Claws of Attraction

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Claws of Attraction

by J_March

Summary

Sequel to "A Hopps, Skip, and a Fox." Judy's trying to hide it, Nick's trying to deny it, and somewhere in Zootopia, a new threat is imminent.
Chapter 1

Nick had never been to Bunny Burrow, but he imagined it looked a lot like the Meadowlands, with miles of open rolling hills and few buildings. Just replace the fields with farmland and the sheep with bunnies, and Nick figured he had a near-perfect picture of Judy's hometown. A simplified stereotype he knew would have annoyed Judy to no end, had she been around to hear it.

As far as how his welcome would compare… Nick imagined if he went to the residents of Bunny Burrow and demanded they give him his partner back, their response might be similar to the one he currently faced from the Meadowland's woolier residents. That is, thoroughly ticked off.

He had clambered up onto a tree stump to give himself a little more height, and the small herd of sheep had converged in a semi-circle around him. Not even the chilly autumn breeze made it through the fluffy wall of bodies surrounding him. All he had was the sun, beating down on him as hot as their gazes.

"Is the ZPD looking down on us?" demanded a sheep to his right. This one with black limbs and a puffy white body. "Is that why they sent us the fox cop?"

"Trust me, nobody is looking down on you," said Nick. "I'm getting a crick in my neck talking to you as it is."

Not so much as a lip twitch from the crowd. Someone stomped a sharp-hoofed foot. So much for diffusing the tension with some humor. Nick sighed and forced back on his serious cop mien. "Look, the ZPD takes every case with the utmost seriousness," he told them. "It's why they sent their closest officers, to get you help as fast as they could. Those officers just happened to be me and T-dog here." He gestured to the hyena behind him, who made a face and said, "I told you I hate that nickname."

"Hence why I use it," said Nick. To the sheep he said, "I assure you, we are going to do everything we can to—"

"You're doing nothing right now," interrupted someone near the back, and though Nick craned his neck, he couldn't pick out the speaker.

"Really!" said another, an older sheep with a raggedy coat. She pointed to a tree behind the officers, at the base of which was a freshly dug hole. "The creep is right in there. Why don't you go in after him? You would fit!"

And possibly lose his nose in the process. Nick knew better than to directly confront a cornered animal. Especially one that was also a wanted suspect.

"I say we grab a hose and flush him out!" This from an extra bulky sheep with curved horns.

That got a few worried looks, but also many nods and murmurs of agreement. Was this a herd or a mob?

"We are not flushing out anyone," Nick told them. Just the thought of it turned his stomach. He imagined Judy, bedraggled and barely conscious, laying in a muddy puddle outside an illegal burrow in the Rainforest District. It was night, and the red and blue strobe lights that flickered over her limp body made her look alternately bloody and dead with each harsh flash of color.

Nick shook his head, expelling the vision. That was history. Judy was fine and now was not the
time for getting sidetracked by bad memories.

He glanced back at Officer Tibor, who continued his hunched pacing in front of the tree. He'd lope five steps one way and then five the other, always in that jerky, uneven gait all hyenas shared. Nick wished he would stop; the movement made him antsy.

The sheep were openly grumbling now. Nick held up his paws. "I understand you're upset," he told them. "If you'd like, you are all welcome to go home and we will call you when we have the suspect in custody."

"We're not going anywhere." This from the horned sheep again. "We want to see justice done. Look what that beast did to my wife's lovely wool!"

A slim sheep with a pale pink face held out her arm, revealing a missing chunk of wool about one inch wide and four inches long down her forearm.

"Me too!" said another, tugging up their shirt to show Nick a gash in their midsection, the wool cut almost to the skin. "I was growing it out. Now I'll have to start all over again!"

"Full body cuts aren't cheap, you know," complained another, turning to show Nick a slice across their back.

This led to a flurry of undressing as the sheep rushed to roll up their cuffs, lift their shirts, and even drop their paints in order to show Nick their ruined wool.

"Okay! All right! There's no need for me to see—how did he even reach you there?" said Nick, trying to fend off the worst of the flashing. Behind him, Officer Tibor let out a wheezy giggle. Nick shot him a glare. The hyena stopped and dropped his head. "Sorry."

"Is the ZPD planning to pay for this?" a floppy eared sheep demanded, pointing to the jagged shear job across his forehead.

"I'm suing the city!" the horned one said. "A family can't even take a nap in the park without being attacked these days. It's inexcusable!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Nick saw a small mound of dirt start to rise about twenty feet away from the tree. As he watched, the soil lifted, cracked, and a dark nose poked out, followed by a pair of very yellow buck teeth and a fluffy round head. Nick quickly took stock: Gopher. Male. Tan color with hints of gray on his sides. Approximately thirty to thirty-five years old. Missing the pinky digit on his left paw.

The gopher rubbed dirt out of his eyes and darted a look at the herd. Nick stayed where he was, keeping his head turned toward the complaining sheep. His partner was still pacing in front of the tree and hadn't noticed the suspect's appearance.

After making sure that neither officer was looking over, the gopher went back to clawing himself the rest of the way out of the hole. Nick waved a paw at Officer Tibor. The hyena stopped and cocked his head.

Nick pointed to the gopher, following it up with a "play it cool" gesture.

Officer Tibor frowned, looked over, and spotted the gopher. His eyes went wide.

"Got 'em, Wilde!" he shouted, startling both the sheep and the suspect, who let out a frightened squeak and shot out of the hole, booking it through the trees. Strapped to his back were a pair of
shearing scissors nearly as long as he was.

"Halt!" yelled Officer Tibor, taking off after him. "You are under arrest for suspicion of illegal woolgathering!"

"You have got to be kidding me," said Nick. "What are you doing, you idiot?"

But the element of surprise was gone and Nick had no choice but to climb down from his stump and chase after them, leaving the herd of sheep in their various states of undress behind.

"We've got him now, Wilde!" the hyena hollered back to him.

Nick was too busy trying to catch up to respond. Even weighed down, the gopher was fast. Officer Tibor had the speed, but his height hindered him. He was forced to duck under branches and dodge around bushes that the suspect could simply run through. Nick had it a little easier with his size, but making up the distance when the speedy gopher had such a large head start was proving difficult.

*If only Judy was here.*

It was times like these that Nick seriously entertained the thought of traveling to Bunny Burrow to get his partner back. But all his plotting always ended the same way, with him on her front porch with nothing to say for himself. What could he tell her?

*I'm sorry about how I reacted, Carrots.*

*I'm sorry I couldn't be the kind of partner you wanted.*

*I'm sorry I hurt you.*

But apologizing would mean acknowledging what had happened, and Nick had zero confidence he could do that and still keep up the necessary pretense. Which left him here. Stuck. Waiting.

"Don't give up on me now, Wilde!" shouted Officer Tibor.

Had Judy given up on him? It had been a month since she'd come to Nick, duffel bag in hand, and told him that she was taking some leave time to visit her family.

"Seeing Mom and Dad after the accident, I realized I owe the family a proper visit," Judy had told him. "It's long overdue. And with fall coming, they'll need every two hundred paws that they have to help harvest. Since the case with the Corsacs is all wrapped up, now seems like the best time to go before something new pops up and I can't get away."

*Get away.* Nick told himself it was his guilt that had made him focus on those last two words. Like she'd been desperate to escape him. But then he thought of the look on her face, her twitching nose and pinched eyes that wouldn't rise any higher than his sternum, and he knew it wasn't just his imagination.

*When I told you to travel safe, Carrots, I meant coming back too.*

Ahead of him, the gopher stumbled as grass gave way to swampier ground. They were closing in on the Rainforest District.

Nick poured on the speed, closing in on the hyena until he was nipping at his heels.

"We'll have this perp in custody yet!" said Officer Tibor.
But when, thought Nick, would he have his bunny back?

"You arrest some shrubbery there, Wilde?" Officer Francine asked as Nick and Tibor entered the lobby of the ZPD an hour later, with mud-caked feet and various bits of foliage sticking out of their ruffled fur. "Looks like it gave you quite a fight."

Officer McHorn, who was standing next to her, snickered and said, "You have to be firm with those bushes, fox. Otherwise they'll walk all over you."

Francine snorted, nearly losing hold of the pen in her trunk that she was using to sign some paperwork.

"You're a riot, rhino," drawled Nick.

"So where's your suspect?"

Nick jerked his head towards the hyena. "Ask T-dog, here."

"Don't look at me!" said Officer Tibor. "I didn't know gophers could climb trees like that!"

"Did you know they had ears?" asked Nick. "Because if you hadn't ruined everything by shouting like you did—"

"I was giving you a heads up!"

"What you did was give the suspect a heads up."

"So was I supposed to mime it like you? What was that, by the way?" The hyena made exaggerated flappy motion with his paws.

Nick bit back a growl. "That wasn't what I did at all."

"Well excuse me for not being well-versed in charades," snapped the hyena. "I'll be sure to study up for next time."

"I've got another gesture for you to study too while your boning up on things," said Nick. "Wanna see it?"

The fur on the back of the hyena's neck bristled and he bared his teeth. Nick smiled wide enough to do the same.

"Hey, hey! No fighting in the lobby," said Officer McHorn. "I don't want to have to do any more paperwork today."

"Clawhauser's looking for Wilde anyway," Francine said, and Nick looked up at her. "He is?"

She lifted one oversized ear towards the far hallway. As if on cue, the cheetah appeared, breathlessly calling for him. "Wilde! Officer Wilde! Nick! Did you hear?"

"Breathe, Clawhauser. What's going on?"

"She's back, Nick! She's here, at the station! And looking as adorable as ever too if I dare say so myself—ah." He clapped a paw over his mouth. "Please don't tell her I said that."

"You mean..." said Nick, hardly daring to believe.
"Uh-huh!" The cheetah bounced excitedly on his toes. "She's at her desk right now!"

His irritation with the hyena forgotten, Nick took off down the hall.

Francine snorted loudly through her trunk. "He sure is happy."

Officer Tibor blinked, looking from the elephant to the cheetah. "What just happened? Where's he going?"

"To go find his partner, I'm sure."

"Partner? You mean—Judy Hopps is back? That's who you meant?" His gaze swiveled to the fox disappearing down the hall. "I thought for sure she was going to change her leave to permanent."

"Hopps? Not likely," said Francine.

The hyena's head drooped, making his hunched posture even more pronounced. Officer McHorn clapped him on the shoulder. "Looks like your service as temporary backup is no longer required, T-dog. Better go see Chief Bogo about getting another position."

"Don't call me that," said Officer Tibor. "And I can't go see Chief Bogo now. I just lost a suspect! He'll send me back to parking duty. It took me two years to escape that position. And only because I convinced Wilde to take me on while Hopps was absent, and he sweet-talked the chief."

"Well there's no chance of you sticking with the fox now that his bunny is back," said Francine. "Maybe you can find someone else in need of a partner?"

"I hear they're looking for officers in Tundratown," said McHorn, smirking. "You could always transfer there. Hyena's like snow, right?"

The elephant and rhino snickered.

"Thanks for the tip," Officer Tibor growled.

He stalked off, his gait heavy and his shoulders up to his ears. Clawhauser watched him go, his speckled cheetah face scrunch in concern. "Poor guy. He hasn't had much luck lately, has he?"

"Try ever," said Francine.

"It's his own fault," said Officer McHorn. "Some animals just aren't cut out to be cops."

"But he made it this far," Clawhauser pointed out. "And I heard he was top five in his class during training."

"Only in P.T. He barely passed his written," said Francine. She dropped the pen back into the ZPD coffee mug-turned pencil holder on Clawhauser's desk. "With Tibor's strength and skills, they had to give him a shot. But it's been how long now and he still hasn't learned to think like a cop. If it hasn't happened by now I doubt it ever will."

"Shame," said McHorn. "Well, if the paperwork is done, I'm oughta here. I got a game to catch with the boys downtown. You wanna come?" he asked Francine.

"Can't. I have to pick up the squirt from swimming practice."

"He doing any better?"
"He actually put his trunk in the water last time."

"So some progress then."

"Night, guys," said Clawhauser with a wave at their retreating backs. He collected their paperwork from the desk and popped it into a folder to be filed later, then logged back into his computer to check his email. As he waited for the screen to load, he glanced back at the now empty hallway and had to bite his lip to keep a happy squeal from slipping out.

Hopps was back!

Judy's back. Nick kept repeating it to himself, trying to make it sink in. He stopped outside the door to the officers' work room and took a couple deep breaths, willing his heart to settle even as he itched to dash inside. His paw were sweating.

Judy's back.

But was it back for good? For a visit? To tell him she'd changed her mind or wanted a new partner? And what could he safely say to argue it if that was the case? Nick fisted his paws. Why hadn't he been thinking about this sooner? He had been so wrapped up in worry over whether or not Judy would return that he hadn't spared a thought as to how he should prepare if the worst didn't happen.

He was still standing there, gathering himself, when the door abruptly swung open, emitting someone, and Nick leapt back, all the warnings to himself that he had been cramming into his brain vanishing as he looked over—and found himself face to kneecap with Chief Bogo.

"Ah. Captain," greeted Nick far too cheerily. "Fancy running into you here!"

Bogo narrowed his eyes and started past him. Nick threw out a paw.

"Uh, sir? About today, in the Meadowlands." Best to take his part of the responsibility for it now, before his boss worked up a head of steam over it.

But the water buffalo said, "I don't want to hear it from you, Wilde," and Nick winced. Not for himself, but for a certain hyena.

"If it makes any difference," said Nick, "I could tell Officer Tibor was trying his best."

"That is what concerns me," said Bogo.

If he were being honest, it concerned Nick too.

"Wilde?"

"Sir?"

"If you leave early today, you had better make up the time before the end of the week."

"As if there was anywhere I'd rather be than here," said Nick with exaggerated obsequiousness. The water buffalo just rolled his eyes and continued on. Nick smiled, caught the door behind him, and went in.

And stopped.

Judy was there. She was perched the edge of her desk, chatting quietly with Officer Howle. Her
duffel bag was beside her and she was still bundled up in a coat and scarf. Had she come right from the tram station? Her gray fur was ruffled from all the wind. It made her look extra soft and fluffy, and though she'd hit him for saying it, he thought she'd never looked cuter.

Nick didn't think he'd made a noise, but one long ear swiveled his way, and the next thing he knew she was turning around, her big violet eyes growing even bigger at the sight of him, and everything inside of Nick stilled for a beat as they stared at each other.

And then Judy smiled.

It made Nick's heart feel like it was being mimed by Officer Tibor. He abruptly felt like an idiot for every doubting her return. Of course she had come back. Judy never let anything get her down for long. Probably she had already cleaned up most of her feelings for him and was ready to move on.

And if the thought stung, well, that was Nick's problem. But he was happy to accept the pain if it meant having her back.

Officer Howle cleared his throat. "I guess I'll get going then."

Judy turned that sweet smile onto him. "It was good to see you, Howle."

"Glad to have you back, Hopps. I'll see you both tomorrow."

He nodded to Nick as he passed.

And then he was gone and it was just the two of them, fox and bunny, alone in the room.

"I was starting to wonder if you really did become a carrot farmer," said Nick, breaking the silence before it could grow thick.

"Never," said Judy with a fake shudder.

"Are you a hundred percent sure about that?"

She hopped off the desk and came over to him. "I love spending time with my family, but there is only so much crop picking I can do without going stir-crazy." She was so close. He could pick out the scent of exhaust from her walk over, but also fresh vegetables and soil and bunny. He just wanted to bury his nose in her throat and breathe in. Her smell had haunted him for days after she'd left, and yet when it had finally started to fade, he had found himself lingering around the places it had been strongest—her desk, the police cruiser—trying to catch a trace of her.

"I heard you were out with Officer Tibor," Judy was saying. "I didn't know he took cases. I thought he was still on parking duty."

"Poor guy came to me a week after you left, asking if he could fill in. Temporarily," Nick hurried to add. "He's looking to impress the big guy. Apparently I have the magic touch when it comes to helping rookies get promoted."

Judy raised an eyebrow at that, but made no comment. She plucked out a twig from his arm, her expression turning solemn. "Are you sure, though? About the temporary part, I mean. I know I was gone for a while. If you've found a new partner who fits you better, I won't—"

"Dumb bunny," said Nick, plucking the twig from her paw and poking her in the forehead with it. "Looks like all the fresh farm air has made you lose your senses. You're stuck with me until the end, you got that?"
Rubbing her forehead, she nodded.

"Good." He tossed the twig into the trash bin. "Now. I'm going to go do a bit of deforestation on myself, and then I say we duck out early and go get dinner. What do you think?"

"Sounds perfect," said Judy.

"Great," said Nick. "And I know just the place."

They reached Marian's restaurant just as dusk was starting to fall.

It was a single story structure that had obviously been built before modern industrial had become the popular architectural style. The last time Judy had been by, she had found the place charming but a little rundown. Long in the ear, as her grandfather would say. The Corsacs had clearly made great efforts in revamping the place.

Twinkly lights had been entwined around the porch railing, illuminating the front walk and giving the place a warm, festive air. Flowering bushes hugged the brick walls. They bulged out, fat and flourishing, over the sidewalk, tickling the legs of the patrons lined up outside who were waiting to get in. A simple white sign with black font next to the door read: The Foxes' Den.

Judy started to join the end of the line, but Nick caught her by the elbow with a roll of his eyes and walked her up to the front. Craven was there, dressed in black slacks and a spotless white button up. His face lit up when he saw them.

"Officer Hopps! Officer Wilde! We were wondering when you would make it over for a visit. Come in! Marian will be so happy when she hears."

"I'm sorry it took us so long," said Judy. "But you seem really busy. Should we make an reservation and come back?"

"Of course not," said Craven, leading the way inside. "There will always be a table available for the two of you here."

He led them through a narrow entryway lined with cushioned chairs where more patrons waited and out into the dining area. More twinkly lights had been wrapped around the exposed rafters in the vaulted ceiling, and the exposed brick walls had been touched up and copper wall scones added for additional light. Here and there where black and white photos of Carol Hopson, the Corsacs, and long-time patrons of the restaurant. The smell of seasoned and roasting vegetables saturated the air. Nick could just make out the sound of piano music over all the quiet chattering.

"You've really made this place your own," said Judy.

"We've tried," said Craven with what seemed to Nick to be genuine modesty. He gestured them to a small two-chair table near a window, where a particularly enthusiastic vine had smushed itself up against the window, acting as a curtain to what would otherwise have been a dreary view of an alley.

"I'm happy to see you guys doing so well," said Judy.

Craven handed each of them a menu. "We're very grateful. The neighborhood has been nothing but supportive since we've returned."

"As if they weren't yelling for our blood just weeks ago," grumbled Reynard, coming up behind
Craven and setting two glasses of water down on their table. He too wore dark slacks and a button up, but had rolled up his shirtsleeves and unbuttoned the collar. He glared under his lashes at the customers around them. "Lying vultures."

Craven frowned. "You shouldn't talk like that."

"Why? It's true. The minute they catch us doing anything they perceive as stepping out of line, they'll dump us as fast as last week's fish special. And then they'll swear they knew it all along, just like last time."

"Well we'll just have to make sure we avoid that then, won't we?" said Craven.

Reynard looked like he had something he wanted to say to that, but he bit it back and turned to Nick and Judy, pulling a small notepad and pencil out of his pocket. "Ready to order?"

"Oh, um—" Judy glanced at the menu and then at Nick. "Not yet?"

"Just wave when you're ready then," he said, and left to go see to another table.

Nick leaned closer to Craven. "Was it really wise to make him a waiter?"

"Believe it or not, he's actually gotten a lot better. And most of the customers that come in have known him since he was a kit. They're used to his, uh, pricklier personality."

Craven returned to his station after that, leaving the officers free to look over their menus. Nick noted that while much of it was vegetables and fruit, there were several predator options too.

When they were finally ready, Nick gamely held up a paw and Reynard came back to take their order. As he was noting down their drinks, there was an angry yelp from the corner booth perpendicular to Nick and Judy's table. Nick looked over, surprised to find it occupied by Todd and Vixie. They had their homework spread out across the tabletop, their backpacks in a pile beneath. Todd was rubbing his muzzle with a sour face.

"So what if you're better at math," Vixie was saying with a sniff. "I can still take you."

Todd snapped his teeth at her; Vixie flashed her claws.

"Hey!" snapped Reynard. "Knock it off or that's the last basket of fried crickets you're getting tonight."

"Oh! Officer Wilde!" Catching sight of Nick, Vixie beamed and waved at him. Judy muffled a laugh behind her paw. Nick shot her a warning look and gave a grudging wave back.

Todd rolled his eyes and reached for a textbook, bumping into his drinking glass in the process and sloshing water over Vixie's textbook. Vixie let out a furious howl, snatching up a napkin to blot the soggy pages. "You did that on purpose!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"That's it," said Reynard, storming over to them. Several minutes of furious whispering later, the kits were chastised back into silence. But Nick noticed there was still some covert kicking under the table once the older fox had gone.

"So how was your time on the farm?" he asked Judy. "Was picking vegetables everything you
remembered it to be?"

Judy wrinkled her nose at him. "It was nice. Seeing my family, anyway. The manual labor less so. But it's great for staying in shape at least."

She did look good. Healthy, rested, refreshed, with firm curves that had become just a little bit curvier from all that hard work and homemade country food. Nick wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms and make note of every new dip and swell. Did she have any new callouses? Had her kick gotten stronger? Was her belly still as soft and squishable as he remembered?

Nick mentally jerked away from the thought. Reaching for his drink glass, he gulped the water down. Now that Judy was back, there had to be some guidelines in place. Important rules so they didn't confuse things. And rule number one was paramount: he had to keep his paws to himself.

Judy was still speaking to him. Nick struggled to follow along.

"Mom and Dad say hello, by the way. They promised they would send along a care package just as soon as they finished up harvesting."

"Care package. Does that mean food?" asked Nick. "In that case, I can't wait."

Reynard came by with a small plate of appetizers and refilled Nick's glass. When he had gone, Judy asked, "So how has work been? Anything crazy happen while I was away?"

"You have no idea. I just can't get the job done without you, Hopps," said Nick, and preceded to tell her, in the most beleaguered tone he could, how hard, unfair, or boring his days at work had been without her. "And here I am confiding all my troubles to you and you're laughing about it," said Nick, making sure to put a whine into the words.

"I'm not," insisted Judy. "It's just..." she shrugged, nibbling on a carrot stick. "It's just nice to feel missed. That's all."

"Of course you were missed, Carrots," thought Nick. How could you doubt it? But he knew perfectly well how, and so he kept his trap shut.

Marian came out to deliver their meals personally. She looked tired and stressed from working all evening in a hot kitchen and yet somehow blissfully happy about it too. The sleeves of her dress were carefully tucked and the strings on her apron tied together around her waist in a pretty bow. She was all smiles and sparkling eyes when she greeted Nick and Judy, proclaiming their meal on the house.

"Oh, but we couldn't," said Judy, but the female fox waved away her protests. "I wouldn't even be here to have a restaurant if not for you two. Business is great and it is all thanks to you."

"It probably also has to do with how delicious this food is," said Nick through a mouthful of crayfish, and Marian's smile turned even more dazzling.

"How is Robin doing?" asked Judy.

"Very well," said Marian. "He comes and helps clean up most nights when he's not busy with work."

"You close at one a.m., don't you? Strange hours for a philanthropist," said Nick, then winced when Judy kicked him under the table.
"He's very accommodating to his clients," was all Marian said, as if that explained everything. "But I better get back to the kitchen. They'll need help keeping up with so many orders. It was nice seeing you again, Nick. Judy. Stop by any time, okay?"

Only when she had gone did Nick rub his shin. "You kicked me," he accused his partner.

Judy popped an apricot from her fruit salad into her mouth and jabbed her fork at him. "You're still doing that thing."

"What thing?"

"That thing you do whenever Robin's job comes up. Why? You don't get like this over Mr. Big's business."

"That's because I know what the shrew is up to."

"So you're saying it's the mystery that bugs you, more than the job itself?"

"Don't judge me for the way I'm wired, Hopps."

Judy shook her head, exasperated, and went back to her salad, only to pop back up a second later, saying, "Oh! I just remembered. I was talking to Clawhauser earlier. He said he got a deal on tickets for Gazelle's new concert and he has two extra, if we want them."

The butter on Nick's crayfish suddenly tasted sour. "Concert?"

Judy nodded, fighting to spear a crouton. "The seats are supposed to be really good."

Nick had to stop himself from reaching for his water again. Truth was, he had already heard about the concert, and he knew how much Judy would want to go. He'd even debated about buying tickets for her himself, perhaps as a bribe or a peace offering to make her come back.

But then he'd thought of how happy she'd be, and how much it would mean to her, and the possible inferences she might be tempted to draw from the offer, and in the end it had seemed too risky, as well as possibly cruel. Or maybe he was just that big of a coward.

But now the offer was out there anyway, and Nick had no choice but to address it. So he made himself say as gently as he could, "I don't think that would be a good idea, Carrots."

Judy's gaze flicked up, surprised, and the happy glow she had been wreathed in all evening began to fade as she realized what he was saying. "Oh."

Curse that fluffy cheetah. Nick was going to make him pay for putting him in this position.

"It's just..." Nick forced a grin. "Those concerts are always so loud. At least one of us has got to keep their hearing. Otherwise how will we will know when we've got criminals sneaking up on us?"

"You're right," said Judy, gamely playing along. She even worked up a weak laugh. "It looks like I was in the country too long after all. I didn't even think about that."

But despite the reassuring smiles they gave each other, the mood was subdued after that. Conversation grew shallow and stilted. Nick struggled to come up with a way to repair the evening, but even humoring Vixie's extended visit to their table to officially invite them to her birthday party that weekend did little to disperse the tension.
When they had finished their meal, Reynard brought them each a small carry out box of dessert, another thank you from Marian, and neither he nor Craven would hear of letting them pay when Judy tried again to suggest it.

Outside, the streets were noticeably emptier, the line of waiting patrons from before long gone. The twinkly lights felt weaker under the weight of full night, and the breeze from earlier had vanished. The air was still and cold.

Nick and Judy walked to the end of the block in silence. When Judy stopped for the crosswalk, Nick waited there with her. She had yet to look at him directly since leaving the restaurant, and Nick used the time to regard her profile, and the clouded, downturned expression he had put there.

"I don't know if I told you yet," said Nick. "How glad I am that you're back, Hopps."

Judy glanced over at him, and it hurt, the way she searched his face, as if trying to gauge his sincerity. Her smile when it finally came was a tiny thing.

The crosswalk light turned green.

"See you tomorrow, Nick," she said.

Nick watched his partner go, her little dessert box tucked in the crook of her arm, and told himself as he turned away and continued on down the block with his own dessert box swinging from his paw that the first few times together were bound to be rough. For both of them. The important thing was to not give up. As long as they didn't do that, eventually, things had to get better between them.

Conning yourself, Nick thought, was a lot easier when you weren't aware you were doing it.
Chapter 2

Judy was already doing paperwork at her desk when Nick arrived the following morning.

For a moment he lingered in the doorway to watch her. She was bent low over a scattering of papers, scribbling furiously with that ridiculous carrot pen of hers. Every so often she'd reach over and punch something into the computer. Her ears were up and pointed forward, and she had that pinched, determined expression she always got whenever she was deeply focused on something. Honestly, the process of filling out forms had never looked so adorable.

Nick waved to catch her attention and let her know he had arrived. She did a double take at the sight of him and sent a harried wave back before returning to her work. Nice to see her little vacation hadn't dampened her workaholic tendencies.

Nick went to hunt down some coffee in the break room.

There were two other officers there. Officer Howle, who was leaning against the counter nursing his own mug of coffee, and Officer Delgato, who was at one of the break tables reading a newspaper, his great mane perfectly brushed and fluffed as always.

Nick used the lower cabinet handles to pull himself up onto the counter. Though the ZPD had made a half-hearted effort to follow the Mammal Inclusion Initiative, that effort did not, sadly, include compensating for height differences when it came to most of the furniture, technology, or appliances.

"You all right there, Wilde?" asked Howle.

"Why wouldn't I be?" asked Nick. "I get to work out for my morning caffeine. I consider it a perk, really."

"Hopefully next year we'll have it in the budget to do some remodeling."

Nick grabbed a coffee mug from the clean dish rack by the sink and joined the wolf by the burbling coffee machine. "Not if Chief Bogo finds more of those anonymous complaints about smaller furniture being a 'hazard' in the ZPD suggestion box again."

"That wasn't why the chief put it off," said Howle. "We just happened to have a lot of unplanned purchases last year."

"Yes. Suddenly everyone and their mother needed new computers, desk replacements, cruiser repairs—"

"It wasn't everyone."

_But enough_, thought Nick, watching the dark liquid trickle down into the coffee pot.

The wolf shook his head. "Still, I am shocked someone left letters like that. It was uncalled for."

"I'm more surprised by the suggestion box itself," said Nick. "Bogo never struck me as the type to welcome opinions."

"It's policy, actually. That's why it's nailed to the wall now. The chief had a habit of throwing it when it was on his desk."
"That I have no trouble believing."

As Nick waited for the coffee pot to finish filling, he noticed a box of doughnuts that had been pushed to the back of the counter. On the lid was taped a note on a scrap piece of yellow copier paper. It read: UNLESS YOU ARE GAZELLE, DO NOT TOUCH!

Nick flipped up the lid. Inside were five doughnuts. Three glazed and two with whipped filling.

"I think Clawhauser was saving those for his mid-morning break," said Howle.

"Perfect," said Nick. He crossed the counter to the fridge. "Mind getting the door for me?"

The wolf obliged. From the table, Delgato made an angry chuffing noise.

"Something wrong?" asked Howle.

"This wedding announcement." The lion wrinkled his muzzle. "Join us in congratulating Agatha the antelope and Perry the zebra on their upcoming nuptials. As if anyone wants to celebrate such an unnatural union. Freaks."

"Watch it, Delgato," said Howle with a glance at Nick, who was studiously searching the condiment shelf. "We are officers of the ZPD. We are supposed to be unbiased protectors."

"Everyone is biased," said the lion. "It's who you're biased in favor of that shows what kind of mammal you are."

"I think everyone in the precinct is aware of what kind of mammal you are," said Howle.

The lion officer growled low in his throat and stood. "Careful, wolf. Or you might find your own name in the suggestion box one day." He crumpled up the paper and stalked out.

"Do we have any of that spicy mustard left from the ZPD cookout?" Nick asked Howle. "Ah, never mind. Here it is." He pulled the bottle out and returned to the doughnuts. The wolf let the fridge door swing shut.

"I apologize for Delgato," said Howle.

Nick stuck the mustard nozzle into the opening of one of the filled doughnuts and gave it a good squeeze. "Though I agree that someone should apologize for that stuffy cat, I can't say I understand why you feel the need to direct that apology towards me."

"Because I know that you and Hopps are—"

"Judy and I are partners and friends. Nothing less than that, and certainly nothing more."

Howle contemplated him over the rim of his mug. "In that case, I guess I should apologize for misunderstanding then."

"That apology I will accept. Put this away for me, will you?"

Howle returned the mustard to the fridge while Nick inspected his work. He wiped off a bit of yellow that was visible in the whipped filling then shut the box lid. The coffee pot chimed.

"Finally."
Retrieving his mug, Nick set about pouring his own cup of coffee. The pot was nearly as big as he was, and he had to angle it just right against the lip of the mug so he could pour without sending scalding coffee all over the counter and on his feet. But he managed, as always.

Officer Howle drained the last of his own drink and set the empty mug in the sink.

"You know..." Nick said. "I would greatly appreciate it... if you know of anyone else who might have a misunderstanding like yours..."

Howle rinsed his mug. "I'll clean out some ears," he promised.

"Thank you."

"Wilde..." started Howle. But Nick never found out what the end of that sentence was, because right then there erupted a furious wailing from the front of the precinct.

"Looks like we got a tear-jerker," said the wolf.

"Oh, no," said Nick. Abandoning his mug, he catapulted himself off the counter and raced toward the sound. "No no no no no no—"

Down the hall, he could hear a female's tear-filled holler, "My precious baby!"

He ran faster.

He rounded the corner. Half a dozen officers had amassed a safe distance away from the front desk, where an older badger in a floral dress stood wailing with two younger ones by her side. She held one by the arm in a death grip, resisting her struggles to pull free, while the other hovered over them. The younger badgers, at least, looked painfully aware of the scene they were causing. Their heads were ducked low, determinedly avoiding eye-contact with everyone but each other.

"Mother, please calm down," said one. "Animals are staring."

Clawhauser was also there, leaning over the counter as he struggled to get the mother badger's attention. But she didn't seem to be shouting at anyone specifically so much as announcing her upset to the room at large and expecting the officers to scatter and do her bidding. Well she had successfully managed to make them do the first part, thought Nick as he struggle to get through the sea of legs blocking him from the counter. No one wanted to get near the hysterical badger. No one that was, except...

"It's all going to be okay, ma'am."

Nick tripped over someone's toe and had to grabbed another officer's pant leg for balance. He cursed; he was too late. Judy was already there, holding up a tissue she had swiped off of Officer Francine's, if the size of the tissue was any indication. The badger buried her whole face in it and sobbed, her one paw still clinging to the captive daughter.

"It's all right now," said Judy, her ears folded back in sympathy. With a gentle paw on the badger's elbow, she began to lead the trio to the officer's work room. "We at the ZPD are here to help."

Someone to Nick's right made a sound of relief. He glared up at the surrounding officers. "Really, guys? You were all here first, but you left the crier for Hopps to handle. Again. Aren't you embarrassed of yourselves?"

"The weepy ones give me a headache," said Officer Furzolli.
"The newest recruits always get the more troublesome cases," said Officer Snarloff. "It's like a right of passage, or paying your dues, or something."

"Besides," said Officer McHorn. "Hopps likes taking the cases. She's good with them."

"Talk about your cop-outs," said Nick.

The officers just looked at him, unrepentant.

Resigned, Nick followed after Judy. She had made it to her desk, the badgers seated around her. Judy was offering words of comfort while pulling out the needed paperwork. She glanced over at Nick when he stepped up next to her and relaxed a fraction, no doubt relieved to have backup. The mother had moved on from angry crying to just angry now. She still held her one daughter by the arm. She yanked on her then, howling, "Someone did this to my baby and I want them hunted down now!"

Judy and Nick looked at the younger badger. She shrunk from their gazes, saying in a tremulous voice, "It's nothing. You're making too big a deal of this."

"It is not nothing," snapped her mother, and Nick had to agree. The badger had definitely gone through something. The dark fur hid it well, but there was swelling around her eye, and deep scratch marks down the side of her neck, disappearing under the collar of her blouse. She was also holding her free arm close to her side, as if either her arm or ribs were hurting her.

"What's your name?" Judy asked.

She ducked her head. "Clare."

"Were you attacked by someone, Clare?" Judy asked gently. "You can tell us. We just want to help."

"I-I wasn't." She squirmed in her mother's hold. "It was my own fault. A stupid thing not even worth getting into. It's nothing," she said again.

"She's lying. It's the secret mate of hers," said her mother. "The one she's so determined to hide from us."

"I told you before," Clare said. "There's no one."

"You think I haven't noticed you sneaking out at night? Giggling on the phone? Cancelling plans with your family? You're dating some bully, aren't you? And now you're covering for them. I didn't raise you to be this foolish."

"That's not it!" Tears pooled in Clare's swollen eye. She fought more furiously to free herself from her mother. "It was just a dumb accident."

"Then why won't you tell me what happened? Why didn't you come home? I had to send Tamora out to find you like you were still some rebelling teenager." The mother gestured to the other girl, who caught Nick's eye and grimaced. "Your sister had to cut classes for you, you know. You're father missed work. I was worried sick—" The mother rounded on Nick and Judy. "We want to press charges."

"Mother, stop it!"

"You make that no-good mate pay for what they did to you!"
"I'm not pressing charges on anybody!"

"Maybe we should let Clare handle it her way," suggested Tamora quietly.

"That would be the same as letting them off," cried the mother. "You know how sweet she is. That someone hurt one of my babies like this—I won't stand for it!"

With a violent jerk, Clare finally freed her arm. She leapt up before her mother could reattached herself, fur puffed and breathing hard. With a terrified look at Nick and Judy, she took off out of the room.

Tamara stood up as well. Murmuring a quiet apology, she followed her sister out. The mother, who had draped the tissue over her knees like a lap blanket, buried her face in it as she burst into tears again.

"I just don't know what to do with her!"

"Has Clare every come home hurt before?" asked Judy.

The badger mother shook her head. "Never."

Judy shared a look with Nick. "It would be hard to punish whoever did this to your daughter if she won't say who it was or agree to press charges."

"Can't I press charges? I'm her mother. She's my daughter. Someone did this to my baby."

"I'll see what we can do," said Judy. "But if I may offer a suggestion for you while we look into things? What Clare needs now more than anything is the support and understanding of her family."

"Of course. We protect our own," said the mother. "I'll lock her up if I have to. Whatever will keep her safe."

"While I understand why you feel that way," said Judy carefully, "that kind of action, even if well-intentioned, might have the opposite effect of pushing your daughter further away from you. The last thing you want is to make her feel more isolated, or pressured to run back to whoever did this to her, if you're right and it is someone she's seeing. Clare needs to know her family is there for her, without judgement. That it's a safe place she can turn to when she's ready."

"You're saying you want me to let Clare go back to the beast who did this to her?" demanded the mother.

"I'm saying she needs to know she has choices."

The badger mother stood, drawing herself up. "You find who did this to my baby. Leave the parenting to the me."

She stormed out.

"That could have gone better," said Judy.

"Could've gone worse, too," said Nick. "I think you handled it well, considering."

"Do you think Clare is really being abused?"

"Couldn't say. But I do know those scratch marks were not self-inflicted. The angle of the scratches and claw size were all wrong." Nick looked at Judy, taking in her adorable pink nose and wide
purple eyes. "The advice you gave that mother… you weren't speaking from personal experience, were you, Carrots?"

"Me?" said Judy with an incredulous laugh, but stopped when she realized he was serious. "No, Nick. I wasn't."

Nick made himself breathe. "That's fine then."

He reached out to tweak her ear, then caught himself and pointed at her nose instead, making her cross-eyed. "Only one of us is allowed to have a sketchy past in this partnership, Hopps. Remember that."

She gave him the derisive look that statement deserved and batted his paw away. Even that tiny touch sent a jolt through Nick's system, and he took a step back, just to be safe.

The work room door opened and Clawhauser poked his head in. "I just saw that badger lady leave. Did everything go okay?"

"Ask me again when I actually help them," said Judy with a sigh.

"Oh, I know you'll come through," said Clawhauser. "You two always do. And in the meantime, I have a present for you."

That made both Nick and Judy perk up. "Present?"

He pulled something from his pocket and held them up. "Ta-da!"

Nick's stomach dropped.

"That's right! I brought you the tickets for Gazelle's concert! You're totally surprised, right? Does this not make your day or what!"

"Ah," said Judy weakly. "That's…"

"I know. It's so great," said Clawhauser. "And only two weeks left! Gah, it's going to be the best!"

"Actually," said Judy with a frantic look at Nick. "We don't… anymore, I mean…"

"What's wrong?" asked Clawhauser. "Are the seats not good enough?"

"No! That is… we decided not to go," said Judy, her voice growing smaller by the word. "So we don't need them anymore. Sorry, Clawhauser."

The cheetah looked from the droopy-eared bunny to the stone-faced fox and back again. "You're not going?"

Judy nodded miserably. Nick wanted to burrow right into the floor—and drag Clawhauser down with him. The cheetah stared at them, comprehending.

Then he burst into laughter.

"Ha! Good one. You almost got me there for a minute. Not going, pfft. As if anyone would turn down a chance to see Gazelle in concert."

He slapped the tickets into Judy's unresisting paws. Purple and gold, they looked gaudy next to the sedate blue tones of her uniform.
"But, wait," said Judy, "that's—"

"Oh, don't worry about paying me," said Clawhauser. "I'll just call in a you-owe-me later, 'kay? Oooh, it's going to be so fun!" And with a happy wave, he left the room, still giggling about what a funny bunny she was.

Nick felt Judy's gaze land on him, light and dangerous as a bee, then flit away. "So."

She looked down at the tickets in her paws. One corner of her mouth ticked up. "Know any good scalpers?"

Bless this bunny. Nick made himself face her. If she could smile through it than so could he. "Actually, I know three."

She nodded and opened a drawer in her desk. "Then I guess I'll just leave them in here for now." She dropped the tickets in. Nick wondered what she would really do with them. Nothing illegal like scalping, obviously that had been a joke. Maybe she would give them to a friend?

Or she could take someone else.

Just because Nick had said no didn't mean Judy couldn't find somebody to replace him. He could think of three bunnies just off the top of his head who would be more than happy to go with her, and one of them was a produce billionaire.

"I guess I should get back to work," said Judy. "I still have a lot of paperwork I need to catch up on."

"Ah. Right," said Nick. "I'll just… make myself useful somewhere else then until you're finished."

Judy smiled at him, bright and brief as a camera flash, and turned to the mess of papers she has shoved aside to make space for the badgers.

Nick saw himself out. He looked back only once. His partner was already back in the zone, ears perked, brow furrowed. Nick envied her the easy distraction.

Those tickets might never exchange hands. They might stay in that drawer until long after the concert was over. Until they were forgotten and dug up only when Judy received a long-overdue promotion or a new desk and she was cleaning things out. But there would be other tickets that she would get that she would share with someone else. Nick knew it, and knew he was going to have to prepare himself for that eventuality, sooner or later.

But not now, he thought. Please. Just not this time.

Laughter erupted from the break room, Officer Tibor's manic giggling among them. Nick heard someone say, "Bad doughnut, Clawhauser?" followed by offended coughing.

Nick pulled out his phone and made his way down the hall, clicking on the camera app as he went.

Time to hunt down his own distraction.
Chapter 3

It was still dark out when Judy's alarm went off the next morning. She rolled over and popped the snooze button, but the sound continued, cheerful and unabated.

She squinted over at the clock and saw that it was only 4:02am. It wasn't the alarm that was chirping; it was her phone.

The sound faded out.

And started up again as the animal immediately called back.

Calls at this time never boded well. Calls that came twice boded worse.

Judy scooped her phone off the nightstand and answered.

She'd been right. It wasn't good news.

Twenty minutes later, Judy was making her way down the empty streets to the waterway. Tall buildings blocked the worst of the wind but there was a damp cold to the place that didn't need a breeze in order to chill the fur. Judy was glad she had decided to wear her heavier coat over her t-shirt and jeans. She hadn't bothered wasting time with her uniform.

Her destination, Riverside Apartments, was situated on one of the lower end tributaries that ran through the Rainforest District and Downtown Zootopia. The complex catered to semi-aquatic marine mammals, mostly those whose roots were central to the equator. The architectural style reminded Judy of a log cabin that had been stacked too high. There were twelve floors in all, with the back half of the building dipping right into the water, giving direct river access to its residents. Still, it's height was relative. It was only tall to the smaller animals for which it had been designed. Buildings for larger animals that had half as many floors loomed over it on three sides, leaving Judy to wonder if the sun ever touched the building directly. Across the way was a gym that boasted awards in walrus wrestling. Beside it was a laundry mat that specialized in cleaning saltwater out of clothes. That explained the dank smell of the street, like dirty towels that had been kept wet for too long.

There were two police cruisers and an ambulance when she arrived. The street was too narrow to accommodate all three vehicles. Instead, the ambulance had been backed in as close as could be managed with the two cruisers parked perpendicular as makeshift roadblocks. A small group of onlookers had gathered, mostly nocturnal animals or those who looked to have been woken by the sirens, judging from their bleary eyes and sleepwear.

Two officers were working crowd control. Officers Francine and McHorn stood like stoic sentries at the building's entrance, dwarfing the front glass doors.

"How bad is it?" Judy asked them.

"Don't know," said McHorn. "The building is too small for any of our guys to get up there and look. Chief Bogo called in Officer Margay from the Rainforest District. She went up with the EMT's a little while ago. No one has come out yet."

"Is Nick here?"

Francine pointed with her trunk to the side of the building where a dock wrapped around to the
back entrance. "Went that way. Said he wanted to get a view of it before heading up."

Judy followed the ramp around. The wooden boards were cool and creaked under her feet, the water subdued as it lapped against the pilings. It had a metallic smell that tickled Judy's nose. This was not a place where she would ever want to go swimming.

She found Nick leaning against the railing, head tipped back as he contemplated the building. His expression was solemn in a way she rarely saw, his features as smooth as the water below them. He too looked like he had gotten dressed in a hurry, his fur still ruffled from sleep. The sight of him disheveled and somber gave Judy a pang just right of her heart and she looked away, following his gaze up.

It wasn't hard to find what held his attention. Four floors up there was a jagged hole in the side of the building, like an elephant had taken their fist and bashed through one of the windows, spilling light out over the water where it floated in broken glimmers like shards of glass.

Judy joined Nick at the railing. "You sure got here fast."

"I know the shortcuts," said Nick. He turned those serious eyes her way and Judy could feel the weight of his concern, and his distaste for what they were about to see. "Ready, Hopps?"

_Hopps_. It was Hopps now. Not Judy. Not even Carrots—and who knew she would miss _that_ nickname so much? For the hundredth time Judy regretted confessing her feelings to Nick. Not because he had rejected her—though the memory of it still hurt like a sucker punch—but because ever since then it felt like Nick was in a constant state of retreat. She had returned after a month of trying to get her head together and found that while she had been gone Nick had redrawn the boundaries of their relationship, and every attempt she made to close that distance only caused him to withdraw further.

Judy wanted to tell him that he didn't need to go so far. That she just wanted to go back to the way things used to be. But that choice was apparently off the table. It was frustrating, and lonely, and oh, did it hurt. But then she'd think of Nick and how he must be feeling. Having that kind of confession sprung on him when he didn't feel the same way. Many friendships would have been ruined by something like that. But Nick had waited for her, still wanted to be partners with her, and was making an effort to maintain their relationship despite his clear discomfort. Judy was just so grateful, she could do nothing but follow along and hope that this rift between them would heal itself in time. If she was understanding and patient enough…

"Hopps? You okay?"

Judy swallowed the lump in her throat and nodded. They _would_ make it through this. They _would_.

They headed inside. The lobby felt unnaturally bright after the long walk over in the dark. Someone had decided to liven up the log cabin feel of the place by decorating with seashells, of all things. They filled the glass bowls along the counter and were set out as coasters on the low table between the chairs in the lounge area. A giant clam shell hung from the wall, big enough that Judy could have slept in it. All the shells had been bleached to within an inch of their lives and cast painful glares under the fluorescent lights.

There weren't any elevators. Nick found the stairs by following the worst of the water stain trails on the wood floor. They climbed to the fourth floor landing. In the distance, Judy could hear the sound of murmuring, but the hallway was deserted. Doors up and down the hall had been flung open and left standing wide with no one within, the tenants having gone to investigate or flee.
Judy led the way down the narrow hall, following the voices. It didn't take long to find them. Rounding the corner to the westside hallway Nick and Judy abruptly found themselves at the back of a messy queue. It looked like every tenant remaining in the building had congregated here. There was a large family of Galapagos penguins, and even larger family of marsh rabbits, a young seal couple, some water rats, even a platypus.

"Guess we found the place," said Nick.

"Excuse us!" said Judy. "Police officers coming through."

That earned them a few startled glances, which turned doubtful when the animals looked around and saw a sloppily dressed fox and a bunny standing there.

Nick pulled out his badge and did that thing with his one eyebrow that Judy could never manage no matter how much she practiced it. At that, the animals grudgingly shuffled over. They made their way through the crowd like that, with Judy calling out apologies as she shoved and elbowed her way forward and Nick keeping to her back, flashing his badge as needed.

Finally they made it to the front of the crowd where crime scene tape kept the onlookers from breaching the victim's apartment. Only two animals stood on the other side of the line: A sour-faced beaver in a housecoat and a quietly weeping capybara clutching a shock blanket. The beaver shot them a look, but the capybara didn't seem to realize they were there. Judy wasn't convinced he even knew he was crying.

They entered the apartment. It reminded Judy of her first place. Small, dingy, and almost sentient in it's refusal to brighten no matter the effort put into decorating. In this case, plants had been added to the darker corners of the room where the poor lightning couldn't quite reach. But instead of making the apartment look more lively, it instead gave the appearance of urban decay, as if the room were slowly being broken down and taken back by nature. The edges of the kitchen counter were cracked and peeling and the walls were long overdue for a paint job, but the vines and flowers were flourishing in their pots, entwining around cabinet handles and standing out brighter than the battered books on the bookcase. There were more plants than furniture. A single bed stretched out from the south wall, opposite a small table and chair set. And directly across from the entrance lay an overturned couch that had probably rested against the far wall before whoever had come and bashed that hole in it. Water was everywhere. It looked like someone had taken cups of it and splashed it over everything. Judy spotted Officer Margay hopping around the puddles, being sure to keep her tail up as she took pictures and collected evidence from the scene. The spotted cat was the smallest officer the ZPD had besides Nick and Judy, and she still looked cramped as she prowled around, taking pictures of the crime scene and any possible evidence.

That only left the middle of the room.

Judy took a breath to steel herself, then made herself look to where a trio of EMT's knelt near the foot of the bed. On the floor lay a mongoose. He was dressed for sleep but his eyes were open and staring. There was no blood or visible wounds, nothing besides the sharp V-shaped bend in his spine, as if someone had bent him backwards like a toothpick until he snapped, then tossed him aside. Judy had seen gorier crime scenes, but the cleanliness of the kill made it more disturbing somehow.

Finished with her pictures, Officer Margay gave the EMT's the all clear to collect the body, then came to join Nick and Judy at the door.

"It's terrible, isn't it?" she said to them. "Zootopia is supposed to be one of the most peaceful cities in the world, and still we get this."
"What happened?" asked Nick.

The jungle cat pushed her glasses further up her nose and gestured to the hall. "The capybara out there, Tomás, called about an hour ago. He and half the animals here heard what sounded like an elephant busting through the building. Apparently the intruder got in by ripping the window right out of the wall. Tomás says he heard Mr. Rick Tavi shout, and when he came in Mr. Tavi was dead and whoever did it was jumping into the water."

"Did Tomás get a look at who it was?"

Margay shook her head. "Said they were wearing some kind of black raincoat with the hood up and had their back to him. But maybe something will come back to him later. He's pretty shook up right now."

Nick nodded to the animal next to him. "And the beaver?"

"Betty Flatalie. Apartment manager. She's a fun one for sure."

"Fun as in…"

"Not fun at all," said the cat officer.

"Anything missing?"

Margay shook her head. "Not the usual stuff at least. None of the electronics were taken—which, considering how they got in, isn't too surprising. But there's a safe in the closet that doesn't look touched and Mr. Tavi's wallet was still on the nightstand, money and cards intact." She looked between them. "I did find something though, in Mr. Tavi's tie drawer, that might have something to do with this." She held out an evidence baggy. Inside were letters written in red ink. She passed them to Nick and Judy.

_You're a filthy animal_, read one. _You know what you're doing._ And, _You'll pay for it if you don't stop_. There were about seven letters in all, each one more hateful and threatening than the last.

"Any hints as to what these letters were referring to?" asked Judy.

"None that I found so far. And the letters themselves are pretty vague. No real clues there besides the obvious. That _someone_ was obviously unhappy with him."

The paramedics had finished loading the body onto the stretcher. They covered it with a sheet and stood. "Ready to go when you are ma'am," a gopher said to Margay.

"Of course. I'll be right back," she told Nick and Judy. "I'm just going to walk them out. That crowd out there isn't messing around."

She led the EMT's out. When they had gone, Nick and Judy made their way over to the hole in the wall.

"Did you noticed outside how all the windows had bars on them?" asked Nick. "Whoever did this ripped out the entire iron frame. Even if we're dealing with a larger animal, that would take some strength."

"And they knew which room to aim for," said Judy.

Nick leaned over the hole and looked down. "What's that down there? Those marks."
Judy pulled a penlight from her pocket and shined it down. "Claw marks."

Nick shivered. "It shouldn't be surprising since they came in this way, but still. The idea that they scaled this building in the dark with just their claws is an unnerving image."

"The digs look pretty deep," said Judy. "Definitely a predator. And of decent size and strength."

"Confident too. They must have known breaking in through the window would send up the alarm, but they did it anyway, knowing they could get in and out faster than anyone could catch them."

"Tomás caught them," pointed out Judy.

"A back is hardly going to help us," said Nick. "Are we going to line suspects up then tell them to turn around?"

Judy looked out over the black water. On the opposite shore, the dark forms of factories lined the bank, some still puffing smoke even at this hour. The odds of anyone having seen anything were slim, which was probably why the assailant had chosen it. Still, she called Clawhauser and asked him to send some officers to do a sweep of the area. Maybe the criminal was still hiding out somewhere over there.

She turned to take in the room again. The space was poor but tidy. Mr. Tavi was clearly someone who had been trying to make the best with what he had. He hardly seemed the type to warrant threatening letters. When she said as much to Nick, his only response was, "Desperation can make criminals of anyone."

Margay returned. Judy gestured to the family photos on the wall. There weren't many, and none of them looked recent. She asked, "Have you started the background check on Mr. Tavi yet?"

"Already sent the request in," said Margay. "But from the quick glance I took at his phone, there's no ICE number saved to his contacts. So I doubt we'll find any help on that front."

Nick and Judy looked at each other. By silent agreement, they returned to the hall. Margay had cleared it out for the most part. The throng of animals was gone. Instead, tenants lingered in their doorways, either too wary for bed or dogged in their hope of witnessing something satisfyingly juicy that they could gossip about later.

The capybara had sunk into a crouch but rose to his feet at the sight of the officers. He wasn't crying anymore but his fur was still marked with tear stains. The beaver stood beside him, her posture stiff and her arms folded across her chest defensively.

"Betty. Tomás," greeted Judy. "I'm Officer Hopps. This is my partner, Officer Wilde. Would you mind if we asked you a few questions about what happened tonight?"

"No need," said Betty. "I'll tell you everything I know, which is nothing. My room is on the basement level and I was asleep. I didn't feel so much as a shiver in the building. Not until Tomás here came banging on my door, wailing about a murder."

"Did you know Mr. Tavi at all?"

"An ungrateful tenant. Always giving me lip about this and that needing fixin'. Nothing is ever good enough for him," Her brow pinched. "Was good enough."

"What did he want fixed?" asked Judy.
"The usual kind of things for an old building like this. Some water damage, mold spots, nothing so pressing that he needed to keep haranguing me about it. I'm on a fixed income too, you know. It's not easy taking care of over a hundred whiny tenants who all think *their* plumbing problems should be seen to first. What do I care about water pressure? You want that, you can take an extra deep dive in the river I say."

"So he was a picky tenant," said Nick. "Did he have a temper?"

"Rick? No. You ever hear the phrase, *disgustingly polite*? If I had a nickel for all his pleases and thank you's, I might've managed to get this building back in decent shape."

"So he never threatened you at all?"

"Of course not."

"It's a little strange, isn't it?" said Nick. "For a mongoose to be living in a predominately aquatic mammal complex?"

"I don't ask why they choose to live here," said the beaver. "Only that they pay their rent on time. And Mr. Tavi did."

"Tomás?" asked Judy. "Can you tell us about what happened tonight?"

The capybara's face twisted. He hugged the blanket tighter around him. "I heard it. The whole wall shook and it sounded like the building was coming apart. I ran out into the hallway, thinking we needed to evacuate, and that was when I heard Rick—" A sob broke free, but he caught himself. After a couple deep breaths, he continued. "I heard Rick yell. I pounded on his door, but he didn't answer. I was scared, so I ran in—"

"His door was unlocked?" said Nick. "In the middle of the night?"

"No, I—I had a spare key. Rick travels a lot for work, you see. So he asked me to water his plants for him while he was away."

"You are not authorized to have that key," snapped Betty. To Nick and Judy she said, "I have a strict rule about keys here. Only myself and the tenants should have one. No copies. No exceptions. Otherwise every time someone moves out I have to pay for a whole new lock, for *safety reasons*." She sneered the words.

"Well I am a tenant, s-so technically—"

Betty slapped her tail down against the floor, the resounding smack making them all flinch. "You will return that key to me immediately," she told him. "It's not like you'll need it anymore anyways."

The capybara blanched. He pulled out a small brass key from his pocket and held it out. Before the beaver could take it, Nick plucked it from Tomás's paw, saying, "Actually, I think I'll take that as evidence."

"But they didn't even break in that way!" said Betty.

Nick tsked and popped the key into an evidence baggy. "The whole apartment's a crime scene. We can't take the risk of someone stealing a key and sneaking in to muck things up. We have to keep the place secure. That means you too," he told her. "I'll need your key as well."
When she only stared at him, he made a chop-chop motion with his paws. "If you don't mind fetching it now? Please and thank you!"

Giving an angry chitter, the beaver turned on her heal and stormed off. Nick watched her go with a smile. "Little Margie was right. She is fun."

Judy turned back to Tomás. "Go on, then," she told him gently. "You said you entered the apartment. Then what happened?"

He swallowed hard. "It was dark. I could feel this weird draft. I didn't know it was because of the wall. I turned on the light, and I saw that Rick was…"

"Did you see his attacker?" asked Judy, as much to know as to get him away from the worst part of the recollection.

Tomás shook his head. "They were already turning away. But they were huge. They could barely fit inside the room. And they were wearing this black rain slicker, soaking wet. They jumped—" The capybara took a shuddering breath. "That's all I saw. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," said Judy.

"You must have been close neighbors with Mr. Tavi," said Nick.

Tomás gave a wet, bitter laugh. "Close. I guess."

"Did you know he was being threatened?"

"What?"

Judy held out the bag of letters. Tomás's eyes darted as he read them. He sucked in a breath. "Where did you find these?"

"Among Mr. Tavi's things. You've never seen them before?"

"I—no. I had no idea."

"Did Mr. Tavi ever talk to you about anything like this? Maybe about someone he had been fighting with? Something that he might've been doing that might make someone mad?"

"Rick was nice to everyone. He didn't deserve this." Tomás wiped at his eyes. "He didn't deserve this at all."

Judy shared a look with Nick. "I think that's enough for one night."

"Finally," said Betty, reappearing next to Tomás and slapping a key into Nick's paw. "Can I go back to bed now? I have class in the morning and I would like to get at least a few hours of sleep."

"What are you going back to school for?" asked Nick. "A masters in log stacking?" He let out a loud laugh. Judy grimaced and shook her head. Betty scowled. Tomás didn't appear to hear.

"We'll call if we have any more questions," said Judy. She held out her card. "In case you want to get in touch with us."

Betty snatched it out of her paw and left. Judy held one out to the capybara.

"Tomás?"
Her voice seemed to startle him. He took the card and with a sniffle and a murmured, "Goodnight," disappeared into his apartment.

"He took our blanket," said Nick.

They spoke with a few other tenants, all of whom confirmed the sounds and witnessing Tomás fighting to get in with his key.

"He was very brave," said André, a seal who lived across from Mr. Tavi.

"Yes, much braver than us," agreed Celia, Andre's wife. "We didn't know what to do. But Tomás jumped right into action. It must have been all that training. I heard he used to be a volunteer fire mammal before he moved here."

"He's an idiot," said Mr. March, the eldest of the family of marsh rabbits that lived next to Tomás and the only one who would answer the door when Judy knocked. "The building could have been falling down around us and he was wasting time on an animal who was clearly done for already."

"You knew that for sure?" said Nick.

"The noises were all coming from his room. It's unfortunate, but at the point you gotta figure the odds aren't in his favor. All you can do is run for it and hope you're not next."

"Well I'm leaving," said Ovide, a platypus from down the hall. "This place was always a dump, but no one had ever been murdered here before. I'm going to stay with my parents until I can find a new place. Betty can charge whatever she wants for breaking the lease. I don't care."

By the time Nick and Judy left Riverside Apartments the sky had begun to lighten into real dawn. They stopped off for some much needed coffee, then continued on to the precinct.

"I wonder why Mr. Tavi never came to the ZPD if he was being threatened so badly," said Judy.

Nick shrugged and sipped his drink. "Maybe he's hiding something he doesn't want us to find. Hence the 'stop it or you'll pay' letters."

"But nothing in his apartment hinted at anything like that."

"We'll see what turns up. But the mongoose was murdered, Hopps. He was definitely doing something someone didn't like."

But that still begged the question: What?

The day dragged.

Howle stopped by around eleven to tell Nick and Judy that they had finished searching the factory sector, but found no suspects or witnesses. The only thing of note was a puddle near the steps of one of the water expressways. But there was no way to know if it was from the suspect or just some marine mammal passing by.

Rick Tavi's records and background check came in at one. It showed no priors or anything outstanding. It turned out that the mongoose used to be a successful sales mammal before a string of bad luck knocked him down. He had been sales mammal of the year at Gerbils, a high-end clothing store that rivaled Mousey's until it went under for tax evasion. The press had had a field day with the news, and even though Mr. Tavi hadn't been part of the illegal dealings, he'd had
trouble finding work after that. Eventually, he'd joined *Billy Goat's Baubles*, one of those pyramid scheme shopping companies. And his skills must have won out, because he had been steadily climbing the ranks when he died. His annual income wouldn't have bought him a penthouse, but it certainly could have gotten him out of Riverside Apartments, if he had been so inclined.

Margay called at three to tell them she had gotten in contact with one of Mr. Tavi's distant cousins. "And I do mean distant," said the cat. "He doesn't even live in Zootopia, and claims not to have been in contact with Mr. Tavi in over ten years, ever since his uncle's—Mr. Tavi's father's—funeral. He says he has no idea what Mr. Tavi's been up to or why someone might want to murder him."

"Thank you for looking, Margay," said Judy.

"No problem. And you turned those letters into forensics too right? Maybe they'll find something. My claws are crossed for you."

That was it for the rest of the day. When evening rolled around, Nick and Judy called it quits.

Instead of parting ways at the intersection like they normally did, Nick followed Judy across when the crossing sign turned green. Judy didn't comment on it and neither did Nick. It was something Nick always did whenever they had a case like this. Judy wasn't sure who he trying to reassure by walking her home, maybe both of them, but Judy was glad that this wasn't one of the things he was drawing a line through unlike so many of their interactions of late.

He walked with her all the way up to her door in silence. Here, Judy hesitated. Normally this was the point when she would invite him in for a drink. They would watch bad television and order in, and shake off the ugliness of the day by seeing who could make the other laugh hard enough to snort lo mein through their nose. But "normal" was up for reassessment these days. A point Nick proved when Judy pulled out her keys and he immediately backtracked down the hall, biding her curt, "Night, Hopps," over his shoulder as he went.

Judy watched him go, his head low and his paws jammed into his pockets. It hit her then. She could chase after him right now if she wanted to, catch him in the stairwell and insist he stop being ridiculous and stay for a drink. She could take comfort in assuring herself that she'd see him tomorrow, and indeed she would see him again soon, and the day after that. But in some essential way she wasn't quite sure of yet, she had already lost her fox. Even when she was standing next to him he wasn't with her. Not like he used to be.

One of her parents' favorite warnings was to never reach for anything when you already had something in your paws. Didn't matter if it was a small thing, or something that would even satisfy. Whatever it was, you were to be grateful for it and never reach for more, otherwise you would inevitably drop both. Even at eight, Judy had known they weren't just talking about her mother's sugared carrot bars. That hadn't stopped her from reaching, or regretting when she dropped things, because until now she had always been able to keep hold of what was most important.

That wasn't so this time.

If only she hadn't reached for more. If only she hadn't dropped what she'd had.

She stared at the key in her hand. Suddenly she couldn't stand the thought of going inside, with fox fur still on her couch cushions and Nick's blueberry yogurt in her fridge. The one he said he'd bought for her, but she sure wasn't the one who kept sneaking away packs like no one would notice.
She left the apartment. Nick was nowhere in sight, but that was fine. She wasn't feeling masochistic enough to search him out anyway. Instead she struck out in a random direction, watching the traffic as animals made their way home for the night and argued with each other over which restaurants would have the shortest wait time for a table.

Eventually she came to a street she had never been on before. One of those little side streets she always passed by while jogging but never turned down because it always looked too crowded. Animal sat on the stoops of their shops instead of hidden away inside and more waved food samples about in front of their stalls. Not even the chilliness of the evening deterred them. There was a store that sold scarves sized 10x-small to 10x-large and another that claimed to have items "from far beyond Zootopia's borders."

At this hour, the food stalls were the most crowded. Almost every vendor had a line—or two if the lines were divided by customer size, with rodent tubes overhead to keep the mice and rats safely away from the bigger customers with might have a hard time watching their steps.

Music drew Judy to a small bar tucked between a store called Lucky's Horseshoes and an out-of-business restaurant that still had some of its holiday decorations up from the time they shut down the previous year. Inside the bar were cozy wing-backed chairs squished around tiny tables and bar that ran the length of the back wall. A small stage, hardly a step higher than the floor, sat pressed against the left wall. An echidna in a voluminous black skirt and purple top sang with only a saxophone and small piano as accompaniment. Her dark spikes with their yellow tips shined like gold under the single spotlight.

Judy grabbed a drink from the bar then found a chair in the back corner where she was out of the way but had a good view of things. The singer was amazing. Even animals who didn't have seats close to the stage had dropped their conversations in order to listen to her.

One such customer, an enormous brown bear nursing a mug of mead, was watching the echidna with a focus that was almost unsettling. Even the few times he had to look away, either to scoot his chair aside so someone could pass his table or to speak with the waitress that was making rounds refilling drinks, Judy could tell by his body language that his focus was still on the singer. His ears stayed pricked in her direction, his posture slightly leaning, as if he might pop out of his chair and onto the stage at the slightest provocation.

Judy found herself watching the bear more than the singer. She wasn't sure what it was about him that made her nose twitch. He was more likely than not just a fan, albeit an intense one. But even lounging back in his chair he looked too alert. Judy recognized false casualness when she saw it. She worked with cops, and Nick.

At one point the echidna did a fancy gesture with her paw that caught Judy's attention for a moment, and when she looked back at the bear their eyes met. He was watching her. Had he sensed her watching him? Judy stiffened in her seat, prepared for anything, but after a moment the bear merely raised his mug and gave her a lazy salute before returning his attention to the stage.

Judy immediately felt foolish. And embarrassed. She shouldn't have been staring. She was reading into things. The darkness of the day was getting to her. Nick would have told her so, if he had been there.

Her mood sunk even further and she gulped down her forgotten drink. What an awful day.

When the echidna's set ended, animals clapped. Many stood to go. Judy was one of them. She stuffed a few dollars into the tip jar near the stage and caught herself looking around for the bear.
She headed out. If anything, the streets were more crowded now. Casual shoppers had turned into boisterous party-goers looking for the next bar.

Judy stood to the side, waiting for a safe opening where she could hop in and join the flow of foot traffic. Raucous conversation surrounded her. Animals calling out their orders to the street vendors. There was passionate bartering war going on at the imported goods shop. A group of young bucks that had to be from the Z.U. campus were laughing uproariously at something in the window of a store farther down the way. And then there was—"Let me go."

Judy turned toward the softly spoken command. A few feet down the street, the echidna stood with her back against the wall. A bear—that same giant bear from before, stood in front of her. When the singer tried to edge past him, he threw out a giant paw, blocking her way.

"Come on, quills. Just listen to me for a second."

"I have no desire to listen to your blabbering any longer. Now let me through."

Judy began working her way towards them. It was slow going. She was fighting traffic, and she had to practically flatten herself against the wall to squeeze by.

The bear leaned in so they were eye to eye. "Who knew your temper would match your hairstyle. I'm trying to help you here."

"I do not want your help."

"You're making a mistake."

The echidna tried to duck under his arm, but he caught her by the shoulder and pushed her back. She squeaked and her spines rose threateningly. "Don't touch me!"

"If you would just—"

"Step back, sir," said Judy, breaking through the crowd.

The bear rolled his eyes. "Not you, too. Hop along, little bunny foo-foo. This doesn't concern you."

"On the contrary." She pulled out her badge. "Menacing citizens falls directly under my main concerns. Now step back."

"Menacing citizens? Look here, copsey—"


The bear sighed and took a grudging shuffle backwards. He couldn't go far with so much traffic at his back, but it was enough for the echidna to slip free and take off down the street. The bear made as if to grab her back again, but Judy lunged forward and grabbed him by the pinky.

He looked down at her. "Are you going to make me pinky promise to leave her alone or something?" he asked.

"No," said Judy. "Just keep you from going after her."

"Yeah, you got me." He wagged the digit, nearly pulling Judy off her feet. "However will I escape?"
He attempted to shake her off more seriously then, but Judy held firm. At the end of the street, a black van pulled up, a tall one like the kind giraffes drove. The echidna weaved her way through the crowd towards it.

"Dirt fried honey nuggets," cursed the bear. He started after her, lifting Judy off her feet and carrying her with him. Judy said, "Stop or else."

"Or else what? You'll nibble on me?"

"No," said Judy. "I'll do this." And hooking her arm around his wrist, she proceeded to bend back his pinky claw until she felt resistance and then some.

The bear roared in pain and stumbled, dropping to his knees as he sought to relive some of the pressure. Animals nearby screamed and ran out of the way. Judy landed on her feet, keeping hold of his pinky and wrist. She looked for the echidna. The singer had made it into the van, which sped off. Judy let out a victorious, "Ha!"

The bear was gasping. "Ha?" he choked. "Ha? You even realize what you did, copsey?"

"Aided the escape of an innocent animal from a brute?"

The bear gagged. "Really, I'm gonna lost my honeycomb if you don't let up, rabbit."

Judy let herself be shaken off this time. The bear stared off in the direction the echidna had gone and sighed. "Rob won't be happy about this."

"Rob who?" asked Judy.

The bear rubbed his abused digit and grumbled, "No one you need to worry about. Can I go now? Or are you really going to go the whole mile and book me too?"

"Would you tell me what that was all about if I did?"

He just looked at her.

"Didn't think so," said Judy. "Look, I'll let you off with a warning this time. But if I ever see you harassing someone again… No means no. And so does 'let go.' Got it?"

"I wasn't harassing. I was trying to stop her from making a stupid decision."

That made Judy think about some of her own decisions lately, and she couldn't stop from sighing. "Every animal is free to make their own decisions. Even stupid ones. You may have had good intentions, but some things you have no control over."

"Little pessimistic for a cop, isn't it? You, especially."

Judy looked up, startled. "You know who I am?"

The bear had the nerve to wink at her. "I make it point to know all the ZPOs. Especially the famous ones."

An opening appeared in the crowd. The bear slipped into it with an agility Judy wouldn't have expected for a mammal his size, leaving her behind on the curb. "See you later then, Hopsey the Copsey."

"Call me that again and I'll arrest you just on principle," said Judy. The bear only laughed. Within
seconds, he had disappeared into the crowd. It was only then that she realized she hadn't gotten his name.

Today really was an awful day.
Chapter 4

Judy woke up the following morning in a terrible mood, one that didn't improve when she forgot to stop by her usual coffee place and got to work only to find that one of the ZPD teams had pulled an all nighter and finished off the last of the supply on hand.

Then she was called in to assist a frantic mother elephant who had accidentally locked her calf in the car. Judy had to dismantle and navigate the enormous air vent in order to get into the vehicle and unlock it, getting her ears yanked on by a stubby, enthusiastic trunk in the process.

Then after that she received a call from the lab with bad news: They had analyzed the threat notes, but the only prints found on them were Mr. Tavi’s.

All of that was bad enough, but the final straw came when Nick returned from his visit to the coroner. "I have the final report," he told her. "The cause of death is officially a broken back. But they also found bruises, old ones, under his fur. So either Mr. Tavi was really clumsy or he was experiencing more than just some threats."

When Judy reached for the paper to see the results herself, Nick dropped the sheet like he feared she had fleas.

Judy caught the paper on reflex, a zing of hurt striking her bad mood like hard candy against a toothache. When she looked up at Nick, his ears went back and he ducked his head like a guilty puppy. The fact that he clearly felt bad about it somehow only made it worse.

