we’ll be taking you up on your offer of switching homes after all mom.”

...

Sunday was spent just lazing around for the first part of the day, with Bonnie cooking everyone a great late breakfast of egg, cheese and veggie omelets.

While Nick prepared his famous special ‘carrot’ soup (which actually had bits of chicken in it) for dinner, Judy and Bonnie went window shopping for clothes and such for the kits. Stu on the other paw, started binge watching old episodes of ‘Tails From The Crypt’ on ZTV.

The afternoon and evening were taken up by shopping for cribs and the like on ZBay. They saved their ‘liked’ items for the near future, not knowing how many kits were coming.

...

Monday morning, after a late breakfast, Judy calls her doctor. “Hello, doctor Clawson, this is Judy Hopps. I need to see you today if you have an opening, it’s really important. I’m going to bring my fiancé along because it concerns him as well.’

‘Ten thirty?’ noticing Nick nodding slightly “yes, that’ll be fine. We’ll be there, thanks.”

“I guess a quick shower and a slow ride are in order for now …?” begins Nick.

“Nick, really?”

“I said a quick shower Squeak, that means no fooling around. I figured the doctor would probably
need to examine you, so I figured I’d leave well enough alone…for now.”

“Good thinkin’ Slick. Gotta paw it to ya, you’re on the ball today.”

After a quick shower together, just enough to help clean each other, especially their backs, Nick and Judy head to the doctors’ office.

Noting the slightly worried look on Nick’s muzzle Judy has to ask “What is it Nick? Something’s bothering you, you’re not having second thoughts or anything are you?”

Giving his mate a rueful smile “No, nothing like you might be thinking I’m sure. I don’t know a thing about raising kits, I guess I’m just concerned that I’ll screw something up. Don’t get me wrong, I’m looking forward to having kits, especially with you, but I’m scared shitless at the same time… does that make any sense?”

Giggling softly “Silly fox, of course it makes sense, but don’t worry about it. Even though I’ve never had any kits myself, I helped mom with hundreds of my siblings, so I think I’ve got most of it down already. You get to join in on the really fun stuff like changing diapers and…what?”

“You just had to go and put that in the conversation didn’t you?” he asked. “Way to add a great buzz kill into the conversation…”

“Oh, I think you’ll survive, a little poop ain’t gonna kill ya.”

…

Entering doctor Clawson’s office, the receptionist told them “Just go on in, doctor is waiting for you.”

Raising a questioning eye as the couple enters her office, doctor Clawson asks “Ok Judy, what can I do for you?”

“First off, I’d like to introduce you to my fiancé, Nick Wilde.’

‘Nick, this is my doctor, Doctor Clawson.”

Turning her attention back to doctor Clawson, Judy continues “Well, I’m sure you’ll remember that I was in here a couple of weeks ago and had you check to see if I was pregnant, and the test came back negative. Well, that was then and this is now…I think I’m pregnant, but I want you to do another test and confirm for sure that either I am or I’m not.”

“Ok, we can go ahead and do another test and I’ll give you a quick exam while we’re at it, just in case you are. Mister Wilde, if you’ll step out into the waiting area for a few minutes we’ll get this all started.”

After about fifteen minutes, the doctor called Nick back into the exam room.

“Well, depending on how you look at it, there’s good news and bad news, or bad news and bad news, or good news and good news…” doctor Clawson began. “Anyway, to start with, Judy you’re definitely pregnant. If the timeline fits like you say it does, you’re no more than one to two weeks along, but … fetus growth is more in line with around a month.”

“W-what? How can that be?” asks Judy.

“While I’m not positive, I’m sure it has something to do with the fact that mister Wilde is a fox and you’re a rabbit.”
“But, why would that make such a difference?” asks Judy.

“To begin with, there are a few things you must understand. Firstly, with, it’s a miracle that you were able to conceive at all. Next, the gestation difference between rabbits and foxes is quite a bit different, almost twice as long for a fox than for a bunny. In fact, I’m just guessing of course, but you could be full term in anywhere from four to eight months, but most likely five to six months.”

Noticing the shocked looks on the couples faces she quickly adds “We’ll need to closely monitor the kits growth, and hope that there aren’t any more than one or two kits, three at the very most.”

“I understand the necessity to monitor their development closely” interjects Judy but why would there be a worry about how many kits we’ll be having?”

“Considering the difference in size between rabbit and fox kits, more than three could be fatal to the kits or to yourself. Possibly both. You must understand Judy, regardless of the fact that that rabbits may have as many as a dozen or more kits, a vixen normally has only one kit at a time, sometimes two. More than three kits, even with them being hybrids, could possibly be more than your small body could handle. You could lose one or all of the kits or possibly become sterile could or even die in the process if there are more.’

‘As it stands right now, you really aren’t far enough along to determine just how many kits you’ll have. You’ll need to come back in a week or two so we’ll be able to determine how many you’ll be having for sure. I know this may come as a blow, but if there are more than three, you may need to consider…”

“NO, absolutely not” shouts Judy! “I’ll never think about terminating any of my kits, that’s entirely out of the question. If there are more than two or three, we’ll just have to figure out something different, that part of the discussion is over” she states with finality. “However,” says Judy calming a bit “I do have a question though … I took my prescription faithfully every day, why didn’t it seem to work?”

“Probably because you failed to mention that you were dating a fox and not a bunny.” answered Dr. Clawson firmly. “If you had mentioned that little fact when you were here the first time, I could have given you a different prescription. The prescription I gave you was formulated specifically for a bunny’s DNA. [1]”

“Well just…. shit” remarked Judy. “Ok, is there anything special I need to eat or do while I’m pregnant?”

“Nothing more than the usual that I can think of for now. Only light to moderate exercise, a normal bunny diet, and…what?” noticing Judy’s suddenly concerned look.

“Ummm, well, I’ve sorta… eaten…chicken lately, is that going to be a problem?”

Astonished, Dr. Clawson asked “Why on earth would a bunny be eating chicken? Did you do this before or after you became pregnant?”

“Well…ummm…kinda…sorta…both…?”

“I-I really don’t know what to say. I’ve never heard of a bunny ever eating meat before.”

“Well…it’s kind of a weird situation really. We went out partying one night and I was venting to Skye, you remember Skye, right?” noticing the slight nod from Dr. Clawson Judy continued “well, I was determined to change a few things in my life and was going to drink some beer when Nick reminded me I needed to eat something so I wouldn’t get sick. So I said ‘fine’ and grabbed the first thing that was handy at the time, which happened to be BBQ chicken pizza. After my last visit, we
stopped to get something to eat at that same bar and I really wanted some more of that chicken pizza. Must’ve been my preggo desire kicking in I guess…”

“Did you suffer any ill effects after the first time you ate it?”

“Hard to tell, I had a mild hangover from the beer since I hadn’t had any kind of alcohol since high school, but I don’t think so.”

“I would have to say that since it didn’t seem to bother you at first, and hasn’t seemed to since, it might actually be beneficial for the kits with them being hybrids and all, if you actually continued to eat meat from time to time.”

“Really? Well, ok then, that’s one less thing to worry about I guess. No special diet…”

“Other than that, I’d like to see you at least once a week to monitor the kits growth, especially to find out how many you’re going to have. We need to get a handle on things in case you have to many kits…”

“So, unless you have any other questions or concerns…”

“Actually, I have one question” says Nick “what about…”

“Nick!!!” interrupts a horrified Judy.

“It’s ok” Says Dr. Clawson, laughing “I think I know where he’s going with this. Intimacy should be alright for the first two to three months. Judy, you’ll be able to tell when it’s time to stop. Your body will probably be mad at you, but you’ll figure something out I’m sure.”

“I understand. Let’s set up my appointments for every Monday morning first thing then ok?”

“All right, we’ll see you next Monday morning, say around nine or so.”

“Well” says Nick as they head to the car “I guess that settles that. We can tell everyone who needs to know that we’re indeed having kits. We’ll tell everyone else in due time…no pun intended Fluff.”

Rolling her eyes, a concerned Judy asks “And what about my work at the shop?”

“You heard the doc, light to moderate exercise. You should be able to do light mechanic work for the first couple of months or maybe a bit longer, then you’ll probably have to spend the rest of the time in the office.”

“But…”

“No, absolutely not! Listen to me Judy, from the sound of things, you’re going to be having a difficult enough time with the kits as it is, so I’m not going to have you taking any chances that might jeopardize them, or you. Do I make myself clear? Losing the kits would be devastating for us, but losing the kits and you would probably drive me over the edge. I can’t and I won’t let you take that chance, and that’s final.”

“Damn it Nick” says Judy tearing up “how can you be so good to me?”

“That’s the easy part Squeak” says Nick wiping her tears away “I love you. We got into this together, we can get through anything, as long as we do it…”

“Together” finishes Judy, with a small smile.

…
“So, now what?” asks Judy on the way to the shop “There’s a car show coming up next week, are we ready for it… and are you going to let me play model or do you think it’s to ‘strenuous’ for my delicate body?”

“I don’t see why you shouldn’t be able to model for a while at least…”

“You mean you don’t think I’m too fat?”

“I didn’t say or even imply that you were fat. But we both know that as small as you are, it won’t be long before you start to show. I know that while you’ll probably less than thrilled, but I can hardly wait.”

“Well we’d better get that wedding planned if you want to get married before the kits show up.”

“No problem” said Nick with a grin “I’ve got something in mind that will be…EPIC.”

“Nick please, tell me now, so I don’t have to kill you and have to marry a corpse….”

Placing his paw over his heart in mock despair “Squeak you wound me, I would never do anything to cause you that kind of anguish.” Noting Judy’s deadpan stare Nick hurriedly adds “Ok, yea I probably would.”

“Ok drama queen, spill.”

“…. Well, ok. But only because you asked so nicely. I thought it would be nice to get married at the car show next weekend and…”

“No, absolutely not.”

“But…”

“Nick, no. you’ve pretty much had your way with all of this so far, but now it’s my turn. I want a simple wedding, preferably at Bunnyburrow, with our families and the shop crew. You can invite whomever else you want, with my approval. I will NOT have my wedding turned into a circus in front of hundreds of mammals I don’t know who probably could care less about the crazy atmosphere you were thinking about creating. Not happening, so get over it.’

‘I know there’s not much time, but this weekend will be the best opportunity to get married, especially with all of the work that needs to be done in the shop, car show notwithstanding. I’m going to call mom and dad and tell them that the wedding is going to happen this weekend at the burrow, you can call your mom, and we’ll tell the shop when we get there. Now, are you good with that or not?”

“Absolutely, one hundred percent, yes.”

“All right then give me a sec and while I call my folks, you call your mom, ok?”

…

JUDY: “Hey mom, is dad handy? No? Well anyway, I know it’s kind of short notice, since you guys just got back to the burrow, but the doctor just confirmed that I actually am pregnant… yes mom it’s a bit of a shock but it’s nothing we can’t deal with. Nick and I agreed that it would be best to get married as soon as possible, and with the work at the shop and car show coming up, that we’d like to get married this coming weekend … yes mom we both agreed …. Well I … mom please … mom … MOM, calm down!”

‘Yes, I know it’s short notice, I just said that, but I … we would like to have the ceremony at home at the burrow so only a few mammals will need to travel. Who else will be coming? I guess just
Laverne and Nick’s aunt plus the shop crew unless Nick has someone else he wants to invite, probably not more than a couple more than that.

‘Mom, it’s not like you guys haven’t done this type of thing before. Saren knows that Thomas and his wife and Calla and her husband were married in just a couple of days after finding out about their pregnancies, so we both know it’s doable on short notice.’

‘Well, I figured we’d have the wedding on Saturday morning, with the reception and party later that afternoon and evening. That way mammals would be able to spend Sunday sobering up and be able to get to work on Monday morning. The shop has a lot of work to get done for the show and sales next weekend, with several more shows and some projects due soon. I don’t want to cause any delays that would jeopardize the shop’s reputation. Nick has worked hard to get where he is and I’m not about to be the cause of ruining anything.’

‘Saturday’s ok? Great. I’ll let Nick know and we’ll see you soon, love you all, bye.”

NICK: Hey mom. Yea, great news, it turns out Judy is pregnant after all. Of course we’re going to go through with it, what the hell kind of question is that anyway? No, of course I’m not mad at you, just a bit shocked that you’d even ask something like that is all. Really? You just wanted to check my commitment to Judy? MOM, I thought you knew me better than that… ok, ok. No it’s fine, really.’

‘Listen, the main reason for the call, besides letting you know that since we really are pregnant, is to tell you that we’re getting married this coming Saturday at … yes mom, this coming Saturday. Yes, I know its short notice but … mom, Judy’s the one who picked the date not me. That’s right, she knows that we have a lot of commitments at the shop with the upcoming shows and customer projects, and she doesn’t want to screw any of that up.’

‘Anywhooooo, it’s going to be in Bunnyburrow on Saturday, probably in the morning. So I’m guessing everything else will be later on in the afternoon so everyone will be able to make the trip back home on Sunday so they’ll be in shape for work on Monday.’

‘So far as I know it’s just her family, yes all 300 or so of them, you and the Wilde Bunch. No, I don’t think there’s anyone else I’m going to invite except aunt Shirley maybe Fin, possibly the Dewclaws. Yea, I’m going to invite him, it’s up to him whether he wants to show or not.’

‘Ok, I’ll let you know the particulars … as soon as I know, you’ll know…love you, bye.”

As Nick and Judy enter the shop, they immediately head for the office, where Skye has just finished talking to a vendor. When she sees them enter to office, she gives them that ‘WEEEEELL? Yes or no’ look. Seeing Judy’s grin (that she was desperately trying to hide) Skye gathered the bunny into a tight hug. “Congratulations, I’m so happy for you … So… names, dates, all of that. Give girl…”

“Ummm, can’t tell just yet due to the difference in gestation terms between bunnies and foxes. Clawson told us that it’ll probably be five or six months, most likely six, and we don’t know how many yet, I’m not far enough along yet to tell. And just so you know, we’re getting married on Saturday in Bunnyburrow at my folks’ place, and of course you’re invited. I want you to be my maid of honor.”

“Wait, what? You mean this Saturday? Really?”

“Yea, well we wanted to get married as soon as possible, a before you ask the date and place were my idea, not Nick’s.”

“So, who all else is going to be invited?”

So far, just my family, Laverne and Nick’s aunt Shirley, and the entire shop gang. Nick, is there anyone else you want to invite?”

“Well, yea … unless you have a problem with him, I’d like to invite Fin. I have no idea whether he’ll
show, but after he helped us after the tornado I thought it would only be right. And maybe the Dewclaws, only because of the uniqueness of the circumstances. It’s your call.”

“I don’t have a problem with Fin or the Dewclaws. Give them all a shout when you get the time ok?”

“Great. But now, let’s give the crew a holler and let them know what’s happening.”

“ATTENTION: ALL EMPLOYEES TO THE MAIN SERVICE BAY PLEASE, ALL EMPLOYEES TO THE MAIN SERVICE BAY.”

After the entire crew shows up at the main bay Nick make the announcement.

“Ok everybody listen up. Judy and I are going to be married this coming Saturday and everyone’s invited. I’m going to reserve enough space on the train for anyone that wants to go, and pay for everyone’s ticket so it’s not a financial burden. Husbands, wives and significant others, and their kits are invited as well. Whoever’s interested, leave your name and the number of extra tickets I’ll need to get with Skye. I’ll let you all know what time we’ll be leaving Friday night as soon as I know. That’s it, now back to work.”

…

Looking at Judy, Nick asks “So, are you sure you want to go back to work?”

“Of course I am, I’ve never slacked off a day in my life and I’m not about to start now.”

“Ok then, finish deconstructing the Cobra and order whatever parts you need to get it right. After that, help Lefty get the show cars, including the Crown Vic that Duane just finished painting, assembled, detailed and ready for the show in just under two weeks. Happy?”

“Perfectly, thanks Slick” giving her fox a quick kiss, Judy headed off to her work station.

After calling the train station and reserving a large block of tickets for Friday afternoon and Sunday morning, Nick called Finnick to tell him the news and invite him to the wedding.

“Hey Fin, what’s up? No I’m not hittin’ ya up for another favor. Actually it’s quite the opposite, Judy and I are getting’ hitched this coming Saturday in Bunnyburrow and I wanted to let you know that you’re invited. What? What the hell kinda question is that anyway? Ok, fine, yes she’s pregnant, but we were planning on getting married anyway, we just moved the date ahead a bit is all. I just wanted to let you know, and I wanted to ask if you’ll be my best mammal …. You’re sure you’re not interested. Ok, no problem. I was just touching base for old times sake to show there are no hard feelings, at least on my part. Ok, I’ll catch you later.”

…

As the week winds down, most projects destined for the upcoming car show are finished with time to spare, with the notable exception of the ’56 Crown Victoria. Since it had just come out of paint with a minor/major color change that Nick absolutely … loved, fully a third of the staff worked to get it mostly completed so there would be less to worry about after they all got back after Nick and Judy’s wedding. After all, there would be less than a week until the car show and sales.

Laverne and Shirley went ahead to Bunnyburrow to assist Judy’s parents with preparations, since there was a significant difference between Lagomorph and Vulpine ceremonies. A happy medium was worked out to the satisfaction of both species.
The trip to Bunnyburrow was relatively uneventful, with Nick and Judy driving the GTO that Nick drove on the day they met. Judy’s brothers rode with Skye in her ’56 Mercury. The rest of the Wilde Bunch rode the train, courtesy of Nick.

…

Early Saturday morning, long before most mammals were stirring, Judy led Nick to the Hopps family cemetery. Once there, Nick looked at the tiny markers denoting the names of siblings that his bride-to-be never got to know: Jonathan, Jerry, Josephine, Jerald and Jeorgette.

“Who would have though the we could be sharing the same pain” remarks Nick as they lay flowers, poseys and forget-me-nots beside the tiny graves.

Walking paw in paw, they returned to the burrow to prepare for the upcoming ceremony.

…

The rest of Saturday morning was hectic, with Bonnie marveling how beautiful Judy was wearing the same dress that she was married in so many years ago.

The ceremony was simple, with the couple exchanging short vows.

JUDY: “Nicholas Wilde, when I had resigned myself to abandon my lifelong dream, you gave me a new dream. When I shared the worst moments of my life with you, you shared yours with me and gave me the strength to carry on. When my family was in desperate need, you didn’t turn your back on them, you gave your all to help them, even though they hated you at the time. Because of these things I pledge my unending love to my dying day.”

NICK: “Judith Hopps, when we met, I never planned to fall in love with anyone. Your ‘I can do anything’ attitude quickly won my heart. Much like you, I was broken and had pain that needed to be addressed. Much like you I was hiding from my past. Thanks to you, I now know that I had a sister that I would never have known about. Together we can accomplish anything. And that’s how I see us going through life … together … until our dying days.”

The bridal bouquet was caught by none other than Skye, and when the garter was caught by Judy’s brother Josh rumors started flying both with Judy’s siblings and with the Wilde Bunch, mainly instigated by none other than Laverne herself.

After the wedding, the reception got going with ‘WildeHopps’ playing a favorite wedding song ‘Wonderful Tonight’ by Eric Clapton, which Nick and Judy slow danced to while gazing deeply into each other’s eyes.

Next came a surprise visit by Gazelle singing ‘Try Everything’. Even though Finnick didn’t make the wedding, this was his gift to the happy couple. Nick explained to all that Finnick had gone to high school with Gazelle.

As the afternoon turned into early evening, the party really got going, and although everyone noticed when Nick and Judy quietly slipped away, no one really cared, it was their honeymoon night after all.

…

Heading down the road toward their honeymoon destination Judy asked “Well, my darling husband, where are we headed now?”
“I’m thinking about the absolute last place anyone would look to prank us tonight…”

“And where might that be?”

“Why home of course! Who in their right mind would look for us there?”

“Sly fox.”

“Beautiful bunny.”

…

Chapter End Notes

A/N: [1] I know, in real life birth control pills either work or they don’t, there is very little variance or specific formulation. But then again this isn’t the real world. Rabbits do NOT actually tolerate protein well … can you say artistic license???.
FYI – The average gestation for a real rabbit is 31 days, with the average birth weight of 1 to 1.5 oz.
The average gestation for a real red fox is 49 -58 days, with the average birth weight being 1 to 2 ounces.
The concern about the difference, though actually negligible is to add to the tension set in the story,
To fit the timelines set out in the original movie I used months instead of weeks. I mean really, a 23 to 24-year-old rabbit and a 32 year old fox?????
Monday morning, bright and early, life regained a semblance of normal at the shop. Preparations were underway for the 23rd annual ‘Zootopia Open’ which was to be held on the upcoming weekend. Everyone who’s anyone in the custom car world will be at the show and swap meet, and Nick and the entire crew of ‘Wilde Times Classic Muscle Cars’ will be ready and waiting.

“Ok” started Nick “like I said before, we’re going to take the Midnight Blue ’67 GTO, the Candy Apple Red ’49 Merc with the suicide doors, and the Candy Blue and Arctic White ’57 Nomad to the show. Plus, since Duane did such a fantastic job on the ’56 Crown Vic, we’ll be taking that as well. I think he really nailed it changing the paint from hot rod red and white to pearl white with an opaque red overlay.’

‘Here’s how we’ll get the cars and ourselves to the show. I’ll drive the GTO, Midnight, you’ll drive the ’49 Merc, Snow, you’ll drive the Nomad and Squeak will drive the Crown Vic. Everyone bring clothes to dress accordingly. Midnight, I think a red blazer with white slacks will work for you, while I’ll be in a dark blue suit.’

‘Snow I think that sexy metallic blue split skirt outfit that you wore the night you dumped me will do” as Judy looked incredulously at Sky who simply rolled her eyes “and Squeak, I know that you have a very nice red outfit that’ll go nicely with the Crown Vic, thanks to Skye.”

“Skye, what the hell?” asked Judy shooting the vixen a look of incredibility.

“What? I never told Nick anything about what we got that day. Nick, help me out here….”

“Relax, both of you. Skye, did you happen to forget who gets the statements when you buy stuff with my cards or on my credit? And guess who signed the ticket….?”

“Well shit!” exclaimed Skye.

“Not to change the subject, but just how are we supposed to get home if we sell all four cars?” asked Judy.

“No problem, mom is going to be driving the shop van. There’s plenty of room for all of us in it if we sell ‘em all. Everyone can dress up when we get to the show, then when we sell a car we can change out of our outfits into something more comfortable if they want to, so be sure to pack something comfortable for the trip there and back home.”

…
The day of the show, not only did Nick’s cars dominate the awards earning Best Paint, Best of Show, and Fan’s Choice awards, but all four cars were sold in record time. Plus, all four of the cars actually sold for well above the asking price due to an intense bidding war among the buyers, bringing in the shop a very nice profit. That is until Nick managed to spend around a third of the profits on three cars to replace the ones sold. Although none of the three cars actually ran, the cost versus the potential profits was well within reasonable limits. The cars were a '63 Corvette split window coupe with a 327 and a 4-speed manual transmission, a ’70 Challenger RT with a 426 Hemi, also with a 4-speed manual trans, and an actual steel bodied ’32 five window deuce coupe with an authentic flathead V-8. Nick called Lefty at the shop and had all three of his rollback haulers sent to the show site to pick up the ‘new’ project cars.

The only drama during the show was the unwanted attention that Skye and Judy got. There were several lookie-loos, potential customers and regular customers that flirted with the two, so Nick and Midnight had to step in and discourage several of them, especially a couple of very drunk rabbit bucks who were hitting up on Judy and seemed to be totally ignoring the scent marking and wedding ring.

Returning to the shop at the end of the day, Nick hands out the assignments for the new project cars to Midnight and Skye. “Ok, here’s what I want done … Midnight, you and Charlie start on the Challenger. Complete tear down, all the way to the sub-frame which I want powder coated. Send the motor to the guys at ‘MoPars R Us’ for a complete rebuild. I want the brakes upgraded to 4-wheel disc and the rear suspension to a 4-link. Paint is up in the air but it’s NOT gonna be the factory ‘Plum Crazy’. Get with Duane to figure a killer paint color.’ ‘Have Martin and Carol start on the deuce coupe. I want the frame rails box reinforced and I want them to shelve the flathead motor and find a good Chevy 327 small block for it. Powder coat the frame, four-wheel disc brakes, chrome the dropped front axle and banana yellow paint. I’ve got a feeling that someone is looking for an ‘Zootopian Graffiti’ deuce coupe.’ ‘Skye, you get Sneezy to help you start on the ‘Vette. Again, complete teardown, but I want it restored to factory including the paint. Somehow the baby blue metallic fits the car. I want the motor sent to ‘Year One’ for a factory stock rebuild if possible, whatever it takes to make the motor right.’ ‘Judy, I know what you’re thinking … for now you can still work on the Cobra if you want. With your ‘condition’ you won’t be actually working on the car for much longer, but you can still be a sort of project manager. You’ll still be involved in the project, you just won’t be able to any actual physical work on the car. I know it sucks, but that’s way it’s gonna have to be.”

“It’s ok, I understand” remarks Judy somewhat despondently “It’s not at all what I want, but all things considered I guess it’s for the best.”

As the next several weeks went by, Judy reluctantly admitted (to herself at least) that the doctor and Nick had been right. She was in no shape physically to keep working on the cars, even though she tried her hardest. No matter how she pushed herself, it just wasn’t possible. She ended up having to take more and more time running to the bathroom dealing with morning sickness and wondering why it was called morning sickness when she was sick fully half of the day. When Judy talked to her mom, expressing her concerns about being sick so much of the time, Bonnie told her that although she hadn’t been sick as much with her first litters, she explained (like the doctor had) that it might have something to do with the fact that the kits were of mixed species. Since the accelerated growth was already a factor, Judy had to agree that this was a reasonable explanation.
Then, one afternoon just after lunch, Nick got an unexpected call over the intercom while he was talking to Midnight and Duane about the paint color choices for the Challenger.

“NICK, COME TO THE OFFICE IMMEDIATELY, NICK TO THE OFFICE IMMEDIATELY!”

When Nick hurriedly entered the office, he noticed Judy curled up in a ball on one of the office chairs crying. “What’s the matter Judy?” that’s when he noticed that Judy’s pants were showing traces of blood along the groin area.

“I don’t know, th-that’s the problem” she managed to choke out through the tears “Jo-Josh has already called 911, there’s an am-ambulance on-on the way.”

“I called mom and your mom too” added Josh.

” I just st-started cramping up re-real bad then I st-started to bleed, I-I don’t know what’s hap-happen-ning…” wailed Judy.

Just then, Laverne burst into the office “I was just down the street a few blocks when Josh called and … what’s wr … oh my god, Judy…”

‘Nick you have got to get her to the hospital NOW”

“There’s an ambulance on the way … in fact I hear it pulling up now” interrupted Nick “I’m going with her to the hospital, you bring Skye and follow us with your car. At the very least we’ll be needing a ride home, at worst we’ll both be staying until we can get this figured out. I’m not leaving her until I know what the problem is…”

As the EMT’s load Judy into the ambulance Laverne tells Nick “I think I know what Judy’s trouble is, but I’d really have a qualified doctor let you know for sure. Have you called Judy’s obstetrician yet?”

“Actually, no I-I hadn’t even thought about it. Would you or Skye call her please, I’m not really sure how I’d handle talking to anyone right now…”

Of course, I’ll make sure it happens. I’ll meet you there, once everything calms down a bit.”

During the roughly twenty-minute ride to Zootopia General Hospital, Judy was given a mild sedative too help her calm down and rest. During the trip, the lead tech got Judy’s information from Nick … insurance information, age, date of birth, allergies and such. The female reindeer asked Judy about her pains, what and when she had eaten last, if she was pregnant, and how far along she was.

Arriving at the ER entrance at Zootopia General, Judy was rushed into a private exam room, where an IV line was started. Nick was very upset when he was quickly ushered out of the exam room by a very insistent and capable badger who turned out to be a male nurse. While impatiently waiting for some word from a doctor, Laverne and Skye rushed into the waiting area, immediately wanting to know what was happening.

“I literally have no idea” was all Nick could say. “They’ve been in there around fifteen minutes and no one has gone in or out since we got here.

“I talked to Bonnie as we left the shop” Laverne informed Nick “she and Stu are on their way and should get here in a couple of hours at the most.”

“How in the world are they going to get here that quickly?” asked Nick.
“Well, it seems like one of Judy’s siblings sort of hijacked a helicopter and is bringing them straight to the hospital” remarked Laverne.

“WHAT?” was all an astonished Nick could say.

“Nick, give it a rest already” said Laverne. “Bonnie told me that one of Judy’s sisters has a shuttle service and offered to bring her folks here because of the situation, I thought you of all animals would know that… Look, I know this is all very upsetting, but really Nick…”

“Yea, well, knowing Bonnie, I wouldn’t put something like that past her at a time like this.”

…

After just a few more minutes, Judy is wheeled out of the exam room.

“Mister Wilde?” asks doctor Berenstain, a smallish brown bear.

“I’m Nick Wilde” answers Nick.

Looking somewhat shocked, the doctor addressed the group “Umm, may I ask who these mammals are and their relationship to the patient?”

“I’m Judy’s husband, and this is my mother and a good friend. Judy’s parents are on their way and should be here soon, probably within the hour. What can you tell me about my wife? Anything you can tell me, you can tell them…”

“I’m sorry to have to tell you, but your wife has suffered a miscarriage. Both of the fetuses were lost, and your wife has lost a fair amount of blood that we’ll need to replace. We’re taking her to a special area where we’ll will need to do an emergency D&C procedure, although you will have to consent to the procedure since your wife is still under anesthesia and I would prefer not having to wait until she recovers enough to give the consent herself. I’m not going to go into detail about the procedure at this time, I need to attend to your wife. You can either speak to one of the nurses or ask your mother or mother-in-law about the procedure, I’m sure they’ll be sure be able to fill you in.’
‘After the procedure, your wife will be moved to recovery for a short while, and then to a private room on the third floor. You can wait in the third-floor waiting area if you like, or the nurse will give you her room number and you can wait there. The procedure should only take fifteen to twenty minutes, and recovery should only be an hour or so after that. After the procedure, I’ll need to speak privately with you and your wife about … some … very delicate matters.”

With that the doctor turned to attend to Judy and left the three-vulpine standing in shock.

“Nick” began Skye “why don’t you and your mom go wait in Judy’s room, I’ll stay here and wait for Bonnie and Stu. When they get here I’ll bring them up, just text me the room number… Nick, I’m SO sorry… Judy’s going to be devastated…”

…

As Nick and Laverne wait for Judy to be brought in from recovery, they’re joined by Bonnie, Stu and Skye.

“Nick” begins Bonnie “Have you heard anything yet?”

“Just that Judy has suffered a miscarriage, according to the doctor, she should be out of recovery soon. We should know something more before lo-”
Just then, Judy is wheeled into the room, mostly awake but still slightly groggy due to the anesthesia.

As the families gather around Judy, they are interrupted by Dr. Berenstain. “I hate to interrupt this gathering, but I really need to speak with Mr. and Mrs. Wilde alone for a bit. If everyone else could please gather in the waiting area until we’re finished it would be greatly appreciated.”

After everyone has left Judy’s room and Judy has recovered enough to be in possession of her senses, Dr. Berenstain begins “I understand that this has been a very traumatic experience for you both, most of all for you Judy. But there are a few things that I really need to discuss before I can release you from the hospital.’

‘To begin with, I know that you are both aware that Judy has suffered a miscarriage. In all, Judy, you lost two fetuses, fraternal twins. One was a fox like female and the other was a rabbit like male. I understand that this is really very soon to be bringing this up, but I need to know what you want done with the fetuses. Some mammals want to bury them with other family members and others just want the fetuses disposed of. I mean no disrespect, but I need a decision from you as soon as possible so the hosp-”

“No disrespect? NO DISRESPECT?” shouts Judy “these are… were MY … our kits. We will NOT have them disposed of like-like some sort of-of unwanted garbage!!!”

“No one is suggesting that at all Judy, and you of all mammals should know that!”

All heads turn to the door and notice that Judy’s doctor, Dr. Clawson has entered the room.

“Dr. Berenstain, I’ll take over from here, thank you.’

‘Judy, let me explain a few things to you that I thought you would have probably already known, with your mother having so many kits. To start with, 10-25% of first pregnancy’s end in miscarriage and up to 35% in stillbirth. This fact alone should tell you why most prey animals have so many kits in each litter. Literally at least one in each litter is expected to be lost through still birth or entire litters lost in miscarriage.’

‘I don’t think I need to tell you that the fact that you were able to conceive at all is a major miracle in itself. While interspecies pregnancies seem to be on the rise overall, it usually occurs in like species, such as rabbits and hares and differing genus of say foxes or canines in general. To my knowledge, there’s literally only one other pred/prey conception that has resulted in a live birth.”

“Yes” said Nick “that would be the Dewclaws, we’re close friends with them. And yes, we realize that the situations are reversed, with Kell actually the one who was pregnant. That’s one reason we were so hopeful when Judy actually became pregnant. Are we doomed to have this repeat itself and need to adopt, or is there some actual hope we can cling to that we can actually have biological kits of our own?”

“Please” pleads a very sorrowful Judy “please give us some hope. Some kind of real hope that we can have some actual kits of our own. While I realize that adoption is an option, I really don’t think I could go through something like this again and keep my sanity.”

“Actually” begins doctor Clawson “I know of someone who would be very much interested in your unique situation. Her name is Doctor Dr. Robin Cotton, a specialist in gene splicing and DNA manipulation. If you would permit me, I’ll get in touch with her as soon as I can.”

“Yes, please” intones Nick “whatever it takes, we’d be more than happy to speak with anyone who could give us a chance at our own kits” who notices Judy nod in agreement.

“With that being said, I do need to bring up the very delicate subject that Doctor Berenstain touched on earlier. Judy, you need to decide how to handle your unborn kits. I know it’s difficult to think
about so soon, but a decision needs to be made, and the sooner the better. If I might make a suggestion or two, there are several reasonable options for you. Burial in a family cemetery is probably most common, but in this case perhaps cremation would be best. That way, the ashes could be interred in both family cemetery’s, rather than agonize over which family should have them or split the twins up.’

‘While we’re on that subject, would you care to know anything about your unborn kits?’

“Yes, please, we would” responds Judy softly.

“Well to begin with, you know that you were carrying twins, one male one female. The female is more foxlike”

“Rose Marie” interrupts Judy softly, with tears forming in her eyes.

“While the male is bunnylike”.

“Aaron Neville” says a somber Nick.

“Those are the names you wish on the certificates?” asks doctor Clawson.

“Yes” they respond in unison.

“And the last names?”

Nick and Judy looked at each other and Judy responded “Wilde-Hopps if you don’t mind.”

“We’ll talk the arrangements over with our parents and let you know as soon as we can make a decision, thank you very much for your help and the kind suggestion” says Nick.

“Alright then, I’ll leave you to spend some time with your families for now. As soon as I get in touch with Doctor Cotton, I’ll let you know when to be expecting a call or visit from her. I’ll stop and check in on you later Judy. You should be able to leave the hospital today, but no strenuous exercise for at least a week, and no sex for at least two weeks to a month ok? You can leave today if you want, but I would suggest that you spend the night in case there are any complications with the D&C procedure. It’s not likely but has happened on occasion, I’ll leave that decision up to you. Just tell the nurse at the nurse’s station what your decision is please. Also, I’ll leave a prescription for the proper birth control for you to pick up at the pharmacy when you leave so we won’t have you going through this again.”

As doctor Clawson exits the room, Nick and Judy’s families and Skye enter.

“Judy” begins Bonnie.

“I’m ok mom … actually, no I’m not, and I know that. I’m just … lost. Do you understand?”

“Judy, you have got to know you’re not alone in this right?”

“I know, but … how does a mammal deal with something like this? It seems like my entire world has suddenly come crashing down. Like there’s nothing left to live for…”

“Guys” interrupts Skye briefly “would you mind give us girls some alone time with Judy please. I think a bit of intervention is needed and you two would just be … umm … kind of in the way?”

“Yea, sure” responds Nick. “Just text me when you’re through, alright?”
“Sure thing, now, off with ya.”

…

As the door closes, Bonnie starts the conversation.

“Listen Judy, I know things are bad right now, but let’s get a few things out in the open … how many kits did you lose?”

“… Two. Twins. Doctor Clawson said there were two. A girl that was kind of fox like and a boy that was bunnylike. Nick and I decided that their names would be Rose Marie Wilde-Hopps and Aaron Neville Wilde-Hopps.”

“And?”

“Doctor Clawson has a suggestion that I think Nick and I agree on. We want to cremate the twins, and bury half of the ashes at Bunnyburrow with my littermates, and half with the Wilde’s. It seems only fitting, since Nick lost a twin sister in stillbirth. That is, if it’s ok with you Laverne.” The last part about Nick’s sister was missed by Bonne.

“Sweetheart, nothing could be more right. I’d be proud to have the twins with Johnathan and Nicholle.”

“Judy…?”

“……God mom, it hurts … so much…”

“I know sweetie. The pain never really goes away, you just learn to deal with it.”

“How?”

“Emotional support from therapists and support groups, but from family mostly. We all handle it differently Judy. And what you might not realize, Nick needs the support too. Don’t forget, he lost the kits as well. I’m sure he and Stu are having a bit of a talk, just as we are. He may not have carried the twins, but he feels the loss as deeply as you do.”

“That’s right” added Laverne “Remember, Nick just found out about his sister, so it’s hitting him harder that it might most fathers who’ve lost kits, harder than you might believe”.

“Wait” interrupts Bonnie “Nick had a sister? I never knew that Nick had a sister!”

“Yes” says Laverne “Nick had a sister that was stillborn, a twin. He only found out a few weeks ago, so this has got to be hitting him hard as well.”

…

After leaving Judy’s room, Stu asks “Nick, is there someplace quiet around here that we can talk?”

“… Yea, I think there’s a chapel on the ground floor, why?”

“Well. I’ve got a pretty good idea what the girls are talking about, and I think we need to have a talk ourselves.”

“Really, and what would that be about?”

“Look Nick, I know you’re not stupid, so don’t act like it. I know you’re hurting because Judy lost
the kits, it’s only natural. I know, because I’ve been down that road as well.”

“Yea, Judy told me she was the only kit to survive her litter."

“Do you really think that those were the only kits we lost?”

“…. No, I guess not.”

“And you’d guess right. We’ve lost a total of thirty-seven kits in all over the years Nick. Stillbirth, miscarriage, accidents and sickness. It never gets any easier, and the hurt is always there.”

“So, how do you deal with it Stu? How do you cope with losing so many kits? I can’t imagine how you would begin to deal with the loss of that many kits.”

“Well, the first time, when we lost Judy’s littermates, I went out and got blind-assed drunk. It didn’t help, just gave me a really mean three-day hangover. I don’t recommend that by the way.’

‘In the meantime, Bonnie had issues as well, depression actually. I made it worse by my not being there for her when I should have been, I damned near lost her … You need to be there for Judy son’ ‘Yea, I said son” noting the astonished look on Nick’s face “I couldn’t ask for a better son of my own the way you’ve taken care of Judy. I might have had reservations when she first started working for you, but you’ve proven that all you really care about is my daughter, species be damned.”

“Stu I …”

“I’m not quite finished just yet. Let me speak my mind first please, then you can have your say. I want you to tell me what you know about the kits, how many, boys or girls, names, everything. I know it sucks big time right now, but trust an old bunny, in the long run it’ll help.”

Taking a deep breath, Nick begins “…. Ok …. We know that there were two kits, twins, a boy and a girl. We were told the girl was sort of foxlike and the boy was bunnylike. We named them Rose Marie Wilde-Hopps and Aaron Neville Wilde-Hopps. I think we decided to have them cremated and would share the ashes, half would be buried with Judy’s littermates and half with my dad and sister here in Zootopia.”

“Wait, you had a sister?”

“Yea, I just found out a few weeks ago. When I proposed officially and got Judy her ring, we went and visited with my mom. That’s when mom pretty much forced me to look at her baby book. Her name was Nicholle Patricia, she was my twin sister and she was stillborn. If I hadn’t been so damned hard headed and visited my dad at the cemetery years ago like my mom asked me to I would have known a lot sooner. It’s been a lot to deal with all of a sudden… first finding out about Trish, now losing the kits…”

‘What am I going to do Stu? I promised Judy I’d take care of her, that I wouldn’t let anything bad ever happen to her again? I broke my promise….”

“Bullshit!”

“W-what?”

“You heard me, I said bullshit. Tell me, just exactly how do you figure you broke your promise? There isn’t a thing on earth that you could have done to prevent this from happening. I told you before, I’ve been through the exact same thing and I meant it. Things like this happen all of the time to regular folks, let alone to a pair like you two.”

“But I promised…”
“Nick you made a promise that was impossible to keep, you’ve got to get over that already.”

“Easier said than done Stu.”

“I know, but for Judy’s sake you’ve got to try, ok?”

“Yea, ok…”

Just then, Nick’s cell phone pinged ….

“That’s from Skye, I guess the girls are ready for us … thanks Stu, I might just be able to make it through all of this now.”

…

As Nick and Stu enter Judy’s room “Mom, can you guys give Nick and I a bit of privacy for a few minutes please? We have a few things to discuss …”

Giving her daughter a quick hug Bonnie agrees “Sure thing we all need to be going anyway, now that we know that you’re going to be more or less ok, at least for the time being.”

“Skye, thanks for being such a good friend through all of this …”

“No problem sis, just get better. We’ll see you at the shop soon, right?”

As Judy looks at Nick and sees a ‘do what you think is right’ look “I think it’ll be best if I took a week or so off, with needing to plan the funerals and such, you know….”

“Yea, it’s ok, I get it. Do you want me to stick around a bit and give you a ride home or what?”

“No” taking a quick look at Nick “I think I’ll take the doctor’s advice and spend the night. I’ve taken enough stupid chances lately.”

Noticing a stern look from Nick, Judy continues “Look, I know that everyone is telling me that there isn’t anything that I did to cause the loss of out kits. I still can’t help but think that if I would’ve just listened the first time, none of this would have happened. I have to work this out myself, ok?”

“Judy, this isn’t a ‘self-help’ kind of deal, ok”? insisted Bonnie. “I speak from experience. I’ve lost enough kits over the years to know a thing or two and…”

“Oh mom, enough already” said Judy, raising her voice “I get it ok? If I think I need help I’ll ask.”

…

After everyone leaves but Nick “Nick, what are we gonna do? I have no idea how to go about taking care of the kits, making arrangements …”

In a soft voice, which Judy would have missed except for her excellent hearing “I’ll take care of the kits and handle the arrangements … I-I don’t want to put you through any more stress than need be.”

“Nick … I …”

“It’s ok … You’ve been through enough heartache these past few months … please … let me take care of this. I’ll coordinate the funerals with mom and your folks.”

“But Nick …”

“Look Judy, let me ask you … do you think you could handle going down to the morgue and claim
the kits without totally breaking down … again?”

“……. No, I don’t think so. Can you?”

“Probably not, but we’re the only ones that can claim them. Plus, I know a few mammals that I …
we can trust to do what we need to have done and do it right. They can pick the kits up and let us
know when they’re … ready … for us to pick them up. Believe it or not, this is as difficult for me as
it is for you. Granted, I never had the honor of carrying them, but they were my future as well as
yours.”

“You get some rest, I’ll take care of the kits, call the funeral home and call our parents. Unless you
have any objections, I think that our parents and maybe Skye is all we need for the funerals. The last
thing we need is a bunch of mammals making things more difficult than they already are.”

“…. Nick, I trust you to do the right things for our kits. And I also think that you’re right about
having just our parents, and about including Skye. She’s been a big help through everything since
we’ve met, so I wouldn’t feel right not including her. You go on, I’ll rest and you can let me know
about everything when you get back.

‘I love you Nick, more than you can ever imagine ….‘

“I love you too, I’ll be back soon” as he kisses Judy lightly between her ears.

…

As Nick exits Judy’s room and heads for the morgue to claim their kits, he makes a call to a mammal
he knows.

“Hello Herman? This is Nick Wilde. Yea, I know, it’s been a while. Listen I need a really big favor
… my wife and I just lost our kits and … no, it’s ok. Yea, she lost them to a miscarriage and we need
to use your services for cremation. Two small kits, and we need them to be cremated together, but
we want the ashes to be put in two separate urns. I know it’s unusual, but they’re going to go to two
separate cemeteries.’

‘Names? Oh, yea … Rose Marie Wilde-Hopps and Aaron Neville Wilde-Hopps. And Herman,
please, give me the best stuff that ya got…’

‘I’ll set it up with Zootopia General so you can pick them up. Let me know when you’re finished so
we can schedule the funerals, then I’ll pick the kits up. No, you don’t need to do anything else, I’ll
make all of the arrangements and transport the kits myself, ok?’

‘Whaddaya mean no charge? I’m not asking for a … You never charge for kits like this? Well, if
that’s your final word then …. thanks.”

…

As the day of the funerals arrive, it was overcast and generally miserable, just enough so to match the
mood of the attendees.

At the Wilde family plot, the service small urn containing half of the twins’ ashes was placed in a
small vault beside Nick’s marker.

The only mammals in attendance were Nick and Judy, their parents and Judy’s brothers Josh and
Duane, Shirley and Skye.

Delivering the invocation was one of Judy’s uncles Thomas, who was one of Bonnie’s brothers.
Bonnie insisted that her brother, who was an ordained minister perform the memorial service mainly
to at least slightly alone for causing Judy so much grief when she was first hired by Nick.
From there, the procession drove to Bunnyburrow where the other small urn was placed with Judy’s siblings, with Thomas again delivering the memorial.

After the service, everyone was mentally exhausted so a quick meal was had, although Nick noticed that Judy never really ate anything, just picking at her food and pushing it around the plate. Then everyone retired for the night.

The next morning, while the burrow was beginning to bustle in its daily routine, Nick couldn’t manage to get Judy to get up for breakfast.

“I’m really not hungry Nick, just leave me alone for a bit please. I’ll be up in a bit, just have mom save me something to eat, ok?”

“… Ok, but if you’re not up by noon, I’ll have to drag your furry but out of bed and feed you myself if I have to…”

“Nick, just leave me the fuck alone for a while ok?” she shouted. “I just lost our kits, and I don’t want to be bothered….”

“Fine, but I meant what I said about you being up by noon. You can’t just not eat and you can’t wallow in self-pity, it’s not healthy…”

He got no answer but the sound of Judy crying. As he gently closed the door, he knew he had to tell Bonnie and his mom at least about Judy’s frame of mind, as worried as he could be.

Entering the kitchen, Bonnie immediately noticed that Judy wasn’t with Nick “Nick, where’s Judy?”

“She said she wasn’t hungry and wouldn’t come out of the room. Then she yelled that she didn’t want to be bothered because she had just lost the kits. Look, I understand that we lost the kits and she’s upset, but this can’t be healthy.”

With very worried expressions, Bonnie and Laverne looked at each other and knew that something had to be done and done soon.

“I’m going to call Doc Hudson and get him here as soon as he can get here” said Bonnie.

“Hello, Doc, this is Bonnie Hopps, I need you to get here as fast as you can. Yes, it’s an emergency, whatever you’re doing, drop it and get here, I think it’s going to be a matter of life and death.’ ‘He should be here about ten minutes or so, in the meantime, we need to go and try to get Judy out of bed. Skye, when he gets here, bring him to Nick and Judy’s room right away please.”

While waiting for Doc Hudson, Laverne and Bonnie enter Judy’s room.

“Judy…” begins Bonnie.

“Go away mom, I just really want to be alone right now.”

“Judy, I know what you’re going through and….”

“Bullshit mom, how can you possibly know how I’m feeling?”
“Listen to me young lady, I’ve lost kits through stillbirth and miscarriage. I’ve buried kits killed in accidents and through disease, so don’t presume to lecture me on losing kits. It hurts every time you lose a kit, I won’t lie. But you can’t keep this up or you’re going to end up killing yourself.”

“Would that be such a bad thing? Really?” Judy said softly “I can’t have kits with Nick, maybe not with anyone. What is life about if I disappoint everyone like that?”

“What the hell are you talking about, disappointing everyone? If you can’t have kits naturally, you can always adopt. There are a lot of kits out there that would love to have you for a mother. Kits that need someone like you for a mother. But you have to want to live to have kits Judy, be they yours and Nicks or adopted.”

“Pardon me, am I interrupting?” came a strong male voice from just outside the room.

Doc Hudson, a large male hare, Bunnyburrow’s resident physician had just arrived and had been escorted to Judy’s room by Skye.

“Doc, please come in. We need you give Judy a quick once over, something’s definitely off with her.”

“What seems to be the problem?”

“She just recently lost her first litter of kits through miscarr…”

“Mom, will you just…”

“As I was saying, she just miscarried and now she won’t eat, hasn’t spoken much, is almost totally withdrawn, and won’t leave the room, plus she’s had several panic attacks recently. I’m worried about her…”

As Judy withdraws from the conversation, doc Hudson asks Bonnie, Laverne and Skye to leave so he can talk with Judy and give a quick look over.

“Judy, please let me give you a quick looksee. I just want to check your vitals, heartbeat, blood pressure and such.”

As Judy just stares into empty space doc takes her blood pressure which is greatly elevated and then checks her heartbeat which is highly elevated as well, at well over 210 beats per minute.

“Bonnie, come in here quick” hollers doc Hudson as Judy collapses onto the bed “I can only guess right now since I’m not a trained psychologist, but I think Judy is suffering from acute depression, we’ve got to do something to get her heart rate down and do it quickly ….”

“I’ll go get Nick, maybe he can help, cuddling with him seems to calm her.”

“Do it and do it fast…”

As Bonnie returns a few minutes later with Nick in tow, everyone hears panic in doc’s voice “We’re losing her…”

XxX
AN: I will NOT elaborate on the D&C procedure, Google it if you really think you need to know, although I would suggest NOT!
AN2: Dr. Robin Cotton is an actual DNA researcher
AN3: A rabbit’s normal heartrate is 120-150 bpm.”
AN4: All statistics quoted to are actual stats.
Chapter Summary

Judy recovers from her episode and she and Nick find possible help from an unexpected source.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

14: HOPE

XxX

“Bonnie, come in here quick” hollers doc Hudson frantically as Judy collapses onto the bed. “I can only guess right now since I’m not a trained psychologist, but I’m sure that Judy is suffering from acute depression. We’ve got to do something to get her heart rate down and do it quickly ….”

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…

As Judy seemingly wakes from a short nap, she looks around and recognizes her old room. However, as she scans the room she sees two small figures that appear to be sleeping at the foot of the bed. And instead of her mother, Nick and other familiar faces, she notices five figures that she somehow knows but is sure she had never met. She also notices that all of the mammals seem to be of mixed species, and all seem to have rabbit as well as fox features about them.

The longer she stares at the figures, especially the small ones that are sleeping, she gets the strangest feeling that even though she has never met any of them, she actually knows their names…

“Pardon me, but I get the strangest feeling that I know all of you, but I don’t recall ever meeting any of you.”