Judy smacked the paper down on the desk and shoved back her chair. "I'm going out."

"Anywhere in particular?" asked Nick, and Judy felt petty for enjoying, just the tiniest bit, the worry she heard in his voice.

She grabbed her coat from off the back of her chair and pulled it on. "I promised Clare's mother I would check out things. Even if I can't do anything officially, I can at least look in on Clare and make sure she's doing okay."

"And put the fear of the ZPD into whoever did that to her if you can find them," guessed Nick.

"Maybe." She could sure use the outlet to vent some of this frustration bubbling inside of her.

Nick perked up at that. He grabbed his own coat from where he had thrown it across his desk. "Sounds like fun. I'll come too. Lay on, Macfluff!"

Clare lived in an apartment complex a five mile walk from the Zootopia University campus. The place was a messy conglomeration of stone and painted brick that had been added onto over the decades with very little care if anything matched. It sat roughly in the shape of a horseshoe, with rooms, stairs, and entryways made to fit every size and shape of college student imaginable. There were apartments with vaulted ceilings that looked like guard towers complete extra wide doors for the larger students, like elephants and giraffes, stooped doorways to cozy little rooms made for the more humble sized students, and even a row of rooftop bungalows for the tiniest of college attendees.

Connecting it all was a courtyard that looked like it had been through several drunken stampedes. The grass, already a crispy brown from fall, had been stomped on by so many careless hooves and
paws that it was nearly indistinguishable from the dirt. Some determined landscaper had attempted to beautify the place by trimming the hedges that lined the walkways into various animals that Nick thought, considering on their poses—all stuffy dignity and snooty elegance—might be based on the more revered Z.U. professors. But someone (possibly lots of someones) had nibbled and plucked the hedges down to size, so to speak. An elephant deep in thought had had their leafy trunk eaten down to a stump, and a proud lion's mane had been reduced to a scraggly bit of bare branches edged in slightly masticated greenery.

There was a watering hole bravely fighting off an algae invasion over in the corner of the yard, and a collection of sunbathing boulders that looked to have taken over the job of the message board as far as leaving notes was concerned. Then again, the oversized wooden board was looking a little full at the moment. There were flyers from everything to available rooms, furniture for sale, roommates wanted, and after hours classes. There were study groups, practice for public speaking, math help, and one that simply read, "Find your successful you today! Programs every Monday. Cash only." There was even an open call for "participants in a new and exciting study. Earn easy, fast cash. It's safe, all kinds are welcome, and you will be compensated regardless of the results. Call The Lab Rats for more information."

Nick flicked the piece of paper. "That brings back memories," he said.

Judy, who had been reading off door numbers, glanced over her shoulder at him. "You went to school here?"

"Please," said Nick. "Studying anything from a book would have been considered completely useless to a younger Nick Wilde. Paws on learning, that was where the money was. But I did participate in my share of college research studies. Easy way to make a buck, and they didn't care if I was enrolled."

"What kind of studies did you participate in?"

Nick plucked a leaf from off the tip of the lion's nose. "Oh, you know, the usual. The effect of color on taste tests—that one got me money and food, albeit strangely colored food. Then there was the sleep supplement made from all natural oils. I won't even tell you what was in that one, but let's just say, I couldn't look my pig neighbor in the face for a month." Nick shuddered.

"Then of course there were your classics. How do predators react differently to stimulus compared to prey animals? Do they tolerate sounds better or worse? How about smell, or pain? Turns out we're about even, if you average in the strengths and weaknesses that species on both sides have for those sorts of things. Imagine that." Nick plucked another leaf. "But that's college researchers for you. They can't all be geniuses with vision. Some of them are just con artists with a fancy degree to give them a cover of respectability. Not a bad gig, actually. But the payoff doesn't justify all the work, I think. What?"

Judy was no longer looking at door numbers. She was staring at him with fire in her eyes. "They did pain tests on you?"

Ah, his fearsome bunny was mad for him. Nick savored the feeling even as he acknowledged he didn't deserve it. He playfully flicked a leaf at her. "Don't look at me like that, Hopps. It wasn't like it was a torture session or something." And those little wannabe scientists must have forgotten during all their brilliant researching that foxes had excellent night vision. Even locked in a pitch dark room, Nick had found that smarmy little pudú and relieved him of his mini electric prod in record time. After a short chat about ethics and whether the dean might be interested in seeing their test results, Nick had left with triple the pay and only a slightly singed arm for his trouble. And if he also felt hurt and bitter, well, at the time the feelings didn't even rate.
"I can't believe you volunteered for something like that," said Judy.

Nick shrugged. "To be completely honest, the students in charge of the study had been pretty vague about what it would entail when I signed on. Made it out to be more of a stress test and said the element of surprise was crucial for accurate results. But even if they had been straight with me, I still would have done it. I was a little obsessed with making money at the time." Nick snorted and plucked off another leaf. The lion looked like he had a sinus problem now. "I say 'at the time', but if the same situation happened now I'd do it again."

"No you wouldn't," said Judy.

"No? You don't even know what my situation was."

"It doesn't matter," said Judy.

"How do you figure that?"

She huffed at him like he was being dense. "Because you have me now."

Nick swallowed and turned back to the hedge, but he couldn't make himself destroy the lion's nose any further. "I do?"

He didn't have her. He would never have her. The studies would all agree with him.

Judy's voice was soft. "We're partners, Nick. Do you really think I would let you go through something like again? If you ever need help with anything, you have to know that I'll be there for you, if you'll let me."

As if he would dump any more of his problems onto her shoulders. After everything he had put her through, he no longer had the right to lean on her for anything.

Instead of answering her directly, he said, "You know it's the same for me too, right? If you need me…"

"I know," she said, but the smile she gave him looked sad somehow, and he realized she hadn't answered any more than he had.

Out of the corner of his eye, Nick saw the curtains move in one of the windows.

"Isn't that Clare's apartment?" he asked.

Judy checked her notes and nodded.

"I think she's home."

They went up and knocked. After a long pause, the door slowly opened and Clare's battered face peeked out. She didn't greet them, just stood there silently, waiting.

"Hi, Clare. Remember us?" asked Judy, even though it was clear from the badger's wavering gaze and tight grip on the door that she did. "Nick and I thought we would stop by and see how you were getting along."

The badger glanced at Nick. She was looking better. The swelling around her eye had gone down and the scratches on her neck were scabbed over. She wasn't holding her arm quite so protectively against her side.
"May we come in?" asked Judy when it was obvious they weren't about to be invited.

Clare looked like she dearly wanted to tell them no, but didn't quite have the nerve. After a moment, she gave a stiff nod and stepped back, letting the door swing wide. She was wearing a pair of worn jeans and a t-shirt for some skunk rock band called The Pepés.

Inside it was warm to the point of stuffiness. When Nick commented on the temperature, the badger broke her silence for the first time to say, "It's because all the rooms are on the same heating system set by the supervisors in charge. We don't have control over it. So the larger rooms tend to be chilly while the smaller rooms roast."

They took a seat at the table next to the small kitchenette. Beyond it a second or even third-hand couch sat facing a small TV. Beyond that, a short hall led to a bedroom and bathroom.

"You have a cute place," said Judy.

Clare shrugged. "It's affordable. That's all that matters to me right now."

"And you're going to Zootopia University? That's pretty impressive."

"Not really. I'm just an English major. It's not as hard as others, like business and finance."

"Is that what your sister is going to school for?"

Clare nodded. "She's in the graduate program. Just looking at her textbooks makes me dizzy. I have it easy compared to her."

"That's only because your skills are in writing," said Judy. "I bet your sister would feel dizzy too if she had to write as many papers as you did."

Clare said nothing, but she did smile a very tiny smile, and some of her wariness seemed to leave her.

While Judy made small talk, asking the badger questions like what year she was in (sophomore), and if she was into any hobbies (Clare said she had recently discovered boxing), Nick scoped out the apartment.

The place looked like a one person dwelling. There were no extra chairs set out and just one coat and scarf hung from the coatrack near the door. There were books and books and more books, and a small set of boxing gloves next to a stack of workout DVDs. But nothing that struck Nick as being not-Clare's.

There were pictures everywhere. They hung from magnets on the fridge, sat in frames beside the TV and on the side table, and had even been clipped to a string hung along the wall like some kind of pictorial clothesline. A few showed friends, the framed ones were all of family, but mostly they were pictures of places without anyone in the shot at all. Nick recognized the falls from the Rainforest District. A sunset out in the Sahara. A frozen pond in Tundratown with the lights of a bait shop twinkling in the background.

"You like to travel?" asked Nick, pointing to the photos.

Clare ducked her head. "Until I came to college, I rarely left Downtown," she told them. "But now, I've met so many animals, gone to so many new places, I finally feel like I'm living my life."

"It probably helps too that your mother isn't always hovering over you anymore," guessed Nick.
Clare squirmed in her chair. "She means well. I know she loves me and just wants me to be safe, but… there are some things she just can't help with." As if bolstered by the thought, the badger straightened, expression firming as she met their eyes. "So while I thank you for stopping by, please don't feel the need to come again. I'm not going to change my mind about pressing charges, no matter what my mother says."

"Well why would you?" asked Nick. "Since you claimed it was an accident all your own anyway."

"Y-yes. Right. That's what I meant. So you can tell my mother to give up. I'm not coming home."

"This isn't a battle of wills," said Judy. "We're not here to 'catch' you. We just want to make sure you're all right."

"Well I'm fine," says Clare. "I don't need help. Honestly, I just want to move on and forget the last week ever happened."

"And if you have another accident?" asked Judy.

"I won't," said Clare, and she sounded like she meant it. "What happened was mistake I won't be making twice. Trust me."

"That's reassuring, at least," said Judy. She rose. "I guess we'll get out of your fur then. But before we go, do you think I could use your restroom?"

"Oh. I guess," said Clare. "It's on the left."

"Thank you."

Nick watched Judy leave. If he knew his partner, she would be searching that bathroom like a hawk, looking for extra soaps, toothbrushes, and towels, even stray strands of fur that didn't match Clare's coloring. Because while the badger might be telling the truth when she insisted she had learned from her "mistake," that didn't mean the next animal would be so lucky, or strong enough to break away when things turned violent. Judy would still want to find who had assaulted Clare, if only so she could make a note of who they were in case it happened again. Without evidence or an official charge, it was the best they could do.

"So..." said Clare. "Are you and Officer Hopps like, partner-partners?"

Nick looked at her. Was this badger insinuating what he thought she was?

"If you mean that I am Hopp's partner and she is mine, then yes, we're partner-partners. A bit redundant to phrase it that way though."

"No, I meant like, together. Like seeing each other."

Nick's gaze shot towards the hall where he caught a streak of gray zipping from the bathroom into the bedroom. "What makes you ask that?"

The badger shrugged, not very convincingly. "Whenever they show you two on the news, you're always together. And you mention each other a lot in your interviews."

"That would be the partner part of our relationship," said Nick dryly.

"So there's really nothing between you?" Clare looked almost disappointed. "I could've sworn… even outside just now, the two of you looked so—"
"I can see why you became a writer," said Nick, interrupting her with an incredulous laugh. "With an imagination like yours, seeing secret relationships in everything. But a fox and a rabbit? Don't be ridiculous."

He wanted out of this conversation. *Now*. What was Judy doing? She was taking too long.

Clare evidently had the same thought, because she leaned forward to glance down the hallway. Her eyes widened when she found the bathroom door standing ajar, the lights off. Empty.

She shot up out of her chair and took off down the hall. Nick was immediately up and following her.

The sound of crinkling was coming from the bedroom. Clare shoved open the door. Inside was a bed, desk, and more bookcases stuffed with books. Judy stood next to a tipped over wastepaper basket. Half-crumpled balls of paper were spilled everywhere. Clare was definitely in a lot of writing classes. There were typed essays and hand-written pages of notes, papers riddled with edit marks and half-finished stories, some with entire pages scratched out and thrown away.

"What are you doing?" screeched Clare, and Nick thought the affront in her voice sounded an awful lot like her mother's.

Judy held several pieces of paper pinched between a shred of tissue. Angry red slashes covered the pages, but these weren't the edit marks of some hyper-critical student. They were threats.

*You're disgusting.\n*\n*Stop now or pay.\n*\n*Find your shame, or I'll find you.\n*

"I think," said Judy, "that we have more to talk about."

"Get out!"

Judy and Nick went sprawling across the welcome mat. Behind them, the door slammed. Judy heard Clare throw the deadbolt.

Nick rose, dusted himself off, and nodded casually to a couple passing deer who froze like, well, a couple of startled deer. "Hi. How ya doin'?"

Judy groaned and clambered to her feet. "I blew it."

"Let's give her some time to cool off," said Nick. "I'm sure by tomorrow she'll come around."

"You think so?" Judy looked down at the letters. Clare had been in such a rush to shove them out that she hadn't even tried to take the documents back. "At least we have more evidence to analyze. Think it would be admissible in court?"

"Maybe. Just avoid mentioning you found it by sneaking into the victim's room and digging through her wastebasket. What made you decide to look through there anyway?"

"Garbage always tells a story," said Judy. "Do you know how much history we learn from what basically amounts to trash?"

Nick grimaced. "Thirty minutes in a college environment and you're already turning into one of
those annoying philosophers."

"We should be lucky I got these papers," said Judy. "It's probably all the answers we're going to get out of Clare."

"Tomorrow," insisted Nick. "Tomorrow I'm sure she'll have something to say to us."

"I have nothing to say to you!" Clare shouted. She had to shout, because while the rest of the apartment complex might be lacking in upkeep, they had made sure to use thick, sturdy wood for their doors, and the badger wasn't about to open hers.

"You could be in danger, Clare!" Judy shouted back. "You need protection! We just want to help!"

"I don't need protection and I don't want your help!"

"Is something going on here?"

Nick and Judy turned to see another badger, Tamara, standing behind them, a Goosie tote bag stuffed with books over one shoulder. She was dressed in dark pants and heels. Her blouse was cream colored and decorated with a single loop of unadorned gold around her throat.

"I thought I'd stop by before class and see how Clare was doing," she said. "Is it—" She looked about for eavesdroppers, but it was early. Mostly everyone was still slumbering away in their beds, and those that were about had the glassy-eyed focus of students still half-asleep as they trudged off to class. They didn't spare the trio a glance. "Is it about Clare's accident? Nothing else has happened, has it?"

"You're sister is fine, for the moment," said Nick. "But what happened to her wasn't an accident. We know that for sure now. Someone attacked her, and we're afraid they might try again."

"We want to help her but she won't listen to us," said Judy. "Do you think she'll talk to you?"

"Are you kidding?" said Tamara. "I'm her sister. Of course she won't listen to me."

"Think you could give it a go anyway?" asked Nick.

She adjusted her bag and sighed. "I can try."

"Her life could depend on it," said Judy.

"Not to alarm you or anything," said Nick went Tamra's eyebrows flew up. "Just, you know, something to keep in mind."

"I'll see what I can do."

Nick and Judy retreated to the cruiser. They watched as Tamara argued with her sister through the door for a few minutes, but was eventually allowed inside. After that, there was nothing to see but the occasional shuffling student making their way like zombies towards the school.

"So, I get why you think we're dealing with the same culprit," Nick said to Judy. "But I've been thinking about it, and I can't figure out the connection. A young college student and a mongoose in sales don't exactly travel in the same social circles."

"I don't know," said Judy. "But you saw the letters. It's the same type of verbiage used in Mr. Tavi's case. The same, stop what you're doing, or else theme. That can't be a coincidence. And you
said the autopsy on the mongoose showed days old bruising, which tells me Tamara wasn't the only one who had a run in with someone's fist."

"So it's not an abusive secret mate then."

"I guess not."

Tamara emerged then from Clare's apartment, the door slamming shut behind her. She looked out across the street and spotted the cruiser. She shrugged and shook her head at them, then joined the growing stream of students that were headed towards the school.

"So much for that," said Nick.

They waited another hour. Then two. Nick popped out to get them some coffee and then breakfast. Judy was just about to call it when the door opened and Clare poked her head out. When she didn't see them in the apartment courtyard, she grabbed her backpack and joined the now busy queue leading to campus.

Nick and Judy hopped out of the cruiser and followed her at a distance. She stopped and chatted to some other students along the way, including a couple other badgers and a coyote. She waved to a kangaroo and a skunk who were passing by but went wide around them, making Nick laugh while Judy grumbled about prejudice against skunks.

Clare grabbed a coffee from University's StarOx, then disappeared into one of the buildings for class. Nick and Judy took up a bench under a grove of trees across the way to wait. An hour and fifteen minutes later, Clare emerged and they followed her across campus until she disappeared inside yet another building.

"She doesn't act like an animal who's in fear of an attack," noted Nick. "She was more nervous around us."

"So, what?" asked Judy.

"So maybe it's because she listened to the threats? Her and Mr. Tavi both received those letters. And both were assaulted. But the mongoose was killed while Clare seems to be fine. Maybe it's because she stopped doing whatever it was her attacker didn't like?"

"And Mr. Tavi didn't?"

"Just a guess. I could be wrong."

"But what could a student and a sales mammal possibly be doing that was so bad an animal would kill to stop it?"

"That I don't know."

"But I bet Clare does. If only we could get her to talk to us."

"Should I put in a call to Mr. Big?" teased Nick.

"Of course not," said Judy.

"Right. Her mother is just as intimidating as the shrew. Clare probably wouldn't even bat an eye. We'll have to go bigger. Chief Bogo?"

Judy smirked. "Anyway, Clare seems safe enough for now. Let's call it and hope Tamara
They detoured to a nearby open air market for lunch before heading back to the station. As Judy debated between a vegetable and fruit salad, Nick slipped between stalls, sneaking bites of grapes or roasted insects as he went.

"Nicholas Wilde," Judy hissed as she caught him stealing a strawberry and popping it into his mouth while the stall owner's back was turned.

The fox grinned and sidled up next to her. Leaning over her shoulder, he said in a lowered voice, "So tell the truth, Hopps. Are you just a real stickler about your vegetables?"

Judy twitched her nose. "Stickler? I don't think so."

"So you don't hassle the grocers or feel up all the produce?"

"Of course not. Why?"

Nick tipped his head slightly to the right. "Because that petrified looking chinchilla over there has been watching us for a while now, and for once I don't think it's me that's making him twitchy."

"Oh stop it," said Judy. "I'm sure you're mistaken." But she glanced over her shoulder anyway to check the animal out. The chinchilla in question was looking their way, half hidden behind a mountain of plums. His paws were twisted in the front pocket of his apron and his tail was crinkled up and shaking behind him. When he saw Judy looking, he started and turned back to the fruit stand, restacking the plums in no particular order.

"Recognize him?" asked Nick.

"Only that," said Judy. "I've come here before and I've seen him a few times, but we've never talked or anything. He does look upset, doesn't he?"

"Must just be that menacing cop aura you naturally exude," said Nick.

Judy shot him a look. "We're probably just reading into it and he's not even looking at us."

"You," Nick corrected. "I snuck fruit from five different stalls and he didn't so much as spare me a glance."

"You should pay for those," said Judy.

"Hey, I was testing a theory, and I'm an officer on the clock. That's called investigating."

"More like rationalizing," said Judy, but she let the matter drop. She chose a fruit salad and paid for it, then walked with Nick passed a few more stalls. And all the while she felt the chinchilla's eyes on her. Whenever she made an excuse to look around, the chinchilla was there, always three stall back, always arranging fruit as if it was the most important job in the world.

"Is there a bunny-chinchilla produce war going on that I don't know about?" asked Nick.

"This is ridiculous," said Judy. "Hold this." Shoving her salad at Nick, she made toward the chinchilla. When he saw her coming he let out a frightened squeak and booked it behind the stalls, disappearing through a back gate marked employees only.

"There you go, scaring animals off again," said Nick. "I can't take you anywhere." He stole a
tomato from off the top of her salad. "This is good. Needs crickets though, for flavor."

"If you put bugs in my salad, Nicholas Wilde, we are through."

"Touchy. Fine, here, take your bland salad." He handed it back to her and swiped a banana from off a stand next to him. "I'll just eat this instead."

"You better be planning to pay for that one."

"You insult me, Hopps. Of course I'm going to..." He patted down his pockets, first his back, then his front. Then he checked his jacket.

Judy raised an eyebrow.

Nick gave her a chagrined smile and held out a paw. "Loan me a dollar, would you, Hopps?"

"Seriously?"

"I forgot my wallet at the station. Come on, what are partners for?"

Judy sighed and pulled out a dollar. She started to hand it over to him, claws safely at one end so she wouldn't scare him away with an accidental touch—and stopped.

She understood the need for boundaries, much as she didn't like them. She knew there would be repercussions for her confession, that their relationship was going to change. But this? She didn't think it was just her hurt feelings or her bad mood or the weight of their current case that made her feel that this was beyond what could be considered reasonable. She didn't deserve to be treated like a mite infested mutt who might get overexcited by the smallest sign of affection. Not by anyone. But especially not by her partner. Her friend. She refused to accept that.

So instead of handing over the money, she slapped the bill down into Nick's open palm instead, digging in her tiny claws when he tried to pull away.

Nick's jaw worked and he dropped his eyes, like he couldn't stand to look at her and touch her at the same time. His voice was rough and pleading as he said, "Hopps."

"Look, Nick," said Judy. "I know you're uncomfortable with this. Borrowing money from me, I mean," she clarified when his gaze flicked up in surprise. "And I'm not saying that it isn't awkward or that it won't take time for us to—to figure it out. But you don't have to worry every time it happens. You don't have to avoid it. Borrowing money... I'm well aware of what it means to you, and what it doesn't."

"Carrots." She would have been more relieved by his use of her nickname if he hadn't sounded so regretful. It was a struggle to keep her ears upright. If she hadn't been squeezing his paw, she knew she would be shaking. What was so hard about this?

"It's not that I mind it," he said carefully, and it took everything Judy had not to call him on the lie. Nick was staring at their joined paws as if she were hurting him, when she knew her grip wasn't nearly so tight. "I just think it would be wisest if we avoid any unnecessary moneylending from now on."

"And for whose benefit is that?" asked Judy.

Nick gave her a helpless look but didn't answer.
They stood like that, the dollar crinkled between them. It was the closest they had been since she'd returned, and Judy just wanted to stay like this, connected to this fox however tenuously.

*Don't make me let go completely, Nick,* she thought. *Anything but that. Just this much. As long as I can remain beside you like this, I promise I won't come any closer.*

"Well somebody had better pay for that banana," said a fuming tapir from the behind the banana stand.

Nick jerked back, yanking his paw away, and Judy released him, curling her claws around the lingering warmth in her palm so the fall air couldn't steal it away.

Nick paid for the fruit with Judy's dollar and together they made their way out of the market. To say the walk back was uncomfortable was an understatement. Judy tried to distract herself by keeping an eye out for the chinchilla, but he was nowhere to be seen and she kept getting distracted by things like Nick's tail swishing stray leaves against her feet, the brush of his shoulder against hers when the crowd forced them to squeeze close. The weight of his eyes on her when he thought she wasn't aware.

He cleared his throat. Judy inwardly stilled, but he only said, "I'm glad tomorrow is our day off. I could use the break."

Avoidance it was then. But if a subject change would help lift some of this unbearable tension, then Judy was more than willing to humor him.

"I feel the same way. But I don't know how relaxing a time it's going to be."

"You got big plans or something, Hopps?"

Judy looked at him. "*We* have plans, remember? Vixie's birthday party is tomorrow."

Nick groaned. "I completely forgot. You sure we can't just send them something?"

"No," said Judy, and his responding expression made her smile. "Don't pout. I'm sure it'll be fun."

"Fun. The way impalement by arrow is fun."

"Technically, you weren't actually impaled," said Judy. "The arrow was a fake."

Nick scowled and threw his empty banana peel into a nearby compost bin. "They're weren't all fake. I think I'm going to burrow a vest from the ZPD SWAT team, just in case."

"Whatever makes you feel safe," said Judy sweetly. Maybe if she got the chance, she'd take a shot at him herself. With a weapon in her paws, perhaps she could finally get Nick to stop avoiding her and instead force him act more like he used to.

*Yeah*, said a snide little voice in her mind, *because nothing says "healthy relationship" like, "hang out with me, or else."* She'd have to be on her guard tomorrow, lest her id slip its leash.

*Note to self: Do not shoot dumb fox in the butt.*

An accident, now, that might be a different story.
Chapter 5

Saturday dawned bright and cold. Judy met Nick in front of the overgrown lot that looked like the entrance to a neglected park or preserve but was actually the Swift's extended front yard.

She eyed her partner's suspiciously fluffy middle. "Did you really wear a vest?"

"Hopps, please, I have my pride." Nick patted his belly. "I just wore some extra layers. It's supposed to be colder out today."

"And extra layers means extra protection."

"From the elements."

"And eleven year olds."

"Just for that I'm making you carry your own present."

Judy tucked her brightly colored package more securely under her arm. "I was planning on carrying it anyway. What did you bring for Vixie?"

Nick pulled a small box from his pocket.

"Jewelry?" guessed Judy.

Nick rolled his eyes. "Yes, because when I think of presents for an eleven year old tomboy who is also the little sister of one of my acquaintances, I think, jewelry."

Judy's eyebrows shot up. "Acquaintance? Not friend?"

"I don't think we're close enough for that, do you?"

"I guess not. I mean, you only helped rescue him and his loved ones from a snowed in mountain, risked your life for them, vouched for them in your paperwork, are about to attend his sister's birthday party. Friends? No, you're right. What was I thinking?"

"Do you know he doesn't pay taxes?"

"Who, Robin?" Judy thought about it. "It must be because of how Zootopia's founders cheated his family out of their land all those years ago."

"It's not just property taxes though. He doesn't pay taxes for anything. And apparently the permissions are all legitimate. I checked."

"It's still not that unusual. Look at the migrating buffalo herd that comes through every summer. They're not required to pay taxes either."

"But he's not a buffalo; he's a fox."

"And because of that you think Zootopia wouldn't give him compensation?"

"They took his family's land in the first place, didn't they?"

Judy rubbed her temple. "That was a long time ago. And you said yourself he has the permissions."
Maybe it means Zootopia is finally changing for the better."

"Not this much," said Nick. "Not for a fox. Do you think he has something on them?"

"Are you going to be like this all day?" asked Judy. "How did we even get on this topic? What did you bring Vixie if it isn't jewelry?"

"Maybe it's a new business card."

"You're joking."

"What? She seemed happy enough with the last one I gave her." Nick flashed Judy a wink and tucked the box back into his pocket. "Speaking of migrating, let's get going. I'm starting to feel like we've crossed the border into Tundratown." He zipped his coat further up under his chin. "What do you think are the chances that they're having this little shindig inside?"

"In that tiny house?" said Judy. "Not good."

Nick sighed. "You're probably right. And the place is so old it might crumble down with too many animals inside it. You've think Mr. Philanthropist could afford to do a little more renovating."

Judy rolled her eyes.

They headed into the trees. The last time they had come through, the woods has felt almost fantastical. Butterflies had flittered about the colorful flower patches and a thick canopy above had given the place a shaded hushness. The fantastical feeling remained, but the butterflies and flowers had gone the way of summer. In their place was a crunchy carpet of partially crushed leaves in every shade of fall. Burnished oranges and blinding yellows, reds bright as apples and crisp browns. The loss of so many leaves meant a thinner canopy above, and weak autumn sunlight filtered in through the barer branches, casting everything in a cozy glow.

Judy knew they were getting close when they passed by the small pond that had so enchanted her the first time they had come, now illuminated with the reflection of the sun and crowded as a marina with its many floating boats of leaves.

Picking up on the sounds of lute music, she followed it into the clearing, Nick close behind. The Swift estate appeared from the trees like the last bastion of a forgotten age. A single lopsided tower made of gray stone brick, with gothic windows and a built-on front porch. Judy half-expected a beautiful horse to appear in the topmost window and let down her long mane for a prince to climb up like in the fairy tales.

The party was already going strong. Speakers from the front porch blasted cheerful lute music and blankets had been spread across what remained of the grass in order to take full advantage of the sun. Two picnic tables had been set out, one stacked with food, the other with a small pile of gifts. Chairs sat under what few trees still have enough leaves to provide shade. Dark red ribbons wound through the branches, spiraling up the thick trunks and swooping from tree to tree.

Smalls groups of animals milled about with children running to and fro, a mismatched pack of pups, calfs, kits, and cubs. Leading the charge was Vixie, a green felt hat on her head. When she spotted Nick and Judy, she doffed the hat in a charming, antiquated bow before Todd ran up and snatched it from her paws. He took off across the lawn with it and Vixie chased after him, the rest of the young trailing behind.

Everyone, Judy saw, was wearing a party hat, either one like Vixie's or a conical hennin with ribbon streamers. Judy even spotted a massive brown bear, at least ten feet tall, over by the picnic
tables with a much too small green felt hat perched on top of his head. He was leaning over a
caracal Judy remembered as being a lawyer friend of Robin's. Will, she thought his name was. He,
too, was wearing a green felt hat, though he didn't look happy about it. His ears kept flicking back
as if he would've dearly loved to shake the thing off. Also with them was a fox, with beautiful dark
red fur and a long thick tail.

The bear bent down and said something to the fox. She tossed back her head and laughed, deep and
throaty, and had to grab her conical hat to keep it from toppling off. Will scowled at them and said
something that sounded like, "Children." The bear turned to him with a grin, and that's when Judy
got a good look at his face.

She made a small sound of surprise and pointed.

"You say something, Hopps?" asked Nick.

She pushed her present into his arms. "Hold this."

"What are you—Hopps, wait! Where are you going?"

Judy didn't answer. She marched over to the trio, all of whom were significantly bigger than her,
even the fox, who seemed exceptionally tall for her species. She raised one perfectly shaped
eyebrow at Judy, an amused smile already curling her lips. "Well, well. Who have we here?"

Surprise lit the bear's face. "Lookie here. It's Hopsey the Copsey."

Will nodded politely to her. "Officer Hopps."

"It's nice to see you again," said Judy. To the bear she said, "I warned you about calling me that
name."

"Yeah, but you're not going to arrest me at my godchild's birthday party, are you?" he asked, all
innocence and pretend worry.

"Godchild?" said Judy, taken aback. That means he must know Robin.

As soon as she thought it, she wanted to kick herself. Of course Robin wouldn't let just anyone
 crash his little sister's birthday party. But, "Godchild? Really?"

Will snorted. "I know. The idea of him being a godfather to anyone is an alarming thought. He's
almost as bad the godmother." He jerked his head towards the fox, whose strong features
condensed into a hard expression.

"I'll have you know that Vixie adores me," she told him.

"That because you spoil her rotten and teach her bad things."

The fox lifted her nose high. "They are important life lessons, I'll have you know. And if Robin
doesn't have a problem with them than neither should you."

"On the contrary, I question Robin's judgment too."

"Well if it wasn't for Robin's judgement, you would still be—"

The bear let out a loud, pointed cough. Both animals stopped and looked at Judy.

"Sorry," the fox said to her. "It's rude to argue in front of guests, isn't it? But that's what happens
when you have such passionate group. Well, *I'm* passionate. Will over there is just a stick in the mud." She offered Judy a paw. "Scarlet. It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Judy."

"Finally?"

"Oh yes." The fox's eyes glittered with mischievous glee. "Between the news stories and Robin, I feel like we've become good friends who just haven't met yet. Did you really take down that charging rhino with just some rope and a light pole?"

"Rhino?" said Judy, trying to remember. "Oh, you mean Mr. Ceros, back in May? Yes, that was me."

"Truly impressive work."

"It's not as impressive as what you're thinking," said Judy. "The papers greatly exaggerated what happened." At least, they had exaggerated her *preparedness* for the event. The news made it seem like she had purposely gone after the rhino on her own, and with just some rope and prayer to aid her. In reality, Mr. Ceros had gone on a rampage in Savannah Central due to a bad reaction from a sinus medication he'd been prescribed by his doctor. Judy and Nick had been responsible for clearing the area of pedestrians while the larger officers chased the rhino down. But a rhino hopped up on stimulants wasn't an easy animal to catch, or more to the point, *evade*, and when Mr. Ceros had changed direction and started charging their way, there had been no time to think.

Nick had scooped up the smaller animals around him and run for it, but Judy had known that they'd be run down long before they could reach the end of the block, and the safety of the chain net barricade that had been erected there. So instead of running, she had grabbed up some rope piled beside a nearby fruit stand and made a loop with it. Then, after dodging Mr. Cero's attempt to ram her, she had lassoed his horn, and using what little she remembered from her high school physics class, used a light pole as a quick and dirty pulley system to catch him up and slow him long enough for the other officers to reach him and bring him down.

When she thought about how close she had come to being stomped on and impaled, she still got a shiver from it, as if the ghosting paws of such a near miss were brushing down her spine. She had won an award for that bit of recklessness, along with a lecture on ignoring procedure from Chief Bogo.

Nick had been beside himself. When he had looked back and realized she hadn't followed him, he had handed the smaller animals off to a brave pedestrian who had rushed out to help and gone back for her. Of course, it was over by then. But that didn't stop him from scooping Judy up and carrying her away from where the other officers were struggling to subdue the tangled up rhino. The whole time he had ranted at her. "Have you finally gone and lost it, Carrots? What were you thinking? Is this because of that medal I got last week for rescuing that polar bear cub? You feel pressured to keep up or something? Well if ever I had a good excuse for not working. Are you hurt? Why are you laughing? Don't go getting hysterical on me now, Carrots."

"I think *you* are the only one in danger of that," Judy had told him. "You can put me down now. I can walk."

"I don't think so. Knowing you, you'll run right back into the fray and I'll have to explain to your parents why their daughter now has a giant hole through her middle."

Judy had made a face. "What a lovely image."

"I know. And it's going to be stuck in my head for the next month."
Judy had rolled her eyes. "How far are you planning on going? I think it's safe to stop now."

Nick had slowed reluctantly. He clearly hadn't had a direction in mind beyond away. They'd ended up in some ritzier neighborhood for larger animals. The stoops for all the houses came up to their noses. There was no one around. Everyone was either at work or tucked away inside their houses, hoping the rhino didn't make it to their block and do damage to any of their properties.

Nick had lowered her down, and Judy had been surprised to find she was shakier than she'd thought when she tried to stand and found her legs didn't want to support her. She'd let herself sink down onto the sidewalk. Nick had crouched beside her.

"Are you sure I don't need to call for an ambulance?"

"No ambulances. I'm perfectly fine. See?" She'd held up her arms and waved them at him, which in retrospect was probably a silly way to try and make her case, but she blamed shock on any poor reasoning in that moment.

Nick's gaze had drifted down, lingering on a spot high up on her right side. When Judy had looked, she'd seen a smeared line of chalky dust there, the kind popularly used on horns, antlers, and bigger sets of claws. If she had been a little slower, Mr. Ceros could have hooked her right under the ribcage.

Nick had taken a deep breath and released it. Reaching out, he'd brushed the dust off her uniform with quick efficiency. "Definitely need to switch to desk work. Filing is underrated, I say. What do you think?"

"I always was good with my ABC's," said Judy and Nick had smiled at her. But the next day they had gone out again, same as usual, and the day after that, and if the close calls made Judy rethink anything it was their relationship, and how regretful she would be if something happened and she never told Nick how she felt.

It turned out close calls were dangerous for more than one reason.

"Hopps? Do we have a problem here?" Nick had followed her over, and in her moment of distraction had inserted himself between her and the bear. He eyed the tall animal mistrustfully, gripping Judy's present like he might use it as a weapon if need be.

The bear widened his smile, as if that might make him less intimidating. "No problem. Right, Copsey?"

"That depends," said Judy. "Have you been staying good?"

"Always."

That received multiple snorts and eye rolls from everyone around him.

"Do you know this bear, Hopps?" asked Nick.

"We had a run-in the other night," said Judy.

"Did you now?" Robin appeared on the bear's other side. He smiled at the two officers. "Judy, Nick, I'm glad you could make it." He looked up at the bear. "You didn't tell me you met our Officer Hopps before."

The bear grimaced. "It was hardly a get-to-know-you type of thing, Rob. Just a tiny
misunderstanding. Didn't think it was even worth mentioning."

"Uh-huh." Robin looked at Judy. "Well, I hope for his sake my friend didn't give you any trouble."

"It was nothing I couldn't handle," said Judy and Robin laughed. To her surprise, so did the bear. He held out a giant paw that was bigger than her head. "Name's Little John."

"Little?" Nick scoffed.

Judy very carefully took the proffered paw. She could only grip his pinky. She looked up at him and he winked.

"If introductions are complete?" asked Robin. "I'll show you where you can drop off those gifts and then I'll take you to Marian. She's been excited to see you all day."

As Robin led the way across the lawn, Nick leaned close to Judy to whisper, "So what happened between you and the honey monster back there?"

Judy glanced over at Robin, but the fox had stopped to help an old badger who was trying to pull around a chair and wasn't paying them any attention. Judy whispered back, "I caught him harassing some singer at a bar the other night. He insists he was only trying to stop her from making a mistake."

"What kind of mistake?"

"He didn't say."

"And he's friends with Robin?"

"Apparently so."

"Why didn't you tell me about any of this?"

Judy shrugged, watching as Robin dragged the chair over to where the badger wanted it and helped him to sit. "Like he said, it wasn't a big deal. I just didn't think about it."

"What were you even doing at a bar, anyway? When was this?"

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it does. It's not like you to just go to bars on your own—" Judy turned to look at him. Their eyes met, Nick's widening as he realized how close they were.

"I don't have much of a choice these days, do I?" she asked him. "It's not like you would have gone with me, and I needed…" She trailed off, not knowing how honest she should be, not sure if she could put into words the loss she'd been feeling since her return. She didn't want to make him feel bad. This mess that had become their relationship wasn't his fault alone.

"I just needed a drink," she finished.

"Because of the case?"

"Why else?" said Judy, wondering why he wasn't moving away. Surely he was uncomfortable with their proximity? But Nick stayed where he was, gaze searching her face like he suspected her of keeping secrets.
"All right," said Robin as he rejoined them, dusting off his paws. "Sorry about that. Tuck's an old family friend. An _old_ old family friend. You know, one time he snuck an entire bottle of liquor right out from under—" He stopped, looking from Nick to Judy and back again. "Everything all right?"

Nick startled away from her and Judy, for once, was grateful. She gave herself a mental shake. "Fine," she told Robin. "You were saying?"

He took them over to where Marian was sitting on a blanket with her brothers, Reynard and Craven, and a quiet weasel couple who were introduced as Betty and Oliver.

Judy took a spot by Marian on the blanket, Nick at her side. It was a cozy space, and as other animals stopped by and places were adjusted, Judy found herself shuffled closer and closer to Nick, until they were pressed knee to hip to shoulder. It was like sitting next to a furry tuning fork. While Judy chatted with Marian about her restaurant and her plans for the future, she was constantly aware of the fox beside her. Twice she had to ask Marian to repeat something because some shifting from Nick distracted her.

Then came the archery competition, to both Nick and Will's displeasure. They had to pair off and shoot at a target, but one person could only hold the bow while the other aimed the arrow. Judy and Nick had partnered up naturally, but Nick kept jumping every time Judy would brush against him in order to line up a shot, and in the end they were one of the lowest scoring teams.

Then they played a variation of the game Fox and Geese, only instead of using pegs and a wood board the guests stood arranged on the grass with one animal playing the "fox" who would have to outmaneuver the geese. One move at a time the geese would try and trap the fox, and when a stand-off ensued the one chosen as fox would have to fight and pin the goose in order to survive and move on.

This second part was not traditionally part of the game, Little John told Judy, but had been added to make it more interesting for "their type of crowd."

"And what _is_ your type of crowd?" asked Nick.

"The fun crowd, of course," said the bear. From behind him, Will rolled his eyes.

If the fox could make it all the way to the end and be the last animal standing, then they won. But if they found themselves outmaneuvered by the geese, or if they lost in one of the paw-to-paw face offs, then the geese as a whole were victorious.

"But aren't the odds against the fox player too unfair?" asked Judy.

"Our mother used to call it a teaching game," said Craven, as Marian, who had been chosen to play the fox for this round, squared off against Will, who couldn't have looked more out of place in his button up and slacks if he'd tried. From the sidelines, Robin was calling out useful if illegal moves to help Marian out. "Go for his ears! His ears! He never listens with them anyway!"

"Your parents never made you play games like this when you were a kit?" Craven asked Judy.

"They did, but they were more about unity and teamwork. You know, how when you work together you accomplish more than when you work on your own?That sort of thing. You couldn't win the game unless you cooperated with your siblings." Judy smiled at the memory. "Now that I think about it, it was hard to win that kind of game too. Still, I feel like the message overall was a positive one. This is more…" She trailed off. Will had tried to grab Marian around the shoulders,
"You can't expect a fox game to be as cute and sweet as a bunny's," said Reynard as Craven made his move forward and Judy sidestepped left.

"Of course not," she said, her defenses going up at his dismissive usage of the word *cute*. "But kits are still kits."

"Exactly. And this game teaches them important things too."

"Like what?"

"Like how to strategize. How to defend themselves. And perhaps most important of all, how to face bad odds bravely."

Will had managed to spin Marian and hook a foot around her ankle. She went down with a yelp, the caracal catching her before she could do a face plant.

"Annnnd she's out!" roared Little John, who had taken up the job as referee and seemed to be having a blast with it.

"You forgot one," said Craven, turning to look back at his brother. "It teaches you to always keep fighting."

Reynard bared his teeth and turned his back on him. "Funny how we all learned that lesson differently."

Judy raised her eyebrows and looked over at Craven, who gave her a sheepish smile and shrugged, as if to say, "Brothers."

"Nicholas Wilde!" Little John was waving a small piece of paper he had pulled from his hat, where every players name had been entered before the start of the game. "Come on down! You are our lucky new fox!"

They had gotten shuffled around quite a bit by that point. Judy had to search around before spotting Nick halfway across the yard from her. But at Little John's announcement, Nick turned and looked directly at her, as if he'd known exactly where she'd be. She expected him to balk at playing the fox, but after a moment of staring at her with an expression she couldn't read, he threw his shoulders back and stepped into position without a peep of complaint.

The game reset then. Judy had known even before they started that Nick would be good, but even she was taken aback at *how* good. Step by step, Nick led them on a chase around the yard. Only one "goose" ever managed to corner him at a time, and he dispatched each one with an efficiency that bespoke of whip-smart planning combined with exceptional police fighting skills. And even more impressive—Judy was forced to acknowledge even as it stung—he was orchestrating all of this while also making sure he never came within three steps of her.

But he was only postponing the inevitable. Unless… he was figuring out a way to avoid confronting her? That must be his plan, she thought as Reynard, then Will, then Scarlet, challenged him and fell. He would last as long as he could, and then somehow bow out. But how would he do it? Fake an injury, perhaps?

She watched as he brought down Marian and then Craven. Craven gave him a bigger fight than the rest, but Nick was on a roll now, and after a brief but intense tussle he flipped Craven onto his back, knocking him from the game along with his breath.
He let Robin corner him next, and Judy wondered if now he would take a dive, let Robin win so he wouldn't have to face her.

But then Robin went down, quicker than Judy had been expecting—or the other animals, if the gasps and ooooh's from the sidelines was any indication—and Nick looked over at her, for once not wary or cavalier, but serious and determined and entirely focused on her, and anticipation bubbled through Judy as she realized he was really going to do this.

They closed in on each other in careful sidesteps and turns, a slow circling that felt less like a strategy game and more like a dance between partners that knew the stakes. A hush had fallen on the watching animals. Adrenaline surged through Judy's limbs, leaving her paws tingling. She could faintly hear lute music still playing from the speakers, an odd counterpoint to the sound of blood pounding in her ears.

Nick lunged first, a simple frontal attack that Judy blocked easily. Snagging his upraised wrist, she whirled behind him in an attempt to pin his arm and force him forward, but Nick lashed his tail, knocking Judy back and pulling himself free. Turning to face her, he grabbed her by the shoulders and stuck a foot between her own, trying to hook it around her ankle and unbalance her in a move similar to how Will took out Marian. But Judy hopped up before he could succeed, clinging to his shoulders and wrapping her legs around his waist. It brought them nose to nose, and Nick made a sudden retreat that with her added weight sent him toppling back. At the last minute, he managed to turn them, cradling her head with one paw and throwing out an arm to break their fall. They landed in a weird half-pushup, Nick on top, Judy still plastered to his front, only her tail in contact with the ground.

They were still nose to nose. Nick's breathing was an uneven pant against her fur, and there was a wildness in his eyes that Judy had never seen before, not even when he had been pretending to be savage. Her bunny instincts didn't know what to make of it all. It felt like danger, but she knew better than to be afraid of Nick. Had she gone too far by jumping on to him? Was he angry? Was that it? But she had seen him furious before and it hadn't looked like this. It hadn't made her feel... excited like this. What was wrong with her?

"So, uh, who won?" This came from Little John.

"Looks like they're both winning," said Reynard, and several animals snickered.

Nick was up like a shot. Judy barely had time to register she was being peeled off of him before she was back on her feet.

"What should we do?" asked Marian. "Should we call it a tie and have a rematch?"

"I'd watch that again," said Scarlet.

But Nick was already shaking his head, backing away from the gathering crowd. "No, no, I yield. Hopps wins."

"Are you all right?" said Marian, reaching out to him, but stopped when Nick shied away from her. "You look a little—"

"Fine. Just the week catching up with me. I'm going to go, uh, take a break. Grab a drink. Does anyone else want one? No? I'll, um, be right back then."

"Is he really okay?" Craven whispered to Judy as they watched the fox book it towards the house. "Maybe you should go with him?"
"Trust me," said Judy. "That is the last thing he wants right now." And she could use the space herself. It was one thing to not be making any progress getting over Nick. It was another entirely to be willfully seeing things that weren't there. And what she had thought she'd seen... the odds of it weren't just bad, they were impossible.

Nick barreled through the front door of Robin's house as if a pack of bloodhounds were on his heels. He caught himself against the back of the couch, his claws digging into the upholstery as he struggled to collect himself. Thankfully, no one was around to see him shaking and gasping like a hunted animal. No, they were all still outside, no doubt gossiping about his strange behavior. And Judy...

Nick buried his face in his paws. He should have just refused to play, declined to be the fox in their little game. But then he had looked over at Judy, and he had wanted... he didn't know. To prove himself maybe? To show her he could be okay. That they were okay.

He had planned it all out, plotting his moves around the other players to give himself time to work up to their eventually face off, building up his courage. By the end, he had gotten so wrapped up in winning the game that he had almost convinced himself that he could do it, that he could beat this, her, them, this guilt and need and fear that was eating him up inside—

A paw came down on his shoulder. Nick let out a strangled yelp and whirled, but it was only Robin, who immediately lifted his paw in a gesture of surrender. "Just me."

Nick swallowed down a snarl. He hadn't even noticed the fox come in. "I don't like being touched."

"I noticed," said Robin dryly. "I'm even going to have bruises from it come tomorrow, I imagine. I took you more for a talker than a fighter."

"What can I say, I'm a fox of many talents."

Robin snorted and made for the kitchen. Nick trailed after him for no other reason than it was Robin's house, and Nick didn't know what to do with himself now that there was an audience around. The fox seemed to have scared the panic right out of him and left him feeling hollowed out and tired.

"Something you want to talk about?" asked Robin as he began looking through his cabinets, one after the other. Nick couldn't imagine what he was looking for.

"Talk about what?" he asked.

"Like what's going on with you and Judy, for instance."

Nick kept his tone neutral. "There's nothing going on to talk about."

Robin snorted and let another cabinet door bang shut. "Now that is a lie and a half. I've seen you face death with less fuss than how you faced your bunny out there."

Nick's paws fisted. He stuffed them into his coat pockets. "She's not 'my' anything and it's partner business, which means none of yours."

"Well do you think you could leave your partner business back at the station where it belongs? This is a birthday party. At least put on a hat." Robin flicked the red feather sticking up from his own green felt hat, which sat atop his head at an annoyingly jaunty angle. Nick would have dearly loved to smack it off.
"I am not wearing that," he told him.

"See, that's your problem," said Robin. "You're too tense. You need to lighten up a little. Aha!" Pulling something out from behind several jars of homemade preserves, he returned to Nick and held the object out to him. "Here."

Nick took it. It was a bottle about the size of a mason jar, with a narrowed top stoppered with a cork. Inside, golden amber liquid sloshed.

"What is this?"

"An old family recipe. Drink and be merry, my friend."

Pulling out the cork, Nick gave the liquid concoction a tentative sniff. Fire burned up his nose, leaving a lingering sweet after scent behind.

"I don't need a drink," he choked out.

"I think we both know what you need," said Robin, adding after a beat, "But since therapy isn't in my repertoire, alcohol will have to do. Now go on."

Nick just looked at him.

Robin sighed. Folding his arms across his chest, he settled against the wall. "Do you know why I invited you and Judy to this party?" he asked Nick.

"Is this a rhetorical question?"

When Robin merely looked at him, waiting, Nick mentally threw up his paws. "I don't know. Why? More free gifts for your little sis?"

"Because it looked like you two could use some allies," said Robin. "No one here is going to judge you for who you are or what you've done. Whatever your decisions, opinions, preferences, doesn't matter. We'll support you."

"And it has nothing to do with the fact that Judy and I are cops who could help you out of a future jam?" Nick scoffed. "Please."

Robin's expression stayed level. "I don't get into very many jams," he said. "And frankly, even if I did somehow end up in one, you two would not be the first animals I'd call to get out of it. No offense."

"None taken."

"If anything, befriending cops—especially cops as famous as you two—is probably one of the more questionable decisions I've made in a while."

"That makes two of us."

"But I'm willing to overlook it for your benefit."

"Spoken like a true philanthropist."

Robin smiled through his sarcasm. Pushing away from the wall, he tapped the bottom of the bottle in Nick's paw. "It's what I keep telling you. Now, drink up."
"If it will make you stop talking, then fine." Nick took a swig. Honey sweet fire burned down his throat liked warmed over syrup and he doubled over in a fit of coughing.

"Good, isn't it?" said Robin.

Nick responded by coughing some more.

"Now let's go have some cake. You're going to need something in your stomach if you're going to be drinking my mead. Just… make sure you stay away from the candles until Vixie blows them out, yeah? Little John once set a whole acre of my forest ablaze because he burped too close to our fire pit while drinking a mug of this."

Nick followed him to the door, wiping tears from his eyes. "I've never seen any signs of fire here."

"Why do you think there's so much clearing in front of the house? We were just lucky this place was made of stone. Otherwise we might be living in a tent right now."

Nick snorted. "I don't believe half of that is true."

Robin laughed. "Well tell me when you believe the other half and I'll know the mead is working."

Nick took another sip. It went down a lot smoother this time, thank goodness. He hardly even felt the burn. "Don't get your hopes up. I'm no lightweight."

Robin patted him on the back. "Never said you were, my friend. Never said you were."
Chapter 6

“So how do you two know Robin?”

Judy watched as further down the table, Nick leaned in closer to the weasel couple, Betty and Oliver. He was far too close for good manners, practically leaning over their plates. At some point he had put on one of the green felt party hats, pulling it low over his brow like he was some detective in a film noir.

The weasels, for their part, were doing their best to smile and not look like they were as uncomfortable as they clearly felt. Judy didn’t blame them. No one liked being interrogated, even if it was over cake and ice cream.

They weren’t the first to find themselves in this bizarre hot seat of Nick’s either. For the past hour he had been making his way up and down the table, occasionally taking a break for extra slices of cake, and Judy had watched, first with amusement and then growing concern as he chatted up the guests, asking more and more probing questions about what they did for a living and when did they first meet Robin? Had they every committed a crime? Not a big one, of course, but maybe a tiny one they might hesitate to bring up in court? Oh, but they shouldn’t worry, he was off the clock right now. This wasn’t an official investigation or anything, although would it bother them if it was? And why might that be?

Something was clearly going on with him. Judy wondered if she should confront him about it, but he had been doing better since returning from the house with Robin, had even made eye contact with her and smiled a couple of times, and she really didn’t want to ruin his mood. But if he was making the other guests uncomfortable…

“He looks like he’s having fun,” Marian whispered to Judy as the fox followed her gaze down the table to where Nick was waving a cake covered fork at the weasels and giving them an impassioned lecture about the responsibility of Zootopia citizens to report any suspicious activity they see.

“He’s… something, for sure,” said Judy. “I should probably go apologize for him.”

Marian laughed at her worry. “Oh, they can take it, trust me. No one here is going to crack that easy.”

Judy smiled wryly. “So you’re not planning on revoking our invitation?”

“Not at all,” said Marian. “I’m really glad you came.” He gaze dropped to her empty cake plate. “Actually, I’ve never had many friends growing up. Partly because I was a fox in a traditional bunny neighborhood, but also because I think Marty chased away anyone who might have been interested in becoming friends with me.”

The mention of Marian’s former friend turned attempted murderer was enough to weaken both of their smiles. There had been a lot of close calls on that case, for her and Nick.

“Well you seem to have a lot of friends now,” said Judy, gesturing around at all the animals chatting happily and stuffing themselves with cake. Nick had given up on the weasels after giving them one last hairy eyeball and moved on Scarlet, who looked more than a little amused at his not-so-subtle insinuations that she might have, “certain questionable friends.”

“Not at all,” said Marian. “Everyone here are all associates of Robin’s or the parents of Vixie’s
friends. None of them have any connection to me, besides my brothers and Robin of course.” She took Judy’s paw. “But I would really love it if I could call you my friend.”

“I would love that too,” said Judy, and Marian beamed.

“Admit it,” Nick was saying to Scarlet. “You know something about Robin.”

“I know something about everyone, sweetie. You’re going to have to be more specific than that.”

Judy couldn’t take it anymore. “Nick,” she hissed at him. “Stop grilling the guests! What is the matter with you?”

“No one will tell me anything,” he whined back at her.

“Maybe because you’re acting like a crazy fox?”

Nick scowled. Marian hid a smile behind her paw.

A little while later they gathered around to watch Vixie open up her presents. When the kit reached for Nick’s gift, Judy found herself as curious as if it were her own.

“Oh, wow!” said Vixie, holding up a scope.

“Not that you need it, am I right?” said Nick, and mimed nocking a bow and shooting it. “Pachoo!”

Vixie grinned and clutched the small gift to her, saying, “Thank you, Uncle Nick!”

Nick puffed out his chest. “Hear that? She called me uncle. I’m an uncle now.” He lurched up out of his seat. “Take that, all you regular mammals.”

“Nick,” said Judy. What was wrong with him today?

To her surprise, he turned at the sound of his name and, spotting her, trotted over. He squeezed himself in between her and Marian without so much as an excuse me, a distinct pout on his face.

The smell hit her then. Judy grabbed her nose, reeling back. “Is that—do I smell alcohol?”

Marian took a tentative sniff. “Definitely alcohol.”

“Hey! That’s s’nuff sniffing,” said Nick, and then broke out in a fit of snickering.

“Are you drunk right now?” asked Judy. “Did you get drunk at a kit’s birthday party?”

“I certainly did not,” said Nick, “I just had a few—just a tiiiiiny bit to drink.”

“Nicholas Wilde!”

“What? You go to bars. Why is it okay for you to go but I can’t? I need drinks too, you know. Bar drinks, party drinks, uh, fox drinks…” Apparently he couldn’t think of any other kind of drink because he tapered off after that with a consternated expression.

Little John, who sat across from them, laughed and said, “Looks like Rob slipped him a little something.”

Robin, who was sitting on the other side of Marian, looped an arm around her shoulders and shrugged. “The poor fox looked like he could use the respite.”
Judy watched as Nick grinned at her, a wide oblivious grin, and wobbled in his seat like he couldn’t find his balance on the bench.

“Don’t be too tough on him,” Little John said to her. “No one can withstand Rob’s infamous mead. That stuff is lethal.”

Judy was more concerned about why Nick felt the need to drink in the first place, but she held her tongue and caught Nick by the elbow when he started to slide backwards. For once, he didn’t flinch away. Well, that was one perk to having him soused.

Vixie continued opening presents. When she unwrapped a stuffed fox, she gave a polite but unenthusiastic thank you and set it with the rest of the pile of opened presents.

Nick, who had been starting to droop against Judy, shot upright and gasped. “Carrots! Carrots, look!”

His sudden exclamation, combined with the use of her old nickname, was enough to jumpstart Judy’s heart. But then he snatched up the fluffy toy and held it out to her as if he were delivering some great prize. “Hey, Carrots. Wouldn’t this go great with your plushie collection? You still have that, don’t you? Is it still hidden in that drawer you’re always telling me to stay out of? It is, isn’t it? Should we add this to the—hey!”

Her long ears burning, Judy grabbed the stuffed fox and tossed it back onto the pile of presents, making sure it landed well out of Nick’s reach and ignoring his noise of affront and the smirks that flashed her way.

“Sit,” she told Nick when he made to rise and go after the toy. She gave the back of his coat a tug and that was all it took to make him fall back into his seat. He huffed and dropped his head on top of her own, his bony chin digging into the space between her ears and heaved a sigh she felt all the way down her spine.

“Carrots,” he whimpered. “Carrots, I don’t feel so good.”

“How much did you have to drink?”

“Uh…”

She held out a paw. “Give it over.”

Chin still propped atop her head, he fumbled around his coat pockets before pulling out a bottle and passing it over.

Little John, who had been watching their exchange, gave a low whistle. “He finished the whole thing and he’s still standing? I’m impressed.”

“I guess he really can hold his liquor,” said Robin.

“Carrots,” whined Nick, turning his head so he could rub his cheek against her. “Carrots, can you stop spinning? Carrots.”

“I better get some water in him,” said Judy. She looked at Robin, who gestured her to the house. “Feel free. The door’s open.”

“Thank you.”
“Do you need any help?” asked Craven who had been watching silently from her other side.

“No, I got him,” she said. Pulling an arm around her shoulders, she lugged him across the field towards the house. To their right, the sun was fast sinking behind the trees and a sharper wind rattled the branches. Several of the ribbons had come loose, whipping like red snakes through the air.

Inside the house daylight had already fled. Judy felt her way along, eyes straining to focus in the gloom. She bumped into the back of the couch, the maneuvered Nick around and dumped him onto the cushions, then fumble her way into the kitchen. She didn’t bother trying to find a light switch. She found the glasses by the reflecting glint of light off their sides and filled one with tap water from the sink. Then she carried it to Nick who was doing his best to stay upright when his whole body was rapidly turning boneless with intoxication.

She passed the drink over. As Nick sipped at it she took a seat next to him, letting her eyes adjust to the dimness of the room and listening to the sounds of merrymaking outside. Someone had changed the music to something more upbeat, and she could hear cheering and clapping as animals took up dancing. She could just see them beyond the window. She tried not to think about the last time she had danced with Nick. How sweet and perfect it had felt, how hopeful she had been. How far away it seemed now.

Nick finished the water and leaned over to set the glass on the coffee table, nearly falling off the couch in the process. She grabbed him by the arm and yanked him back. He looked over at her, his eyes glazed and pupils blown. She could smell honey on his breath, too sweet and hot.

His gaze dropped to where she gripped his arm. Making a choked noise, he flung her off him, retreating against the cushions on the end of the couch.

In that moment, Judy thought she might have understood a little better what a predator felt when prey animals ran scared of them. It hurt, being wrongly judged as something dangerous when your intentions were innocent. And to have it come from her partner? It was gutting.

“I wasn’t going to try anything, Nick,” she told him quietly. “I wouldn’t.”

“You tried,” said Nick, and she realized he was referring to her confession in the cruiser.

Regret flooded her the same way it did every time she thought of that moment. “Well I know better now,” she said.

Nick shook his head. “No, you don’t know. You can never know.” He was still looking at her paws.

“What don’t I know?” she asked.

Dark eyes watched her from across the couch. Outside, laughter broke out. It sounded so distant, like memories from an earlier time.

When Nick made a sudden move towards her, Judy didn’t know what to expect. But she held steady as he reached out to her, taking one of her paws between his own and bowing his head over it. She felt the press of his lips against the sensitive pads of her paws. Judy didn’t dare to so much as breath.

“I wanted to say yes.” The words were a hitched whisper against her palm. “You know that, right? For you, I wanted to say yes. But I can’t, Carrots. I can’t. It’s too—”
Terror was an electric shock through her heart. Judy ripped her paw away before she even knew what she was doing, leaving Nick blinking up at her in befuddlement. Maybe she was a coward after all, because she didn’t want to hear this. She couldn’t stand to sit and listen to him drunkenly confess to all the reason why he couldn’t love her. Her heart couldn’t take it.

“It’s okay,” she said. “You don’t need to explain anything to me. I understand. I know.”

And she did know. She knew what was important. That Nick cared about her, very much. That he would do anything for her that he could. It was simply that hearts were not something that animals had the ability to alter at will, even a fox as clever and determined as her partner. He couldn’t change the way he felt about her. She understood.

Her lips felt numb as she said, “It’s not your fault. It’s no one’s fault.”

She made to rise, wanting to get away from those beseeching eyes, but she hadn’t done more than stand before Nick was reaching for her again, latching onto her wrist with all the desperation of a drowning mammal.

“Where are you going?”

Judy waved to the door. “I thought maybe you’d want me to—“

“Stay with me,” he said. “Please, Carrots.”

There was something close to panic in his voice. Judy could do nothing but sit. Nick released her, watching as she resettled at the other end of the couch. He gave her a bobbly-headed nod. “Good. Right there. You can’t leave that spot, okay? Promise.”

“I promise I won’t leave,” said Judy.

Nick made himself comfortable against the cushions, shoving pillows and twisting around until he found a spot that suited. He snuck several peeks over at Judy as he did so, as if to reassure himself that she was still there. Eventually he settled down to sleep, body curled so that he was facing her. She watched as he drifted off. Outside, the music had quieted, but it picked up again as the next song came on, and Judy wondered just how late they were planning to go. Despite what Scarlet had called their “passionate” natures, it was clear everyone here truly cared about each other and enjoyed spending time together. Judy was touched to have been invited into their circle, even as their camaraderie hurt to watch. She and Nick had been like that. They had gone everywhere together, both at work and outside of it. But now he wouldn’t even go with her to a Gazelle concert for fear of… what? Hurting her? Getting her hopes up? She was already hurting, and with the way he was acting lately, it was impossible for her hopes to go anywhere.

Nick let out a few mumbled yips in his sleep, toes twitching as he dreamed. Even feeling as she was, the sight made Judy smile.

Then his tail flicked up, smacking her with a faceful of fur. Spluttering, she shoved it back down, throwing and arm over it when it looked like it might swing upwards again. In his sleep, Nick chirruped happily.

For a while, Judy stayed like that, listening for the sounds outside that would tell her the party was ending and she would need to wake Nick. But the music carried on and eventually she dozed, lulled by the darkness and the warm fluffy tail across her lap.

Judy woke to the sound of silence. The music had stopped. Night had fallen fully. The only
illumination now came from the glow of lights through the open window.

Judy suffered a moment’s disorientation as she blinked up at the darkened ceiling, wondering at the change in view and why she felt so weighed down. She must have slipped sideways at some point, and Nick had uncurled and now laid sprawled across the couch, effectively trapping her between his body and the back cushions. He had one arm slung across her shoulders, her head tucked up under his chin. One of her ears was draped over his muzzle, his deep, even breathes tickling on every exhale.

Judy laid there, nibbling on her lip and fighting the urge to curl her claws into his shirt where they rested against his chest. How many fantasies had she had about being cuddled in Nick’s arms, warm and safe and loved? She’d lost count. To find herself in this position now was like waking into another dream.

But then she thought about how Nick would feel if he woke up and found them like this. It was a stolen moment in the most literal sense, and she knew she needed to respect Nick’s wishes. The unconscious cuddling had been an accident. But anything from this point on would be a betrayal.

She carefully set about extricating herself. But at her movement, Nick’s claws curled into the back of her jacket, pulling her even more tightly against him and his tail swiped over her feet in agitation.

She stilled.

That was when she realized that while the music outside had indeed stopped, the silence wasn’t as complete as she’d initially thought. Two voices were raised in heated argument, and they were coming right for the house.

“I said no, and that’s final.”

“Are you taking brother lessons from Robin now? I am not a kit. You can’t just put your paw down on my tail and think I’ll won’t snap back.”

“Did you learn nothing from what happened?”

“I learned a great deal. Why do you think I’m doing this?”

“You’re going to ruin everything.”

“I’m trying to protect it.”

“That just shows you how big a fool you are.”

The front door banged open. Judy, who had been struggling to unstick Nick’s claws from her coat, froze as Nick lurched awake, eyes flying wide before pain overtook him and he fell back, groaning.

Reynard and Craven stopped dead in the doorway, taking in the two of them on the couch.

Reynard snorted. “Well, this looks cozy.”

Nick shot him a glare-squint. That’s when he spotted Judy next to him.

He shoved away from her with a choked yelp, falling off the couch and onto the floor faster than Judy could grab for him. He lay there, moaning and clutching his head.

“Sorry for disturbing you,” said Craven. “We didn’t realize you were still here.”
Reynard tsked. “I’ll say we didn’t. Good thing most of the kids are gone.”

His brother shot him a warning look. Reynard just raised an eyebrow back at him, unimpressed.

“It’s not like that,” said Nick, eeking out each word through clenched teeth as he struggled to breathe through the pain of what had to be a truly spectacular hangover. “I would never… with Judy —” His words caught. He exploded off the floor and rushed past the other foxes out of the house. The sound of retching followed seconds after.

Reynard snickered. Craven shot Judy an apologetic look. With all the dignity she could muster she followed Nick out, glad when the brothers didn’t follow.

Outside lanterns had been lit and hung from the trees. Many of the guests had gone, but not all of them. Judy spotted Will and Scarlet in deep discussion over at the picnic tables, the old badger Robin had helped earlier that afternoon nodding off beside them. Little John lay dozing against a tree. Under each giant paw was snuggled a kit, Todd and Vixie, both fast asleep against his enormous belly.

She found Nick over by the bushes and waited a polite distance away while he collected himself. When he shuffled over to her she held out his hat. “You dropped this.”

Without meeting her eyes, he took it from her. “Thank you. I can use it to throw up in later.” His voice sounded ragged. Judy looked him over with concern. “Do you think you can make it to the cruiser?”

“If I have to crawl there,” he said with conviction. “Let’s go.”

Thankfully, Nick didn’t have to crawl. He didn’t need Judy’s help either, though he did have to stop and steady himself against several tree trunks. Neither of them spoke. Judy, for her part, could think of nothing to say. She felt tired, wrung out and disheartened. This was not the outing with Nick that she had hoped it would be. She had wanted this to be a bonding experience, a way for them to mend. Now she wondered if she had expected too much. As much as these woods might feel like a fantastical refuge, all it took was one glance at the night sky, bleached by the light of the city surrounding them, to reveal the truth. They were still in the middle of a city, and even a wood as pretty as this one was couldn’t grant miracles. Life just didn’t work that way.

Light glowed ahead of them. For a moment Judy thought they had somehow gotten turned around and were reproaching the house, but then she realized that they were at the pond, and that someone had come back and decorated it, because she was sure it hadn’t looked like this way before. Lanterns and ribbons hung from the trees, ringing the entire length of the pond, and candles lined the back, flickering in between the reeds like fireflies. Twinkly lights hung higher up in the branches, reflecting off the still black waters and giving the illusion of a star-filled sky just under the pond’s surface, a sky clearer and brighter than the one above.

Judy gravitated towards it, awed by the wonder of it. Behind her, Nick was calling her name. Not Carrots, but Hopps. She was Hopps again. Like the clock striking midnight in a fairytale, everything reverting back to cold reality.

She kept going until she was toe to toe with her reflection in the pond. Another Judy stared back at her, looking frustrated and tired and balanced on the edge of something she feared might be defeat.

She watched as Nick stepped up behind her. His eyes were on her and not the water, and so he didn’t see how his own reflection was looking at her, torn and confused and as lost as she was. They had overcome so much more dangerous and trickier things in the time they had been together,
so why not this? Why was this so hard for them?

A quiet sound of surprise had Judy looking up. Robin and Marian were there, arms wrapped around each other in a loving embrace, one they did not pull from at the sight of Nick and Judy. On Marian’s left paw, sparkling under all the lanterns, was a ring Judy knew, like all the pond’s decorations, hadn’t been there before.

Understanding clicked. Robin had done this. For Marian. For his proposal. And Judy had blundered right into it.

“I-I am so sorry,” she said, backing up so fast she almost crashed into Nick. “We’ll just…um, get out of you way so you can—”

“No no, it’s all right,” said Marian, slipping from Robin’s arms with one last adoring smile and rushing over to Judy. “This saves me the trouble of having to come find you.” Dropping to her knees, she swooped in for a hug, which Judy returned as best she could.

Things went by in a blur after that. Judy offered her congratulations and Nick shook Robin’s paw, solemn for once. Marian was more animated than Judy had ever seen her. She was giddy in her joy, hands clasping and unclasping, sneaking pecks on the cheek with Robin. Eventually they bid them goodbye so Marian could go tell the others the news, and Nick and Judy were able to slip off back into the trees.

It wasn’t until they were back in Zootopia’s city proper that Judy spoke. “I want to stop by the precinct.”

Nick made a noise that might have been agreement, or a burp, he was starting to look a little ill again, but luckily had yet to resort to the hat he still carried. But he followed her to the station nonetheless.

The ZPD was a lot quieter this time of night, with brief bursts of raucousness whenever a perp was brought in or an emergency sent a party rushing out.

Judy and Nick split up, Judy heading off to check her interoffice mail while Nick went to search out some pain killers.

The only other officer there was Tobir, his desk wedged into the far back corner. He nodded to Judy as she passed. He looked tired, the glow of the computer screen turning his mottled fur a washed out yellow and giving him the appearance of a sickly giraffe.

Nick trailed in a few minutes after her. He was no longer carrying the hat. Instead he had a bottled water and was taking careful sips from it, his eyes squinted in the overhead lights.

He paused at Tibor’s desk. “Are you writing an essay, T-dog? Is Chief Bogo still that mad at you?”

“It’s homework,” huffed Tobor. “I’m taking a class on how to be more successful in my career. I’m going to become so savvy the chief will have to acknowledge me.”

“Maybe not if he catches you doing it on the clock.” Nick tapped the computer screen. “That’s not how you spell managerial, by the way.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

Nick shuffled over to Judy. “Well?”
Judy shook her head. “The results on the notes I found at Clare’s came back negative. Only Clare’s paw prints were found on them.” She dropped the papers she had been reading onto the desk with a heavy *whap*. “I have to give it to them. Whoever this is knows what they’re doing.”

“Does that mean we can go home now?”

Judy sighed and pushed away from the desk. “Yeah.”

She slid out of her chair and rounded the desk. As she did, her foot caught on the corner edge and she pitched forward with a squeak.

Nick dove forward, catching her around the waist and splashing water down her front.

“Okay?” He sounded like he was in pain. No doubt his sudden lunge to catch her had been terrible for his headache. Judy nodded. His water bottle was digging into her stomach, its contents trickling down her front and onto the floor.

“What’cha guys doing?”

As abruptly as he had caught her, Nick let her go. Judy was so caught off guard by the sudden release that she didn’t have time to get her feet under her. She hit the floor hard on her paws and knees, knocking her shoulder against the side of the desk and splashing water now dirty from the floor all over her clothes.

“We weren’t doing anything,” said Nick. “Hopps here just tripped. Right, Hopps? No big deal.”

Judy didn’t answer. Tobir was trying to see them past the glare of his computer screen. Nick was fiddling with his now empty water bottle, smiling in a way Judy thought was supposed to be reassuring but looked more like a grimace. And Judy stared up at him, her partner, her *friend*, a terrible suspicion overcoming her with the same stomach-swooping suddenness as when Nick had dropped her.

“Are you… *embarrassed* to be seen with me?” she asked him.


But Judy didn’t think she was being ridiculous. His gentle rejection of the concert tickets, the way he had acted at the party, always so quick to get away from her. Even now, he kept glancing over at Tobir, like he was afraid the hyena might overhear.

“Does the idea of us being together bother you that much?” asked Judy. Her heart was an aching throb inside her chest. She had thought being rejected hurt, but this realization made that pain feel like nothing in comparison.

She struggled to breathe through the burn in her throat and the press of tears against the back of her eyes. She would *not* cry here, in a literal puddle at this fox’s feet. She would *not*.

“It’s not like that,” said Nick, but even as he said that he dropped his voice, putting his back to Tobir even though the hyena wasn’t even looking at them anymore. “It’s complicated,” he said. “But this isn’t the place to explain—“

“Why? Because someone might get the wrong idea?” said Judy. Why did he even care what other animals thought? Nick never used to care about things like that.

She started to rise and Nick reached out to help her. “Carrots—“
“Don’t.”

He flinched back as if she had slapped him. She had a moment’s remorse, but righteous anger replaced it quickly. She moved around him and out into the hall. Nick was right behind her.

“Carrots!”

How dare he call her that now? If he thought that would make her stop and listen—

Officer Howle appeared from Chief Bogo’s office then, his face grave. Judy slowed. “Howle? Is something wrong?”

“Hopps.” He scrubbed a paw over his muzzle. “It’s nothing. Just on my way back out. Found a real bad case this afternoon.”

“Anything I can help with?”

Nick had come up beside her. She refused to look in his direction.

“Not unless you know anything about the Free Range Market over by Zootopia University. Some poor animal was found murdered behind one of the dumpsters there, his throat crushed.”

“That’s awful!” said Judy. “We were just there yesterday.”

“Do you remember seeing this mammal there?” asked Howle, holding up a picture, and despite her anger at Nick, her gaze flew over to him, because Judy did remember seeing him, and so did Nick.

It was the chinchilla grocer that had been following her.
Nick woke to the sound of shattering glass.

He was out of bed like a shot, tearing through the apartment. He could already smell the blood, picture the trail of it that he would find across the floor. Too much. Far too much. He would need to be quick. No waiting on an ambulance this time. He would steal a vehicle if he had to. If Flash was on his way to work, maybe he could drive them… the sloth had never met a speeding limit he didn’t like to break.

Nick burst into the living room, mindful not to step on any glass shards. He didn’t see any, nor the chunk of brick that had smashed through the window, though he knew it was there. He would deal with it later. Forget taking it to the police, filling out that useless report. This time, he would find the ones who’d thrown it and he would hurl it back at them. He would break their dull, herbivore teeth with it. He would—

“Wilde.”

Someone grabbed the hem of his shirt, yanking him down onto his knees, and Nick came face to face with her. Bright green eyes bored into his, beseeching and terrified. Her beautiful russet fur was now wet and matted, stained a red so dark it was nearly black. The scent of copper was so strong it made Nick gag.

“Wilde.”

She shouldn’t have been able to grab onto him. Before, he had found her on the floor, her eyes open but unseeing, her limbs twitching as if she were still trying to crawl just a few inches further—

The blow across his face caught him entirely off-guard. It knocked Nick back and he landed on his tail, cupping his throbbing cheek as clarity finally broke through.

“Finnick?” he asked, then winced as pain shot through his jaw.

“Who else?” snapped the smaller fox, shaking out his paw. “You’ve got a head like a rock, you know that?”

Nick looked over at his living room window. His dazed reflection looked back at him from the intact panes. The smell of blood was gone, vanished like an odorous specter. There was no glass scattered across the floor. No brick. No one lay dying in his living room, though his friend looked angry enough to do murder.

Nick dropped his paw to his chest, where his heart was thumping faster than a furious rabbit’s foot. It only exacerbated the lingering sensation of nausea leftover from last night.

He groaned and fell back. Last night…. Judy…. Suddenly he was overcome with an entirely different emotion: Shame. The way he had acted, the things he had said to her… It was almost enough to make him want to drink himself back into a stupor.

“You’re a mess, Wilde,” said Finnick bluntly.

Nick couldn’t argue that.
His friend looked him over, and he must have found Nick just that pitiful because he blew out a breath and relented, asking, “Bad dream?”

The echo of shattering glass rang in Nick’s ears.

“Bad week,” he said.

“So you told me last night. At length.”

Finnick padded back over to the couch. His pillow and blanket had both fallen to the floor in his haste to get up. He threw the pillow back onto the couch and reached for the blanket. “Next time you feel the need to unload like that,” he told Nick, “pick a better hour. Listening to you whine at 3am is no longer as amusing as it was when we were younger.”

“I wasn’t thinking straight,” said Nick.

“That much was obvious.”

Nick watch him fold the blanket, corner to corner, then in half, then halved again. When he was done he tossed the whole thing on the couch next to the pillow.

“Now that I think about it,” said Finnick. “Next time, give my number a break and call that bunny of yours instead. If she wants to be your new partner than she can sure as heck share the load in dealing with your issues.”

Nick smiled without humor. “You don’t think I’ve put her through enough already?”

“I think if you don’t open that trap of yours soon, she might not be around the next time to let you put her through anything.”

Nick’s stomach swooped at the thought. “I’ve tried. But everything I say always comes out wrong.”

“Are you sure it’s not because you’re still trying to protect yourself?” asked Finnick.

“I’m trying to protect her.”

The smaller fox rolled his eyes. “If you say so. Regardless, you’ll just need to try harder. You’re the one who agreed to the partnership so now you need to take responsibility for it. Not to give you a big head or anything, but you’re usually smarter than this.”

Not when it came to Judy. He was at a loss with her. Always caught on the wrong foot. Desperate to be there for her, desperate to shield her, and continually failing at both.

“You really should charge for your services, with great pep talks like that,” said Nick sarcastically.

“Consider it a friend discount,” said Finnick. He pulled a small pack out from under the side table and headed for the bathroom. “I call first shower.”

“Try to save me some hot water this time, will you?” Nick called after him. The desert fox was a third his size, and yet needed twice the amount of time to clean himself.

Nick looked at the window again. A gray morning sky looked back at him. It looked like they were in for more snow later.

He pulled the blinds and went to go get ready for work.
Morning was in full swing when Nick arrived at the station, and it was with some trepidation that he went in search of his partner.

He found Judy sitting at her desk. Instead of being dressed in her usual police uniform, today she was wearing a black dress suit under her winter coat. A single file lay open on her desk, everything else stacked neatly to the side. Nick recognized the picture paper-clipped to the top of the folder as the same one Howle had shown them last night. The chinchilla smiled back at them, an easy grin that seemed at odds with the nervous creature Nick had seen at the market.

Nick propped a hip against Judy’s desk and folded his arms. “So you decided to go to the funeral?”

“Howle is busy at the crime scene,” she told him, her downcast eyes staying on the photo. But he heard the stiffness in her voice. And was still angry at him. “He wants to finish looking for prints and everything before the snow hits. I said I would go to the service. Learn what I could.” She traced her paw over the photo. “It’s the least I can do.”

“It’s not your fault, you know.”

Judy fisted her paws in her lap. “His name was Ignacio, but everyone called him Iggy. Over a dozen mammals have been interviewed so far, and no one has had anything bad to say about him.”

“You didn’t know what would happen.”

“You saw him,” said Judy. “He clearly wanted to tell me something. If only I had tried harder…”

“He ran away from you,” said Nick. “Were you supposed to chase him through the city, demanding that he tell you what was wrong? It might not have had anything to do with what happened. And even if it did…”

“If it did?”

Nick looked at her. “You can only extend your paw so far. It’s their choice whether they accept it or not. He chose not to. You are not responsible for that.”

“Then why do I feel so awful?”

*Because you are a good cop. Because you care too much. Because you are a decent mammal. Because the situation sucks, regardless of who the animal is.*

None of those platitudes would comfort her, however, and so Nick said nothing. If things had been different, if he hadn’t made such a huge mistake last night, if they had been alone, if the last month hadn’t happened, he would have pulled her into his arms and held her until those tears hovered along the edges of her eyes had dried, until the tension in her shoulders had gone. But all those things did happen, and so he kept his paws to himself and his trap shut. It was the best he could do.

Judy’s pocket buzzed. She pulled out her phone and checked the screen. She sighed when she saw who it was. “I don’t think I have the energy to talk to him right now.”

“Who?”

Letting the call go to voicemail, she pocketed the phone. “Ben.”

“Ben?” said Nick. “You mean… Benjamin Cottontail? You’re still talking to that jackrabbit? Since when?”
Her head came up, a scowl between her brow. “He called a couple of times while I was at the farm,” she told him. “Apparently he heard I wasn’t at the station and wanted to make sure I was okay.”

The surge of jealousy Nick felt was expected, but not the stab of hurt that came with it. Here he had waited a month for any sign that Judy would forgive what he’d done and come back to him, and all the while that crooked bunny had been chatting her up?

“Does this mean you’ve rethought his offer?”

Judy’s answer was immediate. “Of course not,” she said. “We’re just friends.”

That didn’t make Nick feel much better.

“Friends?” he scoffed. “With Cottonbutt? Why would you even want to?”

He expected Judy to rally with some passionate defense of the bunny’s character, but to Nick’s surprise, she looked away with decidedly guilty expression. “That’s—I mean, there’s no real reason…”

Intrigued now, Nick leaned forward across the desk so she was forced to look at him. “Spill it, Hopps. What are you up to?”

“Nothing!”

Nick raised an eyebrow.

Judy sighed. “I’m just trying to help mend what fences I can, okay?”

“Between who? You and Cottonbutt?”

“No. Between Ben and the Corsacs.”

Now Nick was really confused. “But that jackrabbit hates them.”

“They still grew up together.”

Nick frowned. “That doesn’t make them family.”

“They must have some fond memories of each other.”

“Not necessarily.”

“They all adored Carol Hopson, and learned to love cooking because of her. At the very least, that gives them a common interest. And I believe they are all decent animals at heart, even Ben. If I can just get him to give a little—”

“You can’t make animals like each other through sheer willpower just because you want them to,” said Nick, and immediately regretted it when Judy flinched back from him.

“That—look, that came out wrong,” said Nick. “I didn’t mean... I was just trying to say—”

“I think I got the gist of it,” said Judy, and it was Nick’s turn to flinch at the chilliness in her voice. She pushed back her chair and stood. “I have a funeral to go to,” she told him. “I’ll catch up with you tomorrow maybe.”
“Hopps, wait—”

He started to follow her, but as she ducked out the door, Nick heard a voice say behind him, “Disgusting,” and looked back.

Officer Delgato was watching him from his desk, his great snout wrinkled with distaste, and Nick felt his hackles rise.

“You got something you want to say, you oversized hairball?”

The lion chuffed sharply and turned away. Nick eyed him for another moment, but decided it wasn’t worth the time and continued out into the hall. Unfortunately when he got there Judy was long gone.

“Great.”

“Wilde?”

Nick looked around to find Tibor’s speckled face peering down at him. The hyena’s face split into a wide grin. “I was looking for you. I heard Hopps was gone for the day. I don’t suppose you’d mind if I shadowed you for the day?”

“You don’t have more essays to write?” asked Nick, glancing around him down the hallway just in case Judy happened to reappear. She didn’t.

“Oh I finished that paper last night,” said Tibor. “So can I come? I promise I won’t make any mistakes this time.”

“I guess…” said Nick.

“All right! Partners again. Just like old times, eh?”

“Yeah,” said Nick. “Just like old times.”

The chinchilla’s funeral was held in Zootopia Memorial Park, across the street from the city’s main cemetery, Hills of Eternal Grazing.

For someone who wasn’t a public figure, the chinchilla’s service was heavily attended. Not even the biting chill and overcast sky kept the animals away. They filled the field in front of the stage, a collapsible wooden structure that had seen better days. Judy took a bench on the outskirts of the crowd, next to a donkey and large family of chipmunks.

A young, scrawny jackal gave the eulogy. Judy recognized him from the file as the one who had found the body. His name was Freddy. His suit was threadbare and a little big on him. Either he had lost a lot of weight since he’d last worn it or he had borrowed it from a much larger family member. A giraffe had to lower the adjustable podium so the jackal could see over it. Crackling echoed over the speakers as the papers he was holding brushed across the mic.

“Uh, thank you, all of you, who have come here today to say goodbye to a truly special mammal.” His canine drawl was thick with emotion. The donkey near Judy started braying mournfully. From the other end of the field, a wolf howled. A second later five more joined in.

“Not many animals knew this,” said Freddy. “But there was a time when my family was going through some, ah, really worrying financial difficulties. Things like groceries or rent… There were
weeks where we would be force to choose between the two. It got to a point where my mother even collapsed at work. Malnourishment, too many extra hours trying to get just a little more overtime. And of course we couldn’t afford the hospital bills, or the prescription for vitamins so… yeah. Things were tough.”

The jackal’s voice cracked. He paused to clear it, then continued, stronger. “I hadn’t known Iggy for very long then. He was just some vendor I’d chat with once in a while at the market. But he found out about us. My family. He started leaving baskets of food outside our apartment. No note or anything, but I had been by his stalls enough times that I knew who it was from.”

Freddy looked down at the podium. “Of course, being a young punk and full of pride, I went to him. And instead of saying thank you, I told him that my family wasn’t a charity case. That we were doing just fine. And Iggy said to me—“ The young animal chuckled. “He said, ‘From all the yapping you’re doing, I guess that’s true. Then maybe you can return the favor and help me out instead.’”

A crooked smile broke through Freddy’s somber mien. “I worked for him for over two years. He couldn’t pay a lot, but that little bit of extra income was enough to get my family back on its feet. And I watched as he continued to help others. Predator or prey, rich or poor, he would hold out his paw to everyone—usually with a piece of fruit in it.”

That got a ripple of fond laughter from the crowd.

“And even though I’m happy to have shared this story with you, I know it isn’t necessary. I don’t need to tell anyone here how great Iggy was. You’re here because you already know. Iggy was more than just a friend. He was family. To all of us. And he will be greatly missed.”

An elephant near the back trumpeted his agreement, and this set off a chain reaction of roars and yips and more howling, accompanied by passionate stomping of hooves and paws.

Several other animals took to the stage after Freddy and gave similar speeches, all with touching stories concerning Iggy. Afterwards, tables with snacks were set out and animals rose to eat and mingle. Judy weaved her way through and around the herds of mourners, picking up bits of conversation here and there, occasionally stopping to ask a question or two, but after a half hour she had to conclude that if Iggy had any deep dark secrets that might give her a lead as to why he had been murdered, she wasn’t going to find the answers in this crowd.

She eventually found herself over by the park’s watering hole, which had been dyed a darker than natural blue for a more picturesque viewing and tasted faintly of raspberries.

A beaver in a black dress lingered near the edge, her paws curled into the heavy gray shawl around her hunched shoulders. She had such a dark and brooding air about her as she stared off into the water that Judy found herself giving the beaver a more lingering look, and realized as she did so that she recognized her.

“Ms. Betty Flatalie? Is that you?”

The former apartment manager of the late Rick Tavi looked over, and her expression darkened like rain clouds converging into a true and formidable storm.

“Oh. It’s you. The rabbit officer. You’ll have to forgive me for not remembering your name.”

Judy didn’t believe that, but let it go. “It’s Judy. Judy Hopps.”

“Right. You’re here because of how Iggy died, I assume.” She sounded both tired and out of
patience.

“I am,” admitted Judy, edging a little closer. “Did you know Iggy well?”

The beaver gave her a sharp look. “Hardly. And before you go suspecting me, you should know that I’m not the only one from the apartment building who is here today. So don’t even think of making any wild accusations just because I happened to be here after what happened to Mr. Tavi.”

“Never crossed my mind,” said Judy.

Betty *hmphed*.

“But I am investigating what happened to Iggy,” said Judy. “So if there’s anything you know that might help…”

“We were in the same study group,” said Betty with a huff. “He helped me write a few essays. That’s it. We were hardly bosom pals.”

Judy remembered the beaver mentioning she had classes. “You’re enrolled at Z.U., right? Can I ask the subject?”

“How to have a successful career,” said the beaver. “It’s technically a business elective, but a lot of animals take it as a one-off because the lessons can be applied to almost any job.”

“Who’s the teacher?”

“A panda named Mrs. Lin.”

“Who else was in the class?”

“How should I know? It’s a big class. Am I supposed to remember the name of everyone who’s in it?”

“But the beaver let out an indelicate snort. “That mongoose would be more likely to teach a class than to sit in on one. He was successful enough without it, not that he deserved half of what he made. A charming good-for-nothing, is what he was.”

Judy decided not to comment on that. “I think I’ve taken up enough of your time. I appreciate you talking to me.”

Betty waved her off. “Keep your thanks. Not like I had much of a choice. I’m going home. The food is terrible here anyway.”

Judy watched her shuffle off, wondering what it meant, if anything, that the landlady of one victim was also the classmate of another. Could it even be called a connection, or was it just a bizarre coincidence entirely unrelated to the case? She couldn’t, as an officer, dismiss the older beaver as a suspect anymore, but her gut told her Ms. Flatalie wasn’t the one.

Still…

She pulled out her phone, nibbling her lip. The last thing she wanted to do right now was talk to Nick, but she needed to let him know.
After a moment of debate, she decided to text him. She kept the message brief, and after she send it watched, half-worried, half-hoping he would call. He didn’t. A minute later his response chimed: *Will do.*

Well… good.

Feeling oddly put out and unsure why, Judy stuffed her phone back into her coat pocket. She would make one more cycle around the park, and then she would go.

As she made her way past the food tables, she spotted another bunny over by the carrot sticks. Her fur was a similar shade of gray as Judy’s, and when their eyes met over the table they shared knowing smiles.

“How are the celery sticks?” Judy asked.

“Dried out,” said the other bunny. “I’m offended on Iggy’s behalf. He never would have stood for such low quality.”

That startled a laugh out of Judy. She immediately squelched it, unsure if she should be laughing at a funeral. The other bunny’s smile drooped as well. She flicked away a carrot, her humor vanishing as quickly as it had come. “It’s fitting, I suppose. Iggy’s gone, so of course the produce is off as well.”

Her eyes abruptly filled with tears. She swiped them away with a curse. “I’m sorry. My emotions have a mind of their own today. And I was doing so good, too. Ugh.” She gave a hard sniff and shook her head as if she could fling the sadness off like raindrops. She held out her paw. “I’m Harper.”

“Judy.”

“Oh, I know.” Harper winked. “Hardly a day goes by when your name doesn’t pop up in my office.”

“It doesn’t?” said Judy.

“Ah. Maybe I should explain. I’m a journalist. There. Explanation done.” Harper picked up a piece of broccoli and made a face at the withered state of it. “This really is unacceptable. Are they *trying* to be offensive? Because it feels deliberate now.”

“So are you here for work, or…” Judy trailed off.

Harper glanced up, and beneath the irritation Judy saw genuine grief. “Is it terrible if I say it’s both? Iggy was a… dear, dear friend, but it’s been years. The way we parted… it wasn’t how I wanted it to be. But some things can’t be helped. Sometimes endings are going to hurt, you know? And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Judy had a sudden memory of being in the cruiser with Nick, chatting, laughing, arguing over whose turn it was to blast the siren, and it scared her, how quickly her mind went to that place.

“I’m not sure I understand what kind of ending you mean,” said Judy. “Or what you mean by it hurting.”

Harper’s mouth twisted into a bitter smile. Rounding the table, she hooked her arm through Judy’s, who let herself be steered away from the tables and farther into the field, away from the main herd of milling animals.
“I didn’t mean to suggest we came to blows or anything,” said Harper. “Iggy and I had a… falling out, you could say. It was no one’s fault, but I’ve always felt bad about it. I might get awards for my articles in the paper, but I am rubbish when it comes to saying the right things mammal-to-mammal. I know I hurt him. And now—ah geez, these stupid tears are coming back again.” She dashed the tears away with a shaking paw. “Anyway, when my company found out what happened to him… well, they were going to do the article regardless. Iggy was too beloved but the city to let him go without some sort of special recognition. And I figured in that case, it might as well be me writing it. That way I can at least do his story justice.”

Judy thought back to when she had seen the chinchilla at the market. How terrified he had looked, almost like he had seen a ghost. Maybe, it’d had nothing to do with her being a cop. Maybe, he had seen a gray bunny and simply mistaken her for Harper, or been reminded of her enough that it had given him a shock. It would explain why he had run away.

_But not why he was murdered._

“If you knew Iggy so well, do you know why someone would want harm him?” asked Judy. “Did he have any enemies or do anything to get on someone’s bad side?”

“Your cop is showing,” said Harper, but she didn’t sound offended or wary by the question.

She brought them to a stop under a fir tree, releasing Judy’s arm and reaching up to give the lowest branches a playful ruffling. “Everyone loved Iggy. Everyone. He never broke a law in his life, never lost his temper. When others who worked in the market would get into a fight about something, Iggy was always the one they called to help smooth things over. That he died like this…” Harper dropped her paw. “I’m still trying to process it myself. That’s why this article is so important.”

“Important how?” asked Judy.

Harper looked at her, and despite that her eyes were still wet with tears, there was a fierce determination to them that took Judy aback. “Because I am going to find out the truth. It’s the only apology I can give Iggy now. I’m going to find out who did this to him, and then I am going to reveal it to the world. I am going to make the animal who did this pay.”

“Change of plans, T-dog.”

Nick looked up from his phone. Across the screen was Judy’s most recent text: _Betty Flatalie attended same career class as victim. Can you check what classes Clare is taking?_

“We need to make a stop,” he told Tibor. “Turn right here.”

There were more animals about the college apartment complex this time. A young lion still growing out his mane lay stretched out on one of the sunbathing boulders, reading from a physics textbook. A dozen or so mice sat out on the rodent balcony above the doors to the bigger apartments, chatting and sipping from tiny drink glasses. They quieted as Nick and Tibor passed. Nick thought it was a toss up who they were more wary of, the hyena or the fox. They certainly made for an interesting duo, that was for sure.

He knocked on Clare’s door, surprised when a moment later he heard the lock flip. He had been expecting another drawn out wait in order to speak with her.

The door opened. Tamara stood there, a cross look on her face that turned to surprise and then wariness as she took in the two animals on the doorstep.
“Officers,” she greeted with a formal bob of her head. “I didn’t know my sister was expecting you.”

“I find the easiest way to talk to your sister is when she’s not expecting us,” said Nick. “Is she here, by any chance?”

“No, actually. She’s out clothes shopping for the concert tonight.”

“I didn’t realize the Gazelle concert was tonight,” said Nick.

The badger made a scoffing noise. “As if my sister would ever like something so downstream. No, she’s going to some skunk rock concert tonight. She has to be different, my sister.”

“Huh,” said Nick. “Well then maybe you’ll be able to answer some questions for us instead. May we come in?”

Tamara looked at Tibor again. The distrust was written plainly across her features. Even the polite smile she had pasted on her face couldn’t disguise her feelings. Tibor, for his part, kept his expression light. Nick sympathized. If foxes clung to the last rung of the social ladder, then hyenas held onto the step above them by grit alone.

But in the end, manners won out. Clare’s sister pulled open the door and stepped back, saying, “Of course. Come on in.”

“Thank you.”

Nick took a seat at the table where he and Judy had spoken to Clare the last time. Tibor took the place beside him. Luckily, the chairs were armless, otherwise he never would have managed it. Nick heard the hyena’s furry knees brush the underside of the table as he tucked himself in.

That left Tamara to either sit next to Tibor or directly across from Nick. She hesitated, then choose the seat across. Her posture was impeccable, back straight, her paws folding politely in front of her. Only her eyes bounced back and forth between Nick and Tibor, betraying her nervousness.

“What kind of questions did you have?” she asked.

“Your sister,” said Nick. “She said she was an English major. Do you know what classes she’s taking right now?”

“I do, but… what does that have to do with anything?”

“Humor me,” said Nick.

Tamara didn’t look like she wanted to. She shot a look at Tibor, who was shifting around in his seat like he had ants in his fur, trying to find a more comfortable position. Nick cleared his throat pointedly.

“I don’t remember the exact names of them, okay?” said Tamara. “I know she’s taking a creative writing class. Some kind of diversity class. And a class on early world literature. Don’t ask me what century.”

“Not any business classes?”

Tamara rolled her eyes. “For Clare? She could barely pass basic algebra.”

“So nothing to do with building a successful career or anything like that?”
The table popped up, nearly clipping Nick in the chin, before crashing back down again. He looked around at Tibor, who shot him a guilty look and finally ceased with his squirming. The badger stared at him as if he had just tried to pounce on her. “No, she isn’t.”

Nick stayed watching her.

“Really,” she said. “If you don’t believe me you can call the school, check her records.”

She cleared her throat. Her paws, which had fluttered up when Tibor had bumped the table, settled back into her lap. “Look, I apologize if this sounds rude, but I don’t know why you’re back here, asking more questions. I know my sister didn’t contact you. And I managed to talk my mother out of it, just barely. Everything is finally returning to normal around here, and I’m afraid if you keep poking your nose into this it’s just going to upset things. I think… I really think it’s for the best to just leave well enough alone.”

“And the one who hurt your sister? You’re fine just letting them off the hook?”

“I think,” she said, weighing each word carefully, “That my sister, like a lot of young animals, came to college and got her first taste of freedom, and she went too far. I think she knows it too, and that’s why she didn’t want to involve the police. But she’s learned her lesson now, I honestly believe that, and I don’t think anything like this will ever happen again. So yes, I’m letting what happened go, because I think that it’s what’s best for everyone, including my sister.”

Tibor looked from Tamara to Nick, who suddenly felt tired in a way only disappointment could make you.

“I guess that’s everything then,” said Nick. “We’ll see ourselves out.”

As they made their way to the door Tibor leaned over to ask, “You all right there, little red?”

Nick stopped with his paw on the doorknob. “I guess. It’s just—wait, what did you just call me?”

Tibor gave him a sheepish smile. “Is it good? Do you like it? I thought, since you gave me a nickname, maybe I could—”

“No.”

Tibor immediately nodded. “Right. Yeah, no, you’re right. It was dumb.”

Despite the crappy day, the hyena’s awkward backtracking made Nick smile. He shook it off with a forced cough and opened the door.

A kangaroo stood on the front step. He wore sweatpants and a blue hoodie pulled low over his ears. His arm was outstretched, and he froze and blinked to suddenly see cops standing there. Nick glanced up at the door and saw the kangaroo had taped a note there.

A note.

“Ah, sorry,” said the kangaroo. “I’ll just, uh—” He turned to leave.

Nick, who hadn’t a hope of holding him back, told Tibor, “Stop him.”

The hyena caught the kangaroo by the neck of his hoodie and with one powerful yank hauled him back, nearly taking the animal off his giant feet.

“What? I’m sorry. I wasn’t doing anything wrong, I just—“
Nick jumped up and snatched the note from off the door, ignoring the kangaroo’s stuttered explanations. It read:

C,

*I have your things. Coach says they can’t stay in your locker anymore. Call me, please?* J.

Not another threat note, at least. Nick held up the paper to the kangaroo. “J? Let me guess, your name is Joey?”

“Joe.” The kangaroo glared at Tibor. “Can you let go of me now, please?”

The hyena looked at Nick. At the fox’s nod, he released him. The kangaroo hopped back, making a show of tugging his hoodie straight. “Why are you guys here? Clare—she’s okay, right?”

“She’s fine,” said Nick. “Mind explaining this note to us?”

Joe leaned back on his tail and stuffed his paws into his pocket. “Not much to explain, is there? I have some stuff of hers and I’m trying to give it back.”

“And this coach? Are we talking about her boxing class?”

“You know about—I mean, yeah. Yes, boxing. We’re in the same class. Well, were. Apparently she dropped out. No notice. Nothing.”

“Maybe she lost interest?” suggested Nick, but even as he said it he remembered when he had last spoken to Clare. She had talked about getting into boxing, and there had been gloves and boxing videos around the room. That had only been a few days ago.

“You don’t understand,” said Joe. “The semester is almost over, and she was doing really well. It makes no sense for her to drop out at this point. I tried to get her talk to me but she won’t—” he blew out a frustrated breath and looked at the officers, expression turning concerned. “Is this because of what happened to her?”

“You know what happened?” asked Nick.

“It was hard to miss,” said the kangaroo, anger in his voice. “I’ve been trying to find out who did it, but no one seems to know anything and Clare won’t—”

“Talk to you. I got that,” said Nick dryly.

“As well she shouldn’t!” spit Tamara, appearing in the hall behind them. She stomped over to the kangaroo, and even though he easily could have kicked her all the way to the campus like a football, she crowded right into his space, jabbing a claw into the knee of his sweatpants. “How dare you come here! Haven’t you done enough to Clare? It’s your fault she’s gotten mixed up in the crowds she has—”

“They’re her friends,” defended Joe hotly. “The first she’s had since escaping that oppressive family home of yours. Are you the one who convinced her to give up boxing?”

“No, she wised up all on her own,” said Tamara. “And if you had half a brain cell left your head after being kicked senseless so many times, you would leave here and never come back.”

Joe looked like he wanted to argue, but after a tense moment he spun on his tail and hopped off.
Tamara gave the cops one last angry look, then slammed the door. The clunk of the deadbolt sliding home echoed in the cold afternoon air.
Chapter 8

Tibor said Nick could pick the restaurant as thanks for letting him tag along for the day. Nick appreciated the gesture.

He directed the hyena out of Downtown and into the Rainforest District, Tibor following his directions gamely. When they closed in on the Rainbow Cafe, with its giant billboard signs boasting great tables with scenic views of the falls and a light show every Friday night, the hyena laughed.

"You taking me somewhere special, Wilde?" asked Tibor.

"You wish," said Nick. "Turn right up here."

Tibor carefully steered the cruiser forward. Even on a weekday afternoon, this part of the city was stuffed full of pedestrians and tourists alike. The misty roads made visibility an additional challenge, but there were more than enough cafes, diners, and snack shops with glowing neon lights to lead the way.

Nick ignored them all.

"When I said you could pick the place," said Tibor as they rolled by another Biff's Beastro. "I meant in Zootopia, Wilde."

Nick rolled his eyes and pointed. "You'll want the road coming up."

"Haymarket Street? But that will take us to the Meadowlands. Unless you have a taste for wheat grass shakes that I don't know about, why go there?"

"Just turn," said Nick.

They circled the block. Finally, Nick had Tibor park in front of Herds & Herbs, next to a horn and antler buffing business and across the street from a shearing shop.

"You want us to eat here?" said Tibor, staring through the windshield at the sign that had an overly cutey, giant-eyed sheep on it.

"Trust me, you won't regret it," said Nick.

"Too late for that."

Tibor started to head in, but Nick shook his head and pointed to the small group of tables set up on the curb.

"Really?" said Tibor.

"The fresh air will do you good," said Nick.

"Or not-so-fresh," muttered Tibor, eyeing the industrial-sized dumpster next to the shearing shop. "And it's cold."

"What's the matter? Afraid it might be a bit too nippy out here for you?"

Tibor shot him a deliberately wide smile, the kind that revealed an unnervingly long row of teeth.
"Not even the weather dares to nip at me."

"Uh-huh." Nick bumped the hyena's knee with his fist and pulled up a chair. "Just go with me on this okay, T-dog?"

Tibor's sigh escaped him in a puff of white-cold air, but he sat.

A goat waiter scrambled out to greet them, a scarf hastily slung around his neck. "Would you not be more comfortable inside, sirs?" he asked them.

"We're too tough for the indoors," said Tibor. Adding in a mutter, "Apparently."

"Ah, I see," said the goat, though it was clear from his expression that he didn't. He retreated back inside and returned a minute later with two menus and a bowl of flowers, which he set on the table between them. They were star-shaped and purple with fuzzy stalks and leaves. Tibor eyed the plants with bemusement. "A centerpiece? A little fancy for the venue, isn't it?"

"An appetizer," said the goat. His tone was polite, if speculative. No doubt he was wondering why a pair of predators like themselves had chosen to come here.

"Flowers as an appetizer?" Tibor shook his head.

Nick glanced up from his menu. "It's called borage. You should try it. It tastes like cucumber."

The hyena wrinkled his nose. "Is that supposed to be an incentive? How do you know what it tastes like?"

"Judy likes it in her salad." And she liked to wheedle Nick into trying bites off her plate, just to laugh at his expression. Her amusement was always worth the taste.

Well, most of the time.

Tibor grunted but didn't comment further.

Nick ordered the spicy steamed cauliflower. There would be no helping the texture, but at least the heat would cover up the vegetable flavor. Tibor, after grimacing at the menu choices, reluctantly ordered the same.

"So you want to tell me why you picked this place?" he asked when the waiter had gone.

Nick plucked up a flower, twirling it between the tips of his claws. "Consider it a tip."

"Of restaurants to avoid? Consider it taken," said Tibor.

Nick merely smiled. He wondered if he could take the borage to go. He could give it to Judy as an apology, using the information he had gathered today as an excuse to get together. Would she buy that?

As Judy would say, "I might've been born last in my litter, but I wasn't born yesterday."

Nick sighed and dropped the flower back into the bowl.

"Still thinking about those badgers?" guessed Tibor.

"Huh? Oh. Yeah," Nick lied, pushing away thoughts of Judy. "It's a strange case, isn't it?"
"Not so strange," said Tibor. He sounded almost bored by it. "Are you really going to keep looking for the culprit?"

"You think I should stop?"

The hyena bobbed his head from side to side in an ambivalent way. "Animals that commit crimes should be punished, no doubt about it. But while I feel for… Clare, was it? I think her sister is probably right. The bee has returned to its hive, as it were. What's the point in poking at it again? So more animals can get stung while the bee flies away?"

"You don't think it's possible to catch them?"

"Maybe. Eventually. But is it worth taking the time to catch what is, at the end of the day, a single bee?"

"What Clare suffered was hardly a bee sting," said Nick.

"I wasn't trying to diminish what she went through," said Tibor. "But compared to other cases we got going on right now—"

"Like illegal woolgathering?" asked Nick dryly.

"Exactly!"

His shamelessness made Nick grin despite himself.

The goat returned with their orders. Tibor made faces and smushed his cauliflower around his plate until it looked more like mashed potatoes, but Nick made an effort to eat as much of his as he could stand. He even ventured to taste the small plate of bee balm that the goat brought out with their check. The small red flowers reminded Nick of fireworks and tasted like mint. When he offered one to Tibor, the hyena looked at him with genuine concern.

"You do realize you're not partnered with prey today, right? We are predators, Wilde. Predators don't eat things like flowers."

"What about wearing them in our fur?" asked Nick, tucking the bee balm behind his ear. "What do you think? Be honest with me. Ha! Get it? Bee honest?"

Tibor shook his head and grabbed the check. "Forget it. I'm going to go pay this."

Once the hyena disappeared inside the restaurant, Nick dropped both the flower and his smile.

A young zebra came out to clean the table and Nick moved to get out of his way. He watched as the Zebra dumped the bowl of borage into the bus bin, along with the mashed remains of Tibor's meal. It oozed over the flowers like white sludge, bending the stalks and submerging the dainty purple petals.

The zebra saw him staring and flicked his tail nervously. He pointed to the now ruined flowers in the bin. "You… didn't want that to go, did you?"

Nick forced a smile. "No, sorry. Carry on."

He distracted himself with his phone while the Zebra finished cleaning up and hustled back inside. He noted that it was after three. The funeral should be over by now. He wondered how Judy was doing. Maybe he should have insisted on going with her to the service. Not that she would have
wanted him there, but still, he didn't like that she had been forced to go on her own. His fault. She must be feeling pretty down about everything right now. He wanted to be there for her, but he didn't want to force his unwanted company on her either.

After thinking about it, he put in a couple calls. Both animals were surprised to hear from him, but more than happy to grant his request when he explained.

He hung up feeling a modicum better than he did before.

Tibor returned just as he was putting his phone away.

"Well, that was… an interesting meal," said the hyena. "Can we go now?"

Nick glanced across the street. "Five more minutes."

A muscle leapt in the hyena's jaw. "You know, I think I've been a pretty good sport about this, but I can't help but feel like you're taking advantage now."

"Taking advantage? Of what?"

"Of my easygoing personality."

Nick laughed. "I told you. I'm giving you a tip."

"A tip about what?"

The door to the shearing shop swung open and a stylishly groomed sheep with a coat over his apron appeared, a huge plastic bag full of trimmings hefted over each shoulder.

"That," said Nick.

They watched as the sheep carried his load over to the dumpster and stuffed it in, then hoofed it back inside.

"Wow," said Tibor sarcastically. "Can't believe we almost missed such an exciting event."

Nick rolled his eyes. "Just wait."

From down the street, a small vehicle that had been idling, unnoticed at the corner pulled around and came to a stop a few shops down. Nick tugged Tibor back so that they were half-crouched behind the table, ignoring the hyena's glare. A familiar fluffy head with large buck teeth poked its head out the car door and glanced around.

Next to Nick, Tibor stirred.

The gopher scurried from his vehicle and over to the dumpster. He clambered up the side, nearly losing his grip on the lid before forcing the corner up and wriggling his way under. The lid fell back down with a hollow *whap*.

"That's—" spluttered Tibor.

"Turns out he's been hitting up every shearing business this side of Zootopia," said Nick, straightening from his crouch.

"But how did you—"
Nick shrugged. "After our little excursion to the park that day, I made a few inquiries. A rodent like that has to feed his vice somewhere, and no doubt he's going to get caught every now and then. It's not something most shearing places would call the cops about, but when a cop calls *them*, well, its definitely something they're going to remember, the time they caught some gopher sniffing around their garbage cans. I even managed to map out the little cretin's schedule. He's very well organized, this rodent." Nick grinned. "I was just going to tell you, but I have to say, seeing the stunned look on your face is more fun."

From inside the dumpster came a echoing boom and then a snicker.

Both officers started. Nick wrinkled his nose and backed up a couple of steps. "Uh, I think I'll let you take it from here."

Judy headed home early that evening. The snow they were promised had yet to fall, and clouds loomed low and thick over the skyline, blotting out the sunset and making it feel later than it was. The weather perfectly mirrored her thoughts, which felt as if they were turning into their own impending maelstrom inside her mind. Nick, the case, Harper—they swirled about in a bid for Judy's attention that made it impossible for her to focus on any of them properly.

Usually when she became mentally swamped like this, she would find Nick. He always knew exactly when to listen and when to give advice. When to break the tension with a joke or offer his sympathies.

A perfect partner.

Judy sighed and climbed the stairs up to her floor. She could hardly complain about her partner to her partner though, even if he could use a good telling off.

It was a tempting idea.

But the truth was, she no longer felt confident enough in their relationship to give Nick an honest piece of her mind. What if that finished driving home the wedge between them? What would she do then?

But on the other paw, what kind of partnership did they have when she could no longer communicate honestly to him? If she really were still in a partnership, she shouldn't feel this alone.

"Judy!"

The squeaky voice had Judy freezing at the top of the stairs. A fox in a long pink coat and lace scarf stood in front of her apartment, palm outstretched so that the tiny arctic shrew in equally elegant attire and an impeccable bouffant hairdo could knock on the door.

"There you are!" Fru Fru scurried up onto Marian's shoulder as the fox hurried over to Judy. "Why wouldn't you answer your phone? We called you like ten times!"

"I had my phone turned off," said Judy. She hadn't been able to stand the constant wondering if Nick would call her, or if she even wanted him to call, and if she should answer if he did, and what she would do if he didn't... In the end, it had been easier just to turn off her phone. What she didn't know she couldn't worry about, right?

"What's going on?" she asked. "Is everything all right? Why were you trying to reach me?"

"Nick called us," said Marian. "He said you were having a bad day and might need some
company.

Judy felt something electric and not altogether pleasant shoot through her, leaving her cheeks hot and her paws numb. "Nick did?"

"We were so worried when we couldn't get a hold of you," said Fru Fru, her bouffant quivering as she took Judy in with anxious eyes. "You're okay, aren't you? You're not hurt or anything?"

Nick had called them. Because he'd known she'd be upset. Because he was still trying to take care of her even when it was his fault she was upset in the first place.

Really! That stupid fox. She could just… just…

"I'm fine," said Judy. "It was sweet of you to come, but really, I'm fine."

Marian put a paw on her shoulder. "Are you sure?"

Judy nodded.

Fru Fru ran down Marian's arm and onto Judy's shoulder. She patted the bunny's fluffy cheek, holding up her tiny paw when it came away wet. "Oh, sweetie. We might believe you more if you could say it without crying."

"I'm not," insisted Judy, but her voice cracked and her friends faces blurred as tears filled her eyes in earnest. "I'm f-fine—"

She stood there, fighting to swallow the rising lump in her throat. But it was too big and hurt too much. Like the time Nick had convinced her to try a bite of deep-fried cricket. It just wouldn't go down.

Marian, seeing her struggle, stepped close and wrapped her arms around her in a comforting embrace, careful not to jostle the shrew. The rough texture of her fur against Judy's cheek, the swish of her bushy tail brushing across back of her legs, it reminded Judy too much of how it felt when Nick had held her. A single sob managed to break free, and once it was out, the rest came tumbling after, and to Judy's horror she found herself bursting into tears right there in the middle of the hallway.

Fru Fru let out a startled squeak at finding herself in a sudden downpour and ducked beneath one of Judy's ears, cooing to her from under her covering. Marian patted Judy's back sweetly, offering her own murmurs of sympathy.

And Judy cried.

"That's why you should never use an electric razor, because it ruins the wool. What you really want are sheering scissors. Call it old fashioned, but the quality speaks for itself."

"I could have sworn we gave you the right to remain silent," said Nick.

From the back seat of the cruiser, the gopher harrumphed. "Just trying to be friendly. Can't even give an animal some free advice these days without it being held against you."

"When that advice is about how to break the law, then yes."

"A victimless crime."
"The sheep with missing chunks in their wool would disagree."

The gopher jutted out his chin. "It'll grow back. Personally, I think they're just being selfish with it. Why can't they be more giving? Those sheep don't know how lucky they are. Do you know how thin gopher fur is? I have to work near Tundratown, you know? And winter is coming."

"Then buy a coat!"

A tuft of wool floated up, blown by the heater, and stuck to the grating separating the back seat of the cruiser from the front.

"I'm going to have clean this whole vehicle," whined Tibor.

Nick plucked the bit of wool up and added it to the giant bag of evidence between his feet. "It still won't be as bad as cleaning our perp back there."

Tibor shuddered. "Don't remind me."

"Hey!" said the gopher. "It wasn't like that was picnic for me either, you know!"

"Stuff it," said Tibor.

Nick snorted.

When the hyena had hauled the gopher out of the dumpster, the tiny mammal had been covered head-to-toe in wool. It had been stuck to his fur, taped under his arms and to the bottom of his feet. He had even packed his shirt and pants with with it until he resembled a nightmarish kind of plushie doll with its stuffing coming out the seams. Divesting his every nook and crevice of wool had been a tedious, not to mention disgusting, process.

Despite that, Nick could tell Tibor was savoring the win. He sat tall in his seat instead of in his usual hunched position. And he was grinning. A wide, scary thing that wouldn't go away.

It felt nice to finally be able to make someone happy. Nick had been starting to fear he had lost the ability entirely.

When they got back to the station, Tibor took the lead hauling the gopher in. Nick trailed behind, happy to let the hyena take the credit. After securing the culprit in lock up, they returned to their desks where Tibor even offered to fill out the paperwork.

"And if you wait up, I'll treat you to a drink."

"Wheat grass shakes?"

"Beer," said Tibor. "And I'm picking the place this time."

With nothing else to do while Nick waited for the hyena to finish, he headed out front to check in with Clawhauser. The lobby was quiet. Everyone was either out on patrol or heading home for the night. The cheetah was more than happy to spend some time gossiping with the fox.

"And did you hear the news? About Gazelle's concert?" Clawhauser asked.

Nick, who had been scribbling on the corner of the sign-in sheet, tried not to frown.

"I haven't been paying it much attention," he said evenly.
"Well, turns out Gazelle is going to reveal some big news during the show."

"Uh-huh."

"Big news, Nick!" Clawhauser let out an excited squeal that hurt Nick's ears. "What do you think it could be?"

"Something big, I imagine."

"Right? Oooh, I can't wait! But—are you sure you don't want to come with?"

"Positive," said Nick. And to punctuate that statement, he tossed the pen he had been using back into Clawhauser's pencil mug and hopped off the desk. "It's been almost a hour. I better go check in on T-dog. Make sure he hasn't fallen asleep on his paperwork or anything."

"Oh. Okay."

"Catch you later, Clawhauser."

"Wait—Nick?"

Nick turned back. "Yeah?"

The cheetah chewed on his bottom lip with one sharp canine.

"Something wrong, Clawhauser?" asked Nick.

"Not at all!" chirped the cat, but his tail flicked back and forth anxiously. "I just wanted to say that it's really nice of you—to let Tibor join you like you are."

"Okay…" Talk about a random compliment.

"I mean it! Tibor is lucky to have you as back up when he's… out there… patrolling and… things."

"Uh-huh. Is there a question in here somewhere?" asked Nick. "Because it feels like there should be a question."

"I just… wanted to know… Is this, like, going to be a permanent thing, you and him?"

Nick made sure to keep his expression perfectly neutral. "Why are you asking?"

Swish-swish went Clawhauser's tail. "Well, because, Judy left. And lately you two have seemed a bit… tense. And now she's helping Howle and you're working with Tibor, and it just seems like…"

"You shouldn't make assumptions," said Nick.

"Oh I'm not the only one who thinks you two might be on the outs," Clawhauser rushed to explain, and then winced at his choice of words. "W-what I mean is…"

"Seriously, the cops here are more gossipy than a coop of hens," muttered Nick. "Judy and I are fine," he told Clawhauser. "We're just helping out with some other cases. That's it. We're fine," he repeated.

Clawhauser bobbed his head. "Of course. I didn't mean to suggest… I mean, I'm glad to hear it. Really. I'm really glad. Judy's just such a great little bunny… And you two make such an awesome team… I would hate to see it end."
Nick couldn't stand to listen to any more. Cutting off the cheetah's rambling with a curt goodbye, he made his escape back to his desk.

Tibor was waiting of him there, that crazy smile still plastered across his face. "There you are! I'm all done with the paperwork. Now I just need to drop it off and we can get out of here."

"Sounds great," said Nick. He wanted nothing more than put this place behind him for the night.

He followed Tibor out. But instead of dropping the paperwork off at the front desk, the hyena carried on right past Clawhauser and down the far hall. The cheetah gave them a curious look, but didn't seem brave enough to inquire after the way things had just ended with Nick.

Nick, on the other hand, was full of inquiries.

"Uh, where are you going?"

"To drop off my paperwork."

"You mean… you're delivering it directly to Chief Bogo?"

"Yep!" Tibor was still grinning. "I want to see the look on his face when he sees what I've accomplished."

"But in order for you to see it," reasoned out Nick, "that would require you putting yourself directly in front of him, an animal infamous for his temper and his panache for charging tiny creatures down."

Tibor glanced down at him and raised an eyebrow. "I am not a tiny creature."

"Nice to know that at least your ego is solid. Maybe that will be enough to sustain you after he crushes your body."

Tibor rolled his eyes. "Are foxes always this dramatic?"

"Only when hyenas are this cocky."

Tibor gave one of his manic, yipping laughs that made Nick's fur stand on end.

They came to a stop outside Chief Bogo's door. Tibor stared at the brass nameplate.

"Doubts," said Nick, holding up a paw, "I have them."

"We're here now," said Tibor, as if that was an actual reason why they couldn't just turn around and leave. And yet he wasn't moving. Nick took that as a sign that the hyena had some common sense buried in his brain after all.

"Can't you just write your name extra big on the paperwork?" Nick asked him. "Put some stars by it? Bogo just got new glasses. I'm sure he'll see it."

Tibor snorted. He raised his fist and let it fall hard once, twice, against the door.

There was a pause, then the chief's voice rumbled at them to come in.

"Great. Now slip it under the door and let's run away," whispered Nick.

Giving the doorknob a sharp twist, the hyena pushed open the door and strode purposefully into the
office, leaving Nick hovering in the doorway. Why was it that every partner he had was always so stubborn?

Bogo was seated behind his desk, typing furiously away on his computer. He didn't so much as glance up at their entrance. "I don't remember calling you to my office."

"Is this not a good time?" asked Nick. "Our bad. We can come back later—"

"Sir."

The sharp address made Bogo stop typing. He lifted a thick brow at Tibor.

"Is there something you want to tell me, officer?"

Tibor squared his shoulders. "There is, sir." He slapped the folder down onto the desk. "I have caught the Woolgatherer that was terrorizing the sheep over in the Meadowlands. He is repenting in a holding cell as we speak. You do not have to worry about him anymore, sir."

Bogo looked down at the file. Some of the pages had spilled out during its forceful transferal onto the desk.

He looked at Tibor again. "Anything else?"

"Uh—" The hyena glanced over at Nick, as if he feared this might a trick question. "No, sir."

Bogo shoved the folder over to the edge of his desk to join the rest of the pile of papers he had amassed and returned to his typing. "Very well. You're dismissed."

Tibor again looked over at Nick. The fox made a sharp gesture to the door, his meaning clear: You. Me. Leave. Now.

"Sir?" said Tibor.

The water buffalo heaved a great sigh. "What now?"

"I just..." Tibor gestured to the abandoned folder. His proud smile was gone. In its place was a confused frown as he stared at the Chief. "I finally caught the Woolgatherer. I thought you would be more—"

"More what?" asked Bogo, and this time when he looked up from his computer screen, that heavy brow of his was low and angry. "Exactly what were you expecting from me, officer? A pat on the back for doing your job? A promotion? A parade? It took you two weeks to catch a petty criminal—a criminal you let escape in the first place. Am I supposed to find that impressive, Officer Tibor?"

"To be fair, I was also there when the gopher got away," said Nick from the doorway.

"And I notice you are also here just in time for the gopher to be found and caught," said Bogo. "An interesting coincidence, isn't it?"

"Chief—"

"I don't want to hear it." Bogo pointed at Tibor. "Starting tomorrow you are back on parking duty, as you would have been a week ago if you hadn't actively been avoiding me."

"But—I solved the case!" said Tibor. "I caught the perp! Doesn't that get me anything?"
"I'm waiving the suspension that I should be giving you for shirking your duties and defying your superior officer," Bogo told him. "My rewards don't get more generous than that."

"You can't keep me in parking duty forever," said Tibor.

"I can keep you there for as long as I feel you need to be," said Bogo. "Don't like it? Feel free to put in for a transfer. But if you think any of the other districts are going to put up with you like I do then you are in for a rude awakening. Now, for the last time: You. Are. Dismissed."

Tibor's paws fist ed, his muzzle quivering as he struggled not to bare his teeth. Bogo stared the hyena down, his expression implacable, and Nick found himself wondering who would win if it came down to a real knock-down, drag-out fight. Tibor had youth and agility and a crazy amount of strength, but Bogo was like a mountain with horns and a bad temper.

The odds seemed pretty even.

But there was a reason the water buffalo had made it to chief. The hyena broke eye contact first. He looked away with a shudder, his face twisted up in fury. He stormed out of the office, leaving Nick still standing in the doorway.

When the fox looked over at his boss, it was to find that hard gaze now focused on him.

He sighed.

"Officer Tibor really did work hard today," he said.

"With a copious amount of help from you, I imagine."

"I was under the impression that partners were supposed to help each other."

"Don't get smart," warned Bogo. "You and I both know there is a difference between supporting a fellow officer and covering for his incompetence. If I gave in to Officer Tibor's demands and put him out in the field now, not only would I be doing a disservice to those who would be relying on him for help, but I would be putting in danger whoever was foolish enough to agree to be his partner. It's one thing to humor him with a small time criminal like the one you two faced today, but what if it had been someone dangerous? Someone deadly and skilled and he was the only one there to watch your back? Would you feel safe in that situation?"

Nick wanted to say, yes, of course he would. But that was too big a lie, even for him. All he could manage was, "He might get better with time."

"Or this might be the best he can do," said Bogo, and though the words were harsh, his tone was regretful. "It's unfortunate," he said, "but it's my job as chief to know the limits of my officers. And right now I am not going to put that hyena in charge of protecting other animals' lives when he can't even hunt down a gopher with a wool fetish without another officer handing him all the clues."

"Sir—"

"We are done here, Wilde."

Nick didn't need having a staring contest to know Bogo meant it.

He left the Chief's office and went to track down Tibor. He found the hyena ten minutes later in another hallway, on a bench meant for a mammal a third his size. His head was in his paws, his
knees bent awkwardly around his ears. Nick struggled to think of something to say, something supportive, and realized with a start that he couldn't relate to this. Never getting a chance at something that he knew he could do? He lived through that almost daily. But to have the chance at something and consistency fail at it? He had no experience with that at all.

He clapped Tibor on the shoulder. When the hyena raised his head to shoot him miserable look, Nick gave him an encouraging smile.

"Come on," he told him. "Wheat grass shakes on me this time."

The hyena snorted and buried his face back into his paws.

But a moment later he mumbled, "Make it beer," and Nick bit back a grin.

"If you insist."
Once Judy pulled herself together, Fru Fru took control of the situation in the way only the daughter of Mr. Big could do—by giving her an ultimatum.

Judy had two options: 1) they could drink and gossip the night away at Judy's apartment, or 2) they could drink and gossip the night away out on the town.

Which is how they ended up back at the small bar where Judy had first met Little John.

When she told this to Marian, the fox gave an incredulous laugh. "Little John? Here? Even the hibernation chamber he leases isn't this cozy. He has some... personal space issues," she confided to the bunny and shrew. "By which I mean, he needs a lot of it to be comfortable. A place like this would make him twitchy."

"Nothing worse than a twitchy bear," said Fru Fru from her perch on Judy's shoulder. "I should know. My father employs enough of them."

They made their way through the bar. Judy noticed that there seemed to be more empty seats and louder conversation than the last time she'd come. Still, the mood was good, and Fru Fru really seemed to like it, bouncing up and down on her shoulder and clapping her paws together.

"This place is fantastic!" she squeaked. "It's like those old classic lounge rooms that used to be so popular. Do you remember, Marian?"

The fox shrugged apologetically. "I can't say that I do. I've always been a bit of a homebody."

Fru Fru stared up at her, aghast. "Not you too! I'm officially outnumbered now!"

"And yet somehow we wound up coming anyway," Judy whispered to Marian, and the fox giggled behind her paw.

"Hey!" Fru Fru stomped her little clawed foot. "I'm standing four inches away. I can hear you."

They took a seat at the bar. A smaller table was brought out for Fru Fru, positioned in front of the napkin holder so that she still had a good view of the stage. Two jaguars were performing tonight. One was rapping lyrics hard and fast while the other crooned slow and melodic behind him. Their singing skills were impressive, but Judy was still disappointed that the echidna from before wasn't there.

The bartender came over to take their orders. He was an older anteater in a white button-down shirt and pleated black pants that Fru Fru glared at as if she found the excessive folds to be an inexcusable fashion choice. When Judy asked him about the singer, he harrumphed and waggled his long snout at her.

"If I had a dollar for every animal who's asked me that question," he grumbled. "Darling Selene has left us. Apparently to pursue her big break." He mimed air quotes around the last bit, though he needn't have bothered. His sarcasm rang through loud and clear.

"You don't think she'll make it?" asked Fru Fru, almost angrily. As if the anteater's doubts offended her on the singer's behalf.

"Who knows," said the bartender. "Either way, she's not doing gigs here anymore, and that means a
loss of income for us."

"The ones you have tonight are pretty good," offered Marian, gesturing to the jaguars onstage.

"And they'll get big heads and leave someday too," said the anteater with a sniff. "That's how it goes around here. If you need nothing else? I have other customers to attend to. Let me know when you'd like a refill."

"Well he's just a big bowl of sunshine, isn't he?" said Fru Fru as they watched him shuffle off to the other end of the bar. "Good thing he knows how to mix a drink."

The others had to agree. The drinks were delicious.

Judy thought of Little John. He'd said he wanted to stop the echidna from making a mistake, as he put it. Had leaving the bar been what he meant? But then why would he be against her pursuing her dream? Of course there was always a chance things wouldn't work out, but even if they didn't, Judy still wouldn't call the echidna making the attempt a mistake. Why did Little John care about the success of one singer anyway?

"By the way," Fru Fru said to Marian. "I was too worried about Judy to notice it earlier, but is that an engagement ring I see on your finger there, Ms. Fox?"

Marian nodded shyly, hiding a smile behind her lifted drink glass. "It is."

"Well I just have to see this better." The shrew waved her over. "Put it here."

Marian held out her paw, resting it on the tabletop in front of Fru Fru. The shrew clapped her hands with a happy squeal. "Oh my gawd, is that a pearl inside of a water lily? How precious is that?"

"Robin designed it himself," said Marian, and the pride in her voice was unmistakable.

"This foxy fiancé of yours sounds like a real catch," said Fru Fru, winking at Judy. "What does he do for a living?"

"Oh. This and that." Marian withdrew her paw. "Robin is so smart and passionate; he gets bored easily. He's constantly taking on new projects. I can hardly keep up with them all."

"Ah. Projects." Fru Fru gave her a look Judy could only describe as shrewd. "I know how that is. My father used to be the same way. Always had his paws in something or other. You have to be impressed by it even if you can't approve."

"Oh, I am always in support of Robin's decisions," Marian rushed to say. "He's as moral as they come. It's just... sometimes the jobs he takes on are riskier than I would like for him."

"I hope he's smart enough to leave you out of it."

"He does," said Marian. "He would never put me in danger."

"You sound almost disappointed by that," noted Judy.

Marian's smile turned wry. "Do I? It's ungrateful of me, I suppose, but sometimes I wish I could be of more help to him. He's done so much for my family. If only I had a way to better reciprocate."

"Trust me," said Fru Fru, taking a big gulp from her own tiny margarita glass. "Wearing that ring on your finger is all the reciprocation he needs."
Marian looked over at Judy and the two of them shared a smile.

"I'm sure you help Robin in more ways than you realize," Judy assured her.

"Never get involved in another's business," said the shrew with all the sagesness of one well on her way to being tipsy. "When I agreed to be a backup sniper for my father, I told myself it was for the right reasons, that I was helping protect the family legacy, but that still wasn't… what? Why are you two looking at me like that?"

"Did you say backup sniper?" asked Judy.

The shrew waved her paw, her tiny gold bracelets tinkling. "Don't turn into an officer on me now, bunny. It wasn't like that. Here. I have a picture on my cell." She clicked through several photos before holding her phone up. "See? That's me."

Judy and Marian squinted at the tiny screen.

"Need me to zoom in?" asked Fru Fru.

"Is that a rocket launcher on your shoulder?" asked Marian in a hushed voice.

"Size is relative," said Fru Fru. "What would kill a rodent is a mere poke in the eye to bigger mammals."

"You shot animals in the eyes?" exclaimed Judy.

"Just to incapacitate. And I didn't do it all the time. Only when it looked like we might get caught. So the crew could get away."

Judy shook her head as if she could rid herself of what she had just heard. "I don't think you should tell me anything else."

"It's not like I do it anymore," said Fru Fru, putting away her phone with a roll of her eyes. "But if it will make you feel better, we can change the subject."

"Thank you."

"I want to talk about foxy partners some more. Specifically yours."

Judy spluttered into her drink. "I-I don't—"

"You were crying, Judy. Like, seriously crying."

"I told you, it was the funeral."

"Yeah, yeah. It's a sad case, you feel guilty, blah, blah, blah. Well, I'm not buying it. Nicky did something stupid again, didn't he? What was it this time? Did he try to sell you something phony? Run away from a job? What?"

"I don't think that's why she's upset with him," whispered Marian, her gaze far too knowing. Judy squirmed in her chair and looked away.

"Ooooh," said Fru Fru. "I see now."

"It's not like that," said Judy.
"You do know we wouldn't judge you for anything, right?" asked Marian, and Fru Fru nodded emphatically.

Judy looked at the fox. "Do you mean that?"

"Of course I do." Marian cocked her head, expression turning hurt. "You don't believe me?"

"No, it's just… You're entitled to your opinion," said Judy. "You don't have to pretend just to make me feel better."

"I'm not pretending at all," said Marian. "Why would you think that I am?"

"Well… because," said Judy. "I clearly recall you rejecting Marty because he was a bunny. Or did I mishear that?"

Fru Fru's eyes went wide. "You didn't!"

Marian had the grace to look ashamed. Her gaze fell to her lap, claws clinking against her ring as she twisted it around her finger. "I forgot you knew about that part of it."

"So it's true?" squeaked the shrew.

The fox gave a reluctant nod. "It's true. I did tell Marty that." Her head shot up. "But you have to know that it was just an excuse. Things like interspecies relationships… I'm not against them at all."

"Then why did you tell Marty that you were?"

Around and around went her ring. "Because I was desperate. And, well, a bit intimidated. Marty refused to believe I could like him as a friend but nothing more. He insisted I was lying to him. That there had to be a reason, something he vowed he would fix if only I would tell him what it was. Looking back on it, I think I was already starting to sense that there was more to his feelings for me than was… well…"

"Sane?" offered Fru Fru.

"Healthy," said Marian. "But I couldn't put my paw on it exactly, not back then, and he was pressuring me for an answer. So, I gave him a reason he had no hope of changing." She looked up Judy sadly. "I thought I was being clever. Worse, I thought I was being merciful. I was wrong."

From the stage, the jaguars launched into a new duet, their deep voices a rumble like a thunderstorm in chorus.

"You don't know how much I regret it," said Marian. "Not just because it was cruel of me, but because maybe if I had stood up to Marty then and given him my honest feelings, he wouldn't have done what he did. Maybe things would have turned out differently…"

"Somehow I don't think Marty would have ever accepted your rejection reasonably, no matter how well you worded it," said Fru Fru. "From what I read in the papers, he was completely crackers during the hearing. Vowing vengeance on you one minute and eternal servitude the next."

"Maybe you're right," said Marian. "Maybe it wouldn't have changed anything. But I can't help wondering anyway."

She reached for Judy's paw, hesitating to see if Judy would pull away before she took it in her own.
"Regardless, please believe me when I say that I want nothing but your happiness, Judy, in whatever form that takes. And if Nick makes you happy than I will be there to the end to support you two."

"We both will," said Fru Fru.

"He does make me happy," Judy admitted. "He makes me so happy."

"Then why the tears?"

Judy wiped the treacherous drops away. "Because. How Marian felt about Marty... I think... I think that's how Nick feels about me."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Fru Fru. "That fox is head over heels for you. Even my tiny eyes can see it."

"I know that he cares about me," said Judy. "I've never doubted that. But just as a friend. And since I've confessed to him—"

"You confessed?" gasped Fru Fru, and even Marian looked surprised.

"I know. It was stupid," said Judy. "I just... I thought for sure Nick felt the same way. I never would have said anything if I thought he hadn't." Judy ran her paws over her ears, tugging at the ends in frustration. "But I was just reading into things. Seeing what I wanted to. And now it feels like he can barely stand to look at me. Like he's embarrassed to be seen with me in case someone gets the wrong idea."

"You really think so?" asked Marian.

"I don't know how else to explain the way he's been acting. It's... oh it's embarrassing. I'm tired of feeling like this. I thought we were on the same page, that we could just remain partners. But now I can't help but wonder if maybe that's too much to ask for. If maybe I really do need to let him go..."

"Perhaps some time apart would help?" said Marian.

"Maybe." But then why did Judy feel like she was giving up?

"Oooh that—that—stupid fox!" screeched the shrew, and both Marian and Judy jumped in their seats. "Why, I should have my daddy just ice him and be done with it!"

She looked up at Judy, wobbling just the tiniest bit in her seat. "Forget him, then!" she told her. "There are plenty of other mammals out there who would love you! What about that rich, fancy bunny? The produce magnate that's so infatuated with you?"

"Benjamin Cottontail?"

"Yes! That's the one!"

Now it was Judy's turn to hide behind her drink glass. "He was hardly infatuated..."

"You said he's been calling to check on you because he's worried. That's a declaration of interest if I've ever heard one."

"I, um, wouldn't say that," stammered Judy. "Besides, Marian might not be comfortable with me just—they have history too, you know."
"They do? How?"

Judy looked at the fox, afraid she had already given away too much of a story that wasn't hers to share. But Marian shrugged, unbothered. "We grew up together."

"Get outta here!" exclaimed the shrew. "Really?"

Another dainty shrug. "But I would be honored to be able to call you my sister-in-law," she told Judy.

These stupid tears again. Judy couldn't get rid of them!

"Have you spoken to him lately?" she asked.

Marian hesitated. "He called me the other day. It was a very short conversation. Hardly more than the usual pleasantries animals say before he was hanging up. I'm not sure what to make of it."

"I'd call it progress," said Judy.

"You think?" But Marian looked hopeful.

"I do," said Judy. They could both use the win, small as it was, and Judy was taking what she could get at this point.

The acknowledgment sat heavy on her gut like spoiled cabbage. Was that what she was doing now? Taking what she could get? Since when had that been acceptable to her? Waiting, holding back, pretending to be satisfied with the scraps of affection Nick was giving her, saying nothing when he hurt her. Really, how could any partnership work effectively like that? How could either one of them be happy that way?

But refusing to go on as they were would mean change. It would mean forcing Nick into a direct conversation and possibly losing him for good. Was she ready for that?

Did she have a choice?

"To progress!" cheered Fru Fru, holding up her tiny glass. Marian joined in, and then both friends turned Judy's way, smiling, expectant. Judy raised her own glass and very carefully clinked it against those of her friends, repeating quietly after the shrew, "To progress."

Nick expected Tibor to take them Chausie's, the local cop bar. Officers like it because it was close to work and gave a discount to anyone with a badge. In return, they gave the bar a sterling reputation for safety, which made it one of the most popular drinking spots in the district.

But Tibor didn't take them there. He parked the cruiser two blocks from the river, then they hoofed it across the bridge that separated the rest of Downtown from the warehouse district. The air here smelled like rusting metal and the sidewalks that lined the waterside had an unsettling slope to them, as if they were slowly crumbling back into the sea.

This was not a place Nick came through often. Not unless he needed to get somewhere quickly and this happened to be the most direct route.

It was also a great place to hide, not that he had ever used it himself personally. This district, with it's labyrinthine blocks of complexes, all with their wide open bay doors and minimal security, was the perfect place for a desperate animal to get lost in.
And sometimes, never found.

Nick couldn't help but compare it to Cottontail's factory. These were not the glossy, sterile buildings that the bunny operated. These factories were stout, hard-run structures made from a combination of cement and cheap aluminum that had earned their grit and grime.

And the bar Tibor led them to looked just as rough. Crammed between the shadows of two factories still chugging away even at this time of night, the place vibrated with tension and the echoes of high-powered machinery. This was a place that served big drinks and held even bigger grudges.

This was the kind of place that made the more skittish animals so grateful to have Chausie's.

The bar's front doors were made from a thick, dark wood, heavily scarred and without any kind of carving to give it style or even basic features. It looked like someone had selected the two fattest pieces of wood direct from the lumber yard, chopped them into something roughly door-shaped, slapped a pair of hinges on each and called the job done.

When Nick brushed a paw over one of deeper grooves—horns, adult bull, with some momentum behind him—the door swung inward as easily as if it were a saloon. Nick hadn't even touched the knob.

"Being thoughtful of germaphobes?" Nick asked.

"No. Busted hinges," said Tibor. "One too many animals thrown out over the years."

Nick suspected he meant that literally. "Charming."

Navigating their way around the bar was more of a challenge than it seemed at first glance. The place wasn't especially packed, but even the smaller patrons seemed to require more than the usual amount of personal space. Nick went wide around everyone and made sure not to step on any dragging tails. He didn't want to be one that finally did in the doors.

He tried to find a table near the wall, somewhere where he could protect his back. But he and Tibor appeared to be among a like-minded crowd because all those spots were already taken, and they were forced to grab a table near the middle of the room instead. On the upside, at least the lighting was poor enough that Nick didn't feel like he was sitting under a spotlight. The downside, he might not see the threat coming until it was too late.

An ox that only had one horn nodded to Tibor from behind the bar. The hyena raised a paw in greeting.

"So, you come here often?" quipped Nick.

"Only when I need to unwind," said Tibor, ignoring the fox's teasing and answering the question sincerely. "It's useful to have a place where I don't stand out."

That much was true. The hyena looked positively toothless next to some of the animals here.

He also looked depressed. His head was drooped so low his chin was practically resting on the tabletop. It exaggerated the hunch of his back and made the ruff along his neck bristle like a hedgehog's quills.

Nick's conscience twinged.
"Look, T-dog," he started. "About earlier, at the station… If I had known Chief Bogo was going to take it that way…"

"You tried to warn me," said Tibor. "It's my fault for not listening."

"You'll get another shot," said Nick. "Even if you're on parking duty, you're bound to run into some kind of case eventually that you'll be able to tackle. That's how Judy got her big break, you know. And really, I wouldn't have become a cop either if she hadn't been brave enough to go around Chief Bogo and bend a few rules."

"That's true, I suppose."

"Of course it is. And hey! you know I'm always happy to do anything that will annoy old buffalo butt. You need any help you just let me know, all right?"

The hyena gave a reluctant bob of his head, but at least his chin was no longer in danger of touching the weird stain on the tabletop that Nick suspected might be blood.

"And I'll keep my eye out for chances too," continued Nick. "And if I see anything I will be sure to let you know—"

There was a rippling movement from the corner of his eye. Nick whipped his head around. "Hold on—was that a snake I just saw slither in that back room? I didn't even know we had snakes in Zootopia."

Tibor rolled his eyes, but a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He caught Nick by the shoulders and gave him a shove off his seat towards the bar.

"Forget about the snake," he told him. "Why don't you focus on getting us drinks instead? I don't think I can stomach any more of this mushy bonding time without some strong alcohol to dull my predator pride. And whatever you do, don't ask for wheat grass shakes. Rocks doesn't have the sense of humor that I do."

"Are you talking about that ox over there?" said Nick. "The ox's name is Rocks? Rocks the ox? Let me guess, his parents were poets?"

"Why don't you ask him?" said Tibor. "After you get my drink."

Nick joined the throng hanging around the bar and clambered up onto a free stool. When he caught the ox's eye, he nodded to the muskrat beside him who was nursing a mug of ale bigger than he was. "I'll have double what he's having."

The ox grunted and shoved two giant mugs his way.

"By the by," said Nick as he passed over the money. "T-dog tells me you have an interesting story behind your name, but I think you just lost a mean game of rhyme. Care to enlighten me?"

The ox looked at him with flat eyes. He reminded Nick of Chief Bogo, if the water buffalo had an uglier, angrier cousin.

"You want to know how I got my name?" said the ox.

"I surely do," said Nick.

The ox tipped his head to the side, sizing the fox up. Nick gave a dainty sip of his drink.
"Got jumped one night on my way home by a pack of mongrels," the ox said. "I was tied to a crate filled with rocks and tossed into the river not three blocks from here."

"Ah. So it's one of those kinds names. Gotcha." Nick gave him a pointed wink. "Well, it's nice to see you made it back to the surface, you know, alive. Did a do-gooder hippo come by and save you or something?"

"No. I snapped off my horn and used it to cut myself free."

Nick looked up at the stump of Rocks' broken horn. It was easily as thick as Nick's waist.

"Impressive. Did the police ever catch the ones who did it?"

"No," said the ox, and to Nick's alarm, he smiled, revealing two rows of flat, yellow teeth. "I did."

"You took on a whole pack by yourself? Unarmed?"

"I had my horn."

Nick looked up at the ox's remaining horn, which was long and curved and wickedly sharp.

"I guess that would work."

The ox's smile widened. "That's not the one I meant."

"Oh."

The ox held out some bills. Nick shook his head. "Keep the change. You should save up to by a new horn. I hear they're making huge headway—no pun intended—on prosthesis these days."

"Don't need it. I still got both of mine," said Rocks.