“Your really have no clue?” asks the tallest and seemingly oldest of the figures, a handsome male who is decidedly foxlike, but has short grey fur similar to her own but with streaks of auburn, he also has a shorter than average snout and longer ears than a normal fox. And the smirk on his muzzle is even more familiar.

Without really thinking about it Judy asks “Your name is Johnathan, isn’t it?”

The sly smirk was his only reply.

“And the bunny beside you is named Bonnie.”
“And you two” looking at another bunny/fox pair “are Stuart and Nicholle.”

“And you” addressing the remaining mammal “are Laverne. How is it I that I seem know all of you but ….”

“Aren’t you forgetting someone?” asks Johnathan softly, nodding towards the small kits seemly sleeping at the foot of the bed.

Tearing up Judy whispers “Rose and Aaron. A-am I dead?” asks Judy.

“No, not yet, but you are giving it your best shot” answers Johnathan.

“But … I still can’t figure out for the life of me (rolling her eyes at the unintended pun), how I could possibly know you all. Rose and Aaron, maybe yes, because I just lost them, but the rest of you…”

“We’re the reason you have to go back. You’re not supposed to be here, not yet.”

“B-but … I don’t understand, where is here?”

“Right now, you’re kind of in between life and death. In the other world, you’re actually only seconds away from dying.”

Pausing a short bit for a totally shocked Judy to absorb what he’s saying, Johnathan continues “We” gesturing to himself and the others “are your unborn children, those you have yet to conceive. We will never be if you die, and if you die he” motioning to a shadowy figure that is mostly transparent squatting in the corner “will follow you shortly.”

“… Nick …” says Judy softly.

“Yes” answers Laverne “that’s our father to be, but only if YOU live. Mom, when you researched the ‘life mate’ thing you missed one crucial fact. If a fox’s life mate dies, their partner will usually die shortly thereafter. Grief and loneliness will cause dad to die shortly, probably less than a week, after you do.’

‘That’s why you have to go back. There’s always hope. But you already know that, you’ve just forgotten it in the sorrow from the loss of Rose and Aaron.”

“Doctor Cotton … that’s right, I’d forgotten about her. You’re so much like your father, thank you for saving me.”

Still wearing one of Nick’s patented smirks, Johnathan replies “Self-preservation mom, saving you saves us, all of us, dad included. But, you’re welcome. And to answer your unasked question, yea, you can tell dad about all of this. He’ll probably find it a bit farfetched at first, but he’ll believe you in the long run I promise. Telling anyone else … is up to you.”

“Mom” interrupted Bonnie “you have to go back now before it’s too late, please.”

“This isn’t goodbye mom” pipes up Patricia “It’s only so long. And remember, we’ll be along when the time is right, so never quit trying, and never give up hope.”

“We love you mom” adds Stuart.

…”

When Judy’s heartbeats quickly recede to a more normal pace, everyone in the room simply stares at her as she rests quietly in Nicks arms.
“This is nothing short of a miracle” remarks doc Hudson. “I’ve never seen this fast of a recovery in my life, and that’s saying something. If you can bottle and sell whatever you’ve got there young mammal, I’ll take a couple of cases of it.”

“Sorry to disappoint doc, but I’ve got a feeling it’ll only work on this particular bunny” replies a vastly relieved Nick.

“Be that as it may, good work. I’ll be back in a couple of hours to check on Judy again. Just keep her quiet and warm, give her plenty of fluids. Oh, and try to get her to eat something, even a little bit will do for now and she should be fine. Ok everyone, give Nick and Judy some space, I’m sure she’ll be fine as long as Nick is here with her. I’ll check back in a bit just to be sure she’s out of the woods so to speak.”

…

After everyone else leaves the room and Nick and Judy are alone “Nick…”

“Hmmm?”

“I-I’m sorry.”

“We’ve already made it plain that losing the kits wasn’t”

“No Nick, not about that … well maybe a little bit. What I’m actually apologizing for is … I actually wanted to die.”

Stunned by Judy’s admission, Nick was speechless.

“… But …”

“Let me finish, please. The fact that I lost the kits had something to do with it, but not all. I felt that if I couldn’t give you kits of your own, I felt that I was less of a wife than you or anyone else deserved. I know now that that was foolish, but at the time … it actually made sense … to me.’

‘I know this isn’t going to make any sense to you, but for a short time, I was in a sort of an in-between world. In between life and death if you will, and I met our future kits.’

Noting his skeptical look, she continued “Our eldest son explained it all to me and told me you’d find it difficult to believe but would eventually so to not worry.”

“Care to share a bit more, or is it some sort of super-secret bunny thing?”

“No ya big goof, of course I can share. Johnathan said it was ok to share with you…”

“Johnathan …” Repeated Nick softly.

“Yes, our first-born son will be named after your dad, and our daughter in the same litter will be named Bonnie, after mom. I’m going to warn you ahead of time, if you ever call him Johnny, I’ll shave your tail and paint you pink…”

Stunned, Nick could only gape at Judy’s revelation.

“We’ll have 5 kits in all” she continued “Johnathan and Bonnie in the first litter, Stuart and Nicholle in the second and Laverne being a lone kit in the last. And Nick, they’re absolutely beautiful. At least the girls are, the boys are as handsome as you, well almost anyway” she added giggling softly.

“That’s beyond great, it’s marvelous … but how are we supposed to come by these wonderful kits
without a repeat of what we’ve just gone through?” Nick asked nervously.

“Well, Laverne, our daughter to be Laverne, not your mother, reminded me of something that doctor Clawson told us in the hospital, about someone she knew that could help us. A doctor Cotton I believe.”

“Yea, I remember now, Clawson told us to wait for a call from her so we could talk to this doctor Cotton.”

“If we don’t hear from Clawson by the end of the week, would you mind terribly if we called her instead? I have no idea what would be involved but whatever it is, I think we should at least try it.”

“Works for me Fluff. Now, if you think you’re up to it, how about we get you something to eat, ya need it ya know.”

“Yes dad … damn, that sounds kinda nice, don’t ya think?”

“Sounds great to me, maybe we can get started on that … soon?” Nick said, bouncing his eyebrows.

Only blushing slightly, Judy answered “Not for at least a week or so yet. But yea, I don’t see why not, especially now that I’ve got the correct meds so we don’t have a repeat … of … of … this...” she added softly.

Hearing a soft knock at the door “Come in” says Judy startled slightly by the sound.

“Hey Jude, feelin’ better?” inquired Bonnie hopefully, with Stu, Laverne, Shirley and Skye close behind.

“Yea, much better thanks. I’m sorry to be such a bother to you guys.”

“Oh posh, the important thing is that you’re better.”

“Here’s some of Nick’s carrot soup” began Laverne “it’s probably not as good as he makes it, but I think you’ll like it.”

“I’m sure I will, I’m starving, thanks again.”

“Judy” begins Bonnie “I can’t help but ask, do you have any idea how you were able to recover so quickly and come away from death’s door?”

Looking at Nick she thought for a few seconds about their previous conversation and decided to keep her experience between just Nick and herself, at least for now “Not for sure, no I don’t. But I think it has to do with hope. And Love. You need both to survive. And with all of you, especially Nick, I know I have both.”

Several hours later:

“Well” began doc Hudson “I haven’t the foggiest how you did it young mammal” addressing Nick “But Judy’s heart rate and blood pressure are both back to a normal range and holding steady in just a matter of a few hours.”

Looking at Judy with a small smirk on his face that only Judy and Laverne caught Nick commented “All I can figure is that she had more of a will to live than to die. We may never know for sure what happened, but I for one am satisfied with the outcome and I’m willing to leave well enough alone.”
“I guess you’re right there. I’ll be leaving now, I don’t see any reason to come back and check Judy again, she seems perfectly healthy and happier than I’ve personally seen her in years. Everyone take care, this is one that’ll be hard to explain in my journal.”

...

After everyone left Nick and Judy to rest, Laverne hung back for a quick word with them “I don’t know what’s going on with you two, but I’m sure you’ll let me know at some point in time … right?”

“Mom” began Nick, I have no idea what you mi-”

“Cut the bullshit Nick, I can smell a hustle a mile away and you know it. Just be honest enough to tell me that when the time is right, you’ll come clean. OK?”

“Laverne …” began Judy

“Mom if you don’t mind dearie, it’s just too weird having my new daughter calling me by my given name.”

“Ok … MOM … if you insist, I promise that at some point in time we’ll make everything clear. Whether or not you choose to believe it is up to you, ok?”

“Ok, as long as you promise Judy” looking sternly at Nick “I’ll accept that … for now.”

“I think that we’ll probably head back to Zootopia tomorrow after lunch. That’ll give us all enough time to get rested up and get enough food into Judy so she’ll be able to function.”

Looking at his mother “Mom, I think we’ll pass on the house swap thing for now at least. I’m not saying we might not be swapping in the future, but at least for now I don’t think it would be appropriate. Especially being so close to having lost the kits. I know you understand…”

“Of course I do. The invitation will be there for whenever circumstances might change. I’ll leave you two alone for now. It’s getting late so get some rest, I’ll see you two in the morning at breakfast.”

“G’nite mom” comes from both Nick and Judy, who look at each other and smile.

...

After Laverne leaves the room, “Nick … I want to go back to work at the shop.”

Staring at Judy for a few long seconds Nick relents “Ok, if you really want to, I’m fine with it. But not until Monday at the earliest. If you’re dead set on going back to work, I want you to be in top shape, healthy enough physically and mentally to do what needs to be done. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“Fluff, are you gonna be ok until morning or do you want me to go get you some more to eat …?”

“I’m good Nick. I know I haven’t eaten a lot in the last few days because of losing the kits, but I think I’m gonna be ok. I’ve got too much to live for now. I never told you before, but there was another revelation when I was between worlds.”

“Really? What would that be?”

“Let me ask you something first … what would happen to you if I had died?”
“………..”

“You really don’t have to answer, I already know. Laverne, our future kit Laverne not your mom, told me. You’d die wouldn’t you? Tell me the truth Nick, please.”

“……. Yes, I would. It’s all part of the ‘life mate’ thing yea, but that notwithstanding, there’s literally no way I could ever go on without you. You are my life Judy.”

“My gods Nick, I actually had no idea. What have I don-”

“Judy listen to me …. whoever my life mate would be, you, a vixen, a wolf whoever. If she dies, I would follow, that’s just a fact, it’s in our biology. There’s absolutely no one, and I mean no one, that I would rather have in my life than you. Even if we end up having to adopt kits, I want to spend my life with you and only you. It doesn’t matter if we die tomorrow or 50 years from now.”

“Nick …”

“I know, but let’s get some sleep, we can work everything else out tomorrow. OK?”

Breathing a heavy sigh Judy gives up “Ok, g’nite. I love you Nick, more than you’ll ever know.”

“’Nite Fluff” as he kisses lightly between the ears “I love you too…”

And as sleep finds them both, a full moon promising a brighter future, shines down on them….

…

At around eight in the morning, there’s a light tap on the door “Yes?” answers Judy.

“Are you two ok?” asks Bonnie.

“Mom you know we are, you’ve been all checking up on us all night long…”

“…we were just concerned for you hon, no one meant to pry.”

“I know, but maybe you forgot, I’m still a bunny and my hearing’s still as good as ever.”

“Anyway, breakfast is ready if you want some. Most of us have already eaten, but we kept the kitchen open so you could sleep in for a bit and still get something fresh to eat.”

“Give us about a half hour or so and we’ll be along Bonnie” says Nick.

“Alright then, we’ll see you two in a bit.”

“You ready for a quick shower then some breakfast Fluff?”

“Absolutely, and NO funny business…”

“I thought we already agreed last night that nothing would go on for a bit!”

“Yea, but I just want to be sure you remembered you horny old fox…”

“Me? I was worried that you and your bunny hormones would take advantage of me in the shower and…”

“Har, har. That’ll happen, but not now and not here. After we get home and I have more of a chance to heal, we’ll see what happens. Besides, there are a lot of places left in the house we haven’t broken
in yet and…”

“….. ok, ok, TMI for right now if you want to NOT get attacked in the shower. Let’s get moving. I smell blueberry pancakes and turkey sausage cooking.”

…

After they had a leisurely breakfast of blueberry pancakes, turkey sausage, which mildly horrified Judy’s parents (I guess they forgot she had acquired a taste for meat after the Icehouse incident) and carrot juice, Nick and Judy bade her parents goodbye and headed back to Zootopia along with Laverne and Shirley.

“You’re going to be ok … aren’t you” Bonnie asked.

“Yea mom, I am. I may not be back to my old self yet, but I am better, thanks to you all.”

“Well, I don’t know how much credit the rest of us can take, Nick did the hard work, bringing you back almost from the brink of death and all.”

“No mom, it was all of you. The love was there, I felt it. That’s what brought me back. I’ll call when we get back. Love you guys, see you all soon.”

…

The nearly four-hour trip was quiet for the most part with Judy napping off and on. Finally waking fully as Nick entered the city limits “Hey Slick, home already?”

Fearing a replay of the first trip Nick answered cautiously “Yea, sorry I didn’t wake you, You ok?”

“Yea, I’m fine this time. I know that I really needed the rest and we’re together so don’t worry, there’s no panic attack on the horizon.”

“Great … You hungry? It’s been a while since breakfast.”

“Yea, I guess I could use a quick bite.”

“… How about stopping at Mel’s for a bite of lunch before we head home then?”

“Isn’t that where we went after we first met?”

“For breakfast, yea.”

“I’m sorry for causing all of you guys to worry so much lately …”

“Listen, you’ve got to start getting over this. You’ve already admitted that you realize that there was nothing you could’ve done to prevent what happened. So, let’s just keep on moving ahead. I know we can’t just act like nothing happened ‘cause we both know that’d never work. We’ll mark it up as a life changing experience and look forward to meeting this doctor Cotton and see how things work out … ok?”

With Judy still looking a bit dejected, staring at the floor of the truck Nick says softly “Hey…”

Just as Judy looked up, she received a quick kiss in the end of her nose “Hey!”

“Yes?”
“Umm … thanks… for … everything Nick.”

“For you, anything, my lovely bunny.”

As Nick and Judy enter the cafe, Alice and Mel are a bit unsure how to greet the couple. Being pretty much lifelong friends with Laverne and Shirley, they know of the couple’s loss of their kits. The unease is dispelled a bit with Nick’s casual greeting.

“Hey guys, how’s things?” begins Nick casually.

“Been ok, ain’t seen you two in a while. Looks like the bunny ain’t been too hard on ya” greets Alice. “What’ll y’all have?”

With a small grin Judy orders first “I’ll have some of that wonderful casserole that I had the first time, with some toast and carrot juice please.”

“Make that two, but coffee for me please” adds Nick.

“Commin’ right up” says Mel as he begins on their order.

Seeing a bit of indecision still on their faces, Judy decides to broach the subject that is very evidently on their minds.

“It’s ok guys, I know it’s difficult for you because you know it’s uncomfortable for me … for us. We’ll be fine sooner or later, it’s just part of life. Not talking about it just makes it more difficult to deal with later…”

In between bites, Nick and Judy narrate the tragic happening of the past week. While all shed tears (including Mel) the mood was considerably lighter than earlier. As Nick and Judy get up to pay, Mel confronts Nick “If you try to pay me I’ll just throw yer ass out, you know that, right? And no, this ain’t no pity party, it’s just one friend helping another in a time of need”.

Softening his voice and demeanor Mel adds “Now, get going … and don’t be such strangers…”

“So now what?” Judy asks as they make their way home.

“Well, we’ve got a few days until we head back to the shop, how about if we swing by Clawson’s and see if she’s been in contact with this doctor … Cotton I believe, and see if she’s heard anything.”

“… Can’t hurt. I know she was supposed to contact us when she heard something but as long as we’re out and about, why not?”

Entering the doctor’s office, the receptionist greeted them “Mr. and Mrs. Wilde, I was just about to call you. Doctor said that she’s in contact with her specialist friend as we speak. Hold on a sec and I’ll let her know you’re here.”

“Thanks Adella” responds Judy “I know it’s late in the day but…”

“No, it’s ok, I’m sure she would want to have you here while she’s talking to her specialist friend. Follow me please.”
Leading the couple to the doctor’s private office, Adella tapped on the door and announced that Nick and Judy were in the hallway.

“Please come in, you’re just the mammals that need to be in on this call with me.’

‘Doctor Cotton, I have Nick and Judy Wilde with me, they just now came into my office. Do you mind if I put the phone on speaker?’

“No, by all means please do” replied Dr. Cotton.

“All right then, introductions. Nick and Judy Wilde please say hello to Doctor Robin Cotton. Doctor Cotton, Nick and Judy Wilde.”

“Hello” was said by all three at the same time, eliciting a giggle from all four in on the conversation.

“OK, down to business” began doctor Clawson. I believe we all know why we’re gathered here. Doctor Cotton, would you give Nick and Judy a bit of background so everyone is on the same page?”

“Certainly. My name, as you probably guessed, is Doctor Robin Cotton. I currently head the genetic research program here at Zootopia Medical College. I specialize in DNA manipulation and gene splicing.”

“Doctor Cotton, forgive me for interrupting, but can you tell us quickly why you’re interested in helping us with our particular … problem?” asked Nick.

“NICK!!!” admonished Judy.

“No, that’s quite all right” answered doctor Cotton. “That question would have come up before long, so now is as good a time to give you a valid explanation as any.’

‘My husband and I have been trying unsuccessfully for many years to have kits of our own naturally. I’ve lost more kits than I care to mention through miscarriage, that’s exactly why I’m in my current field of endeavor’

‘However, before I tell you any more about my history, I would like to meet with you both personally. I believe it would lend more credence to why I want to help you. If you’re free on Saturday, say around noon, we could meet face to face and discuss the particulars of what will be involved if you choose to work with me on my project.”

Looking at each other and each nodding, Judy spoke up “I believe that we’re free then, where would you like to meet, at the University?”

“No, actually I was thinking more along the lines of the coffee shop at the Palms Hotel, on Sahara Central Avenue.”

Momentarily in shock at the suggestion but noticing a slight grin on doctor Clawson’s muzzle, Nick finally spoke after noticing Judy’s slight affirmative nod “I … believe we can agree to that. We’ll see you around noon on Saturday then.’

‘We’ll be saying goodbye to you both for now, we can see our way out. Many thanks to you doctor Cotton and especially to you doctor Clawson … for everything.”

“I believe you’ll both be pleasantly surprised when you meet with doctor Cotton” adds doctor Clawson as Nick and Judy exit her office.

“What do you suppose that was about?” asks Nick as he opens the door to the truck for Judy.

“I’m sure we’ll find out Saturday” responded Judy.
As Saturday morning rolls around, Nick and Judy grow more pensive.

“What reason could she have to meet us at the Palms rather than the University?” wondered Judy aloud.

“I have NO idea” replied Nick “it does seem odd since she evidently does all of her work there.”

“May I help you?” inquired the Maître d’, a tall male gazelle as they enter the restaurant.

“Yes” replied Nick, we’re here to meet with a doctor Cotton.”

“Ah yes, please follow me.”

Having no idea what this doctor Cotton looks like, Nick and Judy follow the Maître d’ to a table occupied by a female hare and a slightly undersized male grey wolf.

“D-doctor Cotton?” inquired a very surprised Nick and Judy at the same time.

Laughing and wearing a very large grin, doctor Cotton proceeded with introductions. “Guilty as charged. Nick and Judy Wilde, please allow me to introduce my husband of nine years Michael Sees Far.’

‘Michael, Nick and Judy Wilde.”

“So, THIS is why you and doctor Clawson were so mysterious about your identity.” commented Judy.

“Yes, I knew that meeting like this would lend more credence to the reason I want so desperately to work with you. I see you’re a bit confused about my last name. I retained my maiden name when I got married because, well who would take a lagomorph seriously with the last name of Sees Far?’

‘We met and married when I was in the Midwest region seeking natural cures for common ailments. Michael’s father is a well-respected Lakota medicine mammal in his tribe and very accomplished healer. After I actually conceived the first time and then miscarried, I knew that I had to find something to help have kits. So, I changed my primary research field from herbology to DNA research and gene manipulation, hoping to find a way to be able to find a way for me, for us to have kits. I’ll admit, I was rather selfish to begin with, but when I heard that you had successful conceived I had hopes that … perhaps … you’d be willing to help me with my research.”

“How in the world would we be able to help you? Neither of us know anything about DNA stuff or genes or anything…” asked Judy.

“Well, at the present time, I’m using different compounds of natural plant protein strands to enhance the natural reproductive ability of different mammal species … particularly pred and prey combinations such as the four of us.”

“And this would involve us how … exactly?” asks Nick.

“I would like to have you try the same compounds that I’ve already used on Michael and myself to observe their effectiveness on your bodies. I can assure you that they’re relatively safe and …”

“Define relatively” interrupted Nick rather forcefully “We are NOT going to be taking anything that might endanger us since we’re involved in a ‘life mate’ bond, which means that one dying would mean death for the other ...”
“I’m well aware of your life mate situation, and I would never give you a compound that and Michael and I haven’t already taken ourselves. I’ll need to tweak the formulas a bit to take into account the differences in our individual species, you know rabbits and hares are similar but different. The same applies to the differences between Michael and yourself Nick. While you’re both considered canines, the genus is entirely different.’

‘Since there are different formulas for we females and for you males there’ll be combinations and different strengths of each that I’ll need to work on, if you actually consent to the experimentation that is.”

Although Nick looked less than thrilled, Judy quickly agreed “We’ll be happy to join in on the project” she said quickly, shooting Nick a reassuring smile. “Remember our little talk back at the burrow?” she asked. “Everything will be fine, trust me, we can do this … together.”

“So” began Nick “I take it that all of this will be taken orally?”

“Yes, that’s the plan. In fact, I’m sure Judy is familiar with several of the plants that we’ll be using, having grown up on a farm and all. One is actually a plant that under normal circumstances is considered toxic.”

“Really, and which plant in particular would that be?” questioned Judy.

“Midnicampum Holicithias, more commonly known as …”

“Nighthowlers” finished a horrified Judy.

“Wait, wait, wait” began an incredulous Nick “you want to give us stuff made from a toxic plant?”

“Only the raw enzymes are toxic, while I use the basic protein strands. There is nothing toxic in any of my ingredients. As I stated before, Michael and I have already taken all of the compounds that I would be giving you both with no ill effects. The only difference would be a slight adjustment in the amount of each ingredient to adjust for the difference in body mass and species.”

“So, why would we take the same … umm stuff you’ve taken and come out with different results?” asks Nick.

“And” adds Judy forcefully “there’s no way I’m going to risk going through another meltdown like I just had by getting pregnant again and losing more kits, that’s just out.”

“Well actually, to begin with, what I was initially considering was some … umm … biological contributions from each of you to start with, to use as a baseline. Then I’d give you each the same compounds that Michael and I have been taking for a while before I actually begin testing the results. I’ll be using an in vitro method to avoid the risk of the same devastation you encountered the first time you were pregnant.”

Looking at each other, Nick and Judy were totally unsure what Dr. Cotton was talking about until …

“Wait” started an incredulous Judy “you mean to tell us you want…” and she notices a small affirmative nod from doctor Cotton.

“What?” asks a still clueless Nick.

Rolling her eyes, Judy leans over and quickly whispers in Nick’s ear.

“WHAT??? Oh, hell no!”

“Nick!”
“What?”

“Nick, we’re going to do this.”

“But … “

“No Nick … We’re. Going To. Do. This.”

“But she want’s …”

“I KNOW what she wants, I just told you remember?”

“But …”

“NICK, SHUT IT!!”

“…… Fine”.

“Look, if you’ll agree to this I’ll …” and Judy whispers in Nicks ear again, low enough so only he can hear.

“You’d do that … for me?”

“No Nick, for us and the kits, remember?”

“For the kits” says Nick softly, remembering their conversation at the burrow only a few days ago.

“That’s my good fox.”

Addressing doctor Cotton “We’ll keep in touch. I’ll let you know when I’m ready to start my next heat cycle. Would you rather we contact you and come to the University for our … contributions?”

Suppressing a small giggle doctor Cotton answers “Yes I think that would be for the best.’
‘I’m going to start putting together a set of compounds for each of you to begin taking as soon as possible. I’ll explain exactly what will be taking place at that time.’
‘Then I’ll be sure to set aside a place for each of you so you’ll be less … uncomfortable when the time comes for your ‘contributions’.”

XxX

Chapter End Notes

FUN FACT: The plant that is described in Zootopia (and this story) with the scientific name “Midnicampum Holicithias” also called Nighthowlers which belongs to the Crocus variety, does exist in real life. And yes, I’m being a bit liberal with all the science involved here since I don’t think any of it actually exists yet. It’s called artistic license.
A Fresh Start

Chapter Summary

The healing begins, but an unexpected sale at the shop brings additional drama for Judy and Nick.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

15: A Fresh Start

XxX

After returning home from the encouraging visit with doctor Clawson and doctor Cotton, Nick and Judy prepare for the upcoming week, almost welcoming the return to the shop after the recent spirit draining recent events. Then Nick’s phone pings as he gets a text.

Seeing a questioning look from Judy “It’s from Midnight. He wants us to come to the shop tonight. The crew is gonna hold a jam session and they’re pretty much adamant about us joining in. Whaddaya think Squeak? I know it’s kinda soon with all that’s been happening lately, but it might be just what we need to throw off some of this funk.”

“…… I-I guess it wouldn’t hurt to stop by, at least for a bit. I’m sure they pretty much know what’s been going on and just want to help us out as best they can. I wouldn’t want to distance them from us, I know they mean well. So, yea, I think it’d be a good idea. Let him know we’ll be there, at least for a little while.”

“You are one wise bunny, I guess that’s why I love you like I do.”

“Flatterer, you’re just saying that to get into my pants…”

“Is it working?”

“… Maybe … I don’t know though, I am a married bunny after all.”

“Well, I have it on good authority that your husband wouldn’t mind, I do know him fairly well you know.”

“Is that so?”

“Yup, we’re just like that” says Nick crossing his fingers to indicate how close he is.

“Ya big goof. I don’t know, we’ll see how I feel after the session tonight ok? No promises though.”

“Well, a maybe is way better than a no. What say we get a quick nap? I think we could use the rest after everything that’s happened, especially with your visit with our future kits and all.”

With a bit of a far away look in her eyes “The kits…. sure, a nap sounds like a good idea, but just a nap for now Nick, ok?”
“Yea, just a nap Fluff, I promise.”

As they drift off to sleep, Judy can’t help but think back on the ‘conversation’ she had with her future kits. A tear of sorrow and of joy appeared briefly but the hope that someday, somehow, that they would be real and not just a dream gave her comfort.

…

“Nick … NICK … NICK!”

“Huh … What. Where….”

“Nick, let me up. I have to pee. That, and it’s time we got up to go to the shop.”

“Squeak, you have NO idea how much I really wanted to finish the dream I was having…”

“Judging from how you’re poking me in the butt, I believe I might have some idea…”

“Ok, my bad, maybe you do.”

“C’mon, get dressed and we’ll head to the shop. I’ve got a sneaking suspicion that those guys are up to something and I for one want to know what it is.”

“Wow, a country bunny is suspicious of city workers, wait until the crew hears about this…”

“Hush you. You know what I mean.”

“Do I know that?” quizzed an amused Nick “…. yes, yes I do, but it’s fun to mess with you…”

“Laugh it up fuzzball. Keep that up and you’ll mess up any chance of anything happening later tonight, got it?”

“………”

“That’s what I thought, now get dressed.”

While Judy relieves herself in the bathroom, Nick figures that perhaps a slightly more casual look than jeans and his usual green Pawaiian shirt and tie that Judy likes/hates might be the ticket for tonight.

When Judy exits the bathroom, she sees Nick in tan slacks and a black crew shirt. “Lookin’ good Slick.”

“Thanks, I thought maybe I’d try to impress my lady love for a change.”

Giving him a tight hug “Thanks Nick…”

“You’re very much welcome. Now, lets get going before I change my mind and…”

“Easy there Romeo, one step at a time.”

…

Arriving just short of seven pm, Nick and Judy enter the shop and notice that preparations are in full swing for the upcoming event.

“Hey guys, how ya holdin’ up?” asks Skye as she, Laverne and Shirley notice them enter.
“We’re better” remarks Judy softly. “It’ll take some time, but we think everything happens for a purpose. We’ll just have to see what the future brings” as she glances quickly at Nick.

“What?” inquires Skye as she notices the quick glance.

“Later sis, if it’s ok. I promise I’ll fill you in, just … not right now, ok? Please?”

Just then, Midnight and Lefty join the small group.

“Glad you two could make it, you know we were all worried about you. You do know that, right?” says Midnight.

“Yea, thanks guys, it means a lot you know?”

“We’re just about set up, so if you don’t mind we’ll finish and get this goin’.”

Stepping up to the center stage mic, Midnight begins “All right you bunch of yahoos, listen up! As you all know, Nick and Judy have come across some really hard times as of late.’

‘Nick, Judy, will you please step up here for a second.”

Giving each other questioning looks, they step up to where Midnight and Lefty are standing.

“Nick, while you’ve been gone, your mother tabulated the votes for the little contest that you put out there for the new shop name. We … all of us at the shop … decided that the new name will be ‘Wilde Ride Customs’. We also decided that the ’36 Harley EL that was to be the prize will be raffled off, and every single cent is to be used by a certain charity.’

‘That charity will be known as ‘The Rose and Aaron Wilde-Hopps Foundation’. We already have posters made and tickets printed up for sale and we’re taking donations as well. Even though it’s been less than a week, we have over half a million dollars in donations alone, with the largest contribution coming from Mayor Lionheart and his fiancé, assistant mayor Dawn Bellwether.”

“What?” remark a stunned Nick and Judy in unison.

Looking directly at the three vixens standing directly in front of him “This has to be the handiwork of one or all three of you” Nick says accusingly.

Laughing, Laverne shoots back “and you’d be totally wrong. You missed it by a country mile Nick.”

“You can blame it all on Lefty” smirks Skye.

Turning on his heel with a very determined look on his muzzle, Nick strides up to, and stands directly in front of, a slightly nervous coyote.

“So” he begins in mock seriousness “This is all your doing then?”

“Ummm … yea …?”

Gathering Lefty into a tight hug with Judy joining him “Thanks mammal, this is one of the nicest things that anyone has done for me … for us.”

“Boss, you saved my life when I was lying on that bench. You’ve saved a lot of lives with this shop so it’s the least any of us could do for you and Squeak.”

“Just … damn. Thank you all. Words have no meaning right now, but thanks” squeaked out a tearful Judy. “I can’t begin to tell you how much this means to us.”
“We already have a place for the charity money to go,” says Nick. “There’s a mammal, a doctor Robin Cotton at Zootopia University. Doctor Cotton heads the DNA research department there. She and her husband have asked us to assist her in developing natural methods to aid in cross species reproduction, especially pred/prey reproduction. Unless something else comes up, we’ll most likely put every cent towards her research.”

…

Taking over the mic again, Midnight motions to the assemble members of the group “Enough of this mushy crap, let’s get this party started…”

“To start things off, we have a special song request. The request was made by none other than myself, and I want to dedicate it to miss Lorie Prancer. Hit it y’all…”

When the band starts playing ‘I Want Candy’ by the Strangeloves, an attractive female springbok employed by Nick as a parts runner who was affectionately nicknamed ‘Candy’ blushed wildly. “Damn it Midnight, I’m gonna get you for this!” she yelled.

“That’s what I’m hoping for” he yells back, causing her to deepen her blush if that was possible. “Shit!” was all a veeeery embarrassed Candy could say….

After the song finishes, Nick steps up and grabs the mic as he heads to the keyboard. “Now that everyone’s had some fun at Candy’s expense” causing the still embarrassed Candy to practically burst into flames “I have a dedication that I want to play for my darling wife”.

When the opening strains of ‘You Are So Beautiful” by Joe Cocker fill the air, Judy begins to tear up yet again, and slowly makes her way to sit beside Nick.

Wiping away tears and taking control of the mic as the song ends, Judy addresses her husband “Nick, you wonderful pain in the ass” causing the entire gathering, including those in the band to break out laughing, much needed after the heart wrenching song that Nick had just performed “you know that I can’t let this go right?

“Lefty, if you’d be so kind as to kick Nick off of the keyboard” which earned even more laughs from the crowd “and Midnight, hand me that guitar, I have a dedication of my own that I’d like to sing”. She then told Lefty off mic what she was going to play.

“Nick, we’ve only been together for a relatively short time. During that short time, we’ve been through a lot together. Some good … some bad. But what I’m trying to say here is simply this … I will always love you” and begins to play and sing ‘I Will Always Love You’ as recorded by Dolly Parton.

Stunned, Nick could only gape at the wonderful rendition that Judy was performing.

“OK” says a choked-up Nick as the song ends “It’s on now.”

Grabbing another spare guitar, Nick turns and tells the group the oldie that he wants to play. He then breaks out with ‘When You're In Love With A Beautiful Bunny’ (Woman) by Dr. Hook.

Not to be outdone, Judy’s next song is an oldie as well, as she begins to play and sing the classic ‘Dedicated To The One I Love’ by The Mamas & the Papas.

Conferring with Judy after she finishes her song, Nick announces “Judy and I’d like to dedicate this next song to everyone who’s been so patient, understanding and supportive of us these past few weeks. And it goes a like something like this”. There wasn’t a dry eye in the building as the two begin singing ‘With A Little Help From My Friends’ by the Beatles.
When the applause finally subsides, Midnight grabs the mic back “All right you two, go sit down and chill. The rest of us want to get some play time in.”

Headed for a table that has been set aside just for them by Skye and Laverne, Nick and Judy walk quietly arm in arm gazing into each other’s eyes and hug tightly before sitting down.

“What am I going to do with you two?” asks Laverne, confronting the couple.

“Whatsoever do you mean mother?” asks Nick in his snarkiest voice.

“You know damned well what I mean, acting like a couple of kits up there, trying to one-up each other.” She scolded, but in a clearly amused tone.

“Well, he started it, calling me beautiful and all” defended Judy with her paws on her hips, clearly playing along, knowing all the while that Laverne is just trying to keep the mood light.

“Yea, well you are and ….” was all that Nick got out before Judy kissed him soundly. When Laverne turns to walk away laughing at their antics, Judy calls her back.

“Mom,” she begins “Nick and I have talked about it and there’s something we want to share with you. Snow, can give us a minute or two please?”

... 

Stepping into the relative quiet of the office Judy begins “After the kits funeral back at the burrow, I promised to explain the look that Nick and I exchanged. You may not believe a word you hear, but that’s not something I can control, so here goes …”

Maintaining a very noncommittal face during Judy’s recounting of her ordeal while near death, the vixen listens intently. When Judy finishes, Laverne looks between Nick and Judy several times and finally addresses Judy. “Do you actually believe that you spoke to your yet to be born kits?” she asks.

Exchanging glances with Judy, Nick answers. “I, for one, believe every word of it. I accept everything that Judy said without question. If she believes it, and I know she does, then so do I. If nothing else, it’s hope. We have to hope that we can have our own kits. We have to hope that we, especially she, will never have to go through something like we just did ever again.’ ‘Doctor Cotton is our link to that hope, and we mean to grab it and hold on to it with everything we hold dear.”

“Look Laverne,” continues Judy, again using her proper name “I know it’s a stretch to have hope based on a-a dream or a vision or whatever, but hope is something I … we desperately need right now. Even if nothing ever comes of the DNA research that we fully intend to go along with, we have to try. Although I’m not opposed to adopting, but we have to at least try to have our own kits naturally … do you understand?”

“I do understand Judy, I truly do. I just don’t want you to be so disappointed that you have another breakdown and be so depressed that even Nick can’t save you.”

“I get that, I really do. We have an appointment with a doctor Cotton when I start my next heat cycle to discuss everything that’s expected of us so we can try and have our own kits naturally without all of the drama like last time. I promise to keep you in the loop so you aren’t quite so worried, ok?”

As the three gather each other into a tight family hug, tears are shed. Tears of sorrow. Tears of joy. Tears of hope.
“I don’t know about the rest of you” says Judy as they break the group hug “But I’m thirsty, and I hear a red beer calling my name. and yes dear, I’ll eat something, I’m NOT going to have a hangover in the morning.”

To which Nick could only give Judy a patented smirk “I guess we’ll see, won’t we?”

…

Late on Sunday morning, Judy has been up for hours and is cooking a late breakfast for a VERY hungover Nick.

“What in the world is all that damned noise?” asks Nick.

“And you were worried about me being hungover dear?” smirks Judy.

“Do you really have to shout?”

Laughing, Judy commented from the kitchen “I’m barely speaking over a whisper, and you know it.”

“And do you have to laugh about it?”

“Yea, sorry. You know you pissed away any chance of getting any last night by getting so drunk, right?”

“Thanks for reminding me. I’ll never live that down will I?”

“Will you?” posing like she’s deep in thought for a few seconds “No, no you won’t!”

“Great.”

“And the shape you’re in now, probably not for the foreseeable future either.”

“Oh, come-on I wasn’t that dr-”

“Yea, actually you were.”

“But …”

“You don’t remember?”

“Ummm, remember what … precisely?”

“Nick, you were so drunk you were trying to molest me on the dance floor.”

“Wait … really?”

“Yes Nick, really.” Pulling a picture on her cell phone that Laverne had texted her last night “if you don’t believe me, have a look at this” as she tossed the phone to Nick.

“Crap……... and just how many of the crew saw all of this?”

“Just about all of them. I guess you know you’re pretty much fucked tomorrow morning when we get to the shop don’t ya? If your mom hadn’t done something, I would’ve probably been arrested for domestic battery.

‘Oh, don’t looked so shocked, you know you would’ve deserved it. I’m still a bit pissed by the
“Well at least I woke up in bed and not on the couch.”

“Or at the shop.”

“… I guess apologizing won’t help …?”

“Yes, it’ll help, but only just barely. I haven’t figured out your punishment yet, but give me time, I’ll think of something. Now, eat you breakfast before it gets cold.”

Looking at the steaming bowl of … “What the hell is this stuff anyway?”

“It’s called grits.”

“…… What the hell are grits?”

“It’s basically porridge made from corn that’s ground into a coarse meal and boiled. If you ask nicely, I’ll let you put some jam or syrup and butter in it. Otherwise you can eat it plain, just like you see it.”

“Ummm, please …?”

“Please what?”

“Please may I have something sweet to put on my, umm …”

“Grits?”

“Yea, that’s it, grits.”

“Yes, you may. There’s strawberry, raspberry, rhubarb, blueberry and…”

“Blueberry is fine, thank you.”

“That’s a good fox, now fix your grits before they get cold, then go get a good shower. After that you can join me in bed if you want to. No, we’re NOT going to be fooling around, but I will let you cuddle.”

After Nick finishes his unusual breakfast (?) which he admitted to himself wasn’t half bad, he got a good shower and joined an already sleeping Judy in bed. ‘Not a bad way to spend the day’ he thought ‘it could’ve been much worse, considering.’

…

Bright and early Monday morning, as the shop personnel gather in the main bay for their assignments, everyone is pleasantly surprised to see Nick and Judy come out of the office.

“All right everybody, gather ‘round” begins Nick. ‘With all the distractions that’ve been occurring lately, and my … our absence, I’m promoting Midnight and Lefty as co-formammals of the shop. They’ll get guidance from me as to what I want done and I’ll have the final say in every major decision in the shop, but they have complete control otherwise. If anyone has issues with this, NOW would be the time to present any valid arguments.’

‘… Nothing? Good. Midnight, you and Lefty hand out assignments and then meet me in the office and bring me up to speed on what’s been going on while we’ve been gone.”

Returning to her work station after a long absence, Judy lets out a deep sigh as she looks at the
disassemble mess that used to be a wannabe Cobra. After spending several hours trying to prioritize what parts to order from what supplier, she suddenly hears Nick over the shop’s intercom system “Squeak, please come to the office … Squeak to the office” ‘what can he want already?’ she wonders.

Entering the office, Judy notices that Nick has a mischievous grin that threatens to go from ear to ear.

“What?” she asks, slightly worried “How am I supposed to get any work done if I’m in the office all da …”

“Do you think you’re up for a challenge?”

“Challenge?” she asks “what type of challenge?”

“First, let me ask you a different question. Do you know why the Cobra was built in the first place?”

“If you’re asking about why the original Cobra was built, not for sure, no.”

“It was built by Carroll Shelby for the specific purpose of beating the Corvettes at LeMans.”

“And?”

“Well, long story short, I have a confirmed buyer for the ‘Vette when it’s restored.”

“And?”

“Said customer wants the Cobra as well when it’s finished as well.”

“Nick, will you please come to the point” she says, becoming a bit impatient.

“Fine. If we, by that I mean you specifically, can build the Cobra good enough to race and beat the ‘Vette in a three-lap race at Road Zootopia, he’ll pay double the asking price for both cars.”

“WHAT?” she shouts in disbelief.

“Yup”.

“Nick, I’ve never raced a car a day in my life … what’s at stake here if I lose?”

“Ummm, I sell him the ‘Vette at the original asking price and give him the Cobra.”

“… have you lost your damned mind?”

“Relax, I’ve got a plan.”

“A plan? Tell me oh wise one, what the hell is your plan?”

“First. If, and by that I actually mean when you win, we keep the Cobra and he still pays for it.’

‘And second, I have a former shop employee of Shelby Enterprises here to help you with the Cobra build.”

“Really? And who would that be?”

Stepping to one side, Nick continues “Squeak, meet Felix ‘The Cat’ Caterson. Felix, Squeak.”

As Judy evaluates the oversized grey tabby cat with black stripes, a question escapes her lips “If you were working for a top-notch outfit like Shelby Enterprises, what are you doing here? No offense
Nick.”

“None taken Squeak. Go ahead Felix, tell her.”

“Officially I was let go for ‘conduct unbecoming’.”

“And the real reason?” prodded Judy.

“Well” Felix hesitated and blushed slightly “I, ummm sorta, took the bosses daughter for a joyride in a prototype Mustang GT.”

“That’s all? Really?”

Noticing the hard stare from Judy he continued “‘Not exactly… she kinda ended up a little bit pregnant… we’re married by the way. Happily. With two kits.’
‘She also happens to be one of Nick’s cousins. Her maiden name was Winston Schwartz.’

“Wait, I’ve heard that name…”

“Well I hope so” replied Nick “she’s been one of Gazelle’s backup singers for years.”

“Wait, what? Gazelle’s back-up singer Winston, is one of your cousins? And you didn’t mention this because…?”

“Never came up.”

“Gazelle performed at our wedding. Your cousin was there and you never thought it was important?” Judy asks slightly miffed.

“To be perfectly honest, I was a bit too enamored with what was going on with my new bride to even think about it. Gazelle performing was as much of a surprise to me as it was to everyone else remember.’
‘And we’re going to be upset and argue about this because …?”

“I’m sorry Nick, I guess I’m still a little wound up from the last few weeks. Can we just pick up from the introduction please?”

“Of course. As I was saying, Fritz was actually a bit more than a shop employee at Shelby. He was instrumental in engine development and helped with suspension design. Like most employees, he had to sign a confidentiality agreement, which just so happens to have expired with Mr. Shelby’s death.”

“Ok, good enough. So, what are the parameters for the Cobra build?”

“Do whatever it takes to beat the ‘Vette.”

“And what about the race?”

“Well the customer is not a seasoned racer so you don’t have to worry about going up against a pro. As an added bonus, I’ve managed to convince Dale Elkhart senior to help train you how to race.”

“The name sounds a bit familiar…”

“Remember when we went and got your phone and laptop just after I hired you?”

“I met his son that day, right?”
“That’s right. Now, you think you’re up to the challenge?”

Taking a moment to consider, Judy asks “… what’s the budget for the build?”

With his smirk firmly in place, Nick answers “There is none. Whatever you want, you get.”

Doing her best to match his smirk, Judy looks at Felix and gives the only answer she can “What are we waiting for, let’s get movin’ Felix. We’ve got a race car to build.”

Standing side by side, Judy and Felix take turns staring back and forth from the white board and then to what’s left of the fully disassembled Cobra.

“Well” begins Judy, addressing Felix “you’re the expert here, where do you suggest we start?”

“Well, the frame and body mounts need to be cleaned up and sent to powder coat. I think most of the body parts can be salvaged so they can be sent to the body shop once the frame is done.’

‘As far as the engine, I might have an idea where I get my paws on an original 485 horsepower side oiler 427 minus the carb and intake. Believe it or not, as far as the suspension is concerned, there are a few upgrades that we can get through Jegg’s that will be useful, especially since we’re not concerned with it being one hundred percent original.’

‘There are much better brakes that we can get from a connection that I have at Rousch Racing that are way better than what originally came on the car as well.’

‘Couple all of that with a Indy style quick change rear end and some driving lessons and Johnny doesn’t stand a chance in hell against you….”

“Why not use the original carb that came with the motor?”

“Mainly because compared to what’s out there now, the original Motorcraft [1] carb is just not what you need. A Holly HP950 will give you a lot more power and is way easier to tune. If that doesn’t give us the performance we need, we’ll go with fuel injection!”

“Ok, I’ll bow to your knowledge, oh great Cobra guru. Now, who is this Johnny I’ll be racing against? Nick never did tell me who bought the car.”

“Well, a Rich Howlcomb bought the car but he’s just a purchasing agent. It’s actually going to a, ummm, Johnny Whinters I believe.”

“WHAT?” asks a suddenly very pissed Judy.

“Ummm, I said something wrong?” asks a suddenly ill-at-ease Felix.

“How in the hell could Nick not tell me something like that?”

Looking even less at ease by the moment, Felix quickly adds “To be honest, I doubt if Nick really knows who the final buyer actually is. I only found out because I happen to know Rich, who mentioned it to me. Can I ask what the issue is?”

“Follow me” is all a very determined Judy would say, as she headed for the office.

“NICK!” Entering the office, Judy caused everyone to jump about three feet in the air.
“Damn woman, don’t do that! What is it? What’s got you worked up now?”

“Do you have any idea who you just sold the ‘Vette and Cobra to?”

“Yea. On the sales order it states a Rich Howlcomb. Why?”

“Felix just told me that the final buyer is none-other than Johnny fricking Whinters…”

“SHIT!”

“Exactly what I said. Nick, is there any way we can stop the sale?”

“Afraid not.

“Nick, what are we gonna do? I’m afraid if I see HIM again …”

“I know Squeak, I know. But the sales contract is iron clad since I have the initial payment in full for the ‘Vette. If we don’t honor the contract he can sue us for everything we have.”

“I know I’m a bit late to the party, but can someone fill me in on the issue here?” asks Felix as Skye enters the office.

“Let’s just say I have a bit of history with … a certain purchaser. A very bad history” replies a very upset Judy.

“Bad history with who?” asks Skye.

“Oh, you’re gonna love this” answers Judy. “Johnny Whinters just bought a car from the shop through a purchasing agent.”

“What!”

“Exactly.”

“Wait ‘till I get my paws on that little shit, I’ll …”

“You know I can’t let you do that, so why even go there” interrupts Nick.

“Yea, but still…”

“I know, I know. But since there’s no way we can break the contract, we’ve got to be able to figure something out before he comes to pick up the car and race Judy so …”

“Wait, wait, wait … what’s this about Judy having to race the little shit?”

“Somehow, he’s evidently figured out that Judy works here, so one of the conditions he’s managed to slip into the contract is that he gets to race her…”

“Her specifically?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Her specifically.”

“And you didn’t think that was a bit odd? What the hell is wrong with you? I know you’re smarter than that.”

“Ok, maybe I got a bit greedy and saw the dollar signs instead of paying attention to that detail. But what’s done is done and now we’ve got to figure out how to make the best of this mess.”
“I may have an answer to at least part of this, and not the build part, since we’ve pretty much got that locked up” interrupted Felix.
“Really?” asked Nick “how do you figure that?”

“Well, we all know that the Cobra was built specifically to beat the crap out of the Corvettes, which it did quite handily I might add, even in its original configuration. With the performance upgrades we’ll be adding to the engine, suspension and brakes almost anyone can beat the ‘Vette, especially since that’ll be restored to its original factory condition. But with a certain road racing legend I know that happens to owe me a large favor, Johnny doesn’t stand a snowball’s chance in hell.”

“And just who is this ‘legend’ that you know?” asks Judy.

“None other than Jackie Fuelit.”

“Wait” interrupts Nick “You know Jackie Fuelit? The real Jackie Fuelit?”

“I just said so didn’t I?”

“And you can talk him into coming here and give Judy driving lessons … how?” asks Nick skeptically.

“I bailed his brother out of jail a few times when he was too drunk to walk let alone drive and made sure they didn’t make it into the official records. So, yea I know him and yea, he’ll come. In fact, I think he’s in Zootopia now, or will be soon. He’s been invited to narrate some of the track and field events for the upcoming Animalympics.”

“If you don’t mind telling me” asks Judy “just why are you so willing to help with the racing part? I understand the bit with the car, but there has to be a reason why you’d go so far out of your way to help me win the race.”

“To be honest, I’m really not sure myself. But if this Johnny character has gone so far out of his way to try to screw over a sweet girl like you, it just seems fitting that I do whatever I can to make sure that it doesn’t happen.”

“I’m going to head back to my bay. Nick, give Felix the lowdown on my issue with Johnny so he has an understanding of why I hate him so much. There’s no way I can sit through the narrative again, but I want him to understand my motivation.”

Sitting dejectedly in front of her workbench with her head in her paws and her ears laid down flat against her back, Judy hears Felix coming up behind her. As she turns to face him, she notices that he’s almost as angry as Nick was when she told him about her encounter with Johnny.

“Judy” he begins “I don’t know how you managed to make it this far in life bearing the burdens that you have, but you’re probably one of the strongest mammals that I know. I am personally going to help you build the most awesome car that can be built.’

‘Just so you know, I told Nick that I was going to forego my usual fee to help build this car. But when he insisted that I take it, I noticed the posters that were made up for your charity so I’m going to donate every dime of my fee to that charity,’

‘Not only that, I’m going to talk to other mammals I know to do the same. You deserve so much more than I can give it only seems right. I happen to know that you guys routinely have a jam session on certain weekends, so I’m going to bring Winston and the kits along as well. I might need to warn you though, if Winston knows about this charity and the session and the reason behind it, that’ll
probably mean Gazelle will know as well. And if Gazelle knows, she’ll probably show up and you’re liable to have one hell of a session.”

When Judy suddenly gathers Fritz into a tearful hug he tells her “You know I’m going to have a hell of a time telling Winston where the bunny scent came from, right?”
“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cause you any trouble at home, it’s just that I ... we’ve been on such an emotional trip lately that …”

“No worries. Once I tell her about the project and your issues …” seeing her horrified expression he hurriedly added “not to mention any particulars, she’ll probably come down here herself and then it’ll be hug central.”

“Thanks … for … everything.”

“Again, no worries. Now, let’s get this car built so we can help you whip a certain bunnies ass …”

Xxx

Chapter End Notes

A/N: [1] There seems to be no actual information out there telling me exactly what carb originally came on the 427 only that it was a 4 barrel, so I just improvised.
For reference, Dale Elkhart is really Dale Earnhardt and Jackie Fuelit is Jackie Stewart. The Animalympics and characters actually have a short history with Disney.
R&R

Chapter Summary

Judy and Fritz get started on the Cobra rebuild.
Nick gets in trouble with his mom and Judy for pushing the shop too hard, so a bit of a diversion is planned.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

16: R&R

XxX

Reviewing the whiteboard and the parts that will be needed for the build, Fritz steps forward and makes several changes as Judy looks on.

“To start with” begins Fritz “I’ll get in touch with my source and acquire the 427 we need for the build as well as the Indy style quick-change rear-end. Since I have no idea what shape the motor will be in, we may need to do a total rebuild. In fact, I think we’ll just count on rebuilding the damned thing just to be on the safe side.’
‘I know there’s no way you’ll get the right parts for the motor through a regular parts shop or even through Ford, so you’ll need to call ‘Rust-eze Speed Shop’ just off of Savanna Central to get the right parts for the motor, including the Holley carb and correct intake set-up, and talk to Rusty himself. You can drop my name if anyone gives you any lip.’
‘While you’re at it, have him set aside a Muncie M22 Rock Crusher tranny and adapter plate to fit the side oiler block. It’s actually supposed to fit a GM motor and even though they tend to whine, kind of like Nick when he’s upset, it’s guaranteed to take any kind of abuse without breaking and laugh at the competition.”
Giggling a bit at the reference, Judy replied “Ok, that’s a start, what else?”

Handing Judy a slip of paper with some phone numbers on it, Fritz continues “You’ll notice that there are three numbers here, and that the first is for Rust-eze.’
‘The second belongs to Rousch Racing, ask for Ronnie and let him know that I need a complete brake and spindle parts kit for a Cobra build.’
‘The third number is to ‘Competition Suspension’. The suspension parts we need are actually built for use on the Le Mans circuit on the GT entry level cars. If you let them know that the parts are for a retro Cobra build using Rousch spindles and brakes and the quick-change rear end, they’ll get you the correct parts.’
‘That should keep you busy while I track down the 427 and try to find a deep sump oil pan. If I can’t find one, we’ll see how good your brothers are with the CNC machine because we’ll have to make one otherwise.”

“Do you want me to just call and line the stuff up?”

“Actually, I’d prefer that you go and pick up the parts personally since you already have some idea what to look for. Not to disrespect your parts runner, but I’d prefer someone with some mechanical knowledge to be talking to these mammals.”
“Even if I’m a bunny?”

“Look Judy, the mammals I deal with learned long ago not to judge anyone I send to get parts. They actually began to call me ‘Homey’ at some point.”

“Homey?”

“Yes, Homey. Long story short, Homey was a clown on an old TV show. When someone questioned something that Homey said, he’d hit them with something like a fake chicken and say ‘Homey don’t play that.’

‘In fact, if you want to mess with them, just tell them that Homey sent you and watch them cringe.’

“This all sounds very humorous, and expensive.”

“Yea, and? ‘He who shall not be named’ is going to end up paying twice what it’s worth isn’t he?”

“Did you just quote Harry Otter?”

Grinning like a Cheshire cat, Fritz could only comment over his shoulder as he walks away saying “Shouldn’t you be ordering parts?”

…

Meanwhile in the office, Nick is giving instructions to Midnight “Ok, this is what I want done on the ‘Vette. I want it to be a perfect restoration to exact factory specs. Don’t overpower or underpower the motor. Trans, suspension, brakes, everything is to be bone stock down to the correct nuts, bolts and screws. And since there are no restrictions mentioned in the contract considering the Cobra, Judy and Fritz have a blank check for whatever they want or need so this should be a cake walk. Is there anything else anyone can think of while to gain any more of an advantage while we’re at it?”

“Can I make a suggestion?” asks Josh.

“Sure, as long as it’s within the framework of the contract I’ll consider anything.”

“Well, every bunny in the Tri-Burrows area knows that Johnny’s a bucks’ buck. His ego is as large as his pocketbook.”

“And this can help us how?” asks Nick.

“Well, there’s nothing mentioned about paint or markings insofar as the Cobra’s concerned, right?”

“No, there’s not. Get to the point-”

“When Judy whips Johnny’s tail during the race, he has to buy the car as is, right?”

“Yea, that’s the deal, why.”

“Then how about you paint the car a nice bright neon pink.”

“Now that’s just evil and underpawed. I like it. Anything else?”

“Well-

“Out with it. If there’s more I want to hear it.”

“Well, I’ve been working on my airbrushing skills, and I thought maybe I could paint three little bunny heads that look like Johnny on the front fender cowling. You know, like they used to do on
the old-time fighter planes for each kill. One for each lap that Judy beats Johnny during the race.”

“And they’ll be there before they even race?”

“Yup. If that doesn’t put a burr in his butt I don’t know what will. It’ll insult him before and after the race. Especially since he’ll have to buy the car at twice the original price, right?”

“… are you sure you weren’t a fox in a previous life?”

“Not that I know of, why?” Josh asks warily.

“Because this is just about the perfect hustle if I’ve ever seen one.”

“… Thanks … I think”

“Let Duane know that he’s to paint the Cobra the most revolting shade of pink that he can come up with when the body shop’s done with the sheet metal. Then you can paint the bunny heads on the car… if I like it or hate it, or whatever, I’ll give you an extra week’s pay. That good with you?”

“If you expect me to turn it down you’re crazy.”

…

As the weeks wear on, the stress of the build begins to show on not only Judy but the entire shop crew as well.

Entering the office, Laverne confronts Nick “Nicholas Piberius Wilde” causing him to jump about a foot into the air.

“Damn mom, don’t do that!”

“Nick, you’ve got to give the shop a break. You’re pushing them way too hard.”

“Who? You need to be more specific” replies Nick, more than slightly exasperated.

“The whole damned shop Nick. Mammals are working on autopilot. If this keeps up, someone’s going to get hurt or worse.”

“Mom, we’ve got to get these cars done and-”

“Pushing the shop this hard is counterproductive and you damned well know it. Someone’s going to make a mistake that could cost the shop a bunch of money at best or injure or kill someone at worst. You’ve got to give them some downtime Nick.”

“The weekend is almost here, we can have a jam session …”

“It’s not enough Nick. Think about it for a minute, you’ve all been working at least sixteen hours a day, seven days a week for almost three weeks now. You’ve got to take some downtime.”

“Ok, ok, fine I get it. Any suggestions? I really don’t have any ideas right now.”

“As a matter of fact, I do” says Laverne grinning mischievously, holding up a poster.

“What the hell is this?” asks Nick looking at the poster.

“It is what it says it is Nick. An anime convention.”
“Really? That kind of stuff is for kits mom.”

“Look at the poster Nick. There are more adults there than there are kits. Can you think of a better way to destress than to act like a kit for a couple of days? Besides, you don’t need to go the convention, you can just hold one here at the shop for your employees and their kits.’
‘How about this. Call an early day today and let everyone take the rest of the day to rest and recuperate. Tomorrow can be used to put together some sort of costumes. Saturday and Sunday can be used for your own little convention, then back to work on Monday.’
‘Different prizes for the guys and the gals, and even prizes for the kits. Music, food, dancing, costumes … how better to give mammals a break. It’ll help, I guarantee it.”

“You’re sure about this?”

“Would I ever steer you wrong about something this important? You, Judy and all of your employees need this Nick.”

“No mom, you wouldn’t. Ok, you talked me into it. Since it’s almost lunch time, I’ll call a meeting in the main bay in a half hour and give them the good news.” Giving her a big hug “Thanks mom.”

…

“ALL EMPLOYEES TO THE MAIN BAY PLEASE, ALL EMPLOYEES TO THE MAIN BAY”

“Ok everybody listen up. Mom has not so gently brought to my attention that we’ve all been working too hard for too long. As of right now, everybody is off duty until Monday morning, but there are conditions. Go home and rest up for the rest of the day. Saturday and Sunday we’ll be having an anime convention right here at the shop for you all and your kits. You’ll have the rest of today and tomorrow to design and make costumes. The entire time will be with pay of course. There’ll be prizes for the best male and female costumes as well as prizes for the kits.’
‘Before anyone asks, yes, it’s mandatory that you at least show up for the convention. No, you don’t have to be in costume but it’s encouraged. After that, I expect everybody here bright and early at seven o’clock Monday morning ready for work regardless. Now, get lost.”

Following Nick into the office, Judy grabs Nick by the tail and jerks “Hey, that’s tender.”

“Why does it take your mother to point out the obvious Nick?”

“I’m sorry?”

“I told you a week ago we were all being pushed too hard. Are you so damned greedy that you can’t see that on your own or can’t listen to me?”

Looking downcast Nick hesitates before answering in a hushed tone “… actually that’s farther from the truth than you can even guess.”

“Really? How about sharing then, because I’d really like to know.”

“It-it was for you.”

“For me? How in the hell was all of this even remotely for me?”

“To-to help you to get even with the sorry bastard that raped you all those years ago.”

“… You-you really put us all through this shit to help me avenge my honor?”
“Yes, yes I did. Was that wrong of me? To care so much?”

Pulling Nick into a passionate kiss “You dumb fox. You wonderful fool. We’ll get this done without all of the bullshit. Now, let’s go home and get some sleep. Then you can figure out what characters we’re going to be for this anime thing.”

“Me? Why me? I haven’t watched cartoons since I was a small kit!”

“Do you remember the last jam session we were at when you got so drunk?”

“Yea, and?”

“Did you forget that I hadn’t decided on a punishment for groping me while we were dancing?”

“Shit.”

“Exactly.”

“Ok, fine. Let’s get home, get something to eat and grab a good shower” he said, in a tired voice “It looks like I’m going to be catching up on my cartoon watching.”

“Nick, who said it has to be a cartoon character?”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“These things include super heroes and anyone else you can think of. It doesn’t have to be a cartoon character. We watch movies all the time, don’t we? How about we go as some of our favorite movie characters or super heroes?”

“……… well shit. I never thought about that. You really are a sly bunny ain’t ya?”

“One of us has to be Slick. C’mon, let’s go home.”

…

The ride home was unusually quiet.

“Nick?”

“Hmmm?”

“You’re being way to quiet for my own good. What’s going through that twisted mind of yours?”

“Ummm, just trying to come up with some sort of costumes for this anime thing.”

“No, from the look on your muzzle, you already have some sort of idea. What’s up? Give.”

Unable to hide the grin/smirk, Nick confessed … partially. “Yea, I’ve got an idea, for both of us actually. But I’m going to have to ask you to trust me on this. Please.’

‘Since we won’t be able to collect any of the prizes, I figured we can go all out on the costumes.”

“They’re referred to as cosplay Nick.”

“Whatever. Aaaaanywayyyyy, it’s going to take me more than a few minutes to get everything together, so right after lunch I’m going to need to start getting things organized in my mind. Then I’ll need to make a few calls as soon as we get home to certain mammals I know to get everything lined up so I can pick it all up in one trip tomorrow. I know this sounds suspicious and underpawed, but
it’s not. Just trust me on this, please. I promise to whatever gods you want me to swear to that you’ll love the outfits. Ok?’”

Looking intently into Nick’s emerald eyes that absolutely gleamed with devilment Judy gave her answer “Ok, I trust you. But I’ll warn you one time, it had better not be a Playbunny outfit, or we may never have those kits. Do you understand?”

“You know” says Nick, his ears suddenly perking up “I never even thought of that! Maybe that could be for a private Halloween party at home this year, but no, I promise that you won’t be disappointed.”

As Judy facepawed for unknowingly giving Nick an idea that could, and probably would, prove embarrassing to her at some point in the future, she nonetheless admitted defeat. ‘Ok, fine. You make your calls while I start a late lunch, then it’s showers and to bed for some rest. And I do mean rest. If I actually like the outfits, I might, and I mean might, actually model the Playbunny outfit for you some time.

‘Nick, you’re drooling again, you know that, right?’ she adds laughing.

…

While Judy begins fixing a late lunch, Nick is in the garage calling a few mammals that owe him certain big-time favors. After about fifteen minutes, he enters the kitchen where Judy has just much finished making lunch.

“Well, let me guess, you’re making a mess.”

“You, got it on the first try. Smart fox.”

“Great. We haven’t had a mess in a while. I’m actually looking forward to it”

Setting plates of hot food on the table, Judy asks “So, did you get everything set up for tomorrow?”

“You. All of the things we need for the convention will be ready for pickup by around noon tomorrow. I’ll run and pick everything up in one trip, that way we can have time to model it all and make sure it fits right before Saturday.”

“You really aren’t going to tell me ahead of time, are you?”

“Nope. I want it to be a pleasant surprise for my favorite wife” Nick snarks.

“Favorite wife? I’d damned well better be your only wife.”

“Wouldn’t that make you my favorite then?”

“Shut up Nick” she giggles punching him on the shoulder “Let’s go get that shower. If you’re nice, I might let you scrub my back – ok?”

…

Not so bright and early Friday morning Nick and Judy still in bed after a well-deserved afternoon and evening of playing adult games in bed.

“Just so you know, Monday we’re going to have to go see doctor Cotton for our umm … biological donations.”

“Yea, I know. I could tell by the way your scent has been changing the last few days.”
“You’re not still nervous, are you?”

“Nervous isn’t exactly what I’m feeling—“

“OK, apprehensive then?”

“Well, yea, kinda.”

“Remember what I told you before?”

That you’d lend me a paw after you were finished?”

“Yup.”

“Still…”

“C’mon ya big kit, it’ll be fun,”

“How can something like that even remotely be labeled as fun?”

“Because, if you ask really nicely, I’ll be naked? You know that you’re drooling again, right? C’mon Nick be a sport.”

“Ok, fine.”

“That’s my big fox. Now, maybe we can get some work done around here befo …” as Nick’s phone rings.

“Hold that thought for a sec beautiful. Yea, this is Nick. It’s ready? All of it? Already?”

Hiding the caller ID from Judy as he talks to the mammal on the other end of the call… “Yea, I can be there in like a half hour or so. It’s all guaranteed to fit and be one hundred percent legit, right? No, of course I wouldn’t doubt you, of all mammals. Ok, see you in around a half hour barring bad traffic ok? Bye.”

“Well, our costumes are rea-”

“Already? I know you’ve told me you know everybody who is somebody, and that they owe you some bigtime favors but that was really fast.”

“I know, right? Look, I’m going to go ahead and pick everything up now and no you can’t ride along, it’d just spoil the surprise.”

“But …”

“Trust me, this one thing that might rank right up there with our wedding, it’s going to be that good.”

Rolling her eyes Judy deadpans “Yea, right. Like that’ll happen with a costume of all things.”

Giving her a kiss between her ears as he heads towards the door “I should be back in about an hour and a half to two hours. If this disappoints, I’ll do the ‘thing’ at doctor Cotton’s myself.”

“This I’ve gotta see.”

…

Just over two hours later, Judy hears Nick pull into the garage.
As he climbs out of the truck with two garment bags in paw he’s greeted by a very anxious Judy.

“Ok fox, gimmie.”

“Ain’t you just a tad…”

“Damn it Nick…” thumping her foot as fast as mammaly possible.

“Look sweetheart, you’re just going to have to wait until I get these into the house.”

Once on the house, grabbing and opening the garment bag with her name on it, Judy gasps in astonishment. “Nick, what, how, where…” was all she could say, seeing a genuine police uniform, tailored to exactly fit her.

“Do you like it?”

“But it-it looks just like the real thing.”

“Maybe because it is?”

“It’s the real thing?”

“I just said it was, didn’t I?”

“But how-how in the name of Saren… did you know? And how is this even close to being legal?”

“While bunnies may be good at multiplying” earning an eyeroll from Judy “foxes are good at being sly. I’ve known from the get-go that you always wanted to become a cop. Remember when we first met at the station and Fangmeyer and Delgado mentioned that you tried to get into the ZPD?”

“Yea, I’d totally forgotten that.”

“Well I hadn’t. So, when you mentioned that we didn’t have to dress up as cartoon characters, but could go as super heroes, this just sort of popped into my head. You, Judy, are my hero.”

Holding her authentic ZPD uniform at arm’s length, Judy took inventory of the items. Foot wraps, bunny sized, check. Lycra full length form fitting body suit, check. Bunny sized body armor with front and back trauma plates, check. Knee and elbow guards, check. Duty belt complete with pawcuffs, check.

“Nick, I don’t know what to say. I’ve wanted to wear one of these for most of my life.”

“Then don’t say anything until you’ve read this” he says, handing Judy an official looking piece of paper.

‘Be it know to all that Judith Laverne Wilde-Hopps, through no fault of her own, and due to extenuating circumstances, was not able to become Zootopia’s first rabbit police officer. While training and persevering to become said first rabbit officer, Ms. Wilde-Hopps showed a ferocious attitude and indomitable spirit to make the world a better place. Because of this spirit and unquenchable desire to become a police officer, we, the undersigned, hereby bestow onto Ms. Wilde-Hopps the title of honorary police officer in District One of the Zootopia Police Department.’

Leodore Lionheart, Mayor
Leodore Lionheart
Adrian Bogo, Chief of Police, District One, ZPD
Attached to the letter, was another sheet of paper which was signed by every member of the ZPD, with Benjamin Clawhauser, Cynthia Fangmeyer and Stryker Delgado at the top of the list.

“Nick, now I really don’t know what to say” began a tearful Judy.

“Well, if you don’t know what to say about any of that, what about this ‘Officer’ Wilde?” as he shows Judy her nameplate and badge.

Seeing those, Judy was totally speechless and Nick adds “This is all one hundred percent legal. The letter, the uniform, the badge, all of it perfectly legit.’

‘But if you think I’m going to let you be a cop without a great partner, you’d better think again” opening his own garment bag, which contains another genuine police uniform, this one fox sized complete with his own badge and nameplate.

Holding her uniform in one paw and grabbing Nick into a tight hug with the other, Judy managed to cry a river of happy tears.

“Ok, ok sweetheart, I know, I know” declared Nick “You bunnies, so emotional” which earned him a halfhearted swat.

Finally getting control of her emotions (a little anyway) Judy asks “How in the world did you get all of this so quickly?”

“Well, it occurred to me that maybe Mayor Lionheart and Chief Bogo would go along with this because they’re both on board with the interspecies reproduction charity that everyone in the shop set up.”

“And they would do that why again?”

“Did you forget that Lionheart is engaged to a sheep, a ewe to be precise?”

“Yea, I guess that kinda slipped my mind. What about Bogo?”

“It just so happens that Bogo is married to a very attractive female black panther. So, both of them are very interested in the research for obvious reasons.”

“But that still doesn’t explain why they’d play along with the honorary officer bit, especially with the uniforms and the badges and all.”

“After I reminded them how badly you wanted to become a cop and had to pay for your Criminal Justice degree out of your own pocket only to find out that you still couldn’t become a cop, I had their attention. Then I reminded them that you sacrificed becoming a cop so you’d be able to take care of the kits you were pregnant with at the time you got their M.I.I. letter.’

‘Bogo actually asked me about the kits when I talked to him. When I told him that we lost them, that was the clincher. He was actually the one that came up with the idea of me being your partner, complete with the uniform, nameplate and badge, all perfectly legit. And to top it all off, when he passed around the letter for everyone to sign, they all chipped in for the research charity.”

“Nick…” began a tearful Judy.

“Please don’t start crying again, I had a hard-enough time with all of that when I picked up the uniforms at ZPD headquarters.”
“Wait, you were crying?”

“What, do you really think I’m some sort of heartless monster who doesn’t cry? Really?” replied Nick, putting his paw on his chest feigning shock.

“Damn it Nick, that’s not what I meant and you know it.” answered a slightly miffed Judy with her paws on her hips.

“Of course I cried. That damned Clawhauser will never let me live that little episode down I’m sure” mumbles Nick as he rolled his eyes.

“You big softie. Foxes, so emotional.”

“You stole my line” said Nick, to which both chuckled. “Ok, enough of this crying mess, let’s try these on and see how they fit.”

…

Stepping into separate bathrooms to try on their uniforms, each is amazed at the sight they observe in the mirrors.

“You ready?” asks Nick as he emerges from the guest bathroom.

“Give me a couple more minutes and I will be” answers Judy.

Five minutes later:

“Nick, I’m ready. Meet me in the living room!”

As each step into the living room from opposite directions, both stare in awe at the other.

“Daaamn” begins Nick “I’ve never seen a hotter looking cop in my life.”

“You know, I was about to say the same thing” replies Judy.

As Judy notices a smirk begin to take place on Nick’s muzzle she can only ask helplessly “Nick ….. just what on earth can you be … thinking?”

“Well, aside from jumping your bones” which cause Judy’s expression to change from curious to slightly worried “I was wondering what they would say down at the ZPD if we actually showed up in uniform …”

“Damn it Nick, don’t do that, you had me a bit worried for a minute.” Taking a deep breath she continues “Tell you what, let’s go visit Bogo and the District One bunch, just to see their reactions. Then maybe, just maybe, I’ll let you try to get me out of this uniform. Cuffs are included with the duty belts I see……”

…

Less than an hour later, Nick and Judy stride confidently into ZPD headquarters.

Walking up to the front desk “Pardon me my good mammal, would you kindly announce to Chief Bogo” Nick asks Clawhauser “that officers Nick and Judy Wilde are reporting for duty.”

“What, where?” asks a confused Clawhauser, looking around and seeing no one.

“Down here!” pipes up Judy.
Suddenly Nick and Judy’s ears were assaulted by the pudgy cheetah “EEEEEEEEEEEEEEE, you two are just too cute…”

“Umm” begins Judy “you do remember that it’s personally degrading to call a bunny cute, right? I thought we went over this after the tornado.”

“Oh, oh, oh, I’m so sorry, I forgot didn’t I?” says a thoroughly dejected cheetah staring at the floor.

“Clawhauser…CLAWHAUSER…CLAWHAUSER!!!!” shouts Judy.

“…. Um, yes?”

“Will you please tell Chief Bogo that officers Nick and Judy Wilde are here to see him?”

“Yes, yes of course, just a sec.” pressing the correct button on the intercom that connected him to the chief. “Chief, umm officers Nick and Judy Wilde are here to see you? Yes sir, right away.’
‘Go on up to his office. Third floor, second door on the right.”

“Thanks Spots” says Nick” as they head for the elevator.

Knocking on the large mammal door with the frosted glass, large gold lettering proclaiming it belonged to Chief Bogo, the pair heard a forceful “Enter” come from within.

Entering the chief’s office, Nick and Judy notice the huge, well-muscled water buffalo sitting behind a very imposing desk.

“Sit” says a stern-faced Bogo, motioning to a single large chair positioned just in front of his desk. Nick and Judy scramble onto the chair and sit side by side.
“Now then what can I do for you fine ‘officers’ today?” Bogo asks.

“Basically” begins Nick “we wanted to thank you for going out of your way to get us the uniforms and stuff, it really means a lot to us, especially to Judy.”
“It was my pleasure. When you called, I had no idea that you’d lost your kits, my condolences.”

“Thanks Chief” replies a solemn Judy. “If its not too much trouble, it would mean a lot if you’d give is a quick tour. Maybe I’ll never be a real officer, but I would like to see the rest of the department.”

Giving a thoughtful expression, Bogo commented “If you’d like, we’ll be having a shift change if a few minutes, maybe you’d care to join the other officers in the bullpen?”

“Really?” inquired a very thoroughly enthralled Judy.

“Yes, really” countered Bogo with a bit of a smirk which Nick couldn’t help but notice. “I’ll introduce you two like I would normally introduce any other rookies.”

“Ohmygodohmygodohmygodthankyouthankyouthankyou” stammered out the overly enthusiastic bunny.

“Why don’t you two go down and get settled in the bullpen, I’ll be along in a few minutes.”

Entering the bullpen, Nick and Judy recognize several of the officers. After explaining to Fangmeyer, Delgado, Snarlov and Trunkaby why they’re there, they all take a few minutes to converse when Delgado points them to an empty chair.
“Atten ’hut!”

Just as they are settling onto the chair, the officers start pounding on the tables and yelling as Higgins introduces Chief Bogo who then enters the room.

“ALL RIGHT, SHUT IT!” Bogo hollers, and the din subsides.

“I've got two items on the docket today: First, we need to acknowledge the elephant in the room. Francine... happy birthday.’”

‘Number two, there are some new recruits with us I should introduce - but I'm not going to, because … I don't care."

Which slightly shocks Nick and Judy, "Ha! You should have your own line of inspirational greeting cards, sir!” begins Nick.

"Shut your mouth, Wilde!” which gets everyone in the room laughing behind their paws.

"Assignments. Officers Grizzoli, Fangmeyer, Delgado, Tundratown SWAT. Snarlov, Higgins, Wolfard, undercover. And finally, our first bunny and fox officers, Officers Wilde ... Parking duty. Dismissed."

Raising her paw, Judy speaks up “Chief, maybe you forgot, but Nick and I aren’t really officers.”

"Didn't forget. Just don't care…. Just kidding.’

‘Of course, I remembered. This is what you or any other rookie would face the first day on the job here at Precinct One."

“Isn't that kind of demeaning?” asks Judy.

“Actually, yes, it is a bit. It’s designed to take fresh recruits down a peg and give them some time to get adjusted to being on the streets and being visible and known to the public at large before handing out an actual duty assignment.’

‘Besides, without fulltime parking duty attendants, everyone is expected to cycle through parking duty detail on occasion. However, if someone really screws up, it’s also used as a punishment.”

“I see” said Nick. “So, if we’re not actually going on parking duty, could we at least get a quick tour?”

“I’d be happy to show you around for a bit.”

After a quick tour of the department, Bogo takes them back to his office. “I hope you’ve enjoyed your little stay here today.”

“Except for the heart attack in the bullpen, it was quite enjoyable” returns Judy.

Grinning broadly chief Bogo replies “Sorry, but I just couldn’t resist. I really wish you well with your research efforts, Tammara and I are pulling for you.”

“Thanks chief, we really appreciate the support” says Nick.

“Umm, I hate to ask” begins Judy “but do we get to keep the uniforms and stuff, or do we need to return them?”

“No, those are yours to keep. Just, please don’t abuse the privilege.”

“Well” starts Nick “there’s no problem there, except maybe for the cuffs, we mig-”
“NICK!!!” growls Judy loudly, smacking him on the arm.

“Umm, with that I guess we’ll be going now. Although I might need to call you in a bit to report spousal abuse and-”

GrABBING Nick by his tie and pulling him down so they’re eye to eye “Do you really want to go there Mister Wilde?”

Hearing the way Judy addressed him Nick considered his previous comment “Umm … no?”

“That’s what I thought. Do we need to talk about this when we get home?”

“…No.”

“All right then. Chief” says Judy, “Thanks again for the hospitality. We’ll be sure to keep you up on any developments on the research. We’ll bid you adieu for now.”

…

On the way home, Judy chides Nick “Really? You had to bring the cuffs up in front of the chief…”

“Umm, … sorry?”

“NOT going to cut it this time Slick. You’ve let your jaybird mouth override your alligator ass once too often. Even the uniforms and stuff aren’t going to save you. Anything you might have been hoping for in the bedroom for the next however long, is definitely out. And you can forget about my giving you a helping paw when we go to give doctor Cotton our samples.’

‘I don’t know where your mind has been lately, but you need to get your shit together, and soon. You got that’?”

“… Yes ma’am.”

…

Arriving at home, Judy observes that Nick is more despondent than she would have expected. Confronting him she questions him “Ok, out with it. What the hell is your problem? You’ve not been yourself lately, and I want to know why.’

‘First you screw up with the contract with the ‘Vette. I know you tried to make it right with the uniform, but why in god’s name did you get so off the wall with the pawcuff bit at the station? With chief Bogo no less.”

Not getting any kind of reaction from Nick other than him staring dejectedly at the floor, she moves close and takes his paws in hers.

“Listen Nick, if you’ve got something on your mind, we can talk about it. PLEASE don’t shut me out, not now.”

“It’s … I’m…”

“What Nick?”

“It’s you… and the kits.”

“What about us?”

“I guess it’s just hitting me how much losing the kits hurt, and how close I came to almost losing
“Oh, Nick. So that’s why you’ve been so distracted lately? Why didn’t you say something earlier?”

“Because I had to be there for you. I-I knew I had to be strong to help pull you through. I didn’t realize how hard it hit me until after we got home. Looking forward to having the kits and then … nothing. There’s a void, again. Just like with Trish, an-and it hurts.”

“Damn it Nick. C’mere ya big softie” began a tearful Judy as he opened her arms for a hug.

“Nick, I know how much it hurts, you know I do” says Judy softly “But we have each other. And together we’ll get through this, like we have everything else, ok?”

“Yea, I know” came the soft reply “I guess I just needed to be reminded once in a while is all. In the past, it’s been easier to just hide my feelings rather than to bother anyone, especially after Amanda, then Trish, and now the kits. Thanks Fluff.”

“No problem Slick, I think I understand. Now, how about something to take our minds off this subject for a bit and focus on something a bit happier.” “Sure thing, like what?”

“Well for one, has anyone gone to get food, drinks or prizes for the shops convention this weekend? And are there going to be any decorations?”

“… I’m not sure about any of that so I’ll call mom and find out. This was her idea in the first place after all.”

…

Laverne answers her phone- “Hey Nicky, what’s the occasion for the call?”

“Well, Judy and I were wondering, Judy mainly … ‘OWW’ … has anyone gotten food and drinks for the anime thing this weekend? And how about prizes?”

“While you’ve been goofing off, Sky, Shirley and I have been, and are, still busy getting all of that stuff. Did you really think that all of that would just take care of itself?” “Well no, not really. Judy and I slept in late, then we went to take care of some … business at the ZPD.”

“What in the world were you doing at the ZPD?”

“You’ll see tomorrow, but for now, let’s just say the trip was a variable success.”

“What the hell is a variable success?”

“Mom, just drop it for now, you’ll find out tomorrow.”

“Ok, fine.”

“Fine. Is there anything we need top pick up since we’re out and about?”

“Not that I can think of, just go home and get some more rest, you sound like you might need it.”

“Since it seems like you’ve got everything under control, we’re headed that way now” interrupted Judy.
“We are?” questioned Nick.

“Yes, we are. You’re going to make some of that lasagna casserole that I love while I spruce up the house. We’ve been working so hard lately, the entire house is a mess. When you’ve finished with the casserole, you can help me.”

“I hate to interrupt this enlightening conversation” interjected Laverne “but we still need to finish shopping, then get everything to the shop and get it ready for tomorrow.”

“Ok then, we’ll see you tomorrow then” says Judy. “tell your mom bye Nick.”

“Bye mom.”

“Bye dears, see you tomorrow.”

“Now, to the store quick, we need to pick up some turkey sausage for the lasagna, because if there’s any at home, it’s bound to be bad by now” commands Judy. “You’re the boss.”

“And don’t you forget it dear.”

After cooking and cleaning, out favorite couple get a quick bite and a shower and head to bed, anticipating the big event tomorrow.

“Now” says Judy quietly in Nicks ear “where did you say those cuffs were?”

…

Bright and early the next morning, the pair dressed in their newly acquired uniforms. Just as they were putting on the finishing touches (polishing their badges) the front doorbell rings.

Looking questionably at each other and wondering who it could be, they answer the door together, amazed to find Clawhauser there.

“Clawhauser, what are you doing here?” asks Judy.

“Well” he began unsurely “since I screwed up using the ‘c’ word, again, I thought I might make it up at least a little by giving you a ride to the shop in a patrol car.”

“Really??”

“Yea, you-you don’t mind, do you?” he asks, still a bit nervous.

“With the lights, sirens and all?” questioned Nick.

“NICK” exclaimed Judy, punching her fox on the arm.

“No, no, it’s ok. I had actually planned on using them anyway” admitted Clawhauser.

“Then let’s get going” says Judy “C’mon Nick, don’t be so slow.”

…

Arriving at the shop promptly at eight o’clock, sirens going and lights ablaze, Nick and Judy prepare to make their grand entrance.

Greeted at the front door by a concerned Black Panther (Midnight) and Steve Rogers from Captain Zootopia (Lefty) Nick and Judy are pleasantly surprised to see how well the ‘convention’ seemed to
“Glad to see you could make it” says a stunning vixen dressed as Maid Marion from the Robin Hood movies.

“Mom?” inquires Nick.

“The one and only” Laverne counters, wearing a smirk that fit her perfectly.

“Did you officers come to arrest anyone in particular?” asks Skye dressed as Storm from the X-Mammals.

“Snow?” asks Judy. “Sis, is that really you? You’re absolutely gorgeous.”

“Squeak, who else do you know that could pull this look off?”

“But- you look just like the Storm from the movies!”

“Maybe because I did a brief gig as a stunt double for Haylee Beerier?”

“No shit? Really?”

“Yea, during one of my many exploits when I was young, daring and stupid.”

“Nick, did you know about this?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Don’t blame Nick Squeak, there were times when I’d take off for days at a time without telling anyone. Nick tried to find out but it never got him anywhere.”

“Pardon me, but has anyone seen Fonzie? He’s supposed to be here but I can’t find him anywhere.”

“Who-the hell. Aunt Shirley, is that you?” asks Nick.

Standing in front of the group was Nick’s aunt Shirley grinning like a mad mammal, dressed as Joanie from Happy Daze, along with Gazelle dressed as a Mexican peasant, Fritz dressed as Danny Zuko and Winston dressed as Australian Sandy Olsson from the movie Grease.

“Holy crap Nick, it’s it’s…”

“Yea, surprise, surprise.”

“If you knew about this, I’m going to kick your ass for real.”

“Sorry Fluff, I really had no idea that Gazelle would be here, and Fritz never said whether he and Winston would make it or not, so I’m as surprised as you are.”

“Fritz called me late last night and said that he and Winston would maybe be here” interrupted Laverne “and that Gazelle would probably be with them if they did make it. She also said she really didn’t want to perform, she just wanted to be known as Estella Furez and enjoy the convention like everyone else…”

“Well, it looks like the gang’s all here. Let’s get this party started” announces Nick, with everyone in agreement.
A/N: When growing up, my mother would clean out all of the leftovers from the fridge and heat them up—we just referred to them as a ‘mess’. It was a welcome treat after having to live off of government commodities for so many years.
Distractions

Chapter Summary

After the company 'convention, Judy and Nick have words about their upcoming 'adventure' at doctor Cotton's office and the Corvette and Cobra builds continue.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

17: Distractions

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As the ‘convention’ progressed, Nick had to admit that it was one of the best things that the shop had had in a long time. With the costumes, the food and drinks and the atmosphere, the mood of everyone had improved considerably.

Seeing that the sound equipment was set up and ready to go, Nick grabs Midnight and Lefty and talks to them quietly. Noticing this, Judy asks Laverne “What’s that no-good husband of mine up to now?”

“I have no idea, but knowing my son, it can’t be good.”

“May I have your attention please” begins ‘officer’ Wilde “I’d like to dedicate a song to my darling wife.”

“Nick, are were really going to do this again?” questions Judy.

“Are we? …. Why yes, yes we are.”

“Anywhoooo, here we go” says Nick as he begins playing and singing ‘Shake Your Booty’ by K C and the Sunshine Band.

“Ok, but don’t forget” says Judy “you started this” as she takes the stage and begins singing and playing ‘The Thrill is Gone’ by B.B. King’

“Oh no, you didn’t go there” rejoins Nick as he goes straight into ‘Bad Case Of Lovin’ You (Doctor-Doctor)’ by Robert Palmer.

“Maybe you didn’t get the hint” says Judy as she comes back with ‘Hit the Road Jack’ by Ray Charles.

“Here’s another one for ya then” says Nick with a sly smile as he plays ‘I Fought The Law’ by the Bobby Fuller Four, in reference to the uniforms they were both wearing.

“You damned loveable fool” laughs Judy “here’s one last song just for you. It’s called ‘Hot Stuff’ by Donna Summer.”

When Judy finishes the song, she grabs Nick by the tie and drags him offstage and heads towards the drink table.
“Do you think that you can behave for a while, or am I going to regret the last song?”

“Your wish is my command, officer.”

“Good. Now I’m going to go get us some of that Jambalaya, you get me some red beer and I’ll meet you where you mother and aunt are sitting. While you’re at it, find out who that very attractive Artic fox is talking to your mom.”

“What fox, where?”

“Over there dummy” pointing to the table where Laverne and Shirley are sitting.

When Nick begins to head immediately towards his mother, Judy grabs his arm and chides him firmly “Beer first fox, then be nosey”.

Shaking her head, Judy gathers up two bowls of Jambalaya and heads over to sit with her husband, mother-in-law and Nicks aunt, and some mammal as yet unknown to her.

“Judy” begins Laverne, noticing her approach “I’d like you to meet an old friend of mine, Jason Silver. Jason, this is my daughter-in-law Judy.”

Noticing Nick’s less than pleasant look on his face, Judy shakes mister Silvers proffered paw.

“Pleased to meet you mister Silver.”

“And in case you’ve completely missed my son’s pouting attitude.”

“Mom, I’m not pouting.”

“What would you call it then Nick?”

“I’m … concerned, ok?”

“Nick I’m a grown vixen, and I can take care of myself, you know that. Besides, whether you like it or not, I’m allowed to have a personal life.”

“Ok, ok, I get it. If I may ask” being a bit snarky “how long have you two been seeing each other?”

“Well, let’s see now. Today is Saturday” replies Laverne with her own bit of snark “so it’s been … what… almost three years? That sound about right Ron?”

“Yea, sounds right to me.”

“Wait, you’ve been dating for almost three years and I’m just now finding out about it?” he asked, more than slightly miffed.

“NICK” shouted Judy and Laverne together.

“What?”

“You know damned well that nothing serious has been going on” scolded Laverne. “You know I go strictly by tradition. I would never go against tradition, and I would never consider getting married or doing anything else unless I told you first. For crying out loud get a freaking grip.”

“Alright, alright already, I get it. It’s just a bit of a shock ok? To find out that my mother, of all mammals, has been dating for almost three years and this is the first I’m hearing about it? With
everything else that’s been happening lately it’s a bit much to process.”

Patting Nick on the top of his head “You’ll be ok dear” says Judy sarcastically.

As the evening begins to wind down Judy and Laverne notice Nick and Jason in a hushed conversation.

“What in hells bells is going on with those two now?” Judy wonders out loud.

“From the look of it, we won’t have long to find out” counters Laverne as the two todds step up to the stage.

“Closing this evenings entertainment” begins Nick “mister Silver, I mean Jason and I have a little treat for y’all.”

When the opening strains of ‘Dueling Banjos’ fill the air (which is a bit odd being played on acoustic guitars which were drop-D tuned), everyone is amazed to see the two actually smile. As the tempo increases and everyone begins to clap along Laverne can only grin with a full heart, knowing that her son and her boyfriend have found a common ground and are coming to terms with one another.

After the final notes finish echoing through the shop, Nick and Jason shake paws and bid each other a good night.

Biding everyone a goodnight and safe journey home, Judy is a bit taken back when Duane is one of the last to leave.

“Where are you going Dewey?” she asks “I thought you were still living upstairs.”

“Still am” remarks Duane, gesturing towards the stairs “but someone else kinda wants some privacy tonight.”

Quickly looking in the direction Duane was pointing Judy is only a bit shocked to see Skye disappear into the overhead apartment.

“Well I’ll be damned” she remarked quietly.

“Hmmm?” queries Nick.

“Never mind, I’ll tell you later, ok?”

“Ok, fine. I doubt if whatever it is will be as big of a surprise that mom sprung on me tonight.”

Shaking her head and giving Nick her best imitation of one of Nick’s smirks “I wouldn’t be too sure about that.”

After telling Nick about Skye possibly spending the night with Josh and laughing herself silly over his reaction, the couple took a relaxing shower and again proceeded to play some ‘night games’ before finally getting some well-deserved sleep.

With Sunday being pretty much a rerun of Saturday, every one decided to help clean up the shop in preparation for returning to work on Monday morning.

... 

Monday morning came with everyone in the shop arriving with a positive attitude.
The usual Monday morning assignments pretty much went as expected with Midnight telling everyone to pick up where they left off on Thursday.

Judy finished up with the parts orders and looked for Felix for further instructions.

When she got to the office, she noticed Nick finishing a conversation with Felix, both sharing a short laugh and grinned as he saw her enter.

“Ok, what’s up you two?”

“Up? What could you possibly be talking about?” asked Nick, smirk firmly in place.

Walking up to Nick and dragging him down by his tie so she can stare him eye to eye he hurriedly relents.

“A-alright Fluff, since it actually involves you, here it is. Felix has talked Jackie Feulit into bringing a couple of his cars around for you to get familiar with.”

“Say what?”

“I’ve talked Jackie into bringing a 327 Corvette like the one being restored and an upgraded Cobra for us to take to the Road Zootopia racetrack” began Felix.’

‘Jackie is going to take the ‘Vette for three timed laps around the track, then you’re going to take the Cobra and learn to drive like a racer. You’re going to work your way up to driving like a pro. It should be no problem for you to beat Jackie’s time by the time you’re finished. And if you can beat Jackie’s time with his Cobra, you can sure as hell beat Johnny with ours.”

“This is for real? No shit? What about the build, who’s going to work on it?”

“You and Felix will” replied Nick. “Jackie won’t be here for another couple of weeks, so you’re got that much time at least to get a good start and possibly finish it.”

“Great, now you and I have just one more thing to take care of today before I start rounding up the parts I’ve ordered.”

“And that would be…?”

“We have an appointment with doctor Cotton today, remember?”

“Umm, yea … about that…”

“Nick, do NOT tell me that you’re actually thinking about backing out?”

“No, no I’m not. I’m still a bit-”

“Nervous? Apprehensive?”

“Yea, all of that. What you said”

“Don’t worry I won’t let the mean doctor hurt you.”

“Har, har.”

“And yes dear, I’ll help you with your ‘contribution’.”

“Umm thanks? Shall we go get this over with?”
“We shall.”

…

Arriving at Zootopia University, Nick and Judy are directed to the DNA research division, which is located on the fourth floor in room R4125.

Entering room R4125, they’re greeted by doctor Cotton and one of her research staff, a pronghorn antelope.

“Welcome, it’s good to see you both again. So, are you ready to begin?” noticing Nicks less than enthusiastic attitude ‘Am I missing something here?’

“I’m afraid Nick considers this little adventure an afront to his maleness” answers Judy with a very convincing smirk. That being said” she continues “I’ve agreed to lend a helping paw when he-”

“JUDY” interrupted an aghast Nick “what the hell?”

“What? Did you think no one would notice when it came time for you to-”

“Will you please stop talking?”

“Listen Nick, do you want to do this by yourself?”

“No, not really…”

“Then shut the hell up. Go over and sit in the corner and be quiet. I’ll be out in a few minutes after doctor Cotton is finished with me. Are we done here?”

“Yes ma’am” indicated a now very docile fox.

…

After collecting ‘biological contributions’ from both Nick and Judy, doctor Cotton calls them into her office.

“Just to keep you both up to speed with how I want to go about all of this here’s a brief reminder of what we’ve already done and what is in store for the near future’

‘Today the procedure obtained genetic material for DNA profiling and sequencing. I intend to totally map the DNA strands from both of you for comparison to the contributions you’ll be making every few months.”

“W-wait, what?” stammered a Nick who was taken completely off guard. “You mean we have to go through this again?”

“Nick, calm down” scolded Judy.

“Of course. Did you really think that I’d only need one sample from each of you?” inquired doctor Cotton.

“Well, yea, I was really kinda hoping that would be the case.”

“Damn Nick” interrupted Judy “use your head. Doctor Cotton has to have something to use as a reference, doesn’t she?”

“… Yea, I guess.”
“And then she’ll need something to compare the results against, right?”

“… Umm … yea?”

“Ok then. Now, be quiet and let her finish.”

“As I was saying” continued doctor Cotton “your initial contributions will be used as a baseline to be used to compare against samples that will need to be taken every three to four months. I’m going to be giving you various organic compounds to be taken orally between each set of samples.’ ‘The compounds are completely safe, as Michael and I have already been taking the same compounds in different strengths for some time.’

“How will these compounds affect us?” inquired Judy.

“The compounds should not affect your normal day to day functions, nor should they affect your core DNA. What they will do is slightly modify your genetic samples. What I’m trying to do is to gently nudge the DNA of your biological contributions to ‘evolve’ if you will, at a faster rate than is normal.’ ‘We are ever naturally evolving to become more compatible with each other regardless of species as your recent pregnancy suggests. The compounds are meant to bring your individual DNA to a more common ground so to speak. Rabbits share common DNA material, regardless as to whether they are male or female, as do foxes. That’s what enables hares to interbreed with rabbits and different fox species as well as all canids to interbred.’ ‘Since you’ve already become pregnant with Nick’s kits once, the possibility is there that your individual DNAs are very close to being at a common junction already. It only takes a very small push to bring them into complete compatibility. The trick is to find the right ingredients in the right amounts to accomplish this feat.’ ‘Make no mistake, this will not be easy, and will most likely take a good amount of time. The real issue is to take that push in the right direction.”

“Nick” says Judy, looking directly at her husband “I know you feel that this is demeaning, but it’s something that we’ve got to try. Neither one of us wants to go through what we did a month ago, so please, just … just tolerate this as best you can. Please?”

“For you, my darling bunny, I’d do anything. All you have to do is ask nicely.”

“WHAT! Then all of the fuss you caused earlier … was just a ploy to-”

“Yea, pretty much … OWWWW!”

“Just you wait until I get you home, I’ll-I’ll-I’ll …”

“You’ll what?” asks Nick wearing the biggest smirk Judy could ever recall.

“I don’t know yet, but you can bet your tail I’ll think of something, and I guarantee you won’t like it.” She states with conviction.

Turning her attention back to doctor Cotton “Sorry about that doctor Cotton, but I promise that there won’t be a repeat of what just happened just now. Is there anything else we need before we leave today?”

“Yes, actually. Don’t forget to stop by and get a supply of the supplements that you’ll be taking from my assistant at the front desk. You each need to take a large tablespoon full of each mixture during each meal or at least three times a day with a hot beverage, whether it’s tea or coffee or coco really doesn’t matter, it just needs to be dissolved in the beverage.”
"Then I’ll need to see you again in three or four months for another contribution from each of you, so I can continue my sequencing and use for comparison with your initial contributions. We need to give the formulas time to work their magic if you will. Does that work for you?"

"We’ll be sure to make it work… won’t we Nick?” insists Judy, with an ‘I dare you to contradict me’ stare.

“Ummm, yes we will, no problem dear.” agrees a slightly worried fox.

...

On the ride home, Nick keeps peeking at his wife, trying to figure out just how she’s going to get back at him for his little stunt at doctor Cotton’s office.

“What Nick?” asks Judy, well aware of his not so casual peeking.

“Umm, are you really mad?”

“Actually, I’m not mad.”

“Well then-” he says, slightly relieved.

“I’m infuriated, pissed …. I have NO words to describe how angry I am at you right now.”

“But I …”

“I really don’t want to hear it right now Nick. You need to get your head out of your ass, and I mean quick. Do. You. Understand?”

“…. Yes, yes, I do, and I apologize.”

“Put your apology in your pocket Nick, it really doesn’t mean much right now. Playing with my emotions like that it’s just …”

“Ok, ok, I get it. It’ll never happen again.”

“Talk’s cheap Nick.”

“I know, I’ll find a way to prove myself to you, I promise.”

“Again, talk’s cheap. Don’t tell me, show me. Right now, I’m going home, but you’re going back to the shop.”

“The shop, why?”

“First of all, I need a bit of alone time to sort out this latest screw-up of yours. Secondly, you need to get with Fritz and find out how soon all of the parts upgrades we ordered will be ready for pick up. When I can start picking up the parts, then I can occupy my mind by working on the Cobra.’

‘Nick, I love you to death and back, but sometimes you just make me want to strangle you.”

As they pull up to the front of the house, Nick looks so forlorn that Judy can’t help herself “C’mere ya big dummy, I think we both could use a big hug right now.”

As they hug, Nick whispers in Judy’s ear “I am sorry Fluff, I’ll make it up, I promise.”

“I know, just … damn it Nick, it hurts you know?”
“Yea, I know. I promised long ago not to hurt you, and I’ve failed miserably.”

“Nick, I understand. It’s NOT ok, but it does happen. Now, get going and bring some pizza home for supper, ok?”

Seeing the shocked look on his muzzle “AND NO I’m NOT pregnant, I just want some pizza, ok? Half whatever you want and half asparagus and broccoli for me. Got it?”

“Yes ma’am, I’ll be home after I check on your parts and see how the shop’s doing. See you in a bit.”

“I love you Nick, that’ll never change.”

“I love you too Squeak, and I’ll try to remember to engage my brain before my mouth from now on. Try is the key word there.”

Laughing, Judy told him “I get it, now get going, I’m hungry,”

... 

While Nick was gone, headed to the shop to check on Judy’s parts orders and the state of the shop in general, Judy goes over the days’ happenings in her head. She went over everything from finding out about her driving lessons to the stunt Nick pulled at doctor Cotton’s office. Not that she actually minded lending Nick a paw for his contribution which actually caused her to giggle a bit, it was just so infuriating that he acted like such an ass (not to denigrate any donkeys that she knew) sometimes. Knowing full well that he shouldn’t have been that uncomfortable with providing his contribution that way, an idea suddenly came to her that would make him uncomfortable for sure.

Grinning evilly from ear to ear, which is quite a feat for a bunny, Judy suddenly knew the best way to really make the point with Nick was to make him wait until the very last minute to let him know what his punishment was.

...

As Nick enters the shop, he heads directly to the office to confer with Midnight.

“So” he begins “how go the ‘Vette and Cobra builds?”

“Well” says Midnight “let’s start with the ‘Vette. The body’s headed to paint, the frame’s been painted and is waiting for the motor. We were going to powder coat it, but you said exactly per factory specs, so paint it is.’  ‘The guys at ‘Year One’ say it’ll be around a week on the motor rebuild. Evidently all that was needed on the block was a good glaze breaking and crosshatching. The heads are fine and only needed a valve job. New bearings front to back and it’ll be good as new.’ ‘Brakes and suspension were easy to find, Chevy’s new/old parts section really came through.’ ‘We should be ready to go to final assembly when we get the motor back.’

“Good, and the Cobra?”

“Well according to Felix, most of the parts that Squeak ordered are ready for pickup. Speaking of Squeak, where’s she? I kinda expected both of you to show up.”

“Umm, we had a few personal issues so she decided to stay home.”

“You pissed her off somehow, didn’t ya?”
“Yea, my mouth getting ahead of my brain again, let’s leave it at that ok?”

“Figures. Anyway, back to the Cobra. Fritz said that he found the motor they needed and Squeak can pick it up tomorrow at Prestige Motorsports. The rebuild parts for the motor are ready at Rust-eze Speed Shop, and the suspension parts are ready at Competition Suspension. I know we were originally going to use Jegg’s but they didn’t have what we needed so Fritz took the liberty of calling Gerald at Competition. They had what we need in stock so there’s no wait time involved there.’
‘The brake components from Rousch won’t be ready until the tail end of next week, so Felix figured that Squeak could pick up the ‘Vette motor and the brakes for the Cobra next week.’
‘The body guys should have the body prepped and ready for paint right after the ‘Vette comes out. Which brings up a point that Duane made.”