Nick's gaze dropped to the counter, wondering if the ox had it tucked below on some shelf, ready to use at the first sign of trouble.

It was enough to keep a fox sober.

He thanked the ox for the drinks, then made his way carefully back to the table. As he slid over Tibor's mug, the hyena asked, "Well? What did you think?"

"That if I were a more by-the-book cop I would be having some serious moral quandaries right about now," said Nick.

Tibor laughed. "I knew you would be able to roll with it."

Roll with it, yes. Nick knew when to let sleeping oxen lie, especially when those oxen carried weapons made from their own body parts. But that didn't mean he was comfortable with it.

"It's like you said," continued Tibor, "Sometimes you have to bend a few rules to get the job done."

Nick lowered his voice. "But we're not talking about bending the police rulebook here. We're talking about letting someone get away with murder."

"No," said Tibor. "We're talking about justice. You know as well as I do that the pack that attacked Rocks would never have been caught. Not in this neighborhood. Not when it was five against one with no witnesses, and Rocks had his own record."
When Nick didn't immediately agree, Tibor leaned closer. "You're a fox. You can't tell me you've never experienced an injustice in your life. Something so unfair it was criminal and yet the criminals walked free."

Nick looked away. But in his mind he thought of bricks. Bricks and books with blood on their pages and everywhere, the sound of shattering glass.

"Sometimes," continued Tibor. "It's only you and them. And the only way you're going to get justice is by going after it yourself."

*Bricks and books and blood…*

"I've never gone after anyone," said Nick.

"And don't you regret it?"

Nick looked at him sharply.

"What's that face for?" asked Tibor. "Isn't only natural to regret things like that? That's all I meant. It wasn't a judgment, Wilde. Geez, now who needs to lighten up?"

The hyena smiled and playfully punched him in the shoulder. Nick took the hit and let his defensiveness go. He reminded himself that Tibor was only trying to relate to him. He didn't know how many times Nick had regretted not doing anything. How hard it was to go to work every day, to have access to that file, and never look at it.

From the other side of the bar came a shout and the sounds of furious scuffling. Nick turned his attention to it, half to get away from the conversation and half in case he needed to intervene. He might be able to overlook a suspicious tale a bartender told him, but he couldn't just let a crime go down in front of him and not get involved.

Chairs and tables were hastily vacated and then lifted out of the way as the ones who were fighting started to really get into it. From the bar, Rocks had stopped pouring drinks and was watching the progress with hard eyes. The only horn currently in his possession was the one still attached to his head. Nick wanted to keep it that way.

When one of the animals let out a cry of pain, Nick knew he had to call it. He hopped off his chair, Tibor following behind him as he shoved his way through the crowd that had gathered around to watch the fight.

At first Nick only saw one animal, a walrus, who stood in the middle of the watching crowd looking bored by all the commotion going on around him. His posture was erect and dignified, his arms loose at his sides. For a moment, Nick wondered if he had imagined the sounds of a scuffle.

Then a blur of red launched itself at the walrus and Nick identified the other fighter: a fox.

The fox's claws didn't even make contact with the walrus before a backhanded swipe from a flipper knocked him away again. He hit the floor with a pained yip, but was immediately back up and resuming his attack—only to once more find himself swatted away like an annoying fly.

"Call it off! Call of the fight!" the fox yelled, which made no sense to Nick. The fox was the only one really fighting. If he wanted to call it off, all he had to do was stop attacking.

But another smack from the walrus sent him spinning in Nick's direction, and Nick realized with a start that he recognized the crazy fox in front of him.
The fox threw himself at the walrus again, taking a blow across the face for his trouble. This time when he hit the ground, Nick was ready. He darted forward, hooked an arm around Reynard's shoulders and yanked him back. When the fox tried to throw him off, Nick shoved him down and pinned him with a knee to his chest.

"For the love of—calm down!" Nick yelled at the struggling fox. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tibor step between them and the Walrus, playing shield just in case the be-tusked mammal decided to attack while they were distracted. But the walrus stayed where he was, petting his whiskers and for all the world seeming above it all.

"Reynard, stop it!"

At the sound of his name, Marian's brother stilled. He met Nick's eyes, his own widening when he finally realized who had hold of him.

"Officer Wilde?"

"And here I thought you were trying to bite my nose off because you were so happy to see me," said Nick. "You want to explain to me what is going on here?"

The fox's eyes darted between him and the Walrus. He snarled.

"Reynard, focus. What's this about?"

"Do you two know each other?" asked the walrus.

"I think I'm the one who should be asking that," said Nick, sizing the walrus up. His whiskers were precisely trimmed and he was wearing a blue three-piece suit. And a bowler hat. Who wore bowler hats these days?

"Care to enlighten me about this situation?"

The walrus shrugged. "I was just on my way out when this fox came over and attacked me, spouting some nonsense or other. Can't say I caught much of it through all his drunken howling."

Nick winced as Reynard dug his claws into his arm. "I am not drunk," he said, and Nick had to agree. He looked sober. Furious and sober.

The walrus waggled a flipper at him. "I was trying to help you out, kit. Giving you an excuse for this inexcusable behavior. Youth these days." He shook his head at Tibor. "No gratitude or sense, am I right?"

Reynard made as if to launch himself at the walrus again. Nick caught him and shoved him back down with a warning look.

"Is it true that you attacked him?" asked Nick.

Reynard only glowered.

"At least tell me it was provoked."

Reynard lifted his chin. "I don't have to tell you anything."

Nick wanted to shake him. He leaned in closer and dropped his voice. "Look, I want to help you
out here, but you have to give me something. What happened? Why are you acting like you have rabies right now?"

"I didn't come here looking for your help."

"You didn't come here for the drinks either, but they're here and you look like you could use one."

Again Reynard's gaze flicked to the walrus. Nick waited, but when the fox finally spoke all he said was, "Forget it."

He shoved at Nick to let him up. Nick hesitated, but besides holding the stubborn kit down until he talked, there wasn't much else he could do.

Reynard turned to the walrus. "Press charges if you want to," he told him. You're not the only one with friends. Come after me, and your comeuppance will come swift as a blink."

"I think you mean quick as a blink," whispered Tibor.

With one last angry look at them all, Reynard stormed out.

The walrus stroked his whiskers thoughtfully.

"I hope for simplicity's sake you're willing to let this go," Nick said to him. "No harm done and all that."

"There is a time and place for everything," said the walrus, which wasn't exactly an answer, but Nick took it as agreement anyway. Later, he would figure out why Reynard was so upset. And then, maybe, he would be back.

"I'm going to go explain things to Rocks," said Tibor, nodding over at the bar where the ox was still watching them with narrowed little eyes. "If you want to meet me out front in five?"

Nick was more than happy to leave the smoothing of things over to the hyena.

Giving a curt nod goodbye to the walrus, he made his way out of the bar. Outside the streets were empty. This was not an area where smart animals lingered after dark. The snow they had been promised had finally started to fall, light and fluffy and deceptively innocent.

Nick pulled out his phone and stared at it. He wondered if Marian knew anything about why Reynard was acting so strange. And if she was still with Judy. Would she answer the phone now if he called?

There was only one way to find out.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he dialed the fox. After the third ring there was a pause, and then a soft voice said, "Hello?"

"It's Nick," he said, as if she didn't already know. In the background he could hear singing, and the clink of glasses that could only mean they were at some kind of bar. "Is Judy with you?"

"It's Nick," he heard her tell someone, and then a smaller, squeakier voice came on the line.

"If you're looking for Judy, she stepped away to powder her nose. Not that you care."

Fru Fru. So they were all together. And by the reception, they had been doing some talking.
"I just wanted to check in," he said. "Make sure she was doing okay."

"Oh, suddenly you're worried about her now?" said the shrew. "Where was all this concern when you were bashing in her heart, huh?"

Nick winced. "You really have a way with words, 'Fru."

"I'll give you more than words if you keep this attitude up," said the shrew, and more distantly he heard Marian say, "Fru Fru, calm down. This is probably difficult for him too."

"I don't care! The dumb fox made her cry," said the shrew, and even though the words weren't meant for him, Nick felt the blow.

Marian said something else he didn't catch, and then he heard Fru Fru say, "Well I still think she would be better off with Ben." Even the shrew was calling him Ben now? Why was Cottonbutt coming up in the conversation anyway?

"Do you hear me, you stupid fox?" Fru Fru demanded, and there was enough of a slur to her words that he wondered if she was drunk.

Nick gave a heavy sigh. "I hear you."

"And? Don't you have anything else to say?"

Nick looked down at the crumbling cement sidewalk and the brown fringes of a dead weed that had made it up through the cracks only to be done in by the cold. He kicked it, and the plant crumbled under his foot.

"And..." Breathe in, breathe out. "I agree with you. Judy would be better off with Cottonbu—I mean, Cottontail."

Silence from the other end of the phone.

A gust of wind whistled between the warehouses and sent particles of snow swirling around him like frozen bits of confetti. Nick shivered and pulled his coat tighter around him, feeling miserable inside and out.

There was a sudden, high-pitched growl in his ear, and then Fru Fru said, "Don't think your sad martyr act is going to sway me, fox. I have no patience for noble idiots. And you, sir, are the biggest idiot I've seen in a while."

Nick had no argument for that.

"Is it just too hard for you?" asked Marian, coming back on the line. "Is that the problem?"

"No," said Nick honestly. "The problem is that it's too easy."

More silence.

"Did you understand that?" he heard Fru Fru ask Marian.

Then, almost too far away for the phone to pick up, he heard her, cheerful and bright as she hadn't sounded in far too long. "Hey, girls. Who are you taking to?"
"Just Robin checking in with Marian," the shrew lied, calm and smooth even with a buzz. "It's sweet, but a bit too clingy for my tastes, I think. Here, let me just—"

The line clicked and went dead. Nick realized only then that he hadn't asked Marian about Reynard.

But Judy sounded happier. Nick was grateful that at least she was in good paws.

Even if those paws might want to strangle him.

The bar doors swung open with a sharp squeal of hinges and Tibor appeared. He looked at Nick's face and then at the phone.

"Was that Officer Hopps?"

"Just checking in," said Nick, slipping the cell back into his pocket. Clearing his throat he asked, "So is everything okay with Rocks the ox? I'm not going to have to sleep with one eye open tonight, am I?"

"No, you're good," said Tibor, but his tone was distant, his focus still on Nick's face.

Nick tried to force more cheer into his expression, and when it felt too fake he looked away. "Shall we head home then? I know how much you hate the cold."

He started back, careful to step over the dead weed that was slowly being covered in flecks snow.

"I heard you talking to Clawhauser earlier," said Tibor.

Nick stopped. When he looked back, he made sure it was with a more believable smile on his face. "Spying on me, T-dog? That's not very nice of you."

"I wasn't spying," said Tibor. "I finished my paperwork and went to find you… I overheard you and Clawhauser talking and it… didn't seem like a conversation I should intrude on."

"But you felt the need to bring it up now?"

Tibor raked his claws through his speckled fur in frustration. "Only because I'm worried about you, Wilde. I might not be the sharpest cop in the precinct, but even I can pick up on the vibes between you and Officer Hopps. I know that things aren't as okay between the two of you as you keep insisting to everyone that they are."

Another cold gust of wind buffeted them, sending the snowflakes into a mad flurry across the sidewalk. Nick wished the wind were stronger. Something that could blow him out of this conversation and away from this place.

"So?" he said. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm not trying to say anything!" Tibor threw up his paws. "Or maybe I'm just trying to tell you that you don't have to deny it so hard. I know you mean well and that you're trying. I'm sure Judy knows it too. It's not like you to be selfish. Even if it doesn't seem so at first, I know that everything you do is in the best interest of your partner—"

Nick gave a sharp bark a laughter, and it was more biting and bitter than the winter air that buffeted them.

"You're wrong," he told the hyena. "If that was true, I would have already put in for a transfer. I
would have already made a clean break with Judy. I wouldn't be torturing her like this. Torturing myself like this…"

"Then why haven't you?"

"Because I'm selfish!" snarled Nick, the words a ringing echo off the metal and steel walls surrounding them. "Because even though there are a dozen reasons to leave, none of them can beat the fact that I want to stay with her. And so we have this… this mess of a partnership that's not even—I don't even know what to call what we are right now! Masochists? Lost causes in denial? Take your pick. But it's nothing good."

"Still. When push comes to shove, you'll make the right choice in the end," said Tibor. "I know you well enough to know that much."

"And what do you think the right choice is?" asked Nick.

Tibor shrugged. "How should I know? I just give out parking tickets."

The tension inside Nick broke. Laughter burst from him, loud and hard and helpless. After a minute, Tibor joined in with a few yipping giggles. The sound set Nick off all over again.

They stayed like that, laughing like lunatics in the street, until the tears had frozen to Nick's cheeks and the cold had spread from his claws up to the knuckles of his paws. Tibor clapped him on the shoulder, and this time Nick knew to brace for it and didn't stumble.

"And even though I know it's not exactly an offer of the year," said Tibor. "I hope, if you do wind up needing a new partner, that you'll keep me in mind."

And Nick, touched and tired and emotionally drained, found himself saying, "Thanks. I will."
Chapter 10

Nick couldn't sleep that night.

After waking from his third nightmare, he called it quits and got dressed, heading down to the station much earlier than was his norm.

He puttered around the empty break room, made himself some coffee and tried to read yesterday's paper that Officer Delgato had left on the table. There was a small article about the recent string of murders, but all of it was vague conspiracy theories. The reporters were just as much in the dark about what was going on as the cops. Which was a pity. Nick could have used the hint.

When he was done with his coffee, he gave up on the paper and poked his head into the office area. Judy wasn't at her desk, but there was a new stack of papers and a small brown bag he knew contained her daily snack of carrot sticks, so she had to be in the building.

After a moment's thought, he decided to try for the roof. Designed to look like the Savannah, the place was considered a retreat by many of the officers, especially those not native to Zootopia proper.

Three sets of steps led the way up, each one a different size to cater to a variety of animals. The roof itself had been reinforced, and reinforced again to safely hold those of a larger species. The air up here smelled faintly of smog and freshly cut grass. Neatly trimmed bushes lined the wide gravel path that weaved its way around the outer edges of the building, hiding the safety fence from view. There were a few benches here and there, and a small aboveground watering hole off to the side where the runoff could reach the gutters, but the majority of the space was open grassland. In bustling city like Zootopia, with a job that could often make an animal feel trapped both physically and emotionally, having a place where you could have some space to breathe was a welcome escape.

Nick ignored the benches and took a seat on the ground. The snow from the previous night had already melted away, leaving the grass cool and damp. He stretched out his legs, did some half-hearted stretches, then waited for the tiny jogging figure to finish her morning run around the trail. She glanced his way only once, never breaking stride or acknowledging him beyond that initial look. Nick didn't mind. It was enough that she was close. That he could see her and hear her and not have to worry about saying something stupid or giving himself away.

He watched her circle him, arms loose, legs steady, her long ears folded back to keep herself streamlined—and, she had admitted to him once, keep the bugs out. Nick admired her speed and stamina. On most cases in which running was unavoidable, Judy held herself back in order to keep pace with him and not get separated. So it was impressive to see how fast she could go when she didn't need to wait for him.

Nick laid back in the grass and closed his eyes, listening to the distant honking of the traffic below and the quiet pat-pat-pat of little rabbit feet doing laps around him. Cold nipped at his nose and he could feel the dew seeping into his fur, but even still, he felt more comfortable and relaxed than he had been in a long while.

He must have dozed, because the next time he opened his eyes Judy was sitting next to him. Her gaze was on the sunrise creeping over the skyline. A small mound of shredded grass was piled on Nick's stomach. As he watched, she ripped up another blade and added it to the pile.
"We need to talk," said Judy.

Nick sifted through the broken bits of green. "You're right."

Judy looked down. She plucked up another bit of grass, her entire focus seemingly on tearing it into pieces. "Today? After work?"

So soon? But then she had given him extra time already. More time than he deserved, really. Nick made sure his tone stayed perfectly neutral as he answered, "If you'd like."

Judy stopped shredding up the grass. She let the mangled strips flutter back to the ground.

"I don't like any of this," she said.

The apology was on the tip of his tongue, but Nick bit it back. His mother had always told him, *never say you're sorry unless you're ready to change your behavior.* But he couldn't guarantee that.

He couldn't guarantee anything.

He scooped up the grass piled on top of his stomach and sat up, holding up his paw so the pieces were caught by the wind and scattered across the rooftop. A single blade made a loop through the air and doubled back, sticking to Judy's cheek. Seeing her with such a serious expression while there was grass on her face made Nick smile.

"What?" said Judy. "What's so funny?"

Without thinking, Nick reached over and brushed the offending bit of green away. A zing of pleasure went through him at the contact, as if just by the simple act of touching her he was in danger of throwing his entire nervous system into a frenzy. Her fur was soft and just a little damp from sweat and dew. It felt like velvet under her ear, and he couldn't stop himself from running the pad of his thumb across that half inch of space a second time.

Judy's breath caught, and the sound froze Nick more solidly than the cold winter air. He yanked his paw away, trying to appear casual under the searching gaze of those big, violet eyes.

"You had some grass, uh, right there." He pointed to his own face.

Judy was staring at him as if she couldn't understand what was wrong with his tiny, fox brain.

Nick wished he knew himself.

He lurched to his feet. With a single, graceful hop, Judy was beside him.

"Nick…"

The stairwell door slammed open and a wheezing Clawhauser stumbled his way onto the rooftop, gasping their names as he fought to catch his breath.

Judy hurried over to him. The cat looked ready to collapse. She took his elbow as if to help hold him up and Nick leapt to help her, lest she be crushed under the cheetah's much larger frame.

"What's going on, Clawhauser?"

"It's Gazelle…" he panted. "At the stadium. She… practicing for the concert…"

"Not this again," said Nick.
"You don't understand! She's been… attacked."

Ok, Nick hadn't expected *that*.

"She was?" Judy exclaimed at the same time Nick said, "Seriously?"

"Well," amended Clawhauser, "her backup dancer was. But she was near the stage at the time. It could easily have been her."

"What happened?"

The cheetah took a deep breath and straightened. "Ok. So, Gazelle was practicing at the stadium for the upcoming concert, right? But then all of a sudden, part of the catwalk collapsed right on one of the dancers!"

"Oh my gosh," gasped Judy. "Which one?"

"The really cute one!"

"Bengie?"

"No, he's the one with the dancing skills."

"Then Striper?"

"He's the aloof one with the voice. No, the cute one! Hunter."

"Oh, Hunter!"

"To think," said Clawhauser, "if he had been just a little bit slower getting out of the way…"

"Is he okay?"

"From what I heard, only the tip of his tail got caught. He's at the hospital right now. Gazelle even went with him." Clawhauser gave a wistful sigh. "Such loyalty."

"What an awful accident," said Judy.

"That's just it, though!" said Clawhauser. "It *wasn't* an accident. The catwalk was rigged."

"Come on, be serious," said Nick. "That kind of stuff only happens in the movies. Do you know how perfect the timing would have to be in order for it to actually work?"

"Gazelle said she was sure it was sabotage," said Clawhauser.

"Oh, well, if Gazelle says so…"

Judy nudged him with her elbow. To the cat, she said more sympathetically, "Well, at least everyone is okay, for the most part. You'll have to be sure to keep us updated on what they find. Who was the case assigned to?"

Clawhauser looked between the fox and bunny. "You don't understand. The case was given to you two. That's what I came to tell you. Chief Bogo wants you to go look over to the crime scene right away."

"You're joking," said Nick. "We have enough on our plates as it is. We don't have time to coddle
some paranoid singer."

"Gazelle is not paranoid!" cried Clawhauser. "She is the bravest, smartest, more reasonable mammal that I know!"

"You don't even know her."

"I met her once!"

"At an autograph signing. You spoke all of three words to her before you hyperventilated and had to be carried away by Bogo."

"We had a moment!"

Nick threw up his paws.

"Let's just go talk to Chief Bogo," said Judy with a wary look at the cheetah, who looked more ferocious than she had ever seen him. "I'm sure once we explain things he'll understand."

"What are you two still doing lallygagging around here?" the water buffalo demanded when Nick and Judy entered his office ten minutes later. "Didn't Clawhauser tell you the news?"

"He did, sir," said Judy. "That's why we're here, actually." She glanced over at Nick. "As you know, we are currently handling several tough cases right now, and we feel it would be, um…"

"A giant waste of time," supplied Nick.

"Detrimental to our focus," said Judy, "if we took on yet another case. Surely one of the other officers could look into things? Francine or Howle maybe?"

"Gazelle asked for you two boneheads specifically," Chief Bogo told them. "And I'm not about to disappoint someone with that many followers. Who knows what they might do if we offend their singer?"

"Revoke your fan club membership?" guessed Nick.

While buffalo's might not be able to growl, technically, that didn't stop Chief Bogo from doing a pretty good imitation of it anyway. "Watch it, Wilde."

"Come on, Chief. You don't actually think someone tried to commit murder by falling catwalk, do you?"

"I don't care if they did or not," said Bogo. "I don't care if Gazelle wants to press charges against a splinter. You will go there and assist her in whatever way she requires."

"But, sir—"

"I don't want to hear it, Hopps." Bogo pointed to the hall. "Now, if I don't see those fluffy tails of yours leaving through that doorway in the next five seconds, you are going to regret it faster than you can say parking ticket. Now, get going."

After some debating, Nick and Judy decided to go to the Zootennial Stadium first and check out the crime scene while they waited for Hunter and Gazelle to return from the hospital.
With the concert still several days away, Judy had expected the place to be mostly empty besides a few rescue crew and some officers. Instead, they found the entire front of the parking lot packed with vehicles. There were animals running around everywhere. Delivery mammals carried boxes in by the stack. Security guarded every doorway in a stand off with the crowd of excited fans that had come early to try and sneak a peek at the action. And weaving their way through the crowd were the reporters, looking for a chatty witness they could interview or an opening for them to slip inside the building.

"So much for wrapping this up quickly and quietly," said Nick. He sighed and reached for the doorknob. "Into the fray we go then."

"Try and avoid the ones with cameras and microphones."

"I always do."

For once, their smaller size worked in their favor. Nick and Judy managed to go unnoticed until they got to the security guard at the front door, and by that point it was a simple matter of flashing their badges and slipping inside, leaving the crowd and their flurry of questions behind them.

Inside, things were quieter but no less lively. Production crew stood in tense groups, arguing over logistics and barking orders to their underlings, who scurried about looking harried. Vendors for both food and souvenirs were giving serious inspection to their booths' counter space and equipment. One booth in particular caught Judy's eye as they passed. It stood out from the rest, being significantly wider, taller, and all around shinier than the ones next to it. Judy recognized Benjamin Cottontail's face on some of the boxes stacked around it.

"You have to be kidding me," said Nick, also catching sight of the bunny's grinning mug on a bag of organic carrot chips.

"He's in the food business. It makes sense," said Judy.

"There is such a thing as overextending yourself."

"Said the fox who never misses a lunch break."

Nick grumbled something about needing to replenish his energy and yanked open the stadium doors a little harder than necessary.

Furensics were already there, poking and dusting at the mess of metal and wood and glass that covered the stage. The lights had been turned up, and nosy animals watched from the front row seats, business mammals involved with advertising and some of the backstage crew who had been nearby when the accident occurred. The suits were more than happy to talk to Nick and Judy about what had happened, but it was clear after only a few questions that they hadn't actually seen anything, only heard the crash and arrived after the fact.

The backstage crew on the other paw, were polite, and a couple even admitted to having seen the catwalk come falling down, but no one had any real theories and seemed hesitant to point claws at any one cause or mammal. After insisting for the third time that they really did need to get back to work, Nick and Judy let them go and joined the furensic team on stage.

Nick looked out at the hundreds of empty seats and shivered.

"Not a fan of the stage?" asked Judy.

Nick shook his head. "Too many eyes watching."
They made their way over to the other officers. Officer Margay had come again, this time along with the rest of the forensics team, which included a wombat and ferret. Margay was bagging a small clump of tiger fur from beneath the wreck of the catwalk when they reached her.

"Is that from the victim?" asked Judy.

"Looks like," said the cat. "He got lucky. If he had been a little slower he would have been crushed."

"Any evidence as to what caused it?" asked Nick.

"As a matter of fact…" Margay, gestured to the ferret. "Trish, you still have those screws?"

The ferret pulled out another evidence bag and handed it over. Margay showed it to Nick and Judy. There were nearly a dozen screws inside, all stripped nearly to smoothness. "These were what was holding the catwalk up. And then there's the rope." Margay pointed across the tangle of broken equipment where the wombat was cataloguing evidence. "Over there. Brian's already taken pictures of it. The thing's completely frayed."

"What are the odds that this is all just regular wear and tear?"

"We're still looking into that," said Margay. "But Andy is insisting it wasn't like this previously."

"Andy?"

"The one who was on the catwalk when it fell."

"You mean someone was actually on this?" exclaimed Judy, looking again at the twisted metal and splintered pieces of wood around them. She looked up at the jungle of metal and lights far above them. She had no problem with heights, but the thought of falling from that made even her stomach swoop.

"Is he okay?" asked Judy, though she didn't see how he could be.

The cat nodded. It made her glasses slip a few inches down her nose. She pushed them back up impatiently. "Luckily. He managed to jump to one of the supports before it all came down. He's a little shaken, but seems fine for the most part."

"That must of have been terrifying."

"Did he say what he was doing up there?" asked Nick.

"He's part of the lighting crew," explained Margay. "He was up there checking on one of the bulbs, so he says."

"Is he still around?"

"Dressing room." She gestured towards the back of the stage. "I told him to relax there until someone could talk to him. Didn't realize it would be you two again. You always this lucky with cases?"

"Seems like it, doesn't it?" said Nick.

"Well have fun. the dressing room's the third door on the left."

Judy thanked her and they headed behind the stage, careful not to trip on any of the mess scattered
around them.

After the openness of the stadium, the backstage felt claustrophobic in comparison. Judy and Nick had to squish against the wall to let others pass, and twice had to duck under the feet of the bigger animals. It was with relief that they finally made it to the dressing room doors, of which there were several, all of them closed.

"Did she say it was the third door on the right, or left?" asked Judy, looking between the two options. "I can't remember. Nick?"

She glanced over at him. His gaze was focused on something at the end of the hall.

Judy peered around him. Two animals stood in the open doorway to a small office.

One of them was a smushed faced Pallas cat in a striped suit.

The other was Robin Swift.

The fox looked over and saw them. He grinned and shot them a wink. The pallas cat saw them too. He scowled and slammed the door shut.

"What's Swift doing here?" said Nick.

"I don't know," said Judy.

"And who's that cat he's with? The one that looks like he drank sour milk for breakfast."

"I don't know that either." Judy cocked her head at the office door, where the two animals' shadows were just visible through the frosted glass. "He does look familiar though. I know I've seen him somewhere before…"

"Well then, let's go find out."

Nick started down the hall, but Judy grabbed him by the sleeve, halting him. "We're not here to investigate Robin. We're on a case, remember? You can chat with him later if you want to."

"Swift and I do not chat," said Nick.

Judy rolled her eyes. "Well whatever it is that you two do, do it later."

She let go of his sleeve and gestured between the two doors again. "Now, right or left?"

Sending one last look back at the office, Nick rapped on the door to their left. There was the sound of someone clearing their throat, and then a rough voice said, "C-come in."

The dressing room was almost as narrow as the hallway, with one side taken up with a long mirror and table and the other side with a beat up looking couch. A mountain cat sat half-curled on the far end, a paper cup of coffee cradled in his paws.

"Are you Andy?" Judy asked.

"Y-yes, that's me," the cat said, arm shooting up like a kitten being called upon in class. Halfway up he winced and tucked it back down again.

"Are you injured?" Judy asked, coming forward. "Do we need to call for medical help?"
"No!"

The exclamation sounded extra loud in the tiny room. Andy sat back, chagrined. More quietly, he said. "I-I'm fine, really. Just clipped my elbow on a metal beam when I jumped. Please don't call anyone. Things look bad enough as it is."

"In what way?" asked Nick.

Andy stared morosely into his coffee cup. "They showed you the rope and screws they found, right? Who do you think they're going to blame for that? But I swear, we do monthly safety checks! I can show you our maintenance book where we signed off on the records. The equipment didn't look like that before. Far from it. Do you think I would have gone up there if I had known the state of it? It all should have been secure."

"What were you doing up there?" asked Nick.

"Special effects radioed me that we had a burnout of one of the main spotlights. I went up there to replace it and as I'm walking out, I notice that the whole catwalk is creaking and shaking…" Andy shuddered. "I was already halfway across by then. I barely managed to jump onto one of the steel supports before the whole thing went crashing down. It all happened so fast."

"So the rope and screws just happen to both be worn out at the same time," said Judy. "The light just happens to burn out, and Andy just happens to be called to go up there at the exact time there was a performer on stage, and his added weight makes the catwalk break." She looked at Nick. "That's a lot of coincidences."

"It's still a dumb way to try and kill someone," said Nick.

"You—you believe I didn't do it?" asked Andy, sounding cautiously hopeful.

Before Judy could respond, a low voice from the doorway grumbled, "Evidence says otherwise."

The stripe-suited Pallas cat entered the room, that deep, penetrating scowl of his aimed at the three of them.

"And you are?" said Nick.

The cat scoffed. "I was told she requested the best. And yet you don't even know who I am? Consider me unimpressed."

"Mr. Unimpressed it is then," snarked Nick.

Andy made a choking noise behind them. "T-that's Gazelle's manager, Oskar Manul."

"Oh!" Judy remembered him now. Whenever an article came out about Gazelle, her manager was almost always lurking somewhere in the background behind her like a scowling photo-bomb. Fru Fru even liked to make a game of it: Who could spot the angry cat first. Loser bought the first round of drinks.

"Recalled me, have you?" sneered the cat. "I'm only the creator of the greatest singer Zootopia has ever seen."

"I've never been into pop music," said Nick. "Too cheery for my tastes. You're clearly a perfect fit for it, though. In an extreme, opposites attract kind of way."
Judy swore she could hear the cat's teeth grind. "As you say. In any case, I've come to insist you wrap things up so you can be on your way. We have everything under control here and frankly you're holding up important practice time. Not to mention that the longer you're here the more the news is going to talk, and we don't need any bad publicity before the concert."

"What do you mean, you have everything under control?" said Judy.

"It's an open and shut case, isn't it? We don't need to waste time on a full-scale investigation. I've got it all handled."

"How's that?" demanded Nick.

Gazelle's manager raised his heavy eyebrows. "I'm going to sue this stadium for faulty equipment, of course. They told you how the catwalk broke, didn't they? So if you will just run along and write up your report or whatever you cops have to do to make it official, I'll have all the backing I need for court."

Andy sniffled, the paper cup in his paws crinkling as his grip on it tightened, until Judy feared he would crush it and spill coffee all over himself.

"It wasn't us," he said. "It really wasn't."

"Tell it to my injured back up dancer," snapped Oskar. "I hope you have a good lawyer, because you're going to need one." He scowled around at the tiny dressing room. "I told Gazelle we should've had the concert at Savannah Central again this year, but she's as pig-headed as the swine. Who says it's our job to keep places like this in business? When you're out of style, you're out of style. And now the building is literally crumbling down on top of us."

Judy couldn't stand to listen to this anymore. She stepped forward, drawing the manager's attention away from the sniffling mountain cat and back to her. "You're getting ahead of yourself," she told him. "Gazelle suspects foul play here."

"So what else is new?"

"We haven't ruled out the possibility either."

"And in case you didn't realize, you don't get to manage us," said Nick. "We'll leave when we have everything we need, and not a minute before. So if you want us out of your fur, your best bet is to back off so we can do our job."

Gazelle's manager glared at the pair of them. Judy did her best to glare back. Nick, for his part, could have been made of stone. Very unfriendly looking stone.

Finally, the cat caved with a disgusted shake of his head. "What a waste of time and money," he growled. "Fine. Investigate however you want. Just keep it out of the papers until after the concert."

"We'll do our best," said Nick dryly.

The cat turned and stomped out. Or tried to. He was blocked at the doorway by the arrival of Gazelle and her backup dancer, Hunter, who had his arm draped across her shoulders and was leaning heavily against her. The end of his tail had been splinted and wrapped, and he had the boneless posture and bleary eyes of an animal completely zonked on painkillers.

"Back, are you?" said the manager. "Were you at least able to avoid the reporters?"
"No one saw us besides the doctor and a few nurses," said Gazelle.

"I hope you checked their phones for pictures before you left."

"It slipped my mind, unfortunately," said Gazelle, too breezily for Judy to believe she actually cared.

With a fed up huff, Oskar left.

To Judy and Nick, Gazelle said, "Officers, thank you so much for coming. I am sorry if we kept you waiting."

"It's fine," said Judy. She looked up at the giant cat drooped over the singer's shoulders. "I hope Hunter is okay?"

Gazelle patted his huge paw. "Some broken tail bones, and there might be some nerve damage, but considering what could have been, I am only thankful."

She looked over at the cat on the couch with concern. "Are you all right, Andy? I was just told about what happened. I didn't even realize someone had been up there or I would have insisted you come to the hospital with us. Can I do anything for you?"

The mountain cat lurched from his seat. "No, no. I'm completely fine. Don't worry about me. I'll uh, leave you all to talk." He made an awkward move out the doorway, trying to pass the pair in the narrow space while maintaining as much distance as he could, his head lowered respectfully.

"Are you sure I can't get you anything?" asked Gazelle.

"I'm sure. Please don't worry about me. I need to get back to work anyway."

He hurried off down the hall. Gazelle watched him go with a regretful expression.

The tiger, Hunter, let out a low groan, slipping lower over Gazelle's slight shoulders, and she staggered under the additional weight. Judy and Nick both held up their paws, more in defense in case the giant cat came falling down on them than to try and help hold him up.

"I'm sorry. He must be at his limit," said Gazelle, half-carrying, half-dragging the great feline over to the couch and collapsing onto it with him. Hunter blinked unfocused eyes over at them once before letting his head fall back. He curled up around Gazelle, his head on one knee, his tail over the other. Even in plain workout clothes and weary from the stress of the morning, they both looked like they were posing for a photo shoot for the cover of some fashion magazine.

Gazelle brushed a strand of hair from her eyes and gave them both a tired but sincere smile. "Thank you again for coming. I truly appreciate it."

"I'm surprised you didn't just let your great and powerful manager handle everything," said Nick, only half-sarcastically.

"Yes, well, I try and leave as little to his discretion as possible," admitted Gazelle.

"But he's your manager," said Judy.

"By the rules of my contract, at least, yes," said Gazelle.

"If you dislike him so much," said Nick, "then why did you sign on with him in the first place?"
"A naive mistake my younger self made when I was first starting out," said Gazelle. "Still, I can't say he didn't take me to where I wanted to go. And my contract officially ends in a two days, so it's all worked out for the best, I suppose."

She stroked Hunter's head and the tiger curled closer around her, letting out a deep rumbling purr. Gazelle smiled down at him fondly. "He really is going to be embarrassed about this later. But it's too fun not to enjoy."

There was something in the singer's voice... something soft and intimate that made Judy feel like an intruder, and also hyper-aware of how close Nick was standing next to her.

Judy cleared her throat, glad that her fur hid the heat she could feel burning her cheeks. "Can I ask? Why us? We were told you wanted to see us specifically."

"I've heard a lot about the two of you," said Gazelle. "The things you've done aren't just admirable, they're inspiring. I know I can trust you."

"You mean with the accident?"

"It wasn't an accident." Careful not to jostle Hunter, Gazelle reached into her back pocket and withdrew a folded piece of paper. She handed it to Nick. Judy didn't need more than a glance to recognize what he was holding. Another threat note: You will pay for your choice.

"That's the third one I've found," said Gazelle. "It was in my dressing room this morning."

"Why didn't you go to the police with this?" asked Nick.

Gazelle rubbed the scruff of the tiger's neck. Hunter purred even louder and rolled so she could reach under his chin. "I am blessed with many fans, but I have anti-fans too. I've received my fair share of hate mail over the years. But it's always been only words that I could throw away. No one has ever tried to do anything more to me. Until now."

"Does your manager know about this?" asked Judy.

"My contract is up after the concert. We have all but washed our paws of each other at this point. Even if I told him, he would only say I brought it on myself with my bad behavior."

"Bad behavior?" said Judy.

"So he calls it. He is not a fan of my activism. It has led to more than one disagreement over the years."

"Any concern that he might be the one behind all of this?" asked Nick.

"Oskar?" Gazelle sounded genuinely taken aback at the suggestion. She even stopped petting Hunter, who gave a disappointed growl in response. "He's not one to risk his reputation. Not for anything."

"Do you have any idea who might be sending you these notes then?" asked Judy.

"I cannot say that I do," said Gazelle. "But I might know why they are sending them. I think they found out about the concert announcement, and they want to stop it."

"What announcement?" asked Judy.

At that, Gazelle smiled, and the joy it held transformed her from merely beautiful into dazzling.
She wrapped a slender arm around the dozing tiger and cuddled him close. "Hunter and I are getting married."
Chapter 11

The reaction that followed Gazelle's announcement was impressive only in its complete absence. Both Nick and Judy were too stunned to speak. Judy knew she should be offering her congratulations, but past her surprise and joy and a tiny bit of envy she refused to acknowledge, something niggled at her. Something big and obvious and—

_Oh._

Judy wanted to smack herself. She turned to Nick, who was rubbing at his temples like he had a headache coming on.

"I am an idiot," she told him.

"Well if you are then so am I," he said. "I can't believe we didn't see it."

"Tomás and Mr. Tavi…"

"And Clare's got a pretty concerned kangaroo hanging around her. I bet you anything there's something between the two of them. Or was."

"Iggy is the only one who doesn't fit."

"You mean the chinchilla grocer? He didn't leave his fruit stand to anyone special?"

Judy thought about it. "I did talk to an old journalist friend of his. A bunny named Harper. She was really upset about what had happened to him."

Nick made a _there you go_ gesture at her.

"But even if they used to be together like that," said Judy, "they've obviously been separated for years. And there were no threatening notes discovered at his home."

"Maybe he threw them out."

"And the lack of injuries? The others showed signs of having been assaulted previously. But he was murdered without any warning."

"So maybe he's not part of it," said Nick, "Regardless, this changes everything."

Judy agreed. Anticipation had her bouncing on the balls of her feet. There was so much they needed to do now. Go back over all the cases, for one. Re-interview everyone involved. Take another look at their suspect list. Maybe revisit the scenes…

"Does this mean you have something already?" asked Gazelle, and Judy froze mid-bounce, chagrined to realize she had forgotten all about the singer in her excitement.

"Thanks to you," she said. "You have no idea how grateful we are that you confided in us. This information will go a long way in helping us solve the case."

"Then I'm glad," said Gazelle. "Hurtful letters I can take, but I do not like the thought of someone going after Hunter."

"Or you," said Judy. "We still don't know for sure who this attack was aimed at. You were both on
and off the stage at the time. It could have been meant for either one of you."

"Either way," said Nick. "You're both the highest profile this creep has gone after yet. They're either stepping up their game—"

"Or making a statement," finished Judy. "Nick's right. You'll need extra security while we investigate this. I know you already have your own crew, but I'm going to have Chief Bogo assign you extra police protection as well."

"Thank you, officers," said Gazelle. "I knew I could rely on you for help."

They left the stadium an hour later. Gazelle had one of the stage hands show them to a secret side exit in order to avoid the crowds out front, which had increased in both size and volume while they had been inside.

"Looks like the news is out," said Nick.

"Pat of the news, anyway," agreed Judy. She pointed towards the alley. "If we circle the block we should be able to go wide around the parking lot and get back to the car without being spotted."

"Actually… I need to make a detour first," said Nick.

Judy looked at him. "You're going to find Robin, aren't you?"

"How did you—?" Nick stopped and shook his head. "Never mind. Yes, I am. He's a lead we can't afford not to follow up on now."

"I'm sure he would tell us if he knew anything important," said Judy.

Nick gave her a look that said he very much doubted that.

"Well if you believe he's so uncooperative," said Judy. "what makes you think you'll be able to get anything out of him now?"

Nick sniffed and tugged the collar of his jacket up. "Because I'm a clever fox."

"So is he," she couldn't help but point out.

Nick scowled. "Well I'm cleverer. Don't," he said, throwing up a paw when she started to respond. "Whatever you were going to say to that, I don't want to hear it."

Judy bit back a smile. "Look at that. Clever after all."

His put-upon sigh was adorable. But when he turned to go, Judy sobered. "Wait!" she said. "You promised we would talk today, remember?" She tried her best to sound stern instead of plaintive. She didn't want to look needy, but she needed to have this talk with him. And Nick, whether he knew it or not, needed it too.

"I remember," said Nick in a tone that said he wasn't about to forget. "I'll come by your place after I finish up, okay?"

"This isn't an excuse to run away, is it?" she asked, and some of her worry must have showed because Nick's scowl smoothed out and he took her paw in his own, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "I'll be there, Carrots," he promised her. "And whatever it is you want to tell me, I swear I'll accept
it. No arguments or excuses. Okay?"

He released her paw and took off around the side of the building, away from the crowds and down a side street that would take him to the nearest main intersection. Judy watched him go. Once he was out of sight, she made her own roundabout way back to the cruiser. She tried to take Nick's solemnity on their upcoming talk as a positive sign. If he was aware of the problem enough to take it seriously, then that meant their relationship must still be reparable. Right? After all, half the battle was admitting you had a problem, or whatever the phrase was.

If only he hadn't sounded so resigned, as if he were a fox prepared to face the chopping block. That part was less than reassuring.

Positive thoughts, Judy, she told herself. In a couple of hours they would have this whole issue hashed out and then maybe they would order take-out and work on solving this case together, just like old times. There, that was a positive thought.

Now if only she could make herself believe it.

With over an hour's head start Nick knew that the other fox could have slipped off to almost anywhere, but on a hunch he went to Marian's restaurant first.

It was still early in the day. The sign outside said closed but the door was unlocked when he tried it. Inside he found Robin lounging at one of the booths, reading the paper and sipping coffee. Both the obviousness of the location and his lack of surprise at seeing Nick confirmed Nick's hunch: Robin had known Nick would seek him out and was obviously feeling generous enough to humor him with a meeting.

Even when he was being accommodating he was annoying.

Nick slid into the seat opposite and Robin folded away his newspaper.

"There you are," he said. "I was starting to think you weren't coming."

"If I had known you were waiting up for me, I would have taken longer," said Nick.

Robin laughed. "I'm sure you would've. Consider me grateful. It forces me to rest, at the very least. And that makes Marian happy."

"It does," said Marian, appearing from the kitchen with a pot of coffee and refilling Robin's mug. "You always push yourself too hard."

Robin caught her free paw in his and kissed the back of it. "Thank you so much, my love."

"For the coffee?"

"For your concern. Your love keeps me going better than any drink I could consume."

Marian ducked her head shyly. Nick felt both discomfited and slightly nauseous by their display.

"Can I get a cup too, please?" he asked.

Marian shot him an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, Nick, but Fru Fru made me promise that I would snub you properly. For Judy."

Nick gave a double-take, sure he had misheard her. "You're snubbing me?"
"Yes. I'm so sorry."

Nick looked at Robin. The fox raised his paws in a *don't look at me* gesture.

"But don't worry," Marian reassured him. "It's not for forever."

"How merciful of you," said Nick dryly. "Does that mean you and Fru Fru have an end date in mind?"

"Not a date so much. Just until you learn your lesson." She said it so cheerfully.

"Fine," said Nick. "Can I at least ask how everyone is doing? I ran into Reynard last night and he seemed a bit… upset."

"Reynard? He hasn't mentioned anything."

Marian looked over at Robin, who gave a nominal shake of his head. "Got me."

"Do you know where he is right now?"

"The store. We're low on napkins." Marian clutched the coffee pot a little closer. "Is this something serious? Should I call him?"

Nick looked from Marian's worried face to Robin's even stare. They truly seemed to not know anything. It made him doubt. What if he was wrong? He still had no idea why Reynard had been so angry, or who the walrus was. For all he knew, the two had already made up and it was over with. He would be distressing Marian over nothing.

"I'm sure he's fine," he said. "Kit was probably just having a bad night."

Marian nodded, looking relieved. Robin just kept watching him. Nick cleared his throat and made a show of looking around the restaurant. "So, where is everyone else?"

"Well the kits are at school," said Marian. "And Craven is taking some time off. He's looking into going back to college. He never did finish before we… well, before. I'm relieved to hear it actually, I… *Oh.*" She covered her mouth with her paw. "I think I'm talking to you too much. Fru Fru will say that I'm fraternizing. She warned me not to do that. I really should go."

She hurried off to the kitchen. But at the door she stopped and turned back. "If you'd like some coffee I'll just leave the pot on in here, okay? Feel free to help yourself. I mean—" She firmed her chin and gave him a very un-Marian-like frown. "You can come get it yourself."

Robin chuckled as she disappeared into the kitchen. "You really got yourself into it this time, didn't you?" He took a cheerful sip of his coffee, ignoring Nick's scowl. "So? You wanted to see me?"

"Why were you with Gazelle's manager earlier?" demanded Nick, jumping right into it. "What were you two talking about?"

"What I wonder," said Robin as if Nick hadn't spoken, "is if you were always this curious and just repressed it, or if this is a new thing that becoming an officer has brought out in you."

"I'm not curious at all," said Nick. "I'm suspicious. You're confusing the two."

"Too many things about you don't add up."

"Maybe you're just missing some of the variables."

Oh, he was, without a doubt. Nick had no illusions about that. But today had revealed another piece of the puzzle, and Nick didn't like how it fit into any of his theories. He knew Robin was hiding things, but until today Nick's annoyance had lied more in the "not knowing" than from any real fear of what the fox might actually be up to. But seeing him doing business with that sleazy manager? No good could come from that, and Nick had found himself distinctly disappointed in the other fox, and then angry with himself for feeling that way. Whether Swift was as innocent as he claimed to be or not, why should Nick care?

"For a philanthropist you sure have a strange mix of clients," he noted.

"You refer to the one, Oskar Manul?" said Robin. "What makes you think he's a client?"

"What other reason would you have to see him?"

Robin set his coffee mug aside and folded his arms. "Why are you even bothering with my insignificant self right now, Wilde? Don't you have other, bigger problems you should be out there solving?"

"You mean what happened on stage today?" said Nick. "I'm assuming you know about it, since you were around at the time. Funny how that was."

"Now, now." Robin tsked him. "We both know I would never have anything to do with something horrible like that."

"You say that, but you've yet to tell me what you were doing there."

Robin shrugged. "I heard they were looking for new talent. I've always wanted to try my paw at the stage. Did you hear how I played the violin at the party? I'm pretty good, if I do say so myself. Oh, but maybe you had already passed out by then? Well, there's always the wedding. I was going to invite you as one of my guests, but perhaps you'd prefer to sit on Marian's side of the aisle? I only ask because Marian is planning on asking Judy to be her maid of honor, so it's not like you'll be sitting with her—"

Nick held up his paws. "Hang on, just… be quiet for a minute. You know about Gazelle ending her contract?"

"The topic happened to come up, yes."

"Do you know why she's ending it?"

Robin tipped his chin thoughtfully. "There seem to be several reasons."

"The biggest one being that she's seeing her backup dancer."

No surprise from the other fox. He had known this too. Nick felt his frustration rise. "You knew and you didn't say anything?"

"To who?" asked Robin. "You? Why would I? It's hard enough chatting with you when I don't bring up topics that ruffle your fur, as it were."

"You realize I could arrest you for obstructing an investigation?"
"Before today that information would have meant nothing to you," Robin pointed out. "As it meant nothing to me. Not until I visited the stadium and realized how much more was going on."

"It's hardly nothing," argued Nick. "What she's planning on doing is social suicide."

Robin gave another careless shrug. "I find it brave myself."

"Gazelle already has anti-fans. If she comes out with this, it could ruin her career."

"Is that what you're worried about?"

"From everything I know about her, this job is Gazelle's life. It's part of who she is. And she'd going to risk that for—what?"

"True love?" suggested Robin.

Nick made a face.

"Not a romantic, I take it."

"I'm a realist."

"Have you talked to Judy about this?"

"About what? Gazelle's poor career choices? No. I haven't. Not that there's been time to bring it up but..."

Robin's smile was rueful. "Perhaps you should."

Nick narrowed his eyes. "My opinion is hardly relevant to solving the case."

"I'd think she'd find it interesting. I know I do."

"Keep your pop psychology to yourself," snapped Nick.

Robin raised his paws in surrender. "Just a friendly suggestion."

"Well I don't have time for it."

"And yet there was time enough to come after me," Robin pointed out. "Notice how nicely I waited for you? Because I knew that that curious—sorry, suspicious—mind of yours would be turning over on itself after you saw me, and I thought it best to nip that suspicion in the bud and send you on your way."

"You know manipulation usually works better when you don't explain how you're doing it," said Nick.

"I like to think of it more as course correcting. You're not the only one with things to do. Why waste both our times following a false lead?"

"That lead being you?" asked Nick. "You realize your only defense right now as to why you're not involved in this is that you haven't run away and because you say so. Your lawyer friend should give you some pointers on how to argue a case."

"I thought I sounded pretty convincing."
Nick snorted. "What about the manager then? Oskar. Since you seem to know him so well. Do you think he's involved?"

Robin shook his head. "The cat's a piece of work, there's no denying that. But he would never do anything to ruin his cash cow. I'm sorry, cash gazelle. Not while she's still technically under contract. It would be bad press for him."

"But if she's leaving soon anyway, what's stopping him from ruining her and then using it as an excuse for the split?"

"It's possible, I guess. But he doesn't strike me as the type."

"So you think he's clean?"

"Oh, he's far from clean," said Robin, adding with a wistful sigh, "But then, who among us can claim to be so?"

Nick rolled his eyes. "Is that really all you've got for me? It's not you, and it's not the manager?"

Robin grinned. "Unless you'd like me to break out my violin? I'm working on adapting a Gazelle song. For Marian. I could always use an honest opinion."

Nick stood. "I'll pass. And at the risk of losing my wedding invite: don't leave town."

Robin's smile stayed good natured. "Of course. As if I'd ever go anywhere else." He waved Nick on, adding more seriously. "Be careful out there, Wilde. This case of yours won't be an easy one. You and Judy better watch out for each other."

Nick thought of Judy's solemn request to speak with him. He pushed open the front door, making the little bell tied to the door handle jingle. Its cheerful sound was at odds with his heavy sigh. "I don't think that's going to be an issue soon."

Judy took the cruiser back to the precinct's parking garage and then bypassed the subway in favor of heading home on foot. She wanted time to sort out her thoughts and walking helped her think. She would have jogged, but she had forgotten to change out of her uniform and animals tended to panic when they saw a cop run by them. So she kept to a slow trot, and she pondered.

Finally having a reason for the attacks was both a relief and yet horrifying to realize. All those threatening letters insinuating that the attacker knew some deep dark secret of the victims, something deserving of punishment, all hogwash. None of the victims were bad mammals. They hadn't done anything wrong. But because of one twisted mind, animals were being hurt… animals were being killed. For being in love. Judy could barely fathom it.

At least it explained the victims' hesitancy with opening up to her and Nick. They were trying to avoid any more negative attention falling onto them or those they cared about. She and Nick would need to tread carefully, or more lives could be ruined and the murderer wouldn't even need to lift a claw in order to do it. She would need to remind Nick when he came over…

Just like that, her thoughts were back to her partner's impending visit. And despite knowing full-well that this evening was hardly going to be a fun one, her dumb bunny heart still fluttered at the thought that he was coming to see her.

When she got back to her apartment, she found herself pausing to look around the place, seeing it suddenly as if through a guest's eyes. There were dirty dishes in the sink, her garbage can was full,
and she had piles of laundry on the floor that she had sorted out to wash and then never gotten
around to. She knew Nick wouldn't care about any of it—if he even noticed—but this conversation
was going to be messy enough without having a literal mess surrounding them. And even though it
was silly of her, Judy wanted the place to look nice for Nick. It was a point of pride as much as it
was an attempt to welcome him the only way he would allow: in a way he wouldn't notice it at all.

So she washed the dishes, took out the garbage, and stuffed all her dirty clothes back into her
hamper and then hid the hamper in her bedroom closet. She then straightened up the magazines on
her coffee table, (*Gardening for the Urban Mammal* and *Whisker's Weekly*, for the grooming tips),
wiped down her counters, and dusted off the bookcase, hopping up to reach the higher shelves.

That left only the couch. After returning home alone last night, Judy's mood had sunk without her
friends' support there to buoy her. Lonely, depressed, and just a little bit tipsy, Judy had dearly
wanted to call home and talk to her family. Only two things had stopped her: 1) it had been late.
Any phone calls would only scare the fluff from her parents. And 2) she was Jude the Dude. She
was supposed to be the strong one in the family. If she called them up, crying about her heartache
over a fox... well, they wouldn't have known how to help her anyway.

So instead she had gone with plan B. B standing for *bunnies*. Plushie bunnies. She had dug out her
entire collection—the first time since her rough patch after her initial move to Zootopia—and
cuddled up with them on the couch along with the fuzziest blanket she owned.

Had it been an unproductive way to deal with her feelings? Maybe.

Had it made her feel a thousand times better? Yes. And that was the important part.

But now that Nick was coming over, the bunnies had to go. *Immediately*.

She tossed aside the blanket, aghast at just how many of the stuffed animals now inhabited her
couch. She could have sworn there hadn't been that many last night. It was as if they had multiplied
like, well, like bunnies!

Grabbing up an armful, she carried them back to her not-so-secret dresser, as Nick like to refer to it.
Using her foot, she toed open the bottom drawer and dumped her load of plushies into it, then
returned to the couch for another, then another, then another...

Once the bottom drawer was full, she kicked it shut and pulled up the middle one—and frowned.

There, nestled snuggly amongst a few stray bunny plushies she had somehow managed to miss last
night, was a new addition. It stuck out among the grays, whites, and tans like a bright red and black
thumb, complete with bushy tail and pointy black ears.

Judy stared and the fox plushie seemed to stare back, its big button eyes shiny and wide, with a
little furry belly all fat and white. A folded letter was tucked neatly under one arm as if it were
holding on to it just for her.

*Nick*, she thought. Of course it was. It was just like him to do something like this. Sneak in here
and leave her this... whatever it was supposed to be. A surprise gift? An apology? After everything
he had done, did he really think this would be enough?

She glanced around her apartment. Where was he now? Not hiding inside somewhere, surely. She
would have found him while she was tidying up. Had he beat her back here, hidden this, and then
left? Was he even planning on coming back later? If this was him keeping his promise to come
over and talk, by sneaking in when she wasn't around and leaving her a *note*, she was not going to
be a happy bunny.

She stared at the crisp white piece of paper, her misgivings only growing the longer she contemplated it. She thought of the sadness she'd seen in Nick's eyes earlier. What if this was worse than a cowardly attempt at an apology? What if this was his way of saying goodbye? What if he was already gone, halfway to the meadowlands or out of Zootopia entirely?

Angry hurt filled her at the thought. She deserved better than this. And after he had promised her. How did he even know she would be going into her drawer so soon? For all he knew she might not have found his dumb letter for months—

She looked down at the plushies in her arms, then over to the remaining nest on the couch. Sick embarrassment swept her. He'd known she would find it because he'd seen. Judy wanted to burrow into the floor and hide there. Too bad she was ten stories up. It wasn't that her collection itself was a secret. Nick was well aware that she sometimes like to cuddle up with a bunny plushie or two. But this was different. This was evidence of her at her weakest, because of him, and the thought of Nick seeing that…

She let the armful of plushies fall and snatched up the fox and its accompanying note. She didn't know what it could possibly say that would make her feel better. Some kind of bad poetry about her being as lovable as a plushie bunny? Or what if it was a break up letter? *I came to let you know I'm done with this partnership, and then I saw all your toys and whew, did I dodge a bullet or what!*

*Stop torturing yourself and just read it,* Judy commanded herself.

Trying to emotionally brace herself and failing miserably, Judy unfolded the note. In messy, curled writing it said:

YOU BRING DISGRACE TO THE BADGE. BACK OFF THE FOX OR I'LL BE BACK FOR YOU.

Judy stared at the words, struggling to comprehend. She reread it a second time, a cloying sense of surreality closing in around her.

This was…

The sound of something dripping reached her at the same time as the sensation of wetness seeping between her claws. She looked from the note to the stuffed fox she held in her other paw. It's body was now three shades darker and gushing something thick and red. It streamed over her wrist and down her arm, coating her fur all the way to the elbow where it drip-drip-dripped onto the bunny plushies below.

A knock came from the door. Judy dropped the stuffed fox with a start, staring at the red staining her palm. *Blood.*

This was…

"Hopps?"

Nick. Nick was here. She needed to go let him in. But there was so much blood. It had splattered over everything and more was still pooling from the fox. She couldn't seem to tear her eyes away from it.

"Hopps? You there?"
She tried to answer yes but her voice came out choked, the word garbled.

"Judy? Is that you?" called Nick, and he sounded concerned now. "What's going on? Can I come in?"

Come in?

Of all things, it occurred to Judy that she hadn't put away her plushies yet. If he came in now, he would see them.

Panic jolted her into motion. She made to scoop up the plushies at her feet, but the blood really was everywhere and her limbs weren't working for her properly. They felt rubbery and weak, and strangely disconnected from her panicking brain. She stepped right into the growing puddle at her feet and her foot slipped out from under her. The plushies she had managed to grab tumbled from her arms and she tumbled down along with them. More plushies broke her fall, but the thump still reached Nick from the other side of the door.

"Judy?" called Nick. "Is that you? Judy, I'm coming in," he warned her as time time he threw open the door.

Judy watched him take in the sight of her, a blood-covered mess surrounded by a bunch of gore splattered plushies, and the shock and terror on his face helped Judy finally recover her voice.

"I-I'm okay," she told him as he ran to her. "Really, I—"

"Where are you hurt?" He yanked off his coat, and with one nip at the seam in the shoulder, tore the whole sleeve away. He took her bloody paw and held it up, looking for the cut, the cause for all the red around her.

"I'm fine—" Judy tried again.

"You are not, you're in shock!" snapped Nick. "Look at you! Where—" He ran his paws up and down her arm, feeling over the vulnerable places in her wrist and across her palm. Then he flipped her paw over and searched the other side.

"Nick, calm down."

When he found nothing there, he cursed and reached for her foot, the one she had stepped into the puddle with. His paws were shaking as he felt over her toes and arch and heel, his breathing growing faster and more ragged the longer he searched. "I can't find it. I can't find anything. Why can't I— Judy you have to help me out I can't find—"

Judy cupped his chin with her non-bloodied paw and forced his head up. He resisted only a moment before green eyes filled with tears met her own, terrified and pleading.

"I'm all right, Nick. I'm not hurt. The blood isn't mine, I promise. See?" She held up her bloodied paw, wiggling her claws and rotating her wrist. She made a fist and then waved at him. "See?" she said again.

Nick stared, for a long moment uncomprehending. Then his breath shuddered out of him on a sob and he yanked her to him, holding her tight as he babbled out thanks to creatures both divine and mythical.

"Nick?"
"Are you sure you're not hurt anywhere?"

Hearing his voice so close to her ear made Judy shiver. "I'm sure," she whispered.

She expected him to let go of her quickly, but the moment stretched and his hold didn't loosen. Judy wasn't complaining. It felt good, being in his arms again. And she was light-headed enough that she didn't feel guilty for indulging in the moment. She rested her head against his shoulder, letting her own heart settle while she listened to Nick's do the same.

Eventually, Nick released a long, shaky breath. In a wry voice he said, "So I guess I ruined my favorite jacket for nothing then, huh?"

"If it makes you feel any better, you looked really impressive doing it," said Judy.

He gave her a sudden squeeze, making her squeak in surprise, and then released her. But he stayed close, only moving back far enough to get a look at her. One paw cupped the elbow of her bloodied arm while the other lingered at her waist. He looked around at the mess, and his voice was dark as he asked, "What happened?"

Judy hesitated. She thought of the stuffed fox, hidden somewhere in the chaos around them, and the note, which had fluttered half under the dresser during her moment of panic. She didn't want to tell him. It was going to ruin this moment, where Nick was acting like Nick again and all the distance that had been between them up 'til now had shrunk down to nothing. She would have gladly sat, knee to knee with him in this bloody nest of plushies all night if she could have, just to hold on to this closeness.

But they didn't have all night. And Nick, who was looking at her in that fierce and worried way of his, was waiting for an answer.

So Judy carefully retrieved the note and handed it over to him. She watched his face as he read it silently. She saw understanding dawn, followed by fear and then a blazing fury, before he managed to tamp it all down, leaving only careful blankness behind.

"So much for thinking Gazelle was the last," said Judy. "It looks like whoever's doing this just announced their plains for an encore. With me."
Despite Judy calling it in as a non-emergency, that didn't stop every available cop in the area from showing up ten minutes later, and every cop who wasn't in the area from coming ten minutes after that. Which was how Judy's apartment was invaded for the second time that day.

Everyone who worked at the precinct who had even a passing acquaintance with the famous bunny cop wanted to be there, and thanks to the oversized apartment, nearly everyone could. The few who were too big to fit milled around the sidewalk, under the pretense of directing traffic and keeping out nosy civilians who might try to sneak inside and see what was happening.

"You guys are the nosy ones!" accused Nick. "They wouldn't even know anything was going on if half the precinct wasn't parked outside."

"Who you calling nosy?" demanded Officer McHorn.

Fortunately at that point the Rhino's partner, Francine, showed up and was able to diffuse the situation before anything happened that required another case report.

At least the officers who loitered on the street were out of the way. The ones determined to hang around inside Judy's apartment were far worse annoyances. For most of the afternoon Nick stalked from room to room, kicking out everyone who wasn't actively contributing towards the case and shooing away anyone who tried to bother Judy, who had retreated to the kitchen table and so far hadn't said anything beyond her initial statement to Howle.

The memory of that conversation gave Nick the desire to snap at someone. Possibly several someones. Judy's discomfort had been painful to witness. The whole time she talked, her gaze never went higher than Howle's chin. Nick had wanted nothing more than to shoo everyone out of the apartment and hide Judy away until her self-consciousness had passed. But unfortunately, Howle wasn't the type to be shooed anywhere, and one look at the apartment and the story pretty much told itself, with or without Judy glossing over why she had opened the drawer in the first place, which she did. She even attempted a joke about family being better in stuffed animal form, but her attempts at self-deprecation couldn't hide her embarrassment.

To give Howle credit, he'd stayed professional about the whole thing. Not once had he laughed or made any wisecracks, well-meaning or otherwise. All his questions had been to the point and related directly to the case. If he had showed any judgment at all, it was in Judy's handling of the situation.

"What made you pick up the fox in the first place?" he had asked her. "Hopps, you should have known better than that. It could have been poisoned, or an explosive. You know what kind of case you're working on. That note should have been a tip off that something about it wasn't right."

And Judy had only been able to shake her head say, "You're right. I don't know why I did that."

But that was a lie, and Nick knew it. The minute they had unearthed that toy fox from that gory pile of plushies, he had known exactly what Judy had been thinking.

His fault. Again.

Now she sat at the kitchen table with a cup of tea that Clawhauser had made for her. The cheetah had managed to stop by on his lunch break to see her, and had been one of the few animals Nick hadn't felt the urge to chase away. The cat had even managed to get Judy to smile once.
That smile was long gone now. Her ears were drooped and she had her arms wrapped around her middle as if to hold herself together as she watched her coworkers go through her home, pick through her stuff, and bag up her plushies. Because of this one small act, her safety, her privacy, and her reputation had been ripped away. Even her feelings were being used against her.

She swished whatever remained in her teacup around and around, lost in the cold dregs of her thoughts. Nick wanted more than anything to go to her. More than once, he had found himself halfway to her side before catching himself and changing course. Today had taught him all that he could stomach; he didn't need any more lessons. That stuffed fox, that note, the way the other officers were now looking at him and Judy. Whispering, wondering.

"Told you they were an item," murmured Trish, the ferret who had been working with Margay at the stadium that morning.

Nick, who had been passing by as he made another sweep of the apartment, froze in his tracks.

"Meh. Looks oneway to me," said Trish's partner, the wombat, Brian.

"You think?"

"You saw the note. There's a reason why this animal came after the bunny and not the fox, and it's because only one of them is trying to take a walk on the wild side, if you know what I mean." He chortled. "Get it? Wilde side?"

Trish made a face. "You're disgusting, Brian."

"Hey, I'm not the one trying to sneak dates outside my species."

From over in the kitchen, Judy flinched. Nick felt a surge of fury. Didn't these animals know better than to talk about a bunny in her own home? Did they think those long ears were just for decoration? Rude, gossipy idiots.

Nick stormed over to them, ready to chew them out for their thoughtless words. Trish saw him coming and her tiny eyes went wide. Possibly she realized they had been overheard. But Brian didn't notice until Nick was right up on him, and his upper lip curled and he leaned back, as if it offended him to have a fox stand so close.

"Can we help you, Wilde?" he asked sarcastically.

With great effort, Nick checked himself. Creating a scene would only convince them further that something was going on with him and Judy, not to mention it would further embarrass his partner and possibly put her in more danger.

So instead he pointed to the couch, and the plushies they were bagging up by the pawful.

"You've taken enough of these," he told him. "You don't need to collect any more."

"But it's for evidence," said Trish.

"You already have four bags full of evidence," snapped Nick. "And these have nothing to do with the case anyway. Only the ones that were over by the dresser do."

"You don't know that," said Brian. "They might have hidden something inside one of these as an extra surprise."
"The only thing these stuffed animals are hiding is cotton fluff," said Nick. "And I'm telling you to leave them. You got a problem with it, tell Chief Bogo to call me."

Trish's eyes were so wide now they looked in danger of popping out of her face. Brian glared, but when Nick didn't back down he snarled and threw down the plushies he was holding. "Fine. It's no fur off my muzzle. Come on, Trish."

Grabbing the smallest of the four bags, the wombat headed for the door, leaving the ferret to lug the rest, which she did, complaining after her partner all the way.

Nick watched them go. The wombat was about as charming as officer Delgato. At least the lion hadn't felt the need to stop by too. Nick didn't think his temper could have withstood that.

He picked up the stuffed bunnies that Brian had dropped and arranged them as neatly as he could back on the couch. As silly as it was, he couldn't help but feel protective over them. They made Judy happy and gave her a sense of security. Many she'd had for years, and most had been presents from her parents and siblings. They made her feel closer to her family. Nick might tease her, but he knew how important connections like that were.

"Hopps. Wilde. I think I have something," said Howle.

Nick joined the wolf over by the window, Judy right behind him.

"Have you seen this?" Howle pointed to the bottom of the window frame. The tiny brass latch was bent back, the wood around it splintered.

"It wasn't like that before," said Judy.

Nick felt like he was hearing that a lot today.

"I think whoever broke in managed to slide their claw between the window and the frame, and broke the lock that way," Howle said.

"More like destroyed it," said Nick. "Someone did that with just their claw?"

"They managed to climb up a building before," Judy pointed out. "Breaking a lock like this was probably nothing to them."

"I'll have someone check the fire escape," said Howle. "But considering that whoever is doing this has yet to leave any evidence behind, I wouldn't hold out much hope for us finding something there."

"Way to keep our hopes up," said Nick.

Howle shrugged in a it is what it is kind of way and turned to Judy. "Do you have somewhere to stay tonight?" he asked her.

She'll stay with me. Nick had to physically lock his jaw to keep the words from coming out. He couldn't offer her a place. It would be like striking a match next to flammable material. The rumors would erupt.

Howle looked over at him, clearly expecting him to offer. There was a moment of painful silence, then Judy said, "Don't worry. I'll figure something out."

She was looking at Howle as she said it, but Nick knew by her understanding tone that the words
had been meant for him. Her attempt at reassuring him only made him feel worse.

"If the pups weren't teething now, Pearl and I would be happy to have you," said Howle apologetically. "But I would hate for you to have to deal with being nipped at all night on top of everything else."

"I appreciate the thought," said Judy. "But I'll be fine. Really."

"Maybe Clawhauser could..."

Nick couldn't take it anymore. Cursing, he turned away from them. He couldn't stand next to Judy as if he were still any sort of partner to her. Looking after her was supposed to be his job. If nothing else, she should've at least been able to rely on him for protection after having some crazed murderer break into her home and leave her threatening messages. But no, one stupid note and he had been rendered useless. Worse than that, he had officially become a detriment to her safety.

He shoved through the milling crowds filling the apartment, past the plushie bunnies with their accusing button eyes. But they weren't anywhere near as painful as the ones he could feel on his back as he stormed out the door.

Judy hadn't expected to see Nick again that night, so she was a bit surprised when he turned up right after the last officer had gone for the evening. In fact, he returned so soon afterwards that she was sure he had been watching from somewhere near her building, waiting until the coast was clear.

He seemed calmer than when he'd left, but it wasn't a reassuring sort of calm. The resignation she had sensed from him before had morphed into something both deeper and darker, with a physical weight that bowed his shoulders and put a drag in his feet.

When he saw her bag packed and ready by the door, his jaw clenched and his expression turned even grimmer, if it were possible.

"Did you find somewhere to stay?" he asked. It was the first time he had spoken to her directly since she had called to report the break in. His voice sounded tired and hoarse, and there was a new redness around his eyes that made Judy's heart squeeze. But she didn't know how to address any of it without putting him on the defensive, and so with regret she forced herself to overlook it.

"Fru Fru's father has graciously offered to let me stay at one of his hotels in Tundratown," she told him. "The commute will be longer, but he's pretty insistent about it, and so is Fru Fru. On the plus side, there will be polar bear security."

"Good," said Nick. "Tell them to double it."

Judy raised an eyebrow at him. "You don't think that's going a little overboard?"

"No," said Nick, all seriousness. "You've seen how strong this animal is. For all we know they're a polar bear themselves."

"None of our suspects so far are polar bears," Judy pointed out. "Unless we're missing something."

"We're missing a lot of things," said Nick.

His gaze fell to her paws, and Judy had the childish urge to hide them behind her back. They were still stained red in places, the fur of her wrists and arms matted and stiff. She had changed her
clothes and done a quick wash up earlier, but she had been overwhelmed and distracted at the time. She wasn't surprised she had done such a poor job of it.

Without a word, Nick fetched a small washcloth from the closet and went to the sink to wet it. When he returned, Judy held out her paw for it with a quiet thank you.

Instead of handing it over, Nick reached out and caught her proffered paw in his own. The first swipe of the cloth over Judy's wrist made her jump.

"What are you—I'm mean... you don't have to do this," stammered Judy, self-conscious and awkward. She attempted to pull away, but Nick held firm.

"I want to," he said. "Humor me. Please, Carrots?"

The water was warm and his touch gentle, as if he were treating an injury and not just some dried up paint, which forensics had confirmed it to be earlier. The sensation of it sent shivers up her arm.

"W-well if you insist..."

He worked in silence. He patience seemed infinite. Whereas Judy would have gotten fed up and scrubbed herself raw, or just taken scissors to the more stubborn bits, Nick's touch stayed light and slow. He didn't seem to mind going over the same patch of fur again and again until all the red was wiped away. And he was far more thorough. The lines in her palm, the bumps of her knuckles, that ticklish place between her fingers that made Judy squirm, he missed none of it. He even remembered to press on the underside of each furry digit, extending her claws one at a time so he could wipe off the paint that had gotten beneath them. It was hypnotic and strangely intimate, and Judy was lulled into a kind of standing doze as she watched him, the stress of the day melting away one soft stroke at a time.

"So fuzzy."

The sound of Nick's voice after so much silence startled Judy. His gaze was fully focused on her paw; Judy wondered if he even realized he had spoken aloud. She looked down at their paws and found herself, as he was, comparing them.