“And what would that be?”

“You’re sure that Squeak’s going to win this thing, right?”

“Absolutely, one hundred percent … why?”

“Well, Duane thought that maybe he could paint it with whatever color you or Squeak wanted, then put a coat of some godawful pink that you wanted over the top.”
“What would the point of two different colors be?”

“Easy, according to him. The paint he’s going to do the second coat with is easy to wash off.”

“Really? Let him know that that’ll be perfect. I’ll have Squeak get with him to decide what color she wants. The car’s going to be hers after the race, so I want her to decide the color.”
“I’ll let him know. With luck, there’s only around three weeks left on each build. They should be ready at about the same time.”

“Great. Now, do you know where Felix is for sure?”

“Yea, I think he’s at Squeak’s bay. Last time I saw him he was on the phone, presumably with that Jackie Feulit dude.”

“Ok, thanks, I’ll go touch base with him and see how that’s going.”

…

Approaching Judy’s bay, Nick sees Fritz just finishing a phone call.

“Well, how goes the project?” he asks.

“Not bad. Jackie’ll be here on Wednesday of next week, with the cars arriving on Friday. With the project cars about three weeks from being finished, that’ll give Judy around a week and a half to learn to drive a true muscle car. Where is she by the way?”

“We had some … misunderstandings at the doctors’ office and now she’s mad at me.”

“Your fault no doubt.”

“Yea, yea, yea, my fault already.”

“At any rate, I’m sure that Midnight told you that Judy should be able to pick up most of the parts tomorrow, the only hold up is the brake parts from Rousch. They’ll be ready by Friday, so we should be able to get most of the prep work finished by the end of this week. By the time Jackie gets here,
the engine should be rebuilt and ready to install in the frame, along with the suspension and brakes.’
‘The frame and subcomponents are already back from powder coat, so when we get the parts picked
up we can start assembly.’

“Ok, thanks for the updates, I’ll pass the info along to Judy, I’m sure she’ll be here tomorrow, ready
to go back to work.”

…

Returning home, Nick found Judy seemly passed out on the living room couch, several empty bottles
of apple cider lying about. Gently picking her up and taking her to bed, he undressed her and tucked
her in. Going into the bathroom, he retrieved a bottle of aspirin and then got a bottle of water from
the kitchen fridge.

Returning to the bedroom, he was just about to set everything on the nightstand when Judy suddenly
sat up.

“Thanks Nick, but I really won’t be needing those.”

Jumping a foot into the air, water going in one direction, aspirin in another “Shit, don’t do that. I
thought you were drunk and passed out.”

“It’s called a hustle, sweetheart. I put the cider in a gallon jug and hid it in the bottom of the fridge.
This is a little taste of what’s in store for you off and on for the foreseeable future.’
‘Now, what’s up with the builds?’

As Nick regaled the news of both builds progress, Judy listened attentively.

“So, what you’re telling me is that tomorrow I can pick up most of the parts needed for the Cobra
build and start putting stuff together, right?”

“Yea, according to what I’ve been told.’
‘Look, I know I screwed up at the doctor’s office ok? I really am sorry and whatever I need to do to
make it up to you ok?’

“I know, but you’re still going to pay bigtime. You know that right?”

“Yea, and I know I deserve whatever you’re going to do. But can we call a truce in the meantime? I-
we’ve got enough to worry about with the builds and you learning to race without a bunch of extra
drama in the works. Please.”

“… I guess so. But I’m warning you, if you screw up like that again …”

“Ok, I get it. How about a trip to the Gaslight, for old times’ sake?”

“The first place you took me on the day we met? That sounds wonderful.”

“I’ll call ahead and tell Mellissa to expect us. Thanks Judy, maybe this ‘ll help keep things going in
the right direction for me.”

“It’ll be good start, thanks Nick. It shows that you actually do mean to make up for being so
insensitive. It means a lot to me.”

“I know. Let’s get dressed then. I mean to show off my beautiful wife to the world and show how
proud I am of her.”
With a sly grin, Judy commented “And I know just the outfits to wear.”

Seeing Nick’s more than slightly concerned look she adds “Stay there, I’ll be right back.”

When Judy returned with two sets of clothing, Nick was stunned. What she carried in her paws were the clothes that they had worn when Nick followed the Hopps tradition of asking the matriarch (Bonnie) for permission to date Judy.

In one paw was her pale blue dress, with spaghetti straps that had the neckline that dipped and showed just a peek of her bust, while the skirt’s hemline reached down to just above her knees.

Complementing the dress was her amethyst and emerald necklace, the only thing missing was a fresh Calla Lily.

In the other paw was Nick’s attire, from the light blue button-up shirt that matches her dress perfectly, and the tan slacks.

“I know it’s not really called for, but could we stop somewhere and get a fresh Lily?”

“For you my lovely bunny, anything. Let me make a quick call to a florist I know while you get dressed and we’ll be set to go.”

After stopping by Otterton’s Fine Florist for a fresh Calla Lily, the couple headed to the Gaslight Cafe and Lounge, where they had a sentimental meal that was the same as the first day they met.

From there, it was a quick trip to the Icehouse, where they had some beer (red beer for Judy) and picked up some BBQ chicken pizza to go.

Returning home, they fell asleep in front of the tv watching (or trying to watch rather) an old Robin Hood movie.

…

Bright and early the next morning, Judy was awakened by the sound of Nick trying to make breakfast.

“What on earth are you doing?”

“Sorry, I was going to make some … what did you call them again?”

“Grits?”

“Yea, those, but first I couldn’t remember what they were, then I dropped the pan, sorry.”

“Ya big goof, move over. The grits are behind the oatmeal in the cabinet, go get ‘em and I’ll teach you how to cook ‘em. What ever possessed you to make grits anyway?”

“I know they were actually meant as a punishment the first time, but I kinda like ‘em.”

“Especially with blueberry jam and butter?”

“Well yea, there is that.”

After a quick breakfast of grits, toast and juice or coffee, they head to the shop.
After a pleasant twenty-minute drive they arrive and head their separate ways, Nick goes to the office while Judy heads for her bay where she finds Fritz waiting, gazing at the white board.

“I see there are a few things already marked off” she states.

“Yea, the frame cam back from powder coat and the body panels are at prep. Everything except the brakes for the Cobra and the engine for the ‘Vette are ready for pickup, so you can start with that if you want. The only change was with the suspension parts. Jegg’s didn’t have what we needed in stock so I called the guys at Competition Suspension, I’ll give you the address before you leave. We can start putting the car together as soon as you get back, but we’ll need to wait until we get the major components installed before we worry about wiring, brake lines and such.”

“Ok, I’ll grab the step-side and get to movin’. Is there anything else I need to pickup while I’m out and about?”

“Not that I can think of right now. If something pops up I’ll holler at you.”

Stepping into the office, Judy lets Nick know that she’s heading out on her parts run.

“While you’re at it” he tells her “try and think what color you want the Cobra painted.”

“I thought you were just going to paint it pink to piss off Johnny.”

“Well Duane came up with the idea to paint it whatever color we wanted, then go over it again with a washable version of pink. That way we can just wash off the pink and no worry about either repainting the car or just driving a pink Cobra.”

“Brilliant. Ok, I’ll work on a paint color then. But why me though?”

“Well I was going to surprise you, but once you beat Johnny’s ass in the race, I was planning to give you the car.”

“Wait, what? But-I never dreamed you’d let me keep it. It won’t be streetable though will it?”

“We can always either detune it, or you can race it occasionally or both. And just so you know, I always planned on giving you the car anyway.”

Giving her husband a quick hug and kiss “Well, I’m gone for now, thanks for the car, I’ll try not to wreck it during the race. What?” noticing a thoughtful look on Nick’s muzzle.

“Thanks to you, I just thought of an addendum to put in the contract.”

“Which would be?”

“If Johnny wrecks the ‘Vette, or causes you to wreck, he would be liable for any and all damages including replacing either car if one or both are damaged or totaled. If Johnny won’t sign it, the race is off. And if he does, he’ll think twice about wrecking you just to win the race.”

“That’s the sly business mammal I fell in love with. Welcome back Nick…”

While Judy was out on her parts run she got a call from Felix, informing her that she had one additional stop to make. That was at Applied Electronics, where she needed to pick up a complete wiring harness set for the Cobra. After picking up most of the parts needed for the Cobra build, Judy
started helping Felix assemble the suspension components and other major parts onto the frame. Since almost everything was a complete unit or a major subassembly, the installation process went fairly quickly.

The next few days flew by, and before anyone knew it, it was Friday.

As Duane rolled the finished Corvette body out of the paint booth, the Cobra body which was ready to paint, was rolled in. Noticing that, Nick headed to the booth, anxious to find out what color that Judy had selected.

“Well” he asked Duane “what color is this beast going to be?”

“Can’t tell ya.” came the reply.

“Can’t or won’t?” Nick asked.

“Pretty much the same thing.”

“I’m your boss, and you won’t tell me what color your going to paint one of my cars?”

“According to Judy, you’re giving here the car after the race anyway, right?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Judy told me what colors she wants on the car and gave me strict orders not to let you know under any circumstance. You’re not to see the car until it’s completely finished, period. Truth be told, I’d much rather tangle with you than with her. If you’ve got problems with that, you need to talk to her.”

Taking every bit of two seconds to consider asking Judy about her color choice and her not wanting him to see the car until it was finished “Nah, that’s ok, we both know how that’ll play out. Thanks.”

Heading over to the bay where Judy and Felix were putting the finishing touches on the suspension he was greeted with a hug. “Hey beautiful” he greeted his wife as he returned the hug. “Sorry Felix, ya get no hug, wouldn’t want to make Winston jealous.”

“Much appreciated. What’s up?”

“Not much, I just wanted to see how the build was progressing, and to ask my darling wife why she didn’t want me to see the car until it’s finished.”

Folding her arms across her chest, Judy fixed Nick with a stern look. “Two reasons actually.” “And they are?”

“Number one, remember your little stunt at the doctor’s office a while back?”

“Yea, and number two?”

“I just really want to surprise you with it. I really think you’ll love the colors. After we wash the ugly as shit pink off of it that is.”

“Ya know, I’d forgotten about until Duane reminded me about that to be honest. Ok, fine. I’ll trust you and I promise not to peek. Have you picked up the motor for the ‘Vette and brakes for the Cobra yet?”

“Nope, I was actually going to head out in a little bit after cleaning up.”
“How about me riding along and treating you to lunch on the way?”

“You know I’m not going to let on what colors I’m having the car painted right?”

“Farthest from my mind my love. I just wanted to spend a bit of quality time with you is all.”

“In that case, I’ll take free lunch anytime. Do I get to pick?”

“Of course, where to Squeak?”

“The Icehouse. And no, you know I’m not going to have a beer while I’m working, even if it is with the boss.”

“Then let’s go, times a wastin’.”

....

After a quick lunch of pizza (veggies and cheese) and iced tea, Nick and Judy make two quick stops. The first is at Rousch Racing, where they pick up the competition brakes for the Cobra, the second to Year One for the motor for the ‘Vette.

After dropping those components off, Nick heads over to see how the Corvette build is progressing while Fritz and Judy start installing the brakes on the otherwise finished rolling chassis that will soon be a race ready Cobra.

Arriving at bay four where Snow and Sneezy are grinning widely “Hey you two, you ‘bout ready to get this thing runnin’?”

“Hell yea” answers Skye “all we’ve really needed was the motor. We started assembly as soon as it came out of paint, including the wiring. As soon as we get this installed and put the fluids in we’ll be ready for a quick test start. After that we’ll change the oil, run it for about and hour and change the oil again. This thing should be ready to go by tomorrow morning. How’s Judy doin’ on the Cobra?”

“The body’s in paint, and with the brakes being picked up the same time as your motor, I think the Snake ‘ll be finished by Friday. Two builds finished and running a week and a half ahead of schedule has got to be a record.”

“Well, get out of here and find somethin’ constructive to do, you’re slowin’ us down. Git’

“Fine, be that way then. I’ll just go in the office and pout.”

Seeing Midnight gesturing to him from the office he heads that way.

Entering the office, he notices a mammal not much smaller than himself seated next to his desk.

“Nick” begins Midnight “there’s a Jackie Fuelit here to see you.”

Standing and walking over to Nick, the large rodent introduces himself (a Welsh rat to be precise) “Muster Wilde” he begins with a Scottish brogue “Ah’m proud ta make ‘yer acquaintance.” (Please bear with me on the accent, I really don’t have much of a reference for it).

“Mister Fuelit, I’m honored to have you come here to my little shop. Forgive me, but aren’t you a little early? Fritz said you wouldn’t be her until next Wednesday.”

“Ach, ‘tis no a big deal, when mah gud friend Felix told me about you’re luttle problem, ‘ahm happy ta help. As fer bein’ early, ah had nothin’ better ta do, so here ah am.”
“Well then, how about we go meet up with your new student then?”

“Lead on then laddie.”

Xxx

Chapter End Notes

AN: I know the ‘Scottish’ accent sucks, but there really isn’t a lot of info out there to draw on, so let that poor attempt slide, ok?
Lessons

Chapter Summary

Judy gets to meet 2 racing legends, Jackie Fuelit and Dale Elkhart Sr. and gets to train at the track with Dale Sr. A new couple is unsurprisingly thrown into the mix.

Chapter Notes

Again, please bear with the (attempted) Scottish accent, I really don’t have a lot of reference material.
This is going to be a REALLY long chapter, but I couldn’t justify breaking it up, so buckle up buttercup, here we go…

18: Lessons

XxX

As Nick led Jackie Fuelit to the space where Judy and Felix were working, Jackie couldn’t help but be impressed with Nick’s shop.

“Ye’ve got a right nice se-up here laddie, Ye do well, ah take it.”

“Well enough. It makes life a little more comfortable for the mammals I have in my employ.”

“Fritz tol’ me a bit aboot tha. Ye seem ta take in mammals that have had a wee hard time in life.”

“Almost every mammal here has had a hard life, been broken as we say here. We’ve all had tragedies in our lives. From the loss of loved ones to combat vets to shattered dreams that left scars both on our bodies and on our souls, myself included. Who better to know and appreciate these kinds of mammals than someone who’s been there?”

“An’ the lassie that ah’ll be teachin’ to drive is one of those mammals?”

“Yes, she is. And in fact, she’s my… Judy, Fritz, you two got a sec?” interrupted Nick as he and Jackie reach Judy’s bay.

Turning, Judy and Fritz are both a bit shocked to see Jackie standing before them.

“What the hell Jackie?” questions Fritz “I thought you weren’t gonna get here until next week.”

“Well, as ah tuld thus fine yung mammal, ah relly had nuthin’ better ta do, so here ah am. Busides, ah rully wanted ta meet th yung lassie ah’m gun ta be trainin’.”

“Well then, here she is” commented Fritz “your new student. Judy Wilde, Nick’s wife.”

Turning and looking back and forth between Nick and Judy “Ya din’t mention that the yung lassie
was married to the owner here Fritzie.”

“Is that a problem?” asks Nick, at least a little concerned.

“No’ at all laddie, jus’ wasn’t expecting such a fine lookin’ lassie such as her to be workin’ as a wrench in a shop is all.”

“There are a lot of things about Judy that might surprise you” added Nick.

“So it seems” admitted Jackie “so it seems.”

“What with your cars not being here, and the shop not having either of the cars that’ll be racing anywhere near ready to go, what are we going to do in the meantime?” asks Judy of Jackie, feeling a bit left out of the conversation.

“Well, it so happens that ah rented a specially equipped Challenger in case yuh didn’ have anythin’ raceable at paw. We can all take a short trip to the track so ah can get familiar with it, and the lassie can ride with me to get used to it as well.”

“Not a bad idea” admits Fritz “there’s not much left to do on either car. The ‘Vette is headed to final assembly, and the Cobra body just went into paint. We’ve pretty much done all we can do with that until the body’s finished.’
‘Nick, is there anything in the shop that you’d be comfortable taking out on the track?”

“Would anything raceable qualify, regardless of the type of car?” Nick asks with a mischievous smirk working his muzzle.

“Ah don’ see why not.” Replies Jackie.

“Why?” asks Judy. “I know that smirk, and it usually means trouble.”

“Do you trust me sweetheart?”

“Normally, yes, but this idea is sure to have bad written all over it.”

“You haven’t even heard it yet … “

“I know, that’s what’s got me worried.”

“Look, you know I’d never put you in any real danger, right?”

“Yea, and?”

“You take the step-side. Fritz can ride with you and Jackie can follow you to the track in the Challenger.’
‘I’ve got an old racecar in the warehouse that’ll work just fine for you to follow Jackie around the track, just to get the feel of what it’s like to race, to get your paws wet so to speak. The Cobra will stomp the hell out of anything else we can put on the track, but you need to get the sound and feel of what it’s like to compete. OK?”

“Ok, fine, but I’m still not sure about it.”

“Just … look, you all head to the track, I’ll be along in a few minutes. I’ve got to get the car ready and loaded onto one of the rollbacks. But before you leave Squeak, go into the storage room just off of the office. There should be a fire suit and helmet that’ll fit you. The car’s as safe as it can be, but strange things can happen on a racetrack. I’m not going to take any chances of you getting hurt if I
As everyone else heads to the track, Nick goes into a remote corner of the warehouse and uncovers an old race car.

‘This will do I think. It’s old and ugly as hell, but it’s got plenty of power and the handling should be adequate for her first time’ he says to himself.

With Midnight’s help, Nick got the car ready to drive. Filling the fuel tank, checking the oil, making sure the tires have enough air etc.

After a few minutes of wrangling the car onto the rollback, Nick heads to the track.

As Nick rolls into the pit area to unload the car, Fritz, Judy and Jackie all wonder if Nick has lost his mind.

“What in the hell is that?” they all ask, for varying reasons.

“Why are you bringing that-that thing for me to drive?” asks Judy. “And is it even drivable?”

“Are you serious about letting anyone drive that? It’s a piece of Zootopian history dude,” queries Fritz.

“Is that even a race car?” asks Jackie.

“This” answers Nick “is almost a piece of racing history. I bought the car from Dale Elkhardt senior after the Whatkins Glenn race several years ago. It was his backup car that was never used.’

‘It was built specifically for road racing, so yes Squeak it’s drivable. And at the time was very competitive. There’s no way it’ll be able to catch either the ‘Vette or the Challenger that Jackie ‘ll be driving, but it’ll still give you a taste what it’s like to hear and feel what it’s like on the track. Besides, if Squeak can handle it, she can handle the Cobra when it’s finished.”

“But it’s a stock car” interrupted Fritz.

“Look, in the first place, there’s nothin’ stock about a stock car. It’s a race car, get over it already.’

‘So, Jackie, you’re the master here, what’s the plan?’

“Well, ta begin with, ah thot ah’d do several circuits around the track in the Challenger with the wee lassie ta get she and ah familiar with the layout. First slowly, then at a higher speed.’

‘then she can get inta thot … thing yew brot and follow me as best she can.”

“Judy, you good with that?” asks Nick.

“Let’s do this, I can’t learn anything just standing here.”

“That’s the spirit. Ok Jackie, let’s see what ya got.” Says Nick.

Climbing into the Challenger with Jackie, the first thing Judy notices is the 5-point safety harness and roll bars.

“Where did you say you rented this again?” she asks.
“Ah don recall saying at all” replied Jackie “but ah ‘borrad’ it from a friend of mine who builds race cars. He actually built it just for road racing.”

“Oh, ok” was all Judy could say.

“Anyway, here we go. Ah’ll jus make a couple of slow turns to get the feel for the track, the ah’ll open it up fer a wee bit. Hang on and enjoy the ride lassie.”

With Jackie taking the twists and turns at a moderate pace to begin with, Judy begins to relax a little. After the second lap, she tenses when she hears the throaty roar of the hemi engine pick up.

“Ye might want ta hold on a wee bit tighter lassie, now the fun part begins.”

Dropping the 6-speed manual transmission into first gear and flooring the accelerator, Jackie throws the 650 horsepower Challenger into a slight power skid entering the first turn. With the turn being a long sweeping right hander, the car picked up speed rapidly, pining Judy into the seat. Climbing through the gears from just under 40 mph to well over 120 in a matter of seconds, Judy’s eyes threaten to bug out of her head, being so wide open.

As her heart threatens to beat out of her chest, Jackie suddenly applies the brakes to slow the car to a series of quickly approaching S curves, which pitches Judy forward, hard into her safety harness. After negotiating the esses, Jackie is back hard on the throttle again for a few seconds, then again on the brakes to negotiate a set of two quick 90-degree left hand turns.

Then back hard on the throttle, he goes through the gears again. Going from almost a dead stop to over 160 in just under a half mile, he then quickly down shifts for a very dangerous off camber right hand turn.

Then it’s quickly back up through the gears through a short quarter mile straight shot to what’s affectionately referred to in the racing community as a ‘bus stop’ or inner loop, where the speed is drastically reduced again.

Then up through the gears into another 90-degree right hander that opens up to a half-mile long straightaway which includes the start-finish line.

After slowing down and pulling into the pits, Jackie steps out of the car but notices that Judy is still buckled up in the cockpit.

As everyone runs up to the car with very worried expression on their faces, Nick jerks the passenger door open and asks “Judy, are you ok? What’s the matter? DAMN IT SAY SOMETHING…”

“Umm ……. two things. First, I … think I may have wet myself.”

“Damn. And?”

“How fast will the Cobra go when it’s finished?”

“Hopefully a hell of a lot faster than the Challenger and the ‘Vette. Why?”

“Because … THAT WAS FREAKING AWESOME!!”

Seeing the look on his bunnies’ face Nick started laughing.

“What the hell is so funny?” she asks.

“Two things” he said, mocking his wife a bit “one, you wet yourself? Snow’s gonane love that.”
“Nick if you tell her that-”

“What? You’ll be embarrassed? Again?”

“Never mind. I’m sure I’ll just laugh about it somewhere down the line. And the second reason?”

“You’re an addict.”

“What?” she says, staring in disbelief.

“I said you an addict.”

“Nick, make sense. Addicted to what?”

“Speed. You’ve become an adrenalin junkie.”

Thinking about his statement “Then you’re gonna have to feed my addiction. You started this, you’re gonna have to keep me going, you know that right?”

“Squeak, I have no problem with that at all. I already told you that the Cobra’s yours after this is all said and done, so I’ll be happy to sponsor you anytime you wanna race.”

“Great. Now, let me out of this thing so I can go change. Luckily, I actually brought a change of clothes with me. And get that … thing ready for me to drive.”

Grinning, all Nick could say was “Yes dear.”

…

By the time Judy got back to the pits from changing, Nick had the stock car unloaded and ready to go. While she puts her fire suit and helmet back on, she gets some last minute instructions from Nick.

“Ok, listen up. Everything about this car is different from anything you’ve driven before. Throttle response is quicker. Steering is quicker. Braking is much more severe.’
 ‘You may or may not have noticed that there are gravel pits and sand traps at the exits of each of the turns. If you take a turn too fast, they’ll stop you from hitting anything solid.’
 ‘Don’t be afraid of making a mistake, it’s how we learn. Now, get out there and make me proud.”

Just as she was getting ready to climb into the car, Judy notices something above the driver’s door.

“Nick, what the hell is this?” she asks.

“What?”

“Above the door here.”

“Oh that? I thought you might appreciate that.”

There, above the driver’s door window was Judy’s nickname “Squeak’ in grey letters with a red border.

“Josh did that while I was getting the car ready. Neat huh?”

Rolling her eyes, she gave her fox a quick kiss for luck. As she settled in and finished adjusting her 5-point harness, Nick gave her one last instruction.

“Whatever happens, I don’t give a damn about the car, just be safe … and have fun.”
Smiling at Nick, Judy fires the engine and her grin gets noticeably larger hearing the powerful V-8 engine come to life.

...

As Judy follows the Challenger out onto the track, she hears Nick’s voice in her ears through the helmet radio.

“Jackie’s supposed to do about the same thing he did when we first got here. Start slow for a couple of laps so you get the feel for the layout of the course. Then he’s supposed to gradually go faster. Do your best to stay with him but remember he’s used to this and you’re not. He’s been doing it for most of his life while you haven’t. Have fun bun.”

“You did not just call me a bun. Damn Nick …”

“Well, it did rhyme.”

...

As the first laps go by, Judy gets a feel for the increased horsepower of the racing engine, the sharpness of the turning ability of the steering, the g-forces she experienced in the turns and the forcefulness of the competition brakes.

The suddenness of the transitions from the massive straight-line acceleration to the heavy braking and centrifugal force of the sharp curves offered physical challenges to the bunny unlike anything she’d ever seen in her life. The first time she knew she had really screwed up was when she went into the off-camber right hand turn at a slightly higher speed than she was comfortable with. As the car started sliding to her left, not knowing for sure what to do she simply let go of the wheel, closed her eyes and hoped for the best.

Luckily, the car went straight and buried itself in the sand trap and Judy felt the 5-point safety harness bite into her shoulders and groin a bit under the sudden deceleration.

Letting out a breath she didn’t realize she was holding, Judy slowly opened her eyes.

‘Well, that was interesting’ she thought, her heart rate beginning to return to normal ‘Now what?’

As Nick, and Fritz pull up to the edge of the sand trap, she hears Nick over the helmet radio “Just stay buckled up in the car, we’ll use the winch to pull you out. Are you ok?”

“I’m fine, but I think I wet myself again” she said, only joking this time.

“Damn, you’re awfully hard on clothes today Squeak.”

“Kidding this time Nick, thank you very much” she laughed into the radio.

“Well, let’s get you out of there and see if there’s any damage to the car.”

...

After Fritz and Nick get the car out of the sand trap, Jackie finally pulls up.

“Are you ok lassie?” he asks. “Ah dinna see you in me mirror but figured if there was any real trouble ah woud’ve heard aboot it.”

“No, I’m fine” she answered. “Other than nearly soiling myself. Again. I got by with only a bit of
damaged pride this time.”

“Thot be a wicked corner, one ye cud use to yer advantage when ye race the blackard.”

Suddenly seeing the wisdom of Jackie’s statement, she began to understand some of the strategy that Jackie had mentioned while waiting for Nick to get to the track.

‘Ye’ve got to remember somethin’ lassie’ he’d told her ‘ye’ve gotta race the track first and yer competitors second.’

“So” she said thoughtfully “I can actually use the uniqueness of the track to my advantage.”

“Ach, now ye be getting’ the idea” he said, beaming.

Looking at Nick apprehensively, Judy asks “How’s the car? Is it good enough for me to get back out there again today?”

“The only real damage seems to be a bent tie rod, but we should be able to fix it quick enough. You’re sure you want to go back out so soon?”

“Hell yea, I think I could drive this old clunker all day. And by the way, you were right.”

“About what, precisely?”

“Me being an addict. This is an absolute blast.”

Trademark smirk in place, Nick could only gaze at his bunny.

“Give me about ten minutes, and we’ll have you back on the track. Get some water out of the rollback, it’s easy to get dehydrated while racing. I don’t want you to pass out while driving.”

…

Back in the car after the minor repairs, Judy refires the engine and gives Jackie the go-ahead signal.

Following the Challenger and using the Challenger’s brake lights as hints as to when and where to brake, where to coast and where to accelerate, Judy quickly adapts to the car and to the nuances of the track.

After another hour or so, Nick calls a halt to the day’s activities.

Pulling into the pits, Judy climbs out of the car, sweaty, dirty and tired, but with a grin that just won’t seem to go away.

“You know” she said “I don’t think I would have ever thought that enjoying something so noisy and stinky would be so much fun!”

“You’ve really got it bad Squeak.”

Addressing Jackie “Well, how did the bunny do?”

“The wee lassies’ a fast learner. We, and by that ah mean you, need ta get her a faster car ta drive until ya get the Cobra finished. I’m thinkin’ she’s getting’ everythin’ out of the old beastie that there is ta be got.”

“Is there any way to speed up the delivery of the cars that Fritz told me that you were going to be providing? That should make things a lot better a lot faster.”
“Now that ye mention it, they should me here by late tammara afternoon” reflected Jackie. “Since ah knew ah’d be here early, ah made sure the cars would arrive directly after me.”

“That’s great” interrupted a highly emotional bunny, who had been listening to the conversation.

“Easy Squeak, you’ll get your thrills soon enough. And don’t forget, you’ve still got the Cobra to finish. Work first, play later.”

“Ah’ve been wondrin’” says Jackie “just why do ye call the lassie Squeak?”

Judy, too busy trying to hide a very telling blush by pulling her long ears down over her face, allowed Nick to tell the story.

“Well, when she first started working for me, we both felt a connection. When she confronted me about my feelings towards her I told her that yes, I liked her and would like her to be my girlfriend, then she proceeded to kiss me and the entire shop went nuts. Well, she jumped about a foot in the air and let out the loudest squeak I’ve ever heard. So then Skye, one of the girls in the shop, gave her the nickname and it’s kind of stuck.”

“Interestin’.”

“Anyway, I guess it’s time for most of us to head back to the shop, we’ll see you tomorrow around what time Jackie?”

“Ah figured ah’d wait and bring the cars with me, so probably around two or three. Does thet sound ok ta yew?”

“Sounds good to me. Squeak go ahead and get out of the fire suit and head for the shop in the step-side if ya want, Fritz and I’ll bring the rollback and the car.”

“Ok, but do not take any side trips. I’m hungry, thirsty, sweaty and smell bad. We need to get a good shower before you take me out tonight.”

“Wait, what?”

“You heard me” talking as she wiggled out of a very sweat drenched fire suit “We’re going out tonight. I just drove a race car for the first time and I’m going to celebrate. And Jackie, you’re invited as well.”

Noticing Jackie giving off a questioning look, Nick addresses the legend “You might as well just give in and come, when Judy makes up her mind, there’s very little in this world that’ll change it.’

‘Icehouse dear?’

“Yup, they’ve got the best pizza and beer in town and I mean to get my share...”

Grinning, Nick relents “Don’t worry Jackie, I’ll text you the address, just dress casual, ok?”

“Now thot sounds like a plan laddie, ah could go for a cold pint aboot now.”

“Great, well meet you there in about an hour and a half. We need to drop the car off at the shop, then go home so Judy can get a good shower. I’m afraid my bunny smells really funky abo-”

“NICK!”

“Umm, yes dear?”
“If you want to shower alone, keep it up…”

“Umm as I was saying, we’ll meet you there in about an hour and a half or so.”

…

Arriving at the shop, Nick leaves the rollback and race car in the capable paws of Midnight, knowing that the car would get unloaded and put away safely.

On the ride home, Nick can’t help but notice that Judy keeps a steady gaze in his direction.

Wilting a bit under Judy’s intense gaze, Nick asks “What?”

Getting no immediate answer to the question, he just knew that he’d screwed up (again) bigtime.

“Look, I know already. It’s not that easy to stop making smart remarks after a lifetime of it ok? I’m trying and-”

Suddenly standing up and walking across the seat, Judy walks over and stares intensely eye to eye and nose to nose at Nick.

“Stop the truck Nick.” She says in a very serious tone.

“W-what?”

“You heard me, stop the truck.”

“But-”

“Stop the damned truck, NOW Nick.”

“Ok, ok…” As he pulls into a vacant parking lot and shuts the truck off “Look I-”

“Shut it Nick” and with that, Nick received the most passionate kiss that he’d ever gotten from his bunny.

Looking directly into her husband’s eyes Judy begins “If you don’t hurry your ass up and get us home, there’s going to be a very large stain on the seat. Move it Nick, and I mean NOW!”

“Yes ma’am” he replies as he throws the truck into gear, making his second attempt at breaking every traffic law in Zootopia heading home.

…

After a very intense shower with an extremely horny bunny, Nick made an astute observation:

“If I knew driving a race car would turn you on like that, I’d ‘ve started you out a long time ago.”

“I really had no idea that it would affect me like that. To be honest, I was actually a little bit afraid of it all until I put the car into that sand trap. The adrenalin spike was absolutely awesome. And how did you not notice with that overly sensitive nose of yours?”

“I guess the different smells of the car and how sweaty you were must have masked it. Usually I can smell when you’re turned on.”

“Well, let’s finish getting ready, I wouldn’t want to keep Jackie waiting.” A grin slowly working its
way across her muzzle.

“I know that look, what’s on my devious bunny’s mind now?”

“Nothing for sure at this point in time. It’s something I want to talk to you about after I beat the shit out of Johnny on the track.”

“If you say so. Anyway, let’s get moving.”

…

Entering the Icehouse a bit later than planned, mainly because of their prolonged, intimate shower, our pair is greeted by their usual bartender, Joe-Bob.

“Your bunch is back in the Chill Room” he comments “Welcome back, it’s been a while.”

“Yea, sorry about that, a lot’s been going on lately. Make sure the pizza and beer keep coming, especially Judy’s favorites.”

“Believe it or not, Snow already ordered several pizzas and three pitchers of Judy’s favorite red beer. And while we’re at it, who’s the other bunny buck that Snow brought in with her? I know it’s not the same one from several months ago.”

“Not to worry, I think it’s probably one of Judy’s brothers.”

Looking at one another, Nick and Judy get nearly identical smirks, and proceed to get their camera apps ready.

“You know, this is gonna be epic, right?” Judy asks.

“You know it. Shall we?”

“We shall.”

As they enter the room, the party is in full swing. However, two mammals seem to be conspicuously absent. With everyone’s attention currently being occupied by an arm wrestling contest between Midnight and Bolo, Nick and Judy decide to go on the prowl, hunting for the mammals in question.

Slowly surveying the room, Nick gently nudges Judy and inclines his head towards a suspiciously dark corner booth. Sneaking around the edges of the room, the foxes excellent vision allows him to identify their quarry. Readying their cameras, they suddenly step in front of the darkened booth and each take a multitude of flash pictures and videos, catching Snow and Judy’s brother Josh in mid lip-lock, and totally by surprise.

“What the hell!” exclaims Snow, trying her best to rebutton the top buttons of a very revealing blouse.

“Well” says Nick “looks like turnabout is fair play.”

“I think this one would be the best to send to your mom, don’t you think?” says Judy, showing Nick a shot of Josh with his paw in the top of Skye’s mostly unbuttoned blouse.

“And to your folks as well, don’t you think?” added Nick.

“Don’t you dare!” pleads Skye as Judy shows her the photo “Please, don’t, not that one… please.”
“Don’t worry sis, I’m going to keep that one in my private collection. But I think Laverne will love this one” showing Skye a pic that’s just a close-up of her and Josh kissing.

“If ya gotta send one, I guess that’s the one” Skye admits, more than a bit crestfallen. “We were bound to get caught sooner or later, I’m just glad it’s by you.”

Hearing a very loud uproar in the room, Judy, Skye and Josh look to see what the commotion is about. Looking at the 55-inch TV screen mounted on the wall at one end of the room, the three see a short video loop of Skye and Josh kissing, pulling apart as they’re startled, then kissing again.

“Oh, shit” exclaims Skye, her entire body turning beet red under her snow-white fur. “Josh, say something…”

Looking like he’d just been woken up, Josh shook his head to try and clear it “Umm … you’re a better kisser than any of my sisters …?”

"Hey!!!" says a thoroughly outed Judy.

Looking like she’d been struck by lightning Skye huffed and gave Judy a sorrowful look “Just kill me now, please.”

With that, the entire room erupted into chaos as Skye and Josh were treated to a popcorn and beer shower.

“Thanks a lot, you bunch of assholes!” shouts Skye at everyone, which prompts more popcorn and beer being sent their way.

“Looks like you two might need a good shower” prods Nick, laughing so hard he can barely speak. “It’s a good thing the shop’s only a short walk away. And don’t worry about the water bill, use as much as you need.”

“And you know you’ll most likely have to contend with Laverne and Shirley in the morning, right?” adds Judy.

Looking a bit apprehensive Skye and Josh nod, knowing that Judy’s absolutely right.

After the new couple leave to get cleaned up, Nick and Judy make their way to where Fritz, Winston and Jackie are sitting.

“Well, thut wuz inturestin’.” Began Jackie. “These things happen a lot here?”

“Only just about every time we get together” admitted Nick.

“Ah’m thinkin’ ah’m glad ah’ll be spendin’ more time at the racetrack then.”

“Oh, don’t be such a spoilsport” says Judy. “Here let me buy you a beer and have some pizza, it’ll do wonders for your attitude.”

“An’ what in the world do ye be eatin’ and drinkin’ there lassie?”

“Red beer and BBQ chicken pizza.”

“Just what is red beer?” mouth slightly agape “And why would a bunny be eatin’ chicken of all things?”

“Long story” grins Judy “try some of both and I’ll tell ya about it.”
As Jackie tries some of Judy’s ‘delicacies’, liking the pizza but not so much the red beer, he can’t help but be enthralled by the unfolding tale.

“So, let me get this straight” losing a bit of his brogue as he got a little tipsy (you’d think it would get thicker, wouldn’t you) “all of this came about after sharing some of your most painful memories with the white furred lass?”

“Yup, pretty much.”

“And you obviously still like it, even with all you’ve been through?”

“If anything, it’s just gotten worse” added Nick.

“Oh? How so?”

“Well” pipes in Judy “I tend to eat turkey sausage, eggs and the occasional bug burger, but that was only when I was pregnant. Can’t stand the damned things now.”

“Well with all that bein’ said, ah think ah’ll retire for the evening. Thank you all for the lovely day and interesting evening, but I think it’s time for me to be off … wait, ah just said that didn’t ah?”

“’Fraid so. See you tomorrow Jackie, do you need a ride to wherever you’re staying?” asks Nick.

“No, thank you, the Palm, that’s the hotel ahm staying at, has a shuttle service. Ah jus’ called them … they should be here in just a few … wait, I think that’s them now” as a shuttle from the hotel pulls up to the front of the bar.

With Jackie’s departure the party begins to wind down and everyone, including Nick and Judy, heads their separate ways.

“Well” declares Judy as they arrive at home “this has certainly been an interesting day.”

“Yea, who knew I would have a hard-core racer as a wife.”

“You complaining mister Wilde?”

“Not in the least missus Wilde.”

As they get undressed and head to bed, Judy asks in a very sultry voice “Mister Wilde …” with a bit of smirk on her muzzle.

Looking directly into the half-lidded eyes of his very naked bunny “Yes?”

“Why do you still have those boxers on?”

…

Saturday morning arrives to find a certain fox buried under the covers while a gray bunny is running around the house like a mad mammal.

“Nick. NICK. NICK!!! Damn it Nick wake up.”

“I’m awake already woman, damn” comes a muffled voice from under the covers.

“Then get the hell up. I don’t want to miss Jackie arriving with the cars.”
“First, it’s Saturday. Second, it’s only just seven am. And third, Jackie’s not supposed to arrive until around two or three, so what’s the hurry?”

Bouncing from foot to foot, Judy can absolutely not contain her excitement “C’mon Nick you know much I’m lookin’ forward to this and I-“

“Can hardly stand it” remarks Nick as he throws back the covers and jumps out of bed, fully clothed.

“Nick, you shit!”

“Ow, ow, ow, c’mon Squeak, that smarts.” Nick whines as he’s pummeled by an irate bunny.

“One of these days, I swear-”

“Don’t swear, it's unbecoming.”

“Nick….”

“I know, I know. Now, I can tell you don’t have breakfast ready, so while you were running around in a panic-”

“I wasn’t in a panic-”

“I took the liberty of texting Mel to have breakfast ready for us. If we leave now it should be on the counter waiting for us when we get there.”

“You did this on purpose…”

“You, pretty much.”

“What am I gonna do with you?”

“Well … you could go to breakfast with me” he remarked with a smirk.

“Arg … fine, let’s go I’m hungry.”

…

Arriving at the shop after a good breakfast, Judy heads to her bay and finds Fritz locking down the last of the suspension components.

“Ok” she asks “What’s all left?”

“To start with, according to Midnight, the ‘Vette is finished and ready for a test drive.’
‘The suspension, brakes and the entire driveline including the exhaust is finished on the Cobra. As soon as Duane lets us know that the body is dry enough to handle we can mount it and get the Klock brothers in here to wire it.’

“Did he paint it like I wanted?”

“I believe so. All I’ve really seen is that god-awful pink that’s on it now.”

“Well, if there’s nothing left for us to do here for now, what say we make a trip over to the area where the employees keep their project cars. I’ve got an idea that I want to run past you.”
“Why not Nick first?”

“I want you to help me figure out if it’s doable first, then I’ll run it by Nick. I’m sure he’ll let me do what I’ve got in mind, I just want someone else’s take on it first.”

“Ok, let’s see what you’ve got.”

Meanwhile, Nick and Midnight are in the process of trying to wrangle the previous night’s activities from Josh.

“Hell no, I ain’t telling you shit boss” says Josh forcibly “a gentlemammal don’t kiss and tell.”

“Not even a hint?” asks Nick.

“I told you before, if you want to find out anything, go ask Skye.”

“So, it’s Skye now and not Snow? Interesting. Whadda ya think Midnight?”

“Definitely something goin’ on, that’s for sure.”

“Ok, let me ask you one question that I think I already know the answer to. It’s not really personal, it’s just kind of a fox thing … did Snow ask you out or did you ask her?”

“… She asked me, ok? Satisfied?” answered Josh with a bit of an attitude.

“Yea, it’ll do. For now. In parting, I’m going to ask you a simple question that I really don’t want an answer to right now, just something for you to think about. Do you really like her or is this just a fling? I don’t like my close friends getting hurt … I still have one bunny to deal with for messing with her and Judy, don’t make it two.” and with that he left the office, heading towards Judy and Fritz’s bay.

Noticing the pair heading back from the area that personal projects are kept, and being the nosey fox that he is, Nick asks “What’s up?”

Kissing her fox on the cheek, Judy replies “Not much, just showing Fritz some of the personal projects that are going on. What’s up with you?”

“Midnight told me that the ‘Vette was finished, so I let him take it for a shake down cruise. I though we could take it to the track when we get the Cobra finished the first of next week. Maybe Jackie would be willing to see what our ‘Vette can do. If you can beat him driving that car, Johnny won’t stand a snowflakes chance in hell. No pun intended.”

“Wait, you want me to race Jackie … for real?”

“Actually, I thought it’d be a bit smarter to race against each other’s times. There’s less of a chance of wrecking one or both of the cars until the actual race in just over a week.”

“Let me get this straight. Jackie and I ’ll be making timed laps and not actually race each other? How’s that gonna help me race against Johnny? He’s not gonna settle for timed laps, you know that as well as I do.”

“Well, it just so happens that since you won’t be trained on the Cobra by Dale Elkhardt like I
originally planned, Dale has graciously agreed to go one on one with you in the stock cars. You’ll get to race against not one, but two racing legends.’
‘Even though with Jackie it’ll be timed laps, Dale will be on track. And believe me, they don’t call him the ‘Intimidator’ for nothing.’
‘He knows ever trick in the book, legal and … questionable, to win a race.”

“And just why is he willing to do this? Especially on short notice and after not training me in the first place?”

“Squeak, you already know that everybody in the car community knows me and I know them, right?”

“Yea, and?”

“If they know me, they know you. And if you think Jackie was upset when he found out about how you were treated by Johnny, you should’ve seen Dale, he was absolutely furious. Dale may be pretty much anything goes on the track, but when it’s about family, he’s absolutely straight line.’

‘Yea, he was a bit upset when he found out that Fritz brought Jackie in to help train you in the Cobra, but he’s a professional and understood the difference in the cars. That being said, he’s the one who suggested a one on one race with him to get you used to actually racing someone on the track. He’ll show you how to win by driving, and not with just the brute force of the car. He’ll most likely show you a lot of the less than stellar moves that can make or break a driver.’

‘Do I expect you to win against Dale, no I don’t” noticing Judy begin to get a bit angry “but I do expect you to try. Again, Dale’s been doing this for decades and you’re barely beginning. If you really want to continue racing after this is all said and done, this can be an invaluable experience for you. Dale is one of the best professional drives in the country, how could you ask for a better opportunity than to be trained by the absolute best?”

Calming somewhat, Judy sees the wisdom in what Nick says “Fine, but mark my words, I’m going to beat him.”

“Don’t tell me” Nick says, with Judy noticing a huge smirk playing on his lips as he looked over her shoulder “tell him”.

Turning and looking in the direction of the main bay, Judy gapes at the imposing figure of an average sized bull elk, dressed in an all-black fire suit approaching.

While his size was average, Judy couldn’t help but notice that it was his attitude that must have defined him as a racer and as a mammal. Confident in the way he carried himself. The eyes, full of purpose, a fire that Judy was only beginning to feel and understand herself. ‘that could have been me if I was a cop’ Judy thought ‘but that was a lifetime ago. New life, new challenges. Am I sorry that I wasn’t able to be a cop? Yes, a bit maybe, but this is going to be much better in the long run I think. Everything that’s happened to be has happened for a reason. This is my life now and I’m going to make the most of it.’

“Squeak, you alright?” asks Nick.

“Hmm? Oh, yea, just zoned out there for a second, I’m fine.”

As Judy stared into the eyes of Dale Elkhardt senior she understood. The intense gaze was part of who he was, how it defined him. She recalled the same gaze staring back at her from the mirror in her room when she was a kit, wanting to become a police officer.

“Dale Elkhardt, this is my wife and future racer Judy Wilde. Judy, Dale Elkhardt senior, also known
professionally as the ‘Intimidator’.”

“Mrs. Wilde.”

“Mister Elkhardt. And please, call me Judy.”

“Very well, Judy. You ready to go?”

“Pretty much born ready. Did you bring a car?”

“It’s headed to the track. I just wanted to get introductions out of the way here. I’ll see you there.”

As Judy joins Nick getting into the rollback she comments “I can see why everyone calls him the Intimidator, those eyes-”

Actually, that’s not the reason at all” Nick adds with a smirk.

“Then why?”

“You’ll see when we get to the track. If you think he looks intimidating, wait until you see how he drives.”

…

As they pull into the pit area, Judy notices a banged-up black racecar sitting on the asphalt, ready to go. Looking at the nearly pristine condition of her car she hears Nick comment “losing your virginity twice in a lifetime has got to be a weird thing.”

Noting the suddenly horrified look on Nicks muzzle as he realized what he said, Judy whispered in his ear “I actually lost it the first time to you, Slick.”

Grinning at the suddenly confused look on her husband’s muzzle she continued “Part of the reason that my folks and the doctors didn’t believe that I’d been raped all those years ago was because my hymen was still intact. You were actually my first Nick.”

Turning away from her now gaping husband Judy notices Dale approaching “You ready to go mister Elkhardt?”

“It’s Dale Judy, and yea I’m ready, are you?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Any last words of advice before we get this started?” asks Nick.

“Only one thing for Judy to remember” Dale says, looking directly at the doe “The first couple of laps I’m going to be talking you through what to expect from the track at speed, then I’ll show you how to handle a real race situation. First it’ll be gentle nudges, then it’s going to be every mammal for him or herself. Above all, regardless of what happens do not and I mean do not, under any circumstances, ever get angry. Anger leads to bad decisions and bad decisions lead to mistakes. Not only in racing but in life. Got it?”

“Got it, let’s do this.”

After climbing into the cars and getting buckled in, Judy hears “Ok, comm check.” over the helmet radio.
“3 car, ready to roll” she hears Dale say.

Temporarily at loss for words, Judy then remembers the number on the side of the blue and yellow car “5 car, ready. Let’s go already.”

“All right, get rolling” says Nick over the radio “the first lap is a pace lap. Warm your tires up and get your mind in the right place Squeak. You need to remember that there aren’t any brake lights on these cars, so use the pace laps to remember where to brake.”

“Got it, now be quiet so I can concentrate.”

As the first lap goes by quicker than Judy realizes, they go past the start/finish line and Fritz waves the green flag.

"Following Dale for the first couple of laps, going a bit faster each time, Judy gets into a bit of a groove, instinctively knowing where to shift by hearing the sound of the engine and not relying on the tach.

After the third lap, suddenly the 3 car downshifts and begins to leave Judy behind “Let’s see what ya got girlie” comes over the radio, catching Judy completely off guard.

“I’ll show you what I’ve got’ she remarks with a bit of a huff as she downshifts and applies full power to the engine.

The first laps trying to catch the 3-car showed Judy just how poorly prepared she actually was mentally. Heading into the curves too fast, then over braking the corners she was in the grass more often than she was on the track.

“What did I tell you about getting mad?” came Dale over the radio. “Drive with your head, not your emotions. I’ll let you catch up to me and we’ll start this again, ok?”

“You did that on purpose, didn’t you?” she asked.

“Worked like a charm too right?”

Realizing that this was just another tactic to be used she readily admitted “Yes it did, and thanks for that.”

“Lesson one in the books, you ready for more?”

“Hell yea, let’s go.”

Taking the next few laps a little faster each time, Judy quickly was able to almost keep up with the 3 car.

“I’m going to let it all out now” came Dale over the radio “Let’s see how well you can keep up.”

“Is that a challenge?” she countered.

“If you want it to be, sure.”

A bit shocked to see Dale side by side with her, Judy totally missed Fritz drop the green flag again.

Seeing the 3-car gain on her and head into the first turn at race speed, it was all Judy could do to stay calm. Shifting into second gear and applying power, Judy slowed the advance of Dale ahead of her. While she noticed the 3 car slowly disappear ahead of her, Judy stayed calm and gradually learned
where the transition points were and how fast she could take the curves, where the shift points were, both up and down shifting.

Coming up to the pit turnoff after several laps, she heard Nick over the radio “Bring it in, the car and you both need a break.”

As she rolled the car to a stop, she noticed Dale talking to Nick and Fritz with a smile on his muzzle.

“Well, how’d I do?” she asked.

“Are you sure you’ve never driven before?” asked Dale.

“If you don’t count yesterday, then yea, I’m sure.”

“You did really well. After we take a short break, I want you to take the lead, and I’ll try to catch you.”

“What? How is that even remotely not going to happen?” she asks.

“Look, a big part of racing, especially on a road course like this, is not only being able to know how and where to pass another driver but know how to not get passed. The best way to teach that, is to show you … on the track.”

…

Break over, it was back on the track for more hard driving. After another hour of hard racing, two beat up racecars made their way into the pits.

Climbing out of his car Dale walks over to Judy “I hope you never decide to race the stock car circuit, I might have some serious competition.”

“Coming from you, that’s high praise” says an exhausted Judy.

“Judy-”

“Squeak-”

“Pardon me?”

“Call me Squeak, all my friends do.”

“Ok Squeak. You’re a great mammal and a hell of a driver. I know you’ll do well with the race you have coming up. Keep your head screwed on straight and you’ll have no problems. Give ‘em hell my young Padawan learner.”

“No you didn’t just quote a Jedi master.”

“If I had, I would’ve just called you Snips instead.” Said Dale, grinning as he headed for his hauler.

Staring open mouthed at the famous driver as he walked away, Judy barely heard Nick.

“Squeak … JUDY”

“Huh, what?”

Let’s load up and head back to the shop. I just got a call from Jackie; the cars have been delayed and
won’t be in until Monday sometime. We can drop off the rollback and check on the status of the Cobra, then head home. There’s really not much else to be accomplished today. By the time Jackie gets here with the cars, we really won’t be needing them since both of ours will be finished and ready to race.

“Snips …”

“What?”

“He called me Snips.”

“Okaaaay. And?”

“From here on out, that’s my nickname.”

“I think everyone ‘ll be good with that, all things considered. Now, let’s go, you need another shower something fierce.”

“Nick... thank you. For everything. I can’t begin to tell you how much you’ve changed my life for the better.”

“The pleasure has been mine Squea-I mean Snips. Now hustle your furry gray butt, I seem to have a very hungry and horny bunny I need to get home and take care of…”

XxX
Skye and Josh face Laverne the next morning, and the long awaited race is finally here.

Buckle up everybody, this is gonna be another really long chapter

19: The Race

As Nick and Judy pull into the shop with the rollback, they notice Josh and Skye sitting in the office, both wearing long faces (difficult with Josh being a bunny), along with a slightly irate Laverne and Shirley.

As they enter the office, Laverne immediately begins questioning them of all mammals.

“Did you two know about Skye and Josh? How long has this been going on? Why wasn’t I kept in the loop about this? Well, speak up!”

“Mom, calm down, please” interjected Nick when he got the chance. “We suspected something was up after the anime thing but never paid it no mind. Our suspicions were confirmed last night at the Icehouse when we caught them kissing in a secluded corner booth that by some happenstance had the lights out. I’m the one who texted you the picture last night remember?’

‘Besides, what the hell difference does it make anyway? They’re both grown adults that seem to genuinely like each other. Since Skye initiated everything I don’t understand what the big deal is. She and Josh both know how this fox/bunny courting thing goes, especially after everything that Judy and I went through.’

‘And now that I think of it, why are you just now making a big deal out of it? I would’ve though you’d ‘ve been all over it this morning, not waiting until the end of the day to bring it up.”

“Well, for your information, things might have gotten a bit more involved since this morning. Go on Skye, tell them …”

“Tell us what, exactly?” asks Judy.

Looking at Skye nervously, Josh spoke up instead “Umm, well, it seems that, umm, Skye asked me to marry her and-”

“She what?” asked Nick and Judy at the same time.

“Come on you guys” interjected Skye “it’s not like you went together for very long, and at least I’m
not pregnant…”

“Oh, no, you didn’t go there” replied a quickly angered Judy.

“Yea, I kinda did.”

“You know damned well the circumstances were entirely different, we at least went through the proper traditions to start with” Judy shot back.

“As did I with Josh” Skye shot back “I had no parents to consult with. Even though Laverne’s like a mother to me it’s NOT the same. And yes Judy, I asked your folks to court Josh and they were happy to consent. It’s not my fault if they didn’t tell you. Get pissed at them if you want but lay off of us already.”

“Look sis, don’t get me … us wrong” says Judy, trying to calm things down a bit “We’re all happy for you two, it’s just a bit of a surprise is all. With the builds and the upcoming race, we’re more than a little stressed, ok?”

“Alright everyone” interrupts Shirley “can we just start this over from the beginning please? Being the oldest here doesn’t mean I have to be the only adult in the room.”

‘Laverne, Skye by no means has to explain any of this to you or anyone else. She’s a grown vixen and has followed tradition as closely as she could, given the circumstances. Why she and Josh wanted to keep their romance on the downlow is no one’s business but theirs. She did, after all, ask Josh’s parents to court him so what’s got your tail in a twist anyway?”

“I don’t know” Laverne admits “I guess I’m just used to being on top of things and knowing what’s going on all of the time. That, plus this being Skye just … I don’t know, always having Skye as pretty much my own daughter it kind of hurts a little I guess.”

Gathering Laverne into a tight hug “It’s ok mom” says Skye “we just weren’t sure how things would go right off the bat you know? Sure, Nick and Judy are accepted and doing fine, great even. But after my ordeal with Johnny we just wanted to wait and see how things played out after this damned race thing. We were going to let you all know about it after things got settled a bit. Please don’t be mad…”

Hugging Skye back, Laverne confessed “I know sweetie, I know. You’re just so close to my heart it really caught me by surprise. I’m really happy for you both, you know that right?”

“Yea mom, I know. C’mere Josh, now’s not the time to be shy. Family hug, everybody get in here…”

“Ok” says Nick, finally breaking the hug “enough of this mushy shit. Judy and I need to get home and get a well-deserved shower. Skye, Josh, congratulations, but in the meantime, let’s get back to the matters at paw.’

‘Skye, is the ‘Vette ready to go? If so great, and how’s the Cobra progressing?”

“Midnight told me that the ‘Vette is absolutely race ready. The Klock brothers have the wiring finished on the Cobra. The only thing left on it as of right now is to finish the interior. Normally it’s minimal, as you well know. But since it’ll be Judy’s soon enough, he told me that it’s going to get the same interior that the streetable 289 version got so Judy ‘d be comfortable driving it. It should be finished by the end of the day.

“So, basically it’ll be ready to drive on Monday?”

“That’s the impression he gave me, yea.”
“Great.” Giving it a moment’s thought Nick continued “I was going to call Jackie and tell him not to bring his cars, but on second thought, I’ll let him bring them so we can pit one against the other the wise to see just how they stack up against each other, especially the Cobras.”

Looking up at the clock on the far wall, Nick notices the time and calls Midnight to the office.

“What’s up boss?” he inquires.

“Clock everybody out at five but call them to the main bay please.”

Giving Nick a questioning look, Midnight does as he’s told.

“Everyone to the main bay please, everyone to the main bay.”

As the shop employees gather at the main bay, Nick begins.

“Listen up everybody. I know you’ve been working your tails off lately, and our two main projects are all but finished. Put your shit away and head home or to the Icehouse, treats are on me.’

‘Oh, and by the way, everyone congratulate Snow and Josh, they’re engaged.”

“Damn it Nick…” began Skye.

“Paybacks a… well, you know” said Nick as he and Judy head out the door.

…

On the drive home, Judy asks Nick “What do you really think about Snow and Josh getting married?”

“Well … Josh seems to be a pretty good mammal to me, him being your brother notwithstanding. Obviously a hard worker and has his head screwed on straight. As long as Snow thinks it’s ok, I’m one hundred percent for it. And your thoughts are… what?”

“Umm… For the most part, Josh has really been pretty much of a loner. Sure, he had some … I think he called them ‘dance partners’ in his younger days, but never anything serious. It seems like a pretty good match.’

‘We seem to have been quite an influence on my family, in a good way.”

“There’s just one thing I need to do before the wedding, whenever that is.”

“And that would be….?”

“How can your brothers be the only mammals in the shop with no nicknames?”

“Really” you’re concerned about that?”

“Hey, I have a reputation to uphold I’ll have you know. No one has gone this long at the shop without a nickname…”

“That can wait, right now we have much more important things to worry about.”

“Really? Like what?”

“Like a good shower and some supper, then maybe…”

“Enough said, the nicknames can wait.”
After spending a leisurely Sunday at home, mainly doing a bit of laundry and catching up on some movies they’ve been meaning to watch but haven’t had the time or inclination to watch lately, Nick and Judy are up a bit later than normal on Monday morning and headed to the shop.

Entering the main bay and headed to the office, they observe Midnight and Jackie in a lively discussion.

“Jackie” says Nick “good to see you so bright and early. You ready to head to the track? Both of the build cars are ready to go, so if you don’t mind, Judy and I thought we’d pit the cars against each other just for shits and giggles to see how they do, time wise.”

As Jackie and Midnight glance at each other, Judy picks up on a bit of tension “What? What’s up? You two seem a bit … tense.”

Looking a bit leery, Midnight explains “I got a call as soon as I got to the shop this morning.”

“Yea, and?” inquires Nick.

“It seems a certain buyer is headed to the shop to discuss the race.”

“WHAT!” exclaims Judy.

“Did you tell him that that probably wasn’t a great idea? Especially with Judy and Snow both being here?” asks Nick.

“Sure did, but it seems like he’s hell bent on coming, so just be warned.”

“And what time is the little prick (Nick couldn’t help but suppress a smirk) supposed to get here?” asks Judy angrily.

“Somewhere around nine thirty or ten I think” replied Midnight.

“You’d better go tell Snow so we don’t have a fist fight or worse on our paws” warns Nick.

“Jackie” says Nick with a bit of an evil grin on his muzzle “are your cars headed to the track?”

“Aye laddie, that they are. Whut be ye thinkin’?”

“Chase down Midnight and have him load both of the project cars on the long rollback and get them headed towards the track as soon as he can. I’ll try to stall doofus with a plausible excuse as to why the cars aren’t here in order to buy us some time to road test them and give Judy some track time with the Cobra before she races the little shit.”

“Now that sounds like a splendid plan, ah’ll be right back.”

…

Looking at Nick worriedly, Judy asks “Do I need to be here or do you want me to go to the track with the cars?”

“Sweetheart, it’s entirely up to you. If you’re going to be too uncomfortable with him here, by all means go. Otherwise, stay here and confront him, show him that you’re NOT afraid of him.”

Just as Judy turns to leave, nonother than Johnny Whinters enters the office
As Judy suddenly breaks to grab a certain buck rabbit, Nick catches and restrains her just in time.

“Oh come on Nick” begins Johnny “Go ahead and let her go. I wouldn’t mind owning this little set-up you’ve got going here.”

“The names’ Wilde to you Whinters. Friends get to call me Nick and you ain’t on the list.”

“Tsk, tsk. Anyway, I’m just here to confirm the details of the race. There’s no need for hostility.”

“Really?” asks Nick “Raping my wife when she was young and trying to rape one of my employees and I’m not supposed to be hostile?

“Those are serious accusations Wilde, and if you can’t back them up-”

“Skye and I can both back them up asshole” interrupts Judy forcefully. “I still have access to the lab results from the rape kit and blood samples from when I was in high school, and Skye has the results from the night you drugged her. If you really want to go there, we’re both more than willing to send your sorry ass to jail. So, what’s it going to be?”

Stepping back from the challenge that the shy soft-spoken doe that he had known years ago had just thrown at him and not knowing that the statement about Skye’s drug test was a bluff, Johnny quickly recovered “There’s no need for all of that. Let’s just get this race business over with.”

“What’s to talk about? It’s pretty cut and dried according to the contract.” Says Nick.

“Actually, that’s what I wanted to clear up” replies Johnny. I really haven’t ever done any racing, so I want to substitute another driver to race in my stead.”

“And just who might that be?” asks Nick.

“Emerson Fittipalldi has agreed to drive-”

“So, you’re just going to pay me all of that money, never race and end up with only the Corvette?” asks Nick.

“Wh-what?”

“The contract specifically states that you’ll race Judy, and only Judy. I see no reason to let a substitute driver in for you, a pro no less, while Judy, who has never raced before, has to race him. Unless perhaps you’ll allow a Judy a substitute driver as well, then the answer is a very resounding NO.”

“… and who would you have to race for her at this late date?” asks Johnny.

Nodding towards the door just as Jackie enters “Johnny Whinters, may I introduce Jackie Fuelit, Judy’s substitute driver. If you want to allow a substitute, he’s our mammal.’

‘Jackie, Johnny here’s wanting to allow substitute drivers for the race. Do you think you could do well against Emerson Fittipalldi on the track?’

“Against Fitts? Ach, ah can beat him paws down. Ah’ve done it so many times in the past it wasn’t even a challenge anymore. Bring it on mon.”

“Wait, Jackie Fuelit? How, how would you even know him?”

“That’s really none of your concern” replies Nick coyly “what is of your concern is simply this ...
who’s racing who? Are you and Judy racing, or are Jackie and Emerson racing? Decide now, we’ve got better things to do that stand here wasting time and energy talking to you all day.”

“Fine. I’ll race Judy. But I’ll need something to drive, to practice with.”

“The ‘Vette’s race ready, you can use it. But … if you damage it or wreck it you pay to fix it or replace it. And regardless of the condition of the car, you still have to race it on Saturday or face breach of contract and lose the money and the cars. Those are my terms. Take it or leave it.”

“Ok, but on that note, I have a condition of my own.”

“And that is?”

“If I win, I not only get both cars at the agreed to price, but Judy has to sleep with me for no less than a week.”

“Now wait a-”

“Deal” interrupts Judy.

“Judy, what the hell …” begins Nick.

“No Nick, this is my fight now.”

Addressing Johnny “Since you want to make this even more personal, I’ll throw in a condition or two of my own.”

“And what might they be?” asks a very confident Johnny.

“When I win, you’ll never, and I mean never ever darken my door again. Not here, not at my home and not at the Burrows. If you do, I’ll release every document I can get my paws on to everyone you’ve ever done business with. You’ll be lucky to escape the country with your life, and we both know it.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me … please.”

“And the second condition?”

“When I win, I get to keep not only the Cobra, but the ‘Vette as well.”

“Fine” says Johnny. Turning to Nick “When can I have access to my car? I’ll need to practice with it at the track.”

“We still have a bit of work to do on both cars including road testing them. You should be able to pick it up on Wednesday morning, but it needs to be returned by no later than Friday by closing time. You’ll need to have your mechanics check it over before it leaves the shop to be sure it’s exactly factory stock. But before we’ll allow you to race it, my mechanics will check it over to make sure you haven’t tampered with it in any way.”

“And the Cobra?”

“According to the contract, there’s no stipulation as to how the Cobra’s put together. You have to race against it no matter what.
“What?”

“That’s the contract. Don’t like it, too fricking bad. Read your copy, I know you still have it. Since it’s NOT a restoration anything goes. Now, we’ve got work to do here, so get out, and don’t let the door hit your tail on the way out.”

…

After Johnny is finally out of the shop and on his way, Nick turns to Judy “What in the hell were you thinking agreeing to that shit?”

“What, don’t you think I can beat him?” Judy asks now just as angry as Nick.

“Of course I think you can beat him, but that’s not the point.”

“Then what is the point Nick?”

“Anything can happen on a racetrack. A flat tire, brake fade, a broken oil or coolant line. Anything like that happens and you’re stuck sleeping with that douchebag for a week. Doesn’t that concern you?”

“I-I never thought about that” answers a suddenly horrified Judy her paws flying to her muzzle.

“Great. Well, what’s done is done. Let’s get Jackie and … umm where the hell did he go?” suddenly noticing that Jackie wasn’t in the room.

As if Jackie had anticipated the question, he reenters the room.

“When things got heated, ah figured it best if ah left ya all ta yuerselves.” He announced.

“And rightfully so” agreed Nick. “Anyway, we need to get to the track and get some race time in, so let’s get to steppin’.”

…

After a short drive to the racetrack, Jackie, Nick and Judy enter the pits, and observe that Fritz, Midnight, Skye and Bolo, along with two of Jackie’s crew mammals, have all of the cars ready to go.

“Ok, let’s get this thing started. Jackie, why don’t you get familiar with Johnnie’s ‘Vette. Then get your best three lap times posted so we know what we’re up against. We really don’t have the time to pit the cars against each other like we originally planned to.’

‘After you’re through we need to get Judy some track time in the Cobra. At least get her comfortable with the car, then we can concentrate on getting her times down. If possible, maybe we can get her some practice time with her racing the Cobra against your ‘Vette.”

“Ah totally agree wi’ thot plan” agrees Jackie. Let me get inta me suit, and ah’ll get this show on the road.”

Watching Jackie pull the Corvette onto the track, Judy glances at Nick with a concerned look “Nick, I’m sorry I put us in this situation”

“I understand Fluff, but it doesn’t make it any easier. Let’s just do what we need to do and hope for the best.”

As Jackie goes past the start/finish line at full speed, they move towards the scoring table to check
Jackie’s times.

Watching intently as the times posted get increasingly shorter, Judy get more and more concerned.

“How am I ever going to beat those times?” she asks worriedly.

“Not to worry missy” replies one of Jackie’s crewmammals. “Jackie’s been doing this most of his life, and unless the mammal you’re racing has been as well, you should have no problem beating Jackie’s time. In fact, you’ll probably be able to beat his time before we leave today if that Cobra’s half the car that Jackie and Fritz say it is.”

“Do you really think so?” she asks.

“No doubt about it” he answers.

As Jackie takes his cool down lap, Nick tells Judy “Go ahead and get ready to take your familiarization laps in the Cobra. The first thing you need to do is get familiar with how the car handles at speed on the track. It’s going to be a lot different than the stock car you were driving before. Even more power, better handling, better braking. After you get a few laps in slowly, you can get going faster. Please don’t try to get ahead of yourself on this. we’ve got too much to lose for you to overdrive it and break or wreck the car.”

Knowing full well that Nick is serious, she agrees.

“Ok, I promise to be careful and take it slow.”

“After you get some laps in at a fairly good speed, I’ll call you in and you can compare times against Jackie’s, ok?”

“Yes my love, now, let’s get me going already.”

When Jackie pulls the ‘Vette into the pit area, Nick gives Judy the go ahead to take to the track. While Judy accelerates onto the main straightaway, Jackie walks up to the scoring table “Well, whut’s me best time?”

“96.524 miles per hour, and one minute, fifteen point eight seconds” responds his crewmammal.

“And me three-lap average?”

“One minute, twenty-eight and three-quarter seconds. Both track records for that class.”

“Well now, let’s see how well the wee lassie does once she gets goin’.”

After Judy finishes her fifth lap, Nick tells her “Fluff, go ahead and pick the speed up a little at a time. Ease into it, nothing drastic just yet, ok?”

“Will do Nick, you were right, this has the stock car beat paws down.”

“If you promise not to get a big head, I’ll let you know that you were already posting way better lap times than you ever did with the stocker.”

“Really?”

“Yup, now turn up the wick a bit and let’s see how you do.”
“The what?”

“Pick up the speed Fluff and-”

“What did I tell you about the nickname Slick?”

Laughing “Ok, ok, Snips, pick it up a bit. There, ya happy?”

“Sure am. Ok, here we go.”

After two more laps, Nick radios Judy “Ok, when you come past the line, give it a bit more for three full laps then one slower lap to cool the car down and then bring it in. We need to call it quits for today. Well have all day tomorrow to tweak anything we did wrong today. Got it?”

“Got it. Ready or not, here I come” she remarks as she makes the final curve before she passes the scoring table powering up into the straightaway.

Watching the lap times carefully and recording them, everyone was suitably impressed with the way Judy handled the car and the track.

Entering the pits after her cooldown lap, Judy parked the car and turned off the motor.

Leaping out of the car and doffing he safety gear, she ran to the scoring table and asked “Well. How’d I do?”

Seeing every mammal there staring at her, she could only ask “What?”

“Fluff, Squeak, Snips, whatever. Judy you ain’t gonna believe your lap times.”

Looking as worried as a bunny could look “Why, were they that bad?”

“What? No. Not just no, but hell no. you beat Jackie’s best time by a full eighteen seconds and his best three lap average by over twenty seconds.”

“Wait, what? Really?” looking at Jackie, then Midnight and Bolo “He’s kidding, right? I actually beat Jackie’s time by that much?”

“Sure did” stated Midnight, with Bolo and Jackie nodding in agreement.

“It wouldn’t surprise me if ya beat the blackard by a full minute every lap” intoned Jackie,

“And I wasn’t even pushing the car that hard” Judy admitted.

“Well then” commented Nick “lets get the cars all loaded up and back to the shop. Jackie, is it ok if we park your cars at our shop for the night? We can come out early tomorrow and get a little track time in with you and Judy doing some mock racing. You can give her a few more tips on using the track to her advantage better that way.”

“Thot sounds like a grand idea” acknowledged Jackie.

When the all got back to the shop Nick gave instructions to Midnight and Bolo.

“I want the oil changed on the Cobra and new tires put on it. We’ll load up at six in the morning so we can be at the track no later than eight. Got it?”

“Got it boss” answered Bolo.
“Also, give Jackie whatever help he needs with his cars. He’s our guest and I want him treated as such.”

“Will do” answered Midnight. And what about the ‘Vette?”

Pondering the question for a second “Do the same on the ‘Vette. Factory replacement oil and tires. Ground up restoration remember? Everything like it came from the factory.”

“Got it boss.”

…

As they head home, Nick notices the concerned look on his bunny’s muzzle.

“What Snips?”

“Nick, what are we gonna do if something happens and I lose the race?”

“We’ll just have to find a way to deal with it. In the meantime, let’s get something to eat. How about this little place I know that-”

“Really Nick? I’m sweaty and I stink from being in that race car. Where could you possibly take me that I wouldn’t stand out like a sore thumb?”

“Do you trust me?”

Rolling her eyes “Are we going to play that game again?” Judy asks.

“Yes, yes we are. Now, do you trust me?”

“Yes Nick, of course I do. You know that.”

“All right then. Aaaand here we are.”

“The Dewdrop Inn? What the hell kind of place is this anyway?”

“C’mon Fluff, follow me and find out.”

Entering the bar, Judy immediately notices Fritz, along with Dale Elkhardt and his son sitting at a table talking to Jackie Fuelit and his crew.

Looking around the bar, Judy notices that most of the patrons are dressed in either fire suits or garb that has race sponsors on them.

“Well damn, it’s a racer’s bar?”

“Yea, pretty much. It’s not mandatory that you actually be a racer, but if you’re at least a fan this is definitely not the place to be.”

“So I see. Let’s sit with Jackie and them. I’m hungry and thirsty.”

As they approach the table, they’re greeted by Dale senior and Junior, and by Jackie and his crew.

“When Jackie told us about how well Snips did at the track, we figured you’d show up. I took the liberty of ordering a ‘Redneck special’ for you Nick” remarked Dale Senior “and a house salad for the lady”.
“Ok, I’ll bite. What’s a Redneck special?” remarks Judy

Laughing, Nick told Judy “This should be right up your alley.”

“It’s a chick’n cord’n blu sammich” replied a grinning Junior.

“Chicken cordon bleu sandwich” translated Nick for a slightly confused Judy “Basically, it’s chicken breast with salt and pepper, stuffed with cheese and a few veggies. Just what a hungry race car driver and carnivorous bunny needs.”

“Fine, I’ll try it instead of the salad, but only if there’s red beer around.”

Judy, noticing the slightly astonished looks on the faces of most of the crowd at the table “What? I like red beer, so what’s the big deal? You think that since I’m a bunny I can’t hold my beer? And yes, I’m a bunny that eats chicken, get over it already.”

“Snips” admits Dale senior “after what Jackie here told us about your driving, I think you can do just about anything you set your mind to.”

“And you’d do well to remember that” Judy shot back grinning, knowing it was all in good fun.

Gathering a bit of a crowd, there were soon twenty or so racers and their families gathered around the table, or tables as several tables had to be pulled together to fit the accumulated animals.

Introductions were made and Judy was astonished to learn the support that she was getting for the upcoming race, even though almost none of those gathered knew the circumstances.

Finally heading home after a bit of a rowdy evening Judy calls for the first shower.

“Ok, no problem” admits Nick.

After Nick gets his shower he asks a very tense Judy “How about a good back massage to ease those muscles after all of that hard work today?”

“Oh god, I thought you’d never offer.”

“You know you could ask once in a while.”

Starting at her shoulders, Nick gradually works his way down her back.

“Nick.”

“Hmm?”

“That’s my butt … and my tail!”

“Yea, I know. You want me to stop?”

“Don’t. You. Dare. Stop.”

…

Tuesday morning finds Nick and Judy arriving at the shop just before six thirty.

As they enter the main bay, they’re amazed to find the Cobra and Jackie’s Corvette loaded and ready to head to the track.
“Everything’s ready to go boss” volunteered Bolo.

“Oil changed, new tires, everything checked and double checked” added Midnight.

“The laddies went over my cars as well, just for good measure” quipped Jackie as he and Fritz exited the office, coffee in paw.

“Really?” asked Nick. “Just what time did you get here this morning?”

“About ten minutes before you two” said Midnight.

“We had all of this done before we left last night” admitted Bolo.

“What?” you didn’t need to do that” scolded Nick lightly “You should’ve gone home and gotten some rest.”

“Boss” said Midnight in a very serious tone “This is as important to all of us in the shop as it is to you two. This isn’t just about Judy and Snow, it’s about all of us here. We’re family, and family takes care of its own. Now. Let’s get goin’, we’ve got some racin’ to do.”

Once at the track, it took practically no time to get the cars unloaded off the rollbacks and ready to race.

“All right” Nick tells Judy as she readies herself in the car donning her helmet and HANS device “Jackie’ll be walking you through some of the tricks of the trade while you’re on the track. I’m going to stay off the radio unless I really need to interject. I’d prefer that you just use the power of the car and your driving skills to run away from this little shit, but we both know you won’t. So, listen to Jackie and do the best you can, ok?”

“You know me too well Slick. I promise to listen and learn. I’ll see you in a short” kissing Nick on the nose, Judy pulls the car onto the track and waits for Jackie.

…

After several hours of intense instruction, Jackie calls a halt to the lessons.

“The wee lassie’s a fast learner” he admits. “there’s no’ a lot left ta teach her at this point. In these cars, even ah couldn’t beat her on the track, she be that good. There be no use in wearin’ her or the car out unnecessarily. ah’d say it’s time to pack it in and head back.”

“Squeak, Snips, whatever, I know you’d stay out here all day if we’d let you, but Jackie’s got a point. Let’s head back and let the guys at the shop go over the car again and check every nut and bolt, just to be sure nothings left to chance, ok?”

Letting out a disappointed sigh, Judy has to agree with the logic of Nick’s statement.

“Yea, I guess. I don’t know what I’m gonna do, not being able to come back to the track until Saturday when we race, but I’m sure there’s something to keep me occupied in the meantime”

Suddenly her face lights up “On the other paw, the is something I want to go over with you when we get back.”

“And that would be…?”

“You’ll see. My turn to surprise you Slick.”
Rolling his eyes Nick remarks sarcastically “Wonderful!”

“Come on Nick, it’s not that bad.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Umm, well-”

“Never mind, I’m sure it’ll keep. Let’s go.”

...

Returning to the shop, Nick hands out instructions to Midnight “I want every inch of the car gone over, inside and out. Change the oil and tires again. Use the high-speed tires, the ones with the innerliners in them. That way a flat should be one of the least likely things to occur. Pull the oil lines from the pan to the block and replace them and make damned sure they’re tightened. Then go over the entire car again and…”

“Boss” interrupted Midnight “we know what to do. Now, go away and let us do our jobs.”

“Fine, I guess Squeak’s has got something to show me anyway. And thanks guys. This means a lot to both of us, you know that, right?”

“Yea boss, we do. Now git,”

Joining Judy in the office, Nick asks “Ok, what’s this, whatever that you wanted to show me?”

Taking Nick by the paw and leading him back towards the area of the shop that contains the employees project cars “Come with me. I’m going to need something to keep me occupied even after the race so… I kinda thought … that this might be a great project when I’m not working on something for the shop.”

“Oh, the little ‘Cuda. And?”

“Well, now that you’ve got me addicted to fast cars, I’d like to build it to race and beat the old Challenger that Midnight and Charlie are working on.”

“You know that’s an entirely different type of racing, right? While the Challenger ‘ll do ok on a road course, it’s real forte is straight line speed, like quarter mile stuff.”

“Yea, I know. Listen, I’ll stuff a 426 Hemi in it, rework the entire driveline, upgrade the suspension-”

“Ok, ok, I get the idea. You’re sure you want to do this?”

“Am I? yes, yes I am.”

Rolling his eyes at the old byplay they’ve enjoyed for so long, Nick gives in.

“Fine, you can do it. But … only on your own time when there’s nothing else going on in the shop. And before you start on the ‘Cuda, I want you to go over to the Challenger that Midnight and Charlie were working on. Ask plenty of questions and take notes. Lots of notes. Then go over and compare those notes to the ‘Cuda and research everything to see if what you’re planning will actually work. Then get with me and we’ll decide if it’s worth the time and effort. Deal?”

“Deal.”
Wednesday morning, as Nick and Judy arrive at the shop they observe Johnny and several mammals unknown to them waiting outside the main entrance.

As they exit the pick-up, Judy’s cell rings and the caller ID shows that it’s Josh.

“’S’up Josh? Nick and I just got to the shop.”

“Yea, I know. Skye’s up here with me, and if you don’t get Johnny the hell gone in a hurry I’m not promising that I can keep her from coming down there and doing god knows what. Get him and the car gone asap.”

“We’ll do what we can, but he’s got a lot of paperwork to sign before we can let him take the car.”

“I know already, just speed it up, ok?”

“I heard” Nick tells Judy “let’s get this over with. Go around to the side door and head upstairs to help Josh keep Snow occupied.”

“Where is everybody? I need to get this car loaded and get to the track-” begins a very angry bunny.

“Hold up there Skippy” interrupts Nick “The shop doesn’t open to the public for just over an hour. I’m going to let you take the car early because I don’t want you here disrupting my employees or my wife.’

‘But first, there’s the paperwork you need to sign, acknowledging the condition of the car as required in the contract, that you’ll not damage or wreck the car, and that you’ll have it returned in the same condition it leaves in by no later than five pm on Friday. If it’s not here or it’s damaged, either the cops or my lawyers or both will have a field day with your sorry ass. And it had better show up looking exactly like it left or you ‘ll have to pay for any and all damages. Ya get all that?’

“Yea, yea, I got it already. Show my guys where the car is so they can look it over. Then I’ll sign and be gone.”

“In the meantime, you can wait in the office. Do NOT leave the office unless it’s to go out the front door.”

Thirty minutes later, Nick has signed papers in paw and closes the front door with a certain bunny buck no longer on premises.

“Good fricking riddance” says Nick as Judy, Skye and Josh join him in the office. “I’d give the little bastard the ‘Vette if he just left and never came back.”

“Fat chance” says Josh. “His ego wouldn’t let him back out now for all of the money in the Zootopia.”

“That” says Judy with an evil grin “is exactly what I’m counting on.

“Really!” says Skye in amazement.

“Yup. As pissed as he’ll be by race time, it’ll be a miracle if he completes the first lap” answers Judy.
“Be that as it may” interrupts Nick “We still have a shop to run and cars to build.’
‘You two get with Midnight and see what he wants you to do for now. Saturday’s a ways off and I
need to keep you both busy until at least Friday night.”

As three heads turn towards Nick he continues “We’re going back to the Dewdrop and drum up as
much support in the racing community as we can get. How do you think numbnuts will react with
the stands full of hardcore racers cheering for my darling wife, and all he has is his handful of
mammals?”

“You sir” admonishes Skye “are low down and without pity.”

“Thank you, thank you very much” mimic’s Nick in his best impersonation of Elvis Priestly.

Friday afternoon, at exactly 4:59 pm, a very exasperated Johnny Whinters shows up at the shop with
an extremely dirty and used up Corvette on a hauler.

“What the hell is this?” asks Nick. “I distinctly remember that this car was clean as a whistle when it
left here on Wednesday. Now it’s dirty as hell, the tires are shot and who knows what the rest of the
car is like. You’re not going anywhere until my mechanics look it over and assess the condition of
the car.”

Two hours later, a very pissed Nick is dressing down a downtrodden bunny.

“Ok, here are the damages that I know of. All four tires and two rims need to be replaced. After
washing there’s a lot of messed up paint. The oil pan is dented. One side mirror is missing, torn off
actually, so the door will need to be replaced since it’s fiberglass. The brakes are soft from being
overheated so the entire brake system will need to be replaced.’
‘Question is, are you going to race it like this, or do you want to pay my guys to work all night to fix
everything you fucked up?”

“GoaheadandfixitandI’llpaywhateveritcosts.”

“That’s what I figured. Now, I’ll allow one of your mechanics to stay and make sure my guys do
what they’re supposed to do, but you’re leaving and you’re leaving right now. Before the car moves
an inch in the morning, you’ll pay the repair costs or you’ll be in breach of contract. You got that?”

“Yes, fine. Whatever. Just let me the hell out of here.”

And with that, he was gone.

Saturday morning Nick and Judy arrived at five thirty, with most of the shop crew already there.

“Ok, who just got here?” he asks “and who’s been here all night?”

To the first part of the question three mammals raised their paws, and to the second question
seventeen mammals, including Midnight, Lefty, Bolo, Sneezy, and Fritz, raised their paws.

“When did you get finished with the car?”

“About a half hour ago” spoke up a very wiped looking brown bear named Chris Brown, who was
the mammal that had been Johnny’s crewmammal. “And just so you know, your mammals clued me
in to Johnny’s past. As soon as the little bastard gets here, I’ll be looking for another job because I’m
quitting. If you’re hiring, I’m interested.”
Giving the mammal a thoughtful stare, Nick finally spoke “Tell you what. You do your best to help your current boss win, and I’ll consider it, regardless of the outcome. I want him to win or lose fair and square. Do we have a deal?”

“Deal. Now let me out of here for a while, I need a shower and every minute of shuteye I can be before he gets here.”

…

At nine am, with the shop fed and somewhat rested, Johnny and the remainder of his crew show up to get the car.

“Alright” says Nick as the two face off in the office. “There were a few other minor things that our mechanics caught while they were working at repairing the damage you did. Look over the itemized bill and pay up. You’ll notice that the repair order has been signed off by your mechanic as being accurate.”

“Twenty-seven thousand dollars? That’s a crock of shit!”

“Really? Eighteen mammals, including your crew mammal worked thirteen straight hours fixing your fuck up. Pay up and pay up now or this little adventure is over, right here and right now. Cash if you don’t mind.”

“Ok, fine. Here” as Johnny hands over the money.

“Now, load your car up and head to the track, most of my crew is already there, along with Judy and Skye. By the way, I hope you don’t mind but I invited a few friends to watch the race.”

…

Pulling into the pit area of Zootopia International Raceway, Johnny is amazed and disheartened to see well over two thousand mammals seated in the grandstand area.

This includes most of Judy’s close family, the entire shop crew and their wives, husbands, significant others and kits, as well as a lot of ZPD’s finest. Add in tons of racers, their families and lot of just plain race fans and you have a really good crowd.

“I thought you said you invited a few mammals, this is a lot more than a few.”

“I can’t help it if they invited some friends. The track is open to anyone who wants to race or watch.”

“How do I know the timing and scoring’s going to be on the up and up?”

“Timing and scoring is going to be kept by the operators of the track, with two of your crew and two of my crew to verify that everything here’s legit. If you have a problem with that and have an alternate solution, now’s the time to say so. If not, get suited up and get your car offloaded and lined up.”

Looking at the scorer’s table, Johnny decides that everything will work “Fine, let’s do this.”

…

As Johnny’s crew pushes his car to the designated spot in the pits, the track’s chief scorer has instructions for the two drivers and their designated pit crews.

“After reviewing the terms of the contract provided to me by mister Wilde, here are the track rules for the event: when you start off, you will have one lap to get your machines up to operating temperatures and to warm the tires. After you exit the last turn on that lap, you will roll up to the start/finish line at sixty miles per hour and watch the flag stand. The official starter, mister Humpty
Wheeler, will wave the green flag to start the race. If anyone jumps the start, they’ll be given a five car-length penalty and the mammal who did not jump the start gets to go as soon as he or she gets to the start/finish line. A second violation will incur an additional ten car-length penalty. A third violation will disqualify the driver and their day is over. Are you clear on that point?”

After everyone asserts that they do, the official continues,

“Next, while a certain amount of bumping and banging is expected, any overt attempt to intentionally wreck a competitor will automatically disqualify a driver, and the person instigating the contact will be financially bound to pay for any and all repairs to both cars. Is that understood?”

Again a chorus of ‘yes’ is heard with no dissentions.

“One last thing. If by chance one of the drivers overshoots a corner and ends up in one of the sand or gravel traps, you’ll have to wait until a tow truck is available to winch you out. The entire track will be under a yellow flag and the remaining driver will slow his or her pace to no more than sixty miles per hour and follow the designated pace car, but the laps will still count. By all accounts, whoever ends up in one the traps on the last lap, your day is pretty much over. Official scoring is done with the aid of electronic monitors so there’s no griping about the timing, and there are cameras set up to monitor every inch of the racetrack. If someone tries to cheat, you will not, I repeat, will not get away with it.’

‘If there are no questions or concerns, let’s get to it.”

…

As Judy and Johnny head to their cars, Johnny is a bit irritated to see that the Cobra is an absolutely hideous shade of pink.

“Why on earth is my car pink of all colors?” he asks.

“First off” answers Judy smugly “it ain’t your car until you win it, which you ain’t gonna do. Secondly, I like the color, and thirdly … try not to screw up the ‘Vette, I plan to give it to my brother as a wedding present.”

“Listen here you fu-”

“Problems here?” asks Nick as he approaches the two.

“No babe” answers Judy, “the one-inch wonder and I were just wishing each other luck for the race” kissing Nick on the cheek, all of which only infuriates Johnny all the more.

“One-inch wonder?” asks Nick quietly.

“That’s what the other girls he ‘dated’ in high school called him” she answered, giggling.

“Damn, that’s just …. mean”

As the drivers are strapped in their cars with helmets and HANS devices firmly in place, Nick asks Judy “Ok, just how are you gonna handle this?”

Grinning, she replies “To start with, I thought I’d power away to a comfortable lead, then let him catch up a little at a time, even if it takes almost two laps. After I let him catch me, I’m gonna try to set him up to try to pass on one of the tricky corners Then either power away or let him pass and just pass him back. We’ll just have to see what happens on the last lap...”
“Just be safe, and don’t lose, ok?”

“Got it. let’s get this over with, I hear pizza and beer calling my name. I think the Dewdrop is gonna be rockin’ when were done here.”

As the cars weave back and forth at a moderate speed on the pace lap getting component temps into operating range and tires warmed, Judy notices Johnny getting closer and closer as they exit the last corner and approach the start/finish line.

Rolling side by side as they get to the start line, the flagmammal drops the green flag and Judy hammers the throttle using the huge horsepower advantage to power from second to third and finally forth gear and leaving Johnny far behind.

Rounding the long sweeping right hand carousel turn, Judy has a full two second lead on the ‘Vette and keeps building the lead until she gets to the bus-stop section of the course, where she begins to slow so Johnny can catch up to her.

Crossing the start/finish line for the third time and seeing the white flag which signals the final lap, she finally sees Johnny in her mirrors, gradually catching her.

Heading into the carousel turn for the final time, the ‘Vette begins to close the distance rapidly. Knowing that at this point Johnny is as angry as he can possibly be, Judy sets her plan into action.

As Judy applies the brakes to slow the car to a series of quickly approaching S curves, she pitches forward into her safety harness.

After negotiating the esses, Judy is back on the throttle again for a few seconds, then quickly on the brakes to negotiate the set of two quick 90-degree left hand turns.

Then back on the throttle, she goes through the gears again. Going from almost a dead stop to over 100 in just under a quarter mile, she then quickly down shifts for the dangerous off camber right hand turn.

Just as she enters the turn she sees Johnny pull alongside, and from the look on his muzzle, she knows exactly what he’s planning.

Instead of accelerating and trying to fight him off as expected, Judy suddenly slams on the oversized competition brakes, just in time to watch the Corvette shoot across the track in front of her and slide off track into the grass and finally imbed itself in the sand trap.

Coming to a near stop Judy sounds the horn and gives Johnny a middle finger salute, while the radio (which happens to have a killer sound system in it) blasts out “Hey Little Cobra’ by the Rip Cords.

Cruising towards the finish line at a moderate 60 miles per hour (yellow flag, remember) behind the pace car, Judy does a burnout after she crosses the line that leaves Nick gaping. Then pulling into the pits as Judy exits the car, Nick asks “Where in the hell did you learn to do that?”

“Dale senior showed me that in the stocker when you were in the bathroom that day” she answered, grinning through the lingering tire smoke.

Bowing to the wildly cheering crowd and waving the checkered flag, Judy can’t help but gloat as the
Corvette rolls slowly by, on the bed of the rollback. As Johnny glares at the happy couple, he hands Nick the check for the agreed to amount of both builds.

“I’ll take my car and go if that’s ok” he states broodily.

“Sorry” interrupts Judy “But you ain’t taking my car anywhere.” As she points a low-pressure water hose at the Cobra.

“What?”

“According to the amended contract which you demanded by the way, I won the race so I keep the ‘Vette and the Cobra. You get to pay for them both and leave empty pawed.”

“…….. what the hell” as Johnny digests the implications of losing the race, he’s doubly shocked to observe Judy running water over the ugly pink car. As the pink slowly washes off, a beautiful grey and white pearl paint job with russet red accents slowly emerges.

“Well, I’ll be damned” remarks a stunned Nick.

“You like?” she asks.

“Almost as beautiful as the driver”

“Flattery will get you absolutely anywhere my dear, especially today, or should I say tonight.”

…

As the thoroughly defeated buck slowly walks towards his private car, he suddenly encounters yet another problem. His entire crew, including the driver for the transport, has quit after learning of his past.

After Nick quietly encourages two of Johnny’s former employees to get the transport to wherever Johnny wants it delivered and a third to follow and pick them up, Johnny is finally gone.

“So” asks Nick “what are our plans for the evening Fluff?”

“Why ask me? I know you already had my victory party planned. Jolene told me that you’d paid Gideon to bring pastries, Big Dummies to bring the beer, and Mel’s to cater the rest of the food. Did you really think that I wouldn’t find out about almost everything coming from the Burrows?”

‘While I’m thing of it, what are they pulling the flatbed trailer onto the main straightaway for?’

“To start with, that was all part of a different plan.”

“What plan was that?”

“To throw the best bachelor and bachelorette party ever in Zootopia for Josh and Skye. The flatbed is for the entertainment that’s scheduled. Your victory celebration begins at home… when we get there”

XxX

Chapter End Notes
A/N: I hope the race was worth the buildup, I had a lot of stuff come up while I was trying to get to the actual race, and it just seemed to fit. Read and review please….
And Life Goes On

Chapter Summary

Johnny suffers a complete loss of income and is threatened with divorce after everyone finds out about his past, the shop gets several massive orders for cars, including one from 'The King' and MGM studios. Jackie gives Nick and Judy a big surprise and Judy gets some payback with Nick at her next doctors appointment.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a bit shorter than most have been, mainly due to life. What with a ton of work, some health issues and another (un)healthy dose of writers’ block, I’m not sure when the next chapter will be out. I’m not giving up on the story by any means, I just need to get more time and a bit of inspiration for upcoming chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

20: And Life Goes On

XxX

…

While waiting for the flatbed trailer to be set up as a makeshift stage for the tribute band, Nick tried to make an announcement from the scorer’s table.

He began with “Alright, everybody calm down please” but his voice was drowned out by the large fireworks display that was suddenly shot off and the crowd went wild.

“Nick” asks Judy accusingly, watching ing at the aerial display “Did you plan that?”

“Sorry Fluff, I’m sorry to say I didn’t think of that one, but I think I know who did” he said, looking directly at his mother.

“What? I can’t make a big deal out of my daughter’s engagement?” Laverne asked.

“Anyways” continued Nick, quickly regrouping and carrying on with his announcement “I’d like to present my favorite wife” which earned an eyeroll and blush from Judy “with this beautiful trophy which was provided by ZASCAR, courtesy of Dale Elkhardt senior. It reads, and I quote: ‘Judy Wilde, winner of the first annual Zootopia International Speedway Challenge Cup.’”

‘If Judy would be so kind as to consider this challenge, ZASCAR would be willing to host an annual event featuring Judy against the reigning ZASCAR champion, regardless of who it may be each year. All proceeds of each race will be donated in their entirety to the Nicholle and Aaron Wilde-Hopps foundation.’

‘At the current time, with nine races to go, and considering the points lead that the current leader has, it will most likely be none other than Dale Elkhardt senior himself.’
‘What do you think Fluff, you up to another challenge?’

Taking the microphone from Nick, it was Judy’s turn “First off, I’d like to kick my darling husband’s tail for dreaming this stunt up. Don’t look so innocent Nick, it could only be you to come up with it.” which earns a laugh from the crowd.

“Next, I’d like to thank ZASCAR and Dale senior for the beautiful trophy. And I’ll gladly accept the challenge. Dale, I once told you I’d beat you racing, this is my chance to back it up. All ZASCAR has to do is come up with two cars that would make everything equal except the drivers’ skill.’ ‘Lastly, I’d like to thank everyone who showed up to watch and cheer for me today and congratulations to my sister Skye and her fiancé, Josh Hopps. Wait … her fiancé is my brother … well, that was just weird! Ok, for those of you who don’t know, Skye is my adopted sister. Umm, never mind, just congrats you both, have fun.”

Stepping off of the improvised stage, Judy collects Nick and heads toward the refreshment area.

“I am so getting even with you for all of that.”

“I know, but it was so worth it.”

…

Leaving the racetrack, Johnny Whinters is absolutely livid.

‘That damned slut’ he said to himself ‘who the hell does she think she is? Hooking up with that damned fox, costing me over one hundred thousand dollars, embarrassing me in front of thousands of mammals. NOONE treats me like that and gets away with it. There’s got to be some way to get back at all of them.’

After being dropped of at ‘Whinter’s Fresh Produce’ by his former employers who immediately quit and left to head back to Nick’s shop, Johnny stormed into his office.

With nothing better to do for the time being, Johnny went home and searched the internet for ideas to complete his revenge.

Early on Monday morning, as he ponders his options on the best way to get back at Judy, Nick and anyone else who had contrived to humiliate him, he is interrupted by his purchasing agent who informs him that his primary suppliers that he buys produce from have just canceled all contracts with his company, citing his past indiscretions as grounds for their actions. He suddenly realized that those suppliers were not only mainly Hopps Family Farms but Bonnie Hopps immediate family the Thumpers as well. It seems that almost everyone now has learned about his less than stellar past.

To make matters worse, his sales manager informed him that virtually every customer had called and closed their accounts. He was financially ruined. With his business virtually in the toilet he did what any washed-up bunny did in his predicament, he got blind assed drunk.

Driving home, he was stopped by officer Wolford and arrested for driving under the influence.

Tuesday morning, after bailing himself out of jail, the hits just kept coming.

After finally getting his car out of impound, he arrived at his home to find his clothes in several piles on the front lawn. A note on the locked front door informed him that he was being divorced by his wife of nine years (his third by the way) and that papers would be served at his business as soon as they were filled out by her attorney. Now, it seems, EVERYONE has found out about his sordid past and is taking steps to distance themselves from him.
Having no choice but to go to his apartment that he kept for certain ‘girlfriends’, Johnny has become even more despondent and desperate. Suicide was not really an option, mainly because he wanted, no NEEDED to make everyone who had wronged him pay. Thinking over his options he realized that at some point in time, Judy would absolutely drive the Cobra around to flaunt the fact that she had humiliated him and he needed to be ready to act. He decided to do some scouting to see what route she and Nick took to go home and make some sort of plan to enact his revenge.

…

After a not so fun Sunday, mainly comprised of recovering from hangovers, Nick and Judy, both are up and getting ready to get back to the shop on Monday morning.

Sharing a quick shower after getting rid of bad cases of morning breath (among other things), a breakfast of grits, toast and juice for Judy and coffee for Nick is the order of the day.

Arriving at the shop just before seven am, the couple are astounded to see that everyone from the shop is already there.

“Ok, what’s the deal?” asks Nick. “There has never been a time when everyone beats me, let alone us here in the morning, especially a Monday morning at that.”

“Well, since you asked so polite like” began a sarcastic Midnight “we all thought that you might be interested to know that… well, Fritz, you give him the news.”

“After the show that Judy put on at the track, Dale senior told us that ZASCAR got in touch with him after the race on Saturday and has an independent shop ready to begin production of four identical Trans-Am cars for Judy and the winner of this years’ ZASCAR Cup. They want to schedule the race as a separate event after the banquet. All you need to do is give them a date that’ll work, any time after the presentation.”

“Why four cars?” asks Judy.

“They told Dale that when you get ready to race, you’ll each pick a ping-pong ball with a number on it and that will be the number of the car that you’ll drive. It sets a more even field that way, plus if one or more cars get damaged during a practice session, there’ll be backup cars.”

“Makes sense I guess” replied Nick. “So, you still didn’t answer my question, why is everyone, and I mean everyone here so early? The shop doesn’t open up until eight, and we always have mammals straggle in at all times until then. And why are you still here Fritz, I figured you’d be long gone by now.”

“Whul, meebe ah cun answer thut fer yuh” came the reply from the entrance to the office.

“Jackie?” replied an astonished Nick and Judy at the same time.

“Thut’s mu name, dun’t wear it out” Jackie answered with a large grin. Ah managed ta bring a few of the athletes who’ll be competing in the upcoming Animalympics with me. They really wanted ta meet you two fer sum reason. Ah din’a think yu’d have a problem wi’ it.”

“Absolutely they can come” said Judy before Nick could even open his mouth “we’d love to meet them.”

Opening the door to the office, Jackie motioned for the mammals inside to come out into the shop area.
“Ah guess ah’ll handle the inductions then. To begin with we have Animalympics marathon runners René Fromage (a goat) and Kit Mambo (a lioness). Then thur’s Lola and Buggs bunny from the male and female basketball teams.” An’ lastly here’s Brenda Springer (a springer spaniel) and Keen Hacksaw (American Bulldog), who are both announcers fer the Animalympics”

“Ohmygodohmygodohmygod” spouted and incredulous Judy, bouncing up and down excitedly all the while shaking Nick like a one of her old plushies. “I never in a million years thought I’d ever get to meet any famous mammals”

Looking at Nick “No offense dear, but-”

“That’s ok Fluff, I get it.” replied Nick with his usual smirk firmly in place.

“Actually” began Lola “we wanted to meet you. Overcoming the adversity of your species to accomplish so much.”

“And finding true love regardless of their species, and having the courage and conviction to face the speceist attitudes that seem to be so prevalent at times” adds Kit.

“Yes” adds Brenda “while Keen and I don’t seem to get any of the hate both being canines and all, we’ve seen enough of it directed at other mammals to make us sick. That’s why we, all of us here today, are going to pledge to your research charity.”

“We also have tickets for the two of you to attend the Animalympics as our guests” says René.

“Wait, what?” interrupts Nick.

“Tha’s right” says Jackie handing Judy a pair of tickets “thur’s VIM (Very Important Mammal) tickets rite here that ’r good fer all events during the Animalympics.”

Tearing up, a grateful Judy hugs everyone “Thanks so much, you have no idea how much this means to me, to us.”

“Your research will benefit everyone” a heartfelt Kit reminds Judy “it gives all of us a chance to have young ones of our own, regardless of species” as she looks fondly at René.

“I know you two really need to get to work” interrupts Laverne “but Shirl and I brought breakfast for everyone. If you’ll give us a few minutes to set up, you can serve yourselves. Separate tables for pred and prey, but feel free to try whatever tickles your fancy. Coffee, water, a variety of juices and coco are on the end.”

“Mom, you were in on this too?” asks a stunned Nick.

“Of course dear, you’re not the only one who knows almost every one ya know” she says, winking at Judy who of course giggles.