He was right about the fuzziness. The pads of her paws were made of nothing but fur, with a few tiny spots here and there were callouses had formed, either from farm labor or police training. At least her fur was on the shorter side for a bunny, so she didn't need to do much trimming or worry about out of control fur between her claws (like poor Uncle Buster). This experience would have been a lot less pleasurable and a lot more mortifying if that had been the case.

In comparison Nick's paws were, well... simply calling them bigger wasn't hardly accurate. While her paws were small and stubby, Nick's were longer, slimmer, and far more dexterous. His fur was shorter and coarser—no fur maintenance needed for him—and he had thick, dark pads that were rough even with all of Judy's fuzziness to protect her. but even rough they still felt... nice.

And then there were his claws. Thicker, longer, and sharper than her own, there was no amount of furry layering that would protect her from them if he had a mind to do anything. But then, the thought was so ridiculous to Judy now that she couldn't even think it with any seriousness. How could she have ever feared him? This fox who was currently washing her off so tenderly, keeping those giant claws carefully tucked back as far as he could. Who in this evening alone had fought to save her life, shed tears for her, guarded her from other officers, and even defended her silly plushies for no other reason than he knew it was important to her.
This fox whom she loved so much.

She wasn't getting over him, Judy realized. Not for a long time. Maybe not ever. And not even his current behavior could make her do more than hurt for them both and wish for a change. A change she realized she was going to have to initiate, if she ever wanted it to happen.

When the towel was stained completely red, Nick went back to the sink and rinsed it out with more warm water. When he returned and reached for her paw again, Judy willingly held it out.

"You promised we would talk tonight," she reminded him gently.

The pause was slight, no longer than an exhale, then her paw was back in his and he was meticulously wiping away every last spot of red.

"You're right," he said, so calmly that Judy was surprised by it. Then he shocked her further by adding, "Do you mind if I go first?"

"If you'd like," said Judy, wary hope blooming in her chest. Maybe she wouldn't have to initiate everything after all.

He didn't speak right away. He finished cleaning off her paw, nudging her elbow up so he could make sure he hadn't missed anywhere. He ran the washcloth one more time down her arm, stopping when he reached her palm, which was back to its usual light gray color. He closed his eyes and sighed. "I'm sorry, Carrots."

It was silly to feel so relieved at so little. But still, Judy's heart leapt at his apology. "You are?"

"Of course I am. I've been a terrible partner to you these past couple weeks. No, I take that back. I've been a terrible friend. And I could go on and on about how my intentions were good and how I never meant to hurt you the way I did, but it doesn't change the fact that I did hurt you, and there's no excuse for that."

"That's not—" started Judy, so stunned by his sudden, blunt honesty that her gut-reaction was to deny his words, despite the truth of them.

"It's okay," said Nick. "We both know it's true. Tonight too. Everything has become such a mess and it's my fault. I should have known better."

"You should have known better?"

He nodded. The rough pad of his thumb brushed over the inside of her wrist, and Judy hoped he couldn't feel how it made her tremble.

"But I want you to know that I have a plan."

"You do?"

"I do. An easy, foolproof plan that will fix everything."

Instead of feeling reassured by that, Judy felt anxiety trickle like ice water into her gut. "And this easy, foolproof plan entails what, exactly?"

He folded up the washcloth and set in her palm. "Tomorrow, when you get to work, you're going to go see Chief Bogo and ask him for a new partner. No, you're going to demand it. If others hear you, all the better. The dumb fox even had the nerve to force a smile. "Like I said, easy, right?"
Judy stared at him, at a loss for words. So many emotions were running through her, she could hardly sort them all. Easy? Was he nuts?

As if he could read her thoughts he said, "I know. It's... not ideal. But it's all we can do at this point, and it will keep you safe. It will stop all the rumors for good."

"You think I care about rumors?" said Judy.

"I saw how hard today was for you, Carrots. You can't tell me it wasn't. But if you think that bit of gossiping was bad, tomorrow will be far worse if you don't follow my plan."

Shame was a hot, writhing thing inside Judy's stomach. How was it fair that even when Nick was actively avoiding her, he still somehow saw everything?

"The only reason it was so hard for me," said Judy slowly, "was because the things those animals were saying were all true. And this particular truth..." She took a breath in, let it out. "It still hurts. A little."

Nick looked away from her. "All the more reason to get rid of me."

She clenched the washcloth in her fist. "I am not going to just get rid of you. Not because of some rumors, and not to keep myself safe either."

"And what about your happiness?" asked Nick.

"What about it?"

"We both know you haven't been happy with me lately."

"We both know why that is, too," Judy shot back. "It's like you want me to leave."

"Of course I don't."

"No? Are you sure? Because if we're going to talk about happiness, you haven't exactly been a ray of sunshine either these days."

"I know," said Nick. "And I'm sorry. I'm trying my best to fix this—"

"By telling me to get a new partner? Does that seem like a reasonable solution to you?" Judy shoved the washcloth back at him. It left a wet smear against his shirtfront, a fresh splotch of red among the dried stains from earlier. Unlike Judy, he hadn't changed his clothes. The sight made her even madder. He had been gone for hours; why hadn't he cleaned himself up? Taken a nap? Eaten a snack? Now that she looked closely at him, how had she not noticed before now the exhaustion shadowing his eyes, the leanness in his face? Whose fault was that? Hers? His?

"I asked you when I first came back to work if you still wanted to be my partner," said Judy. "Why didn't you just be honest with me then if this is how you felt?"

"I was being honest."

"Were you?"

"Yes!"

"Then why are you trying to make me leave now?" demanded Judy. "Why do you keep pushing me away?"
Nick stalked back into the kitchen. He balled up the washcloth and threw it into the sink where it landed with a wet *whap*. "Because I want you to be *safe*, Judy! I want you to be *happy*. I want you to not be hounded by a bunch ignorant animals who are too busy focusing on something that is none of their business to see how special you are! Do you think I actually want this? I hate it. I feel like I'm in this nightmare that just keeps getting worse and worse and I can't wake up. And yet if I think about how waking up might mean you'll no longer be around, then the nightmare suddenly seems preferable and that's just..." He gripped the edge of the sink, head low as he stared at the gory-looking bundle near the drain.

"I would stay your partner forever if I could, Carrots," he told her. "But that's not going to be possible. And the sooner I accept that... then the better off you'll be."

The sooner *I* accept that. Not you. Not even *we*. *I.*

Judy knew he was going to leave even before he started across the room to the door. As his paw gripped the doorknob, she asked him, "And you? Will you be better off?"

He looked back. They faced each other. A whole apartment's distance between them and more. The sun had started to set and it illuminated the space around them in harsh oranges and golds, jagged shadows angling out from the corners of the room like giant pieces of glass.

"If it keeps me from walking into a room and finding you like I did today?" Nick scrubbed a paw over his eyes, as if the image was still there, haunting him. "I don't want to go through that again, Carrots. So please, I'm begging you, tell Chief Bogo you want a new partner."

"And if I do?" asked Judy. "What happens to us?"

The silence was made of sharpness. Each second felt like a cut to Judy.

"I don't know," Nick said finally. "I hope, at the very least, we can remain friends."

*Friends*. It should have been enough. It should have been everything. But as Judy watched Nick slip out the door, she couldn't help wondering why he said it as if it were a tragic ending.

There was no sleep for Nick that night. He tossed and turned, worrying about Judy and dreading what the coming day would bring.

When the sun finally decided he had tortured himself enough and decided to rise, Nick got up and dressed. He lingered in front of the mirror, staring his reflection down. It was imperative that he have all his emotions under control before he went out that door. His time as Judy's partner was over. All that was left was to send her off coolly. And try not to be sick while he did it.

At work, more officers than usual loitered in the lobby. They whispered and pointed. Nick saw curiosity, pity, confusion, disgust, anger. Clawhauser was behind the front desk, chewing on his claws and looking like he was about to cry.

Nick wanted to snarl at all of them. Mangy gossips. Didn't they have anything better to do? If they thought they were going to get some kind of show, then they had another thing coming.

"Everything okay, Nick?"

Even if he somehow hadn't recognized her voice, the sudden increase in whispering would have...
told Nick who had come up behind him.

He braced himself before turning around. Judy stood there, looking as cheerful and collected as ever. Her smile didn't falter at all the chattering going on around them, though she had to be hearing it twice as clearly. More than ever, Nick was in awe of her. Her strength, her grace, her optimism, her determination to power through. Even when she was knocked down she got right back up again, quicker than anyone had a right to ask for. And she did it of her own volition. How was she keeping it together so well?

*She had time to think about it, and she realized it's for the best, that's how. Just like you wanted. Happy now?*

His inner voice sounded a lot like Finnick at his most mocking.

"Nick?"

Nick gave himself a mental shake. Judy had asked if he was okay. Half the precinct was watching. He had to pull himself together.

"I should be the one asking you that," he told her, and was proud that his voice didn't shake. "How are you?"

Judy's smile, already blazingly bright, lit up another full wattage. "I'm great, of course!"

Of course. Now that the gossips would be out of her fur and the murderer off her back, why wouldn't she be great?

"I mean," she went on, "It's a new day, I've got a great partner, and we've got a big lead to follow on this case…"

She had already gone to see Chief Bogo? She had already been assigned a new partner? Judy never was one to wait around, but the speed took even Nick aback. He had to remind himself again that this was for the best. This was the only way he could keep her safe, and maybe, salvage something of what their relationship used to be.

Nick knew he should ask who it was, wish Judy the best, thank her for everything, but the words stuck in his throat. He wondered with more than a little jealousy who it was that had replaced him. It had better be someone who could protect her. Someone who could keep up with her, physically and emotionally. Someone clever and tough. Someone who appreciated her. Someone who admired her strengths and adored her weaknesses. Someone who—

The sudden touch jolted Nick from his thoughts. Judy had slipped her paw around his arm, to his and everyone else's shock. Clawhauser gave an audible gasp and covered his mouth with both paws, releasing a long, piercing squeal that reminded Nick of a teapot left too long on the stove.

Judy tucked herself against Nick's side, giving him a flirty hip-bump in the process, and Nick could only stand there, frozen and confused and wondering.

She poked him playfully in the cheek. "So. Are you ready to get started then, partner?"
Chapter 13

Judy's heart was pounding. The breezy facade that had seemed so easy when she had practiced it that morning in front of the mirror was a lot harder to pull off now that she was face to face with her unwitting partner.

She clung to Nick's arm, refusing to break eye contact even as he stared at her like she was a crazy bunny. To the dozens of animals watching them, it probably looked like they were merely lost in each others' eyes. There were definitely sparks coming from Nick's end, but the heat wasn't the romantic kind. He looked… angry. And confused. And terrified. And he was doing his best not to show any of it, which both amused Judy and made her pity him just a little bit.

He leaned into her, a smile that was much too tight stretched across his face, and whispered through clenched teeth into her ear. "What are you doing, Carrots?"

Judy ducked her head as if embarrassed. The fact that she was actually feeling self-conscious only lent credence to the act. Covering her mouth with her paw, she whispered back, "Isn't it obvious? Don't worry about it and just do what you usually do."

Hurt flickered across Nick's face and Judy's conscience twinged. He glanced around at all the surrounding officers, none of whom were pretending to be doing anything but shamelessly watching them. A muscle in his jaw ticked.

He took a deliberate step back and Judy let him go, reminding herself as he detangled his arm from hers that this was the reaction she wanted. Now he would walk away and Judy would play the part of crushed admirer. She could do this. She had been doing this for weeks. Now, at least, there was a point to it. It was happening on her terms. She could be prepared for what came next.

She wasn't prepared.

Because then Nick reached back, and in front of Clawhauser and everyone, took her paw in his own.

Judy stared down at that innocent point of contact, struggling to comprehend the sudden reversal. When he tried to tug her forward, Judy balked, locking her knees and jerking back. What was Nick doing? This wasn't part of the plan!

He looked over his shoulder at her, one eyebrow raised in mocking inquiry, and Judy realized: he was calling her bluff. She didn't know why, but regardless, she could hardly refuse him now without blowing her own cover, which meant she had no choice but to go along with whatever this was he was doing.

Clever, annoying fox.

So she let Nick tow her across the lobby, ignoring the gasps from the other officers and a muffled squeal from Clawhauser. A small herd of antelope who had been filling out visitor stickers at the front desk watched them pass, identical looks of confusion on all of their faces.

"What's happening?" asked one, "Is something happening right now?"

A group of cops had congregated in front of the hallway. When Nick led Judy towards them they scrambled to get out of the way like mice before an elephant stampede, predators four times Nick's size outright fleeing his approach. Nick was too worked up to notice, but Judy certainly did.
He turned into the first open doorway they came to, kicking out the doorstop as they entered so that the door swung shut behind them. Unsurprisingly, no one dared to follow them inside.

Judy took in the aisles of lockers and abandoned clothes left on the benches and shook her head. "This is definitely not going to help with the rumors, if that's what you were going for."

Nick dropped her paw like it was a rotten cabbage. He stormed off down the aisle, kicking abandoned hats and belts out of his way as he went. "As if it could be any worse after the scene you just made back there."

Judy sniffed and followed after him. "I thought I was very natural."

"That's even worse!" exclaimed Nick. "What were you thinking, Carrots? I thought we had reached an understanding last night."

"No, you tried to force an understanding," corrected Judy. "But I thought about it, and I've decided I'd rather do it my way instead."

"You are not playing bait."

Judy had to give it to him, the fox had always been quick on the uptake.

"Why not?" she argued. "It will draw the culprit out quicker, hopefully keeping them focused on me instead of other possible victims, and allow us to continue working together, which you said yourself you wanted. And if the rumors bother you so much…" Judy gave a helpless shrug. "Then once we solve the case we can tell everyone it was just an act to catch the criminal."

They had reached the end of the aisle. Nick whirled back around and Judy, who had been hot on his heels, crashed right into him.

Nick caught her by the shoulders as she stumbled back. Even once she had found her feet, he didn't release her.

"And if something goes wrong?" he demanded, clutching her tight like he wanted to shake her. "We're partners, Judy. How do you think I'm going to feel if you get hurt because of something I agreed to go along with?"

"You shouldn't feel guilty for something that was my decision," started Judy, but by the disgusted look on Nick face, she knew she wasn't going to win with that kind of argument. So she tried another tact instead. "We take risks for our job all the time."

"This is different," said Nick. "It's one thing to dive into a dangerous situation that requires an immediate decision. It's another to antagonize a known murderer into coming after you. It's like you've put out an open challenge: Hey, crazy killer, come get me!"

"Well you know how good I am with challenges," quipped Judy.

Nick gaped at her. "Are you really making a joke right now?"

Judy sighed. "I was just trying to help you relax. In all seriousness, Nick, I'm not planning on failing this one."

"You don't get to just decide what you fail at," snapped Nick. He released her and turned away, as if he couldn't bear to look at her anymore. He shook his head, then again, more firmly. "No. You can't make me agree to this. I won't do it."
The guilty twinges became sharp stabs.

"That's the thing though..." said Judy. "I don't need you to."

Nick cut her a sharp look. Judy nibbled her lip and dropped her gaze. She had planned out this part of her argument as an upside for Nick, something she could say to reassure him. But she realized now that wasn't going to be the case. At all.

Her tone apologetic, she said, "It doesn't matter if you don't agree to it. You can keep pushing me away as much as you want to. My actions are the only ones being watched right now. If anything, you not going along will only make things easier, because then the target will stay squarely on me."

Nick growled something unintelligible and stomped off down the aisle again. Judy followed after him, at a greater distance this time.

"I won't get hurt," she called after him. "I'll be okay."

That earned her a disbelieving snort.

"I promise."

"You can't make that kind of promise."

"Then I promise to stay as safe as I can."

"That's hardly reassuring when there's a killer after you."

"Better me than a civilian who can't protect themselves."

Her partner stopped and Judy stopped too. He looked up at the ceiling as if praying for patience, or maybe scouring for a last ditch argument, because a moment later he said, "There's no way I can talk you out of this, is there?"

Judy twirled a padlock on one of the lockers. "Actually, there is one way."

She felt his gaze refocus on her, sharp and intent. It was the look of a predator frantic to catch its quarry, and Judy fought the urge to shiver. Renewing someone's hopes had never felt so intimidating, and though she knew Nick would never hurt her physically, emotionally... well, he had already proven himself capable of that without even trying, hadn't he? And if he was as desperate as he seemed to be...

Judy swallowed, tail twitching nervously. Maybe it was a mistake to say this... No, she needed to say it. "I want you to answer one thing honestly for me."

Nick's gaze narrowed, ready to pounce.

Judy clasped her paws tight together in front of her. "All those times you pushed me away... it wasn't our closeness that bothered you was it? You were just trying to protect me. It wasn't because you were really disgusted by me, was it?"

*There.* A flicker of sympathy, maybe even guilt in the fox's eyes. But then came understanding and what Judy could only describe as a mercenary interest took over. This was Nick the con artist. Nick at his most distant and scheming.

"And if I say it was?"
"Then this will all end here," said Judy simply. "I'll think of something else."

"Just like that? After all that?"

The suspicion in his tone rankled.

"I'm not going to inflict myself on you if you truly don't like it," said Judy. "Not for any reason."

_Then I wish for you to stay away from me._

Judy could see the words forming on Nick's tongue, could practically feel him willing the sentence out. It didn't need to be true. Heck, it didn't even need to be believable. She didn't have the strength of heart to fight him on this, even if she had the right, which she wasn't sure she did. No matter his reasons for saying it, no matter how much she might suspect otherwise, it was only right that she respect his wishes on this, whatever he claimed them to be.

_You disgust me... I don't want you near me... Keep your distance from now on..._ So many hurtful words. They filled Nick's eyes like tears as he glared at her, his paws fisted. Judy could hear his labored breathing from where she stood; she didn't dare breathe at all.

Nick spun away with a curse. He slammed his fist against a locker, the clang reverberating through the room. Judy jumped. He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead to the metal. His shoulders slumped.

Judy gave a hesitant shuffle forward. "Nick?"

A sigh shuddered out of him. He mumbled something against the locker, something that made Judy's heart leap even as she told herself she must have misheard. "What did you say?"

"I said, I don't mind it." One eye opened to stare balefully at her. "As if anyone could find a bunny disgusting. I mean, really." He gestured to her as if she were a perfect exhibit A. "Whoever says something like that is either lying or has something wrong with them."

"Really?" Relief rushed through Judy, leaving her lightheaded. Or maybe that was from holding her breath for so long. She felt weightless and giddy, as if she were being filled with fizzy bubbles of pure happiness. Her instincts hadn't been wrong after all! She hadn't misinterpreted Nick's reactions to her. Whatever his reasons for rejecting her, it hadn't been for lack of attraction. Which meant... there was still a possibility, wasn't there? For other great and wonderful things? Maybe? Someday?

Judy bounced on the balls of her feet, unable to contain her joy at the thought. She could feel the big silly grin on her face and didn't care in the least.

_Thank you, Nick_, she thought. _For being honest with me. For wanting to protect me. For putting my feelings first._

But he would hate it if she said all that. So instead she just left it at a simple, "Thank you."

"Don't," he growled. "I still think this is the worst idea ever. In fact, I'm already regretting it. If something happens to you I will never forgive you, Carrots. Not ever."

"Understood."

"Then why are you're still smiling?"
"I'm just… happy you're calling me Carrots again," said Judy.

Nick snorted. "Well now I know you've lost it if you're happy about that."

"Possibly," agreed Judy. "Or maybe it's because I am just hopelessly in love with you, Nicholas Wilde."

The poor fox jolted away from the locker as if her words had electrified it. He gaped at her, a sound like choking coming from his throat. He pointed an accusing claw at her. Judy laughed. "I'm sorry, I just can't seem to stop springing that on you, can I?" she said. She skipped a little closer towards him and Nick blinked and stumbled back like he was afraid she might spring at him. "But I needed to tell you just once, clearly, so that you know exactly where I'm standing in this."

"Judy…"

"It's okay," she told him, fast, because the tone of his voice when he said her name hurt like a hard poke at a still-healing wound. "I didn't say it to pressure you or make you feel bad. I just needed to be honest, and to apologize, because I know telling you will make things even harder for you."

"It's not me I'm worried about," grumbled Nick.

"I know that now," said Judy. grinning even wider, she added, "It only makes me love you even more."

Nick groaned. "You're killing me here, rabbit." But even as he said it he reached out and snatched her up into a hug, and for the first time in what felt like forever, there was nothing awkward or distant between them.

Judy hugged him back happily. "Good," she said. "You deserve to suffer some too. Half of this is your fault, after all."

"Vindictive bunny. I knew you were still mad at me."

She thumped him on the back lightly. "Of course I am. You've been horrible these past couple weeks."

Nick tucked his head so that his muzzle was pressed just behind her ear, in that sensitive spot that made her shiver. "I'm sorry, Carrots."

Judy snuggled closer against him, enjoying the warmth and breadth and closeness of him, this sweet, infuriating fox of hers.

"So… You really won't change partners?" he asked, and though it was undeniably a final plea, there was something vulnerable in his voice too.

"Sorry," said Judy. "But you're stuck with me for good now."

"Stubborn rabbit." But she felt his muscles in his body relax, his head falling more heavily against her own. Judy smiled into his fur.

"But you have to promise me," said Nick. "The second it gets to be too much, you'll end things."

"That will never happen," said Judy.

Nick mumbled something so quietly that even with Judy's excellent hearing she wasn't sure she heard him correctly.
"What was that?"

Nick only shook his head and held her tighter. But the words stayed with Judy, a wisp of a phrase all the more haunting for its brevity.

*If only.*

The hallway was empty when they finally emerged from the locker room.

"I thought for sure we were going to have to face down a crowd," said Nick.

"Maybe you scared them off," said Judy. "You were pretty imposing earlier."

Nick gave an incredulous laugh. "I don't think you can use that word to describe someone who only comes up to the average animals' kneecap."

"You didn't even notice," said Judy, "how they all hurried to get out of your way. It was really…" She made an appreciative humming sound in the back of her throat that sent Nick's heart jackhammering and made him feel too hot in his fur.

*I am just hopelessly in love with you, Nicholas Wilde.*

It was so surreal, this new and open Judy who gave away her feelings for him without a care. Nick hardly knew how to handle it, and he feared it as much as he craved for more. This was dangerous. So dangerous.

"What time is it?" he asked. *That's it. Redirect the conversation. Distract.* "Hm?" Judy pulled out her phone and checked. "9:25. Why?"

Now the empty hallway made sense. "Because we're late."

They took off at a fast trot towards the Bull Pen. Judy stuck close to Nick's side. He was hyperaware of how her shoulder kept brushing against his arm. He should have been inured to it by now he thought as the light contact sent another zing of sensation through him, threatening to scramble his brain utterly.

Moving away did nothing to discourage Judy either. Every time he tried to sidle sideways she would give him that cheeky grin and close the distance between them once more. This kept up all the way down the hall, until another sidestep from Nick caused him to clip his elbow against a water fountain.

He cursed and clutched his injured elbow while Judy tried to look sympathetic. It would have been more believable if she hadn't been biting her lip against a laugh.

"You're enjoying torturing me like this, aren't you?" Nick accused her.

"Very much," she said without a hint a shame, and Nick straightened with a small growl that only made her giggle. That teasing twinkle in her eye… it made Nick want to crowd her back, see if she'd shy away or hold her ground. Two could play at this game—

A door farther down the hall opened and the group of antelope that had been in the lobby earlier filed out. They barely spared the two of them a glance, but it was enough to bring Nick back to his senses. He took a deliberate step away from Judy, grateful when she let him.

It had been hard enough to hold himself back when Judy had been helping to maintain their status
quo. But now she was actively working against him, leaving the burden of restraint entirely on his shoulders, and for the first time in maybe forever, Nick was not feeling confident in his abilities.

*Nothing's changed,* he told himself. The same dangers were there, closer than ever. It was imperative that he not give in, that he remain vigilant and not get carried away.

He looked over at Judy again, with those huge, expectant eyes and teasing smile that dared him to say something.

He was in serious trouble.

He ducked into the Bull Pen, Judy trailing cheerfully behind him.

Sound cut off so abruptly at their entrance that for a wild moment Nick thought he had gone spontaneously deaf. Nearly every officer in the room had stopped to watch them; it made the hackles on the back of his neck rise under his collar. Not for the first time, Nick bemoaned Judy's preference for the front seat. It put every judging eye on the their backs, not to mention left them vulnerable to any possible attacks. Judy had called him paranoid when he'd mentioned it his first day on the job.

"They're our *coworkers.*"

"They're highly trained predators who are obsessed with justice."

"Not *all* of them are predators," she had pointed out. "And don't forget that you're one of them now."

But Nick didn't feel like one of them. Not completely and certainly not today, and he would have given a lot to have been able to sit in the very last seat, with a wall at his back and every possible threat in his sights.

Judy took a seat next to him. If she was uncomfortable with the attention she didn't show it. At least she didn't try to sit any closer to him than usual, but that hardly mattered when they were sharing a chair.

"I wonder where Chief Bogo is," she said, and it was only then that Nick realized there was no grumpy water buffalo ready to tear into them for being late.

He chanced a glance around the room. No Bogo. He spotted Officer Tibor though, sitting next to Delgato. The hyena saw Nick and waved. The lion looked between the two of them and curled his lip in a silent snarl. Francine, who was a seat behind them, made a gesture at Nick with her trunk that Nick believed was the elephant version of a thumbs up.

From Nick's right, Officer Howle looked up from the stack of files he had been flipping through. "You two aren't the only ones who are running late this morning," he said. "Chief Bogo said he was stopping on his way in to check on Gazelle. Looks like he got caught up."

Nick snorted. "I'm sure he did. That buffalo is as hopeless as Clawhauser."

"Is that the grocer murder you're working on?" Judy asked Howle, leaning across Nick to get a better look at the files, and Nick sucked in a breath. She smelled good—she always smelled good—but she also smelled like *him.* Not in a faint, "we shook paws five hours ago" kind of way either, but in a "I rolled around on your bed this morning" kind of way, and was that ever an image he didn't need in his brain right now. Then he remembered the hug they'd shared and he wanted to bang his head against the table. Stupid. He probably smelled like her too now. It would be hard to
notice as long as they were together, but then second they split up everyone would know *something* happened in that locker room.

*Stupid!*

While Nick was berating himself, Howle and Judy were still talking about the case.

"The claw marks on the body are indicative of a larger predator," Howle was saying, "but as far as who or why, my team has nothing. Either it's just one of those cases of random, senseless violence, or this animal actually kept his secrets. And if that's true, well…"

Nick felt for him. There was nothing worse than having to give up on a case due to lack of evidence.

Judy turned to look at the door, an odd expression on her face. Five seconds later, it opened and Chief Bogo strolled through. Nick was hesitant to call the mood their boss was in necessarily a *good* one, but the ever-present scowl sat lighter on his face this morning, and there was, *almost*, what Nick would call a bounce to his step.

"I heard him humming as he came down the hallway," whispered Judy. "It was a Gazelle song."

Of course it was.

Chief Bogo looked over at the two of them and—ah, there was that look of irritation they knew and loved.

"Five bucks says Clawhauser told him what happened," Nick whispered to Judy.

"No bet," she whispered back.

Chief Bogo cleared his throat, but for the first time in a long time there was no need to tell everyone to shut up and sit down. Instead of looking pleased by this, he shot Nick and Judy another glare, as if they had ruined it for him.

"Let's get this done then," he said.

For the next half hour he went over several smaller cases, including chewing out Howle for his lack of headway in the grocer murder. It was only at the very end of the meeting that he finally turned his attention back to Nick and Judy.

"Hopps, Wilde. I heard you made a break in the case yesterday."

Whispering started up behind them. Judy sat straighter in her seat. "Yes, sir. We believe we've discovered the culprit's motivation for the attacks. That is, whoever is doing this is targeting animals in interspecies relationships. This was confirmed by Gazelle yesterday who is currently seeing her backup dancer, Hunter. It also explains how the other victims were selected." Her chin came up a bit higher. "Including me."

The whispering grew more furious. Nick waited for Bogo to tell them all to shut it, but his focused stayed firmly on Judy. "Any suspects?"

"Not as many as we would like. But we will be revisiting those involved later and with any luck—"

"You better be relying on more than luck," said Bogo. "I want a plan, Hopps."

Judy glanced at Nick. "We're um… in the process of that, sir."
"Good. Now what about the press? I'm due to give them an update on this case in an hour. What am I telling them?"

The whispering turned contemplative. Howle spoke up first. "We should let them know, shouldn't we? To give citizens who might be targeted a heads up."

"We're afraid that may do more harm than good," said Nick. "The previous victims have already been named in several articles. If we release the reasons for the attacks, other animals who are less… understanding of the victims' choices might make things even harder for them. It could set off a whole other chain of attacks."

"That's their problem, isn't it?" This came from Delgato. "They're the ones who decided to shack up with another species."

"They still have a right to their privacy," said Officer McHorn.

"But then what if the culprit attacks someone else?" asked Francine. "Like Howle said, they could get hurt or worse because we didn't warn them ahead of time."

"I don't think these are just random attacks based purely on who's dating who," said Nick. "There has to be a connection between the victims that we just don't know yet."

"Maybe not though," said Francine. "Maybe it's just whoever this creep bumps into that's dating the 'wrong' species—"

"You don't usually learn that kind of thing just by bumping into someone," said Nick. "Whoever's doing this must know the victims better than that."

"We can't be sure of that though," said Howle.

"He's just worried about his precious partner's reputation being ruined if word gets out," sneered Delgato.

"My reputation will survive just fine," said Judy as Nick started to rise from his seat. "But thank you for your concern."

"All right, enough!" snapped Chief Bogo, and a grudging silence fell. The water buffalo stared them all down before continuing. "We're not here to make personal judgements. We're here to keep the citizens of Zootopia safe. That includes making sure that the city doesn't turn on itself. The last thing we want is for a piece of evidence given in haste to create another rift in the populace." He gave Judy a pointed look. "To that end, I will hold off on giving any statements to the press. For now. But I mean it Hopps. Wilde. I want a plan and I want results, or I may have to rethink this decision. Got it?"

Judy nodded. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"In the meantime, Gazelle's concert is coming up. It would be a perfect time for this miscreant to try and make a statement. Therefore, we will be helping beef up security for this event." Chief Bogo held up a sheet of paper and stuck it to the white board behind him. "Be sure to check the list for your name. Anyone who doesn't feel like participating is welcome to stack traffic cones instead. You're all dismissed."

Chattering broke out as officers started gathering their things and making their way to the front of the room to check the list. Nick leaned over to tell Judy that this was a good chance to make a break for it at the same time her phone started to buzz. The name on the screen was not a
welcomed one: BEN.

Judy looked over at Nick, perhaps remembering like him the last time they had talked about Cottontail.

"I'll be right back, okay?" she told him.

She slipped off the chair without waiting for a response, answering her phone with a cheerful, "Ben! How are you?" as she ducked out the door. Even with her confession still fresh in Nick's mind, the sight of his partner talking so sweetly to that smarmy rabbit still left a sour feeling in his stomach.

He said goodbye to Howle and then made his way out into the hallway after her. The place was back to its usual noisy chaos now that the morning meeting was over. Judy was nowhere to be seen and Nick hovered, wondering if he should just go wait for her by the cruiser.

"Wilde! Wild, wait up!" Tibor crashed into the hallway, knocking several officers out of the way in his haste. He came to a skidding stop in front of Nick. "I just saw the list, and I'm actually on it! I made the security team! I almost didn't even bother looking because I thought, there's no chance, but then I did and I got it!"

"Glad to hear it," said Nick. "Congratulations, T-dog."

"Thank you. I—" He stopped, a strange look crossing his face as he stared at Nick. He cocked his head. "I guess I should be saying the same thing to you."

"What for?"

"Because, you… I mean…" The hyena glanced around and lowered his voice. "You made up with Officer Hopps, didn't you?"

"You're talking about what happened earlier?" said Nick. "No, that was just a—"

"I don't mean that," interrupted the hyena. "I meant because… well…" He tapped his nose with a knowing look. "That can only mean good things, right?"

Nick cursed, long and furiously inside his head. "It's not what you're thinking."

"Uh-huh, sure it's not," said Tibor, "I'm sure there's a perfectly innocent explanation for why her scent is all over you."

Nick growled. "There is."

Tibor gave one of his yipping giggles. "Ah, well. There goes my dreams of us being a team together. I guess I'll just have to find a new partner to clean up the streets with."

"Wow, look at you, jumping the gun like that," said Nick. "T-dog gets one special position and all of a sudden he's fantasizing about being the next super cop. You better take this job seriously, you hear me? Listen to the other officers. Pay attention and learn from them. Impress Bogo so much he'll have no choice but to promote you. Got it?"

Tibor gave him a mocking salute. "Sir, yes, sir!"

Nick waved him away. With another yipping giggle, Tibor bounded off to join the group of officers who would take first shift at the stadium.
Judy sidled up beside Nick then, pocketing her phone. She gave him a knowing look. Nick looked back warily. "What?"

"Nothing," she said, but she was still staring at him in that smug way and Nick couldn't stand it. "What? Why are you looking at me like that? Did Cottonbutt say something?"

"No. I'm just… proud to be your partner," she said.

"Well, I am a pretty great partner," Nick agreed. "You're acting pretty suspicious though."

Judy laughed. "Am I?" She nodded to Tibor. "You did that, didn't you?"

"Did what?"

"Don't play dumb. I know full well Chief Bogo didn't just change his mind. You convinced him to put Officer Tibor on the security team, didn't you? Was it yesterday, after we left the stadium?"

"I might have made a call…" said Nick. He scrubbed a paw over the back of his neck. "It's just… It won't hurt for them to have an extra pair of eyes, and he'll get some experience out of it. Bonus, even if he messes up, there will be others around to cover for him."

Judy was still looking at him with that faint smile.

"Do you think I made a mistake?" asked Nick. "Should I not have said anything?"

"No, I think it was sweet of you to fight for him," said Judy. "And maybe you're right and this will be the final push he needs to really get into the swing of things."

"You think so?"

Judy nodded and they started walking together towards the parking garage. She moved closer and took his paw, swinging it back and forth playfully to draw extra attention to them. Nick raised an eyebrow at her. The hallway had cleared a bit since they'd first started talking, but there were still plenty of animals around.

"You're really committing to this, aren't you?" he said.

"Yep," said Judy. "But you can pull away if you want to. This should be enough for now."

Nick looked down at their entwined paws. Taking pity on him, Judy started to pull away herself. But Nick tightened his grip, halting her.

Judy looked up at him in surprise.

"Everyone's already seen anyway," he mumbled. "Might as well leave it now, until we get to the car."

Delight lit Judy's features and she closed the gap between them once more. "Well. If you say so."
Chapter 14

The neighborhood for Riverside Apartments didn't look any more inviting during the day than it had at night. The menace of darkness was gone, but daylight revealed details that were just as discomfiting. The amount of trash stuffed into the gutters, for instance, or the oily sheen of the tributaries that ran parallel to the sidewalk.

When Judy pointed out the discoloration to Nick, wondering if they shouldn't call someone about it (like the department of sanitation), Nick waved a paw over at the factory side of the river further upstream.

"It's fish oil from the processing plant," he told her. "All natural, of course. There's a filtration system in place, but it still builds up from time to time."

"That explains the smell," said Judy, wrinkling her nose.

"If you think it's strong now then you should visit in the summer when it's hot out."

"Does no one complain?"

"You're assuming they want to." Nick gestured to the walrus gym and the penguin diner with its extra sets of long tables. "Look around. We're smack in the middle of marine predator habitat. To them, that fishy smell is probably the most pleasant thing about this area."

He had a point.

They turned a corner and Riverside Apartments came into view. Like the first night they took the dock ramp to the back entrance. Judy couldn't help pausing to look up at the side of the building. Plastic sheeting had been placed over the opening where the window had been busted out, but a corner had come loose, flapping in the wind like a trapped bird. Judy shivered and continued on.

Inside the lobby was empty save for a young walrus lounging on one of the couches, a backpack on the floor beside her. She didn't so much as glance up from her phone at their entrance. Judy could hear the tinny sound of game music interspersed including sound effects that sounded like popping bubbles and an elephant trumpeting.

They took the stairs up to the fourth floor. The hallway was empty this time. Police tape hung slack across Tavi's door.

Judy crossed to the apartment opposite and knocked.

"Tomás? It's officers Hopps and Wilde. We were hoping to ask you a few more questions."

There was silence for a beat, then came the sound of the lock sliding free. The door swung open revealing the capybara. Judy's heart squeezed at the state of him. His fur was matted and there were damp tear trails around his eyes. His clothes were wrinkled in a way that could have only been achieved through having been slept in, repeatedly. Not for the first time, Judy wondered how she hadn't realized the truth behind his pain that first night. At the time, she had chalked it up to shock. Losing a neighbor to violence, and so close to home, would upset anyone. But this wasn't trauma. This was grief.

"We are so sorry for your loss," said Judy.
The capybara's eyes widened in surprise, but that only lasted a moment before his expression wilted into a tired resignation.

"I wondered if you would figure it out," he said. Looking between the two of them he asked, "Are you here to arrest me?"

"For what?" asked Judy.

"For not telling you the truth about Rick and I. Isn't that withholding evidence or something?"

"It's only evidence if it's relevant to the case," said Nick. "But if you're asking, then you already know that it is, don't you?"

Tomás dropped his gaze and nodded.

"Then you've probably read about the other attacks too, haven't you? You've already guessed what they have in common."

Another reluctant nod.

Nick looked at Judy and grimaced. She understood. It was frustrating, borderline embarrassing for a civilian to be figuring out the case quicker than they were. But it couldn't be helped.

"We understand why you would be hesitant to confide in us," said Judy. "But please believe that we have no intention of punishing you or any of the other victims. All we want is stop any more animals from being hurt."

"I doubt I can tell you anything helpful," said the capybara, but he shuffled back to let them enter.

Inside an empty apartment greeted them. The only furniture left was a couch, a tv stand, and in the corner a small bed stripped of its sheeting. Boxes were stacked around the front entryway, taped and labeled, ready to be carried out.

"Let me guess," said Nick. "Day trip?"

"I can't stay here any longer," said Tomás. "It's too hard. Every time I step outside I see that yellow tape over Rick's door and I just…" He trailed off. He nudged one of the boxes closer to the door with his foot, as if he was itching to continue and get it done. "I find myself wishing the case would just close so they would take it down, but then I think of someone else moving into Rick's place, eating where he should be eating, sleeping where he should be sleeping, and I don't know what's worse."

"I know it's hard," said Judy.

"Hard?" the capybara's tone was scornful. "Hard is trying to sleep for more than a hour—two hours at a stretch. I keep dreaming about what happened that night. I wake up thinking I hear him over there… struggling. And I'm halfway out the door before I wake up enough to remember: ah, that's right. It's already over and I didn't make it. Rick is dead and all I can do is go back to bed. How messed up is that?"

He glared at a potted plant on the kitchen counter. It was some sort of bushy vine Judy recognized but didn't remember the name of, and as the silence stretched she found herself wondering if the plant flowered or if it required a lot of watering, how much sunlight it liked and if the roots were in danger of becoming potbound, since it seemed to be overflowing it's container. She continued contemplating these things until Tomás spoke again.
"Rick left me some money. Did you know? I didn't even realize he had a will, much less included me in it." He gave a bitter snort. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. I debated accepting it, but it turns out I want to get away from here more than I want to keep any sort of dignity."

"You shouldn't feel bad about taking it," said Judy. "I'm sure that's why Mr. Tavi gave it to you, so that you would be taken care of."

"I'm sure he did too," said Tomás. Under his breath he added, "Selfish bastard."

Nick raised an eyebrow. "Strange thing to call someone who left you all their cash."

The capybara turned away from them. He grabbed the potted plant and stuffed it into an open box. Its long, leafy tendrils spilled out over the top and curled around sides.

"Look," he said as he struggled with the plant, "I know you came here hoping I would have answers for you. But besides the fact that Rick and I were in a relationship, there's honestly nothing else I can tell you because he didn't tell me anything. I had no idea Rick was being harassed like he was. Not until that night when I just happened to see some of those notes the police were collecting."

"You had no idea at all?" said Judy.

"None." The capybara tried to swipe the rogue plant strands back into the box, but more tumbled out the moment he lowered his paw.

"I remember one night Rick was laughing too hard at all my jokes," said Tomás. "I wasn't the funny one to begin with, but he was in tears over this one story. I can't even remember what it was now, but I can still hear his laugh. I thought maybe his humor was finally rubbing off on me. He has—had—such a great sense of humor. I had no idea it might be due to anything else. I remember that."

Again, Tomás attempted to brush the plant back into the box. Again, it sprawled out like a lazy octopus the minute he let go of it.

"I remember the day Rick canceled our date saying he had to work, even though it was a Sunday and he never worked on Sundays, and he certainly never cancelled on a date. But it was nothing, he said. Unavoidable. By the law of averages, it had to happen to us sometime, he said. And I had no reason to believe otherwise. I remember that too."

The capybara tried shifting the pot around in the box, but that only shook dirt onto the other items and made more leaves spill over the sides. Tomás gave a growl of frustration.

"And I remember running into him in the hallway three days after that and finding him covered in cuts and bruises. I remember him telling me that he'd taken bad fall off his bike and thinking to myself that his injuries didn't look right for a biking accident. But he told me it was nothing and so of course I believed it was nothing. I mean, if you're mate tells you he's fine it's only natural to believe him, right?"

Grabbing a fistful of the tangled greenery, Tomás stuffed it into the box, crumpling leaves and breaking several stalks with his roughness. Judy started to say something but stopped herself. Once he had jammed the last bit inside, he smashed down the top flaps.

"Six years we were together," he said. "Six years. I never thought we'd make it even fraction that long. An anxious little homebody like me with someone so… vibrant. But we did. Happily. Ridiculously. And every time I floundered or got myself worked up Rick was right there,
supporting me, and with this smile... like I was somehow doing him the favor by sticking around." Tomás shook his head and reached for the packing tape. "Rick really did have the most wonderful smile. It could brighten your mood even against your will. I'm not being facetious when I say that smile saved my life more than once."

Finishing with the tape, he tossed it aside and pulled out his phone to show them. Judy had seen several photos of the mongoose since the case began, but this wasn't one of the many haunting crime scene photographs or bad ID shots that peppered Tavi's file. This was a personal photo taken of a mongoose still alive and well, and so obviously in love with the photographer that it felt a little voyeuristic to look at. Bright, intelligent eyes sparkling with affection and good humor looked out at them, a smile of fond amusement stretched wide across his face, and Judy understood perfectly why Tomás had fallen so hard.

The capybara's lowered lip trembled. "Six years we were together and I didn't bother to wonder. How could I not have known something was wrong? After all those times he was there for me."

"It wasn't your fault," said Judy, but the capybara didn't seem to hear her. He was still focused on the photograph.

"Six years we were together," he said again. "And yet he never said a word about what he was going through." Holding the phone in both paws, he shook it. "If I didn't notice then you should have said. If I didn't notice it was because you told me not to. Why? Did I seem that weak to you? That unreliable? Was it my fault for leaning on you too much? Did I not want to see, deep down?"

"I'm sure he was just trying to protect you," said Nick.

"He was the one who needed protection!" cried Tomás. "Even if there had been nothing I could've done he still should have told me. Instead of trying to handle it all on his own... suffering alone... being scared, all on his own... when I was right there. I want to be mad, I feel so mad, but then I think of the pain he was in and I can't—"

His voice caught on a sob and he turned away from them. Judy looked over at Nick, wanting something to say, but she was at a complete loss. By Nick's solemn expression, he was too.

"I'm sorry I couldn't help you, officers," said the capybara after he had managed to collect himself. "I'm not a very helpful mammal, as it turns out. I hope you don't mind seeing yourselves out. I have packing to get done."

Their descent down the stairs was a heavy-footed one.

Judy gave a miserable glance upwards, nibbling her lip. "I don't like leaving him like this. Should we go back?" she asked.

"And say what?" asked Nick.

"I don't know. Something. Something comforting, at least."

"I doubt anything we could say to him would help right now," said Nick. "There's only one mammal he wants to talk to, and unfortunately that's not us."

"But then what do we do?" Judy looked upwards again. "He was so sad..."

"Watch out!" Nick flung out an arm as Judy missed a step. He caught her around the shoulders and yanked her back. Judy froze where she stood, her sadness over the grieving capybara upstairs
muddying in the awareness of having Nick wrapped around her.

He held her like that for a beat. She could feel his heart pounding against her back, the weight of his chin on her head, then he sighed gustily over her ears and released her.

"Well one thing I know for sure: taking a spill down the stairs definitely won't help," he said, passing her to take the lead down. "I know you don't want to hear this, Carrots, but sometimes all you can do is leave things alone and hope they work on on their own. Tomás is going to have to think about some things, and he'll either figure them out or he won't. Nothing anyone else tells him is going to get through."

It sounded to Judy like he was speaking from experience. Before she could ask him about it however, they reached the lobby. At the same time the door behind the front desk swung open and a polar bear in shorts and a t-shirt stepped out, a backpack slung over one massive shoulder.

"Isn't that Flatalie's room?" asked Nick.

Judy watched as the polar bear stooped down to lock the door behind him. "I think so."

"We should question him."

"Why?"

"Because she's connected to two crimes," said Nick. "That's one more crime than any other suspect we have so far."

"She rented a room to one victim and took a college class with another. I don't know, I think you might be reaching. Especially considering that there's no evidence the two crimes are even connected at this point."

"Still odd though."

"And the fact that she wouldn't have the strength to do half the things the culprit did? Even if she could climb up the side of a building, there's no way she yanked out an entire window frame all on her own, or overpowered any of the victims."

"She could have a secret accomplice," said Nick. "Some big brawny mammal that does her bidding."

"Like who?" asked Judy.

Nick raised his eyebrows and looked pointedly at the bear.

"Just because he came out of her place doesn't make him involved. It could be pure coincidence."

"Coincidence that's the size of our cruiser," muttered Nick. "Maybe the old log stacker isn't on your shortlist of suspects, but she is on mine, and I'm not about to let that furry iceberg over there get away without asking a few questions."

He approached the front desk, Judy following after him reluctantly. They hopped onto the counter. There was rusty bell with a yellowed sign next to it that said ring for service. Nick glanced at Judy with a raised eyebrow.

Don't, Judy mouthed at him, but her partner was already reaching over. He tapped the old bell once with his paw. There was a screechy clunk, and a cloud of dust and loose fur puffed out. Nick made
a face. Judy sneezed.

The polar bear turned. Even with them standing on the counter, he towered over the pair. At the sight of the officers, his eyes widened and he shuffled back a step.

"Morning!" greeted Nick. "We were hoping to have a chat with Betty Flatalie. She wouldn't happen to be in by any chance, would she?"

The bear shook his head, grip tightening on strap of his backpack. "Sh-she's at class right now."

Nick pointed to the backpack. "Same class as you?"

"No, sir. I-I'm still in high school."

"Ah. Apologies. You looked older to me. Must be all that… height, you have." Nick gave him his friendliest smile, but the bear only took another uneasy step backwards.

"If this is about the renovations Ms. Flatalie still hasn't set a date yet…"

"The renovations, yes." Nick nodded as if he'd expected as much. "What's the hold up on that anyway?"

"I-I'm not really allowed to answer any questions," stuttered the bear. "M-maybe you should come back later…"

"Aw, but we've come all this way. Surely you can answer a few easy questions?" wheedled Nick.

"I, um…"

"He can't," said a voice from behind them, and Nick and Judy turned to see the walrus from earlier rising from her spot on the couch. She tucked her phone into her pocket and hauled her backpack on. "He's already late for school. Aren't you, Duncan?"

The polar bear bobbed his head and shuffled over to her side gratefully. The dyed red pouf of the walrus' hair barely reached his shoulders, but that didn't stop him from ducking behind her.

"Mrs. Flatalie will be back this evening if you really want to talk to her," the walrus told them. "Not that you'll get anything out of her but excuses."

"What makes you say that?" asked Nick.

The walrus gestured to dank lobby with it's dated beach decor. "Can't you tell just by looking? She's been promising to fix this place up since I was a pup. She's never actually going to do it. Not unless she suddenly came into some sort of windfall, and even then, it's more likely she'd just take the money and run. Why waste it on some annoying tenants, am I right?"

The polar bear tugged on her sleeve and whispered, "Polly. The time…"

She batted him away, snapping, "Who's fault is it that we're late in the first place? If your internal clock is still so out of whack then use the one on your phone like I showed you. No amount of cash is going to help me if I flunk out." To Nick and Judy, she said, "Anyway, you should take your complaints to her, and not this giant mush ball here."

"I am not a mush ball…" mumbled Duncan.

"Yeah, yeah. That pout of yours is really terrifying. Let's go."
With a sarcastic salute to the officers, Polly led the way out. Duncan shot a nervous look over his shoulder at the officers before hustling out after her.

"There's no way that cub committed any sort of crime," said Judy after they had gone.

"I don't know," said Nick. "We never did find out why he was in Flatalie's apartment."

"He seems to be staying there."

"Yeah. But why? A polar bear cub with an older beaver? Even you have to admit that's an odd pairing for roommates."

"Maybe it is, a little," said Judy. "But there could be a perfectly reasonable explanation for it."

"Not to mention that the bear definitely seemed skittish enough to be hiding something."

"Lots of mammals get nervous talking to police. He struck me as a shy cub anyway."

"Easily intimidated, you mean. With enough pressure, who knows what he might be convinced to do?"

Judy rolled her eyes. "Fine. Keep him on your list then, if you want. I'm still not adding him to mine. Can we get out of here now? It smells worse in this lobby than it did outside."

"Agreed." Nick gave a little cough. "I can almost feel the mold growing in my lungs."

Judy understood what he meant. The fishy air outside tasted almost fresh in comparison.

They hoofed it back to the cruiser. The campus was next on their list. Judy was itching to talk to Clare again. Unfortunately, the badger was quick. Judy caught only a glimpse of her before the badger spotted them and took off. Judy tried to chase after her, but the University was more crowded than a sold out Gazelle concert. She lost her after a near head-on collision with a hippo over in the science department. They searched around for her for almost an hour, and while they never did find Clare, they did find someone else, which was how they ended up back in the cruiser, doing something Judy hadn't done since she was a tiny bun-bun.

"I spy, with my furry eye, something... white."

Judy gave a half-hearted look around them. "The house?"

"Nope."

"That other house?"

"Nope."

"That sheep grazing on his lawn?"

Nick tsked. "You're not even trying anymore."

Judy dropped her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. "I think three and a half hours of I Spy is my limit."

"It's almost eight. It shouldn't be too much longer."

"Unless Joey lied, or called to warn Clare after telling us. You said you thought they used to date."
He could be covering for her."

"Worry beats out loyalty, always," said Nick. "And trust me, he's plenty worried about her."

Judy shivered. They had the cruiser turned off, the windows cracked just the tinniest bit for some fresh air, but all that seemed to be coming in was cold, leaving Judy feeling both stuffy and chilled.

"Maybe he had the wrong night," she ventured.

"The kangaroo was adamant. Every Wednesday is family dinner night. No exceptions."

The streetlights flicked on. A group of colts who had been racing each other in the street took notice and disbanded for their homes.

This was a nice area, Judy thought. A peaceful little slice of almost-suburbia snuggled in between Downtown and Savannah Central. Mostly smaller to medium sized animals lived here, but Judy had seen a few elephant manses on their way through as well.

"Listen. About earlier…" said Nick.

"Hm?" Judy looked over. Her partner had been acting excessively cheery since they left the apartment, cracking extra bad jokes and badgering her into playing silly games. Though she knew he was forcing it a bit, she hadn't called him on it, unsure who's benefit he was doing it for.

But Nick's expression was somber now, his gaze focused on the still grazing sheep, and Judy felt herself come alert at the change.

"What about earlier?" she asked.

"What the capybara was saying, about his partner… you don't think that I…"

"That you, what?"

Nick's gaze shifted, head cocking as something outside caught his interest. Abruptly he came alert in his seat. "She's here."

"What?"

"Clare." He pointed. Further down the street, a small dark figure was exiting a red car that had pulled up to the curb. It was too dark for Judy to make out who it was herself, but she trusted in Nick's superior night senses.

The badger waved goodbye to whoever was inside and the vehicle sped off down the street. Judy and Nick bailed from the cruiser. They caught up to her just as she was turning down the walkway to her house. The porch light was already on. A plastic pumpkin leftover from the fall holidays was still sitting on the stoop.

Clare saw them at the same moment the front door opened and her mother stepped out. Judy tried for a friendly wave. "It's nice to see you again, Clare. I hope everything has been well?"

The badger did not smile or wave back. "What are you doing here?"

"We had a few more questions we wanted to ask, if you don't mind humoring us one more time."

Clare shot a worried look towards her mother who was watching them intently from the doorway. Backlight from a light deeper in the house, she struck an intimidating silhouette. "I can't right
"We promise it won't take long."

The badger let out a tiny growl. Lowering her voice so it wouldn't carry, she asked them, "Why are you doing this to me? I said I didn't want any help. I'm fine. Do I have to formally rescind my mother's complaint in order to make you two leave me alone?"

"Unfortunately the case has gotten much bigger than just your accident," said Nick. "But if you don't have time for us, that's okay. We certainly don't want to hold you up."

"Thank you—"

"We can just talk to your mother instead. Isn't that right, Judy?" Nick pointed towards the older badger with his chin and Judy didn't think it was just the backlighting that made her expression seem so dark. "She looks like she has quite a lot she'd like to say. And I'm sure she'd be very interested in hearing what we've learned—"

He and Judy started up the walkway. Clare gasped and dove in front of them, throwing up her arms to ward them off. "No, wait!"

Nick and Judy waited.

Clare turned to the house. To her mother she called out. "I'll be right back, Mom. These officers needs my help with something. Tell Tamara not to worry, okay?"

Nick clapped a paw around her shoulder. "See?" he said cheerfully. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"Easy for you to say," hissed Clare. "You're not the one who's going to have to deal with her later."

"We'd be happy to talk to her for you," offered Judy.

"No," said Clare. "I mean, I can handle it myself."

"Do you always insist on doing everything on your own?" asked Nick.

"You didn't come all this way just to ask me that, did you?"

"Point," said Nick. "Well, after you then."

They relocated to a diner down the street. Inside it was empty save for a single waiter and waitress, a young doe and buck who paid more attention to each other then their customers, and an older rhino cook who, judging by the menu, served things one of two ways: fried, or not at all.

The doe came over to take their orders. She was a tall, slight thing with a smattering of white fawn spots still visible across the bridge of her nose. Nick and Judy stuck with drinks. When Judy offered to get Clare something, the badger shook her head with a stiff, "I don't want to ruin my appetite."

"Your mother must be a good cook," said Judy.

Clare shrugged. "She'll make me eat when I get back whether I'm hungry or not, so I'd rather just wait."

"Bit of a bulldozer, huh?" asked Nick.
Clare's eyes flashed. "Who is this investigation about?" she snapped. "Because so far your questions have all been—"

"We know about your relationship with Joey."

The badger's mouth snapped shut. She stared at them, horror dawning in her eyes. "How did you—" She stopped, looking wildly around the diner, but the doe and buck had gone back to flirting with each other and the rhino behind the counter was busy scraping remnants of past orders off his grill with a giant metal spatula.

Lowering her voice, she said, "You can't say anything."

"To your mother?"

"To anyone. My sister is already mad enough about it as it is. She'll just flip out all over again if you bring it up to her. And my mother will absolutely freak. Not to mention if this gets out... th- that animal might think we're still together and come back."

"You admit it then?" said Nick. "That the two of you were in a relationship."

"It wasn't even that," said Clare. "It was hardly anything. A few dates... it wasn't serious."

"It was serious enough for someone to take issue with it and go after you."

"Which is why I ended it," said Clare. "Even I can take a hint. I broke things off with Joey, quit boxing, and the notes stopped. No one has bothered me since. I'm fine now."

"But other animals aren't so fine," said Nick. "We think whoever attacked you is now going after others in similar relationships."

That seemed to bring her up short.

"You see now why we had to talk to you," said Judy.

Clare shook her head. "This whole thing is crazy."

"We're not trying to put you in any danger," assured Judy. "Or hurt your relationship with your family. We just want to keep everyone safe."

"Well then tell them to stop what they're doing!" snapped Clare. "If it worked for me it will work for them."

Nick frowned at her. "You really think that's a reasonable way of handling things? By ruining everyone else's lives and letting a killer go free?"

"Killer?" squeaked Clare, just as the waitress returned with their fries and drinks. But the doe was too busy giggling at the winks and air kisses the buck was sending her from across the room to even notice. She passed out their drinks and left without asking if they needed anything else.

"We hope you understand how serious this is now," said Nick after the doe had gone.

Clare swallowed, looking slightly queasy.

"And beyond that," said Judy, "don't you miss Joey? The sooner you help us catch who's doing this, the sooner you and Joey will be safe to continue on in whatever kind of relationship you want to pursue."
Clare snorted. "As if. It's never really going to be safe for us. And it's not like my family would ever allow it anyway. I was stupid for starting anything in the first place."

"But don't you want to be with him?"

Clare looked across the room at the two deer who were theoretically wiping off a table, but the buck kept leaning in to nuzzle the doe's ears or playfully jab at her with his still growing antlers. One surprise lunge made the doe jump away with a giggling shriek. The rhino gave a loud, pointed cough, and the two settled down again, grinning at each other as they got back to work.

Clare's gaze dropped to her lap. "Joey is cute and all, but he's not worth dying for."

"How can you just give up on someone so easily?" asked Judy. "You must have liked him at least a little to start anything, even if it wasn't serious. And even now Joey's first thought is for your welfare. There has to be some real feelings there."

"He wouldn't stay either if he knew the truth."

"If he did, then what?" demanded Clare. "There's still no future for us. Why waste time and put ourselves at risk for something that's never going to last?"

"You don't know that it won't," Judy argued back. "And even if you did, is longevity the only part of a relationship that matters to you? Isn't it better to find happiness even if it doesn't last? What good is it to be safe and lonely? Is that really living to you? And listening to the opinions of others... is your life their life? I would never let anyone tell me who I—"

A paw covered hers under the table. It was only then that Judy realized she was shaking, and that she had balled her paws into fists in her lap. She must have raised her voice, because even the deer were looking over at them with giant, startled eyes. Another pointed cough from behind the counter and the deer looked away.

Judy swallowed and glanced over at Nick. He had on that small crooked smile that always broke her heart. He shook his head at her, just once, and Judy felt the fight drain out of her.

Nick turned to Clare. "Whatever you do in your private life is your business," he told her. "Frankly, I couldn't care less. But we'll be handling this case our way, which means we expect your full and honest cooperation." At the badger's scowl, he added, "You're legally obligated, if that helps."

"Whatever," said Clare. Crossing her arms over her chest, she slouched back in her seat. "I just want this to be over with."

"I couldn't agree more," said Nick. "So. Why don't we start from the beginning? If you would be so kind as to tell us what happened."

Clare looked down at the table. "There's not much to tell. It was night. It was dark. The attacker... they came from behind me. It was so quick, and they were wearing some kind of dark, baggy clothes with a hoodie. I honestly couldn't tell you what kind of animal they were, besides that they were taller than me." Clare touched the healing wound by her eye. "Then they started hitting me. I don't remember much after that, besides that when I finally managed to get up again they were gone."

"Did anyone else know where you were?" asked Judy.
"No. It wasn't a planned trip at all. Tamara had called and asked me to pick up some books she'd left at the library. She'd been feeling sick that day and gone home early, and she'd forgotten them."

"Any grudges? Ever argue with anyone over grades or dates or anything?"

Clare shook her head.

"What about Joey?" asked Nick.

"What about him?"

"How did he treat you? Was he a jealous boyfriend? Sheltered girl meets controlling guy… It's not an original story."

"Joey would never hurt me," said Clare. "He was always the kindest—"

"But you said yourself that no one expected you to be there. Is your sister known for studying at the library at night?"

"It's her preferred time, yes, but I don't see how this has anything to do with—"

"You said yourself that your sister was angry you were in a relationship with him."

"So?"

"So, I'm guessing she told you to break up with him. She probably told Joey too."

When Clare said nothing, Nick continued, "I'm sure it didn't sit well with him. Maybe it scared him, that you might listen to her and break up with him. Maybe he got angry. So he went to where he knew your sister was likely to be. It was dark, and you and your sister are of relative height and weight. Kangaroos aren't known for their night vision, but they are known for their quick fists—"

"Joey would never do that!"

Clare was out of her chair. The deer and the rhino all looked over but she didn't seem to notice. Her fists were clenched. Her whole body vibrating with emotion. Judy thought that she looked ready to leap across the table at Nick and Judy readied herself, just in case.

Nick merely cocked his head up at her. "Are you sure?" he asked. "Maybe the one who was sending you the threatening letters and the one who attacked you are two entirely different animals."

"Joey would never hurt anyone," said Clare. "He takes fighting very seriously. He's always lecturing the younger students on how they should never take advantage of others with their skills. He would never hurt me, unknowingly or otherwise."

"Sounds like a good marsupial."

"He is. He's the best. He's like no one I've ever—" She suddenly cut herself off, looking betrayed. "You—" she snarled at Nick.

"Did I go too far?" asked Nick innocently. "My apologies. You're right. It was ridiculous to suspect him. I take it back."

"You—" she said again, at the same time that the diner's front door swung inward and Tamara stormed in. For a moment she stood highlighted in the doorway, the night a black curtain behind
her and the harsh florescent light of restaurant casting her in an unflattering glow that was nonetheless dramatic. She marched over as soon as spotted them, out of breath and looking more disheveled than Judy had ever seen her. Her pencil skirt was rucked up from running and the bow from her blouse had come untied, hanging from her neck, wrinkled and limp. She yanked Clare behind her and snarled at Nick and Judy. "How dare you! How dare you come and take my sister like a couple of kidnappers! I don't care if you are cops. I will claw you up if you bother my sister again."

"Well that's a bit of an overreaction," Nick said with a look at Judy. "Not to mention illegal."

"Leave us alone," said Tamara. "We have nothing else to say to you."

"I think there's been a misunderstanding," said Judy, also rising and raising her paws placatingly. Unfortunately, she forgot that Nick was still holding her paw. He let go immediately, but it was too late. In that half second both badgers had already spotted it. Clare looked between them, a frown pinching her brow. Tamara openly gaped, but she managed to rally first. Grabbing her sister's by the arm she declared, "We are done here. Come on, Clare," and hauled her sister out.

"Well," said Nick, rising himself and making show of pushing in his chair. "That could have gone better."

Judy had to agree.

Dropping some money onto the table, he waved to the deer and rhino with a rueful, "Sorry about that."

Judy echoed her own apologies, added a few more dollars to the pile, and they headed out.

The badgers were already gone when they stepped outside. Back home to explain themselves to their mother, most likely. Judy hoped she didn't give them too hard of a time.

Nick nudged her in the side with his elbow. "They'll be fine," he told her.

"How did you know?" asked Judy.

"That sad gaze of yours kind of gave it away."

"No," clarified Judy. "I mean how did you know Clare was lying before, about her feelings for Joey?"

Nick pretended to think about it as he zipped up his jacket. "Hmm. Call it my foxy intuition."

Judy snorted, Nick smiled, and like that they were back.

They started walking back to the cruiser. Clouds covered the stars in wispy streaks. It was Zootopia's coldest night yet. Each time they crossed under a streetlight, Judy imagined the air warming the slightest bit, then dipping again as they moved back into the darkness, and she found herself dreading returning to her hotel in Tundratown where it would be even colder. Fru Fru had done her best to warm up the room, but slightly above freezing was nowhere near warm, and even Judy had her limits.

The sheep who had been grazing his lawn had finally gone in for the evening. The lights to the badger's house were all on, the curtains shut tight. Judy couldn't image the conversation they were probably having now.
She fiddled with the edge of her scarf. She wanted to know if Nick thought, after all of this was over, if Clare and Joey would have a chance. But something inside told her she wouldn't like his answer, so she didn't ask.

Once they reached the cruiser Nick insisted on driving her back to the hotel. Judy, too disheartened by everything that had happened today, didn't argue.

Upon entering Tundratown, the temperature plummeted and Nick had to turn the heater up to full blast just to combat it. At night, the streets of Tundratown sparkled like crystal, with the frozen river glimmering silver under the headlights and the icicles that hung from the snowpacked buildings lending an early holiday charm to the air. The snow generators had been turned on for their nightly cycle, and soft flakes floated down. Nick grumbled, flicking on the wipers and burying his chin further into the collar of his coat.

More than the cold, though, Judy found the change in sound to be the bigger annoyance. The muffling sensation created by the snow was even more pronounced to her sensitive bunny ears, making her feel like she needed to strain to hear properly. But paradoxically, there were certain sounds that seemed to reach her more easily. The sharp cracking of shifting ice in the river and the crunch of heavy paws on snow. The distorted warbling of music from some restaurant and the distant echo of a wolf pup's howling from three streets over. All these noises came in crystal clear and painfully loud for Judy.

The fact that Mr. Big's hotel was located in the richest part of Tundratown helped. Not for the luxury of it, but because the area in general was quieter. There were less animals around overall and those that walked the streets would never do something as wild as running around or shouting. The only noise here was the burbling of the public ice flow and a single violin player from one of the upper apartments. Judging from the size of the sound, Judy thought the musician must be some sort of ermine or lemming.

As they pulled up to the hotel's front curb, Judy saw a tiny, familiar figure waving to them from the miniature staircase that wrapped around one of the building's front pillars that led to the rodent residences on the upper levels.

Nick threw the cruiser into park and they both jumped out. Even braced as she was for the cold, the blast of freezing wind that greeted Judy stung like a slap. But she forgot her discomfort as she reached Fru Fru.

The shrew jumped onto her arm as soon as she was close enough, scurrying up onto her shoulder and hugging her cheek. "Judy!"

"What's wrong, Fru Fru? Why are you doing out here? Did something happen?"

"Yes. I mean, no. Maybe. I don't know yet." Fru Fru paced back and forth on Judy's shoulder, wringing her tiny paws together. She had on gloves, the bunny noticed, but not winter gloves or party gloves. These were much more utilitarian. In fact, the shrew's whole outfit was the opposite of her usual, classy style. Heavy work boots, black silk cargo pants, and a hooded vest with lots of pockets jammed full of various bits and bobs. She had even done away with her favorite bouffant hairdo in favor of a black cap pulled low over her eyes.

"The thing is," said Fru Fru, "Daddy had to call all his bears away to handle this thing tonight, so there won't be anyone here to keep an eye on you. I need to go as well, otherwise you know I would stay here myself—"

"Of course you should go," said Judy. "Don't even worry about me; I'll be fine here by myself. But
if it's really that serious... is there anything Nick or I can do to help?"

"Help?" squeaked Fru Fru.

"Of course. We'd be more than happy to lend an extra pair of paws. Wouldn't we, Nick?"

Fru Fru gazed up at Judy, tears crystalizing in the corner of her eyes. "You would do that for me?"

"We're friends, Fru Fru. Of course I would."

The shrew's face crumbled. She buried her face in her paws, crying. "I don't deserve you, Judy. I really don't."

"Don't be silly," said Judy, alarmed at her friend's sudden upset. She cupped her paw around the little shrew. "Just tell me what you need from me."

Fru Fru wiped at her eyes and shot Judy a hesitant look. "Actually, there is one thing you can do."

"Name it."

Looking away from her, Fru Fru said, "Could you not ask me any questions right now? Could you just pretend I didn't tell you anything? Daddy said not to say anything, but I couldn't just leave you here without protection and not warn you. I promise I'll tell you everything later, but just for right now, can you act like nothing's wrong?"

Unease tickled Judy's stomach. She understood only too clearly what her friend was asking of her and wished she didn't.

It wasn't that she had forgotten who Fru Fru's father was. Mr. Big wasn't a mammal one ever forgot, especially when you worked for the ZPD. But they had come to a truce of a sorts, and as the months had passed and everything remained quiet, Judy had let herself believe that maybe Mr. Big really had moved on from his darker proclivities.

That could still be the case, Judy thought to herself. Even Fru Fru seemed torn on the subject. Just because Mr. Big had a past, just because he was taking his hired muscle out with him to do... something, didn't necessarily have to mean it was anything bad or illegal. For all she knew he was taking his employees on a spontaneous MT or some other perfectly innocent thing.

A little naiveté may be forgivable, she told herself, but denial is not.

She looked over at Nick. He was watching the shrew, his expression unreadable. As if he felt Judy's stare, he glanced up and their eyes met. He returned her gaze levelly. If he had an opinion about this, he wasn't about to share it. He was leaving it up to her.

"Judy?" asked Fru Fru.

She looked down at her friend, one of her nearest and dearest, who had made her godmother to her children. They had saved each other's lives, and perhaps even more importantly, where there for each other through life's more mundane highs and lows. She was asking—no, pleading—for Judy to give her a little time.

Judy sighed, her breath clouding the air like fog. "I can wait," she said. Please, please don't let this be a mistake.

Fru Fru clasped her paw together. "Really? You really mean it? Oh, thank you, Judy! You are the
most wonderful, understanding bunny—"

"But I can't wait for long," Judy warned her, not unkindly. "As soon as you can, you have to tell me what's going on."

"Oh, I will. Absolutely. You'll be the first to know. I'm sure it's nothing. A silly misunderstanding. You know how dramatic Daddy can be. But... what about you? Is there someone you can call to come stay with you tonight? Maybe Ben would be willing to—"

Nick coughed. When Judy and Fru Fru looked over at him, he pointed to his throat, saying, "Sorry. It's this cold air. Dries out the throat."

Judy turned back to Fru Fru. "I don't think calling Ben is necessary," she said.

"But he said if you ever need anything—"

Nick muttered something under his breath. Fru Fru glared at him, paws going to her hips. "Something to say, fox?"

"Who, me?" said Nick. "No, nothing."

"Good."

"Just that it's a dumb plan, that's all."

"Why? I think Ben would be more than happy to come over."

"He'd be ecstatic, I'm sure," Nick agreed dryly. "But what's Cottonbutt going to do if someone breaks in? Throw money at them?"

"As I recall, you were fine with idea before."

Nick gave her a smile that was all teeth. "Is that how you interpreted it? You were mistaken then."

Fru Fru cast him a withering look.

Nick heaved a great sigh. "I guess there's no helping it. I'll just have to stay with Judy tonight."

"Maybe she doesn't want you to stay."

"It's fine, Fru Fru," said Judy. "Really."

"See?" said Nick. "Carrots knows. I am a bastion of reliability."

"Well she's far from the first mammal you've fooled into believing that."

"Fru Fru, that's not fair," Judy chided gently.

"It's more than fair. The shrew shook her tiny paw at the fox. "For your sake you had better mean it this time, because if anything happens to Judy don't think for a moment I'll just leave you alone."

"An unnecessary threat, but consider it noted."

Dismissing him with an upturned nose, Fru Fru turned back to Judy. She gave her a kiss on the cheek. "I promise to visit as soon as I can," she told her. "If you need anything just call me. And if you can't reach me—" she looked at Nick. "Call Ben."
"I'll be fine," said Judy. "Just take care of yourself, okay?"

A polar bear Judy hadn't even noticed before appeared from the shadows. Instead of the usual business suit, this bear wore a gray sweater and black cargo pants. Fru Fru hopped onto his offered paw and with a last wave at Judy, was carried off.

Once she was gone, Judy turned to Nick.

"You don't have to stay if you'd rather not," she told him. "I'll be fine on my own for one night."

Nick just looked at her.

"I'm going to go park the cruiser, " he said. "Wait for me in the lobby. Even if the security is gone, there should still be a couple animals manning the check-in desk. You should be safe enough there until I get back."

"Are really you sure?" said Judy. "Because I truly don't mind if you want to—"

"Ah, this cold!" complained Nick. "I swear it's even more freezing than the last time I was here."

He shooed her toward the door. "Go inside already, will you? I'll be back in ten. Ah, seriously, who can stand such ridiculous temperatures?"

Judy watched him stomp his way back to the cruiser, complaining all the way. She could only shake her head in exasperation.

This fox.

Judy's room was located third floor from the top. Though she had argued when Fru Fru had first shown it to her, her friend had insisted she stay in the suite, claiming it was the most secure. Even stepping into it now, Judy felt overwhelmed but the lavishness of it. The architecture style was minimalistic with more classic furniture pieces adding presence to the space. At first glance, the place look colorless, a pristine white like the mountains outside, but then little hints of color would jump out, soft pinks and purples and golds like a winter sunset. Frosted french doors separated the living room from the bedroom area, which had a bear-sized walk-in closet and its own en suite, complete with hot tub. A far cry from Judy's childhood home made from grass and dirt.

Nick pushed her back into the entryway. "Wait here," he told her.

Judy watched with a mixture of fondness and exasperation as he began making a sweep of all the rooms. "Is that really necessary?" she asked. After all, it took a special key card to even have access to their floor, and Fru Fru had made it a point to suspend all other reservations until further notice, so it was just the two of them on the entire floor.

Nick came out of the bedroom and went over to inspect the large glass windows that took up the entirety of the westside wall.

"We're on the twelfth floor," Judy couldn't help pointing out. "The building is covered in six inches of slick ice. I don't care how strong the animal is, they're not climbing up that."

"You never know," said Nick, giving the glass a hard rap with his knuckles.

"Is this because of Fru Fru?" Judy asked. "I hope you don't let what she said get to you. She's just under a lot of stress right now—"

Nick barked a laugh. "Trust me, you don't need to make up an excuse for her. I know exactly why
she said what she did, and she wasn't wrong."

"She wasn't?"

Nick shook his head. "Do you remember the rug incident Mr. Big was so mad about?"

How could Judy forget? "You think Fru Fru is still holding a grudge against you for that? Even Mr. Big has forgiven you for it, and Fru Fru told me once that she didn't even like her grandmama. She said she was constantly nipping at her ears and lecturing her about her life choices. I can't see Fru Fru still being mad over your little rug scam."

The look Nick gave her then was almost pitying. "How do you think I got into his house in the first place, Carrots? Mr. Big isn't the type of shrew you just bump into on the street."

Understanding dawned. "You used Fru Fru to get to him."

Nick made a *bingo* gesture at her.

"I suppose you pretended to be some down-on-his-luck sales mammal?"

"A *charming* down-on-his-luck sales mammal," corrected Nick. "Straight up pity would never have gotten me through the door. And I had a bit of luck on my side. Apparently she had just gotten into a fight with her father over spending money, so being able to get a good deal was just the type of win she was looking for."

"You sound almost proud of yourself."

"Well, yeah. Few can boast escaping from that shrew's clutches alive, not to mention pulling one over on him like that. I didn't pay for my own drinks for a *week*—" At Judy's scowl, Nick coughed and added more remorsefully, "In my defense, I didn't know what he wanted the rug for until after the deal had been made."

"I can't believe Fru Fru didn't tell me about this," said Judy.

"To be honest, so am I," said Nick, giving the window a final tap before stepping away. "Every time you went to lunch together I waited for it, but you never said anything and I realized after a while that for whatever reason, the shrew wasn't going to spill it."

"Why didn't *you* said anything?" asked Judy.

Nick shrugged. "It seemed only fair that she got to tell you first. And then other things came up and I honestly forgot about it."

"You need to apologize to Fru Fru," said Judy.

"I'm sure that I—" Nick did a doubletake. "Wait, what?"


"You can't be serious. Can't we just continue on with our distant yet civil relationship? I was just starting to warm up to it."

"You hurt her feelings, Nick! I don't know why she hasn't said anything but it's clearly still bothering her. I mean, doesn't it bother *you*?"

"I've put up with worse."
"Nicholas Wilde!"

"All right! Fine, geez. The next time I see her I will go down on my knees and grovel appropriately, okay?"

Judy rolled her eyes. "I don't think you'll need to go that far."

"Well I do. Has she told you about that giant gun of hers yet? That thing is a monster; I've seen it myself. If I lose an eye over this the blame's all going on you."

They both gravitated into the kitchen. Judy watched as Nick made a sweep of the fridge and cabinets, making a face at the slim pickings. A jar of clam sauce, a few bottles of wine and, for some strange reason, several bags of crushed ice.

"It's 38 degrees in here. What in the world do they need ice for?" wondered Nick.

Judy slid a room service menu over to him. Most of it was seafood but there were a few side dishes that would do.

While Nick ordered Judy went to the bedroom and collected some of the extra blankets from off the bed. She brought them out and dumped them onto the couch. From the kitchen she could hear Nick on the phone. "That's right. I want one order of iceberg salad—let me guess, it costs twenty-five dollars because of the clever name. The freshness, huh? Listen, half-frozen doesn't necessarily mean fresh. Uh-huh, if you say so. I would also like one order of the fish and chips, but replace the fish with more chips. Oh, I completely expect to be charged the full price. Yeah. Ok, thanks."

Judy made herself comfortable beneath the blankets. Nick came out and tossed his phone onto the coffee table. "About 45 minutes," he told her.

Judy held a blanket out to him and Nick took it gratefully. He plopped down onto the couch next to her and reached for the remote. Nostalgia squeezed Judy's heart. If not for the high-end room and freezing temperature, she could imagine it as any one of the other dozens of nights when they had done this same exact thing, crashing at each others places after a late night at work, ordering take out and making fun of the bad tv shows. Sometimes, if they had been drinking, Judy would grab Nick's tail and cuddle it like a body pillow. Nick would always complain loudly about it, but looking back he never did pull his tail away.

"You see anything good?" he told her as he flicked through the channels.

"Not yet," she told him.

He shot her an accusing glance. "You're not even looking."

She was, just not at the television.

"Can you believe this show is still on the air?" asked Nick, pausing on a certain reality show they had often mocked in the past. "I don't know about you, but I don't want to know any more about the secret life of skunks than I already do."

"That rug incident really traumatized you in more than one way, didn't it?" teased Judy.

Nick gave a fake shudder. "You have no idea."

"Can I ask you something?" said Judy as Nick resumed his channel surfing.
"Shoot."

"What made you decide to target Mr. Big in the first place? I mean, it doesn't really match with your usual M.O."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because. The rug selling makes sense, I guess, what with your love of smart ass technicalities—"

"Hey!"

"But you always went after animals like office lemmings, carpenter mice, jerky elephants... not shrews famous for their shady business dealings and who employ a small army of polar bears as henchmen. And for what? Offloading one rug? That's a lot of serious risk for very little payout. Hardly worth endangering your life over."

"I can't argue with you there," said Nick.

"So then why'd you do it? Why Mr. Big?"

"Why the sudden curiosity?"

Wasn't it obvious? "Because," said Judy. "It's you."

Nick looked over at her.

"You're my partner. Of course I'm curious about it." Flashing him a smile, she added, "You always have a reason, even for your stupid decisions."

Nick huffed a laugh. "Gee, thanks."

"So? Are you going to tell me why?"

The only form of illumination currently in the hotel room came the TV. Perhaps because of that, the glare of it felt extra intense. Judy could see it reflected in Nick's eyes, bright and flickering. It almost made her miss the shadow that passed across them.

"If you'd rather not say..." started Judy, that sense of foreboding making her pull back, but Nick shook his head.

"It's not like there's much to it," he said, very matter-of-factly. "That was the year my mother died, and I handled it about as poorly as you'd expect."

"By going after Mr. Big?"

"Yeah."

Nick plucked at the buttons on the remote with the tip of a claw. Judy watched him, distress gnawing at her insides. She had known that his mother had passed away years ago and that he only had a few cousins left scattered around who he never talked to. From how little he spoke of his mother, and the way in which he spoke of her when he did—always quietly, as if she were a ghost sleeping nearby that he didn't wish to wake—she knew that he had loved her dearly. What she hadn't known was how deep his grief had been.

"You could have been killed."
Nick acknowledged that with a dip of his head. "It wasn't something I was particularly concerned with at the time."

Judy was scared to ask, but she had to know. "Was it why you took the job?"

"No." Nick sounded adamant. But then his expression collapsed a bit and he added, "At least, not consciously. Looking back I sometimes wonder about that myself. But, Carrots—" His paw found hers under the blankets. "That's not something you have to worry about anymore, so stop making that face will you? I'm fine now. I mean, look at me. I've sold out my con artist lifestyle to shamelessly run around as a cop with you, and I'm enjoying the heck out of it. I'm not about to give that up for anything."

"I just don't like thinking of you like that," said Judy.

Nick gave her paw a squeeze. "It's not a particularly happy time for me to look back on either," he said. "So let's talk about something else now, ok?"

Judy pointed at the TV where a skunk was talking to a doctor about the pros and cons of scent gland removal. "Like the secret lives of skunks?"

"Not that either," said Nick, picking back up the remote.

It became a contest after that to see who could find a worse show. Judy picked amateur flamingo dancing while Nick insisted it was Late Night Howling with Alf A. Lobo.

"No way is that his real name," said Nick.

They stopped on an old, made for TV movie called Moonraiser, about a wolf who comes back from the dead only to find that his mate has chosen another, sending the wolf on a rampage through the town. Judy was annoying Nick with a terrible impression of the wolf's howling when their dinner finally arrived.

Nick made the room service delivery animal give him his name and then called down to confirm with the front desk that the food had really been sent up before he let Judy open the door to a sour faced penguin in bowtie. After tipping him more than he probably deserved, they took their food back to the couch where they could eat in relative warmth. As they ate, talk turned to the case.

"I just can't make heads or tails of it," said Nick, biting into a fry and making a face. "Blech, cold. Why am I not surprised? I should have eaten something while we were at the diner."

"Try putting the dipping sauce they gave you onto it," suggested Judy.

"Nah, it smells like fish. Anyway—" He shoved a fry into his mouth and chewed with a grimace. "I hope you've got some new ideas, cause I've got nothing."

"Not really," admitted Judy. "Although…"

"What?"

She bit into a tomato cautiously. It was a little bit icy, but chewable. She reached for another. "I keep thinking about the university."

"What about it?"

"Well, besides the victim's relationships, that school is the closest thing we have to a connection
between anyone."

"Pretty loose connection," said Nick.

"Clare and Joey go there. And so does the apartment manager, Betty."

"Still sounds more like a coincidence than a connection. Z.U. Is the biggest campus in the city. Thousands of mammals go there each year. And Clare and Betty aren't even in the same field. Clare's majoring in English, and I'm pretty sure Flatalie is into some kind of managerial study."

"Wasn't it business?" asked Judy.

"Either way." Nick took another resentful bit of fry.

"Iggy was also enrolled," Judy pointed out.

"The grocer? you said yourself that we still don't know if that case is even related to this one. And you're forgetting everyone who doesn't go there. You, for one. And Gazelle. And Rick Tavi."

Judy picked a chunk of ice out of her salad and rolled it to the side with her fork. "True. Still, it can't hurt to look into it a bit more, right?"

"It's not like we've got much else to go on," agreed Nick. Giving up on the fries, he tossed the container onto the coffee table and slouched back against the couch. "I can't think about this anymore tonight. Let's talk about something else."

"All right." Judy set aside her salad bowl as well. "Let's talk about us."

Nick stiffened against the couch cushions. "Us?"

Judy nodded. "We didn't get to discuss it earlier, but I think it's important for both of us that we set up some boundaries."

"You want set up boundaries?"

"Yes," said Judy, trying not to feel insulted by his skepticism. "I realize that I've kind of… forced your paw with this whole acting as bait thing—"

Nick snorted.

"And I know how uncomfortable you are with the touching thing—"

"Judy…"

"So I want to make sure we're on the same page as far as what's acceptable and what isn't. The last thing I want to do is take our acting too far and upset you."

Nick's voice came out choked. "How thoughtful of you."

"It's the least I can do, considering—" Judy stopped as she saw his lips twitching suspiciously. She frowned. "Are you laughing at me right now?"

"I would never!"

"I'm being sincere you know."
"I know you are." He gave her a soft look that made Judy's insides feel all warm and melty. The room didn't feel half so cold all of a sudden.

"So… so that's why…" Judy cleared her throat. Her thought's had completely fluttered off on her.

"You want to set some boundaries," Nick finished for her.

"Yes. Exactly."

"All right," said Nick.

"All right?"

"Yeah. Sounds like a good idea to me." He cocked his head at her. "You got a list or something you want to go by?"

She didn't. Though now that he said it, that probably would have been the smarter way to go.

"I thought we could just make it up as we go," she said.

Nick's eyebrows rose. "And how, exactly, did you want to do that?"

"Well… just something like…" Tugging off her blanket, she scooched over so that she was sitting next to him on the couch. "For example, is this much okay?"

Nick, who had tensed up at her approach, relaxed a bit. "Of course," he said.

Judy reached over and took his paw. A tremor went through him at the first touch but his paw stayed lax in hers.

"And this?" she asked. "Does this bother you at all?"

"Not at all," he forced out.

Liar, she thought, feeling a twinge of exasperation go through her. If he wasn't going to be honest then this would never work.

Deciding to push him a little more, she wiggled closer until she was nestled into his side, pulling his paw across her lap and pressing her cheek to his arm, which tensed and flexed against her.

"What about this?" she asked. "Is this too close?"

Nick coughed and looked away. "It's tolerable," he said.

But Judy could feel the way the pulse in his wrist was dancing beneath her paw, and she didn't think he had taken a full breath since she had first touched him.

She told herself she should back off now. Nick's limit was obviously up to here even if he didn't want to admit it. That's all she had wanted to know when she had first started this.

But her partner's stubborn denial pricked at something inside of her, and she couldn't explain why, but suddenly more than anything she needed to hear him admit that her nearness affected him. She felt desperate for it. Entitled to it.

Releasing his paw, she slid her arms around his neck, rising up so she could tuck her head right under his clenched jaw. His fur was soft and warm here, protected from the chill of the room by a
layer of blankets, which had fallen from his shoulders as she'd pressed herself close. She could feel the pounding of his heart and hear the hitch in his breathing as she turned her head to nuzzle at the base of his throat. He let out a subvocal growl that Judy felt all the way to tips of her toes and she suppressed a shiver, hiding a smile against his fur. Victory was near.

"Still okay?" she asked innocently and Nick made a ragged sound that might have been her name. His paws fluttered at her waist.

Gripping his shirtfront for balance, Judy rose up on her knees and leaned forward in her final takedown move. Her mouth was inches from the corner of Nick's when there was a sudden soft pop-pop sound and the fabric she had clenched in her fist went lax. Judy toppled sideways across Nick's lap with a squeak. Paws that encompassed her entire waist caught her and yanked her back. The next thing Judy knew, she was nose to nose and chest to chest with a very, very affected fox.

Well, in this at least she had prevailed. Nick's eyes were dark, his breathing uneven as he stared her down. For professing to have been so cold before, he practically emanated heat now. His paws were still wrapped around her waist. When Judy shifted, realizing with some embarrassment that she had come to straddle his lap during her graceless slip, his paws cinched tighter, holding her in place. The sensation had her kneading her own tiny claws against his shoulders where she held onto him.

At that, Nick gave a full body shudder and buried his face against the crook of her neck. "Don't move," he bit out.

Judy nodded, trying not to shiver when he released a shuddering breath against her throat. It was her turn to act the statue, barely daring to breath as Nick clung to her and struggled to collect himself. Sanity slowly returned to Judy as well. The daring vixen that had momentarily possessed her body had flown, and all she was left with was an achy dissatisfaction and growing sense of shame. What had come over her? She'd started this to set up some boundaries, not seduce Nick against his better judgement.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean to..." But she couldn't make herself finish the sentence. The truth was that she had meant to. And if not for Nick's penchant for wearing old button ups she would have done more.

Nick brought his paw up, rubbing her back in soothing circles. "It's all right, Carrots."

"It's not," she said. "I shouldn't have... when I know full well where you stand on this right now. I just don't know what came over me."

Nick lifted his head. He didn't look mad, or like he was re-thinking this whole partnering with a crazy bunny thing. He gave her long ear a playful tug. "So this wasn't another round of punishment for how I acted before?"

Judy shook her head emphatically. "It wasn't like that at all. I wish I had that as an excuse."

"Then why?"

"Honestly?" She couldn't bear to look at him while she talked about this. Her gaze dropped to his ruined shirt and the white patch of exposed fur. It looked so soft and thick. She was reaching for it before she even knew what she was doing. She clenched her fist and pulled back. "I just can't seem to help myself with you," she admitted.

The silence that followed was a long and painful one. Had she gone too far? Said too much? Judy
felt regret reaching for her with sharpened claws. It was one thing to be honest about your feelings, another to confess to a lack of self-control. Nick already seemed to be overwhelmed by her. What if this time he actually—

Black paws came up, cupping her face and smooshing her cheeks until she squeaked. "Dumb bunny," Nick said. "Why are you saying it like it's some bad dark secret?"

Judy scowled, knowing it lacked menace with him squishing her cheeks like he was. "Because... won't it bother you?"

Nick's lips twitched. "Torture would probably be more accurate."

Stung, Judy immediately tried to pull away, but Nick didn't let go. "In a good way," he clarified. "Really, Carrots." He sighed and gave her head a little shake. "Do you have any idea how happy I am to have you in my life? To know that you like me so much? It's incredibly—" He coughed and cleared his throat. "Flattering, to say the least."

Judy felt her cheeks heat. "If you say so." She still had her doubts, but at least Nick didn't look ready to run for the hills. It was enough to make some of her earlier confidence come sneaking back. "You got it wrong, though."

"Hm?"

"You said I like you, but that's not it. Not even close." She reached up, taking hold of his wrists where he still cupped her face. "I love you, Nick. And while I still don't know about the rest of it, this is the one thing I won't let you downplay. I love you. And I'll tell it to you as many times as I need to in order to get it through that thick fox skull of yours—Ow!" she exclaimed as Nick clunked his forehead against hers.

"Sorry," he said, not sounding sorry at all. "Just trying to help it get through."

Just as Judy opened her mouth to give a sharp retort, Nick swooped in and pressed a kiss to the injured spot. He paused there for only a moment. Judy barely had time to register the sensation before he was pulling away again.

"There," he said. "All better."

Catching Judy around the waist, he lifted her off his lap and tossed her back onto her side of the couch where she landed with a bounce against the cushions. By the time she had righted herself, he had tossed away the blankets and was heading down the hallway.

"W-where are you going?" she asked.

"To go take a cold shower. If this hotel can do one thing right it should be that." He glanced back and gave her a cheeky wink. In a mock-stern voice he warned, "Don't think about following me. Remember: boundaries."

With that, he ducked into the bathroom, chuckling, leaving Judy sputtering indignantly.

She pressed a paw to the spot where he had kissed her. In one move, he had managed to steal the victory right out from under her.

Her partner really was a very sneaky fox.
Chapter 15

Judy dreamed about polar bears. Big, silent mountains of white fur that lumbered through the hallways of Mr. Big's hotel like bad-tempered ghosts, uncaring of the bunny in their midst. Whenever Judy tried to stop one of them and ask for directions, they ignored her. The hotel had tripled in size the way buildings tended to do in dreams, and no matter how many doors Judy went through or hallways she walked down, she couldn't find the way out. Every door led to another staircase, every staircase led to another hallway, and every hallway led to a dead end. Whenever she passed by a window, it was to find herself still looking out over Tundratown's skyline, never any closer to the ground despite having descended half a dozen flights of stairs. It was extremely frustrating.

And it was cold. The real hotel had floors made of marble, but the dream version was carpeted in deep snow, with the walls trimmed in actual ice molding. Wind gusted through the hallways, stinging her eyes and threatening to knock her off her feet. No matter where Judy turned, there was no reprieve from the elements.

It felt like she wandered through that labyrinthine building for hours. When she finally ran across another polar bear, Judy was determined to make it listen to her.

Trudging through the heavy snow after bear, she demanded to be shown the exit. When that produced no response, Judy found herself doing something she never would have done in real life. She kicked the bear right in the shin.

A real polar bear wouldn't have even felt it. This one teetered like tripped giraffe. It wobbled one way and then the other, the physics of its movement not quite right, as if the bear were full of helium or the gravity surrounding it had suddenly become shoddy. And though Judy did her best to get out of the way, no matter where she went the bear still loomed over her, falling forward an impossible distance, at an impossible angle, until it finally toppled like a felled oak right on top of her. Judy threw up her paws in a vain attempt to protect herself—

And woke up.

The first thing she became conscious of was the cold. At some point she had rolled out from her little nest of warmed blankets and over towards the chilly outer sheets. She immediately retreated back towards the center of the bed, but it was no use. Her sleeping spot had long since cooled. The whole mattress felt like a spongey block of ice now. Perfect.

Giving up on any more rest, Judy rose and dressed quickly. She pulled on her heavier coat and scarf, uncaring if she looked silly wearing them inside. She was so cold, if she had brought her hat and mittens along with her she would have put those on too.

She made her way down the hall and into the living room. The couch was a rumpled mess of blankets and pillows, half of them spilled onto the floor.

No fox.

The bathroom was dark, the kitchen empty. Judy was just starting to wonder if Nick had left the hotel room entirely when she heard a funny scratching sound, like claws against glass.

Logically, she knew she had been right when she'd told Nick that it would be impossible for anyone to break in through the window. They were hundreds of feet above street level, the climb
up a sheer summit of glass and ice. Throw in a truly impressive wind shear and you had an
indomitable fortress.

But even knowing all that, it didn't stop the soft, unknown scratching noise from raising the fur on
the back of Judy's neck and sending a spike of adrenaline through her gut.

Wishing she had her tranquilizer gun with her, and that she knew where Nick had gone, Judy crept
forward and peeked around the corner into the living room.

Well, there was the answer to one of her wishes.

Her partner was there in front of the window, half-hidden by the glare of morning light filtering in
through the glass. He had his back to her, claws raking across the frosted surface as if he were
trying to scrape away some of the condensation. Judy knew from experience gained from her first
night that it was a lost cause.

He was still in his sleeping outfit of sweatpants and a long-sleeved t-shirt. "It's bunny-proof," he
had joked when he had come out of the bathroom the previous night. "See? No buttons."

Judy had been sorely tempted to prove to him just how wrong he was about that. But
embarrassment from the scene she had caused only a few minutes before had still been hot in her
cheeks, and she had been uncertain if the remark had been an innocent tease or something else. It
had been far safer to let it go. Why was it that even when Nick had no buttons, he still pushed hers
so easily? It was hardly fair.

"Couldn't sleep either?" said Judy. "Maybe you should have worn something cold-proof instead."

Nick grumbled something she didn't catch, continuing his irritated swing at the window. Judy
rolled her eyes. He never had been a morning mammal.

Their dinner from last night was still sitting out on the coffee table, both of them having forgotten
it in their argument over who should take the couch, (Judy had lost). At least the cold had kept the
food from smelling up the room.

Collecting the tray of dishes, Judy said to Nick, "Since we're both up, why don't we head out early
and stop for breakfast? I'm thinking hot coffee with hot pancakes and more hot coffee to go. What
do you think?"

Another unintelligible grumble. Judy made a mental note: early hours and extreme cold turned
Nick into one surly vulpine.

She put the tray outside the hotel room door for the staff to collect. The floor was empty save for
one stoat with a cleaning cart at the far end of the hall. The white fur and long hallway reminded
Judy too much of her dream. She shivered and went back inside quickly.

Nick still hadn't moved from his spot at the window.

"Is your paw stuck to the glass or something?" Judy teased. "Come on, let's go. The faster you get
ready, the faster we can be out of here and defrosting in a nice warm diner somewhere. Remember
that place in Sahara Square that sold those giant bear claws you loved? I heard from Francine that
they have a two-for-one special on Thursdays."

No response. Nick continued his vain scratching at the glass. The steady repetitiveness of it,
combined with his absolute refusal to acknowledge her, set off a warning ping inside Judy.
She made her way over to him cautiously. "Nick? Everything okay?"

He mumbled something, but it didn't sound like a response to her. Through the thick layer of ice that covered the window, Judy could just make out the distorted smear of sunrise breaking through the blurry, gray dawn sky. There was nothing else to see. Nothing that should have captured her partner's focus to such a disturbing degree.

"Nick?"

She laid a paw on his arm. Touching him had never failed to produce a reaction before. But she might as well have been a ghost for all that Nick seemed to care. She peeked up at his face. His expression was one of worry, his brow pinched and his ears back. His gaze was focused on something beyond the window, beyond even the city. Even with Judy standing there, he continued to swipe at the glass. She could hear what he was saying now, but the words made no more sense than they had before. "Blood... books... bricks... broken... too late... too late..."

Gooseflesh prickled, raising the fur on Judy's arms. Was this... sleepwalking? She had a second cousin who used to dig holes in her bedroom floor while sleeping when she was a kit, but that didn't feel quite the same as this. Her cousin had been active but in a peaceful way—or as peaceful as one can be while digging a hole in the floor. But Nick's movements were more restless, more manic. It scared her.

"It's okay. Everything's okay, Nick." Judy kept her voice low and soothing. "Why don't we come back to the couch now, huh? Let's rest for a bit more."

She took his paw in her own. The coldness of it shocked her. How long had Nick been standing there, mindlessly scratching at the glass like that? How long would he have gone on if she hadn't woken up? She didn't even want to speculate.

She tried to lead him away from the window. But one step in Nick registered the change and pulled away from her with a panicked cry. He scrabbled desperately at the window, his words coming faster, more terrified, "blood, bricks, books. Too much, too late..."

Fighting her own panic, Judy pulled out her cell phone and dialed. Finnick answered on the fifth ring. "You know, some of us are nocturnal, Rabbit."

"Something's wrong with Nick," said Judy. "He's sleepwalking o-or something. He keeps mumbling something about blood and... and books? I can't get him to snap out of it."

An annoyed sigh came over the line. "Not again."

"Do you know what this is?"

"Just slug him a good one," said Finnick. "That'll knock him out of it."

"Slug him a— I am not going to hit him, Finnick!"

"It's always worked for me."

"Well I'm not doing that!"

"No fur off my nose," said Finnick. "He's your partner now, not mine."

"What's that supposed to mean?"
"It means Wilde's issues aren't my problem anymore," said the fox. "They're yours. Enjoy."

The line clicked. Judy stared down at her phone. That stubby little jerk had just hung up on her! Didn't he care that Nick was suffering from... from something? How could he act so callously towards a friend like that? Even if he didn't like her, Nick needed help.

Her partnered whimpered, a broken sound that dug right into Judy's heart. She put her phone away. She would chew the small fox out later, once Nick was over this... whatever this was.

As gently as possible, she inserted herself between Nick and the window. The glass was cold at her back. She could feel the chill wafting off of it, even through her coat and the sweater beneath. She wrapped her arms tight around Nick, to let him know she was there and to keep him from prying her off.

"You're okay," she told him, patting his back in a way she hoped felt comforting. "Everything's okay. No one's bleeding. The books are fine. It's all fine. Relax. Shhh, it's all okay."

Heavy paws gripped her shoulders and clung. She continued to speak softly, piling on the endearments and reassurances, repeating them over and over. "You're safe. Everyone's safe. There's no need to worry. Shh, please wake up. You're all right."

She knew the moment when Nick finally snapped out of it. His body went rigid in her arms, like a vibrating wire suddenly pulled taut. His choppy breaths cut off on a sharp inhale. Those cold paws slid across her back, as if unsure who held him. "J-Judy?"

"Right here," she said, giving his middle a light squeeze. "Are you back with me now?"

He responded with a shuddering exhale. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm good."

"You were having a nightmare, I think," said Judy. "I couldn't get you away from the window."

They broke apart. Nick's expression was closed tight. Still, it was obvious her words hadn't surprised him. It confirmed for Judy what Finnick had already hinted at: this wasn't an isolated incident. Far from it. It was common enough that Nick was able to collect himself immediately afterwards, and his friend no longer treated it as anything but an annoying hassle to be dealt with.

"How often do you have these episodes?" asked Judy.

"More often than I'd like lately," admitted Nick. He shivered. It reminded Judy of how cold his paws were, and she could have kicked herself. Here they were standing around talking when he must be freezing.

"Here." She directed him back to the couch. This time Nick went willingly. She fetched his coat, and once he had pulled that on she added a blanket on top of that. Nick snuggled into it with a grateful sigh, tucking in his chin in a way that made him look ten years younger.

Judy took a seat next to him. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Her partner shot her a wry look. "If I say no, how badly are you going to bug me until a cave?"

"Only very," said Judy.

Nick laughed at the same time another shiver wracked him. His teeth clattered together and he clenched his jaw.
"Really, though," said Judy. "It's okay if you'd rather not talk about it now."

Nick seemed to ponder the coffee table in front of them. After a moment he asked, "How much did you look into, back when we first met?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," said Judy.

Nick looked over at her and smiled. Back before Judy had met the fox, smiles had always been straightforward things. She'd seen happy smiles and sad smiles, amused smiles and not-so-amused smiles. Mean smiles and scared smiles. But her partner took it to a whole other level. Never before, for instance, had Judy seen anyone smile at her in a way that conveyed both understanding and forgiveness, while at the same time calling her on her bull crap, all with one twist of the lips.

"You're talking about your police file," said Judy. "That, well... I may have… peeked at it once."

"No need to look so guilty," said Nick. "Let me guess, it was after the pawpsicle incident? Of course you looked me up. You wouldn't be the cop that you are if you had ignored such an obvious resource."

"For all the good it did me," muttered Judy. "Every page said the same thing. The officer in charge knew you were up to something but they couldn't pin anything on you, either because of a lack of evidence or because of some legal technicality. You were annoyingly perfect about covering your tracks."

"Naturally."

Smug fox.

This time when Nick shivered, Judy did too. Even with her jacket on it was still freezing in the hotel room. The weak sunlight coming in through the window wasn't anywhere near as warming as one would hope.

Judy untangled a blanket from the pile on the floor and pulled it across her lap. As she was tucking in her feet, Nick's voice came softly from beside to her. "If you saw my file, then you saw my mother's too, didn't you?"

Still no judgement, just a sad resignation. Judy felt horrible anyway.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It popped up alongside yours and I just…"

Nick's shrug was careless. "I figured as much. My curious partner never could help herself."

"I thought it would help me understand you better," said Judy, feeling like she needed to explain.

Nick nodded, but it was an automatic sort of response. His gaze had gone distant again. "And did it?"

"No. I didn't know you well enough then to tell if... well, if what I had read was influencing any of your actions."

"And now?"

"I still don't," said Judy honestly. "You're not the easiest fox to read, even on a good day." But if he was bringing up the past now, of all times, when he had pointedly not talked about it for so long... clearly she had missed something.
"Did it—" Nick stopped. Judy thought it was to brace for another shiver, but the tremor that went through him then had nothing to do with the cold. "Did it say how she died?"

Judy started to answer, then faltered. "You didn't read it yourself?"

If there had been a case file on record about someone in her family, one of the first things Judy would have done after being hired was look through it. Like Nick said, she wouldn't have been able to help herself.

But Nick's head-shake was adamant. "It's better that I don't."

What did that mean? Judy wanted to ask, but Nick was still waiting for an answer to his question.

"The cause of death is listed as accidental," said Judy.

Nick's bark of laughter was bitter. "Well they're consistent. I'll give them that."

"You mean it wasn't an accident?"

Her partner glanced over at her, and Judy hated that for a moment he seemed to be sizing her up: friend or foe.

"Did I ever tell you where I grew up?" he asked her instead of answering.

"I don't think so?"

"Sahara Square," said Nick. "Or, well, just a couple blocks outside of it."

"That's… a really nice area," said Judy. Because it was, surprisingly so.

Nick's look was knowing. "You thought I was going to say somewhere like Sandy Ridge or Wall Street, didn't you? Some falling apart block on the outskirts of the city or near the factory district."

Judy bit back a denial. It would have been a lie anyway.

"We had a house," said Nick. "Actually owned it too. Took three generations to pay it off, and don't ask me how we managed to get a bank loan for it in the first place. I'm pretty sure my great-grandfather made some sort of deal with the bank owners. Then again, this was before the hotel and casino were built, so it wasn't like Sahara Square was the hot place it is now. Anyway—even without the monthly house payment it was just me and my mom by this point, so we still couldn't afford the place. It was over a hundred years old by then, and constantly needed repairs we couldn't afford. Some days it felt like the house was falling apart brick by brick. The outside was crumbling, the wallpaper inside was peeling. We had mice renting out our attic space that kept nibbling on the wood then deny it whenever we confronted them. Going a week or two without water or lights was a common practice for us. We'd use battery powered lamps. Take showers at friends' apartments. We had it down to a science. I told my mom more than once that we should just sell the place. Cut our loses and find a more affordable home somewhere else. But she always refused. The house had been in her family for decades. It was in a good neighborhood, near the nicest schools in the district."

"She wanted the best for you," said Judy. "She loved you."

"She did," agreed Nick. "She also really loved the house. We had this front room with a great big windowseat that overlooked the street. It was full of books my grandparents and great-grandparents had collected. My mother loved sitting up in that window and reading to all hours of the night."
Even if the power was off she'd just pull out her little battery-powered lamp and keep going. I'd come back from a late night out to find her still there, reading away. At the time I just thought she was an incorrigible bookworm."

"She was waiting up for you," said Judy.

"Yeah," said Nick. "Our worst fights always happened late at night, in that room."

"How come?"

Nick's smile was self-deprecating. "Probably because that was always when I was coming back from doing something stupid, and somehow she always knew."

Nick scrubbed a paw over his face. "That night I came home… I could tell by the dark front stoop that we hadn't paid the bill again. When I looked at that front window and for once didn't see her lamp there I felt… *relieved*. I thought I had finally caught a break, finally." He laughed once without humor.

"I went inside, and that's when I noticed that there was light coming from the front room after all, but the angle of it was wrong. It turned out the lamp had fallen off the side table where she usually kept it and rolled into a corner, so you couldn't see it from the street. If it hadn't been for that, I might not have even checked the room. I would have snuck on by, and not even wondered until the next day why…"

His paw shook where he gripped the blanket. That wasn't from the cold either. Judy covered it with her own.

"When I went into the room, Mom was… she must have been reading by the window like usual, and some young buck had walked by, probably with his school herd, and thought it would be funny to start something. He had picked up a piece of brick that had fallen off our own house and thrown it right at the window. Shattered the whole thing. And one of those shards… it just happened to cut my mom in *exactly* the right place… the amount of blood was—" Nick stopped, swallowing hard. Judy squeezed his paw. He took a deep breath in and let it out.

"She had made it to the phone, but with our electric turned off she couldn't call anyone. The medics told me she wouldn't have made it anyway, as if that was supposed to make me feel better. And then to top it all off, the police ruled it an accident. 'An unfortunate bit of teenage mischief,' they called it. The buck who did it was underage at the time and his father worked at the City Council Office. They slapped him with a minor property damages charge that was written off by his parents with one check. I tried to argue it, but even if I wasn't a fox, his father's status ensured his safety. Maybe if Chief Bogo had been around… but this was a few years before he took over."

"The one who did it," said Judy. "Was he someone you knew? Did he have a grudge against you or something?"

"That's just it," said Nick. "I had never even spoken to him before what happened. He was just some rich buck who lived down the block from us. We didn't even go to the same school. He had no reason for doing what he did besides that he had an opinion about foxes and he wanted to let us know it."

The paw under Judy's was a hard fist. She wanted so badly to cuddle closer to Nick, but everything about him radiated a desire for distance, and so Judy kept hers.

She thought about what she had read in the file. Nothing in it had come close to painting the picture
Nick had just described. It had read more like an obligatory legal note. The report brief and the facts vague: female fox, 42, died from blood loss due to accidental causes. Pronounced dead at the scene. All necessary family has been notified. No legal action required.

"So these nightmares of yours," said Judy. "They're about that night, aren't they?"

Nick nodded.

"But we've slept over at each other's places so many times. How come I've never noticed?"

"Usually it's not this... involved," admitted Nick. "I dream, I wake myself up, it's over. This sleepwalking thing is a newer, uh, development. In any case, it'll pass eventually. It always does. It's like allergies. Once the season's over, no more sneezing."

He shot her a smile, weak and fleeting. Judy was relieved to hear him joke, but she disagreed with the comparison. This was nothing like allergies; this was trauma. And this case they were investigating was like a sharp stick, poking at that trauma over and over again. No wonder he was having nightmares. Anyone with his experiences would. Animals were dying, his mother had been killed, and Judy—

Understanding hit her in a giant wave. She thought about the look on Nick's face when he had found her that night with the bloody plushie. The terror. The panic that she might be fatally injured.

A riptide of guilt rushed through her. This was his fear, she realized. That fate would repeat itself. And she had offered herself up as bait. She had flaunted her feelings like a red cape before a bull, knowing that Nick was in the arena with her. Knowing there was always a chance she might get gored.

"I'm sorry if I scared you," said Nick.

"Me too," said Judy. He had no idea how sorry.

Nick's lips twitched. "You're sorry you scared me?"

"Yes."

He searched her face, his expression turning solemn at whatever he saw there. "It's not what you think," he said.

But Judy knew that it was. It explained the reason for his strange behavior and his distance, his reluctance to be open with his feelings. He was afraid that someone would hurt her the way they had hurt his mom. Because they were partners. Because she was with him.

Because she loved him, and didn't care who knew it.

Oh, she was a very sorry bunny indeed.

Because she still didn't care.

A buzzing suddenly erupted under Judy's tail. She leapt away from it with a squeak of surprise.

"What?" said Nick, scrambling away from the spot as well. "What is it? A spider?"

The buzzing came again, muffled by the blankets. Nick saw it this time and his expression cleared. "Oh, my phone. I kept it with me last night just in case." Digging through the sheets, he held up the device so he could read the screen. "I don't know this number."
"Answer it," said Judy. "It might be about the case."

"As if we could be so lucky," said Nick, but he answered anyway. "Hello?"

Judy settled back on the couch, willing her startled heart to settle down. Nick turned to her with a frown. "Reynard? Why are you calling me?"

Reynard? Judy mouthed the name, unsure if she'd heard correctly. Nick nodded. "Slow down," he said. "What about Craven?" He held up his paw like he could ward off the fox through the phone. "All right. All right, I got it. Just tell me where you are and Judy and I will come and get you." Nick's expression went hard. "That's non-negotiable. Now tell me where you are." He cursed. "Kit, stop being stubborn about this."

"What's wrong?" asked Judy.

Pressing the phone to his chest, Nick said, "He says Craven's in trouble. Something about a big fight. But he's refusing to tell me the location until I promise not to bring you."

"Me?" said Judy in surprise. "Why not?"

"Because he thinks you're too close with Marian and you'll tell on them." Nick rolled his eyes. Into the phone he said, "Like Marian finding out matters right now."

"Tell him I won't come then," said Judy, tugging on the sleeve of Nick's shirt. "Nick, tell him."

"Fine!" her partner snapped. "I'll come alone. Happy now? Now tell me where you are, kit."

Judy tried to hear, but wherever Reynard was, it must have been crowded. The sounds of shouting and heavy foot-traffic muffled his words.

"Listen to me," said Nick. "Find a corner and stay there. Don't engage with anyone, got it? I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Did he say where he was?" asked Judy after Nick had hung up.

"Somewhere deep in the warehouse district. Even I've never been there before. Dumb kits are going to get themselves killed." Nick rose. "Just give me five minutes to get ready and we'll go."

"I can't come," said Judy.

"Of course you can," said Nick. "Why can't you?"

"Because you said you wouldn't bring me," said Judy.

"So I lied," said Nick. "Who cares? They'll appreciate the help once we get there."

"Or they might spot me first and run away," said Judy.

Her partner stared at her. "You're serious."

"We don't know what they'll do, Nick," said Judy. "But if they're desperate enough to call you and not Marian or Robin or any of their friends, then we need to tread lightly here. Help them first. Lecture them later. Okay?"

"I'll call the station then," said Nick. "Have Howle or Clawhauser go pick them up. I'm not leaving you here alone."
"They asked for you."

Nick let out a frustrated growl. "I don't care who they ask for!" But he glanced at the clock all the same, and she could see him doing the math. Rush hour was in full swing now. It would be slow going, even if he used the siren. The warehouse district was a minimum of thirty-minutes away…

Judy put a paw on his arm.

"I'll be okay," she insisted. "I can handle things myself for a couple of hours."

"Someone is after you," said Nick. "The same animal who's after Gazelle, and we have a whole squad of cops guarding her. Who's going to watch out for you?"

"I'm a cop," said Judy.

Nick took her by the shoulders. "Claws will still cut you, cop or not," he said. "I'm not leaving you without backup, end of story."

"Then what about the kits?"

Nick's jaw tightened and again his eyes slid to the clock. Judy could see the fight waging inside him.

She waited.

"Okay, compromise," he said. "I'll go get the kits if you agree to let me call someone over to stay with you."

"You mean babysit me."

"Protect you." He pulled her closer, crouching down so they were nose-to-nose. "Please, Judy. If you have any pity in you at all, humor this paranoid partner of yours for just one afternoon."

Eyes still shadowed by nightmares begged her. Whoever said a doe had the most entreating gaze had never been face to face with a pleading fox before. Judy would have accused her partner of conning her except that she knew he was being one hundred percent sincere.

It was the sincerity that sent her resistance crumbling.

"Okay!" said Judy. "You can call someone over if it will make you feel better. But only because this is a special case," she added as Nick broke out into a relieved grin. "Don't think this is going to become a habit in the future."

"Perish the thought," said Nick with feeling. Releasing her, he pulled out his phone and started dialing.

"So," said Judy. "Who exactly do you have in mind?"

From his place on the couch, Finnick scowled at her. He had taken over Nick’s nest of blankets, the only warm spot in the whole hotel room. All Judy could see of him were his giant ears and the glint of angry eyes under a mutinous brow.

His bat sat propped against the couch cushions next to him. From where Judy was sitting, he looking like he was fantasizing about using it on her.

Judy couldn’t say she was any happier to have him there. When she had first spotted his van pulling into the parking lot, she’d turned to Nick. She’d been unable to keep the accusation out of her tone. “You had him come?”

Nick raised an eyebrow at her. “Since when do you have a problem with Finnick? I thought you guys had made nice with each other?”

“I don’t and we did,” answered Judy curtly, watching as the small fox pulled into an empty parking space. It took a bit of wrangling to get his door open; the wind kept trying to blow it back closed on him. “I’m surprised he agreed to come.”

“He knows how important this is to me,” said Nick.

“I guess. But it’s not like he even knows who Reynard and Craven are,” said Judy.

Nick slid Judy a droll look.

“What?” said Judy.

“Nothing,” he said.

Giving the fur on top of her head a fond ruffle, he stepped out from under the hotel’s overhang. He jogged over to where Finnick was struggling to cross the parking lot. The fox in question had finally made it out of the van, but each step was a visible struggle. Even the trusty bat slung over his shoulder failed to stabilize him.

“Need a paw there?” Judy heard Nick ask.

“Pick me up and die, Wilde,” Finnick growled as an icy blast of wind hit him squarely in the chest, knocking him back a foot.

Nick grinned. He felt into step beside his friend, keeping to his left side so that his body acted as a windbreak for the smaller fox.

When they made it over to Judy, fox and bunny squared off.

“So you managed to get up after all,” said Judy.

“Yeah. Stupid me for thinking I might actually get some sleep now,” said Finnick.

“Oh, by all means, don’t let us stop you.”

“That’s rich coming from the fuzz who called me twice this morning.”
“Oookay,” said Nick, stepping between them. “I’m going to assume you don’t need me to handle whatever this is that’s happening right now. I’ve got two dumb kits to go save.” He shot a half-pleading, half-threating look over at Judy. “Please be careful.”

“Same to you,” said Judy. “Call me as soon as you find them.”

“Will do.”

He looked over at Finnick, and the two foxes exchanged a few silent words with only their eyes. Judy rolled her own. “Would you go, already? I’ll be fine.”

Nick turned back to her. Still, he hesitated.

“What now—” Judy started to say, but broke off as Nick swooped her up in a sudden, rough hug that lifted her clear off her feet.

In a low, gruff voice he said, “Make sure you keep your phone on you. And don’t ditch Finnick even if it’s tempting. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Try not to take any risks without me.”

“I’ll do my best,” said Judy dryly, but she hugged him back just as tight. Her insides felt fizzy, like shook up champagne. She suddenly had an overwhelming urge to go with him after all. What if things got out of paw there? What if he needed her? Where would his backup be?

Only the fact that she knew she was being ridiculous stopped her from giving in and saying she would go. Nick would be fine. In a few hours he would be back, the kits would be safe, and they would continue on with their investigation. Same as always.

He deposited her back on her feet. With one last affectionate tug on her ear, he set off towards the cruiser. Judy watched him go with a sigh.

Next to her, Finnick snorted. When she cut him a look, he said, “What? I sneezed.”

She took in his outfit, thawing a little despite herself. He had pulled on a zippered hoodie over his usual short-sleeved button-up, but that did nothing to protect him from the elements. His ears flicked back to help keep out the snow flurries that buffeted around them. It made him look even more ticked off than usual.

“Shall we continue this inside?” she asked.

“Happy to,” he growled.

And so in they went. Finnick took the couch, Judy took an armchair, and together they continued their silent face off—if not comfortably, at least minus the windchill.

“Would you like to watch tv?” asked Judy.

“There’s nothing good on now,” said Finnick.

“Would you like a drink?”

“Only if it’s beer.”

“It’s eight thirty in the morning!” exclaimed Judy.

“Your point is?”
Judy’s phone started to ring. She answered it gratefully. “Hopps speaking.”

“Can we meet?” It was Harper.

Judy turned to Finnick. “You up for a drive?”

“Do I look like your chauffeur?” asked the fox.

“I’ll reimburse you for the gas,” said Judy. When he only rolled his eyes, Judy added. “It’s in Savannah Central.”

He flung the blankets aside and made for the door. “Let’s go.”

Twenty minutes later they pulled up to a small diner called the Buck’s Stop. If not for the open sign on the front door and the crowd that was visible through the plate glass windows, Judy would have thought the place shut down. Spots of rust dotted the metal roof like raindrops and half the tiles checkering the walls were chipped or missing. The neon sign above the building had several letters burnt out. It now read, “Bus Stop.”

After arguing with Finnick over what constituted a legal parking space, Judy eventually convinced him to grab an open meter halfway down the block.

“You’re paying for this,” said Finnick.

“I wouldn’t dream of having it otherwise,” said Judy.

The smaller fox gave her the side-eye at the sarcasm and reached for the door handle. Judy stopped him with a paw on his shoulder. “It might be better if you wait here,” she told him.

The side-eye turned into a full-on glare. “I didn’t come all this way just to stay in the van, Rabbit.”

“You pretty much live in this van,” argued Judy. “It’s practically the same as asking you to stay home.”

“Not happening.”

“Look, Harper might not be comfortable talking about such personal things in front of a stranger.”

“And that’s my problem how?”

“It might not be your problem, but it is my job,” said Judy. “And if I can’t do my job, she doesn’t get help, and then bad things happen. Animals get hurt. Please,” she added when Finnick didn’t look swayed. “Stay here. Listen to your music. Blast the heater. I’ll bring you back a coffee when I’m done. And a muffin. One of those elephant-sized ones with the whole blueberries in it, all right?”

“And if something happens to your fuzzy butt while you’re in there?”

Judy tried not to sound dismissive as she said, “Nothing’s going to happen to me. Nobody knew we were coming and I looked for a tail all the way here. There was no one. Besides, this is a crowded public place. Our culprit would have to be crazy to try something here. And regardless of whatever else they are, they’ve been smart about their actions so far.”

“You can’t guarantee it, though,” said Finnick. “And you’re not the one who will have to put up with Nick if something happens to you.”
For the second time that morning, Judy found herself recalling Nick’s reaction to finding her “injured” that night at her apartment. His shaking paws and panicked eyes, the utter *lostness* in his voice.

Judy swallowed and pushed the memory aside. “Nothing’s going to happen to me,” she insisted, as much for Finnick’s benefit as her own. As much as she didn’t want to hurt Nick, she couldn’t not do her job on the off-chance that something might happen to her. That was no way to work. Or live.

“I’m just going to have a nice little chat with a friend and come straight back. See that bunny inside?” She pointed to where Harper sat by the window, sipping a coffee. “I’ll be right there. If anyone suspicious appears, you’ll see them right away. And then you can come beat them up or finally use that bat you insist on toting around with you, okay?”

“Is this how you usually con Nick out of things?” Finnick asked.

“Not everything is a con,” huffed Judy. “This is what they call a *compromise*. It’s what good partners do.”

“No wonder he’s turned so neurotic,” said Finnick, and grabbing up his bat, he hopped out of the van.

“H-hey!” exclaimed Judy. “Wait just a cotton-tailed minute!”

Finnick was already making his way down the street. Judy scrambled out after him. This time of morning, the sidewalk was packed with animals. Judy dodged around a pack of jackal pups dressed in their school uniforms and under the stilt legs of a jogging giraffe before catching up to the fox.

“What was that supposed to mean?” demanded Judy.

“Look, I don’t know how it works in prey relationships,” said Finnick. “But you can’t expect a predator to sit back and wait for their mate to get hurt before doing something about it. We’re not the ZPD.”

Judy barely registered the jibe. Her brain had gotten stuck on something else he’d said.

“You consider me to be Nick’s mate?” The thought made Judy feel both self-conscious and absurdly happy.

Finnick made a face. “For lack of a better term. You’re missing the point, rabbit.”

“What is?”

“That the compromise was already made.”

A break in the traffic appeared. Finnick took the opening and jogged across the road.

“No jaywalking—” started Judy, but it was useless. Giving up, she checked both ways again and followed after him.

As they hopped up onto the curb, Judy said, “What compromise are you talking about?”

Finnick gestured impatiently between them. “Me. Being here with you instead of Wilde. *That’s* the compromise. Not leaving my weapon behind at the apartment. Not me waiting in the car while you go gossip about carrots or tomatoes or whatever it is you rabbits like to gossip about—“

“Murder. We’re talking about a murder, Finnick.”
“Exactly. It’s like you’re trying to give Wilde an early heart attack.”

“That’s not in the least bit true,” said Judy.

“Please. You’re constantly throwing yourself into danger. I don’t know if it’s because you’re a cop, or prey, or both. Maybe your threat sensor is always turned up so high it has no affect anymore. Or maybe it’s just you. Really, I don’t know and I don’t care. But for someone who was so upset that I didn’t come over and coddle Wilde through a scawry widdle nightmare, you sure don’t seem to mind torturing him in other ways.”

“I hardly think me having brunch with someone is torture for Nick,” said Judy.

“And this plan of yours to use yourself as bait to catch some psycho?”

“That’s different.”

“I’ll say. I don’t think you could’ve sliced Wilde’s scars open any cleaner had you used an actual knife.”

Judy caught the end of Finnick’s bat, pulling him up short. In front of them was the diner. Out of the corner of Judy’s eye, she saw Harper spot them, a frown appearing between her brow.

“First of all,” said Judy, lowering her voice. “I didn’t know Nick had scars I needed to be concerned about until this morning. But secondly, I’m a cop, and animals are dying right now. Is my plan dumb? Risky? Yes. Yes, it is. But if this dumb, risky plan of mine can save lives, what kind of officer would I be if I didn’t take the opportunity? I gave an oath when I got this badge. I have an obligation to protect the citizens of Zootopia.”

Finnick raised a single eyebrow. “Is that right? And what, exactly, do you consider your obligation to Wilde?”

Judy drew back. “I don’t—I mean, of course I have to keep him in mind. I do keep him in mind.”

“Uh-huh,” said Finnick. “Face it. You can preach from your soapbox about police responsibility all day, but when it comes to sharing your life with a mate you haven’t got a clue. If he hadn’t brought it on himself, I’d pity Wilde for what you’re about to put him through.”

It was a direct hit, as Finnick had meant it to be. Judy rocked back on her heels, her paw falling away from the bat. She struggled to think of a fitting comeback, but all she could manage was a pithy, “I love Nick.”

Finnick did not look impressed.

A bell jangled as a zebra exited the diner. When he spotted them standing there he held the door open with a cheery, “Morning!”

Finnick grunted in response and ducked inside.

The striped animal smiled awkwardly at Judy. “Going in?”

Collecting herself as best she could, Judy thanked the zebra and entered.

Inside, the restaurant was buzzing with a drowsy kind of morning chaos. Sleepy-eyed herd animals occupied nearly every table, with families of field mice and gophers safely ensconced in smaller corner booths. Orders were shouted, colts whinnied to their parents for more sugar cubes, and there
was the constant sound of clinking silverware and the scrape of hooves against the linoleum floor. The whole place smelled like crisp apples and strong, dark coffee. A chalkboard behind the checkout desk announced the morning’s special: Extra large oatcakes topped with cinnamon apple compote and served with a side of freshly baked hay. And for the rodents: fresh fruit and wildflower seeds.

Finnick had grabbed himself one of the few empty tables left and had already caught the attention of a waiter. It was on the opposite side of the diner from where Harper was sitting, but Judy noticed that there was a clear sightline between them. Dare she interpret this as his own form of compromise?

Some of her anger eased. At least enough that she was able to genuinely smile as she joined Harper.

“Everything okay?” asked the other bunny. “You two looked like you were arguing outside.”

“Just a small disagreement,” said Judy.

“Is that why your partner is sitting all the way over there?”

“Oh, he’s not my partner,” said Judy. And then, because she knew he could hear her and it would irritate him, she added, “He’s just my ride for the day.”

“I thought he looked a bit short,” said Harper, to Judy’s delight. The journalist shot her a wink. With exaggerated seriousness she went on, “You know, if you’re looking for a good ewebur driver, I know a sheep…”

Finnick growled a few choice words that, even over the cacophony of the diner, their sensitive bunny ears picked up easily.

Judy and Harper laughed.

An elk waitress stopped by to refill Harper’s cup and take Judy’s order. Judy asked for coffee, extra hot, and oatcakes with fruit.

By the time the waitress left, Judy was finally feeling warm enough to remove some of her layers. She pulled off her heavy winter coat and slung it over the back of her chair, followed by her scarf and topmost sweater. When the elk returned with her order, Judy huddled around her coffee mug, letting the heat of the ceramic warm her paws and breathing in the hot steam.

“Tundratown?” guessed Harper, her expression sympathetic. “I usually wind up trading my assignments there with a snowshoe hare I know. Was it for work?”

“More like… work adjacent,” said Judy.

“An intriguing use of semantics,” said Harper, but her expression said she wasn’t particularly interested, and she didn’t ask about it any further. Her nose kept twitching in a way that was decidedly antsy. She fiddled with the silverware in front of her. She had already unrolled and shredded her napkin. She was wearing what Judy found herself terming Harper’s Investigative Journalist Outfit. Practical, nondescript shirt and pants. No jewelry or accessories besides a small gray backpack that she had tucked against her on the seat, one arm still curled through one of the straps like she was afraid someone might try and snatch it from her. Combined with the fact that she was a gray bunny, one of the most common colors of one of the most prolific species in Zootopia—who also happened to be small and quick and generally overlooked—she couldn’t have blended in any better had she been, in actuality, invisible.
“I’m finding that with this job, the line between work and personal life often gets tangled together,” said Judy.

“Isn’t that the truth.” Harper huffed a laugh. “I feel like we should be having this conversation in a bar instead.”

“I don’t think morning drinking on the clock would go over well with either of our bosses,” said Judy, adding after a pause, “As much as I could use a drink right now.”

Had Nick found the kits yet? Were they all safe? Judy checked her phone, but there were no new messages.

Harper’s lips quirked. “Are we a mess and half right now or what?”

They were. They were also stalling, and they both knew it.

A spoon went clattering off a nearby table and a brown spotted calf started to cry. Harper watched the parents attempt to soothe it with uncaring eyes.

It was time to bite the bullet. Taking a fortifying sip of coffee, Judy said, “Any news on Iggy?”

Like that, the tough facade crumbled. Harper slumped in her seat, ears drooping. “Nothing. Not even a hint of anything. I’ve been turning myself inside out trying to solve this, and it’s not like I’m some green-horned reporter, you know? I’ve been doing this job for ten years, and I am good at it. One of the best. But there’s nothing to find. Iggy had no enemies, no debts, legal or otherwise. So why did someone murder him? It makes no sense.”

Unfortunately, not all murders were done for logical reasons, something Harper was no doubt already aware of, even if she didn’t want to admit it. For all they knew, it was Iggy’s very friendliness and generosity that had gotten him killed. All it would have taken was trying to help one wrong animal at the wrong time for a tragedy to occur. It would explain why there was no motive or evidence of theft. Unfortunately, it also made the likelihood of finding out who did it nearly impossible unless the culprit decided to come forward themselves, and Judy could count on one paw the number of times that had happened in the ZPD’s history.

“Please tell me you’ve found something,” said Harper.

“I’m sorry,” said Judy. “I called Howle again on my way here, just in case, but there’s nothing.”

“What about this serial case you’re working on then? Any chance it’s connected to what happened to Iggy?”

“How did you know I was working on a case like that?” asked Judy. “We haven’t even done a press release on it yet.”

“I told you,” said Harper. “I’m good at my job.”

Judy had to agree that she was, to an unnerving degree.

“I hope you’re not planning on publishing any articles about it yet,” she told her. “I’m not sure how much you know, but if certain things get out it could put many civilians in danger.”

“And others might be in danger if I don’t,” Harper pointed out. “Don’t worry,” she said when Judy looked at her in alarm. “I’m not planning on writing anything up on it right now. Iggy has my full priority. Besides,” she held up her mug towards Judy in a mocking toast. “you’re the first cop I’ve
managed to get on good terms with. I’d like to not ruin that if at all possible.”

“The ZPD appreciates your understanding,” managed Judy.

“I’m sure.”

Harper finished off the last of her coffee and set the mug down with a decisive \textit{thunk}. “So, in the spirit of sharing, \textit{is} Iggy involved in this serial predator case of yours?”

“I don’t see how he could be,” answered Judy honestly. “Unless… forgive me for prying, but you never did say what you relationship with him was. Were you two ever involved romantically?”

“Iggy and I? \textit{Gah}, what a question!” Harper shook her head. “He was like an uncle to me. Or an annoying teacher.”

“And Iggy? Are you sure he didn’t harbor any deeper feelings for you?”

Harper made a face. “I can’t imagine it. Iggy was always terrible at hiding his emotions anyway, and he could never keep anything from me.”

“You said before that you two had a hurtful falling out.”

“Yeah, because I didn’t want to be a \textit{grocer} like him,” said Harper.

Their waitress came by and refilled Harper’s drink. Judy used the moment to stuff a couple bites of oatcake into her mouth.

When the elk left, Harper pulled the mug back towards her but didn’t drink. “I came here from the Burrows too,” she said. “I escaped from a giant family that never missed me unless the carrots needed to be harvested or the soil tilled or the barn painted. They considered early frost a big news week, and the only unsolved mysteries were about things like which Sinclair kit had tipped over Mrs. Moo-shin while she was enjoying her daily afternoon nap in the hay field. Like you, I wanted more in my life.”

“So you came to Zootopia.”

Harper nodded. “Where my naive self was promptly fleeced, rejected, and stomped on within the week. Seriously, a moose stepped on my foot. I permanently lost three claws. If not for Iggy finding me and taking me in, I would have woken up one morning in a hotel bathtub full of ice missing a foot, or worse.”

“What’s worse than Underground rabbit feet collectors?” laughed Judy.

“I might have caved and gone back home,” answered Harper seriously. “To live a life of apple picking and kit-sitting.” She shuddered. Just thinking about it makes me feel panicky.”

“But Iggy found you,” filled in Judy. “And… hired you to work for him?”

“Pretty much. It was an excuse for his charity. He did it all the time—take animals in under the guise that they were doing \textit{him} the favor. Of course, coming from a farm I knew my produce. And I was thankful enough to work hard. And I genuinely adored the old chinchilla. And I guess… it makes sense that he would think I wanted to stay there.”

“What happened?”

Harper squirmed in her seat. “He offered me a job. A real one. Partners, if you can believe it.”
“That was generous of him,” said Judy.

“It was dumb,” snapped Harper. “Just because I could tell an apple from an orange, I was still young and stupid about everything else. How he could even think of offering me something like that…”

“You said no then?”

Harper shook her head. “It wasn’t anything close to as mature as that. It hit me then that I was falling into a different version of the same life I’d had back on the farm. A better one, to be sure, with more money and respect and animals who genuinely cared about me, but still. Boxing carrots is boxing carrots. I freaked out. I said so many horrible things to him… about how horrible it was to be a grocer. How I wasn’t going to waste my life like he was…”

“You were young,” tried Judy.

“I was awful,” said Harper. “Age is no excuse. I hurt him because I couldn’t deal with my own issues. It’s the biggest regret of my life.” She looked at Judy. “That’s why I have to solve this. It’s all I can do for him now.”

“We’ll figure it out,” said Judy, but inwardly she wondered if she believed that herself.

“Yeah,” said Harper, but she sound tired.

Judy ate her now-cold breakfast while Harper polished off her second and then third cup of coffee. By the time Judy set down her fork, Harper was vibrating with anxious energy: tapping the table, twirling her cup, chewing the silverware.

“I’ll get the check,” offered Judy.

“No, I got it,” said Harper. “You’re the one doing me the favor. If you hear anything…”

“I’ll call you,” assured Judy.

Harper nodded. She adjusted her backpack and Judy collected her coat and other shedded layers. Then together they made their way to the checkout counter up front. Finnick saw them and followed.

Outside the sun was climbing higher in the sky. It was warm, but the wind blowing in from the north over Tundratown’s climate wall put a chill in the air. Finnick cursed and put the hood of his sweater up.

“Where are you off to now?” Judy asked Harper.

“Freddy’s. The jackal who gave Iggy’s eulogy. I promised I would help him sort through Iggy’s things. Of course he left everyone he knew something. His textbooks alone are going to take several hours to go through.”

“That’s right. He was enrolled at Z.U., wasn’t he?”

“Yeah.” Harper looked at her. “Is that relevant, do you think?”

“I don’t know,” said Judy. It could be coincidence, like Nick said. But she couldn’t shake the feeling… “Possibly. Maybe if we look into the exact class we might find something.”

“Leave it to me,” said Harper. “I know a goat in admin who owes me. I can have it to you by
“Really?” said Judy. “In that case, do you think you could look up the classes for a couple other animals too?”

“Consider it done.”

“Great.”

Harper pulled a notepad from her backpack and Judy gave her the names. As Harper checked the spelling, Judy looked up and spotted a familiar form across the street. Giant and fuzzy and brown, walking hunched as he spoke with the echidna at his side. Judy recognized the gold-tipped spikes, the lyrical voice that carried even across traffic.

Not again.

With a hasty goodbye to Harper, Judy took off after them. Finnick followed, but his little legs and heavy bat made keeping up impossible, and she lost him as she ducked into the street, dodging tires and jumping hoods in her haste to get across. That was okay. She didn’t need backup for this.

“Help a bear out here, honeybee,” Little John was saying. “We can’t keep making these little trips for you without some idea of where to look. It’s risky for us too, you understand.”

“I already told you,” snapped the echidna. “He put it in his desk drawer. I’m positive.”

“Well Robin’s searched the whole room and didn’t find anything, so it must have been moved. Come on, think. You’ve been in that office how many times now? Is there nowhere else? A hidden safe, perhaps?”

“Like he would reveal something like that while I was there? Please.”

“Something I can help with?” asked Judy.

The echidna yelped and spun as if poked with one of her own quills. She looked Judy up and down, taking in her winter dress and windblown state. “Who are you?”

“We met outside that bar the other week,” said Judy. “In a similar situation you could say.”

Little John’s sigh gusted over her ears. “It’s not like that, cops—“ At Judy’s warning look, he amended, “Officer Hopps. This is business, and not the funny kind. Isn’t it, Selene? You want me around, right?”

“I’d rather you be somewhere else, doing your job,” snapped Selene. With a wary look at Judy, she said, “I’m leaving. Don’t call me unless you’ve found something.”

“Divas,” said Little John to Judy. “So quick to sting, aren’t they?”

“What business are you two involved in?” asked Judy. “She wanted nothing to do with you last time. Now you’re working together?”

“Technically, she’s working with Robin. I’m just a helpful intermediary.”

“Working on what? I heard you mention hidden safes and searching offices. It almost sounds like you’re trying to steal something from someone.”

“Steal! As if I would ever be part of something so barbaric. Get it? Bar-bear-ic?”
Judy folded her arms. “So what are you doing then?”

“See, this is why cops are so unlikeable. No sense of humor.”

Judy tapped her foot and waited.

“Don’t give me that look,” said Little John. “I’m not at liberty to say, okay? Client confidentiality and all. If you really want to get nosey about it, you’ll have to talk to our lawyer.”

“Lawyer?”

“Yeah. You remember Will? The grouchy caracal who also has no sense of humor.”

Judy remembered. He was also the reason Marian and her brothers had gotten off with such light sentences after their own brief tango with the law. Watching him in court had been both impressive and intimidating. Whatever Robin was up to, he wasn’t fooling around.

Nick was going to be beside himself when she told him.

“Is that to get me to talk?” asked Little John, and Judy turned to see that Finnick had finally caught up to him, bat in paw.

“I’d rather use it to make you shut up,” said the small fox.

The bear’s eyebrows flew up, then he laughed. “Well, no need to tell me twice. Consider me gone.”

He looked at Judy and winked. “Tell that partner of yours hello for me. Hope he’s keeping his nose clean.”

Judy thought she could say the same for him.

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Reynard’s directions led Nick deep into the heart of the warehouse district. Not even with Tibor had he ventured in this far. Nick didn’t know why he was surprised. The way his week was going, of course the kits would be in a place like this.

The streets were deserted, though it was well into the afternoon and time for the lunch hour rush. Down certain dead-end streets, he could actually catch glimpses of the border that made up the official boundary between the city of Zootopia and the Wildlands that lay beyond. It was on one of these streets that he eventually parked. It was as close to the actual location as he dared to get and as hidden a parking spot as he could manage. Coming in the cruiser was probably not the smartest move, but he hadn’t had time to swap it out for another vehicle and really, even a civilian’s car would only have been so safe. He’d just have to risk it and hope the cruiser wasn’t spotted while he was gone.

The rest of the way he made on foot. As he went, he text both Reynard and Judy to let them know he was on his way.

Judy’s reply was almost immediate: Please be careful.

Reynard’s took longer and was far less touching: Took you long enough. Meet me around back in five.

Nick reached the end of the block and hung a right, taking the back way behind the buildings and leaving the sidewalk behind. Here there was only dirt and the occasional sprig of grass. And to his left, Zootopia’s border.
Nick could count on one paw the number of times in his whole life he had seen it in person. Once, when he was a kit and his mother had gotten turned around while taking him to a fair out in the middle of the Meadowlands. A second time on a dare when he was a young teen. And then once more, after his mother had passed.

Nick couldn’t remember now how he had gotten out there, or what had made him think of going in the first place. His memory was so hazy he sometimes wondered if the whole incident hadn’t just been some kind of waking dream cooked up by too much grief, stress and lack of sleep. But he remembered that moment of standing there, how angry and reckless he’d felt, and how overwhelming the urge had been to just… go. To say good riddance to the city, its laws, and its two-faced animals with their stupid justifications for not helping a fox in need.

Nick stopped, took a breath and let it out. This was not the time or place to reminisce on past resentments.

He refocused his attention back on the border. It struck him every time, how unimpressive the boundary was in comparison to the towering, high-tech climate wall that held the districts of Zootopia together. The border wall was barely taller than an elephant, and made from mismatched bits of stone, as if whoever had built it had been in a rush and simply grabbed whatever they could find. It reminded Nick of the crumbling ruins Robin Swift called a home. It was the same type of stonework, and had the same vibe that the construction you were seeing was only half functional structure, half defunct relic.

Here and there you could see places where stones had fallen away, leaving gaping holes in its face. To the south and west there were whole sections where the border had crumbled. Every few miles signs were posted: Warning — no authority beyond this point. Proceed at your own risk.

Of course, animals still went over. Teenagers especially. The curiosity of what lay beyond was just too much for some of them.

Nick paused and reached out to touch one of the stones. It wobbled in it’s place like a loose tooth. Claw marks scarred its surface where some animal had climbed up. Nick knew several who had gone over, and besides one wombat who was known for his tall tales, everyone else had reported seeing the same thing during their explorations: nothing. Just empty wilderness. It turned out their social studies teachers were right. The last of the animals had moved into the metropolises or died out decades ago. Still, that didn’t stop animals from telling stories around campfires and during sleepovers about the monstrous creatures that still prowled these endless woods, looking for those foolish enough to enter their territory.

And it wasn’t just young cubs making up tales. The top grossing film last year had been about a family of deer that had decided to go off-grid and moved out into the Wildlands, only to be met with terror and death. Finnick had gone on about it for weeks, claiming it was a conspiracy cooked up by Zootopia’s government to scare those who might be thinking about leaving.

Nick thought that might have been giving too much credit to a movie whose main tag line was now it’s nature’s turn to “get back.”

Nick tipped his head up. From here he could just make out the tops of the trees that lay beyond, catch a whiff of air that wasn’t filtered for pollution or tempered to a specific degree and humidity level. Empty wilderness or not, he couldn’t deny that there was something about the Wildlands that called to an animal. It was both undeniable and unnerving. An unpleasant sensation that came deep from your gut, as if all of your most primal feelings and desires were stirring awake one by one. And it made Nick wonder… if the danger in going out there wasn’t because of what you might find peeking out at you from behind a tree, but from within your own heart.
Turning away sharply, Nick continued on down the street. He was being ridiculous. The only thing the Wildlands was capable of stirring up was a fox’s overactive imagination.

Still, he breathed easier when he turned up another side street and the border vanished from sight behind him.

He didn’t stop again until he reached his final destination. It was a warehouse, of course. And like the rest of the area, the place appeared to be completely deserted.

Nick made his way around, looking for a way in. There were a few bay doors around back, but they were all padlocked shut. The walls were painted that particular shade of white that lasted for years and could blind you if you looked at it in direct sunlight. Weeds grew in abundance along the sidewalk edges and in the rain gutters that lined the roof. The windows were all barred, and caked so thick with dirt that it was impossible to see in. Scraps of old advertising litter blew around like tumbleweeds.

He found nothing of interest until he rounding the west side of the building. There Nick spotted a small, intricately designed NO painted in red about three feet above his head. Oddly, it was the only graffiti he saw on the entire building. He didn’t recognize the tag. A new group perhaps?

From around the corner came the hollow rumble of a metal door being forced open and Nick peered around. In the middle of all that blinding white, Reynard squinted out at him from a gash of darkness. When he spotted Nick, he flapped a paw at him in a hurry up gesture, gaze darting around as if fearing spies. Nick rolled his eyes but gamely trotted over. As he joined the fox at the door, he asked, “Where’s Craven?”

“Inside,” said Reynard.

Nick wasn’t sure if that was an answer or an order, but he ducked past him anyway.

On the wall next to the door, he noticed another tag. The same NO symbol as the one he’d seen outside.

“What’s with this?” Nick asked, tapping on it with a claw.

Reynard shrugged. “I think it’s their brand. It’s all over the place here.”

“What does it stand for?”

“I have no idea,” said Reynard. “Does it matter? It could stand for ‘nattering otters’ for all I care. I just want to get Craven and get out of here.”

Nick glanced back outside, taking in the warehouses across the street.

“*Now* what are you looking at?” asked Reynard.

“There’s graffiti on the other buildings.”

“So?”

“So that means it’s not for lack of pack activity that there’s no graffiti here,” said Nick. “It means they know better than to mess with this place.”

“You’d leave this place alone too if you knew what was going on in here,” said Reynard with a shiver.
Nick looked around. The warehouse was empty. Perfect silence filled the space, broken only by the occasional gust of wind. Weak sunlight filtered in through the grubby windows, illuminating the dust that drifted through its beams and making it sparkle like glitter.

“You’re right. This place is terrifying,” said Nick.