…

After every mammal has a bite of breakfast, Nick and Judy give their guests an impromptu tour of the entire shop. When that’s finished and all of the guests have departed, Midnight calls Nick to the office. Giving Nick a hug and quick kiss on the cheek, Judy heads to her bay to begin cleaning up her area. Although it’s not normally a mess, it was left that way due to finishing the Cobra build and subsequent race the weekend before.

“What’s up?” asks Nick.
“Boss, you ain’t gonna believe the orders for cars we’ve gotten since the race on Saturday.”

“Come again!” says an astonished Nick.

“We’ve gotten almost a hundred orders for restoring and upgrading cars alone, and another forty something orders for builds, several of which we actually have in the warehouse. I got calls all weekend.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope, I’m dead serious. And that includes a monster order for the Superbird that’s back there, from none other than ‘The King’ himself.”

“Wait, what?” asks a stunned Nick “The King actually found out that we have a Superbird? How the hell did that happen?”

“I dunno, but he’s going to send us the specs for us to turn it into the same car that he won Daytona with in ’70. Since it was already more less turned into a race car, I figured that it would be a lot better than trying to restore it to factory. Not to mention at least we don’t have to find and ruin a perfectly good ‘Bird to build a race car. In fact, Lefty’s going to run the VIN to find out if maybe it’s the actual car that the King used during that time, or at least one from his old shop.”

“Complete with the King’s special blue paint?”

“Yea. When it gets far enough along to paint, he’ll send enough to completely paint it, inside and out.”

“Well just … damn. Good job. Make sure that the ‘Bird gets on the shop floor as soon as we can make space for it. Any shop builds we have going on need to either be finished by the end of the week or put into the warehouse, customer orders will always come first.’

‘While we’re at it, I want an honest answer … is Judy ready to be put on any of the builds. Don’t worry about hurt feelings, I need to know the truth for sure.’

“Boss, I’d trust Squeak to do as good a job as anyone in the shop, myself included. Yea, she’s ready.”

“Ok then, I want her to join you and anyone else that you want on the ‘Bird build. Get Lefty to start looking for the cars we need to get for the customer builds. Then start pulling the cars out of the warehouse that we have for the orders we can fill with what we have on hand. Then get the car hunters on the road looking for ones we don’t have.’

‘We can integrate customer upgrades and restores along with the cars we have on hand.’

Seeing the slightly confused look on Midnight’s muzzle he quickly adds “Look, I know I made you a shop foreman, and after the ‘Bird build you’ll go right back to being one, but this is just too important a build, and you’re one of the best wrenches I’ve got. While you and Snow are the two best, I’m saving her for the next big build, whatever that might be.”

“It’s ok, I don’t mind a bit. Consider it done boss.”

“Anything else special as far as builds?”

“Well, there is one slightly off-beat request…”

“And that would be?”

“Ummm, well we have a request from a movie studio for a custom paint job on a semi-trailer and for
three black ‘77 Trams-Am Firebirds.”

“Really?”

“Yea, the request came through Mammal Goldburg Mayor studios. Evidently they want to film an action movie starring Burt Reynard, Sally Field and Jerry Red called Smokey and the Bandit. Something about hauling bootleg beer from Texacana to Antlanta with lots’a chase scenes in it. The paint job on the trailers s’posed ta depict a stagecoach robbery back in the old days I guess. I didn’t want to commit to that one until I talked to you first.”

“Wait, you’re telling me that the studio wants to make a movie using two foxes and a bunny as the lead characters??”

“Yup, and they’re using Jackie Grayson, a brown bear, as the cop who’s supposed to chase them. Which reminds me, they also want a couple of Pontiac Grand LeMans cars for cop cars as well.”

“Do they have an artist’s drawing of the trailer or do we have artistic license on it, or what? And are there any specifications on the cars?”

“They did send an artist’s concept of what they want on the trailer, and two of the Trans Ams are to be hopped up with roll cages and stuff for stunts, while the third is for close-ups of the actors.”

“Budget?”

“Didn’t say. I figured I’d let you handle that part.”

“Any ideas who you might want on the builds?”

“Well, if you’re ok with it, I figured Josh could do the paint job on the trailer, and Skye and Bolo could handle the Trans-Ams. If we get pushed for time on the cars, Pete and Charlie can help with the small stuff. You know, sub-assemblies, suspensions, exhaust, brakes and stuff.”

“Great. I’ll call the studio and let them know that we’ll take the project and work out the details.”

“And, umm, that’s actually not quite all…”

Really, there’s more?” Nick asks.

“Well, I got a call from ZASCAR just before you came in.”

“And?”

“Seems like they want to talk to you and Squeak about airing her little race with Johnny as a special segment before or during this coming Sunday’s race. PR sort of thing to attract a few more viewers I guess. To my understanding, they’re willing to pay handsomely to use the footage.”

“Really? …. I don’t see why not. I’ll run it by Squeak and see what she thinks, thanks.”

…

After working out the details for the movie prop builds with the movie studio, Nick heads to Judy’s bay but stops by the paint booth to talk to Duane for a quick second.

“Duane” says Nick “I want to complement you on the paint you did on your sisters’ car, it was absolutely killer.”
“Thanks boss, nothin’ but the best for her.” Duane replies. “She’s had a rough time of it since she was a kit, so I figured I’d give it my best shot. I can’t thank you enough for stoppin’ by the station that day and giving her a job here. And thanks for hiring Josh and myself too by the way.”

“Don’t forget to pat yourselves on the back, I probably wouldn’t have even seen her if it wasn’t for you two. Umm, I don’t suppose you could get a copy of the security camera footage from that day for me could you?”

“I might could, any special reason?”

Grinning like a fool Nick replies “Not yet, but I’m sure an opportunity to use it will present itself in the future. And please don’t tell Judy. Whenever I do bring it out, I want it to be a total surprise.” “I’ll get ahold of mom and see about getting’ you a copy” says Duane trying unsuccessfully to hold back a grin “You know Judy’ll kill you for it right?” “Yea, I know. But it’ll be totally worth it, thanks.”

…

Approaching Judy’s bay, Nick is greeted with a hug and kiss.

“What’s up Slick? The talk around the shop is that we picked up a bunch of orders because of the race on Saturday.”

“Yea, well, it’s true. And you’re going to be put on one of the best projects that the shop has ever had.”

“Really? Do tell.”

“ZASCAR Legend ‘The King’ has purchased the ’70 Superbird we have in the warehouse and wants it totally fixed up to match the car he won Daytona with in ’70. Midnight says you’re ready for a build of this importance, so you’re on the build team.”

A huge smile lights up Judy’s muzzle and she jumps up and gives Nick the tightest hug ever “Really? I’m on an important build?”

“Yup, you’ve impressed Midnight to the point that he says you’re good enough to be on the team, so you need to be sure to thank him when you get a chance’

‘Sorry, but your pet ‘Cuda project is gonna be on the back burner for a while. We picked up over a hundred and forty customer orders of all sorts since Saturday and probably still counting, so the shop’s gonna be really busy for the foreseeable future.’

“That’s ok, I know it’s there and it’s not going anywhere. And thanks Slick, for letting me show what I can do on something this important to the shop.”

“Squeak, if I didn’t have the confidence in you, we would never have made it as far as we have together. Now, get out there and get busy. As soon as you finish with this van conversion for Ernest and Celestine, you can help Midnight get started on the ‘Bird. I know I made him a shop foreman, but this builds too important to screw up. Tiny can help Lefty run the shop in the meantime.”

“You never did tell me why this is such an unusual build Nick. What’s with the large mammal size driver’s area and the really small sized passengers seat anyway?”

Grinning, Nick elaborates “Well, Earnest happens to be an average sized brown bear as you might guess. as a matter of fact, he and his significant other, Celestine, were the stars in a relatively successful move a few years ago that was the result of their unique friendship. The van that was used
in the movie sat neglected in a backlot at the studio for years, Ernest found out, bought it and wants it restored. And yes, Celestine is an averaged sized grey mouse. They really make for an adorable couple, about as offbeat as we are.’
‘There is one more thing we need to discuss, it should only take a few minutes.”

“And what would that be?”

“Midnight told me that ZASCAR wants to use the footage from your race Saturday at some point during this coming Sunday’s race as a PR thing to promote the challenge race, to boost ratings I guess. They’ll need permission and some sort of release I presume. Midnight also told me that they’re willing to pay handsomely for it.”

Taking a few minutes to think it over, Judy comes up with a proposal.

“I certainly don’t mind, and I’m sure you don’t or you wouldn’t be suggesting it. How about this, they can use the footage with final approval of the edited content ok’d by us. Instead of taking any money from the usage, we stipulate that they donate to the kit’s charity foundation, and that they plug the charity on air as well.”

“I have taught you well, my young padawan.”

“Nick, really? You used senior’s line?”

“Well, it works doesn’t it?”

“Yea, well…….”

…

The race between Judy and Johnny was aired during the next ZASCAR race, with several short clips shown several times in slow motion. The segment was received by the entire ZASCAR community as an, unparalleled success and donations for the Wilde/Hopps foundation poured in.

Although there was a lot of resistance from Johnny, an agreement was reached (signed by his estranged wife) which further infuriated the now destitute buck.

…

With the Animalympics taking place the next week and the shop being as busy as it was, Nick and Judy had very little time to take in may of the events. They did, however, make certain to take in the male and female finals in basketball with Lola and Buggs finishing with gold medals in their respective divisions. The cheered on Kit and René who finished tied for first in the long-distance marathon event and alternated with Keen and Brenda in the announcer’s booth.

…

As the weeks drag on, the time comes due for Judy’s next appointment with doctor Cotton much to Nick’s dismay….  

Entering the shops office, Judy gets Nick’s attention “Nick”.

“Hmmm?”

“Don’t forget, we have an appointment scheduled for tomorrow with doctor Cotton.”

“Yea, about that…….”
“No Nick, WE’RE going and that’s that, no argument.”

“But—”

“I said no arguments and I meant it. Yea, I know we’ve got a lot of projects going on but THIS is more important!”. The look in her eyes and on her muzzle was enough to let Nick know that she meant exactly what she said and wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“Fine, what time are we supposed to be there?”

“Nine, just like the last time.”

“Ok, I’ll try to be on my best behavior this time.”

“If you ever want to have those kits, you’ll do well to remember that.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Grinning to herself, Judy can already imagine the shocked expression that Nick ‘ll be wearing when she springs her revenge surprise on Nick the next day. ‘He really has no idea just what’s in store for him tomorrow’ she thinks.

…

Early the next morning, Judy awoke to find that Nick was already up.

‘What the heck?’ she thought ‘Nick is almost never awake before me, let alone being up’.

“Nick? Where are you?”

Not receiving an answer, Judy heads to the recently added music room to find Nick at the piano. Noticing Judy enter, he immediately begins to softly play and sing ‘You Are So Beautiful’ by Joe Cocker.

“I couldn’t sleep, so I thought I’d practice for a bit. Did you like it?”

Tearing up slightly she remarks “You damned loveable idiot, of course I loved it. Thank you.”

“I told you I’d do anything for you, I need for you to know I really mean it.”

“Does that mean there won’t be a repeat of you showing out at doctor Cotton’s again today?”

“Yes, of course. I know I act like a total ass sometimes, no disrespect to Jose at the shop, but it’s a kind of defense mechanism I use sometimes to help counteract a situation that makes me very nervous.”

“And you’re not nervous this time?”

“Not as much at least.”

“I hope that doesn’t change when we get there. Let’s get some breakfast and get ready to go.”

Giving Judy a questioning look Nick asks “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Showing Nick a bit of a smirk she answers “I guess you’ll just have to find out when we get ready for our ‘contributions’ won’t you?”

…
Arriving at doctor Cotton’s office just before nine o’clock Nick and Judy are greeted by the receptionist Nina, a gazelle, strikingly resembling a certain famous singer.

As Judy opens her mouth to comment, Nina smilingly holds up a hoof and answers the unspoken question “Yes, I know I look just like Gazelle, I’ve been asked like, hundreds of times. We’re actually distant cousins. I’ve substituted for her at several photo shoots when she’s on tour, just to help her meet contractual obligations. There’s actually a small disclaimer at the bottom of several ads denoting the fact.”

Just then, doctor Cotton steps through the interior door.

“Ok then Judy, we’re ready for you now, if you’ll just step this way….”

“Actually” began an evilly sounding Judy “if you don’t mind, I think Nick should go first this time, I might help him get over his nervousness not having to dwell on what’s ‘coming’ … so to speak.”

“Har, har, so funny” deadpans Nick at the bad pun as the ladies giggle.

After a somewhat boisterous session, Nick and Judy emerge from the privacy of the ‘collection’ room.

At that point, Nick decides to ask “Doc, I’ve been meaning to ask, just exactly why do you want to do this just prior to Judy’s heat cycle?”

“NICK!”

“What? I’m just asking…”

“It’s actually a very good question, I’m frankly surprised it didn’t come up sooner” responds Dr. Cotton.

“The first step in in vitro fertilization (IVF) involves injecting hormones so mammals produce multiple eggs each month instead of only one. With bunnies of course, this is never a problem so we skipped that part. Judy was then tested to determine whether she was ready for egg retrieval. Prior to the retrieval procedure, she was given a medication that ripens the developing eggs and starts the process of ovulation. Timing is important; the eggs must be retrieved just before they emerge from the follicles in the ovaries. If the eggs are taken out too early or too late, they won't develop normally. We may do blood tests or an ultrasound to be sure the eggs are at the right stage of development before retrieving them. The IVF facility will provide you with special instructions to follow after the procedure.”

“Ok, ok, I think I get the picture, that’s plenty of info for now, thanks” interjects Nick.

“Actually, it’s not” remarks Judy.

With both doctor Cotton and Nick giving Judy questioning looks, Judy asks doctor Cotton “Doctor Cotton, is there any reason why I can’t have Nick in the room observing my procedure?”

“Well, to my knowledge it’s not something that’s been done before, but I don’t see why not. Any particular reason why you might want him to accompany you?”

“Yea” says an aghast Nick “I’d kinda like to know why myself.”

Looking sternly at Nick Judy confronts her husband “After you showed out the last time, embarrassing me with your little display, I told you you’d regret it didn’t I?”
“Well technically, you said you’d get even, and that I wouldn’t like it…”

“NICK”.

“Ummm yes?”

“You’re going to do this, and you’re going to watch. You’re going to watch the entire process or I’ll
have doctor Cotton record it and make you watch it at home … more than once. Do I make myself
clear?”

“…….”

“That’s what I thought. Now, let’s get this over with. And if you’re a good fox, I’ll treat you to lunch
at that new restaurant called Black Abby You know, the one on Sidco Drive. Any smart-assed
comments before we get started?”

“No ma’am”.

“All right then, doctor Cotton, let’s do this…”

…

After leaving doctor Cotton’s office Judy invites Nick out for lunch before heading to the shop.

“So” begins a smirking Judy “you up for an early lunch?”

Scowling “Hell no, not after that I’m not.”

“Don’t tell me that you lost your appetite after that little procedure, not after what we did last night.”

“That’s different, totally different.”

“C’mom Nick, it’s not that big of a deal.”

“You don’t think that that’s a bit humiliating?”

Looking sternly at Nick, Judy answers “Honestly Nick, with the different procedures that we females
have to go through at different times of our lives, what with pelvic exams, cancer screenings, check-
ups when we’re pregnant and such, this is no big deal. It’s just something that we learn to deal with.
We’re going to Black Abby for lunch. You can come in and have a bite with me or you can sit in the
truck, it’s your choice. But if you come in, you’re going to eat something, and that’s that. Got it?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“So, what’s it going to be?”

“…. I’m guessing BBQ Chicken pizza and red beer?”

“Firstly, that’s NOT what I meant and you damned well know it. As far as the menu, not a chance,
it’s going to be a nice sit-down expensive lunch, and I changed my mind, you’re paying. After we’re
finished eating, I guess the next thing is head to the shop so I can start helping Midnight with the
Superbird?”

“Yea, might as well. You really do need to get started on the ‘Bird build, and I need to work out the
particulars with Snow on the movie car builds.”
After enjoying a two mammal special of chicken parmesan and wild rice to quell Judy’s occasional appetite for meat, Nick and Judy head back to the shop.

…

Entering the shop, Nick finds out from Midnight that there are still a few things that needed to be finished on the project that’s in the bay where the Superbird build is to take place. Deciding that since Judy wanted to do some shopping for Skye, he allowed her to take the time to do that rather than just sitting around since her bay was currently being prepped for another customer build.

Giving Nick a quick kiss, Judy sets off in the Cobra on a little shopping trip.

Not long after Judy leaves, Nick is going over the items needed for the movie car build with Skye, Duane and Josh.

“Where’s Judy Nick?” asks Skye “I thought she was going to help Midnight with the Superbird?”

“Well, she said she was going to …………”

Just then, Nick is interrupted with a call from Laverne. “Hey mom, what’s up?”

“Nick, is Judy with you now?”

“No, she’s not. After we finished at doctor Cotton’s office we went to that new restaurant, Black Abby, for an early lunch before coming to the shop. After we got here, Midnight wasn’t ready to start on the Superbird build so she took the Cobra and went to pick up something for Snow’s bridal shower. What’s wrong, you sound really stressed!”

“A grey bunny doe that was driving a Cobra that looks like Judy’s was just killed in a car wreck on Savanna Central Boulevard. I had to check and make sure that it wasn’t her.”

…

Chapter End Notes

The actual 1970 Dodge Superbird that Richard Petty won the ‘70 Daytona race was never found, but one of the cars from his stable at the time was. It was restored by a fan and is run every year in an old timers’ race every year at Daytona.

For you medical minded folks, I realize that this is NOT an actual in vitro procedure, it just works for the story ok? I claim artistic license.

The reference to the movie Smokey and the Bandit was due in part to the recent loss of Burt Reynolds. Somewhere, Sheriff Justice is still chasing the Bandit and the Snowman. They’re just waiting for Frog to show up. And yes, I know the movie was actually released by Universal not MGM, but I don’t care, it fits the story better.
Karma

Chapter Summary

Judy’s fate is revealed...as well as the fate of the mammal responsible. A prank is pulled and revenge is plotted, and a Halloween party is scheduled to help ease tensions at the shop.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

21: Karma

Entering the shop, Nick finds out from Midnight that there are still a few things that needed to be finished on the project that’s in the bay where the Superbird build is to take place. Deciding that since Judy wanted to do some shopping for Skye, he allowed her to take the time to do that rather than just sitting around since her bay was currently being prepped for another customer build.

Giving Nick a quick kiss, Judy sets off in the Cobra on a little shopping trip.

Not long after Judy leaves, Nick is going over the items needed for the movie car build with Skye, Duane and Josh.

“Nick, where’s Judy?” asks Skye “I thought she was going to help Midnight with the Superbird?”

“Well, she said she was going to …………..”

Just then, Nick is interrupted with a call from Laverne. “Hey mom, what’s up?”

“Nick, is Judy with you now?”

“No, she’s not. We finished at doctor Cotton’s office and went to that new restaurant, Black Abby, for an early lunch before coming to the shop. After we got here, Midnight wasn’t ready to start on the Superbird build so she took the Cobra and went to pick up something for Snow’s bridal shower. What’s wrong, you sound really stressed!”

“I just heard over the police scanner that an unidentified grey bunny doe that was driving a Cobra that looks like Judy’s was just killed in a car wreck on Savanna Central Boulevard. I had to check and make sure that it wasn’t her.”

“SHIT! Did you try her cell?”

“Of course I did” replied Laverne with a desperate tone to her voice “but it went straight to voicemail. Nick I’m worried tha-”

“Mom, calm down. Here’s what I need for you to do. Head towards the scene and get as close as you can to the wreck. Maybe you can see for sure if it was Judy’s car or not. I’m going to call Bogo and see if he’ll release anything that might help us know if it was actually her or not. Besides, if it
was her I’m sure I would have gotten a call from the ZPD by now.’

‘In the meantime, I’m gonna have Snow head out and check Judy’s favorite shopping places in that area to help narrow down the possibilities.’

‘Look, I know Judy’s ok. I don’t know how unless it’s the fact that that the life-mate thing hasn’t started affecting me. Still, we need to make sure everything’s ok so I’m going to leave and head towards the house in case she may have doubled back.”

Before Nick could say anything, Skye, Duane and Josh were headed out of the office knowing that time could be of the essence.

Dialing Bogo’s personal number as he headed towards his truck Nick was in a mild panic, betraying the clam exterior he had portrayed in front of Skye, Duane and Josh.

“Wilde?” answered Bogo in a huff “Why the hell are you calling me on my personal line?”

“Chief, I need some information and I need it straight and I need it now. I know that there was a fatal traffic accident involving a bunny doe in a grey sports car on Savanna Central Boulevard, and I need to know if it was Judy or not. I’m not asking for any other information, I have to know if it was her. Please Adrian, just give me that … please.”

Pausing for a few heartbeats to consider Nick’s request, Bogo finally answered “Under normal circumstances, I’d tell you to fuck off, you know that, right? However, I’ll do this one favor for you this one time since you’re only asking about Judy and considering all that you’ve both been through lately. The mammal involved was NOT your wife. That’s all you get Wilde.”

“Thanks chief, that’s all I really needed to know. Just so you know, I actually found a Hummer for you and it’ll be moved to the top of the build list ahead of every other build. I was saving it for a surprise, but you’ve earned that by granting me this favor. Again, my eternal thanks chief. Now I need to call a few mammals and give them good news and call off the bunny hunt that’s currently in progress.”

With that Nick ended the call to Bogo and called everyone out hunting for Judy to let them know that she was safe as he headed back to the shop.

…

As mammals began to filter back into the shop, Nick noticed that there were a lot of concerned muzzles staring at him that weren’t up to speed on the exact situation. Deciding to head off a situation what he knew was about to be really uncomfortable, he called all shop employees to the main bay.

Addressing the entire shop population, he began “Ok here’s the deal, I understand that some if not all of you have heard about an accident, and the word has spread that Judy may have been involved in a fatal traffic accident. I spoke with Chief Bogo and he has personally assured me that the mammal involved was in fact NOT her. I appreciate the concern, and I’ll tell you all straight up that the reason I didn’t say anything to y’all was to minimize panic. As soon as I can, I’ll have her come and let you know that she’s ok, I promise.’

‘Now, everymammal back to work.”

…

Returning from her shopping trip at the exact moment that the shop meeting was ending, Judy enters the shop to be confronted by several concerned/upset mammals.
“Umm … what’s up? Why all the funky attitudes?” she asks worriedly.

Escorting Judy into the privacy of the office “You really don’t have a clue?” asks a slightly irritated Nick.

“Obviously not or I wouldn’t be asking” returns Judy, glaring and picking up an attitude of her own. “What the hell is wrong?”

“Did you turn your cell phone off?” asks Laverne before Nick could.

“No, of course not. I forgot to charge it last night and the battery died. What-”

“Judy” interrupts Skye “a doe fitting your description, driving a Cobra practically identical to yours, was killed in a traffic accident just a little while ago. You didn’t answer your phone and we thought the worst.”

Her paws flying to her mouth, Judy was horrified.

“When I was in ‘Le Petite’ I heard the sirens and saw the ambulances go by but never paid ‘em much attention. I had no idea that … guys, I’m so sorry…”

Quickly taking a trembling, tearful Judy into his arms and wrapping his tail around her, Nick began stroking her ears that were presently laid flat against her back, consoling his wife.

“It’s ok Jude, it’s ok” he crooned softly “just PLEASE make sure you charge your phone from now on ok?”

“I promise” came the sobbing and muffled reply.

Just then, Josh’s phone rang. Looking at the caller ID he told the assembled group “It’s Debra” he declared.

Debra Hopps was one of Judy’s older siblings and the current head resident of the small mammal ER scrub nurses at Zootopia General Hospital.

“Hey Debra” began Josh as he answered the call. “What’s that? Ok, ok, hold on a sec, I’ll put the phone on speaker.”

“First off” came the angry voice over the phone that Josh made sure to hold as far away from himself as his arm would allow “Why in hell’s name isn’t Judy answering her phone? Why did I have to find out from Jason that everyone thought Judy was killed in a wreck, then only to find out it wasn’t her?”

“Wait a second” says Duane “Jason who?”

“Jason Wolford of course, ya damned dummy. You know I’ve been dating him for a while now.”

“You mean Jason Wolford the cop?” interrupts an amazed Judy.

“How many more Jason Wolfords do you know Judy? And by the way, glad to hear you’re ok, but answer your damned phone next time ok?”

“The battery went dead while I was out shopping, all right? And yes mom, I already promised Nick I’d keep it charged.” Judy fires back.

“Ok, fine! Now that we’ve got that settled, I’ve got one more piece of news that you might or might
not like to hear, even though giving it out might cost me my job. Before I tell you, you’ve all got to promise that you’ll never tell anyone, and I mean anyone where you heard it.”

“We promise” came the group reply.

“The mammal that caused the accident was none other than Johnny Whinters.”

Waiting for the collective gasps and accompanying din to die down, Debra continues “It seems he must have thought that the poor doe was Judy and he t-boned her car at roughly 80 miles per hour right in the driver’s side door, she was killed instantly. Johnny wasn’t wearing a seat belt when he hit her and was thrown completely through the windshield. We just finished emergency surgery on him a few minutes ago and there are a couple of reasons why I doubt if he’ll ever bother any female ever again.”

“And they are?” asks a very angry Judy.

“Well to begin with, to put it mildly, Johnny is no longer a buck, just a bunny, sort of.”

“What?” yelled all of the rabbits in the room at the same time, which earned questioning looks from all of the vulpine in attendance.

“Yea, that’s right, seems like Johnny lost the family jewels, among a few other things.”

“Like what?” asks Josh.

“Well, like both ears and most of his tail” responds Nadine.

“Well just … damn” finishes Josh.

Nick, Josh and Duane all grimaced at the statement.

“And the other reason?” asks Judy.

“According to Jason, once Johnny is released from the hospital in say two or three months, he goes straight to jail for premeditated murder and or vehicular homicide. I’m sure he’ll make someone a nice girlfriend while he’s locked up. Only fitting if you ask me.”

“Sorry to say it, but at least that’s a small piece of good news, Karma can be such a bitch sometimes … Thanks for the info sis, take care and say hey to Jason for us” says Josh as he ends the call.

“What is the deal with everybody dating preds now?” Duane mutters quietly.

“What, you jealous or something?” asks Josh, with Judy giving her brother a curious glance.

“Umm … no?” deadpans a suddenly even quieter Duane.

“Ok bro, spill” demands Judy “We all already know you liked preds, but you’re doing a damned poor job of hiding something. Who is it? What species? Give, damn it.”

“Well, if you must know-”

“Yea, we must” interrupted Skye. Looking around and noticing the questioning looks aimed her way “What? I’m practically family now, so I’m entitled.”
Rolling his eyes, Duane continued “It’s … Tiffany Foxly.”

“Tiffany Foxly … Tiffany Foxly” repeats Nick slowly tapping his muzzle with one finger. “I’ve heard that name somewhere. Wait, I’ve got it, she’s Winston’s cousin on her mom’s side, isn’t she?”

Ears standing straight up and eyes wide open Judy has to ask “Where in Saren’s name did you ever meet her Duane?”

“Well duh, at your wedding sis, where the hell else? She sorta kinda asked me to dance and didn’t see any harm in it so… I said ok.’

‘Then one thing led to another and before I knew it we started dating. And before you ask, that’s all that going on, at least for now. Nothing past dinner, an occasional movie and a little make-out session now and then. There, satisfied?’

“Why you sneaky little shit” started Josh. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Who you callin’ little, asshat?” Duane shot back “I’m taller than you are! And besides, who you callin’ sneaky after all the time you were going out with Skye and not telling anyone?”

“I’m callin’ you little, I’m older so that makes you littler than me.”

“You’re screwed in the head, dummy.”

“Who’re you callin’ a dummy-”

As the two bucks begin to square off like they’re going to start fighting, Laverne interrupts - forcefully separating the two bucks “That’s enough, the both of you. Take it outside before I paddle you both!”

“Yes ma’am” the bucks replied in unison, still slightly miffed while still giving each other the stink eye.

“Well just … shit” piped up a slightly disappointed Judy “just when things were getting’ interestin’.”

“Damn Judy, really?” asks a mortified Laverne.

“Yea, really. I haven’t seen those two clowns throw down since I was seven. They got into a fist-fight in the driveway back at the burrow. Duane ended up with a black eye that lasted for almost a month and Josh had two cracked ribs.”

“Really?”

“Yup. Mom tried to step in between them and almost got pasted herself.”

“Oh my!” declared a horrified Laverne, paws flying to her muzzle.

“Luckily, the boys both knew better than to hit her even accidently, ‘cause they’re both still alive and breathin’. Ain’t that right guys?” returned a grinning Judy.

Both brothers just looked at the floor, shuffled their feet and nodded slightly.

“Ok, I guess that’s about enough drama for one day, everyone back to work” interrupts Nick “Snow, you Josh and Duane pretty much know what to do with the movie studio builds. Fluff, since there’s still no space in bay seven to start on the ‘Bird build, have Midnight bring that Hummer I found into bay four and start with the modifications on it. Once bay seven is free, you can hand the Hummer off to Charlie and Bolo. That should keep them busy until Snow needs them on the movie car builds.”
“What’s the big deal with putting the ‘Bird in bay seven anyway?’ asks Judy.

“Bay seven’s just a touch larger and I want you two to have plenty of room for that build” returns Nick.

“And while we’re at it, why start on the Hummer right away?” asks Skye “I thought that was scheduled farther on down the build list.”

“Well” states Nick, looking at Judy intently “I asked a huge favor of Bogo to make sure Judy wasn’t the bunny killed this morning, and promised that I’d bump the Hummer up to the top of the list to repay him.”

Noting the slightly crestfallen face of his bride, Nick was quick to add “No Fluff, I’m not blaming you or making excuses, I would have gladly given everything I own to make sure you were ok. I’m just answering Snow’s question. I know your phone died, it’s just happenstance is all. I love you more than life itself, nothing will ever change that. I would never dump on you like that, and you know it. Now, everymammal out and get to work, except for Judy. I need a hug and some slobbers before yo-”

“Ick, gross” remarks Duane as he quickly heads out the door, followed closely by Josh, Laverne and Skye.

Giggling at Duane’s outburst Judy remarks “I guess the sight of his little sister kissing a mammal still bothers him. See ya in a short Slick” as she gives Nick a hug and quick kiss on the nose and heads out of the office in search of Midnight.

…

Heading towards bay four, Judy finds Midnight just now pulling the large black Hummer into the bay.

Stepping out of the vehicle, Midnight notices Judy almost at the bay, so he decides that now is the time to give her the package that had been left in the vehicle.

“Judy” he begins “there’s a package that was left in the passenger’s seat with your name on it.”

“Really?” she wonders aloud “I wonder what it is?”

“I have no idea, it’s wrapped in plain brown paper. No ribbon or nuthin’.”

Staring at the package with a very dubious look on her muzzle, Judy slowly and gently shakes it first. Hearing it rustle softly, she carefully begins to unwrap the paper, wondering if maybe she should have called the police, especially after the incident with Johnny earlier in the day.

Then Judy is slightly startled when Midnight inquires softly “Are you sure you want to open that?”

“Damn it Midnight, don’t do that.” answers Judy, feeling her heart almost stop.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you, but after what happened earlier …”

“Yea, I know, still.” After the wrapping is pulled off and the contents are revealed to Judy she stares at the contents and exclaims “Well I’ll be damned …”

“What?”

Looking at Midnight she asks him point blank “Are you in on this shit?”
“In on what?” answers a bewildered Midnight.

Holding up a fresh box of unopened breakfast cereal and shaking it violently “This! Are you in on this?”

After seeing the picture and reading the lettering on the box along with the paw-written sticky note, small smile slowly turns into a large smile. Then into a barely hidden laugh which turns into a belly laugh that brings Midnight to his knees.

Holding up his paws in defense “I – I’m sorry Squeak. Hee - hee. I – haa - haa . . no, I’m not. And I really, honestly, don’t know who is, not for sure.”

“Damn it, I’m getting to the bottom of this” holding the box of cereal in her paws, Judy storms off towards the office.

As she stomps angrily through the shop, she hears snickers coming from several of the other employees that she is most familiar with and is convinced that more than at least a few of them know about the prank.

Arriving at the office, Judy bursts in startling Nick who is conversing with Laverne, startling both canids.

“What the hell Fluff?” yips Nick.

“Did you know about this Nick?” demands Judy holding up the box of cereal.

“Know about what Fluff?”

“This, damn it” shaking the box of cereal.

As Nick and Laverne exchange glances, Laverne is the first to smile. Then Nick joins in as both begin to snicker, then to outright laugh, and laugh until the tears rolled.

“No Fluff, I cannot tell a lie” gasps Nick finally as he wipes tears from his eyes “I didn’t know about it and I can assure you that it wasn’t me. Someone in the shop has finally pranked ya. Welcome to the shop.”

The angry and slightly shocked look on her muzzle began to slowly fade. As the situation finally registered Judy couldn’t help but finally smile. Considering all that had happened today, perhaps this was something that was needed by everyone, especially her.

Heading out of the office into the shop, Judy glances back at Nick and his mother with an evil grin on her muzzle “Don’t worry, I’ve got this.”

Grabbing a small table and a single chair from the employees break room, Judy sets said items in the middle of the main bay. She then places the box of cereal on the table and retrieves a bowl and spoon from the same break room. After getting a small bottle of milk from the vending machine, she sits down to pour a bowl of cereal for herself.

One by one, the shop employees gather to watch Judy slowly devour a large bowl of Trix® cereal.

As Judy finishes the bowl, she smacks her lips and remarks to the crowd with a large smile “As you all can clearly see, Trix® are NOT just for kits.”

Greeted by thunderous applause, Judy happily takes her bowl and utensils and deposits them in the
breakroom sink, secure in the knowledge that she had handled the prank as everyone who was in on it had hoped she would. Now she knew that she was truly one of the ‘Wilde Bunch’.

Fresh with the knowledge that she was now totally accepted as a normal shop employee by everyone, Judy decided to put her long unused criminal justice skills to good use. She slowly glanced around the shop as she heads back to bay four to help Midnight upgrade the Hummer, seeking clues as to who the perpetrator or perpetrators might be. Everyone in the shop had access to the Hummer in the warehouse, but who might be deranged enough to prank a bunny with a box of cereal?

Although several suspects came to mind immediately, Judy needed to be absolutely certain of the culprit before enacting her revenge. Although nothing had ever been said out loud, Judy was sure that a return prank was almost certainly expected, and she absolutely did NOT want to disappoint.

Midnight was almost certainly out. It would be too convenient for him to just drop the cereal in her lap like that, but who? Who would have the nerve? As Judy narrows the list of suspects, she first eliminates Nick.

With very few exceptions, Nick wouldn’t have had the time or opportunity to even buy the cereal without her knowledge. That and he would have most likely have stopped the prank after the happenings earlier in the day.

Laverne? No, she looked as shocked initially as Nick did, so she was out.

Lefty? Nope, too kind hearted.

Bolo? Same with him.

Josh or Duane? Possible but not likely.

As the list narrows for one reason or another, the culprit becomes obvious. The question is … how to get back at the mammal with the same flare and not cause physical injury. It’s just revenging a prank of the same magnitude after all ….

Staring at the guilty cereal box, the answer becomes obvious….

As Judy busies her paws with her part of the interior detail in the Hummer, her mind is going a hundred miles an hour working out details of the return prank.

…

Since the conversion of the Hummer was reasonably simple with a large mammal seat on the driver’s side and small mammal seat set on the passenger side, the work was actually finished by the end of the next day.

After clocking out for the day, Judy heads for the paint booth for a quick word with Duane.

Seeing Judy enter that area, Nick joins her and asks “What’s up Fluff?”

Showing Nick her bunny version of a smirk “I just need a quick word with Dewie here before we leave.”

“All right? Special project? You know he needs to finish mapping out the paint for that semi-trailer for the movie build, right?”

“This won’t take but a minute, and it’s something that he can do after hours in a matter of a few
“And that would be … what exactly?”

“For me to know and everyone else to find out.”

“Oh, so it’s gonna be like that?”

“Yup, at least for now. Too many sensitive ears around. I’ll tell ya on the way home, but for now, gimme a couple with Duane, please.”

After spending less than five minutes with her brother, Judy joined Nick in the truck and outlined her plan on the way home.

After listening intently, Nick has to admit “That’s absolutely genius. So, is Duane gonna help with it?”

“He’s gonna try and dig up some pics for me. I’m sure I can rummage through them to find one I can use.”

…

As the week winds down, Nick notices that the constant pressure is beginning to get to everyone in the shop. Not wanting to have a repeat of the last time, he decides to take matters into his own paws before anyone else brings it up.

Calling a brief meeting just as everyone was about to clock out for the day on Thursday, Nick makes the following announcement:

“Ok everyone, listen up. I know that everyone’s been pushing hard on these projects. I refuse to have a repeat of what happened a while back, so here’s what’s gonna happen. Work tomorrow as usual, but quittin’ time will be at three instead of five. The Chill Room has been reserved for the rest of the day tomorrow” which brought plenty of cheers from the crowd and a questioning look from Judy. “That being said” he continued “I expect everyone in here at noon on Saturday” which, of course, drew a chorus of boos from the same crowd.

“Nick, just what the hell?” intoned Judy.

“If you’ll all just settle down for a sec, I’ll explain”

As the crowd finally attains a semblance of quiet, Nick is finally able to explain.

“With Halloween only a few days away, most of the day will be used as Halloween party for everyone. Everyone is expected to show up and bring their husband, wife, boyfriend girlfriend, significant other or whatever and kits if ya got ‘em. There’ll be prizes and games for adults and kits for best costumes, so get busy’. And before anyone asks, no ya can’t use the costumes y’all used earlier for the convention. Plus, customers and the ZPD are invited as well, so y’all gotta behave, at least a little.’ ‘And yes, everyone gets Sunday off. Now, everyone git…”

***

As Nick and Judy are preparing for the shop’s first annual Halloween bash, Judy is wondering if she can survive Nick’s pranks long enough to have fun.
Her first Halloween with Nick is beginning to look like it could be a trial for Judy. Every time he seems to come up with something a little freakier or weirder, and she can't help but worry a bit what this particular round will bring.

Unfortunately, her worst fears are about to be realized as she hears "Juuuuuuuuudddddyyyyyyyyyy!" coming from the den.

"What is it Nick, another stupid idea for Halloween? You know we don't have a lot of time to get costumes ready for the shop party Saturday night, which is tomorrow night…"

As Nick emerges from the den, Judy notices a small gift-wrapped box in his paws.

"And what, pray tell, do you have in there?" she asks, grimacing as she hesitantly accepts the brightly colored item.

"Why, it's your Halloween costume of course" replies Nick wearing his patented smirk.

Rolling her eyes, Judy gently gives the small box a gentle shake, and finds there seems to be nothing rattling around inside. "This had better not be empty" she sternly advises her husband.

"Trust me, it's not" which worries Judy even more as she very gingerly opens the lid and peers inside.

"I thought you said it's not empt…Oh hell no" as she notices the inside of the lid.

Taped to the inside of the lid is a G-string and a set of pasties. "You can absolutely not be serious! If you think I'm wearing this to the party, you have lost your ever-loving fluffing mind!"

"Actually" says Nick, wiggling his eyebrows "I kinda figured that you might wear that to our own 'private' party tonight., I thought we might as well have some fun."

'Well duh' thought Judy 'as jealous as he gets when someone even looks my way I should have known better'.

"And what did you intend to wear to complement my outfit if I may ask?"

"Ummm…this" indicated Nick as he brings a new green and purple tie that matched their eyes out from behind his back.

"I actually got this for you to wear to the party" says Nick as he presents Judy with a slightly larger box, which she notices actually rustles a little as he paws it to her with an extra-large smirk on his muzzle.

Suspiciously Judy opens the newest addition to what's likely to become a yearly prank fest. "Oh, HELL no. If you seriously think I'm going as a Playbunny I'm going to strangle you with your new tie, skin you and will wear your hide as a coat!"

Nick recoils in fake shock "Fluff, you wound me, you can wear that over the first set I gave you. Umm, by the way, you know that the first set…ummm…they're …actually edible…" he adds with a huge grin on his muzzle.

As Judy's normal complexion gradually turns from pink to blood red under her grey fur, she grabs her fox by the tie and jerks him down to her eye level. "If you ever tell anyone about these getups, I guarantee, you will never, and I mean never ever taste bunny ever again…. Do I make myself clear?"
"As crystal" answered Nick, still with a bit of a smirk still on his muzzle.

"Good" said Judy smiling seductively as she released Nick's tie and gives him a quick kiss on the tip of his nose.

"In all seriousness" begins Nick I actually do have a great getup for the party for each of us".

"I can barely contain my excitement" deadpans Judy crossing her arms across her chest and cocking a hip as Nick disappears briefly into the den and returns with a large, flat box, tied with up silk ribbons.

Nick gently places the box on the dining room table and carefully unties the ribbons, then slowly lifts the lid. Inside he carefully lifts an item that seems to be wrapped in fragile paper, held together with more silk ribbons.

As Nick slowly and carefully lifts the article of clothing from its wrapping of rice paper, Judy's paws fly to her muzzle as she gasps in amazement.

Before the gaping doe is a bunny sized kimono. The pale blue silk of the robe is accented by hand painted white and pink flying cranes and small red maple leaves.

"Nick, where on earth did you get that beautiful…..umm…"

"It's called an Uchikake kimono Judy. Messing with you is fun, but you are going to be the most beautiful female at the shop party tomorrow night, bar none. There is also a matching Obi, which is a belt, a pair of wooden Geta, which are clogs, and a pair of straw zōri sandals if you prefer those. And of course, there are Tabi socks to go with the footwear for authenticity."

"Well, I'm suitably impressed" said Judy, giving her fox a well-earned kiss. "And what will you be wearing? Is there anything that you could possibly wear to properly accompany me?"

Nick again makes a short trip to the den and returns smirking with a similar box that joins Judy's on the table. "I think I've got that covered my good bunny."

Nick opens the second box and displays his male kimono. The kimono is actually a Haori top—which is white, a Juban undershirt, a pair of Hakama pants—which of course is dark blue, along with a matching Obi as well as Tabi and Zōri. There was also a matching katana - a prop of course, the most commonly known type of Japanese sword, which is a single-edged and usually curved longsword traditionally worn by samurai from the 15th century onwards.

"Where on earth did you ever get the idea for this, let alone find these gorgeous outfits, and do you have any idea how to wear these?"

"Do you remember the Far Eastern Zootopian's who gave the ZPD the paw to paw and self-defense training a while back?"

"You mean Sensei Baku and Meeka?" replied Judy.

Sensei Baku was a giant Panda and Meeka a ring-tailed fox.

"Yup, those two. When I got the idea for this, all I had to do was look on the computer for martial arts instructors and guess who popped up. I went to the ‘White Lotus’ in the Eastern part of District four to get them custom made.’

‘As for how to wear the outfits, I found a couple of sites on Zoogle and Zootube on how to properly put it on and wear them."
"I gotta admit, you’ve really outdone yourself, especially after your… prank filled start."

"Does that mean I'm forgiven for the…ummm other things?" asked Nick, only slightly worried.

Grinning seductively Judy answered "I'll let you know as soon as I try all of that stuff on. Edible huh?"

Swallowing hard, Nick nods "So I'm told, I take it were about to find out?"

The gleam in Judy's amethyst eyes tells it all as she heads for the bathroom for a quick shower. Picking up the two smaller boxes along the way as she comments "If you can find that blueberry flavored oil, I believe you'll be eating plenty of bunny before the night is over….."

While Nick watches Judy walk towards the bathroom, his very sensitive olfactory nerves were working overtime considering the pheromones given off by a very aroused bunny.

‘Looks like I’m in for a long night’ he says grinning to himself.

…

As Nick and Judy enter shop’s Halloween party on Saturday afternoon, all eyes fall on the couple. "Oooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh look at you two" gushes the highly excitable Clawhauser, who was dressed up as Pig Hero 6. "You two are a shoe-in for the grand prize unless some mammal can top that look."

“Hate to break it to ya big guy” Nick responds “but since we’re throwing the bash, Judy and I aren’t competing for the prizes.”

Moving through the crowd, looking around they spot several of their guests and shop mates in costume.

Chief Bogo is dressed as Arnold Snortsenagher from the ‘Predator’ movie (odd choice for a prey mammal), Delgato is doing his impression of ‘Captain Zootopia’, while Fangmeyer was killing a ‘Wonder Mammal’ impersonation.

Gazing around, Judy notices Josh dressed as Ant Bunny, while Skye is wearing a matching outfit dressed as the ‘Wasp’. Duane seems to be carrying a compound bow and wearing an all-black outfit portraying ‘Hawkeye’ while his date Tiffany Foxly is absolutely killing a ‘Black Widow’ outfit.

Lefty is dressed as a blind samurai (complete with cloudy looking contact lenses) and Bolo has a biker look down perfectly.

Heading up the entertainment for the day and evening is an all hedgehog band known as Bobby (Boris) Picket and Crypt-Kickers.

Leading off the song list was ‘Monster Mash’ which the Krypt-Kickers had recorded themselves. Other songs included ‘Black Magic Woman’ by Santana, ‘Bad Mood Rising’ by Creedence and ‘Highway to Hell’ by AC/DC.

Of course, no entertainment would be complete without Nick joining in. Stepping up to the organ, Nick serenades Judy with ‘Magic Carpet Ride’ by Steppenwolf.

Not to be outdone, Judy comes back with ‘Mammals (People) are Strange’ by the Doors.

Finally, Judy wraps up the little session with ‘I Can’t Help Myself’ by The Four Tops.

…

As the night wears on, Judy manages to keep Nick's alcohol consumption down, much to his annoyance.

"What's up?" he asks, slightly irritated "You're driving home so I figured I could let loose a little."

Judy hands Nick a PredEx envelope and tells him "You can open this when we leave. It's my Halloween present to you this year."

“Fine” says Nick, grudgingly accepting the envelope and Judy's explanation as well.

"All right, pipe down everyone" calls out Laverne as the evening winds down "we have runaway winners for the best costumes tonight. As you all know, everyone was given a ballot to turn in for the best costumes. There’s actually a tie for best costume … will Rudy and Fiona Dewclaw please come forward and claim your prize."

It turns out that Rudy and Fiona won a pair of VIM (Very Important Mammal) backstage passes to Gazelle's next concert that is scheduled for two weeks from Halloween night. The couple had almost perfect renditions of Jedi master Plo Koon and padawan Ahsoka Tano from the Fur Wars movies.

"Thanks a lot" said Rudy to Laverne, Nick and Judy as Fiona jumped up on stage and gave Laverne a quick hug.

“There’s one more prize to be given out tonight” says Laverne taking the mic and holding up a small box wrapped in orange paper tied up with a black bow. Skye Winters, will you please come up to the stage?"

As Skye slowly approaches the makeshift stage, a nagging suspicion tickles the back of her mind.

“It’s not sure what this is for” begins Laverne “but the note has your name on it Skye. And yes, you have to open it here and now.”

Gently undoing the ribbon and then the paper, Skye looks at the contents. First her muzzle shows a bit of confusion, then a smile begins to play on her lips.

Holding up a large box of breakfast cereal all she can do is look at Judy, smile and comment “Well played sis, well played.”

The modified box had a picture of Skye with a bowl of sugar-coated corn flakes, but the name had been changed to ‘Snow Flakes’ instead of Frosted Flakes.

As the gathered crowd hooted, hollered and applauded, Skye and Judy exchanged hugs, showing that there were no hard feelings and all was done in fun.

…

Since she was driving the short distance home, Judy allowed Nick to open the envelope since he had (begrudgingly) managed to limit his intended drinking to only having a slight buzz.

"Ok Slick, go ahead and open your present."

Nick slowly pulled the zipper type opener at the top of the envelope, then shook out the contents. Grinning, he proudly held the contents in his paws and said "I guess the edible undies and carrot
flavored oil mean that a certain bunny is going to be eating well tonight?"

"Good guess Slick" returned Judy with a mischievous glint in her eyes and smirk on her muzzle "I enjoyed the other night so much, I just figured I'd return the flavor, I mean favor…"

...

Chapter End Notes

AN: NO CEREAL WAS HARMED IN THE WRITING OF THIS CHAPTER
Chapter Summary

Judy gets read for the big race with the ZASCAR champ, but ends up with another challenge.

Chapter Notes

This is going to be a really, really long chapter, but breaking it up wouldn’t fit well with what I have planned for the next chapter, so enjoy.

22: Another Race - Or Two

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Five days after the fatal crash that claimed the life of an innocent doe, Nick and Judy are standing quietly outside of the Heart of Nature Chapel in the Meadowlands district:
“Judy, are you sure you’re ready for this?” asks a concerned Nick.

“No, not really to be quite honest.” quietly answers a solemn Judy, realizing how serious Nick is by using her proper name and not a nickname “But it's only right that we pay our respects, especially considering the fact that we both know how easily that could’ve been me laying there.”

As Nick and Judy enter the small chapel, they slowly cross over to the flowers by the casket and gently place a bouquet of yellow roses, forget-me-not’s and baby’s breath that they had brought with them, then took their seats towards the rear of the chapel.

At the end of the service, as mammals were congregating and offering their condolences, Nick spots Mr. and Mrs. Viera, the young doe’s parents, who regard the couple with sad but curious looks on their faces.

Nick gently nudged Judy, who turns to see Mr. and Mrs. Viera. Approaching the grieving couple, Judy gently pats Nick's arm, who understands the unspoken message and hangs back a few steps as Judy takes a deep breath and readies herself.

Mrs. Viera started the conversation “Excuse me miss, may I ask how you knew my daughter?”

"Well Mrs. Viera” begins Judy “truth be told we actually didn’t. I however do know Johnathan Whinters, the buck that caused the crash. I’m the one he holds a grudge against, as I unknowingly cost him a large sum of money, his business and recently his marriage.’
‘As you can see, your daughter and I were very similar in appearance and each owned a gray Cobra. As it turns out, Johnny mistook her for me and caused the crash that took your daughter’s life.”
With her ears drooped flat against her back, Judy started to shake as she tried to hold back her tears as she ended her statement with “I'm so sorry.”
Nick took a step forward to comfort his wife but was beaten to Judy by Mrs. Viera, who stepped up and hugged the doe.

Joining the hug, Mr. Viera sorrowfully consoled Judy by saying softly “There now little miss, you’ve no need to apologize, it was that buck’s actions that caused the crash, not yours and I will not hear otherwise.” Nick silently nodded at Mr. Viera as thanks for his kind words.

“I have to ask miss,” interjected Mrs. Viera as she parted the hug “what is your name?”

“Oh, my apologies, its Judy. I mean to say its Judith Wilde. And this is my mate Nicholas Wilde.”

“And your maiden name was …?” asks Mrs. Viera.

“Hopps.”

“Of the Bunnyburrow Hopps?”

“Yes ma’am” answered Judy, a bit concerned.

Mrs. Viera's eyes softened just a little “You’re one of Bonnie and Stuart's kits?” to which Judy simply nodded.