By the Reynard’s face, he didn’t appreciate the sarcasm. “Follow me.”

He led Nick to a back office. The floor here was carpeted in bits of paper that had been stomped into a pulp by heavy foot traffic. The only furniture in the room was a desk made from cheap particle board and a large metal filing cabinet that had been tipped over and lay face up on the floor.

“Here,” said Reynard.

Nick stared at him. What did the kit mean, here? There was no one in here. No place to go. Certainly no Craven hiding in a corner anywhere. He felt his temper start to fray. Had he left Judy alone for this? “Kit, if this is some kind of bad joke…”

“It’s not a joke.” Reynard reached over and felt around the edge of the filing cabinet, looking for a claw-hold. Nick could only shake his head at him. Did he actually think he could lift the thing? It was 20 feet long and had to weigh over 500 pounds. He’d need an elephant to help him right it. Maybe two.

“Now you’re just stalling.”

“Just give me a second. Ah, here.” He dug his claws into a small niche in the side of the cabinet, invisible if you didn’t know to look for it. Nick heard a faint click. The top of the cabinet popped open. Reynard slid the whole thing back on silent hinges, revealing a hollow interior with a massive set of stairs leading down.

What the…

“Hear that?” Reynard asked.

Nick did hear it. Sounds were echoing up the stairwell. Yells, jeering, screeches of pain. The snarling of jungle cats. The howling of wolves. But this wasn’t the companionable howls Nick liked to make fun of. This was howling of a hunt. It sent chills down Nick’s spine.

He looked over at Reynard. The fox’s chin was set, but terror was banked in his eyes. In that moment, he truly looked like a kit, a scared and unsure one who was desperate for help.

Which is the only reason why Nick didn’t swat him when Reynard abruptly collected himself, stepped back from the staircase, and with a grand flourish of his paw said to him, “Age before beauty.”

Nick descended the first step. Then the next, and the next. Reynard trailed behind. Occasionally, Nick would spare a glance back at him. The fur on his neck was bristled, his shoulders hunched in a defensive posture, but he never turned back or lagged behind. Nick had to give him credit for that. His own instincts were screaming at him to run away before it was too late, a feeling that only got stronger the farther down they went. The sounds grew steadily louder, haunting yowls that echoed through the stairwell. Light flickered, illuminating the walls like a growing fire, shadows dancing in the flames: snapping fangs, slashing claws. Nick had to resist the urge to shrink away from the walls.
And then, between one step and the next, the view opened up, and Nick forgot about running. Forgot everything in the face of the chaos laid out before him.

The room was large, easily twice as big as the actual warehouse above, and with a ceiling tall enough to fit a giraffe if one could make it down the stairs. The walls were roughly dug. Some burrowing creature must have spent months digging it all out. Giant pens were set up around the room, around which animals swarmed in a great crush, shouting threats and encouragement with equal passion, fists pumping, feet stomping. The air smelled like sweat and blood and the musk of too many animals trying to claim alpha status. For the first time since he’d left Judy back at the hotel, Nick was grateful to be without his partner. She would’ve appreciate the sentiment, but just the thought of having to watch his bunny dive headlong into this crowd gave him heart palpitations.

There was a pen set up next to the staircase and Nick found himself leaning over to see. Inside, a weasel and a young cougar circled each other. But this was not a typical fighting match: both animals were on all fours, claws out, teeth bared. Tension hummed in the air, imminent violence not just a threat, but a promise.

The weasel dove for the cougar first, dodging a swipe from the cat’s giant paw and managing to scramble up onto the feline’s back. The cougar tried to shake him off, but the weasel clung tight, scurrying up to claw at the cat’s face, aiming for its nose and eyes, any vulnerable bit it could reach.

The cougar snarled, whipping its head around and biting down on the weasel’s tail. He flung the weasel off him where he slammed against the side of the pen.

In the next instant, the cat was pouncing. There was a shriek of alarm, then the unmistakable sound of snapping bone. Cheers and boos went up. The cheers outnumbered the boos by far.

When the cougar stepped away, Nick saw the weasel lying prone on his back, claws still curled to scratch, his eyes wide and startled. His chest heaved with deep, rapid breaths and Nick felt a moment of relief that the animal still lived. The cougar climbed out of the pen where he was greeted with hearty backslaps and playful shoving, the crowd swallowing him up in seconds. No one went to the weasel, who continued to lie there, not even attempting to pick himself up.

That was when Nick noticed something deeply wrong about the way he was positioned, the angle too sharp even for a natural contortionist like a weasel, and Nick’s stomach gave a sickening lurch as he realized.

He rounded on Reynard. “Explain this place. Now.”

“What does it look like?” the fox snapped, but his chin was trembling as his gaze darted around the room. “It’s an underground fighting ring. That big-toothed jerk runs it.”

“Who?”

“The walrus you saw at the bar. Clive Kulovic. He pits animals against each other for sport. And money,” added Reynard. “Lots of money.”

Nick looked around at all the pens, counting them up. “Where does he get so many fighters?”

“A lot of them are sickos just like him,” said Reynard. “They like doing this stuff. But some of them… some of them just need money. Really, really badly.”

“Is that why Craven came here?” asked Nick. “I thought the restaurant was doing well. Are you
guys having money problems?”

Reynard’s expression turned dark. “No. My idiot brother chose to come here.”

“For what?”

Reynard’s tone was mocking. “For training.”

What did that mean? Nick looked around at the pens again. He didn’t see any foxes. Most of the fighters were bigger predators: wolves, hyenas, leopards. Unless Craven had developed some serious fighting skills, he wouldn’t last a minute in a one-on-one fight against any of them.

From somewhere in the room came a wrenching cry of pain, cut off so abruptly Nick’s insides twisted. He yanked out his phone. “This is insanity. I’m calling the station right now and bringing this whole place down.”

Quick as a bunny, Reynard leapt towards him. He grabbed Nick’s wrist, covering the phone with his paw. “You can’t!”

“Why the heck not?”

“Because what they’re doing is not, technically, illegal.”

“What are you talking about?” said Nick. “Everything about this place is illegal.”

“Only in Zootopia,” said Reynard.

“Which is where we are! Look, I’ve studied enough cases of unsanctioned burrowing to know that Zootopia law still applies no matter how far down you dig. That precedent was set over fifty years ago when some gopher committed murder almost four miles down.”

“We haven’t just traveled down though,” said Reynard.

“What are you talking about?”

The fox glanced up, as if he could see through the ceiling of rocks and dirt all the way back to the surface above. “You saw how close the warehouse was to the boundary, right? I think we’re about… twenty yards out?”

“Out,” repeated Nick. “You mean… out in the Wildlands?”

Reynard nodded.

Nick felt his blood turn to ice.

“Do you get it now?” said Reynard. “We’re out of your jurisdiction, officer. Nothing that happens here can be charged in Zootopia’s court. I looked it up in one of Uncle Will’s law books. It was the first thing I thought of when I started looking for a way to get Craven out of this. If you bring your buddies down here, the only thing anyone can be charged for is use of an illegal tunnel system. That’s a $300 fine maximum. They’ll be back out on the street within the day. And as we’ve been standing here oh-so-casually, we’ve been made by at least five of Clive’s thugs that I’ve noticed. Cops come, they’ll know who brought them, and who do you think they’ll come after once they get out of jail? Not just you and me, but Marian and Todd and Robin and Judy. We’ll all be targets. Not to mention, by the time backup gets here Craven’s fight will be over and it will all be pointless anyway.”
Nick cursed and pulled away from him. He stomped up several steps, cursed again and stomped back down. Reynard watched him with that stubborn chin and those terrified eyes. Scared of this place. Scared for his brother and family. Scared of Nick.

“Why did you even call me for something like this?” Nick demanded. “Why not Robin instead?”

“I did try to call him,” said Reynard. “But he’s out on a job right now and his phone’s turned off. I didn’t have time to wait for him to get back to me.”

“Must be in one heck of a meeting,” snarked Nick, but his mind wasn’t on the MIA fox. He was trying his hardest to figure out how he was going to get them all out of this alive. He felt beyond ill-equipped. One unarmed fox against a room full of blood-crazed predators to whom the law did not apply? It was suicide. There was no way. If he had any smarts at all, he’s drag Reynard back up the stairs right now and consider it a successful rescue of two.

As for Craven… well… he’s the one who had gotten himself into this mess. Was Nick really supposed to get himself and a civilian killed trying to rescue him?

A hesitant paw closed over his own and squeezed tight.

“Please,” whispered Reynard. “Please help me save my brother.”

Nick cursed again. He closed his eyes, trying to block out that pleading face, but he could still feel his paw clutching at him, silently begging him.

Nick clenched his jaw, already regretting.

“You are going to listen to everything I tell you,” he said to the kit, biting out each word. “You are not going to do anything without my express permission. Stay behind me at all times. Don’t speak. Don’t even make eye contact if you can help it. Got it?”

Reynard beamed. “I got it. Thank you, Nick.”

“Don’t thank me. Odds are I’m about to lead us both to our deaths.”

The kit actually had nerve to laugh at that, as if Nick had just told an amusing joke. He clapped Nick on the shoulder. “Let’s do this!” And bounding down the rest of the stairs, he shot off into the crowd, calling back to Nick, “He’s over this way!”

_We are so dead_, thought Nick. _This is me, heading off to my death_. Judy was going to move on and marry Cottonbutt and they were going to have 35.5 kits together and each one was going to have a frozen dinner designed after them by daddy dearest. And then twenty years from now Judy was going to become the first bunny chief of the ZPD and Nick wasn’t even going to be able to see it —gah!

Nick ducked as a bear turned around suddenly and almost clotheslined him with one giant, furry arm. Reynard was just a red blur ahead of him, shoving aside whoever he was able and dodging around the rest, leaving a mass of hissing, growling animals in his wake. Nick followed after him, mumbling apologies as he went. As this rate, the kit was going to get them killed before they even reached Craven.

He looked over and spotted a rhino who was standing over to the side of the room. By his formal stance and the way his gaze was sweeping the crowd, Nick pegged him as one of the Walrus’s enforced that Reynard had mentioned. A little red and gold NO pin was clipped to the collar of his shirt.
As Nick watched, his gaze swung back around and their eyes met. The rhino smirked at him in a way that said he was well aware of who Nick was, and then, to compound the stress to Nick nerves, he looked away, as if Nick wasn’t even a threat worth watching.

Nick’s confidence sunk even further.

He continued on after Reynard. The kit didn’t stop until he reached the very last pen in the farthest corner of the room. An equally boisterous group of animals were gathered here, arguing over bets.

Reynard shoved aside a mink in his haste to get to the front. The mink hissed and bared her fangs at him. Nick took a pointed stepped between them and shot her a hard look. She backed down then.

Nick tried to not show how relieved he felt.

Craven was crouched in the corner of the pen. Nick didn’t see his opponent anywhere. The fox’s eyes were closed and he appeared to be doing some kind of deep-breathing exercise.

Reynard reached through the chicken wire and smacked the back of his brother’s head.

Craven whirled around with a snarl, ears flat back, claws extended. When he saw who it was, his mood did not improve. “Reynard? What are you still doing here? I told you to go home.”

“And leave you to die of idiocy?” said his brother. “Won’t that look good on your tombstone: here lies an idiot.”

“I am not having this argument with you again. This is my decision, and I’ve decided that I’ll—“

“Get out of there now,” Nick finished for him. “Great decision. Let’s go.”

Craven’s eyes went wide at the appearance of Nick there. He turned back to his brother with a growl. “You brought him here? Seriously?”

Reynard lifted his chin. “I did. It turns out your stupidity is too much for one fox to handle alone.”

“Why didn’t you just go all the way and tattle on me to Marian too?”

“Because unlike you, I care about hurting our sister.”

Craven flinched. “I’m doing this to protect her. To protect all of us.”

“You can’t protect anyone if you’re dead.”

“I’m not going to—“

“Kits,” said Nick. “This is the wrong time for an argument. Craven, get out of there. Now.”

“I’m sorry,” said Craven, shaking his head. “But you don’t understand…”

“You’re welcome to explain it to me on the way home. Now, out.”

A cheetah appeared from the crowd then. She stepped up to the pen and reached out, raking her claws over the wire so it screeched and sparked, grabbing the attention of all the animals in the vicinity. When everyone had quieted down she announced, “The fight will now commence! Combatants, to your corners!”

Reynard snarled at her. “No way. The fight’s off.”
“I don’t think so,” said the mink. “I’ve already put good money into this.” She gave Craven a dismissive once-over and smirked, adding, “Easiest cash I’ll ever make.”

The chicken wire was suddenly yanked downwards. One fat, stumpy leg stepped into the ring, followed by the thick, bulging belly of a full grown male hippo. When he let go of the chicken wire, it sprang back up into place behind him, solid as ever. He looked over at Craven and grinned, revealing long, curved tusks that looked abnormally sharp.

“Ready to rumble, kit?” he asked, in a deep, guttural voice that sounded like he was gargling with rocks.

Craven looked more ready to lose his breakfast. But he managed a curt nod all the same.

Reynard was still arguing with the cheetah. “You’ve get to be kidding me! This was supposed to be the amateur fighter pen!”

“Broney is an amateur fighter,” cackled a hyena. “An amateur hippo fighter.”

“Please get Reynard out of here,” Craven whispered to Nick. “I don’t want him to see this.”

“He won’t,” said Nick. “Because I’m not letting you do this.” It was time to end this craziness. Grabbing hold of the chicken wire, Nick climbed up, dropping over to land in the pen next to Craven. He grabbed the fox by the arm. “We’re leaving. Now.”

“But—“

Unfair!” howled a wolf from the hippo’s side of the pen. “This is supposed to be a one-on-one fight.”

“Butt out, Balto!” Reynard snapped. “As if that lumbering pachyderm you bet on is really outnumbered by two little foxes.”

The pen rattled. The next thing Nick knew, a honey badger had joined the hippo.

“There,” it cackled in a screechy voice. “Now it’s even.”

“Oh no, you don’t,” said Reynard, and ignoring Nick’s shout for him to stay put, he clambered into the pen and took up the spot next to his brother.

From somewhere in the crowd someone yelled out, “Survival of the fittest!”

Chaos erupted.

Animals rushed the pen, pouring into it en masse from every direction. The chicken wire rattled and bulged under the weight of so many bodies before, with a shriek of tearing metal, it gave way completely, and the pen was engulfed in a crush of stomping, leaping, and clawing creatures. Nick shoved the kits behind him in a futile effort of protection, but the attacks were coming from too many directions. The cheetah took a running swipe at the hippo, the honey badger dove for the mink. Nick tackled Reynard to the floor just before a warthog could hook the kit through the ribs with a sharpened tusk.

“Where’s the nearest exit?” he hollered at Craven.

“Stairs! It’s the only way out.”

Was he kidding? “What kind of death trap design is that?”
Reynard, who was still pinned under Nick, said, “I don’t think they were worried about safety regulations when they created the place.”

Well Nick had a feeling they were going to be worried about it now. The fight was spreading through the room like wildfire, with animals either jumping into the fray or making a run for it. And here Nick and the kits were, literally cornered. Even if it was possible to get across the room unscathed, how were they supposed to not get crushed in the stampede going up the stairs?

A wolverine dove for Craven, wild-eyed and foaming at the mouth. The impact sent the two of them rolling, both scrabbling to pin the other, with the wolverine taking giant, snapping bites at Craven’s throat. Nick leapt off of Reynard, grabbed the wolverine by the scruff and hauled him off. The wolverine lost his balance and tumbled backwards into a hyena, who immediately turned to engage him.

Nick pulled Craven up. “You okay?”

“Yeah.”

Reynard pointed to Craven’s upper arms, where the fur was dark and wet. “You’re bleeding.”

“It’s just some scratches. I’m fine.”

Nick had no choice but to take him at his word. It wasn’t like he could do anything about it now anyway.

“It’s too dangerous to try and make a break for it,” he told the kits. “We need to find somewhere safe to lie low until the fighting dies down.”

“Yeah, but where?” said Reynard.

Craven’s expression pinched as he tried to recall somewhere. Nick looked round the room, trying to spot a place through all the fighting going on around them.

That’s when he spotted the rhino from earlier. The giant horned thug was stomping through the room with deadly purpose, his beady eyes narrowed into furious slits. Those that weren’t quick enough to get out of his way were prompted to do so with a violent prod of his horn. His little NO pin was askew on his shirt, which looked to have been clawed at by at least three separate animals. For the second time that day, His he turned his head and met Nick’s gaze through the crowd, but this time, Nick had his full attention.

Figures, thought Nick as the rhino starting making directly for them. He turned to Reynard and Craven. “Looks like we’re going to have to go with plan B.”

“What’s plan B?” asked Craven.

“I’m working on it. How fast can you two run?”

The kits exchanged glances.

“Why?” asked Reynard.

Nick pointed. “Because you’re going to follow that rhino.”

More glances were exchanged. “And you? What will you be doing?”

Nick forced a smile he didn’t feel and answered, “Running.”
The rhino was closing in. Nick could feel the vibration of his steps through the floor like thunder. Reynard and Craven still looked unconvinced.

That made three of them.

“Just do as I say, okay?” said Nick. “I mean it, Reynard. No matter what, make sure you follow that rhino. I’ll meet you at the top.” He hoped.

The rhino was almost on top of them now. He had to go.

With one last look at the kits, Nick turned his attention to the far side of the room. Picking the clearest path he could find, he took off at a sprint. As he’d hoped, the rhino changed direction and followed him. He didn’t so much as spare the kits a glance.

“Out of my way!” Nick shouted. “Move it or lose it, you furry psychopaths! Fox in a hurry coming through!”

Heads turned. And while there was nothing intimidating about seeing a fox running towards you, the charging rhino behind the fox was enough to make animals stop chewing on each other long enough to get out of the way. It was like he had a bomb tied to his tail. No one wanted to be the one he crashed into.

Nick chanced a look back. Behind a truly furious rhino he spotted the kits. For once they had listened to him and were keeping pace behind the rhino, their way clear in his thunderous wake. Reynard even had the nerve to grin and flash Nick a thumbs up between the rhino’s legs.

Okay, thought Nick. Time for phase two.

He made for the stairs.

For the first few steps, it looked like the plan would work. A few shouted words from Nick and animals were rushing to get out of the way. He began planning what he would do once he reached the top, how he would evade the rhino long enough to regroup with the kits and make it back to the cruiser, all without being gored or trampled on in the process.

Nick was about halfway up the staircase before he realized he had other problems. He had made a grave miscalculation, one that was becoming increasingly more apparent the farther up he went. Everyone who saw the rhino coming were doing their best to get out of the way, but on a staircase the only escape was upwards, and they could only go so far before catching up with those in front of them, who were, in turn, equally desperate to escape and equally hindered by the crowd ahead. This created a bottleneck about two steps before Nick realized what was going to happen, and he had just enough time to thoroughly curse his stupidity before coming to a standstill on the steps, a wall of panicking animals all scrabbling to be the first to make it through.

He looked back. The rhino was still coming, charging at full force up the stairs. He was snorting and puffing from exertion now. He probably hadn’t had to chase someone down like this in years. The thought gave Nick a modicum of satisfaction.

When the rhino saw that Nick was trapped, he bared his dull, herbivore teeth in a flat smile and lowered his horn, preparing to ram Nick right into the back of the crowd, and Nick had a moment of disbelief that the rhino was so willing to take out others just to get to him. It was just so crazy, all of it.

Nick looked wildly around for another escape route, but he had effectively trapped himself. He couldn’t double-back down the stairs. The rhino was blocking the way and would stomp him flat if
he tried. Plus, even if he made it, that would put the kits who were still following him in the direct
path of the rhino. He eyed the dark forest of legs in front of him. He could probably wiggle
through, but again—the risk of possibly being stomped to death would be high.

No time.

Nick grabbed the shirt hem of the nearest animal and hauled himself up. He made it onto the
shoulders of a moose just as the rhino was closing in.

Nick leapt.

He didn’t see the collision, but he had no sooner landed on the head of a kangaroo than the crowd
pitched forward like a mass of toppled dominoes. Nick scrambled from shoulder to shoulder, doing
his best to ride the tide of falling bodies lest he slip beneath and be crushed to death after all.

“Nick!” Reynard and Craven had paused on the steps below the rhino, who was buried up to his
waist in a pile of crumpled bodies.

“Climb!” Nick called back to them. “Hurry!”

They climbed. The rhino managed to pull himself free just as they were passing. He made a wild
grab for Reynard, but the fox slipped through his grasp, leaving only a tuft of fluffy white tail fur
behind.

As they reached Nick, Craven asked, “Where now?”

“Up,” said Nick.

Below, the rhino was fighting to follow after them, but as strong as he was, even he couldn’t move
every single animal out of his way with any speed.

A massive buck managed to free himself from the tangle. As he pulled himself upright, Nick
gestured to the kits and together they piled onto his antlers. The buck was too blinded by panic to
even wonder at the added weight. He dashed up the stairs along with a small herd of other animals
who had escaped the crush and out of the warehouse, taking the foxes with them.
Finnick scowled over the steering wheel. "I want it on record that I'm against this idea."

Of course he was. Finnick seemed to be against all of Judy's ideas.

She pointed through the windshield at the stadium. From where they were parked, they had a perfect view of the front entrance, and all the guards surrounding it. "The only place to find better security right now would be the ZPD itself."

"Didn't stop that deer from getting hurt."

"You might not like Gazelle's music, but don't pretend you don't know what species she is," said Judy. "That's just rude. And what happened was before we knew to be on the lookout. We even have police officers stationed here now."

"Nick says this mongrel always comes back."

Jerry says a lot for someone who can't text me back, thought Judy, looking down at her darkened phone. It had been a half hour since his last message. She was starting to get worried. Shouldn't he be out of there by now?

"You think staring at that thing will make it ring?" said Finnick.

Judy bit back a defensive retort and stuffed the phone back into her pocket. "Nothing is going to happen here today," she told him.

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because the concert is tomorrow."

Finnick looked back at the stadium, a frown of contemplation on his sharp face. "You think whoever is doing all this is going to wait until tomorrow to try something?"

"They've targeted one of the biggest singers in Zootopia only days before her concert. The opportunity is too good to waste, don't you think?"

Finnick grunted. Judy couldn't tell if it was in agreement or not.

The stadium's wide glass doors swung open and three animals stepped out—Tibor and two other officers Judy recognized as newer recruits: a warthog and a sun bear. They stopped on the top step, scanning the crowd expectantly.

Finnick grabbed his bat. "Let's get this over with then."

Rumors about what had happened had only drawn bigger crowds to the stadium. Animals whispered and pointed as Finnick and Judy passed. When Tibor stepped forward to help clear the way, those closest hurried to give him a wide birth. Even wearing a grin that stretched from ear to ear, the hyena was intimidating. He spread his arms wide in greeting. "Officer Hopps! On the case as always! And I see you've finally ditched Wilde for a new model."

"Nick had something else he needed to do today," said Judy, "Finnick is…" She glanced over at the other officers. She hadn't thought of how she would explain Finnick's presence to them. If she told them Nick thought she needed a bodyguard, the ribbing she and Nick would get would be
relentless.

Thinking fast, she said, "He's a fan of Gazelle. When he heard I was coming he all but begged me to bring him along. Didn't you, big guy? And how can you say no to that face?"

The three cops looked down at Finnick, and Judy had to give the small fox credit: all those years running cons with Nick had really taught him how to roll with a lie. Between one second and the next his scowl had smoothed out and he widened his eyes, even scuffing his feet a bit as if he were bashful. If Judy hadn't known better, she would have believed him to be just another young fan.

"What's the bat for?" asked the sun bear.

"He's a big fan of baseball," Judy confided. "He's hoping Gazelle will sign it for him."

"I'm sure she'd love to," said Tibor. "That is, if you can get her to stop practicing for long enough. The whole group's been at it for hours."

"Can you take us to them?"

"It's what I'm here for." Gesturing for her to follow him, he led the way inside. The other two officers fell in behind.

Judy nudged Tibor. "So am I right in guessing that you've been assigned as the leader of this group?"

Tibor puffed out his chest. "That's right. Team C. We're in charge of securing all lighting and backstage areas."

"Congratulations," said Judy. "I know you are going to do a great job."

Tibor tipped his head shyly and gave a short, yipping giggle. "I'll do my best."

They bypassed the ticket counter and crossed the main floor where the last of the merchandise booths were being set up. No matter where Judy looked, Gazelle's face beamed back at her: Mugs, tote bags, posters, shirts. Judy even spotted a giant oil painting in an elegant gold frame of Gazelle singing her heart out onstage.

Finnick saw it too and scoffed. "Tacky."

The sun bear looked at him. Judy faked a laugh. "He's a purist. Believes the work should speak for itself. Right, Finnick?"

The fox's eyes promised murder, but he pasted on a smile and eked out an agreement.

Tibor led them through a door marked Employees Only and out into a deserted corridor. "This hallway circles around the backstage area and connects to the maintenance tunnel and loading bay," he explained. "Team A is in charge of security here."

"Has anyone noted anything suspicious?" asked Judy.

Tibor shook his head. "Nothing besides what they're charging for soda here. I know I'm not supposed to encourage this, but if you have any friends coming tomorrow, tell them to bring their own snacks."

They stopped at an oversized set of doors. "Backstage," announced Tibor unnecessarily.
Inside animals were rushing about, arms full of costumes and makeup and various other gear. A panther in a dark suit stood in the middle of the chaos with a clipboard, rattling items off a checklist. Half-unpacked boxes of equipment were strewn around, with a team of serious looking beavers huddled in a corner arguing over a diagram of schematics.

"This way," said Tibor.

They circled around, keeping to the walls until they could duck around to the front of the stage. Here they finally found Gazelle, along with all four of her backup dancers, practicing their hearts out just like Tibor said they would be. Even in casual workout clothes and covered in sweat, they were captivating to watch.

Music thundered from the speakers around them. Gazelle spotted Judy mid-dance step. Her face lit up in a smile and she made a swiping gesture above her head. A second later the music cut off.

"Judy! It's so good to see you!"

"And you," said Judy, standing up on her tiptoes to accept Gazelle's hug. "I hope we're not interrupting?"

"Not at all! Let's take ten, guys, yeah?" Gazelle said to her crew, who all nodded in agreement and made their way to the edge of the stage, where a gopher waited with a cooler full of water bottles.

Tibor checked his phone and turned to Judy. "If you're okay here, me and the guys are going to head back to our stations."

"Of course," said Judy.

"If you need anything, just call."

"I will."

"Don't forget to have her sign the bat," said the sun bear, speaking up for the first time. He sent a wink at Finnick.

Gazelle looked over in bemusement. "Bat?"

"T-that's right," said Judy, jumping forward to block the sour face Finnick was making. "My friend here was really hoping you might be kind enough give him an autograph. But if it's a problem please don't feel you have to—"

"Of course I will sign," said Gazelle. "If someone has a pen?"

A marker was promptly brought forth. Judy gave Finnick a helpful shove when he didn't immediately move. "Go on. Don't be nervous."

With a look that said she would pay for this stunt later, Finnick held out the bat. Gazelle signed her name with a flourish and passed it back. "There you go."

Finnick muttered a thank you. The sun bear clapped him on the shoulder. "Congratulations, little buddy."

Finnick looked at the paw on his shoulder and Judy could practically see his internal debate: to bite or not to bite...

She hurried forward, politely shooing away the officers before Finnick could lose his cool. Once
they were finally gone, she joined Gazelle on the side of the stage.

"I just wanted to stop by and check in on things." She looked over at Hunter, who had returned with a water bottle for Gazelle. "How are you doing?"

"Better now, Officer Hopps, thank you," he said. "And I apologize for my rude behavior the last time we met. I was not quite myself then."

Judy thought of the intimate way he had curled himself around Gazelle and felt her face heat.

"No apology necessary," she said. The poor tiger had been drugged out of his head on pain medication at the time. She wasn't about to hold his actions against him, even if the memory of how intimately he had curled himself around Gazelle did make Judy's face heat.

She nodded to the tiger's tail. "It's nice to see you up and about again, but... is it really okay for you to be practicing with a broken tail?"

"The show must go on, as they say," said Hunter. "At least until our contract is up tomorrow. Oskar even had our costume designer make a sleeve out of spandex to match my costume so the cast won't ruin my look on stage."

Considering the pallas cat's attitude the last time she had met him, Judy wasn't surprised to hear that. "Is he here now?" she asked.

"For once, no," said Gazelle with feeling. "He is back at his office doing paperwork."

"You mean homework," corrected Hunter with a disapproving chuff of air. "He's going to fail that precious class of his if he keeps procrastinating like this."

"Oskar is taking classes?" said Judy.

"At the college, yes."

What were the odds of that, Judy wondered.

"Did you need to speak to him?" asked Gazelle.

"I did have a question or two for him," admitted Judy. "But maybe one of you might be able to help me instead."

"You can ask us anything," said Gazelle, and Hunter nodded.

Judy glanced around them, but everyone was busy with their own work. No one seemed to be paying their conversation any mind.

"There was a fox here the other day," she said. "His name is Robin Swift. Maybe you've heard of him?"

"Robin?" Gazelle's familiarity was evident just by the way she said his name. "We've known him for a long time now."

"How long is long?"

"Ever since I became a singer."

"Can I ask how you two met?"
Gazelle shared a look with Hunter, and despite saying that Judy could ask her anything, Gazelle's voice was cautious as she said, "Is this also for the case?"

"I'm not sure yet," said Judy. "Mostly I just had some... concerns, I guess you could say. I was hoping to get them cleared up today, but if you'd rather not say..."

Gazelle crossed her arms. "No, it's okay. In truth, he first approached me right after I received my contract to work for Oskar. He... tried to talk me out of signing it." She pressed back into Hunter, who laid a reassuring paw on her shoulder. "I did not listen."

Judy thought of Little John's warning to Selene. "Is that something Robin's known to do?"

"I'm not sure," said Gazelle. "I haven't spoken to him in a long time."

"Since you signed the contract?"

Gazelle shook her head. "He showed up again. After. He offered to help me. The way he spoke, it was like he knew I was having a hard time adjusting, even though I hadn't spoken about it to anyone."

"When you say adjusting..."

The singer gestured to Hunter's splinted tail. "There is no such thing as an easy climb to the top. That's one of Oskar's favorite lines. We have all sacrificed much to get here, Officer Hopps. More than was reasonable, perhaps, but we were determined to do it anyway. I was determined to do it, no matter how bad things became."

Judy couldn't help but ask. "How bad did things get?"

"I managed," said Gazelle. "It would be hypocritical of me to complain now when these are the results." She looked around at the stage, the spotlights, the dancers, Hunter.

Judy wanted to argue that, but thought better of it and bit her tongue. "So Robin offered to help you and you said no. Did he say in what way he planned to help?"

"It was nothing I wanted to be a part of," said Gazelle. "Though he meant well, I know."

"Do you think you could be a bit more specific?"

Gazelle hesitated. "I really do not want to get him into trouble. It was such a long time ago. And I told him no, as I said, so it's not as if he actually did anything."

"But your contract is over," Judy point out. "Which means Oskar is going to be looking for a new singer."

"I admit I have been trying to not think about that. You think he has someone in mind already?"

Judy thought of Selene's tear-stained face. "I think he has someone already."

Gazelle turned to Hunter, and the look of alarm that passed between them spoke volumes.

"You may have turned Robin's offer down," Judy said, watching them. "But I don't think this mammal did. And whatever it is they're planning together, whether they succeed or not, the end result will not be good for either of them if they break the law."

Gazelle looked distressed. "What can be done then?"
Judy contemplated the singer. "Before coming here, I had no idea. But after talking to you… Honestly, I think maybe the animal in the best position to fix this isn't me, but you."

Gazelle seemed to shrink away from her. Hunter's hold on her tightened.

"Me?" said Gazelle. "But what can I possibly do?"

Judy's phone chimed then. Apologizing, she pulled it out to check. It was a message from Nick: 
*Everyone's safe. Heading back now.*

Thank goodness.

She looked up at Gazelle. The singer was still watching her with big, worried eyes.

Judy smiled at her.

"Did you know? I've always been inspired by you. Your music got me through some of the toughest times in my life. It helped me make it through police training. It encouraged me when I was struggling to find my place in this city and at the ZPD. And of course, your concert was one of the most fun nights of my life." Judy looked out at the stadium, at the dozen or so animals scattered around in various seats, sneaking lunches or making calls, not even paying attention to the star on the stage. It was just another day, another show for them.

"But even with all that," said Judy, "what meant the most to me... the moment where I became your fan for life... it wasn't when you were singing at all."

"But I haven't done anything memorable besides sing," said Gazelle.

"You stood up for Zootopia," said Judy. "When this city was at its most divided, you and your whole family here, you stood *together.* You urged citizens to be *better.* To not let fear rule our instincts. You didn't give up, and you didn't back down." Judy's smiled turned self-deprecating. "I can't even say that."

"My mother, may she graze peacefully in the eternal grasslands, raised me to live my life with integrity," said Gazelle. "What I—and Hunter, and the others did back then, it was no more than what we should have done—"

"Which was still far more than what you *had* to do," said Judy. "And it's why I trust that you'll make the right choice about this."

Gazelle's voice was small. "And if I do not?"

Judy patted her on the arm. "Don't worry. You will."

Judy called Nick as soon as she was back in the hallway with Finnick.

Nick answered on the second ring. "Keeping out of trouble there, Carrots?"

The cocky tone of voice would have reassured her more if he hadn't sounded so out of breath.

"What happened?" asked Judy.

"More than I could begin to explain over the phone."

"And no one's hurt?"
"Craven's a bit cut up but he'll live."

"Not for much longer, thanks to you," a furious voice said from what sounded like the backseat. "You have no idea what you've done."

"You're welcome," said Nick

"Was that Craven?" asked Judy.

"Yeah. The kit was less than happy to see me, to say the least. Reynard, will you do something with your brother before I stick him in the trunk?" To Judy, Nick asked, "Where are you now?"

"Just heading back." Getting Finnick's attention, she pointed to a door with a sign that said MAINTENANCE TUNNEL TO PARKING LOT. Finnick shrugged and shoved his way through, Judy right behind him.

Nick's tone was resigned. "Why am I not surprise that you left the hotel? Please tell me Finnick is at least still with you."

"Relax. He's right here next to me."

"That's something, I guess."

The door fell closed behind them with a hollow boom. The tunnel had cement floors with the walls and ceiling made out of painted brick. Every step they took echoed. A single line of fluorescent lighting stretched the length of the ceiling.

A sign across the way pointed right for the parking lot, left for the loading dock. Judy and Finnick headed right.

"I'll have you know, Officer Wilde," said Judy, "that I have been the embodiment of safety all day."

"Uh-huh."

"It's true. Not a hare harmed."

"A bad pun and a lie. I should write you up for that."

"It's not a lie." She had no defense for the pun.

"Got any way to prove it?"

Judy did, in fact, have a few ideas of how she could prove such a thing, but she didn't know if Nick wanted to hear them and she certainly wasn't going to say them aloud in front of Finnick.

At her silence, Nick lowered his voice. "You thought of something dirty just now, didn't you?"

"I did not!"

She liked to think his sigh sounded fond. "What am I going to do with you, Carrots?"

Judy said nothing.

"You just thought it again!"
Blackness dropped around them with an electric *vrumph*. Judy froze where she stood. Next to her, Finnick stilled as well. If not for the weak bit of light coming from her cell phone, the darkness would have been complete.

"Carrots?" said Nick. "You still there?"

"Yeah," said Judy. "Yeah. There's just been some sort of power outage."

"Power outage? Where are you?"

"The stadium."

"*The stadium!*" Nick let fly a volley of curses. "You said you were being the embodiment of safety!"

"I am. I am the embodiment of safety at the stadium."

"Then why are you whispering?"

Finnick pointed to the door behind them and Judy grabbed the handle.

Locked.

"It's one way," she told Finnick, hating how her words came out hushed. "We need a key card to open it from this side."

"Judy—"

"I'm fine. We're fine," she insisted, forcing herself to speak louder. "They're still getting ready for the concert here. Someone probably just blew a fuse."

"Is there anyone around you?"

"No. Finnick and I were on our way out. We're in—"

Farther down, there came the quiet squeak of a door handle being depressed. Someone had just entered the tunnel.

Judy's instinct was to get low, stay quiet, and try to creep away, but she shook off the urge. She would not give in to paranoia. For all she knew, it was some staff member who was just as disoriented and nervous as she was.

"Hello?" called Judy, cringing as her voice reverberated down the long tunnel. "We seem to have gotten ourselves stuck out here. Do you know what's going on? The stadium seems to have lost power."

Silence.

Finnick raised his bat.

Dread filled Judy's stomach. Maybe they were too scared to answer. Or maybe she had misheard the sound of the door and no one was there. Just the darkness playing tricks.

"Did you see anyone?" This time her whispering was done on purpose.
"Just a shadow," said Finnick, and even he kept his voice low. "They moved away from the door the moment they stepped through. They're big."

"Even if they are, they're no better off than we are," argued Judy. "If we can't see them then they can't see us."

Finnick made a sudden lurching movement beside her. He grabbed Judy by the wrist. The light from her phone screen set his horrified expression aglow. "The phone!"

From out the darkness came the sound of pounding feet: heavy, big, fast, and headed right towards them.

Every fiber in Judy's body screamed at her to flee, but she couldn't make herself move. This was it. The criminal they had been tracking was mere feet away. If she could only catch a glimpse of them she could solve this case right now. If only she could see.

She turned her phone outward. The glow swept over where Finnick stood crouched with his bat at the ready, out into the darkness, but it wasn't strong enough to penetrate more than a foot or two.

Nick was shouting, his voice a tinny mess of sound she couldn't make sense of. She would have liked to say something to him, just one last thing, just in case, but she couldn't think of anything and there was no time.

She threw the phone at the same time her attacker pounced. The glow of that small square of light caught the whites of their fangs, long and sharp and glistening, and Judy found herself freezing at the sight of that impossibly wide maw descending down to snap her up.

"Duck!"

That gravelly shout jolted Judy back into action. She dropped to her knees, feeling the whoosh of air over her ears as Finnick swung his bat, her senses plunging into darkness as her phone hit the ground with a clatter and went black.

The deafening crack of splintering wood echoed through the tunnel and Judy flinched as something spattered against her face and chest, along with a gust of hot breath from her attacker as they were knocked backwards.

Judy immediately reached out for Finnick and found his paw already there, seeking hers. They grabbed onto each other and ran.

Judy couldn't see so much as the whiskers in front of her face. If there was anything on the ground, if there was a turn in the tunnel, they were going to hit it. There would be no way to know, or avoid it. They could only run, and hope.

She couldn't tell how far away their attacker was, if they were farther back or closing in. Panic was a wild buzzing in her ears, the muscles in her back and shoulders locked in a permeant flinch as she anticipated at any moment to feel those giant fangs biting down.

Ahead, the bright glow of an emergency exit sign slid into view, and Judy skidded as she course-corrected for the corner, nearly taking out Finnick against the wall. The sight of escape so near pushed them both faster. If they could just get out… If they could just make it outside…

They burst through the door at full speed, smashing it into the brick wall behind it and triggering the alarm system. Judy and Finnick landed in a heap on the cold sidewalk. Animals who were passing by stopped and stared.
Judy made it to her feet first. She whirled around to face the tunnel doorway, squinting past the blinding afternoon sunlight to see into that shadowy interior. But even with spots still dancing in her vision, she already knew: No one was coming after them.

A beaver wearing a shirt that said STAFF took a few hesitant steps towards them. "Hey… are you two okay? What happened to you?"

"We were attacked," said Judy. "Call security. Tell them there's a dangerous animal on the premises. And have them to check on Gazelle. Whoever came after us might go for her next."

The song *Mauvais Mammifère* started blasting from Finnick's back pocket. The sound was oddly harmonious with the emergency exit alarm that was still blaring away. He pulled out his phone and, after a glance at the screen, answered it.

He grimaced and held the phone away. "For crying out loud, lower the volume, will you? We're fine."

Nick.

Someone tugged on Judy's sleeve. The beaver gestured to his cell. "Security is with Gazelle now."

"Is she safe? Was anyone hurt?"

"She's fine," said the beaver, and Judy breathed a sigh of relief. Thank goodness.

Finnick was still arguing with Nick. "Why would I lie to you? If something had happened I wouldn't have answered the phone in the first place." He threw up a paw. "I don't know what you're so upset about. *I'm* the one who just lost a perfectly good bat."

"Who am I saying is reporting this?" the beaver asked Judy.

"Officer Judy Hopps."

That made the beaver do a double take. His eyes went wide. "I'll be darned, it *is* you."

Judy mustered up a weak smile.

The alarm stopped. For a moment, the world felt unnaturally hushed. But then quieter sounds started filtering back through: Finnick's growl and the murmurs of the crowd. The soft clip-clop of passing hooves and the whoosh of the breeze through the trees.

Through the open doorway, Judy saw the lights snap back on.

She couldn't have explained why, but the sight of that lit up tunnel spurred something inside of her. She made her way back over to it. Behind her, the beaver was calling, "Hey. Hey. Where are you going? Security wants to talk to you."

She paused at the doorway, sniffing the air, listening for… anything. There was only the buzz of the fluorescents and the faintest scent of popcorn filtered down from the vendor's sense of danger that had permeated the tunnel only minutes ago was gone.

"Hold on, I think your bunny's doing something dumb again," Finnick said to Nick. "You're not actually going back inside there, are you, rabbit?"

"The lights are back on," she said.
"All the better for that lunatic to murder us by."

Judy took a few steps inside. "That's not going happen."

Finnick cursed. "I'm going to have to call you back, Nick."

Judy made her way down tunnel, Finnick following behind her like a disapproving shadow. There wasn't much to see. Their attacker was long gone. Her phone remained where it had fallen. Broken bits of bat littered the floor.

"Did you manage to see anything?" she asked Finnick.

"Not really." The fox picked up a chunk of bat that used to be part of the handle. "They were big. And they were wearing some sort of dark pullover." He shrugged. "That's all I got."

From down the tunnel she heard a door slam, then the sound of multiple running feet. Security was on its way.

Judy went over and picked up her phone. Something crackled against her paw and she turned the device over. Stuck to the cracked screen was a sticky note in the shape of a paw print.

The note said only two words: Last warning."

The drive back was a silent one. Judy had expected Finnick to lay into her, but for once the small fox seemed inclined to hold his tongue. That was fine. Judy was kicking herself enough for the both of them.

If only the lights hadn't gone out. If only she hadn't frozen up like some kind of green-horned recruit. If only she could recall anything but those teeth bearing down on her. The sight of them was burned into her brain. Why was it that she could recall that one detail with such clarity and yet when she tried to picture anything else, nothing would come to her? If anything, those teeth only grew bigger and sharper with each recollection.

She'd blown it. She'd risked her life—worse, she'd risked Finnick's life—for nothing.

She had inspected the whole tunnel with security, and then again when the ZPD arrived. They'd found nothing. They even did a sweep of the building, just in case, but when all they had to go by was, "a big predator dressed in dark clothes," well, it hardly made for a detailed criminal sketch. By their size and teeth, they might have been feline or canine, bear or something else altogether.

Judy wasn't surprised when they didn't find anyone. Her guess was that after she and Finnick had fled, the culprit had booked it in the other direction and gone out the back loading dock. Though this too was only a guess. Security feeds had been turned off at the same time as the power.

The mystery to this, at least, had been easily solved. They had found a member of Team A unconscious on the floor of the security room, a giant knot on his head and no idea of who had gotten to him.

Poor Tibor had been beside himself when he'd heard what had happened. He had stayed by Judy's side the rest of the day—much to Finnick's annoyance—and had insisted on taking the lead as they searched the stadium, just in case. "Nick's gonna have me shaved and neutered as it is," he'd whimpered. "I'm so sorry, Judy."

"It wasn't your fault," said Judy. No, the blame was hers to bear. For all her talk, she had been
unprepared. They had caught her by surprise and if Finnick hadn't been there…

Judy kicked a foot in frustration. She accidentally struck the glovebox. It popped open and various bric-a-brac came spilling out.

"Hey! Watch those giant feet, rabbit," snapped Finnick.

"I-I'm sorry. Hold on, I'll just—" Leaning forward, she began shoveling the various bits and bobs back in. A tire pressure gauge, a half-empty bag of chips, vehicle paperwork and an outdated manual, a crumpled baseball hat, a photograph. Judy paused to take a closer look at the picture. It showed a young female fox, the same shade of sandy fur as Finnick, with heavy eyeliner and a cocky smile, holding up a baseball like she was showing it off.

Judy held the photo up to Finnick. "Who's this? Family? Girlfriend?" She said it teasingly, happy to have found a distraction from her dark thoughts.

But at the sight of the photo, Finnick's eyes went hard. "None of your business, rabbit. Put it back."

Girlfriend then, thought Judy. Probably an ex-girlfriend. An old ex-girlfriend, judging by the age and wear of the photo.

Judy laid it carefully on top of all the other junk in the glovebox and closed it up. After a quiet moment, she said, "I'll buy you a new bat."

"Don't bother," was Finnick's curt response.

"It's my fault it got broken. I would feel better if you'd let me replace it."

"Some things aren't replaceable," snapped Finnick. "You might want to learn that sooner rather than later."

And for once, Judy couldn't argue.

When they got back to the hotel in Tundratown, the sun was nothing but a distant glow beyond the city, with the sky a rapidly darkening shade of blue. The brighter stars were popping out here and there, with no clouds to obscure them. It wasn't snowing, but the temperature was still cold enough to freeze your whiskers off.

Nick was waiting outside for them. He had paced a shallow trench in the snow in front of the hotel. When Finnick pulled up, Nick had Judy's door open before she could reach for the handle. She sucked in a breath at the blast of icy air, and again when he caught her around the waist and lifted her from the seat. She grabbed onto his shoulders for balance. The look in his eyes—a mixture of anger and relief—sent her heart galloping.

He set her down on the frozen sidewalk, ignoring Finnick's yell for him to shut the door. Those big paws of his brushed over her face, her chin, her cheeks, her ears…

"I'm fine, Nick," she told him, catching one of his paws within her own. It was like holding a block of ice. "How long have you been out here?"

"Not long," he said, his free paw gliding over her throat, her shoulder, her stomach. If she hadn't been holding onto him she thought he might have continued his inspection all the way down to her toes.
"You should have waited inside," she said

Nick stared at her, incredulous and angry. "I should have waited?"

That was when Judy noticed Reynard and Craven, standing a little ways behind him. They both looked cold and unhappy, but otherwise okay, though Craven had bandages wrapped around his upper arms.

"Are you okay?" Craven asked Judy.

She nodded. "You?"

He gave a halfhearted shrug. Reynard rolled his eyes. "Ignore my brother. He's just pouting. Big bad fox thought he was going to be some top alpha predator—"

"I had an opportunity that you ruined with your—"

"Give it a rest, the both of you," said Nick. He looked at Judy, studying her. "Something else happened."

How did he always know?

Steeling herself for his reaction, Judy took the sticky note from her pocket and handed it to him. Nick stared down at the words for far longer than it should have taken to read them.

"You were right," said Judy. "I underestimated them."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" Crumpling up the note in his fist, Nick threw it down into the snow.

"That was evidence!" exclaimed Judy.

"As if we don't have enough of the dumb things already," growled Nick. He turned to Finnick. "Thank you. I owe you one."

"You owe me ten," said the smaller fox. "But I'll take one off your tab right now if you'll close the damn door."

Nick shut the door.

As Finnick sped out of the parking lot, another vehicle pulled in, this one a sporty red thing that shined under the streetlights.

The young foxes both made noises of alarm. "You called Robin on us?" said Reynard.

"No, I called Marian on you," said Nick, not sounding sorry in the least. "Robin just happened to be with her at the time."

Robin and Marian both got out of the vehicle. Marian came at a run. She pulled Craven and Reynard into a rough hug and Judy thought the fox might burst into tears, but then she took a breath and in the next moment unleashed a storm of fury at them. "What in the world did you two think you were doing? How dare you scare me like that! Craven, what happened to your arms? Do you need to go to the hospital? If you think being hurt is going to get you off the hook you have another thing coming! Get in the car. Now. Just wait until we get home."

"I didn't think she could get angry like that," said Nick.
"You'd be surprised," said Robin, watching as Marian bullied her two brothers over to the vehicle. "Thank you for calling us."

Nick shrugged. "Your family, your problem."

Judy took a step forward. "I need to talk to you about Oskar," she said to Robin.

At least the fox didn't insult her by pretending not to understand. "Is this for an investigation, Officer Hopps?"

"It may very well become one."

If Robin was worried or offended by her statement, he didn't show it. He continued to regard her warmly, admiration and amusement dancing in his eyes. Either he was the most understanding fox in all of Zootopia, or he was even cockier than Nick.

"I would be happy to discuss whatever you'd like, Officer Hopps. Just name the time and place."

"You may also want to bring your lawyer with you," warned Judy, but Robin just laughed. "If I bothered Will for something small like this he'd have my head. I'll risk it alone, if it's all the same to you."

His dismissiveness of the situation irked Judy. "I'm trying to help you."

"I know you are," said Robin. "And I appreciate it. Really, I do. And I will be happy to talk with you whenever you'd like."

"That overconfidence is going to get you into trouble one day," said Nick.

"Trouble is what I handle best," said Robin.

Marian had finally managed to stuff her younger brothers into the car. When she finally joined the others she was still fuming. "I just can't believe those kits. They've never done anything like this before."

Robin put an arm around her shoulders. "Do not stress yourself, my love. We will get this all sorted out as soon as we get home."

Marian nodded, taking several deep breaths to calm herself. To Nick she said, "Thank you for going to get them. I don't even want to think about what would have happened if you weren't there."

Nick gave an awkward head bobble and looked away. "It was nothing. Don't worry about it."

"It was not nothing. You saved their lives," said Marian. "Will you be at the concert tomorrow?"

"How could we stay away?" said Nick dryly.

Marian smiled and pressed her paws together in subdued excitement. "In that case you have to stop by my booth when you come! I'll let you eat as much as you'd like, free of charge!"

"You have a booth at the stadium?" said Nick.

Marian nodded. "Peter—I mean, Ben—called me up the other day just out of the blue and offered it to me. Apparently there was some mistake when his secretary made the reservations and she booked too many. And Ben, he... he actually thought of me. Can you believe it? I'm still in shock.
over it myself. It was like a miracle or something."

Nick's paw found Judy's and squeezed. "Or something," he said.

The wind gusted through the parking lot then, and everyone shivered in unison. Conversation wrapped up quickly after that. Once the foxes were on their way, Nick turned to Judy. "Now will you let me take care of you?"

Even exasperated, his words made Judy's heart flip-flop.

She turned towards the hotel. The sight of that imposing, icy facade with all it's fancy trimmings, like some kind of overdecorated frozen wedding cake, made something inside of Judy sink. She had a sudden, overwhelming longing for a warm cozy room with hot food and a bed that didn't have to be defrosted before you could sleep in it. Where she didn't have to worry about her paws sticking to the metal surfaces when she went to take a shower.

Judy sighed a white plume of air. "I don't know if I can stand to spend another night here."

"Then let's go home," said Nick, as if it the solution was that easy.

"My apartment is still a closed crime scene, remember?"

"I remember." He took her paw. And though they were both freezing at this point, Judy still felt the warmth in that simple gesture. "So let's go to mine."
"Wait—then you did what on top of a buck?"

Nick waggled a claw at her. "There you go with that dirty bunny mind of yours again. We're really going to have to do something about that, Carrots."

"I'm not going to let you joke this away, Nick" said Judy. "You could have been killed."

"Well I guess that makes us even for the day then." He cut a reproving eye her way. Judy glared right back. The silent face off lasted until a car behind them beeped their horn. The light was green. Nick looked away and hit the gas.

"Has anyone gone to check the place out yet?" asked Judy.

"I gave a heads up to Francine and McHorn on my way back. Francine called me right before you arrived. She said everyone capable of running away already had by the time she and McHorn got there."

Capable of running. Judy suppressed a shiver. "And the rest?"

Nick's paw tightened on the steering wheel. "Three dead. Nine seriously injured. The few they managed to question either won't talk or don't know anything. It seems to be a word-of-mouth only kind of group. You hear a rumor from a third party, you go, the end."

"Do they know—"

A cheetah suddenly bolted across the road. Nick slammed on his brakes, throwing Judy forward against her seatbelt. More horns blared behind them. Nick stuck his head out the window. "Hey! ZPD, right here!"

The cheetah, who had made it to the other side of the street, gave him a cheeky wave and then booked it around the corner.

"What's with animals today?" wondered Nick. "That cat's lucky I'm all run out today, otherwise—"

"You'd chase him down?" Judy snickered.

Nick grumbled at her and drove on.

 Falling serious again, Judy asked, "Do you think Craven would be willing to talk to us about any of it? Or Reynard?"

"Reynard, maybe," said Nick. "Craven not so much."

"He's angry right now," reasoned Judy. "Once he calms down I'm sure he'll be more understanding about things."

"Maybe," said Nick. "But he was determined to be there, Carrots, and this wasn't just some fight club that had gotten out of hand. It was more like a convention center for every psychotic alpha wannabe in Zootopia. I still can't believe we made it out of there alive."

Judy reached over and laid her paw on top of Nick's on the steering wheel. When he he shot her a questioning glance, she said, "I haven't told you yet how glad I am that you're okay."
Nick's expression softened. He took her paw in his own. "I'm glad you're okay too, Carrots."

They drove in silence like that for a while, paws entwined over the gearshift. Eventually Judy asked, "So, are you going to tell me where we're going?"

"I told you. My place."

"This is not the way to your apartment," said Judy.

Nick lived in a nice neighborhood in the middle of downtown, but that was miles behind them now. They were close enough to the border of the Rainforest District that Judy could smell it: the scent of stagnate water and rotting leaves and the perfume of a hundred different species of exotic flowers. The trees around them had turned from the neat, skinny palms that lined Central's Square into soaring lupunas and mammoth-sized ficuses. Strangler figs with their mess of roots clawed at the sides of the crumbling road.

"I never said I was taking you to my apartment," said Nick.

"But you just—"

"Allow me to clarify: When I said my place, I referred not to my apartment but to another place that I own. Ergo, my home, where I am taking you now."

"Since when do you own a second residence?"

Nick paused. "Allow me to clarify: when I said I own—"

"Oh, just stop."

They drove over a familiar, stone bridge. Judy whipped her head around. "Wait a second… I know this place." It was where Finnick had sent her to find Nick after she had ruined everything on her first case. There was a house out here?

Nick hung a left down a grassy incline and parked beneath the bridge. The air here was muggy, but at least it was warm. Judy inhaled a deep breath of it, smelling the pollen and rain and wet soil. All better scents, in her opinion, than the ice and fish smell of Tundratown.

"This way," said Nick. He led her out from under the bridge and down a short trail crowded with fat-leafed ferns and brightly-colored orchids. Intertwined tree roots and vines criss-crossed back and forth across the forest floor, forcing Judy to watch her every step.

"I don't get it," she said to Nick. "You don't even like the Rainforest District."

"No," agreed Nick. "But it does have one perk."

"And that is?"

Nick stopped. He turned back to Judy and grinned. "It's the perfect hiding place."

He shoved the last of the vegetation aside. For a moment, Judy couldn't even tell what she was supposed to be looking at. It appeared to be more rainforest, albeit with an unnatural quality to the arrangement of the bushes and vines that grew around the roots of the trees, as if someone had half-heartedly tried to do some landscaping years ago in this random spot and then given up on it.

It was like one of those optical illusion pictures. The longer Judy focused on the scene, the more strange details started popping out, like the wood slats just barely visible in the shadows between
the spaces of the aboveground tree roots, the glint of glass nestled in the dark recesses of a rotted out tree cavity. This wasn't just a poor attempt at rainforest landscaping. This was an actual hidden structure built within the framework of a hollowed out tree.

"It's a safe house," murmured Judy.

"One of the safest," agreed Nick. "Unless you're trying to hide from the damp. Then it's the worst."

They carefully picked their way over to it. Nick had to lift aside a curtain of vines just so Judy could get to the doorknob.

Inside it was pitch black. Nick reached around Judy and snapped on a switch. A single strand of bare lightbulbs wrapped around the ceiling's center crossbeam flickered on, revealing a small room with a couch, a table, and a room divider that hid a bed over in the corner.

"This doesn't look like one of the ZPD's usual safe houses," said Judy.

"That would be because it isn't," said Nick.

Grabbing a chair, he carried it over so that it was under one of the ceiling's crossbeams. He stood on it, reached up, and felt around a bit before extracting a small dart gun.

"So you have an unauthorized safe house with what I'm guessing is also an unauthorized weapon," said Judy as she watched him check for ammo. "Do I even want to know?"

"Probably not tonight," admitted Nick. "I left some stuff in the car. I'll be right back with it. Don't go anywhere, okay?"

Where else would she go? Judy almost said it aloud, but Nick was already slipping out the door and she found herself standing there, alone, in the silence of the house. The place was warm and smelled like wet earth and wood. It made her think of her family home, when it would rain really hard and sometimes bits of soil would break off from the ceiling. They'd find piles of it on the floor or countertops afterward. Once, a big glob of it had fallen right onto her sister Molly's bed while she had been sleeping. The shrieks she'd made had been so loud, Judy would have sworn she'd woken up every bunny in the burrow.

The lights flickered, just a brief off-on flash of the bulbs, but Judy's warm childhood memory vanished quick as a switch-flip, and suddenly she was back in that tunnel, those monstrous fangs lunging toward her, ready to bite down, ready to kill—

The front door flew open and Judy whirled around, stifling a squeak. Nick stood there, arms full of several bags. His face went tight at whatever expression he saw on her face.

"Sorry," he said, "I should have knocked first."

Judy tried to school her features into something less like a rabbit caught in the headlights. "Don't worry about it. You just surprised me, that's all."

She stepped forward and he handed her one of the bags. "Here."

"You bought me…" Judy peeked inside and back at her partner. "A toothbrush and toothpaste? Are you trying to tell me something, Wilde?"

"Because we left your stuff back at the hotel. I know how adamant you are about your oral hygiene. There's a toothbrush and bottled water in there too. Unfortunately there's no running water
here, so—"

Judy pulled out another package, this one wrapped in plastic.

"Ah, that." Nick cleared his throat. "I had to guess the size, sorry. But I thought it would be better than having to sleep in your street clothes."

It was a pajama set, the kind you get at a general store. The PJs were green with little orange carrots on them. The label read *for mammals small to medium.*

Judy's eyes stung. She rubbed at them before they did something ridiculous, like tear up. The stress from the day really must be catching up to her if she wanted to cry over a silly pajama set.

No, not over the pajama set. Over Nick. Even in the middle of the jungle he tried so hard to take care of her.

"I love them," whispered Judy.

"Really?"

She hugged the package to her chest. "More than I have words for."

She looked up and their eyes met. Judy couldn't say what exactly Nick was feeling. His expression looked torn between fondness and pain. That was okay. Judy knew better than to expect anything. As long as he understood her, that was enough for—

His paws settled onto her shoulders, heavy but gentle, and Judy's breath caught. What was he doing? No way it was what she was thinking. No way, right?

She gripped the pajama set so hard her claws punctured the plastic packaging. "Nick, I—"

In one smooth motion, Nick twirled her around so that she faced away from him, and Judy suffered a moment of total confusion before he gave her unresisting self a shove towards the corner, which she could now see hid a small alcove with a counter and basin sink.

"You can get cleaned up back here," said Nick, and then he was gone, vanished before she could even eek out a thank you.

In a daze, Judy stepped up to the basin. A small, scratched-up mirror hung on the wall behind it. There was just enough light spilling over from the main room that Judy could make out her reflection. She stared at herself, at the stunned look on her face, and broke out into a wry laugh—silently, lest Nick overhear.

*Got excited there for a minute, didn't you?* she asked her reflection. *Silly, bunny.*

She cleaned herself off as best she could with the bottle of water and a small towel she found in the bag. Then she brushed her teeth and changed into the pajamas, which were on the bigger side. She had to fold the leg hems several times in order to be able to walk, and the drawstring had to be tied tighter so they wouldn't slip off her hips altogether. The top had less to manage. It buttoned up the front and had short sleeves, which worked in her favor. The only real issue was the collar, which had been made for a neck three times as thick as her own. It hung loose around her collarbone. She was going to have to make sure she didn't lean forward or she would really give Nick a show.

Her partner was waiting on the couch when she came out, fiddling around with his own bag of supplies. At the sight of her, he jumped up and ducked past her into the alcove, saying, "I'll just be
a minute."

Judy stood there, uncertain what she should do now. Should she sit on the couch? Get in the bed? Or maybe sit on the bed? Lie down on the couch?

From around the corner she heard the crinkle of plastic and then the glug of water being poured. In the quiet, to Judy's ears, the noises sounded too loud. She felt as if she were somehow invading Nick's privacy. She wandered closer to the bed, but even from there she could still hear him. The place was just too small and her hearing too good.

Noise. She needed noise. But there was no noise here. Only the sound of Nick brushing his teeth, rinsing his mouth, spilling water—cursing. Judy stifled a giggle. But her amusement died a second later when she heard the sound of a zipper being undone.

*Noise! Distraction! Now!*

"I think Robin is planning something," Judy blurted out.

There was a beat, and then Nick said, "Oh really? Does this have anything to do with what you were talking to him about earlier?"

Judy explained to him what Gazelle had told her before, and about her suspicions regarding Little John and Selene. As long as she talked, she could barely hear the sound of rustling clothes.

Nick listened, or at least seemed to be listening anyway. But when she was finally done all he said was, "Huh."

"That's all you have to say?" said Judy. "*Huh?*

"It's something to look into, I guess."

"You guess? You've been chomping at the bit to investigate Robin. Why the sudden change of heart?"

"It's more like a change of priorities."

Nick came around the corner. He had also changed into a matching PJ set, this one blue with little fishes on it. His was on the small side. The bottoms didn't quite reach his ankles. He still carried the dart gun.

"What?" said Nick when he saw Judy looking.

Judy bit her lip. "I'm just really sad I don't have my camera right now."

"Don't even think about it, rabbit."

Judy pulled out her phone. The cracked screen was still dark. No matter how she pressed the power button, it wouldn't turn on.

"We'll have to get you a new one after tomorrow," said Nick.

Tomorrow. This would all be over, one way or another, after tomorrow. Judy didn't like that she couldn't work up the same level of confidence about it that she'd had that morning.

Nick checked the lock on the front door and single window. Then he snapped off the light. For the second time that day Judy found herself engulfed in blackness, complete, confining. Suddenly it felt
hard to breath.

*I'm safe. I'm safe here,* she told herself. They were hidden. No one knew about this place besides Nick and maybe Finnick. And Nick was here, with her. He would protect her. They would protect each other.

From across the room, soft light illuminated Nick's face. He had turned his own phone on. He used it to make his way over to her. When he got close enough that the light enveloped Judy too, he stopped, eyes serious. "What's wrong?"

Judy shook her head. "Nothing. Just thinking."

"Uh-huh." His free paw found hers. He led her to the far side of the bed. "Well sleep while you think. It's better for you."

"That's not a thing."

Nick flashed her a smile. In the light of the cell screen it looked almost ghoulish.

He rounded the bed. Judy expected him to head for the couch, but he dropped the dart gun and cell on the side table and started pulling back the bedcovers. "Uck. It's dusty. I should have thought of that. We'll have to ditch this top sheet."

We.

Judy's mouth felt suddenly dry. "Are you… sleeping here too?"

Nick paused. There was very little light to see his expression, but his tone was neutral as he said, "That was my plan."

Plan? He had a plan for this? Judy couldn't even think logically beyond *bed and Nick and sleep together.*

"I know we were testing boundaries last night, but this is a bit of a big hop, isn't it?" She tried to make the question teasing, but there was too much anxiety in her voice to be convincing.

"You bunnies have such overactive—"

Judy tsked him.

"Imaginations," Nick finished with a sly grin.

Judy wanted to smile back. She wanted to be as casual as he was being about this. Mature. She knew she was reading too much into this. Worse, she knew he knew it too.

"It'll be easier to protect you from here," he explained.

Would it be? She supposed so. But that really wasn't her issue.

As if trying to sweeten the deal, Nick added, "I won't even mind if you want to cuddle together."

*Won't mind.* If *she* wanted. Heat flooded Judy's face. Of course she wanted to. That was a given. But while the open invitation was enticing, overwhelmingly so, she continued to stand there, hesitating.

Now Nick was starting to look unsure. "I really expected you to jump on that one. What's with this
sudden shyness, Carrots? Don't get me wrong, it's adorable, but not really like you. You were all over me last night."

Judy's embarrassment increased. She wasn't ashamed he knew her feelings for him. But something about this situation... humoring her needs at his expense, that did make her feel shameless.

"This is different," was all she could say.

Nick straightened away from the bed. He looked genuinely lost now. "Would you rather I sleep on the couch?" he asked. And Judy knew if she said yes now he would go, without argument, without resentment.

Judy shook her head.

Nick cocked his head at her, and bless him, she could see even in such limited lighting that smart fox brain of his evaluating, considering, trying to figure her out.

"If I told you," said Nick slowly, "that I wasn't doing this entirely for your benefit... Would you feel more comfortable with it then?"

"What do you mean?"

His cell phone chose that moment to turn off. In the absence of the screen's glow, there was only darkness. Judy waited for Nick to turn it back on.

He didn't.

Just when she started to wonder if he had given up and gone to the couch after all, she heard him say softly, "I could have lost you today, Judy. When my call with you got disconnected, when you didn't pick up again, all I could think about was how they'd found that grocer in the alley, dead in some pile of trash, and how that might be you next. It terrified me."

There was a soft creak of bedsprings, and then the light sound of paws brushing against the sheets as he slowly crossed the mattress towards her.

"That's why I brought you here," Nick continued. "Not just to protect you. And not just because I'm trying to get better at this comforting thing. But because I need you. I need you to be here with me tonight. So that I can reassure myself that you really are okay. That we both survived. It's... honestly, it's pure selfishness on my part, plan and simple."

"Do you really mean that?"

She heard Nick breathe in, breathe out. "More than I have words for."

Judy reached for him, feeling her way through the blackness, and Nick must have been able to see her, just a little, because his paw caught hers and held on tight. Judy's heart was thundering inside her chest. Nick needed her. He needed her just as much as she needed him. The knowledge made Judy feel lifted, wanted, giddy.

"Is this close enough?" Judy whispered.

"Not nearly," said Nick.

She reached out with her other paw and this time found his cheek.

"Now?" she asked, and felt him shake his head.
She wished she could see his face. She wanted to see his expression, the things that might be hidden in his eyes.

"Can you turn the light back on?" she asked him.

"No," said Nick.

That surprised her. "Why not?"

"Because I'm trying to be serious right now, and there's no way you're going to take me seriously if you're looking at me in these pajamas."

Judy burst out laughing. "You're joking."

"See? You've just proven my point exactly. Just mentioning them ruins the moment."

Judy wasn't sure who acted first, if she jumped up or if Nick pulled her. But somehow she found herself in the bed, slipping into Nick's arms so naturally it felt as if they had done it a hundred times instead of just a precious pawful. Nick wrapped his lankier body around hers, his tail sweeping around to brush against her toes. After the chilly bed of the past few nights, being snuggled against his warm form felt heavenly.

"Okay?" whispered Nick.

"Perfect," said Judy.

And it was.
Chapter 19

The night felt interminable to Nick.

Judy nodded off almost immediately, tucked against his side like a warm, breathing weight, holding him in place. If the worries of the day had followed her into sleep, she must have lost them in her dreams, for she never stirred in her rest.

Nick on the other hand laid awake for hours, starting at every little noise, imagining malicious silhouettes in the shadows. He held Judy close, breathing in her sweet bunny scent and reminding himself that they were as hidden as he could make them. No one knew where they were. His dart gun was in easy reach. On the off-chance someone broke in and found them, Nick would have enough time to react.

It was enough.

He repeated it so many times, at some point he must have convinced himself, because he woke up sometime later shaking and damp with sweat, visions of blood-covered fur seared into his mind like the after image of a camera flash.

It took another hour for Nick to return to sleep, but the nightmares only returned with it, and the cycle started all over again.

It was relief when he jolted awake from yet another dream of blood on his paws to find that morning had come at last. A single beam of sunlight through the window cut a sharp angle across the small room, illuminating the dust motes and bathing the safe house in a warm, orangey glow. A rare morning for the rainforest district. The sprinkler system must be on the fritz again.

Nick had rolled away from Judy sometime during his restless night. When he looked over he saw that she was laying on her side, watching him with heavy-lidded eyes. Concern pinched her brow; her worries had found her.

“Bad dream?” Her voice was still husky from sleep. It made Nick’s gut clench and his paws ache to reach for her.

He rolled away instead, shoving aside the dart gun so he could get to his phone. No sooner had he picked it up than it started buzzing in his paw.

It was Clawhauser.

“Nick, is Judy with you?”

Nick bit back his first reaction, which was to deny it. As if admitting Judy was with him would somehow give away that they had shared a bed last night.

He told himself to stop being so paranoid. The cheetah couldn’t see them. And it was almost eight o’clock. A perfectly reasonable time for him and Judy to be together.

“Yeah, she’s here,” said Nick. “You need to talk to her?”

“Not me. I’ve got a bunny at the front desk here. She says she’s a friend of Judy’s.” Clawhauser lowered his voice to a whisper. “I think she’s a reporter.”
Judy was already holding out her paw. Nick passed the phone over.

“It’s okay, Clawhauser,” said Judy, “you can put her on.”

Nick flopped back against his pillow as he listened to Judy apologize to Harper and explain about her phone getting broken. She nibbled at the end of her claws while she talked. The sight of that fluffy paw pressed to that even fluffier cheek captivated Nick. She was just so soft. Nick had never felt fur as soft as hers before. Not that he went around feeling up all the animals in Zootopia, but still. And the fact that all that softness was also capable to taking down a fully gown rhino and outsmarting even him, well, was it any surprise that he—

“Nick, look at this.” Suddenly Judy and all that soft fur of hers was pressing up against him, warm and heavy and quivering with excitement. It put thoughts into his head—thoughts that with the current state of his sleepy fox brain he had no defenses for.

Desperate for distraction, Nick focused on the phone Judy had shoved in front of his nose. She had ended her call with Harper and pulled up her email. The other bunny had sent her several pdfs—schedules of a certain group of relevant students: Betty, Tamara, Iggy, and Oskar.

“Turns out all of them are enrolled at Zootopia University,” said Judy as she started scrolling through. “I thought it couldn’t hurt to get a look at their schedules and see if we couldn’t find some commonality—"

“I like a bunny who can use such big words first thing in the morning,” said Nick.

Judy’s lips twitched upwards, but she schooled her expression into one of seriousness. “Focus, Wilde. I need your eyes on this.”

The Great Turtle help him, he was doing his best. But she was practically nestled in his lap and that pajama top was threatening to reveal all kinds of interesting things with the way she was leaning over the phone screen like that.

Nick inclined back a bit under the pretense of needing to stretch. Judy, bless her, leaned back right along with him. It didn’t lesson the torture of their position, but at least it put them at a safer angle.

Judy continued to scroll through the attachments, Nick reading over her shoulder. If not for the fact that they were both acutely aware of the time ticking down, the moment might have been peaceful. Nick had experienced countless peaceful mornings before. Prior to joining the ZPD, he had made it a point to relax as often as possible, especially in the mornings. But this was the first time he had passed a peaceful morning in the company of someone else. He found that he liked it. Really liked it. And he found himself already feeling lonely to think of future mornings where he would no longer have this… her… next to him when he woke.

Judy’s paw slipped, one of her claws scraping across the screen. She made a sound of alarm and held the phone up, checking for damage.

“Don’t worry,” said Nick. “It’s got scratch protection.”

She gave him shaky nod, eyes still on the screen. That’s when Nick noticed how fast she was breathing.

“What’s wrong?” said Nick. “Did you find something?”