“How are they? I haven’t spoken to Bonnie in years. We were in the same home-ec class in high school in Bunnyburrow”. 

“Mom and dad are fine. Here, let me-” As Judy opened her handbag to look for a pen, Nick hands her a pen and one of his business cards “Thanks Nick” she said as she took the card and wrote down the number for the main Hopps house phone on the back. “If you call that number you’ll get one the fluffle. Just ask for Bonnie and you'll be handed off to her, I'm sure she'd love to hear from you after all this time, especially after-”.

Just then a young buck approached, noticeably a bit shaken upon seeing the resemblance between Judy and his late sister and politely interrupted “Mum, dad, we’re ready to head to the wake”. 

“Ok son. Looks like we need to go hun-” said Mrs. Viera to her mate sadly.

“Judy, will you and Nick be joining us at the wake?” asked Mr. Viera.

“I’m sorry” returned Judy “but Nick and I have other arrangements that we need to deal with today, but we felt it necessary to at least stop and pay our respects. ”

As Judy hugged Mr. and Mrs. Viera, Nick shook Mr. Viera's paw.

When Nick offer his paw to Mrs. Viera, he felt her tug him down for a hug and whispered in his ear “Please take care of her.”

“I will certainly do my best.” Nick returned in the same whisper.

And with that, the couples parted ways.

... 

As the next few weeks slowly roll by, the furor that was present in the shop begins to lose steam. After cranking out several really important builds like the King’s Superbird, the movie studio cars and Chief Bogo’s Hummer in really good time, several only slightly less important builds have also been put in the books.

Among the other builds that were finished during that time was a two-seat convertible coupe that was
done on consignment by a white bunny named Roger Rabbit and his red furred mate Jessica. Jessica Rabbit was a top model and film star, so it made sense to place the car near the top of the build list. Along with these builds was a build that was the ‘55 Bel Air hardtop that Nick had finally found for Mel, which was painted red and cream to match the colors on the outside of the diner.

Then there was the refurbished and updated pink and white ’52 sedan-delivery that was done for Gideon Gray, Judy’s former tormenter turned close friend.

The last really important build was an old ’54 F150 pick-up that had been brought in from the back of one of the Hoppers family barns (totally unknown to Stu) and completely rebuilt for Stu and Bonnie Hoppers. Unknown to either Stu or to Bonnie, it is to be presented to them on their fortieth wedding anniversary in just six weeks’ time. The truck was painted a combination of pastel blue, yellow and white to match the main entrance of the couple’s burrow. This, along with the automatic transmission, upgraded engine, suspension and brakes, and satellite radio would definitely make life easier for the aging bunnies, especially with them being his in-laws and all.

Just as Judy was putting the finishing touches on the interior of the truck, she was called to the office by Nick.

Entering the office, Judy couldn’t help but notice the slightly larger than normal smirk (was that even possible?) on her husband’s muzzle.

“Ok, Slick, what’s up?” she asked with mild concern.

“I just got a call from ZASCAR, and the cars for the featured race between you and the new ZASCAR champion is set for just three weeks from now are finally finished.”

“Really? And just what mammal am I gonna have the honor of racing?”

“Would you believe none other than Dale Elkhart himself?”

“Oh, come on, I mean really? I gotta race him again? After he demolished me the first time?”

“Well, you did make it a point to challenge him after you beat the crap out of Johnny that day. Now it’s time to pull on your big bunny panties and own up to it Fluff.”

“Fine” says Judy rolling her eyes in mock disgust “So, when and where is all of this take place?”

“According to ZASCAR, it’s scheduled for a noon start time on the last Saturday in November, a week after the awards ceremony. It’ll be at Zootopia International Raceway, the same track you raced Johnny at. They wanted the race to be somewhere you’d be at least a bit familiar with, especially with Dale racing on mainly oval tracks all season.”

“And what about the cars? And will I be able to practice?”

“From what I gathered talking to Mr. Francis, the Director of ZASCAR, there were four identical Trans-Am cars built for the race, just like stated before. Those four will be used for qualifying and the actual race. We’ll just have to make do for practice sessions until we can find a viable car besides the old 5 car for you to practice in. I’ve been told that each of you will be able to practice at the track on alternate days so you both aren’t on the track at the same time and don’t get into an ‘unofficial’ race and wreck a car or get injured in the process.’

‘Since Dale has been racing for most of the year, ZASCAR has agreed to allow someone to mentor you again, to make the race as fair and competitive as possible. I’ve contacted Fritz Caterson and he’s agreed to try to find another couple of cars similar to the cars that you’ll drive in the race to help
train you in if you’d like.’
‘I’m not sure where he’ll find them, but unless I miss my guess, they’ll be very race ready cars. Probably very close to the actual race cars provided by ZASCAR.”

As Friday morning finally rolls around, Nick returns to the office after making a tour of the shop to check on several of the various builds still in progress. As he opens the office door, he’s greeted by none other than Felix Caterson and a fox that he was sure that was most likely unknown to Judy in the form of Darrell Cartrip.

“Well” begins Nick “I’m guessing that a visit from you two probably means that you’ve managed to find a car for Judy to practice in? And while you’re at it how about we introduce Judy to your guest.”

“Works for me” returns Fritz.

Entering Judy’s work area, Nick gets Judy’s attention and gets things started.

“To begin with” says Nick “introductions … Judy, you already know Fritz. As far as the new mammal, meet one of ZASCAR’s most successful road course drivers and one of Dale Elkhardt’s biggest rivals on the track Darrell Cartrip, better known as ‘Jaws’. Darrell, this is my wife and the love of my life Judy Wilde, also known as ‘Squeak’.”

“Charmed” says Darrell as he takes Judy’s proffered paw and kisses the back of it. “By the way, I’m not ‘one of’ the most successful road course drivers in ZASCAR, I am the most successful and accomplished road course driver in ZASCAR history.”

As Judy blushes lightly, Nick does a classic eye roll, not in the least jealous of the new arrival because he knows that Darrell is a happily married fox and has no actual interest in his wife. This was just the persona that he was known to have. “And now you know why he’s called ‘Jaws’.” interrupts Nick.

“Actually” interrupts Felix wearing a huge grin “I’ve managed to find and put my paws on not one but two race ready Trans-Ams, similar to the ones built for the race.”

“So” asks Nick “where are they and just when will they get there?” asks Nick.

“They’re actually out back as we speak, ready to be taken to the track and driven.”

“Great, let’s go see ‘em” says Nick. “Judy, come on out when you get cleaned up a bit.”

Exiting the shop via the back door, Nick gapes at the sight of the two race cars sitting on a large rollback truck.

“What in the hell” exclaims Nick “are those?”

“Those” answers Felix “are two race cars donated by a close personal friend of mine.”

“I can see why they’re donated” states Nick, visually taken aback at the sight of the two cars.

“Was anyone killed in the wreck?” he asks in all honesty.

“Nick, stop being such a drama queen and let me give you the backstory on the cars before you decide to pass on the offer ok?” says Fritz in mock anger.
“Ok, fine. Explain away.” finished Nick crossing his arms across his chest, not the least bit convinced that the cars in front of him are viable race cars.

“To begin with, the cars were donated in good faith by none other than Jessie Jameses, the owner of ‘Auston Speed Shop’. The cars were built as part of one of the ‘Monsters Garage’ episodes that aired on Zoo TV several years ago. They’ve been sitting in the back of his lot since the episode and he was actually thinking about either junking them or just blowing them up on a future episode. When I remembered that he might still have the cars and called him, he was happy to donate the cars on one minor condition.”

Sporting a slightly worried expression Nick asked “And that condition would be …?”

“All you need to do is acknowledge that Jessie donated the cars, that’s it.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

“I’ll talk to Judy about it but-”

“Talk to me about what Slick?” asked Judy.

Jumping a foot in the air, Nick grabbed his chest turned to his wife and exclaimed “Damn Fluff, don’t DO that!”

Giggling up a storm, joined by the hysterically laughing Fritz and Darrell, Judy stood on her tiptoes and kissed her fox on the nose.

“You’ll get over it dear.” she told her exasperated husband.

“As I was asking before” began a finally slightly subdued bunny, wiping tears from her eyes “ask me what?”

“Look at that truck and tell me what you see.”

Taking a long hard look at the two beat-up Trans-Ams on the back of the rollback, Judy can’t help but ask “Do these things even run? And where on earth did you find them?”

As Felix related to Judy the same story he had previously told Nick, and seeing Judy regarding the cars, he noticed a bit of confusion on Judy’s muzzle.

“What?” he asked.

“Growing up in Bunnyburrow, we didn’t get a lot of time to watch TV. I’ve never heard of this Jessie Jameses mammal or that Monsters Garage program. To be honest, the cars look to be so beat up and in such poor shape that I seriously doubt if they’ll even run. Even the old 5 car looked to be in better shape”

“How about this” Darrell suggests, not bothering to hide his grin “let’s take ‘em to the track, unload ‘em and see what happens.”

“When are we able to use the track?” asks Nick.

“It just so happens” interjects Fritz “that Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays are your days to use the track. Dale’s days are Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday with Sunday being a no practice day.”

“Well” remarks Judy “I guess we’ve got nothing to lose, let’s go.”
Arriving at the racetrack, the cars are unloaded and rolled into the pit area.

As the mammals all gather around the cars Judy notices Darrell changing into his fire suit. Something seemed familiar about the orange and white fire suit with the green trim. As he turned his back to Judy, she notices the suddenly familiar ‘TIDE®’ laundry detergent logo.

“Holly crap!” she exclaims, more than a little astonished “you’re actually Darrell Cartrip … the Darrell Cartrip! I remember now. I watched you and Dale Elkhardt try to wreck each other at Richmond one year!”

Giving Judy a familiar smirk (did all foxes smirk like that?) he replied “I guess I am. It would sure surprise Stevie (Darrell’s wife) if I wasn’t.”

Sitting down on the pit wall, Judy tried to absorb meeting yet another ZASCAR legend. Not to mention the fact that he was going to be training her to actually have a chance at beating Dale Elkhardt.

“Are you ok young lady?” asks Darrell.

“Umm … Yes? … No? … Maybe? I’m not really sure to tell the truth. Meeting another ZASCAR legend is a bit much to absorb right now.”

Laughing, Darrell continued “I hear you’ve had the pleasure of racing Dale before. And how’d you do?”

“I kinda sucked actually.”

“Well, how about we see if we can even the odds a bit? With a few weeks of practice, you still may not beat him, but at least you’ll make things interesting. As a matter of fact, I think that Fritz and your hubby have a little somthin’ for ya that might help put you in a better frame of mind.”

“Really? And what might that be?”

“How about this Fluff?” asks Nick, as he holds up a custom-made fire suit.

“What th-Nick! How. When. Why ….?”

“You like?”

What Judy was seeing was a custom-made fire suit, done up in the colors of the Hopps Family Farms, the same colors that were on the freshly rebuilt pick-up done for her parents. The back of the fire-suit had the Hopps gas station logo and the phrase ‘Hopps Express®’ on the back and ‘Squeak’ on the front for her name.

“Nick, it’s beautiful. When did you ever have time to get it done?”

“You can thank Snow and Josh for designing it, sizing it and having it done. When Fritz told me that he was bringing Darrell over to train you, I had a feeling he’d show up wearing one of his old fire suits. So I thought it’d be nice if you had a professional looking fire suit for the race. No better time to see how it looks, fits and feels than now, right? If it doesn’t fit just perfect, there’s still time to get it altered as long as you don’t … ummm … stain it? (which earned him a very dark and disproving look from his bunny). “Now, go put it on while we get the cars prepped and ready to go.”
“Ok,” says Darrell to Judy and the others assembled in the pits “there are a few things I need to make plain before we start this. Regardless what you might think you learned from Dale before, there is one thing that you have got to get straight in your head. Above all else, Dale is driven to win. If you expect him to take it easy on you because you’re a female or a bunny, you are dead wrong. Dale is driven to win, no matter what it takes. If it’s even remotely legal, he’ll try anything to accomplish that. If you have any doubts, watch some of his best races, especially the Richmond race. What I’m going to do is race you like I know Dale will. Do you think you’re ready for all that?”

“There’s only one way to find out, let’s do this.”

…

Heading out onto the track, Darrell set about reinforcing what he’d told Judy in the pits…

After letting Judy take off and lead a couple of laps, Darrell decided to try to rattle her a bit. Following her very closely and waiting until they start down a straightaway, he finally hit the rear end Judy’s car just hard enough to unsettle the car.

Watching Judy’s car start to wobble all over the track and listening to her cuss over the radio, Darrell couldn’t help but smile.

Calling both drivers in to the pits, Nick and the rest were anxious to see just how Judy would react to the bump that Darrell had given her.

Climbing out of her car, Judy angrily stomped up to Darrell and confronted him nose to nose: “Just what in the hell was that? Slamming into me like that?”

Wearing the largest smirk she had ever seen, Darrell answered Judy “In the words of a former crew chief Harry Hogg, I didn’t slam you, I didn’t bump you, I didn’t even nudge you, I rubbed you. And rubbin’, Judy, is racin’. This is exactly what Dale is going to do to you if you get ahead of him during the race. And he won’t care if it’s on a straightway like I did or in a corner. Knowing Dale, he’s liable to let you lead for a bit, just like I did, just to do the same exact thing I did a bit ago.”

Wearing a bit of a shocked look on her muzzle, Judy stood with her mouth slightly agape, digesting what Darrell had just told her. Then she recalled the words of advice that Dale had given her some time ago “Above all, regardless of what happens, do not and I mean do not, under any circumstances, ever get angry. Anger leads to bad decisions and bad decisions lead to mistakes. Not only in racing but in life. Got it?”

After pondering the words of Darrell and Dale, Judy’s expression changes from shock, to wonder, then to a growing smirk. It occurs to her that their words of advice, coupled with Nick’s ‘Never let them see that they get to you’ persona aren’t that much dissimilar. Putting that with her ‘I never quit’ attitude is exactly what she needs to get her through this entire ordeal. While the fire that drove her to become a police officer was still (kind of) there, she could channel that same fire in a different direction. To kindle a passion that could be useful in her budding racing career.

“Ok, I think I get the idea now. All bets are off. If it’s a free for all you want, a free for all you’ll get. Let’s get back on the track and see what you’ve really got!”

“You’re sure that’s what you want?” asks Darrell.

“You said you were going to race me like Dale would, so bring it.” says Judy tauntingly as she climbs back into her car. “How can I learn to race against him and beat him if you take it easy on me?”

Giving Nick and Fritz a quick look and notice Nick give a slight shrug, Darrell climbs back into his car and the two head back onto the track.

With both cars getting back up to speed, the ‘rubbin’ begins again.

Catching back up to Judy, Darrell gives her another bump just as they head into the esses, a bit harder this time. To her credit, Judy keeps her cool and waits until they exit the set of curves. She then pulls suddenly to the right and hits the brakes causing Darrell to expectantly pull a past and slightly ahead of her. Nudging the left front of her car into the right rear of Darrell’s car while then accelerating, she managed to not only spin him out, but he actually got stuck in the wet grass at the edge of the track.

Giving up trying to get unstuck, Darrell hears Judy over the radio “Ooops, sorry about that!” all the while she wasn’t the least bit sorry.

After Darrell is towed out of the grass and the car put on the rollback, everyone gathers in the pits.

Climbing out of the rollback, Darrell strides up to a slightly worried Judy “Now, that’s what I’m talkin’ about!” he declares, with a huge smile lighting up his muzzle.

Relieved that Darrell isn’t angry, Judy slowly returns his grin, albeit a bit sheepishly.

“Um … yea, sorry about that… kinda?”

“No, don’t get me wrong, that was prefect” remarks Darrell “It’s exactly the thing that Dale or I would do given the circumstances. Great job.”

“I think we’ve had enough excitement for one day” says Nick, glad that there’s no real tension between Judy and Darrell. “How about we load up the cars, take them back to the shop and have the crew go over them to make sure there isn’t any real damage, then go to the ‘Dew Drop’ for a bit of relaxation?”

“Is that place still open?” asks Darrell. “It was the place to go to before they shut down the old Fairgrounds race track when the track lost their ZASCAR affiliation…”

“Yea.” replied Nick “Even though it was closed for a bit, it reopened just after the track started back up. They only run a few races a year at the track now, but it’s still a fun place to go to every now and then, and the Dew Drop is open every day.”

“You know-” began Fritz, a thoughtful (or was it mischievous) look on his muzzle.

As all eyes turn towards him, Fritz continues “I still have connections with the track owner and former competitor of Darrell’s namely Sterling Martin.”

“And?” prompted Nick.

“Just for shits and giggles, how about digging out the old 5 car and see how Judy would do against Darrell on the old Fairgrounds track. If they’re both up for it that is.”

“We’ve got four spare days a week until the race, what could it hurt?” asked a very interested bunny.

“Sounds like fun to me. Are you sure you wanna do this?” Darrell asks Judy.

“Sure, why not? What could possible go wrong?” Judy asks.

“Seriously” asks Nick? “You mean like … wrecking the car and possibly getting injured in the
process? And no, I’m not the least bit worried about the car, it’s just a car.”

“Hell yea” answers Judy, giving Nick her best ‘doe eyes’ look. “C’mon Nick, pleeeeeease-”

“Damn Fluff … just … ok, fine. But only if Darrell promises to not be too hard on you.” giving Darrell a ‘I’ll find you and kill you if you do’ look.

“No problem here. Just a few laps to see how she does, ok?”

“Sure, we’ve still got the old 5 car, but well need to do some modifications to turn the 5 car into circle track car. Next question” states Nick “where are we gonna find a second car, what is Darrell gonna drive?”

“Do you really think that I don’t have a few of my old race cars sittin’ at home that I can use for somethin’ like that?” asks Darrell.

Sighing, Nick relents “I guess if Judy really wants to, there’s not a thing I can do or say that’ll change her mind. Give us a few days to rework the suspension on the 5 car a bit and make a few other minor changes and we’ll let you know when we’re ready to go.”

“YES!!!” exclaims Judy as she jumps into the air towards Nick, ready for her mate to catch her.

Two days later, the old 5 car has finally been reworked to change it from a road course car to a more or less circle tracker. Steering geometry (caster and camber), rear end stagger as well as the gear ratio in the steering box and finally the gears in the rear differential that had to be changed. Not wanting to waste a day, Judy was looking to try and go to the track on her scheduled day at the road track.

“Fluff, I know I can’t stop you if ya really wanna take the 5 car out. But if you really want a chance in hell of a good showing against Dale, you need to go to ZIR and put your time in there. You can take the 5 car to the fairgrounds tomorrow. You do want to try to actually beat Dale don’t ya?”

“Of course I do, it’s just … you know…”

“I know Fluff, I know. You’re in a hurry to try something new and exciting and get that adrenalin rush. But the track will still be there tomorrow, and think about this for a second … you’ll be racing the same mammal on two different types of tracks on consecutive days. Road course today, circle track tomorrow, and then you’ll be switching back to a road course.’

‘While the fairgrounds will be a bit of fun, it’ll be a distraction from what you’re really trying to learn, which right now is road racing. I know Darrell will most likely go along with whatever you want, but remember how we do things at the shop. Work first, play later. Please, let’s load up and go to ZIR.”

Seeing her fighting to come to a solid decision, he decides to sweeten the pot a bit.

“Tell you what” he continues “If you concentrate, really concentrate, on the road racing all week and go to the fairgrounds on Saturday, we’ll make it a shop function to go and watch. Plus, if you’ve done your homework like I asked you to, I’ll let you start working on your ‘Cuda. Deal?”

The smile that lit up the bunny’s muzzle was a sight to behold!

“Really? You’d do that? For me?”

“Of course Fluff, I’m a fox of my word after all.”
Leaping up and giving Nick a tight hug and a peck on the end of his nose, she gave the only answer that she could: “What cha waitin’ for slowpoke, let’s head out!”

Jumping back down, Judy headed for the step-side at a dead run.

…

The next two weeks were extremely busy, what with the normal activity at the shop, Judy going over her notes that she had taken off the Challenger build that had taken place on what seemed ages ago and her trips to ZIN every other day, the only break in the routine was the promised trip to the Fairgrounds raceway the following Saturday.

The Fairgrounds was a former ZASCAR sanctioned one-half mile racetrack that had fallen from the regular ZASCAR circuit because the owners at the time had refused to keep up with the times and upgrade the track itself, seating and other needed accommodations. A private individual had been behind the purchase of the track to keep it from being leveled by developers, and held races a couple of times a month in lower classes of races such as modified, Legends series cars and other lower series venues to keep the public interested as well as to satisfy the urges of the local racing enthusiasts.

On this particular Saturday, there was a large crowd turnout of not only the crew from Nick’s shop and their families, but quite a few of Judy’s family plus a large segment of the local racing community as well. Word had gotten out (probably from Darrell) about the matchup between Darrell and Judy, and it seemed that everyone wanted to see the spectacle, especially after the race with Johnny Whinters.

As Judy exited the small building situated in the center of the infield, she couldn’t help but notice the crowd.

“What in the world are all of these mammals doing here?” she asks, at least a little perturbed.

“It seems that your teacher/opponent for the day has had a paw in all of this. And don’t look now, but I think I saw Dale Elkhardt and his bunch in the stands as well.” Replies Nick.

“WHAT? Why would he be here instead of at ZIR practicing?”

“Maybe he figures he doesn’t need the practice” says Nick “it’s not like he’s never raced there before.”

“I’ll show him whether he needs the practice or not” says a very motivated bunny, heading towards her racecar.

“That’s the spirit Fluff” returns a smirking Nick, knowing how determined his bunny could be when something got under her fur.

“By the way” Nick continues “tradition demands that we introduce you and Darrell to the crowd.”

“Wait, WHAT? But … everyone already knows us both, it’s not like no one knows what’s goin’ on here!”

“Yea, well, you wanna know how long your little outing is gonna be and a few of the rules don’t ya?”

Looking as if someone had poked her with something, Judy startled, never even thinking about how many laps she was going to be running. Couple that with the fact that she had never even driven a
lap on an oval racetrack before. The bunny moaned inwardly. “Well, shit” she thought to herself “Another fine mess I’ve gotten myself into”.

As Darrell and Judy join Nick on the podium that was set up just above the starters stand, Nick begins the introductions: “All right everyone, here’s what’s gonna happen. Darrell has consented to give Judy ten laps to familiarize herself with the car and the track. Then when the green flag waves, they’ll start side by side and will compete for twenty-five laps. Any and all yellow flag laps will not count towards the final lap count. In case one of the cars is damaged beyond the ability to compete, it will be considered out of the race and the opposing driver will be declared the winner. That is unless the car is damaged due to an intentionally caused wreck.’

‘Finally … presenting the principals for today’s spectacle: in the number 5 Hopps Express® car, Judy Wilde. In the number 17 Tide® Ride is Darrell Cartrip. Drivers, to your cars and may the best driver win.”

While headed to her car, she was passing a smirking Darrell standing by his old racecar. Just as Judy shot him a very convincing ‘go to hell’ look, she paused midstride for just a brief second when she sees the car itself. The car is the same one that he had won the ZASCAR Cup with a decade or so before. It was the old number 17 car that had been dubbed the ‘TIDE® Ride’. Judy suddenly remembered that Darrell had not only won the ZASCAR Cup in that very same car, but had been a two-time track champion at this very same track.

As Judy nears her own car, she notices that the paint scheme has changed. The colors are the same as her fire suit and the former name on the car has been changed to the ‘Hopps Express®’ logo of her family farm and the same as the logo on the back of her fire suit. It seems she had been so absorbed in what was happening that she totally missed his remark during introductions.

Turning and shooting Nick a look of confusion, her fox simply shrugged, smirked and blew her a kiss.

“We’re gonna talk about this later!” she warned.

“Yes dear.” Said Nick, smirk still firmly in place.

As Judy gets assistance from Nick getting her safety harness and HANS device firmly in place, Nick has a few last words for her over the radio as he installed the window netting firmly in place: “Ok Fluff, take a few laps to get the engine, trans and tires warmed up, then start easing into the throttle. It’s ok to push it harder until you spin out, that’s the only way you’ll know where your grip levels are. You get three laps to warm up the car, then ten to figure everything else out. And before you ask, another driver that Fritz knows came in and set up the car for you.”

“Really? And who might that have been?” she asks.

“None other than Rustee Wallece, another of Dale Sr.’s old rivals. There are a lot of mammals who want to see you do well Fluff, both here and against Dale. Now, go out there and give Darrell hell. But most of all—”

“Yes?”

“Have fun and be safe.”

As Judy slowly circles the one-half mile track bringing the operating temps up to normal range, she gets a feel for how different the car feels from the last time she drove it, and she can’t help but marvel at how her life has changed since she met Nick. From a low point, totally bummed at not being able to be a cop and working in a gas station to … this. Even though this was very poor time for introspection, it was certainly something to reflect on later. As she finishes her third warm-up lap, she pushes the thoughts from her mind and concentrates on the task at paw.
While circulating the track, Judy gets harder into the throttle each lap and feels the centrifugal force in the steeply banked turns push her deeper into the seat and throws her against the seat bolster. As the speed and force increases, she also notices that she spends less time in the throttle and more time in the turns, and it begins to overwhelm her. Slowing for a few seconds, she gathers herself and reminds herself of her own personal motto ‘I never give up’ and gets hard into the throttle. Picking up speed she takes a corner fast enough that she feels the back end of the car start to break loose. As she hits the brakes to avoid the outside wall and slides to a stop, she hears a new voice over the radio, the voice of Rustee Wallece.

“Judy, I know you may not remember me, but this is Rustee Wallece. Here’s a bit of advice as weird as it sounds. When the rear end gets loose like that, stay in the gas and turn your front wheels to the right, just a little and it should straighten out. Get back going again and give it a try.”

“Let me get this straight … you want me to turn right to go left???”

“That’s right. Just give it a try.”

Shaking her head, Judy shifts to first gear and starts around the track again. Building speed, she shifts to second then third and finally to forth just as she enters the turn. As she feels the back-end break loose again, she stays in the gas and turns slightly to the right (as absurd as it sounds). Gently straightening the front out as she recovers from the minor power skid, she grins and goes a bit faster each lap until she finds that fine line where the traction ends. Building more and more speed until she’s on the ragged edge of control. By the time her ten laps are over, Judy has pretty much figured out where to hit the throttle hard when exiting each turn and where to brake when entering the next turn.

Seeing the yellow flag, she slows to a reasonable speed and follows the track’s pace car and quickly she notices Darrell’s car pull alongside on her right side. When Judy notices Darrell wave his paw at her past the window netting, she returns his wave with a middle finger salute.

Suddenly she hears Darrell’s voice in her radio “Now, now, now, not nice.”

“How the hell are you on my radio channel?” she asks, more than slightly annoyed.

“Relax Judy. Nick, Felix and I came up with this to make sure that we give everyone a good show and do it safely. Winning or losing isn’t the big thing here, it’s to have some fun and give you a taste of this type of racin’. We’re gonna do some rubbin’ and I’m gonna talk you through it all. When this is all said and done, we’ll cross the finish line together.”

“Why the hell didn’t Nick say anything to me about this?”

“First of all please stop the cussin’, it ain’t ladylike. Nick told me that you get rattlesnake mean when you’re irritated, and that you don’t know when to quit. So, what say we get this show on the road so to speak, and give the mammals a good show!”

…

As Judy and Darrell go past the starters stand in second gear and receive the green flag, Darrell hits the throttle, grabs third then forth gear and heads into the first turn at full song (full speed for all of you non-racer types). Taken by complete surprise, Judy quickly follows suit, and finds the backend of the car starting to slide towards the wall. Keeping in mind what she heard from Rusty earlier, she turned right and kept her foot on the gas.

Straightening the wheels and getting back on the gas as she began her brief (3-4 seconds) run down
the back straightaway, she started to set up for the next corner. Hearing Darrell over the radio, she listened to his input, knowing he was just trying to help. “Ok Judy, listen up. You’ll find that if you run closer to the wall in the straights and head towards the bottom of the track in the corners, it gets easier to run faster. It’s called ‘diamonding’. Experienced drivers like myself, Dale and Rustee can run the track at around 160 and make 15-16 second laps. You’re doing fine considering the fact that you’ve had zero experience at the track. I’ll fall back a bit and you can just follow me as I run a lap or two so you get the hang of it ok?”

“Sounds like a plan, let’s do it.”

As Judy pulls up on Darrell, she takes his advice and follows him for four laps, quickly learning another of the nuances of short track racing.

“Ok, now I’m gonna slide up the track a bit in the next corner, like I would if I actually took the corner too fast. You stay on the bottom like I showed you and pass me ok?”

“Ok, here goes…”

As Judy follows Darrell into the next corner she sees him slide up the track just far enough so she can slip just between his car and the inside edge of the track, then allows her car to push out to just short of the outside wall.

“Well done. I’ve got a quick question for ya … you wanna race now? I mean really race? I promise not to get too rough with ya, just enough to make things interestin’.”

“Sure thing, I won’t learn if I don’t try. And nothin’ is better that paws on experience.”

“That’s the ticket. Hang on to yer helmet, ‘cause here we go…”

Just as Judy begins to set up for the next corner, Darrell gently bumps her car from the rear, causing her to momentarily slide up the track just far enough for him to pass her on the inside.

“That’s called using the chrome horn.” He calls out merrily over the radio, not able to keep the amusement out of his voice.

“Dang it Darrell” she retorts, remembering that he really dislikes any kind of cussing “You coulda warned me or something!”

“Yea, well, my bad. You’re welcome to try it yourself. The trick is to do it gently so ya don’t actually wreck the other driver. Remember during an actual race there are anywhere of 40 or more cars on a track this size. To wreck one driver you might actually take out ten to fifteen cars.”

“Oh my! You’re sure you want me to try that? I really don’t wanna wreck you ya know.”

“Only one way to learn. I’ll let you catch me again and you can give it a try. Just remember, a gentle nudge is all it takes.”

As Judy slowly catches Darrell, she waits until they begin to enter a corner and she gently bumps the rear of his car, causing him to slide up the track, right up to the outside wall. Judy is amazed that she can actually hold her line on the bottom and passes him with ease.

“Good job. We’ve got about six or seven laps left, what say we give them a show? I promise not to bump you to pass you, just give it all you’ve got and we’ll see who wins, ok?”

“Let’s see if the fox can catch the rabbit. See you at the finish line.”

“This should be fun. Pull those belts down tight bunny and let’s go racin’. BOOGETY, BOOGETY
BOOGETY, let's go racin’!”

As Darrell follows Judy closely for the next several laps, Judy spends as much time looking out of her rear-view mirror as she does through the windshield, wondering what in the world Darrell has up his sleeve.

Beginning to exit the final corner, Judy has the checkered flag in sight but as she tries to allow the car to slide out to the outside wall, but to her surprise Darrell is there trying to pass her. Not wanting to let him pass, she keeps her paw hard on the gas and slides up into the side of his car pushing him farther up the track and into the outside wall. As Darrell fights to get away from the wall, he turns down towards Judy causing them both to spin sideways. They both cross the finish line at the same time in a cloud of tire smoke. When the smoke clears, both cars are locked together, facing the wrong way on the track, they actually did, just like they had (sort of) planned.

“What just happened” asks Judy over the radio, slightly disoriented.

“Welcome to short track racin’ darlin’.” answers Darrell over the radio.

“We got our tie. Not exactly the way we planned it, but it works. Now hop on out of your car and wave at the crowd.”

Judy unhooks her radio, takes off the HANS device and drops the window net. As she climbs out of the car, she’s suddenly aware that the assembled crowd is standing and cheering and actually chanting her name.

Noticing Darrell standing on the top of his car, Judy stands on hers and waves to the crowd.

“And there you have it ladies and gentle mammals” announces Nick over the PA system “Thank you all for attending the grudge match between Judy ‘Squeak’ Wilde and Darrell ‘Jaws’ Cartrip. As a reminder, one hundred percent of all donations today will go directly to the Rose and Aaron WildeHopps charity fund for interspecies kit research. I also want to remind you all that Judy will be racing Dale Elkhardt senior next weekend at Zootopia International Raceway so please bring your friends, enemies, neighbors, wives, husbands, boyfriends, girlfriends, kits and unnamed homeless mammals to the race. As with today’s race, all proceeds will go directly the Rose and Aaron WildeHopps fund … have a safe and sober trip home.”

…

The next week at the shop was extremely frantic for Judy. Monday, Wednesday and Friday were taken up at ZIN, practicing road course racing with all of its various nuances with Darrell and from a helpful Rustee Wallece who showed up on Friday to lend his support. The rest of the week, including Saturday, was used comparing her notes taken from the Challenger build and comparing them to what she wanted to do with her ‘Cuda project.

As she was eating lunch with Nick in the office, Nick looked at his wife with a bit of concern.

“Fluff.”

“Hmm?”

“When you’ve finished eating we’re taking the rest of the day off.”

“… But, I need to get a few things out of the-”

“No. You need to unwind. You’ve been going pretty much non-stop for the last three weeks and you’re physically and mentally drained. You’ve got to take a break, especially with the race with Dale coming up tomorrow. I know the only way to get you to take that break is to take it with you,
so we’re leaving.”

Knowing that Nick is right, she allows herself to be led from the shop.

“So, what’s the plan? Dinner, movie, Wilde unbridled sex?”

“That can all come later, but first I thought that this might be a good way to start it all.”

Looking up at the building that Nick stopped in front of Judy sees ‘Forrest Springs Paw & Stone Massage and Facial Spa’.

“Really?”

“Yup, really. Just the thing to soothe your overworked mind and body. And don’t worry, I’m not gonna just dump you off and leave, I’ll be right there with you. They just happen to have a great rate on couple’s massages.”

“You would find something with great rates. Fine, let’s go. I guess you’re right, I have been pushing myself too hard lately, and thanks. I guess that’s why I love you so much, ya scruffy old fox you.”

“I am not scruffy, I’m well worn. As far as old, I may be older than you, but I’m still young enough to enjoy the … well, you get the idea. But you’re welcome anyways. And I love you too, dumb bunny.”

After a very relaxing two hour massage, our pair head to catch the new Harry Otter movie: ‘Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald’. Then, dinner at the gaslight and a slow ride home for the rest of the evenings … entertainment.

Bright and early on Sunday morning Nick and Judy are up getting ready to head to the track.

“Nick, tell me again. Why are we up at six to go to the track? The race isn’t until noon and I was really comfortable.”

“We have to get there early enough to get your pre-race instructions, and to qualify.”

“Qualify? What the hell Nick. There are only two of us!”

“Yes, qualify Fluff” Nick states a bit forcefully “You can’t believe how important the choice of starting positions is even if there are only two of you racing. Remember how the course starts out? Long sweeping right hand turn with a sharp left-hander at the end? You need to be on the inside of that left-hander. That’s the advantage the pole position can give you!”

Staring wide-eyed with both ears straight up at Nick, a slightly startled Judy can only answer “Ok Nick, ok. Jeez lighten up a bit will ya.”

“Judy look, I’m sorry. Maybe I’m taking this a bit more seriously than I need to, but I know how much you’d like to beat Dale. Let’s stop at Mel’s and get some breakfast, ok?”

Kissing her husband’s nose and giving him a tight hug, Judy relents. “I get it Nick, I really do. This is supposed to be fun, but I really do want to win. And if this give me a better chance, I’m all for it. Thanks for caring so much, ok?”

…

After a brief stop at Mel’s diner for breakfast (which had its moment) the couple was on their way to the track.
“I still can’t believe that Mel was closing already!” says Judy. “And we almost missed breakfast!”

“Did it make sense once he explained it to you?” Nick questions.

“Well yea, but to close the café just to go the race? I mean really?”

“Just shows to go ya how much you mean to a lot of mammals sweetheart.”

“Wait, what? Nick, that doesn’t make a bit of sense”

“Yea, and?”

“Never mind, just … get us to the track, ok?”

Arriving at the track, Judy and Nick notice that Dale and Dale junior are already there.

With the drivers and crew members assembled in the infield, the track officials go over the basic rules for the race, which were exactly the same as the rules that were in place just a short time before when Judy raced Johnny with a few exceptions. The exceptions were: 1) yellow flag laps will not count towards the total lap count. 2) the race itself was to be twenty-five laps in duration. 3) at some point during the race, but NOT during a yellow flag lap, each driver had to make a complete pit stop. The pit stop MUST include fuel and all four tires. Since there were only two drivers, there was no actual speed limit down pit road, but a driver could not endanger a crewmember or said driver would immediately forfeit the race. Pit boxes were three stalls apart, so there would be no opportunity for a driver to impede the pit stop of the other driver if they both stopped at the same time.

Colored Ping-Pong balls were used to determine which car each driver was to use for qualifying and to race. Each driver drew one ball and exited the meeting.

Exiting the driver and crew meeting and heading towards her car, Judy noticed Darrell, Rustee and a couple of other mammals standing beside the cars.

“What’s up guys?” she asks.

“Well” begins Rustee “a few of us got together and decided that we could take up places around the track during the race and help you out on the radio. Give you intervals and maybe some tips to help you make this an interesting race. You already know Dale is out to win the race regardless, so we figured a little extra guidance wouldn’t hurt. And before you ask, yes, it’s perfectly legal. We do the same thing all the time when we race here during the season. Dale will have spotters all around the track, so we figured that fair is fair.”

Tearing up a bit Judy is at a loss for words.

“Thanks guys” says Nick taking up for Judy “you know how emotional bunnies can get … OWW! Dang it Squeak, that smarts!”

“I guess we know who wears the pants in your household.” remarks Darrell.

“Yea well” returns Nick with an evil smirk while still rubbing his arm “tell me it’s different with you and Stevie and I’ll be sure she finds out.”

“That’s ok” says Darrell laughing “I think we understand each other.”

“Aaanywho” begins Rustee “Judy needs to get in the car and start getting ready for her qualifying
As Judy walks over to her assigned car, gets in the car and gets buckled in, Nick begins laughing.

“What the hell is that all about now?” asks Judy.

“Squeak, the irony here is unbelievable” chokes out Nick.

With Judy, Darrell, Rustee and others staring at Nick, he explains by asking a simple question. “What color and number is Judy’s car guys?” he asks.

“The Black 3 car.” responds Darrell.

“And what color and number is Dale’s car?”

Noticing for the first time what color car Dale was in, everyone saw the irony and laughed. While Judy had drawn a black Ping-Pong ball with the number 3, Dale had evidently drawn a bright green ball with the number 2.

Noticing the puzzled look on Judy’s muzzle, Darrell explains: “Judy, Dale normally drives the BLACK 3 car, and absolutely hates green colored cars, since green is supposed to be bad luck. And to top it off, the number 2 is Rustee’s old number. This is too rich to believe.”

Staring at a slightly upset Dale Elkhardt, Judy suddenly remembers his advice about being angry or upset. With a widening grin, she starts the car and gets a quick kiss from Nick.

“Since you’re first to qualify, here’s the deal. You get the first lap to warm up the car. When you come off the final turn wind it up because you get one timed lap as your qualifying lap. When you’re about halfway through your second lap, they’ll turn Dale loose to do his laps. Shortest time gets the pole position. You’ve been out here for two, almost three weeks, remember your training and give it all you’ve got.”

When Judy heads out onto the track, she take the first turn, a long sweeping right hander at a fairly slow pace, weaving the car from side to side to help warm the engine, transmission and other components and to also warm the tires for maximum grip under race speeds.

Exiting the final turn before the start/finish line and flag stand, Judy hits the gas and goes from third to forth and crosses the line at full speed.

After Judy finishes her timed lap she slows and pulls into the pits climbs from the car and is greeted by Nick and Midnight.

As Judy is about to ask her time, Midnight reads the numbers off to her. “96.524 miles per hour, and one minute, fifteen point zero eight seconds”. With a slightly puzzled look, Judy is sure she’s heard those same numbers somewhere before.

“Aren’t those about the same numbers that Jackie posted with the ‘Vette?”

“Not about the same Squeak” answers Midnight “almost exactly the same.”

“But how can that be? Different types of cars, different day, same time? Really?”

“Did you really think your skill level wouldn’t improve with all of the track time, especially with virtually the same car that you drove then and now?” asks Nick.
Just then Dale, powers past the pits on his timed run.

Anxiously waiting for the results of his qualifying run, everyone is amazed to say the least when the results are posted on the scoring pylon.

“95.314 miles per hour, and one minute, fifteen point three eight seconds.” reads Nick. “Fluff, you actually won the pole, great job sweetheart.”

Reading Judy’s expression, Rustee is quick to add “And yes Judy, you actually won it fair and square, there’s no way Dale would just hand you the pole, that’s not the way he races. With him it’s all out, all the time.”

Seeing Dale approaching the group, Judy is a bit apprehensive to say the least. Extending a hoof, Dale is all smiles “Good job Snips. Looks like I may have taken this little adventure a bit lightly. Let’s see how you do on the track.”

And with that, Dale heads towards the scorers stand for introductions, followed closely by Judy after a bit of nudging by Nick.

Stepping up to the podium, Judy and Dale are introduced by a special guest announcer, Mikel Bufer. “Ladies and gentlemammals” he begins “presenting todays contestants. In the black number 3 car, we have the challenger, Judy ‘Squeak’ Wilde.’ ‘And in the green number 2 car, we have the reigning ZASCAR champion Dale the ‘Intimidator’ Elkhardt.’

‘You’ve both been given your instructions in the drivers meeting … do either of you have any questions? NO? Then shake paws and drivers go to your cars and’ ‘Llllllllllet’s get ready to rumbllllllllllllllll!!!’

‘This event is brought to you by the Rose and Arron WildeHopps Foundation.”

And with that, Judy and Dale head to their respective cars and get strapped in.

Starting her car, Judy hears Darrell over the radio while getting a quick good luck kiss from Nick “Ok Judy, get your head screwed on straight. You’re gonna have to go like a mad mammal from the drop of the green flag. If you do everything that you were taught, you have a better than average chance of actually winning this thing.”

As Judy and Dale follow the pace car around the track, Judy is encouraged by Darrell’s assessment. ‘I can actually win this. All I have to do is not be intimidated and drive like I was trained to.’

As Judy and Dale circulate around the track warming the engines and tires, it was still difficult to not be intimidated by Dale. The one thing that helped, was the fact that he was stuck driving that awful green colored car. Even though she knew that it would probably make him drive that much harder to defeat her, it still lifted her spirits.

Exiting the last turn before the start/finish line, Judy hears Darrell’s voice on the radio: “Ok Judy, heads up. You keep and eye out for the starters flag, but when I say go, give it all you got. Keep you wheels on the edge of the curb all the way to the first left hander and do just like we trained you.”

As Judy approaches the starters stand, her eyes are on the flagmammal, but as soon as she hears Darrel shout “GO-GO-GO!!!” over the radio, she floored the gas and kept it floored almost all the way through the carousel turn until the last possible split second, then braked hard for the left-hand
turn, beating Dale and forcing him to slow and swing wide giving her a clear shot at the next corner.

The first few laps unwound with Judy still in the lead, with Dale following close behind, only applying a small amount of pressure.

Just before entering the ‘bus stop’ section of the course on the sixth lap, Dale gave Judy a slight bump from behind causing her to enter that section just a bit too fast and swing wide in the center of the turn.

Keeping her temper in check (mainly with Darrell and Rustyee’s prompting over the radio), Judy was content to follow Dale fairly closely for the next few laps.

Speeding across the start/finish line suddenly Durrell came over the radio “Judy, pit … pit now and slow down enough so that you don’t slide through your pit box!”

When Judy stops in her pit box she hears Darrell over the radio again “Sorry about that, but now is about the best time to pit. The car won’t take a lot of gas and the tire change won’t take long, but the main reason I had you stop so quickly is simple.”

“Oh really? And what would that be?” she asks, not entirely sure of Darrell’s motives.

“When you go back on the track, you’ll have one lap fresher tires and turn the first lap around three seconds faster than the lap that Dale is turning right now. That’ll give you at least a three second advantage on the track that he’ll really have to hustle to make up. I didn’t tell you sooner because I didn’t want to give Dale a chance to pit at the same time”

“It’s called a hustle sweetheart!” pipes in Nick.

“Well, just da-” was all that Judy got out when she felt the left side of the car drop, signaling her to take off out of the pits.

Heading out of the pits at full speed (no speed limit remember?), Judy entered the racetrack part way into the carousel turn and kept her speed up until she needed to brake for the sharp left hander.

Driving as hard as she dared for the next several laps, even though she couldn’t see Dale in her rear-view mirror, the guys kept her informed of his steady progress.

With ten laps to go, she could see Dale beginning to inch slowly closer.

With three laps to go Dale was right on her back bumper again, patiently waiting for her to make the one mistake that would allow him to pass her without needing resort to ‘questionable’ tactics. Finally, on the last lap, Dale gave Judy a slight nudge just as she was about exit the carousel turn and brake to enter the tight left hander.

Swinging a bit wide in order to control the car and not spin, Judy was back hard on the throttle getting ready for the next turn. Suddenly, Rustyee was in Judy’s ear “Be calm and just drive like you have been, it ain’t over yet. You’re only a couple of car lengths behind right now. Try to be right behind him exiting the esses and stay close for one last chance at the last right hander before the short straight just before the finish line. Listen close, this is what I want you to do.”

Following Dale through the final right-hand turn, Judy slid the side of her car into the side of Dale’s car under full power. With neither driver wanting to give an inch, the unexpected happened-Judy flinched and accidentally touched the brakes. Unexcitedly both cars began to spin, albeit in opposite directions, with Dale crossing the finish line backwards about a car length ahead of Judy, who was facing in the correct direction as she crossed the finish line.
When the smoke cleared, Dale was the winner with Judy finishing less than a second behind.

Sporting a wide grin, Dale ran up to Judy’s car to make sure she was ok. Finding out that she was, he helped her from the car and told her “That was one of the closest races and one of the dangdest finishes I’ve ever been involved in. I thought there for a second that you had me. Way to go Snips, and congratulations, that was a heck of a race.”

“Thanks Dale. It was a lot of fun and all, but I think I’ve had enough excitement to last me for a while.”

“Well, when you want to give it another go” he counters as they head for the announcers stand “let me know and I’ll be happy to accommodate you.”

“I may just do that, thanks.”

…

“Ladies and gentlemammals” begins the announcer as he raised Dales hoof “your winner in the green number 2 car, and STILL champion, Dale ‘The Intimidator’ Elkhardt senior.”

“Thank you, Mikel,” says Dale as he takes the microphone “I want to congratulate Judy Wilde on a very hard fought and exciting race. I can only hope that she doesn’t want to begin a ZASCAR career in the future. Well done Judy, everyone here should be proud of you. You’ve done a hell of a job considering the short time you’ve been racing. Again, well done.”

Taking the mic from Dale, Judy returns the praise “Thanks Dale. Coming from a champion like yourself, that’s high praise indeed. I’d like to thank you for a clean and exciting race. I know you could have probably made thing a lot more difficult than you did, but the gentlemammal in you won the day. For myself, for Nick and for the Rose and Aaron WildeHopps Foundation, thank you from the bottom of my heart!”

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A/N: To start with, a loud shout-out and props to Vescu for the bulk of the funeral scene. His idea and input, I just reworked it a bit.
After more than few comments about Judy constantly hitting Nick, bunny does often box their mates or potential mates as a sign of affection not only in in several stories, but in real life. It is BY NO MEANS SPOUSAL ABUSE!!!!
Other miscellaneous notes of interest: Jessie Jameses would be Jessie James- owner of the Austin Speed shop and Monsters Garage would be Monster garage.
Darrell Cartrip is actually Darrell Waltrip, who really IS/WAS the best road course driver in all of NASCAR.
Hopefully everyone has picked up the fact that Dale Elkhardt is Dale Earnhardt.
Sterling Martin is actually Sterling Marlin.
Rustee Wallece is none other than Rusty Wallace.
Of course, Mikel Bufer is the one and only Michael Buffer.
The exchange between Judy and Darrell in the pits is almost word for word the same as in a scene between Cole Trickle and Harry Hogge in Days of Thunder.
Zootopia Fairgrounds racetrack is modeled after Nashville Tennessee’s Fairground Speedway and Bristol Motor Speedway. While both tracks are one half mile tracks, Bristol is high banked and Nashville is not.
I’ll bet y’all were wondering if I was ever gonna fit ‘Hopps Express’ back into the story again weren’t ya? SURPRISE!!!
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Chapter End Notes

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Shocking Revelations

Chapter Summary

Ongoing testing DNA occurs and doctor Cotton and Michael have a proposition for Nick and Judy. The planned wedding anniversary takes place, while disaster strikes.

Chapter Notes

This is going to be another really long chapter, so settle in for a spell. Hopefully there will be a few shorter chapters upcoming, but I make no promises.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

23: Shocking Revelations

XxX

... After two races in less than a week, Judy is more than happy to let things get back to a semblance of normal. Arriving at the shop just a bit later than usual on Monday morning (twenty-five laps of hard racing at Zootopia Fairgrounds and twenty-five more at ZIR had taken more out of her than she could have ever imagined) Judy had allowed Nick to talk her into showing up at around nine instead of their usual seven o’clock.

Finding the shop working at a normal pace, Judy approaches Skye. “What’s up sis?” she asks.

“Not much, just putting the finishing touches on the Nomad.”

“Nice. Say, when you get a minute after you get that wrapped up, I need to ask you about something. Nothing serious, just … a bit of advice …”

“Ok, no problem. You gonna be at your bay?”

“Yea, I’ve still got a bit of a mess left over that I didn’t get cleaned up before the race on Sunday.”

A short time later, Skye joins Judy at her bay, Skye asks “Ok sis, what’s up?”

“Well, you know that mom and dad’s anniversary is in a couple of weeks, and Nick and I are trying to figure out ways to get them away from the burrow so we can get the stage set up and truck unloaded and set up to surprise them.”

“Yea, and …..”

“Well Nick figured he’d probably be able to talk dad into giving him a tour of the part of the farm that he hadn’t seen yet. That should take care of most of the day for dad, but I’m having a tough time trying to figure out how to get mom to leave for most of the day.”
After a few moments of thought, a sly smile slowly grew on Skye’s muzzle.

“What?” asks Judy, more than a little concerned.

“Well, knowing you for almost as long as you’ve been in Zootopia, or at least as long as you’ve known Nick, so I guess I can safely say that you’ve never been much of a girly girl. That sound about right?”

“Yea I guess, what’s your point?”

“Didn’t Nick treat you to a bit of a spa day just before you raced Dale this past weekend?”

“Yea, and?”

“Did you enjoy it?”

“Of course I did, but what does that have to do with anyth……! Oooooooh, I think I get it. But that would only take few hours and I need to get mom out of the burrow for most of the day.”

“When would you say was the last time your mom was pampered, I mean totally pampered? Claws done, facial, full body massage? Maybe a new fur style? You know, the works!”

“Well, now that you bring it up …. Probably …. Never. Mom and dad were married practically right out of high school and started farming and raising kits about the same time.”

“Well, after talking to several of your sisters yesterday at the track, I may have something in mind that’ll help.”

“Really? And that would be … what?”

“As I understand it, there’s not only a place in Deerbrook that does massages similar to the ones that you and Nick got, but there’s also a fur stylist practically next door.”

“…..”

“That’s what I thought. You had no idea, did you?”

“Umm … No? But ya gotta understand, I never went to Deerbrook much as a kit, and even less as I got older. I was so focused on becoming a police officer that I really had no time or inclination for that kind of stuff.”

“Here’s what I suggest.” begins Skye, handing Judy a couple of business cards. “Call both of these places and make appointments for … the anniversary party is set for a Saturday night, right? Make the appointments for that Saturday morning first thing. I’d suggest the massage first and the styling last. You don’t want to mess up a good styling right away by having your mom sweat and spoil it all, right?”

As Judy gives a slight nod, Skye continues.

“Coordinate everything with Nick so you get your folks back to the burrow about the same time. The rest of us can have the truck all set up behind a bunch of balloons or behind the bandstand or something. You can spring the truck on them after the opening ceremonies.”

“Now that” comments Judy “sounds like a plan. Thanks sis.” and heads towards the office to get Nick up to speed.
Entering the office, Judy begins to fill Nick in on the plan to occupy her mother that Skye came up with.

Stroking his muzzle, Nick adds his twist to the plan “How about this. It won’t take a bit longer, so why don’t you get the massage and stuff along with your mom? I think it would look a little weird if you just sat there while she gets the full treatment, don’t you?”

“Yea, I guess that makes sense, thanks dear. Are you sure you don’t have an ulterior motive in mind?”

“Well, not at the start, but it might be interesting to see what you’d look and feel like with a new furstyle. Not that I mind the look that you have now of course” noting the critical look that she was giving him “but a change of pace never hurt once in a while … right? And the extra energy you had the last time was …”

“Ok, ok, I get the picture already” commented Judy, stopping Nick, noticing the poorly hidden grin that they were getting from Josh.

Looking straight at Josh, Judy tells him “If you breathe a single word about this, I swear that Skye will never find your body… do you understand”

“Umm … YES?”

“That’s what I thought. Now then Nick, I’m gonna call these numbers and set up a couple of app-” just then her phone rings.

Recognizing the number on her caller ID, Judy answers, putting the phone on speaker so Nick is privy to the conversation without Judy having to relay information. “Good morning doctor Cotton, what can I do for you today?”

And with that, Josh heads out of the office, knowing for sure that he doesn’t want to be in the middle of this particular conversation.

“Good morning Judy” begins doctor Cotton “I just want to remind you that you and Nick need to stop by the University to give us your samples soon. Plus, there’s something else I’d like to discuss with you both while you’re here.”

“Is there any particular date or time that you have in mind?” Judy asks “I have a family get together coming up in a couple of weeks that I can’t miss.”

“No, any time in the next week or so would be fine” answers Doctor Cotton. “Actually, how about Friday morning at the normal time? That will give us plenty of time to discuss the other thing that I have in mind. And before you ask, I’d just as soon not discuss it over the phone. It’s nothing secret or drastic, it’s just that it would be too complicated and drawn out to discuss over the phone is all.”

Looking at Nick “… Unless Nick has anything special planned will Friday at nine work?”

Noticing him give her a thumbs up, Judy is relieved

“That should be fine, we’ll see you then. Oh, by the way, would coffee afterwards be ok with you two? Michael wants to join us. It’s actually relative to the topic I want to talk to you about.”

Looking at Nick and seeing him nod yes, Judy answers “Friday will be fine, we’ll see you then. Bye.”
And with that, Judy severs the connection.

…

Friday morning finds Nick and Judy headed towards doctor Cotton’s office.

“You know” begins Nick softly “if you don’t want to help me with my ‘contribution’ its ok.”

“What brought that on?” asks Judy, more than a little curious.

“Well, I kinda guilt tripped you the first couple of times. I’m sorry, and if you don’t want to, I understand.”

Blushing only a little Judy admits “I really don’t mind, it’s not like I’ve never done that before.”

“I know, but still … I just wanted you to know that it’s ok if you don’t, ok?”

With a bit of a thoughtful look on her muzzle, Judy responds softly “Ok.”

Entering doctor Cotton’s office, they are greeted by Nina “Hey you two. Doctor will be delayed for just a bit, but you can wait out here if you’d like.”

“We’ll be fine, thanks Nina” responds Judy.

With a thoughtful, but slightly concerned look on her muzzle, Judy asks quietly “Nick.”

“Hmm?”

“…. Why do you love me?”

“What?

“Why do you love me?”

“What the hell kind of question is that?”

“It’s been on my mind since our conversation in the car. We’re almost polar opposites. You’re a lot older than me, you’re a predator while I’m prey. In the past we would have been mortal enemies. Your kind used to eat my kind and-”

“And I still do from time to time Fluff” Nick interrupted, trying to mellow the mood a bit.

“Damn it Nick, I’m tryin to be serious here.”

“Yea, I know. But I think you’ve got your fur ruffled for no good reason and I’m trying to figure out where you’re going with this.”

“I guess I really don’t know for sure. By all rights, we shouldn’t even like each other, let alone be married and trying to have kits.”

After a few moments of thought, Nick takes Judy’s paws in his own and emerald eyes met lavender

“Do you remember when we first met?”

“Yea, the first few minutes didn’t go well if I remember correctly.”

“And do you remember how we began to figure things out then, why I needed you and you needed to be at the shop?”
“Because we both figured out that we were both…”

“Broken.” Nick finished.

After another brief pause for thought, Nick continues “Judy, do you know what glue is?”

Giggling a bit Judy answers “Of course you dumb fox, why?”

“Do you know exactly how and why it works?”

“Umm … no, not really.”

“Does it really matter that you don’t know?”

“What’s your point Nick?”

“Sweetheart, we are the glue that holds us together. You’re the glue that fixed me, and I’m the glue that fixed you. We fixed us. It doesn’t matter if we understand how it works, only that it does. Does that make any sense to you? I really don’t know how to explain it any other way.”

Tearing up, Judy pulls Nick into a deep kiss, mumbling something about a dumb fox when doctor Cotton enters the waiting area.

“Ok you two, if this keeps up, I won’t be able to collect a sample the way I’m supposed to. There’s no way I’m going to even try to collect both samples from only you Judy…”

Giving a startled “Epp!!” Judy apologizes profusely.

“Doctor Cotton … I … we, I mean to say-”

Laughing, doctor Cotton stops a very flustered Judy in mid-sentence.

“It’s alright. I take it I must’ve caught you in an awkward moment?”

“We were just mulling over the past a bit” intoned Nick “discussing what’s led us to this point in our lives, a bit of introspection if you will.”

“And you’re both good?”

“Better than ever, thanks” answers Judy truthfully.

Alright then, let’s get this over with, shall we? Who’s first, Judy as always?”

Shortly after collecting the needed samples from each Nick and Judy, doctor Cotton meets with them briefly in her office.

“Michael will be joining us in the café where we first met shortly, but first I want to go over how you two are progressing, if that’s ok.”

“It’s fine” answers Nick and Judy at virtually the same time causing all three to smile briefly.

“Ok, here are the results. The tests so far have indicated that your DNA has evolved almost to the point to where you two almost genetically a perfect match for having kits without the undue stress and consequences that you encountered earlier.”

Noting their slightly confused looks, she continues “There are certain genetic markers in each species
that make male and females compatible to produce offspring. As animals have evolved over the centuries, these genetic markers tend to stay within certain parameters for each species, but also seem to have evolved enough so that other species may interbreed. Are you with me so far?” she asks. Seeing both mammals nod the affirmative, she again continues.

“I firmly believe that within a very short period of time, especially with the aid of the compounds that you’ve been taking, that you will be able to naturally conceive and carry to full term with no undue hardships.”

Smiling at the slightly stunned looks on Nick and Judy’s muzzles, doctor Cotton sits back in her chair and asks “Are there any questions that you may have for me at this point?”

“You’re absolutely serious?” asks Judy.

“Yes, I am” came the reply.

“But there is no guarantee, is there?” asks Nick, apprehension apparent in his voice.

“Let me be totally honest Nick.” says doctor Cotton evenly “Even in same species couples, there is no guarantee that a female will get pregnant and absolutely NO guarantee that she will be able to carry to full term. Some things are simply out of our paws. But this will give you a much better than average chance to have kits of your own, despite the difference in species. Do you understand?”

Taking Judy’s paw in his own and wrapping his tail around her, Nick nods and says “Yes, I believe I do.”

“All right then” concludes doctor Cotton “let’s go meet Michael in the café.”

…

As the three mammals meet Michael in the café in the Palms food court, greetings are exchanged and doctor Cotton gets to the heart of the matter.

“To begin with, even though I initially told you that I wanted to speak with you about something, it’s actually Michael’s, or should I say his father’s idea to present this to you. Michael, if you would be so kind as to fill Nick and Judy in please…”

With a very serious look on his muzzle Michael began his explanation “Not long ago, I was in a bit of a heated conversation with my father and mother. The conversation, as you might guess, concerned my wife and myself. The subject of the conversation, of course, was our ability … or lack thereof, to bear children. Their, and our, heirs. This is an especially touchy topic since I am an only pup, and if I have no children our bloodline dies with me.”

With her paws flying to her muzzle, Judy can only just squeak out softly “Oh my!”

“It’s ok. If that is to be the will of Wakan Tanka, the so be it. Who are we to second guess the will of the Great Spirit.?”

“I’m guessing that somehow we managed to come up during the conversation” interrupted Nick.

“That is correct. You are very perceptive. This must be why you have done so well with your life” complements Michael.

“Thank you, but trust me that it hasn’t always been that way. Growing up a fox kit in the city was tough. Lots of specism, lots of hate and mistrust. But yea, I’ve managed to make things work, and the only mammal to actually heal me mentally is this beautiful bunny beside me” says Nick, causing Judy to blush heavily.
“Growing up on the reservation was not easy either my friend” continues Michael “there is plenty of hate whenever you manage to break free of the rez to try to make things work outside of the Nations. Drug and alcohol abuse are rampant. There is little to no industry to speak of, only misery.”

“That’s a tough choice of words indeed.”

“But” asks Judy “isn’t the government supposed to take care of you? Weren’t you initially put on the reservations to make life easier?”

Smiling a rueful smile, Michael decides to let Judy in on a poorly kept secret “No. I’m sorry to say, the government put my ancestors on the reservations to die. We were traditionally hunters and gatherers. When we were put on the rez, the government took away almost all of our weapons. We had no true weapons to hunt with or to protect ourselves with. No bow and arrows, no spears, no guns, only our knives and our wits. Our children were taken from us and made to study in ‘civilized’ schools. They were forbidden to speak our native tongue and punished if they did so.’

‘We had no knowledge of how to work the land to help sustain us and no one would teach us. We were given what were called ‘commodities’ to live on. Moldy wheat, lard, salt, sugar and the like. Then and even now, scheduled supplies of these commodities are still sporadic. They were seldom on time if they came at all, mainly because of the greed of the BIA agents. That’s short for Bureau of Indigenous Affairs. Most times they would simply steal the supplies and sell them to enrich themselves, leaving my ancestors with nothing.

‘But in spite of it all we still endeavor to persevere. We now teach our language, history and our traditions to our young so the old ways are not forgotten.”

“I, that is we, had no idea. But” asks Nick quietly “what does this have to do with us? I mean no disrespect, but just where do we figure into all of this?”

“The history of the Lakota mammals, of all indigenous mammals, needs to brought into the light so that it may be preserved. If we can spread the truth, even if it is by word of mouth, one mammal at a time, it is a start. However, the history of my ancestors is not of a primary concern at this time, the continuation of my bloodline is. This is where you and your mate enter in.’

‘Because of Stands With A Fist’s research-’ noting the openly confused looks that he is getting from both Nick and Judy, Michael grins and elaborates.

“I forget, that you probably had no idea what my wife’s Lakota name is. In Lakota it is “Naji kici WA nape” meaning ”Stand with a Hand”. Sorry, but the word fist doesn’t translate well.”

“I’m guessing there’s a bit of a story there…” smirks Judy.

“And you would be correct” admits doctor Cotton, with a bit of a smirk of her own. “But before I begin that little story, please call me Yvonne. We’re not in a professional setting here, so I prefer that if you don’t mind.”

“Not a problem Yvonne. Please, do go on.” says Judy.

Much to Michael’s discomfort, Yvonne continues “When Michael and I first met, I was treated pretty much like most unwelcomed nosey outsiders. What was the word that was used again Michael?”

“Wašiču (wah-she-chew), which is used pretty much for all non-Natives.”

“Yea, that’s the word. Very derogatory by the way. Anyway, suffice it to say that initially Michael was rather put-off by having to show me around the countryside and point out all of the various plants and their uses. After a while, I’d had enough of his attitude and shook my fist under his nose and told him I didn’t care how big he was or that he was predator. If he didn’t straighten up, I’d kick his tail into last week. Then he’d have to relive everything all over again, especially me.”

All of which garnered a laugh from Nick and Judy.
“Well, suffice it to say, his parents saw the entire thing, especially the part where Michael actually backed down and was polite for the rest of my tour. A two-week excursion turned into and extended stay. Weeks turned into months. During that time, Michael and I turned into best friends, and then eventually married.”

“This is beginning to sound a bit familiar” interrupts Nick.

“Quiet you” returns Judy a bit shyly, thumping Nick softly on the arm.

Smiling at the exchange, Michael picks up the story “My parents were a bit put-off with the aspect of us marrying. Not necessarily because of the difference in species mind you, but because of the probability that we wouldn’t be able to have children. When Yvonne got pregnant the first time, not only my parents but the entire village was ecstatic. Imagine the dismay when we lost the first litter. Several months later the same thing happened again.”

“That’s when I decided to change my field of studies to DNA research” continues Yvonne “Michael’s father is a renowned medicine mammal in the Lakota communities, deep into natural cures for most things that occur on and off of the reservation. That said, I leaned and am still leaning heavily, on him in my research so I could combine natural herbs and plants to find a possible solution to our reproductive problems. There have been a lot of interspecies couples come through my clinic, but when you two came in, you gave us hope. Real hope. A canid and a lagomorph, able to conceive, just like us. You have no idea what this means, not only to us, but to Michaels family and to his entire clan.”

“Ok, that’s all well and good, we understand completely” states Nick “but there’s a bit more to it than all that, isn’t there?”

“Actually, there is” replies Michael. “My father has tasked me with asking if you would consider visiting him and my mother as guests on the reservation.”

“And the reason for this sudden invite is …?” asks Judy.

“He would like to have you undergo a special ceremony, generally reserved for tribal members only.”

“And that would be?” asks Judy.

“It’s called a sweat lodge or Inipi (pronounced "ee-nee-pee") which means 'to live again'. It’s a form of purification ceremony.”

Noting the questioning looks coming from both Nick and Judy, Michael explains “It’s much like a sauna in the civilized world, only more intense. It is very spiritual, kind of like going to church but in a sauna...”

“I would personally encourage you to accept and attend the ceremony” says Yvonne. “While it can be rather intense, it is, as Michael hinted at, very spiritual. There is no set ‘religion’ per-se for the Lakota mammals, although some have converted to a few of the accepted religions. You would not be seen as strangers or Wašiču, you would be honored guests since you were actually invited by the tribe’s medicine mammal. If I’m not mistaken, you want to make a difference in the world with interspecies reproduction research. This is your opportunity to back it up, starting with the mammals who have been here the longest and suffered the most indignities, Michael’s tribal members and many others like them.”

Looking at Judy and getting a ‘why not’ look from her, Nick accepts the invitation “We would be
honored to accept your father’s invitation Michael. We have an upcoming family event of our own coming up in a couple of weeks that we really need to attend. However, after that we would be free to make the journey and stay as long as is deemed necessary.”

“Excellent” returns Michael “I will tell father that you have accepted, and then he can set a date for the next Inipi. I’ll have Yvonne get in touch with you when it’s all set, she can give you all of the details like the date and time, and the place of the Inipi as well. In the meantime, please use Zoogle to research what you can find so you’ll have a better understanding of what to expect, and perhaps fathom what you part may play in all of this. I’m sure father has his reasons for asking you both to attend. And I’m sure he will want to give you a history lesson, but it’s all important in understanding not only the Inipi itself, but of our past and perhaps our future.”

Standing and exchanging hugs all around the two couples part ways.

“Well, this should be interesting” says Judy on the ride back to the shop.

“Yea” replies Nick “but if it helps us and it helps Michael and his tribe in the long run, I can’t think of a better way to spend time away from the shop. Even with your folks’s anniversary upcoming, it’ll be good to get away from the shop for a while, don’t ya think?”

“Couldn’t hurt. Now. Let’s get back to the shop, there are a few things I need to check out for my ‘Cuda build.”

“Fluff, you are an amazing bunny.”

“Do I know that?” Judy wondered out loud, giving Nick a quick peck on the cheek “Yes, yes I do.”

…

After returning to the shop, Judy found herself more involved in setting up appointments for her mother and herself at the massage parlor and the fur stylist than she had originally thought. By the time she got finished setting up appointments with both businesses it was well past lunchtime.

Grabbing a chicken salad sandwich from the vending machine for a quick lunch (which absolutely no one in the shop batted an eye at, knowing her and Nick’s past) she returned to her notes for her Barracuda build.

Looking over her notes, Judy notices that since the little ‘Cuda has an A-class body, it didn’t have an actual full frame, but instead had a sub-frame which was connected to the rest of the body with just four bolts. The sub-frame contains the motor, transmission, front suspension, steering box and the like. This would be a problem with the rebuilt 426 Hemi that she planned to install. Unless she found something to stiffen the body, the massive torque from the powerful hemi motor would literally tear the little car in half.

After a couple of hours of research through various interweb search engines, Judy found that there were actually specialty parts made specifically for use on her car. Sub-frame connectors for her ’64 ‘Cuda were available from Trixie’s Speed Shop. The parts ran from the end of the sub-frame the entire rest of the length of the car. Those particular parts were readily available and could be found right at the border between the Sahara and Rainforest districts. Some parts were just not available because of the use of the dated engine, so custom made motor mounts and a few other parts such as a drive shaft and other parts would need to be made in house in the fab section of the shop, and on the CNC machine.

Never having started this type of complete project before, Judy is becoming more and more
convinced that she may have stepped into a bit more than she bargained for. Experience, especially here at the shop, has taught her that asking for help is never a bad thing, so she heads for the one mammal she is most convinced that can assist her with her current dilemma.

“Midnight” she begins, walking up to the panther “When ya got a minute, got you give me a bit of help with the little ‘Cuda?”

“Sure thing” he answers “I’ll be there in around ten minutes or so.”

“Ok, thanks” she answers as she heads back to her bay.

When Midnight shows up at Judy’s bay and she explains her quandary, he explains that she’ll need to make major changes to the sub-frame assembly to fit the massive hemi into the car to make everything work. This includes the custom-made motor mounts as well as new transmission mounts and possibly cutting and widening parts of the sub-frame assembly. Then the entire front suspension will need to be totally redesigned and reinforced to handle the weight of the larger motor and trans. Then a much larger heavy-duty radiator will be needed to handle the increased temps that the motor will create. All new wiring would need to be included to complement all of the new gauges to be used in the cockpit that would need to be installed since Judy had chosen to go with the new/old stock type gauges to run the nostalgic hot rod class that had just been created at the Zootopia dragstrip a few years ago. That’s also why she wanted to use an original 426 hemi for a powerplant.

After thanking Midnight for his insight and input, Judy decided that the best thing to do at this time would be to rethink such a drastic build.

‘Maybe I just need to install a small block motor like a 318 and a four speed, restore it to near factory and use it more as a daily driver’ she thinks.

Heading towards the office to inform Nick about her possible change in plans, Judy notices a small crowd as she steps inside.

Seeing exactly who’s inside, Judy is three steps past curious and has to ask “Hey guys, what’s up? This looks like some sort of bunny-fox convention!”

“Well” begins Skye “Nick was telling us about your planned trip after your folk’s anniversary bash, and we were … kinda wondering if … um…”

“You could tag along?” Judy finishes.

“Yea” chimes in Josh.

“As a matter of fact,” joins in Duane “Tiff and I would like to tag along as well.”

Looking between her brother and the strikingly gorgeous red fox vixen Judy asks “Are you two serious enough to be considering having kits?”

“Not yet” answers Tiffany “But we’d kinda like to be as well informed as we can be if we actually do get that far in our relationship.”

“And you two?” asks Judy. “What about you?”

“Well” begins Josh a bit tentatively “we’re not really looking to have kits anytime soon, but still…”

“You realize this isn’t supposed to be a fertilization ritual or something of the sorts, right?” asks Judy.
“Look” says Skye “what could it hurt to ask? We stand to benefit as much as anyone from what you and Nick are doing, and it might just show Michael’s family just how committed our entire family is to all of this. Just ask, please. If the answer is no, then at least we tried. Ok?”

Looking at her brothers and then at their vixens in turn, then to Nick, Judy was baffled at exactly what to do for sure. On the one paw, their argument was valid. On the other paw, she didn’t want Michael’s family to see this as an invasion of sorts or to seem like they were being too pushy.

“What could it hurt to ask?” asks Nick. “The worst case is that they say no, right?”

Finally giving in, Judy reached a but of a compromise “Fine. But on one condition…”

And that is?” asks Duane.

I’ll call doctor Cotton right now but you all have to be right here with me, otherwise no deal!”

…

Calling doctor Cotton on her private number, Judy’s call is answered almost immediately.

“Hello Judy, I’m more than a bit surprised to hear from you, is something the matter?”

“No, absolutely not” answers Judy firmly “this has to do with the visit that your father-in-law has asked about.”

“Really? Is there an issue with that?”

“Not an issue really, but sorta-kindra?”

Not sure how to address Judy’s last statement, doctor Cotton waits for Judy to explain.

“Nick was explaining the invitation to two of my brothers and their significant others… both fox vixens by the way, and they were wondering if they would possibly be welcome to come along with us to the … uh.”

“Inipi?” asked doctor Cotton, with a hint of amusement in her voice.

“Yea, that what you said” returns Judy. “Can I put you on speaker, the others are right here with us.”

“Certainly you may, no problem. Personally, I don’t see what harm it would do, but I’ll relay your request to Michael nonetheless, and he’ll see what his father says. It’s liable to be a few days before I get back to you, so why don’t you and Nick fill them in with as much background information as you can in the meantime. I’ll have to tell you, this is not going to be a walk in the park by any means. Michael didn’t tell you outright, but life on the rez even now is no cake-walk. Housing is substandard in most places, with electricity, running water and restroom facilities being questionable during the best of times. Kicking Bird, that’s Michael’s father, will no doubt put you up in the best accommodations available, but I’m not sure if there’ll be room for the six of you. I can NOT stress enough that you need to not only do your research on the Lakota history, but on the Pines Ridge reservation as well.’

‘Remember when Michael told you about the drug and alcohol abuse? And the lack of industry? No jobs and very little hope give mammals lots of free time to pursue many bad things, so be warned. And make sure you do that research, not only on the ceremony, but on the reservation itself. It’s the Pines Ridge Reservation by the way.”

Looking at all mammals in the room, Judy gives the only answer that she can under the
circumstances “We understand Yvonne, let us know what your father-in-law says and we should have everything sorted out on our end by the time you get back to us.”

“Well, if that’s all, I really need to get back to the grind. Thanks for the call, I promise to let you know something as soon as I hear it. Bye.”

“Bye.” says Judy as the call is terminated.

“Ok you guys, there it is. You heard the lady. We’ll get together and talk this over at our place tonight. In the meantime, you guys do your research and let me know whether you really want to go or not. Nick and I are committed to this but you’re not. You’ve got tonight and probably all of tomorrow to figure out just how bad you really want this, so get to it.”

…

Speaking briefly with Nick before heading back to her bay, Judy asks Nick “Do you actually think that this is a good idea or not? Truthfully Nick.”

After a few moments of careful thought, Nick slowly answers “At first, I thought it was a terrible idea. But the more the conversation wore on, the more I warmed up to it. If Michael truly wants to expose the problems on the reservation to the rest of the world, how better than to involve as many mammals as possible?”

“I wonder” says Judy thinking out loud “if Michael’s dad would let us record some of the conditions on the reservation…”

“To give Zootopia and the rest of the world proof about how some mammals are still being treated so badly? What could it hurt to ask?”

After texting their thoughts to doctor Cotton, Judy informs Nick of her decision to scrap the drag racing idea and mostly restore the little Barracuda to a daily driver.

“Truthfully, I was hoping for something like that” regards Nick. “Don’t get me wrong Fluff, I’d still have been behind you all the way, but this makes a lot more sense.”

“And you just wanted me to figure it out for myself rather that try to browbeat the decision into me?”

“Yea, pretty much.”

“Thanks for that Nick” she says pecking his cheek.

…

Returning to her bay, Judy looks over the white board and begins to change more than a few items on it.

Gone is the massive hemi engine, replaced with a crate 318 small block engine, and the unneeded sub-frame connectors are completely eliminated. The heavy-duty brakes and cooling system are then replaced with updated four-wheel disc brakes and slightly upgraded cooling system. Next to be eliminated are the new/old stock racing gauges, replaced with reproduction gauges and speedometer to return the car to more of a factory look, with only a small tachometer added. Judy decides to keep the four-speed transmission and heavier duty clutch over the factory installed three speed trans and light duty clutch set-up that came with the original six-cylinder motor.

Seeing Nick heading towards her bay, Judy realizes that time has once again gotten away from her,
and it’s now quitting time.

“Squeak-” begins Nick.

“Yea, I know” she answers.

“All work and no play make Judy a dull bun” Nick jibes playfully.

“Niiiiick, really?”

“Yup, really. Listen, your brothers and their vixens are gonna stop by the house around seven or so. How about a reservation at the Gaslight for supper?”

“What’s the special occasion?” she asks, slightly concerned.

“Nothing special, I just wanna take you out for supper is all… I dunno how wrapped up the conversation is gonna get later and I don’t want either of us getting stressed out by needing to cook, ok?”

“Well … how about Mel’s instead? I’m really more in the mood for some of that casserole rather than something fancy.”

“OK, I like that idea. Let’s go eat and get ready for the rest of the evening.”

As Nick and Judy return home, they are followed shortly by Judy’s brothers and their vixens.

“Well” starts Judy “how went the research?”

Looking a bit paler than normal, Skye answers “Judy, you ain’t gonna believe me, but that place makes Happy Town look like an amusement park!”

A bit confused, Judy looks to Nick, who in turn looks totally shocked and disbelieving, for an explanation.

Frowning, Nick explains “Happy Town is basically the pred slum section of Zootopia. Poor roads, dilapidated buildings, few businesses in the area except for and occasional convenience store, liquor stores and dope dealers. NOT a pleasant place.”

Looking at his long-time friend for more information, Nick nods at Skye to continue.

“That’s right. But here …” as Skye opens her laptop “look at this documentary that we found on the Hisstory channel.”

As the three couples watch the documentary unfold, all are dismayed and disgusted at the sight that unfolds before them. Run down homes with windows and doors missing, barely covered with bits of old sheets or whatever happens to be handy. Abandoned vehicles dot the entire area. Very few homes seem to have power lines leading into them, so all wonder how any mammal can survive the brutal winters that take place in that part of the world that’s not climate controlled like Zootopia is. Naked or near naked children play uncaringly with homemade toys in neglected yards.

On what appears to be a main street, empty shells of building that used to be stores line both sides of the streets. Mammals of many different species of both sexes, mostly various species of canine, that seem to either be drunk or high on drugs (or possibly both) appear to be the only inhabitants of the area.
The few cars or pick-ups that drive along the poorly maintained streets appear to be very old and in as poor repair as the homes and stores.

As the assembled mammals look at each other, various reactions are observed. Judy, Skye and Tiffany have paws over their muzzles while trying to contain tears. Nick and the bucks are beyond angry.

“How in the name of all the gods can this be allowed?” Nick angrily asks no one in particular. “How can the powers that be ignore this?”

After a lengthy silence Judy has to ask everyone in the room “Has this changed any of your minds about coming along? I don’t know about Nick, but this just pisses me off to no end and makes me more determined than ever to go.”

“Hell no” replies everyone else in the room at virtually the same time.

“There’s literally no way in hell you can keep me from going unless we’re told explicitly by Michael not to” says Skye firmly.

“Same here” replies everyone else in the room.

“You know my answer Judy” says Nick using her given name. Knowing that that response by Nick only strengthens his resolve, Judy nods.

“As soon as I hear something from Doctor Cotton, I’ll let everyone know. Ok?”

As everyone hugs and their guests leave, Judy turns to Nick “Nick-

“I know Fluff, I know. But there’s literally nothing we can do for now but wait. Bothering doctor Cotton won’t help our cause, but when she does call, at least you have everyone’s firm commitment either way. Let’s get some sleep and start getting ready for the trip to your folk’s anniversary. Ok?”

…

Having heard nothing from doctor Cotton since the last phone call, Nick and Judy return to the shop on Monday, hoping for the best.

Part way through making her new parts list for the restoration of the Barracuda, Judy gets a call from doctor Cotton.

“Hey doctor Cotton, you can’t believe how happy I am to hear from you”

“Hey Judy. I guess you’ve been a bit anxious for the last few days, waiting for me to call.”

“To say the least, yea. If you can hold on for a few seconds, I want to head to the office to share this with Nick and several of the others ok?”

“No problem, I’ll wait.”

As Judy quickly heads toward the office, she catches Duane and Skye’s attention and motions for them to follow her.

Once in the office, she quickly puts the phone on speaker and tells doctor Cotton to continue.

“Doctor Cotton, go ahead, all of us are here except one and I’ve got you on speaker.”
“To begin with, I have to ask” starts doctor Cotton “have you all done the internet search like I suggested?”

“Yes, we have” answers Judy “and what we saw is very disturbing! How can mammals live like that? Why is it allowed to go on?”

“For the most part, the powers that be mostly don’t know how bad things are there. The few that do know try their best to either ignore it or cover it up. But the question at hand is simply this … how committed is everyone to make this trip? You saw yourselves how bad it is and please believe me, it’s actually worse in real life.”

With her jaw almost hitting the floor, Skye has to interrupt “Just how in the name of the gods can it be worse than the documentary we saw?”

“If you saw the show that I think you did, it was only about an hour long. From the sound of your voice, I’d say that you’re a vixen, correct?”

“Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?” Skye asks, slightly irritated.

“I assume that you’re familiar with Happy Town? Do you think that a single one-hour documentary could cover everything that’s wrong in Happy town?”

“……..”

Hearing silence doctor Cotton continues “That’s what I thought. Think about it for a second, what’s the one thing that could never be portrayed in a documentary that would cover a place like Happy Town?”

“The smell” says Nick quietly after a moment’s thought.

“That’s right Nick” says doctor Cotton “The smell.”

“So, I’ll ask again … how committed is everyone to make this trip?”

“Doctor Cotton, this is Duane, one of Judy’s brothers. I think I can answer for everyone here and for my girlfriend, that we’re more committed than ever. If we’re able, we want to go there, see everything for ourselves, and maybe we can do something for the community.”

“Please understand, all of you. This is not meant to be a pity party. The mammals there do not need someone to go and look things over and feel sorry for them, to make them feel like they’re being looked down upon. These are real mammals who have real feelings. They need hope, not pity. Do you understand?”

As everyone looks around the room at each other, a grim sense of purpose settles in.

“Yes doctor Cotton” says Skye “I believe we do. Can you tell us when the umm ….”

“Inipi?” comes the word over the phone that Skye was searching for.

“Yea, that” says Judy, with a bit of a smile playing on her muzzle.

“Aaanyway” continues Skye rolling her eyes “any indication as to when the next Inipi will be?”

“If I remember correctly, Judy indicated to me earlier that her family get-together is scheduled for this
coming weekend?”

“That’s correct” answers Judy.

Doctor Cotton continues “Michael’s father, who’s name is Kicking Bird by the way, told me directly that the Inipi will be held two weeks after that. He asks that you make the trip as early as you can, both so you can all acclimate to the natural weather there, and to get acquainted with some of the locals. I personally believe that it would be in your best interests to do so.’
‘And as for your request to record your visit, Kicking Bird told me that he will allow it, as long as you agree not to record any of the ceremonies that you may attend.”

“That is something that we can easily agree to, right everyone?” asks Judy.

Noting everyone in the room nodding, Judy quickly tells doctor Cotton “Everyone agrees Yvonne. I do have one more question before we hang up.”

“Before you even ask Judy, yes Michael and I will be there. In fact, we’ll be leaving on Wednesday morning.”

Grinning, Judy signs off “Ok, thanks for that, it’s a big load off all of our minds to have someone there that we know. If everything plays out well, we’ll see you in around a week to a week and a half.”
“Sounds like a plan, see you then, bye.”

“Bye” says Judy as the call ends.

...

“Ok everyone, back to work” says Nick. “You’ll all need to have at least two weeks’ worth of stuff ready for when we leave for the reservation. We’ll leave on Sunday, right after we all get back from Bonnie and Stu’s anniversary. I’ll have Lucky, Charlie and Midnight work nonstop on the van so it’ll be ready for the long drive to the reservation. Now, git.”

With everyone heading to their work stations (except Josh who was performing IT stuff on the shops computer system when everything began), Nick called Midnight into the office and filled him in on what was expected to get the shop van ready for the trip to the Pines Ridge reservation. After Midnight left to corral Lucky and Charlie to begin the comfort upgrades to the shop van for the expected trip to the reservation, Nick was trying to figure out how to handle the coming range of events that he couldn’t fully comprehend even yet.

The uncertain duration was one thing to consider. Even though it was only supposed to be a two-week trip, doctor Cotton’s revelation earlier about HER anticipated brief excursion that had turned into months, Nick knew that their trip didn’t have the same unknowns factored in. All involved were already either married or paired in meaningful relationships.

The uncertainty was the fact that except for the web searches, documentary and narrative from doctor Cotton, little as actually known about the reservation and the true conditions there.

There was also something niggling at the back of Nick’s mind that he couldn’t put a finger on. That is until Judy stepped through the office door and brought up the subject.

“Nick” she said “I thought about something the I believe is important.”

“And what might that be.”
“Well, one of the subjects that was brought up was that females on their ‘moon’ or heat cycle couldn’t participate in the purification thing.”

“THAT’s what was on my mind just a minute ago, thanks for-”

Noticing that his bunny was giving him ‘the look’ that all married mammals know, Nick stopped short and allowed Judy to finish.

“As I was about to say before I was so rudely interrupted” Judy continued “I knew that my heat cycle wouldn’t be an issue, so I asked Snow and Tiff about theirs. Luckily for us, they’ll finish theirs by the end of this week, just before my parents’ anniversary bash. So we’re good to go as far as the … thingy.”

“Well, that’s one less thing to worry about I guess” finished Nick. “Any thoughts about what to take along as far as clothing and food?”

“We can discuss that between now and Friday, I guess’ Judy replies. “Anyway, let me get back to the ‘Cuda. I only have a few things left to plan out before I get started on the actual building of it, although I’ll probably hold off starting it until after our trip to the reservation. No telling how long we’ll actually be gone.”

“Sounds like a good plan” says Nick praising Judy, kissing her on the top of her head before she heads back out into the shop.

…

As the week wore on and the time for the Hopps anniversary draws near, Thursday morning sees a brief conference in the shop office.

“Ok” begins Nick “is everyone ready to leave for the burrows right after work tomorrow?”

“Skye and I’ll be heading out right behind you two in her ‘Merc’” says Josh.

“Tiff and I will be ridin’ with Josh and Snow.” pipes up Duane.

“Has everybody got enough stuff ready to last at least a couple of weeks at the reservation?” asks Judy.

Seeing four heads nod the affirmative, the next question is easy to ask, but seems to get varying results: “And you’ll remember to bring them to work tomorrow right?”

Seeing the doubt on her brother’s muzzles, Judy scolds the bucks “You know damned well that we’re leaving for the reservation right after we get back from mom and dad’s anniversary. We’ve been over this! What the hell’s the issue here?”

Seeing the smug look on Skye’s muzzle, Judy suspects that the bucks have been procrastinating as usual, but wants to hear Josh or Duane, or both admit that they’ve put everything off until the last minute.

“Well…” slowly says Josh, who’s wearing a very ashamed look in his muzzle “we, that is I … umm-”

“Yea, I get it” interrupts Judy “Just like always, dragging your feet until the last second, right?”

“Umm … yea?” answers Josh.
“And you Dewey?” she asks.

“…..”

“Damn it you two, you know how important tis trip is! Here’s the deal” she says, getting a bit angry “… if you aren’t ready for the trip to the reservation when you get here tomorrow morning, you’re NOT going. I really hate that, but ‘c’mon, really?”

“Yea, yea, we get it” says Duane.

“I’m not so sure you do” fires back Judy, a bit hotter yet. “You guys pull this shit all the time, and it’s time to stop it once and for all. I mean it, if you ain’t ready tomorrow morning, I will NOT let you make the trip.”

“DO YOU UNDERSTAND?” she shouts.

“Ok Judy, that’s enough” interrupts Skye I think they get the message.”

“And just why didn’t you light a fire under Josh’s butt?” Judy asks Skye.

“Mainly because I figured this was a lesson best learned the hard way” Skye answered, remarkably calm “When Josh kept putting it all off, I figured it would come to this and wanted you to make the point to him. The point’s been made, so enough’s enough, drop it already, ok?”

Realizing that Skye was indeed correct, Judy conceded, staring directly at both brothers and asks “You two get the message, right?”

Hanging their heads for a brief second, both bucks look at their sister directly and answer “Yes ma’am.”

“Fine. Now, get to work and be ready to leave here for Bunnyburrow by no later than five tomorrow afternoon.” says Nick, concluding the meeting.

Friday morning arrives with all six mammals assembled in the shop’s office.

With both of Judy’s brothers looking very contrite, the two vixens were present (Tiffany decided to be at the shop all day) making sure that the trip to Bunnyburrow get started on time.

With work beginning to slow down a bit since the race, Midnight, Lefty and Charley were able to complete the alterations to the shop van easily on time.

With no real deadline pressure on any of the vehicles being built, Nick decided that everyone would be able to leave around noon and arrive just before suppertime.

The trip was pleasant, with Nick and Judy in the step-side, Skye and Josh in Skye’s ’56 Merc, and Duane was with Tiffany in her ’55 210 sedan, a clone of the one used in Zootopian Graffiti.

Arriving at the Hopps burrow right on time, the small caravan is greeted by a multitude of Judy’s siblings.

As Judy leads her brothers and their vixens to wherever her parents might be at this time of day, Nick heads towards the field where the concert was held after the tornado not that long ago. Since that’s where the stage was being set up for the entertainment upcoming that next evening, arrangements needed to be made so the refurbished pick-up would be concealed until the big reveal.
Nick was a bit confused seeing several rabbits that were unknown to him amongst all of Judy’s family. Not sure if the bunnies were distant relatives, friends or whatever, Nick pulled a chocolate colored bunny (that he had appropriately nicknamed Easter-much to the male bunny’s dismay) aside to ask about the newcomers.

Upon learning that the rabbits in question were all relatives of one Johnathan Whinters, Nick turned and headed towards the main burrow.

Stepping through the front door, Nick could hear a very loud disagreement coming from the main sitting room.

“…..in the hell were you thinking?” Nick could hear Judy loudly asking someone.

“Don’t you dare use that tone with me Judith Laverne Hopps” came her mother’s equally loud reply, forgetting either accidentally or on purpose (most likely) that Hopps was not her last name anymore. “And watch your mouth while you’re here, there are still young kits around. This is still my burrow and until it’s not, I can invite whomever I please with or without your consent!”

“But mother” continued Judy, still angry and clearly exasperated “Johnny raped me and evidently several other of your daughters, not to mention god knows how many other does over the years, why on earth would you invite his family here. Especially now of all times?”

Rather than get in the middle of this particular argument, especially with the same question on his mind, Nick decided it would be much more prudent to let his mate work this out with her mother.

“Judy, listen to me” carried on Bonnie “Johnny was the one buck that did this to you. One buck, not his entire family. Irene and Leroy Whinters came here weeks ago, hat in paw to apologize for the way Johnny treated our entire family. Why would you hold his family accountable for his actions? They had no more idea as to what was happening than we did. Are you going to continue to blame us as well because we didn’t believe you that night? … Well, are you?”

Being more than slightly shocked at her mother’s outburst, and even more shocked by the logic of it, Judy’s ears fell and she stood there open-mouthed for several seconds.

Beginning to understand her mother’s logic, Judy begins to tear up “Mom, I’m … I … I’m sorry, you’re right. I can’t hold the entire Whinters fluffle accountable. I – I’m sorry.”

Pulling her distraught daughter into a tight hug and stroking her ears, Bonnie comforted Judy “There, there, Bun, it’s ok. We got past that and so can you. Nick, from the look on your muzzle, you had the same concerns when you came bustin’ in here didn’t you?”

Looking more than a little embarrassed, Nick openly admitted “Yes ma’am I did. I know you understand why, but learning about only a few minutes ago was a bit of a shock.”

Smiling a small, rueful smile Bonnie pulled Nick into the same hug “It’s all part of the process Nick, we’ll all be fine. Probably even better than fine after this is all over, ok?”

“Yes ma’am” he replied “While I’m thinking of it, mom sends her regards. She told me that she won’t be able to make the shindig, something about a cruise that she and a certain mister Jason Silver already had planned.” states Nick, rolling his eyes.

While the females looked at each other with knowing grins, all of the males, especially Nick, looked around, clearly a bit embarrassed.

“Now” says Bonnie, clearly breaking the moment on purpose “You all go outside and help with the
preparations, and play nice with the Whinters, please. They're nervous enough as it is without the bunch of you adding to their discomfort. Scoot!"

…

As everyone exited the burrow and headed towards the area that was being used for the coming activities, Judy sees Johnnie’s parents, Irene and LeRoy Whinters, and several of their kits, mostly around Judy’s age just off to the side of the stage area.

As Judy approaches the Whinters, it’s readily apparent how nervous and stressed they are when they see her.

With her ears flat against her back and wringing her paws, Irene Whinters begins the conversation “Ju-Judy. I-I’m not sure how to start this, Umm-”

Drawing Mrs. Whinters into a tight hug, Judy tells her softly “Shhhhh, It’s ok, it’s ok. After talking to mom, I understand. Mom and dad didn’t believe me at the time either, so I guess I can’t hate you any more than I could hate them. Johnny is paying for what he did to me and so many others over the years. Karma finally caught up to him.”

“Actually” replies Mrs. Whinters sadly “It’s worse than we all thought.”

Noticing the surprised look on Judy’s muzzle, Mrs. Whinters continues “I’m afraid several of his brothers picked up his bad habit and are under investigation for doing the same thing…”

Surprise turned into shock, which then turned into horror for Judy.

“Wh-what?”

“I’m sorry to say” says Mr. Whinters sadly as he joins the conversation “that seven of Johnny’s brothers are under investigation as well. Five have already been arrested here in the Tri-Burrows area, but two are in hiding. And before you ask, we are doing everything we can to have them brought to justice. This is a terrible thing to have happen to anyone, and you must know that we have never condoned that type of behavior, ever.’

‘We’ve given the police all of the information we could to where Jherald and Jarod might be. I guess it figures that his littermates and several close in age to him would have the same bad traits. Everyone in the entire Tri-Burrow area is looking for them, so I’m sure they’ll be caught soon. You must believe us when we tell you that we want them caught almost as much as you do” he finishes.

Before Judy could form a comeback, Nick answers “I, for one, believe you”

Looking down and meeting Judy’s questioning gaze, Nick reassures his distraught wife “Fluff, you know how well I read mammals, please truest me. I truly believe everything the Whinters have told us. I believe that they had no idea about Johnny’s activities, or his brothers for that matter. I believe that they’re cooperating with the police and want the bucks brought to justice almost as much as you do. What say we put all of that behind us and concentrate on getting things ready for the anniversary party tomorrow night?”

Seeing how steadfastly Nick believes the Whinters statements, Judy concedes.

“I guess. It’s just a shock to know how deep all of this runs … damn it anyway!”

“I know Fluff, I know. But you can’t change the past, you can only look to the future and hope for the best.”
“Fine” says Judy “I really hate it when you’re right so much of the time. You know that, right?”

“You’ll get over it I’m sure” he says winking at her.

“NICK!! Judy yells, as Nick has just squeezed her tail, getting exactly the reaction from everyone he’d hopped for, which was to lighten the mood a bit.

As the nervousness dissipates, a very embarrassed Judy smacks Nick on the arm “Damn it anyway!”

Getting smiles from the entire group, everyone pitches in to get the stage and everything else set up. This includes the special items required for concealing the refurbished pick-up to be presented to Bonnie and Stu the next evening.

…

Saturday morning brings a practically cloudless sky and a promise of a beautiful day.

As the younger bunnies gather up breakfast dishes, Stu nudges Nick “You about ready to tour the fields off to the south? There’s a few blueberry bushes there and some large rhubarb patches that haven’t been seen to for a while.”

Nick’s ears shot up so fast Judy had to laugh “Careful there Slick, I might need those ears later …. I mean you might need them later… Damn!”

“Umm, anyone need more juice?” she says, so red from embarrassment Nick thought that she’d burst into flames.

With everyone at the table suitably shocked at Judy’s outburst, Nick decided to get things moving along “Ok Stu, let’s check those south fields. I’ve never sampled rhubarb before, so let’s get goin’. Judy, don’t you and your mom have something planned for this morning?”

Blinking rapidly, Judy caught the hint, while Bonnie looked more than a little confused.

“Do we have something planned that I don’t know about?” Bonnie asks.

“Umm, yea. I kinda forgot on purpose to tell you that we’re taking a short trip to Deerbrook.”

“We are?”

“Yup, let’s get moving. Nick and I have a special day planned for you, and you’re NOT gonna miss it. in fact, I’ll bet you’ll love it.”

With Stu and Nick headed towards the south fields and Judy and Bonnie headed to Deerbrook, Josh and the rest of the Zootopia bunch headed to the stage area to get everything ready for the evening’s entertainment. This, of course includes the unveiling of the completely redone pick-up.

…

Saturday afternoon, as Nick returns with Stu and several baskets of blueberries (also some rhubarb). When they get to the main family room of the burrow, both Stu and Nick stop dad in their tracks.

Standing before them in a very attractive dress and brand new furstyle is a totally made over Bonnie.

The dress was a pale blue with spaghetti straps, similar to the one that Judy wore when Nick proposed, only not quite as revealing, with the neckline not quite so low and a slit in the skirt only going up to her mid-thigh. The yellow Calla lily on her left ear marking her as a taken doe added to
the effect perfectly.

“Stu…” says Nick, laughing at Stu as Stu was actually gawking at his own wife “STU - STU!”

“Uhh … huh? What?” was all Stu could babble.

“Pull you mind out of the gutter and go get ready for the concert.”

“Concert?”

“Damn Stu, you’ve really got it bad. And stop drooling, you’re making me look bad.”

“What … I … um … yea, ok. Holy cow!”

As Stu heads towards the bedroom to get dressed for the evening’s festivities, Nick, Judy and Bonnie can only laugh.

“He hasn’t been like this since our wedding nearly forty years ago” says an overjoyed Bonnie “I can’t begin to thank you two enough, especially you Nick.”

“Why me?” Nick asks, a bit bewildered “It was mainly Skye’s idea.”

“I know, but to be able to spend the time with Judy and catch up on everything, and for footing the bill for the spa, the pawdicure, the dress and everything….”

Smiling and lightly kissing Bonnie on the cheek, Nick could only say “We’ve all come a long way in a relatively short time, it’s the least I could do. And besides, you’re my favorite mother-in-law!”

As Nicks statement finally sunk in, Bonnie’s small shocked look became a soft smile “You scoundrel you…”

“Do I know that? Yes, yes I do.”

And with that exchange, Stu reenters the room with a semi-formal outfit of a light blue button up shirt to the tan slacks that almost perfectly matched Nick’s on that night so many months ago.

“You two have gone to a lot of trouble for all of this” Bonnie scolded in fun.

“Yea we did mom” answered Judy “but it’s so worth it.”

“Shall we begin the evening’s entertainment?” asks Nick, taking Bonnie’s arm, gently leading her out of the main entrance of the burrow towards the main stage. Judy and Stu followed close behind, with Judy walking arm in arm with her father.

Entering the stage with Judy, Bonnie and Stu in tow, Nick steps up to the microphone “Ladies and gentlemen, family and honored guests, allow me to present mister Stuart Hopps and his lovely wife Bionica, better known as Bonnie.”

Amid thunderous applause Bonnie and Stu were at a loss for words. They had no idea that they were so loved by so many, but now it was apparent.

“Before the rest of the festivities begin, there is a special present that needs to be brought forth. Joshua, if you please, let’s see that beautiful truck!”

A bit startled by the throaty roar of the large V-8 engine being started just behind the stage, Bonnie and Stu could only gape in awe when they see the fully restored and upgraded pick-up as Josh pulled
Looking squarely at Nick, Bonnie could only tear up. Grabbing her son-in-law in a hug that could rival Judy’s she finally choked out “Damn it Nick … I couldn’t ask for a better son-in-law. I’m so sorry for all of the grief that I caused you and Judy in the beginning.”

Giving Bonnie a soft look, Nick responded “It’s all in the past and things have worked out fine. Go. Enjoy. You’ve both done a fine job raising your kits and providing a stable and loving home for them, it’s time for you to take it a bit easy and enjoy life for a while.”

As the entertainment gets going full swing, Nick gets an unexpected phone call.

“Yea, what’s up Midnight? It’s kinda late to be …”

Listening intently, Nick’s muzzle changes from neutral, to concerned to pure outrage.

Judy can only wonder what the conversation is about, since the music from the stage is making it impossible to listen in to anything other than Nick.

“Well just … shit. Are the cops there yet? They are? And Bogo’s in charge? We’ll be there in a few hours, however long it takes us to get there. Sit tight and keep me posted, ok? Thanks, bye.”

Grabbing Judy’s paw, Nick heads straight to where Bonnie and Stu are sitting.

“I’m sorry, but Judy and I have got to go back to Zootopia immediately”

“What on earth has happened?” asks Stu only seconds before Judy or Bonnie can.

“There’s been a bombing in the city.”

With everyone sitting in stunned silence, Nick continues “That was Midnight. Someone tried to blow up the shop. We’re heading back right now. We’re leaving everything here that we brought with us since we’ve plenty of clothes and everything else back at the house.”

With that, Nick and Judy sprint for the pickup at a dead run and head back to Zootopia……

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Almost everything mentioned about the Pine Ridge reservation in southwest South Dakota is fact. Only a few things have been changed to make it more inline with the story. Not only is there plenty of documentation that can be found on-line, but I’ve been there myself and can personally attest to the poor conditions. Pine Ridge is in the poorest county in America. There is well over 80% unemployment and over 80% addition to some sort of drugs or alcohol.

The slightly formal/stilted speech that Michael is using is common among natives that have spent most of their lives on or around the reservations.
End Notes

This story is also posted on fan fiction under the same title and under the same writer.

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