“No,” said Judy. “I mean, I did. But that’s not why I…” She huffed, almost at herself, and said in a steadier voice. “Your paw.”
Nick looked down at the paw he had resting on his stomach. What about it? he started to ask dumbly, before realizing that she was referring to his other paw, the one that had gotten pinned behind her when she had cuddled into him. That paw was currently splayed across her lower back. And, unconsciously it seemed, he had been brushing the pad of his thumb back and forth across the soft fur in the curve of her spine where her shirt had ridden up.

Nick yanked his arm back as if burned. “Sorry. My paw must have fallen asleep.”

It was a stupid excuse and they both knew it. Judy looked over at him with small, knowing smile. In her eyes Nick could see the flickers of desire his touch had stirred, but it was the depth open affection there that tore the biggest holes in his self-control.

He cleared his throat. “You said you found something?”

“Found something?” Judy repeated in a dazed voice.

Nick tapped on the phone’s screen, which had gone dark. Judy looked down at it and seemed to recall herself. She gave her head a little shake to clear it—an action so obvious and adorable Nick could barely stand it—and swiped the phone back on. “Yes, I did find something. At least I think so.”

She pulled the files back up, scrolling through the pages. “Betty, Tamara, Iggy, Oskar—they all took the same class. See here?”

She held up the phone. Nick read the name aloud. “Success in Business. That’s random.”

“Maybe it’s not, though.” Excitement was vibrating through his partner now. “Maybe it’s not random at all.”

Punching in a phone number, she bounded out the bed, grabbed up her bag of toiletries and clothes from off the floor, and darted into the small alcove she had used to change last night. “Harper? It’s Judy again. Do you think you could do me one more favor? I need the roster for the class Success in Business. Yes, I can give you the course number. Tell me when you’re ready.”

Ready or not, thought Nick as he rose and began collecting his things as well. Here we come.

“Clare’s not here right now.” Tamara’s pronouncement was delivered with a scowl and a threatening paw on the door handle.

“We actually came to talk to you,” Judy told the badger. She widened her smile, trying to project friendly and trustworthy like they were psychic waves.

Tamara’s expression darkened further. The gap between the door and the jam shrunk several more inches. “Me? What could you possibly have to talk to me about?”

“We’d prefer to tell you that inside,” said Nick. He shot a pointed glance over at the algae-infested watering hole, where a group of college students had congregated for an early bit of R&R, including an elephant who was doing a spirited aerobics workout in the water.

“Well I would prefer there to be witnesses,” said Tamara in a raised voice.

A tiger who was dozing over on the grass flicked her ears back.

“We’re happy to talk wherever you’ll be most comfortable,” Judy reassured her.
“I’d be most comfortable not talking to you two at all,” said Tamara.

With more sympathy than Nick would have managed, Judy said, “We know things have been hard. And we don’t mean to keep bothering you and Clare like this—”

“And yet here you are again.”

When Judy started to apologize, the badger cut her off with an impatient wave of her paw. “Just say what you came to say already.”

Judy bit her lip and looked at Nick. He knew this wasn’t the way she wanted to have this conversation, but what could they do? They didn’t have time to stand around trying to win the stubborn badger over.

Nick stepped forward. “We came to ask about a class you’re taking. Success in Business.”

Tamara’s gaze darted between them. “Is this because I’ve been skipping class? Look, it doesn’t mean anything, all right? I swear to you. I’ve just had a lot on my plate right now. And it was an elective anyway, so—“

“We couldn’t care less about your attendance record,” said Nick. “We want to know about your classmates.”

“C-classmates?”

Nick made a show of pulling the papers from his pocket and unfolding them. On the way over he and Judy had stopped off at the office to print out the paperwork Harper had emailed them. It wasn’t that they needed it to remember the animals’ names, but as Nick had reminded Judy, presentation was important for situations like this. The sight of an official form, even if it was just a simple class schedule, could be the difference between a confession and a lie.

Nick held up the first page. “Betty Flatalie. Beaver. Fifty-six years old. Manager for Riverside Apartments.”

“Do you recognize her?” asked Judy.

Tamara dug her claws into the wood of the door. “It’s a big class. Maybe I’ve seen her. I don’t know.”

Nick held up the second page. “How about this one? Oskar Manuel. Pallas cat. Forty-five years old. About to become Gazelle’s former manager. Impossible not to remember this grumpy mug once you’ve seen it.”

Tamara gave a violent shake of her head.

Nick held up the last page. “And him? His friends called him Iggy, and it turns out he had a lot of friends. Were you included in that category?”

Tamara’s voice was thick. “I might have said hello to him a couple times…”

“Then maybe you noticed he hasn’t been coming to class lately?”

“I—“

“That’s because he was found a few days ago, dead in the street. No witnesses. Friendliest chinchilla you ever met. Murdered. Makes it hard to turn your homework in on time when that
happens.”

“Nick…” Judy put a paw on Nick’s arm. Tamara was looking at them with tear-filled eyes. Nick reluctantly lowered the picture.

“Why are you doing this?” whispered Tamara.

“Why?” said Nick. “Because some beast is out there attacking innocent animals, and we have reason to believe these classmates of yours know something about it. We think you might know something. And we need you to tell us. Lives depend on it.”

But Tamara was shaking her head, retreating further into the apartment. “I already said I don’t know anything. I swear. What else do you want from me?”

“Only the truth,” said Judy gently.

“Stop saying things like that!” cried Tamara. “Why are you doing this to me? What kind of sick game is this?”

Nick glanced at Judy. She looked as confused by the outburst as he felt.

“You lost us,” said Nick. “What kind of game do you think we’re—”

There was an alarmed trumpet over at the watering hole. Nick jumped. Even the dozing tiger had leapt to her feet, tail puffed. The elephant who had been doing aerobics was pressed up against the side of the watering hole, yelling at—of all things—a giant piece of algae that had floated close to him.

“Stay on your own side, will you?” he said to the soggy dark mass. “It freaks me out when you stick to me like that.”

“Sooooorryyyy,” said the algae.

Nick did a double take. The algae—which wasn’t algae at all but a sloth with dyed green hair—reached out a clawed arm and started doing a very slow breaststroke away from the elephant.

“You better clean the water properly this time once you’re done using it,” said the elephant. “I’m not paying to fix the pump again if you clog it with all that slimy hair of yours.”

“Alllllllll rrrrrrright,” said the sloth.

“Nick!” yelled Judy, and Nick whirled back around to see the badger using their moment of distraction to throw shut the apartment door.

Judy leapt forward and grabbed the knob, twisting it before Tamara could turn the lock. Nick threw his shoulder against door, popping it back open and sending Tamara stumbling with a yelp.

She bolted into the living room and around the front of the couch. Nick and Judy chased after her but were forced to retreat as Tamara started hurling things over the couch at them. Textbooks and DVDs, a remote and coasters.

A volume entitled *poultry poetry and verse* clipped Judy in the hind leg and sent her tumbling under a side table. Nick made a go for it and nearly got boxed in the head by a pair of boxing gloves.

When a flurry of small, decorative pillows announced the end of her good ammo, Nick dove
around the side of the couch. Tamara saw him coming and shoved a couch cushion at him, but he batted it away and tackled her to the floor.

“Paws on the ground,” he ordered. “We’re done playing games with you. If you don’t want to talk to us than maybe there’s someone down at the station you’ll talk to.”

“I don’t think so,” said a new voice from behind them.

Without letting go of Tamara, Nick twisted around to see who had spoken. The tiger from the watering hole was standing in the hallway, and she had Judy pinned to the wall by her throat.

“Let her go,” Nick growled.

The tiger nodded towards Tamara. “You first.”

Judy twisted in the cat’s grip. She didn’t appear to be choking, but the sight of those giant claws digging into her fur sent cold terror through Nick.

He released the badger. She sprang to her feet with a furious hiss at the tiger. “Took you long enough, Tory.”

Nick pulled out his dart gun and aimed it at the tiger. “Now you.”

Tory took in the weapon and gave a chuffing laugh. “Don’t be stupid. Even if that little booster shot was enough to drop me, it definitely won’t do it fast enough to stop me from snapping your partner’s neck here first.”

“But it will be the last thing you ever do,” said Nick.

The tiger scrunched her nose. “What a cheesy line.”

She looked from Nick to Judy, and some of the disgust left her expression as recognition struck. “Hey, I know the two of you. You’re those two cops. The ones that are always on the news.” With her free paw, she snapped her claws together. “Yeah. Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde.” She turned to the badger. “Hey, did you know they were—“

“Of course I knew,” snapped Tamara.

“And you’re sure it’s them?”

“Without a doubt.”

Tory looked disappointed. “That’s too bad. Just goes to show, I guess. Anyone can be dirty nowadays.”

“Whoa, time out,” said Nick. To Tamara, he said, “I know we didn’t end things on such a great note the last time we spoke, but calling us dirty is exaggerating things just a bit, don’t you think? Not to mention hypocritical, considering you’ve been sending your tiger out to attack innocent mammals.”

“Are you talking about me?” said Tory. “You’re accusing me of attacking them?”

“Don’t listen to him,” said Tamara. “He’s just trying to trick you. You can’t trust anything he says.”

“Said the badger with her own attack tiger.”
Tamara rounded on him. “I hired her for protection!”

“Because you’ve been doing something illegal?”

“No. Because you have.”

Nick looked at the badger, noting the genuine fury and fear in her eyes, to the tiger, who was watching him warily.

Nick lowered his gun a bit.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay, wait a minute. Clearly I’m missing something here. But first—” He gestured to Tory. “Would you mind easing your grip on my partner there? She’s supposed to be gray, not blue.”

The cat gave him a measuring look.

“Please,” he added.

She relaxed her hold. Judy sucked in a deep breath.

“Talk to me, Carrots,” said Nick.

“I’m good,” she coughed out.

“Only you would say that while a tiger is holding you by the throat.”

She coughed a laughed.

“Okay, now let’s try this again,” said Nick. “What makes you two think we’re dirty cops?”

“Why are you still playing dumb?” demanded Tamara. “It’s not like anyone else is around to hear us.”

“That’s not what I’m—“

“I know!” she exploded. “I know what you are. And I know what you’ve done. I was there! You came to the apartment and tried to trick me into giving away something then. Like some sick test when you know full well—”

Nick shook his head. “You’re mistaken. I’ve never—”

“You came here with him,” Tamara jabbed a claw at the small kitchen table. “You sat right there and threatened me. Pretended like you were just some nicey-nice cops when it was obvious you were checking in on my sister. Making sure she hadn’t slipped up. Making sure I was keeping my mouth shut. I am not mistaken about any of that.”

Nick felt as if she had struck him in the gut with another boxing glove. He had only visited this place with one other officer. There was only one other him she could possibly be referring to.

“You have to be a mistake,” whispered Nick.

Tamara sneered at him. “Stop playing stupid. I’m finished playing along with your game. You can go straight to the Wildlands for all I care. You, and that hyena cop you call a partner.”
Nick insisted on driving. Judy looked hesitant, but handed over the keys without a fight. He needed something to keep him busy. Keep his mind focused. Otherwise he’d have nothing to do but sit there and think about things, and that was the last thing Nick wanted to do right then.

As it was, driving wasn’t nearly as distracting as he would have liked. Traffic was nearly at a standstill. Even though it was barely noon, it seemed like every animal in Zootopia was on their way to the stadium. Not even the cruiser’s siren got them anywhere, and Nick finally had to silence it out of sheer frustration.

Judy sat in the passenger’s seat, watching him with a somber expression. In the back sat Tory and Tamara. Nick could feel the tiger’s gaze on him in the rearview mirror.

It had been surprisingly easy to convince her of their innocence. Or maybe not so surprising. There had been nothing feigned about his shock to Tamara’s revelation. If she had sucker-punched him in the gut he would not have looked more stunned.

It wasn’t that he had never been betrayed before. Over the years, he’d had plenty of partners skip out on him. Leave him in a lurch. Try to cheat him out of his cut of the profits. But he hadn’t trusted them to begin with. T-dog, though… with his nervous laugh and awkward social skills, who couldn’t catch a culprit to save his life… It strained the mind to think that he had been out there, terrorizing animals. And Nick had been… sticking up for him. Having drinks with him. Completely oblivious.

A paw brushed over his and Nick started. Judy gave him an apologetic look and tipped her head towards the road. “Traffic’s moving.”

*Get it together, Wilde.*

Nick pulled forward. Judy kept watching him. He really wished she would stop.

“Nick… about Tibor…”

The hyena had broken into Judy’s apartment. He had invaded her privacy, destroyed her things, threatened her, hurt her—

“Nick?”

Nick swallowed hard as a wave of nausea swept him. He jerked his chin over his shoulder. “You should see what you can get out of Tamara, while we have time.”

From the back, the badger let out a wet sniff.

Unlike her tiger friend, Tamara had been less than relieved to find out that the officers were innocent. Her accusations of corruption had turned into defensive rambling as she’d started to realize she had assaulted and run from mammals of the law.

From the backseat, Nick heard her ask Tory, “How was I supposed to know? There was no way to tell. What was I supposed to think when they came together like that? A fox and a hyena. Talking as if they were close buddies—”

Nick gave a bark of bitter laughter and the badger flinched. Judy shot him a concerned glance, but was distracted by her phone chiming.

She checked the message and sighed.
“What is it?” Nick asked.

“Harper sent me the class roster. Tibor’s on the list.”

It was nothing they didn’t already know. But seeing the evidence in print felt like another blow.

Nick focused on the road.

Judy shifted in her seat so she could look at Tamara. “If you’re feeling up to it, an explanation would be extremely helpful about now.”

“I had no idea,” whispered the badger. “I swear I didn’t.”

“But you admitted you knew Tibor was behind it all.”

“That wasn’t until later! And I thought the two of you were working with him then. Maybe the whole precinct. I could hardly say anything.”

“And before that?”

Tamara dropped her gaze to the floor. “I sat next to Betty and Oskar in class. I liked talking to them. They were serious about learning and improving their careers, unlike most of the other students who couldn’t even be bothered to stay awake most days.” She glanced up at Judy. “I don’t know who brought it up first. But one day we started talking about animals we knew in our lives who were making… bad decisions.”

“You mean dating outside their species?”

She gave a jerky nod.

“Like your sister?”

“I was just venting! I didn’t know it would get her hurt. Clare drives me crazy sometimes but I would never do anything to put her in danger.”

“Yeah, you’re a real sister of the year,” snarked Nick. “How is Tibor related to this?”

Tamara took a shuddering breath. “He overheard us talking. It had become a standard topic of conversation for us by that point. He invited us out for drinks, sympathized with our problems. None of us had any idea he would actually do something. I wasn’t sure myself it was him until he came to the apartment. That’s when I realized.”

“And Iggy?” Judy asked.

Tamara squirmed in her seat. “Nosey chinchilla. He overheard us talking once and gave us this ridiculous lecture on transcending love and universal acceptance. Really hippy yak type junk. After the attacks started happening, I saw him talking to Tibor after class. It didn’t look like a friendly conversation. It was only later that I wondered if he’d suspected something. He must have tried to confront Tibor or… I don’t know. But he’s dead now. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out what must have happened.”

No, it didn’t.

Once again, Nick felt Judy’s eyes on him.

“When we get to the stadium,” she whispered. “If you would rather sit this one out—"
“No.” There was no way he was going to stand by and let someone else take the hyena in. Nick had a responsibility to stop him. As his former partner.

And former friend.
The stadium was already packed when they arrived. Animals flooded the parking lot, armed to the teeth in Gazelle swag and blasting her songs from their phones and car speakers in a cacophony of pop music.

Tory took lead in the group, snarling at anyone who didn’t immediately move out of Nick and Judy’s way. Tamara trailed behind them. Nick half expected her to bolt while she had the chance, but she stayed with them as they bypassed the ticket counter and made their way inside.

The front lobby was a madhouse. The noise of hundreds of animals talking, laughing, and singing reverberated off the walls and set Nick’s nerves on edge. Judy had her ears pinned back. The sound must have been painful for her more sensitive bunny hearing.

The ZPD stood to one the side of the lobby. It was less crowded here. Animals gave them a wide berth. Some watched them curiously, as if they sensed this was more than just the usual security detail.

Clawhauser greeted them with sad eyes. “I filled them in on what you told me, Judy.”

“Thank you, Clawhauser. Any word on Tibor’s location?”

The cheetah shook his head. “No. We can’t reach Tibor or the rest of his team.”

Judy nodded. It was unfortunate but not unexpected. “We’ll have to go in and search for them then. Have the exits been secured?”

“Chief Bogo is seeing to that now.”

“And Gazelle? She should be transferred somewhere safe for the time being until we apprehend Tibor. Hunter too.”

Clawhauser shifted uncomfortably. “Uh, about that… Gazelle and Hunter have both gone missing. Not even the other backup dancers know what happened. Howle is talking to the other security teams about it now.”

“They must still be in the building.” Judy looked over at Nick, reading his thoughts. “Tibor would want to make his statement during the concert. He can’t have gone far.”

“This is crazy,” grumbled McHorn. “There’s no way it’s Tibor doing all this. It can’t be. He’s one of us.”

“He was one of us,” corrected Francine. “Not he’s just a criminal.”

“A criminal who’s making us look like idiots,” growled Delgato. He glared at Nick. “That mongrel has been following you around for weeks. You’re seriously telling us you never suspected anything in all that time?”

Nick felt the gaze of every single officer swing his way. Tamara’s and Tory’s too. “No,” he answered tightly. “I didn’t know.”

“How incompetent do you have to be not to notice something like that?” asked Delgato. “Or maybe you did notice. Maybe you two have been secretly working together all along—“
“Nick would never do something like that,” said Judy. “He’s a cop.”

“No, he’s a fox.” Delgato shot Nick a hateful look.

“But Tibor’s been going after interspecies couples,” a hippo officer named Henrietta pointed out. “And Nick and Judy are….” She trailed off with a worried look, like she was afraid of pointing out what Judy had already revealed so thoroughly the other day. “Plus, Judy has been attacked herself.”

“Supposedly,” said the lion. “Though I find it suspicious that she couldn’t catch even a single glimpse of her attacker—”

“It was pitch black inside that tunnel,” said Judy. “Not even you would have been able to see anything.”

“And we’re just supposed to take your word for it?”

“Yes.” This came from Francine. “Because Hopps and Wilde are the only two who have managed to make any headway at all in this case. So stop acting like a cub who’s just had his tail stepped on and let’s move on from this.”

“Francine is right.” Chief Bogo broke through the crowd and stepped up next to the elephant. “What’s done is done. I don’t want to hear any more squabbling over who is at fault. I want the victims returned safe and the culprit caught and jailed.” He gave every one of them a hard look, even Tamara and Tory. “I want everyone searching this place in pairs. We’re going to check under every last seat in the stadium if that’s what it takes to find Tibor and others. Understood?”

The officers chorused their assent.

Everyone scattered. Nick was the only one who didn’t immediately move. Guilt was like a living creature clawing up his stomach. He felt ill and overwhelmed. If he failed this… where did they even start?

A small, warm paw slipped into his and squeezed tight. Nick startled and looked down at Judy. She gave him an encouraging smile. “Come on. This way.”

She tugged him through the crowd. Nick knew he should address the paw-holding, but he didn’t have the willpower to pull away and no one was paying attention to them anyway. There were too many other more exciting things to look at here. Instead he asked, “Where are we going?”

“To talk to Gazelle’s manager. He must be here tonight. With any luck he’ll know something helpful—”

“Helpful?” exclaimed Tamara from behind them.

Nick jumped. He’d forgotten about the badger and tiger entirely.

“Seriously? Oskar? We’re thinking of the same cat here, right? The insufferable feline with the miserable puss? He’s never helped anyone but himself a day in his life.”

“It still doesn’t hurt to try,” said Judy.

They made their way across the recession area. It was even more crowded here than in the lobby. Judy had to let go of Nick’s paw just from the sheer crush of bodies pressing in on them. Even with Tory’s help, getting anywhere was an arduous process.
Judy hopped up to wave at someone as they passed, and Nick craned his neck to see Marian waving back from her booth. At the booth next to her’s stood Cottontail. The two of them both had lines stretching halfway across the room; longer than anyone else’s by far. Cottontail was passing out his usual assortment of products, but was also taking time to schmooze and smile at every animal that came up to him.

Marian leaned over to say something to the business bunny. His posture was stiff, but his response seemed sincere enough and the fox beamed like he had just given her the biggest compliment.

Judy had done that, thought Nick. Despite his doubts, she had managed to start bridging the gap between those two, which by all rights should have been impossible. She really was an amazing bunny.

The fur on the back of Nick’s neck rose at the feeling of suddenly being watched. He stopped and looked back. It was surprisingly easy to find the source. In a room that was a riot of motion, there was a single still figure looking his way.

It was the rhino from the fight club.

He watched Nick with those small, cold eyes and Nick froze, his mind racing as he calculated all the possibilities. All the bodies filling the room had suddenly become a trap. If the rhino decided to charge—

“This way,” said Judy, and Nick turned to see her yanking open a staff door. Tory and Tamara ducked through. Judy held out her paw to him. “Nick, come on. We need to hurry.”

“But there’s—“ He turned back.

The rhino was gone.

Judy watched as Nick searched the crowd. He had been looking a bit shellshocked since leaving the apartment, but this was a more immediate state of fear. He looked frantically to his right and left, as if he expected a sudden attack from the sides. Had he spotted Tibor?

“What is it?” she asked him.

When Nick told her who he had seen, she gave the room a sharp once-over herself, ears pricked for the pounding of heavy feet against the floor or sounds of distress from the crowd, but there was nothing. Even the place where the rhino had been standing had already been filled in by others without an inch of space to spare.

“Should we go back look for him?” Judy asked.

“There’s no point,” said Nick, even as his gaze continued sweeping the room. “If he’s really after me, he’ll reveal himself on his own later. Until then, we have more important things to focus on.”

“Your safety is just as important to me,” said Judy.

That got Nick to look at her. He even managed a small smile. “I know,” he said. He reached over and gave her shoulder a squeeze. “It’s okay. Let’s keep going.”

They joined Tory and Tamara in the back hallway. After the cacophony of the front rooms, the staff area felt stiflingly silent.
They continued on to Oskar’s office.

Judy had been right in her hunch. The pallas cat was there. He was pacing around behind his desk when they entered, his already thick coat fluffed with irritation. Judy knocked on the doorframe to get his attention.

He rolled his eyes when he saw them. “Great. You two again. Just the last thing I need.”

“I guess that means you already heard about Gazelle and Hunter,” said Judy.

“What about them?” He held up a paw. “Wait, don’t tell me. Whatever they’ve done I hold no responsibility for them anymore.”

“They’ve gone missing.”

Oskar sniffed. “So? It’s probably another dumb publicity stunt Gazelle cooked up. Just you watch. Rumors will spread. Animals will be beside themselves by the time the concert starts. Then—lo and behold!—she’ll appear on the stage after a dramatic pause and the crowd will go wild. She does this kind of thing all the time.”

“This isn’t some stunt,” said Nick. “Gazelle has been kidnapped. Hunter too. We think there’s a good chance they’re still being held somewhere on the premises.”

The pallas cat raised a furry brow. “Kidnapped? By who?”

“By Tibor.” Tamara, who had been lingering in the hallway with Tory up until that point, stepped up next to Judy.

“For crying out loud!” said Oskar. “You’re here too? Why are you with them?”

“You’re not listening, Oskar. Tibor kidnapped Gazelle.”

“So the lot of you keep saying. But why would he do that?”

“You know why.” The badger moved closer to the cat. “I remember the things you said that night. How you wished you could punish Gazelle for making your life so difficult. That she was ungrateful and needed to be taught a lesson.”

The cat bristled. “So I got a little hot under the collar. It was just some harmless venting. It doesn’t prove anything. It’s not like I told that crazy hyena to do something to her.”

“Are you sure about that?” asked Nick.

Oskar threw up his paws. “This is ridiculous. I have bigger issues right now then worrying about some stupid hyena playing vigilante with a spoiled singer. I’m a victim too, you know!”

“I find that hard to believe,” Nick muttered.

Oskar pointed to the laptop on his desk. “For your information, fox cop, I’ve just been hacked. They’ve gotten into everything. *Everything.* Records, videos, receipts. So why don’t you put your limited focus into *that* instead of standing around making up insane charges.”

Judy said nothing. Nick said nothing. If the pallas cat had been less upset he probably would have taken their distinct lack of reaction as significant. Thankfully, he was too busy huffing and puffing about the injustice caused to him to wonder at their silence.
Judy glanced over and met Nick’s gaze. She knew they were thinking of the same animal. Still, like the rhino, it was a problem that was going to have to wait.

“You’re welcome to come down to the station and file a report,” Judy told Oskar. “Another officer will be able to look into more for you.”

“Yeah,” said Oskar sarcastically. “I’ll be sure to do that.”

“This isn’t getting us anywhere,” Nick whispered to her. “We should go.”

He was right. Either the cat was feigning ignorance or he really thought nothing was going on with Tibor. Either way, staying any longer would be a waste of time.

As they made their way back into the hall, Tamara hesitated at the doorway. “I think I’m going to stay.”

Judy looked back to where the pallas cat was starting to furiously gather items from around the office. “Are you sure?”

“He might say more without the two of you around. It’s the least I can do after…”

“You don’t owe us anything,” Nick said.

Tamara raised her chin. “You’re right, I don’t. But I do owe my sister. I’m staying.”

“I’ll stay too,” said Tory. “Just in case.”

When the badger looked at her in surprise, the tiger shrugged. “I’m technically still your bodyguard right now. Might as well stick around.”

“For Pete’s sake!” exclaimed Oskar. “Why don’t all of you just stay and I’ll order a freakin’ pizza for everyone! We’ll make it a sleepover!”

“Call us if you hear anything about Tibor,” said Judy. “And be careful.”

“We will.”

Judy and Nick returned to the hallway.

Nick sighed. “Well, we are officially out of leads.”

“Then I guess we’ll have to do this the old fashioned way,” said Judy. And marching across the hall, she pulled open the first door she came to.

It was a janitor’s closet.

After a cursory inspection where she felt sure no hyena’s were hiding inside, she moved on to the next door. Behind her, Nick started doing the same.

For the next half hour they made their way slowly along, checking each room and stopping every animal they saw to question them. Judy tried to stay focused on their task, but she couldn’t stop herself from stealing glances at her partner. His expression was closed up tighter than a bear trap, but he looked ready to spring apart at the slightest provocation. She ached to comfort him, but this was neither the time or place. Later she could—

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. It was Clawhauser.
Nick was at her side before she’d even answered. “Hopps speaking.”

The news wasn’t good. Judy tried to keep her expression neutral, but one look at Nick’s face and she knew he could see right through her.

“Just tell me,” he said when she disconnected.

Judy took her time putting her phone away. “They found the rest of the security team. They were hidden in a crawlspace under the stage.”

“Are they okay?”

Judy shook her head.

“How bad?”

“Dead. All of them. Blood loss, they think.”

Nick scrubbed a paw over his face and turned away.

“Nick…”

He yanked open another hall door. This one led to an empty waiting room. For a moment he just stared into the space, unmoving besides the angry twitch of his tail.

“This isn’t your fault, Nick.”

He slammed the door shut. The echo of it rang up and down the hallway. Judy winced.

“How is it not my fault, Carrots? Delgato’s right. I should have seen the signs. Instead of waiting for a victim to show up and throw the answers into my face.”

“Nobody saw the signs,” said Judy.

“But he was my partner.”

“And that means you’re supposed to know every hidden desire he has?” demanded Judy. “Not even you are that clever, Nicholas Wilde.”

“That’s not what I—” Nick clenched his paws. “You don’t get it, Carrots. It’s not that I missed some tiny clue. This whole time, Tibor was playing me. That means everything he did, every conversation we had, it was all a lie. And I failed to see through any of it.”

In other words, he felt like he had been conned. By a friend.

A door at the end of the hall flew open and Officer Howle poked his head out. “I thought I heard the two of you out here. Come with me. We may have found something.”
Howle led them through the backstage area, which was far more crowded than the last time they had come by. The place was full of various stadium staff loitering about, looking nervous. Whether it was prey seeking the safety of a herd, or a predator wanting the protection of a pack, when danger closed in everyone felt safer in a group.

Nick and Judy followed Howle over to a small crowd of crew animals in the back that had gathered around a narrow doorway. A sign above it read: small staff only. Inside was a wooden staircase, dusty and poorly lit. All the animals were watching it warily. Like they expected a monster to appear from the gloom at any moment.

"Where does it lead?" asked Judy.

"It used to lead to the catwalk," said Howle. He said used to because more than twenty planks had been snapped in half, as if whoever had gone up it had put their foot through each step as they went, leaving more than half the staircase unusable and the catwalk itself inaccessible.

"Tibor must be up there," said Nick.

Howle nodded. "That's what I think too. I've asked around, but this is the only way up."

"What about a ladder?"

"They don't have anything tall enough. We could call the fire department to bring us something but…"

But it might not be in time to stop whatever was happening upstairs.

Judy eyed the distance to the first intact step, gauging the height and angle.

"I can make that," she said.

Nick followed the direction of her gaze. His eyes went wide. "You can't be serious. That has to be over twelve feet!"

"I've done fifteen."

"That was for training. There were safety measures in place. Plus, that was straight across. This is up."

"I can make it," Judy insisted.

"Well I can't," snapped Nick. "And there's no way you're going up there without backup."

"I'm better than nothing, which is what Gazelle and Hunter will have if I don't go," Judy pointed out. "You don't really think Tibor went up there alone, do you? They're in danger, Nick."

"And you joining them will help them out—how? Do you have a plan? Information on the situation that I don't have? Because if you do, by all means, enlighten me."

Judy raised her chin. "You know I don't. But we don't have time for any of that. I'll just have to wing it when I get up there."
"Wing it." The words came out faint. "Like how you winged it in the tunnel?"

The words stung. Judy's ears went back. "That was different. I was caught off guard then. I'll be going in prepared this time."

"We must have very different definitions of what constitutes being prepared," said Nick. He looked her over. "You didn't even have your tranq gun with you."

"No…" Judy drew out the word. "But I do have a very clever partner who thought to bring his along." She held out her paw with a guileless smile. "You'll lend me yours, won't you?"

Nick did not soften at compliment or the smile. He turned to Howle in appeal. "You can't agree with this crazy strategy?"

"It's not ideal," the wolf admitted. "However..."

"However?" Judy urged, earning a scowl from Nick.

Howle shot the fox a sympathetic look. "However, I saw the bodies of the security guards. It wasn't pretty. Whatever Tibor has planned, he means business. I don't believe he means to leave Gazelle or Hunter alive."

"All the more reason why Hopps shouldn't go up there alone," snapped Nick.

"All the more reason why I should," said Judy.

They stared at each other in a silent stand-off. From out in the stadium they could hear the growing noise of fans taking their seats: laughter, yipping, and even the occasional excited howl filtered though the many layers of thick curtains and moveable wall dividers. They had no idea of the violence that had already happened just below the stage, or the danger their favorite singer was in.

Judy looked expectantly at Nick.

She saw the moment when the fight went out of him. His whole body seemed to fold in on itself and he sighed, a deep, resigned sound. He pulled out his tranquilizer gun and handed it to her. "At least promise me you'll be careful up there, Carrots."

"Of course I'll be—"

He reached out and cupped her face, drawing her close. His paws were so big they cradled Judy from her cheeks to the base of her skull. She felt engulfed by him, both physically and emotionally. His gaze bored into hers, dark and serious.

"Not like that," said Nick, "I need you to promise me that you will take every precaution up there. That you won't just dive into something without thinking about what could happen to you first."

"I always try to do that."

"But this time I need you to do better than try. I need it to be at the forefront of your mind the entire time. I need you to promise me, Judy. Please, just—" He pressed his forehead to hers, as if he could will her to say the words and mean them.

From the corner of her eye, Judy saw Howle pointedly turn away and start peppering the crew animals with questions.

"I promise." She tried to mean it. She didn't intend to fail; she never did. But they both heard the
acknowledgment of the possibility in her voice.

Nick blew out a hard breath and released her. Judy felt his paws fall away and had to stop herself from grabbing them back. She felt bereft and strangely guilty and wasn't sure why. Surely she was making the right decision here? Animals were in danger and she had the ability to try and help. Didn't that mean she had an obligation as an officer to give it her all?

"And what, exactly, do you consider your obligation to Wilde?"

She tried to fling off the unwanted memory, but the small fox’s words stuck like a particularly painful burr in her paw.

Nick had turned away from her and was sizing up the broken staircase like a dragon he intended to slay.

"I'll figure out a way up as quickly as I can," he told her, his voice hard with determination. "There might not be a ladder, but if I have to build a new staircase out of costume racks and lightning equipment in order to get up there to you then that's what I'll do."

And if that bravado-laden proclamation wasn't enough, he followed it up with an overlarge smile and a cheesy wink. Still reassuring her, still promising to protect her, still giving her all the freedom she could ever desire even as his every look and gesture screamed his unhappiness.

From out in the stadium animals had begun chanting for Gazelle, a violent tolling sound that said they were running out of time. If Judy was going to do this now was the moment.

Still, she hesitated.

"You can preach from your soapbox about police responsibility all day, but when it comes to sharing your life with a mate you haven't got a clue."

Except Finnick was wrong. That was the most frustrating part about it. If Judy had simply been clueless, how much easier things would be! If someone just had to point out to her what she was missing so she could fix it…

But Judy wasn't clueless. She knew exactly when she was hurting Nick and why. When she took a risk that scared him. When she put her job before "them." She was always intensely, acutely, painfully aware. She was just at a loss as to what she could possibly do differently.

The chanting grew louder, rising in excitement and speed until it was nothing but a senseless roaring. Booming vibrations through the floor announced the arrival of the bigger animals taking their seats. Elephants trumpeted.

Still Judy didn't move.

"Carrots? You all right?"

"I should have planned better." The admission came quietly. If Nick had been any farther away he might not have heard it over the noise of the crowd.

"You never plan for anything," he said, and though he didn't say it like a judgement, for the first time the truth made Judy feel lacking.

"Still, I should have planned for this. It's important. It might be the most important thing. And I knew it would be hard and I still thought I could just go along and everything would turn out
okay."

Nick cocked his head at her. "You know you're not making much sense here, right, Carrots? If this little speech is supposed to be making me feel better about you going up there alone then I have to tell you you're missing the mark."

"That's just it. I'm so used to going it alone that even after this long it's the first action I turn to. I can't keep doing that. More importantly... I don't think I should."

She stepped away from the staircase and closer to Nick. The poor fox looked utterly confused now. "What's with this sudden turnaround?"

"Call it... second thoughts? You were right before," said Judy. "I shouldn't face Tibor alone. He will be a tough opponent even in the best of circumstances. I want—I need—my partner there with me." She held out her paw.

Nick looked down at the proffered paw, and Judy saw the surprise and relief that passed over his face as he started to take it. But then doubt clouded his expression and he hesitated. "Are you sure about this, Carrots?"

"When it comes to my partner," said Judy, "I am always sure."

"Thank the Great Turtle." The words came out a whisper. His big paw wrapped around hers, sure and strong, and Judy thought that whatever the outcome, she wouldn't regret this decision.

Together they both looked over at the broken staircase.

"You've already thought of another way up, haven't you?" said Nick.

Judy smiled. He knew her so well. "Maybe."

"I'm not going to like it, am I?"

Her smile widened. "Not at all," she said, because she knew her fox well too.

Nick took a deep breath in and nodded. "Okay. Let's do this."

"Together," she said.

"Together," he agreed.

"I've changed my mind. You go up without me."

"It'll be fine," said Judy. "Francine has great aim. Don't you, Francine?"

The elephant puffed out her chest. "Champion of the javelin throw three years in a row on my track and field team in high school."

"I am not a javelin," said Nick.

"No, you're more like a noisy dart," agreed Francine. "Now hold still, will you? Otherwise you might find yourself crowdsurfing."

Nick went rigid in the grip of the elephant's powerful trunk. He was still muttering curses even as she lifted him up and let him fly.
Luckily, her aim was as good as her word. Nick started to lose speed just as he reached the first set of intact stairs. He grabbed for the solid pieces of wood, caught hold, and pulled himself up.

He was still clinging to the step when Judy landed with a graceful leap beside him a minute later. On instinct, he reached out and caught her by the wrist. But her balance was perfect, of course, and she smiled at him as if his fear of her plummeting to her death was the cutest thing in the world.

She turned and waved down at Francine, Howle, and the growing collection of backstage workers who clapped and whistled like they had just been shown an entertaining trick. Howle shushed them with a growl. "This is serious police business."

Nick forced himself up on wobbly legs. "Okay, now what?"

"Now we go find Tibor."

"Uh-huh. And then what?"

"We, um, catch and arrest him?"

Nick gave a quiet laugh. "You really are terrible at this planning thing."

"It's a work in progress," said Judy. "Now let's go."

She bounded up the stairs, silent and quick as only a bunny could be. Nick followed more carefully behind. The sign above the doorway hadn't lied. This area really wasn't meant for animals over a certain size. The floorboards felt soft beneath Nick's feet. No wonder Tibor had been able to break the stairs so easily.

They reached the upper landing, which stretched out into a network of narrow, rickety walkways that zigzagged above the stage, held up by fraying rope and sketchy metalwork. As loathe as Nick was to agree with Oskar about anything, he had to admit the pallas cat was right that this part of the theater at least had seen better days.

Below them, dozens of spotlights illuminated the stage. Their blinding glow reflected off the glossy floor of the stage and back up into the rafters, rising around them like a strange, artificial dawn, complete with a musty smelling heat that made Nick's nose itch. He did he best to rub the sensation away. The last thing they needed was for him to give away their element of surprise with a sudden fit of sneezing.

Judy tapped Nick's arm and pointed. At the very far edge of the catwalk, directly over the stage, was Tibor, Gazelle, and Hunter.

Nick and Judy took cover behind a dust-caked pile of lighting equipment and took stock: Gazelle and Hunter were lying prone with their wrists and ankles bound. Both were dressed for the stage with Gazelle in sparkling sapphire gauze and Hunter in black sequined lycra. Gazelle's hair had been swept into a tumbled updo that now looked more tumbled than up, and she had one of her legs tucked against her in a way that made Nick think injury. Hunter sported signs of abuse too, with significant swelling around his left eye, and his tail, sheathed as he'd said it would be in more glittery spandex, bent at an unnatural angle that made Nick's stomach turn.

But the most distressing thing of all was the coil of rope tied around each of their necks. Tibor had his back to Nick and Judy. His shoulders were hunched, his movements fast and jerky as he bent to check Gazelle's and Hunter's bindings, adjust the tightness of their nooses, or peek over the railing at the swelling crowd below. He didn't speak to Gazelle or Hunter, who seemed docile
enough that Nick wondered if they had been drugged or beaten far worse than they first appeared. The only sounds came from the animals below, the groan of the floorboards as Tibor went about his preparations, and the hyena's own quiet panting.

Nick had a moment to hope that perhaps his former colleague—former friend—was anxious. That maybe he could still be talked down, made to see that what he was doing was wrong. But then Tibor leaned over the railing again, his face caught full in the glow from the spotlights, and Nick felt his hope turn to ash like a paper scrap in a bonfire. Because the expression that illuminated his face wasn't one of nervousness, but excitement. His lips were turned up in a smile, and there was a crazy light in his eyes that had nothing to do with the spotlights. This was not a creature conflicted by moral doubt.

This was not a friend he could save.

Beside him, Judy started to pull out the tranquilizer gun, but Nick covered it with his paw and shook his head. Tibor was too big, too determined, and too close to the edge of the catwalk. The sedative wouldn't work fast enough to drop him before he dropped Gazelle and Hunter first.

Judy looked at Nick in silent question. Nick mimed a noose and pointed up into the darkness of the rafters where Gazelle's and Hunter's ropes were tied. First, they needed to remove the threat of hanging.

He pointed at himself and then Tibor, and then at Judy and the rafters. *I'll distract Tibor. You climb up and untie the ropes.*

But Judy shook her head and waved a paw in front of her face, then gestured up. It took Nick a second to figure out what she was trying to get across. The lighting was poor. It would be even poorer higher up. And Judy was brilliant at many things, but seeing in the dark was not one of them.

She then did some pointing of her own: Herself, Tibor; Nick, rafters.

It was a valid plan B.

Nick hated it.

Judy laid a paw on his arm. She waited until he met her eyes, then pointed at herself and made a "cross my heart" gesture over her chest.

It was ridiculous that she thought such a silly gesture in the face of real danger would make him feel better.

It was ridiculous how much it worked.

He pointed a claw at her in warning, just so she knew he wasn't a complete pushover. She rolled her eyes and shoved him away, and Nick pretended not to see the smile she shot him. He slipped off into the darkness and started to climb.

Judy waited until Nick was a shadow in the rafters before turning her attention to Tibor. The hyena had returned to watching the stadium. His wide mouth was pulled back into an unnerving smile as he surveyed the animals below. The sheer glee in his expression was terrifying.

*Time to put a stop to this.*
Judy stepped out from behind her dusty bit of cover and purposely let her feet scuff over the floorboards.

Tibor whipped around, claws extended and teeth bared. If Judy had been within reaching distance she felt sure he would have slashed first and not bothered with questions later. Even in the gloom with her poor vision she could see the blood that caked the front of his uniform. Her stomach flipped and she had to swallow back the grief that rose in her throat. He hadn't just killed those security guards. He had slaughtered them.

Tibor spotted her immediately. It was a chilling reminder for Judy that hyenas were famously known for their superior night vision.

His grin widened at the sight of her. "Hopps."

Judy inclined her head fractionally. "Tibor."

His gaze snapped to the darkness behind her, then to the left and right, searching. "Where's Wilde?"

"Still stuck in traffic, I'm sure," Judy lied. "He just went to visit a classmate of yours. Your secret's out, Tibor. Everyone knows it was you."

Inexplicably, this caused him to laugh. That high-pitched, yipping giggle raised the fur along Judy's spine.

"Did I say something funny?"

Tibor shook his head, shoulders still shaking. From below, the howls of several excited wolves rose up, reverberating off the metal ceiling above them.

"It's almost time," Tibor told her. "For Nick's sake, I'll give you one last chance to run. Fair warning though: once I'm done up here, I'm coming after you."

"For Nick's sake? You honestly expect me to believe you still care about Nick's feelings?"

"Of course I care." The hyena sounded offended. "I'm his friend."

"You're joking."

The manic grin finally faltered. He looked at her coolly. "I understand him better than you ever will. We come from the same background. We face the same prejudices. We know how the world really works. How unfair it is."

Behind him, the rope from Gazelle's noose went slack, and then fell with a quiet whumph onto the wooden boards.

"The world is unfair to all of us," said Judy. "That's why it's so important that we keep fighting. To make things better."

"For once I'm in complete agreement with you. It's why I've worked so hard at this."

"Meting out your own brand of justice on those who don't conform to your personal beliefs is not how we make the world a better place," argued Judy. "Who gave you the right?"

Tibor smacked his chest. Flakes of blood broke off and floated down like mutilated feathers. "I gave myself the right. That the whole point! And once I've proven myself, then he'll see."
"Killing animals won't prove anything to Nick besides that you're sick," said Judy.

Tibor cocked his head in confusion. "I'm not doing this convince Nick of anything. I know I'll need a different approach when it comes time to make him see. But I'll get there eventually. He's too smart a fox not to realize the truth. And you'll be long gone by then, so that will make things easier too."

Judy felt her temper flare. Not because of the casualness with which he spoke of her impending death, but of his confidence that he could get Nick to join him in committing such atrocities.

"Nick will never be part of your pack, with or without me around."

"We'll see," was all Tibor said.

At that moment the lights started flashing, off-on, off-on. A signal for the audience to take their seats. Apparently no one had remembered to tell the workers over in the tech booth that things had gone awry. Each flash sent Judy's world from pitch black to gloom and back. She grabbed the handrail as vertigo swept her and her balance tilted.

Tibor adjusted his blood-soaked cuffs. "That's a good enough cue as any," he said. "Last chance to run, rabbit."

Hunter's noose wobbled and then dropped. Judy dared not risk so much as a glance upwards. Inwardly though, she cheered. Now she just needed to hold out until Nick could get back down to her. Then they would figure out a way to turn the tables somehow…

The tiger stirred the second the noose went lax around his throat. Very gently, he began nudging Gazelle with his nose. But while he seemed to have been feigning unconsciousness, the signer appeared to be genuinely groggy. She rolled onto her side with a quiet moan, tucking her hurt leg in tighter.

Tibor started to glance back. Judy rushed forward. "Stop this!"

The hyena looked back at her, one eyebrow raised. The sight of a charging bunny probably looked comical to him. Judy was more concerned with how close she had gotten. There was barely a tail's length between them now. But she didn't retreat. She raised herself to her full high, ears erect, demanding the hyena's full attention.

"Killing me won't help you get away," she told him. "There will be at least a dozen officers waiting for you below and the only one way down. There's no escape."

"Escape was never part of the plan," said Tibor, as if she were missing the obvious. "Once I finish killing these two I will be turning myself in. It will be a completely peaceful process."

"And killing me, of course," Judy added.

There was that creepy grin again. "Of course."

That seemed to be all there was to say. Still there was no sign of Nick. Tibor watched her, a bloody specter in the dark, blinking in and out of existence as the lights continue to flash. Judy cast around for something else to say to keep him distracted.

"Why have you been trying to kill me?"

Tibor shook his head. "You're just stalling now. Run if you want; grilling me won't save you."
She was stalling, just not for the reason he thought. "On the contrary, I think I have a right to know why you've been so set on killing me."

"I haven't been trying to kill you," Tibor denied. "Those were just warnings before. I give everyone a warning. But I'm not surprised you didn't listen. Few do."

"So because I didn't listen you've decided to kill me?"

Tibor shrugged. "I can't let you get away with what you've been doing just because you're partners with a friend of mine."

"And what have I been doing?"

Tibor snarled at her. "You know exactly what you've been doing. Putting strange thoughts into Nick's head, ruining his true nature. He'll be far better off without you."

"Your sense of altruism is staggering. Truly."

He waggled a claw at her. "Sarcasm doesn't become you. Still, I will admit it's not just about upholding my moral code and freeing a good friend from a toxic relationship. There's a selfish reason mixed in there too."

"And that is?"

Tibor gestured to her, a sweeping motion that encompassed everything from the tips of her ears to her fuzzy toes. "It's you."

"What does that mean?"

"You're the favored officer of the ZPD. Zootopia's hero. The preys' sweetheart bunny. Killing you will impress him more than all my other achievements combined."

"Impress who?"

"I'm afraid that's a secret you won't get to find out. Still, you should be thanking me for sparing you this long. I really have let my mouth run away with me. You always were easy to talk to. I will miss that."

Judy felt the shift in him. She was going to have to run. Still, she tried one last time. "Tibor, don't."

"Sorry, rabbit," said Tibor.

And then he pulled out a gun and shot her.

Nick had been trying to find his way back down when he heard the shot. The sound exploded off the rafters like shrapnel; freezing his steps, freezing his heart.

Through the crisscross of beams and rope and shadows he saw Judy. She stumbled back, yanking something out of her shoulder and tossing it away: a tranquilizer dart.

Nick forced himself to breath again. It was just a dart. Not a bullet. There was still time…

But not much. Already the sedative was starting to take effect. Judy's movements became wobbly as she backed away from the advancing hyena. Each lurching step sent her teetering dangerously close to the catwalk's rusted railings.
Tibor took one shuffling step after her at a time. If they had been on the ground, he would already have been able to pounce. But the catwalk was too fragile for an animal as heavy as he was to go leaping across it. Nick still had time to do… something.

Nick spared a precious moment to look back at Hunter and Gazelle. The tiger had already chewed through the rope binding his and Gazelle's wrists and removed their nooses. Gazelle leaned heavily against him. Her delicate features were pulled tight in pain as she clutched her leg. Blood stained her dress. When Hunter lifted the delicate fabric, Nick could see the break in the bone even from so high above.

As if he sensed Nick's gaze, Hunter looked up. He met Nick's eyes and swung a decisive paw in Judy's direction. Go.

Nick didn't have the luxury of doubting him. He took off across the metal rafters, nearly slipping twice in his haste.

Below, Judy tripped and went down. When it was clear she wasn't going to be able to get herself back up, she rolled onto her back and yanked out the tranquilizer gun she had taken from Nick. She fumbled it, caught the weapon and swung it up just as Tibor reached for her.

She fired off a shot.

The hyena let out a fur-raising shriek and threw his head back, his great claws scrabbling to pull out the dart now embedded in his left eye.

Judy half-crawled, half threw herself behind the pile of lighting equipment that had served as their hiding place not ten minutes before.

Tibor had gotten hold of the dart, and with a pained howl, pulled it from his eye. He took off along the catwalk, his furious steps sending up squeals of protest from the thin wood planks. He was ten seconds away from reaching Judy. Seven seconds… five…

Nick watched in growing horror. There was nothing he could do from so high up, and there wasn't time to get down. If only he had some sort of weapon, or even just something he could throw…

That's when he noticed the sandbags. There were dozens of them all along the rafters. Counterweights and spares, poorly-maintained or forgotten entirely.

They would have to do.

Nick made his way over to the nearest one, took aim, and shoved.

The sandbag whistled down, striking the hyena across the back and sending his right foot crashing through the floorboard. He pitched forward but caught himself against the railing. The whole thing squealed and buckled, and Tibor straightened away from it, yanking his leg free. He shuffled away from the compromised spot. Fresh blood matted the fur on his leg.

He looked up at the rafters, paw cupped over his injured eye. "Is it you up there, Wilde? It is, isn't it? Come down. We don't need to do it like this."

"You're right." Nick pulled out his cuffs and tossed them down. They landed with a clatter in front of Tibor. "Get on your knees and cuff yourself. Then we can end all of this right now."

Tibor looked down at the cuffs. "If it will make you feel better, then of course I will do as you say." He looked up at Nick. "But I have to finish my job here first."
He whipped back around and started as fast as he dared towards where he had left Gazelle and Hunter. When he saw them standing there, awake and free of their bindings, true rage flashed across his face. He increased his pace, the boards bending with every step. Nick ran for the next sandbag and pushed it over.

This time the hyena was prepared for it. Sharp claws flashed and the sandbag exploded in a shower of gritty rain. The hyena howled as particles got in his injured eye and he shook his head in an effort to clear his vision.

It was all the distraction they needed. Gazelle reached up and wrapped her arms around Hunter's neck. In a flash he had scooped her up into his arms and darted off into the shadowy maze of footbridges.

Tibor spun around with snarl. "None of you are getting out of here without going through me first!" he shouted at them. "So you might as well come and face the music now." He abruptly broke out into a fit of yipping giggles. "Get it? Music? We're at a concert? I'm about to snuff a singer? Come on! I thought that was pretty good."

A clatter came from Judy's hiding place as a single dart rolled across the catwalk. Apparently she had been attempting to reload the tranquilizer gun. Tibor ran for her, no longer being careful with his speed. Nick threw down another sandbag and this time Tibor caught it. The boards below his feet made a noise of distress and he tossed the heavy bag away quickly. He kept going.

Above him, Nick flew across the rafters. There was another sandbag across the way but the angle was bad and the next closest one was too far.

Tibor reached Judy's hiding place. Nick shouted a warning and Judy leapt drunkenly away just as Tibor grabbed for her. Lighting equipment scattered. Tibor landed hard on his stomach and the whole floor bowed. He made a wild swipe for Judy, those long claws catching her in the side. Judy cried out.

Nick didn't think. He grabbed a coil of rope, checked that the end was tied off, and jumped.

The dusty air stung his eyes, but Nick kept them open, trying to aim as best he could while freefalling.

He landed directly on Tibor's back. The floor below the hyena gave with a deafening crack. Tibor yelped and tried to roll to safety, but the break extended too far and he fell through.

Judy, too, got caught in the collapse. Nick grabbed for her as she started to slide down. It wasn't a gentle or graceful move. He threw out paw and managed to grab a clawful of the back of her shirt. He yanked her as securely against him as he could. With his other paw he held tight to the rope. But they were still falling, the rope continuing to unspool at an ever-increasing speed.

The world went white as they fell beneath the beams of over a hundred spotlights. The momentary blindness spared Nick from seeing Tibor hit the stage, but he still heard it. The crunching thud. The silence that followed. Nick pulled Judy's limp body closer and thought: This is it.

The rope snapped taut. Something popped in Nick's shoulder and fire burned through his paw as the rope was ripped from his grip. He hit the floor feet first, bolts of pain shooting up his legs as momentum sent him sprawling across the stage floor.

Nick lay there, trying to breath through the pain that seemed to emanate from every part of his body. Not one inch of him didn't hurt. His shoulder was a throbbing drum of agony, and his paw
felt like he had stuck it in a fire and cooked it for five hours. His right arm didn't feel right; it didn't hang right. Just looking at it made Nick feel ill. He had never in his life wanted to pass out so badly. The option was there. He could feel it hovering on the edges of his mind, waiting for him to give in to it. But then he remembered: Judy.

She lay just out of reach on her side, unmoving. The sight was terrifying enough to get Nick up and moving. Clutching his messed up arm, he tried to rise, but putting weight on his feet was like trying to walk on a floor made of electrified needles. Instead he half-dragged, half-scooted himself those precious few inches over to his partner's side. With his good paw he tried to check her over for injuries. There was a good-sized lump already beginning to grow near her temple where she had struck her head, and she moaned when he touched her left wrist, but nothing stood out to him as needing emergency first aid. Her side where Tibor had slashed at her was bleeding but the cut looked shallow. Already the edges had started to clot. Her breathing was sluggish, but that could be from the sedative.

Nick ran a paw over her belly, checking for any signs of internal damage. Her eyes fluttered. Blown pupils struggled to focus on him. "Did we... stop him?"

Nick spared a glance at the unmoving mound on the other side of the stage, crumpled beyond hope. The was a surreality to the sight that Nick didn't yet know how to process. He had never killed anyone in the line of duty before. And though he wanted to say that it hadn't been his intention, that he hadn't thought past protecting Judy and the others, admitting he had killed someone thoughtlessly didn't make him feel any better.

Not just someone. Tibor.

Nick shook the thought away. Later. He would think about that later. Now he needed to get Judy help. Get himself help. Where were all the other officers? Surely they had heard what had happened from backstage?

"Shot," Judy slurred, rubbing a clumsy paw over the spot where the tranquilizer dart had struck her. "Dumb... Got too close."

"Just relax," said Nick, catching her paw. "Do you hurt anywhere?"

Judy jerked her head. "Li'l bit. Mostly just... sleepy."

"Then sleep."

But even as he said it, the stadium started to buzz with the whisperings of thousands of mammals as the shock of what they had just witnessed started sinking in.

—What is going on?

—This can't be part of the show, can it?

—Did that hyena really just die on stage?

—Where is Gazelle?

—Is that Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde?

—Should someone call an ambulance?

Nick tried to ignore it all. Just staying upright was enough of an effort right now. As far as he was
concerned, his job was over. Let Howle or someone else take over soothing the frightened crowd.

But then someone in the audience screamed. Adrenaline shot through Nick's exhausted body and he whipped around, wondering if he yelled at them to be quiet if they would hear him without a microphone.

Then he saw what had made them scream. Nick's stomach dropped.

Tibor was moving. No, he was getting up. Those long claws scrapping across the wood as he fought to rise. Blood flow freely from his head. The entire right side of his face was covered in it. Something was wrong with his jaw. It looked crooked. His sharp fangs were exposed in a way that was unnatural. Pink saliva hung in ropey strands from the corners of his mouth as fought to breathe.

"—ruined it… you ruined it…" The words came out thick, garbled, and angry. "After e-everything I did… you and tha' bunny…"

Nick moved in front of Judy protectively. "You have to stop now, Tibor. It's over. All you're doing now is making your injuries worse. Stand down so we can help you."

"Help me?" Tibor let out a whine, ragged and raw. He clutched at his chest. it was oddly sunken. Nick could see the white points of bone sticking through the gray speckled fur.

"If you want to help… T-then move. I can still… finished this. I can still show him…" 

Judy's small paws were suddenly at Nick's back, weakly pushing at him. Did she really think he would leave her there and save himself? Dumb bunny.

With his good paw Nick reached behind him and caught her paws in his, stilling her.

"I'm not letting you have Judy," said Nick. "That's just not going to happen."

"She's just some hare-brained—"

"My partner."

"A n-nuisance."

"You're not getting her."

Judy's paws went limp on his. Her head lolled against his back. Nick told himself it was just the tranquilizer. Nothing more.

"Why?" The question came out a wheeze. Blood bubbled at the corners of the hyena's mouth.

"You know why."

"Say it!" The words were shrieked through torn muscles and punctured lungs, blind rage giving them a strength they had no right to have.

"Because I love her," said Nick. He bared his teeth in a fierce smile. "I guess that puts us both on your hit list now."

Tibor shook his head, flinging blood and spit. "It's a mistake…"

"No, it's the best choice I've ever made," said Nick. "You're the one who's made the mistake. I can only hope you live long enough to realize that."
"Left me… no choice."

"You still have all the choice you need," said Nick, but Tibor was already starting towards them. He couldn't straighten all the way, forcing him to stay on all fours. His breathing was growing more labored, a wet sucking sound that made Nick feel like choking just by listening to it.

"Have to... kill you both."

"Stop being an idiot and listen to me for once!" Nick shouted. Still the hyena didn't slow.

Nick released Judy and angled himself as best he could to defend against the incoming attack. He had one working arm and enough strength, maybe, for one last fight. It was going to hurt like a beast, but if he managed to time things right, with Tibor in the condition that he was, there was at least a small chance Nick could win...

Heavy steps suddenly pounded across the stage, and Nick sent up a prayer of thanks. Backup to the rescue. Finally. And in the form of Officer McHorn, if Nick were to guess by the distinctive tread.

"Took you long enough," Nick started to say. But then he caught sight of the approaching figure and realized that while he had been right about it being a rhino, he had been very wrong about which rhino.

It wasn't Officer McHorn.

It was the rhino from the fight club.

*Looks like Tibor is going to have to get in line,* Nick thought as the hyena froze at the sight of the charging rhino. But whatever small amount of satisfaction Nick took in seeing Tibor's final plans sabotaged was quickly drowned in a wave of inevitability. Because whether it was hyena or rhino, Nick could no longer fool himself into believing that he and Judy were going to survive this.

He turned and pulled Judy against him. It was awkward with only one arm and it hurt, but he'd be damned if he was going to leave her undefended in their final moments. Her sleeping form sagged against him and Nick was grateful she had at least been granted this one small mercy. He curled himself around her as best he could and prayed for a miracle that at least she somehow might live.

Out of the corner of Nick's eye he saw a blur of white and gray explode from the backstage curtain and streak towards them. Howle to the rescue at last.

But it was too little, too late. He reached them just as the rhino was closing in. With no time for anything else, he threw himself between the pair and the rhino, his teeth bared and hackles raised, as if one lone wolf was somehow going to be able to stop five thousand pounds of charging muscle. Nick didn't even have time to call him crazy—or thank him for trying.

The rhino blew by them like a rocket. Nick felt the gust of air as he barreled past and had a moment of utter confusion—how could he have possibly missed them?—But then he realized.

He looked around just in time to watch the rhino slam into Tibor at full force, lifting the broken hyena off his feet and sending him flying backwards off the stage. Nick never even heard the impact over all the screams.

A lot of things happened at once then.

More officers rushed onto the stage. McHorn, Francine, and Chief Bogo all tackled the unresisting rhino and cuffed him. Officer Delgato read him his rights. The rhino made no attempt to struggle
or speak the entire time.

Theater workers appeared in the stands and began escorting the audience out one row at a time.

EMT's came. They swarmed around Nick and Judy until Nick could no longer see the edge of the stage where Tibor had gone over.

"Tibor too," he said, shaking off the paws the gently tried to push him down. "You need to go help Tibor too. His injuries are far more serious than mine."

"Someone is already down there taking care of it." This came from Howle.

It. Not him. Nick felt himself bristling. "Just one? He needs way more help than that. Stop touching me!" he snapped as a lemur tried to inspect his injured arm. "Go help Tibor. I can wait—"

"Wilde, you're in shock," said Howle. "Calm down and let them look at you."

"But Tibor—"

"Can't be helped," said the wolf, not unkindly. "Not anymore."

Nick wasn't consciously aware of trying to move until he felt pain flare up his legs. The EMT's all made noises of alarm and started to reach for him, but they were prey animals in the end and he was a fox, and one snarled, "Don't touch me!" had them all shrinking back.

All except for Howle. The wolf caught him by his good arm and yanked him back, jostling Nick's bad shoulder and sending a wave of pain-induced nausea through him. "I understand you're upset. But causing a scene isn't going to help. What are you trying to do?"

"I need to see."

"Seeing won't make you feel better," said Howle. "You need to—"

"Help me or let go," said Nick. "I'm not going to ask twice."

"You're not asking now," the wolf pointed out, but he helped Nick get to his feet.

It was bearable. Just.

With Howle's support Nick hobbled across the stage. The rhino had been taken away, leaving only officers to finishing making notes and taking evidence of the scene. They shot Nick looks as he passed but he ignored them. All his focus was on that single point beyond the edge of the stage.

There was an EMT there, just as Howle had said, along with a few other officers and stadium crew members who had been tasked with clearing the audience from the immediate area.

And then there was Tibor. Until the coroner saw him, they wouldn't know if the official cause of death had been impalement by horn or a broken neck from the fall. Either way, Howle had been right. Tibor couldn't be helped by anyone. Not anymore.

The wolf had been right about one other thing as well: Seeing it didn't make Nick feel any better.

"Did you find Gazelle and Hunter?"

"They're on their way to the hospital as we speak."
"Gazelle's leg…"

"You should be worrying about your own legs right now," said Howle. "And your arm. You know it's dislocated right?"

"Hadn't noticed."

Howle muttered something under his breath. "Wait here. I'll have them grab you a stretcher."

He waited like he expected Nick to argue, but honestly the idea of walking back sounded like torture, and all Nick felt now was tired.

Before going, Howle helped him to sit. When the wolf still lingered, Nick said, "I promise I won't go anywhere."

"It's not that," said the wolf.

"Then what?"

"We could hear you up there, you know. On the catwalk. Your voices echoed."

"So at least the acoustic here work," said Nick. "Score one for the theater."

"The way Tibor was talking, it sounded like he was working for someone."

"More like he wanted to work for someone."

"Do you have any idea who he meant?" asked Howle.

Nick looked down at the body of what had once been his partner, and possibly, in his own twisted way, his friend.

"No. But I intend to find out."
Chapter 22

"Good evening, citizens of Zootopia. I'm Fabienne Growley from the Zootopia News Network, here to bring you a special report with two very special guests." The snow leopard gave one of her famous reserved smiles and inclined her head to the two animals seated next to her. "Officer Judy Hopps. How are you this evening?"

Judy, who had been nervously swinging her feet over the edge of her too-large chair, stilled and went straight in her seat. She smiled wide for the camera. "Nothing a few stitches and a little rest couldn't fix, Fabienne," she said.

"Well I think most of Zootopia would agree that you and Officer Wilde have certainly earned the rest," said the snow leopard. "Though we were sorry to hear your partner couldn't join us today. Reports over the past two weeks have all indicated that you both have been healing up well. I hope none of his injuries have taken a turn for the worse?"

"Only his aversion to cameras," Judy said with a laugh. "He's actually heading back to work as we speak. This case is far from over; we intend to see it through to the end."

"We're all glad to hear it," said Fabienne. "Is there any new information you can give us about this case? That rhino attack came as a shock to everyone. And from what I hear, the assailant in question still hasn't been identified in the Zootopia Citizen Registry."

"Unfortunately I am not at liberty to discuss details of the case at this time," said Judy. "But I am confident that we will have answers for you soon."

"Looking forward to it."

The snow leopard turned back to the camera. Her expression became serious. "It's been seventeen days since the attack at the theater. Our dedicated officers were not the only ones who were injured. Zootopia's most beloved singer, Gazelle, suffered several serious injuries herself. Reports on her condition have been scarce, but I am pleased to announce that she is here with us now, and appears to be in very high spirits. Ms. Gazelle, thank you for agreeing to come on the show today."

"It is my pleasure," said Gazelle. She was dressed more casually than she had ever been for a public appearance in a modified jumpsuit that had been professionally hemmed to allow for the cast on her leg. But even casual, the outfit was still high quality, made from a dark, shiny fabric that was slinky and soft and draped over her curvy frame perfectly. Her hair rippled over one shoulder in a glossy blonde wave and her makeup was flawless. She looked—if not completely recovered—determined to become so.

"First of all," said Fabienne. "Can Zootopia hope to find you back up on stage soon? What have the doctors said?"

"I will most definitely be returning to the stage," said Gazelle. "There is nothing that could keep me from it. So long as the citizens of Zootopia are kind enough to continue to listen, I will continue to perform however I am able, though I am optimistic that after some physical therapy, it will be on my own two feet."

"I'm sure that will come as a huge relief to your many fans," said Fabienne. "Though it seems like you might have overcome a great deal already. More than any of us ever realized. News broke yesterday that this attack wasn't the first painful moment you've suffered through during your
career. You're former manager is now facing several serious charges, including physical abuse and exploitation, is that correct?"

Gazelle nodded. "Yes. It's all true."

"How could something like this happen?" asked Fabienne. "And why didn't it come out before now?"

"I look back now and wonder the same thing myself," said Gazelle. "I was so young and new to the business... I thought that was just how things were. But thanks to the support of friends—" She slid Judy a shy smile, "—and more recently, a darling sable therapist, I realized that what happened in my early career wasn't okay at all, and I will be working closely with the ZPD to make sure no one else ever has to pay the price that I did to achieve their dreams."

"Just this morning the Zootopia Times printed an article about the Pallas cat's most recent illegal dealings with his new singer," said Fabienne. "An echidna named Selene. The amount of evidence given was staggering, and it all came from an anonymous source no one seems able to trace. Did the ZPD receive this evidence as well?" she asked Judy.

"We did," admitted Judy.

"Any idea who sent it?"

"We have a couple ideas," Judy hedged. "But for now the ZPD is focused on bringing justice to the current case. Mysterious helping paws—while we cannot condone the method—are not as high on our list of priorities."

"But they sure are fun to wonder about," said Fabienne.

Judy suspected that was true, for everyone who wasn't a police officer. The idea of a vigilante running around was a lot less thrilling an idea for the ZPD. As for her, she had lost sleep over it more than one night. And while Nick hadn't brought it up the few times she had seen him, she knew he had to be worrying about it too... on top of many other things.

The snow leopard faced the camera again. "Well, that brings us to the end of our interview. But before we go, Gazelle, I believe you had some exciting news to share with fans?"

"I do." Gazelle's smile, which had been warm and soft, brightened into something truly dazzling. "Hunter and I are officially engaged. It is a miracle I never would have dreamed of when I first started down this path, and I can only hope that Zootopia supports us as it has always so graciously supported us up until now."

"Well on behalf of Zootopia, allow me to extend my sincerest congratulations," said Fabienne.

"Thank you very much. In fact, we are going to be working on a couple album together. Most mammals don't know, but Hunter is also a very talented singer. All proceeds will be going to the nonprofit group, Mammals United. I hope everyone looks forward to it."

"I'm sure they will," said Fabienne. The snow leopard glanced over at Judy. "And how about you, Office Hopps? Zootopia was beside itself after that dramatic confession Officer Wilde gave onstage. Dare I say we will be hearing similar news from the two of you soon?"

"Ah, that, well..." Judy squirmed in her seat. She supposed she should have expected this. It was too juicy a story to let go unquestioned, but she had been hoping nonetheless.
She had seen the videos, of course. More than one mammal in the audience had pulled out their cell phones when the craziness onstage had started. Clawhauser had shown her the first one while she had still been laid up in the hospital, and since then she had watched Nick's confession from over a dozen different angles with varying sound and video quality. The only way she hadn't heard it yet was live from Nick himself. And until she did, she wasn't about to make any assumptions, no matter how tempting.

"Nick and I agreed ahead of time that acting out a con like that would be the quickest way to get the culprit's attention and draw him out. I'm sure Nick was merely trying to keep up the act, so that Tibor's attention stayed on him and not some other possible victim."

"Well it certainly fooled most of Zootopia," said Fabienne.

"It most certainly did," said Gazelle, more quietly. She sounded disappointed.

*You're not the only one,* Judy thought.

The snow leopard gave her goodbyes to the audience, the camera lights went off, and like that the interview was over.

A bunny dressed in old jeans and a gray shirt only two shades darker than her own fur bounded onto the stage and over to Judy, her ever-present backpack slung over one shoulder. "Ok, politician you are not. But that wasn't the worst interview I've ever seen."

"Thank you for helping to set this up," said Judy. "I really appreciate it."

Harper waved off her thanks. "You helped get justice for Iggy. Making a phone call or two was the least I could do."

"I'm surprised you didn't want to do the interview yourself."

"I'm not a big fan of being in front of the camera. Besides, I had my own news story to break."

"Your article about Oskar..." ventured Gazelle. "It was very detailed."

"My source was very thorough," said Harper.

"Yes. They were."

Harper looked like she might get defensive, but when Gazelle said nothing more, the bunny let the conversation go with a roll of her shoulders. "Welp, I'm going to go say a quick hello to Fabienne before I take off. I'd rather avoid the reporters if at all possible. Give your mate my best," she said to Gazelle. She winked at Judy. "Yours too."

She was gone before Judy could stammer out a denial.

Gazelle touched her shoulder, drawing her attention back. "I want to thank you for agreeing to come with me today. I know it probably wasn't easy for you."

"I should be the one saying that," said Judy. "I can't imagine how hard it must be to come out about something like this."

"No, it was a mistake to not speak out before now," said Gazelle. "I can't keep relying on others to take care of the hard things for me."

"That's not true at all," said Judy. "You're constantly speaking out for animal rights and staging
peaceful protests…"

"It's easy to be good for good causes," said Gazelle. "It's harder when you need to be bad for them. I always thought of myself as having a reputation for not caring what others think. But I'm starting to realize that wasn't true. Really, I had created a reputation for myself as the 'nice' one who never said anything bad about anyone. But that can't always be the case for things like this. So I'm going to be braver from now on. Like you."

"I think you're already plenty brave," said Judy.

"Thank you, my friend." Gazelle reached for her crutches and Judy moved out of the way so she had room to stand. "So, shall we bravely face the reporters outside together?"

Now this was something Judy was expert at. "Let's do it."

"There's more to a perfectly fried cricket then most mammals think. Take this one for example." Nick plucked a cricket from the greasy fast food carton in front of him. "See how the legs on this one are black? That means it was fried for too long. It'll be dried out and burnt tasting. Not a perfectly fried cricket."

Nick popped it in his mouth and chewed noisily. "Still edible, though. I don't like to waste food. It's irresponsible. Not that you would understand anything about responsibility, but I digress."

He picked out another cricket. "Now this one this has been decently fried. See how it's has that nice golden brown color all the way around? Perfect, right? Wrong. This is not a perfectly fried cricket either. Where's the seasoning? It's entirely missing from this fried cricket. Sorry, that was a bit of a trick question."

Nick held up another. "Then there's ones like this, which has way too much seasoning. Understand, it's a very fine line. Only a true connoisseur would notice. Fortunately for you, I happen to be a master on fried cricket eating and have all this free time in which to teach you. I know you're just busting with joy on the inside, aren't you? You stoic types are always like that. It's adorable."

Nick held up both crickets. "Now, here's a trick you'll thank me for. If you ever find yourself with a non-seasoned fried cricket and an overly-seasoned fried cricket, don't panic. You just do this." He tossed them both into his mouth and crunched down. "You eat them both together! Genius, right? See, it's all about balance——"

The door to the interrogation room swung open and a frowning Howle stuck his head in. "What on Earth are you doing in here?"

Nick shot him an offended look. "What do you mean? I'm in the middle of an interrogation. Can't you tell?"

"It looks more like you're out to lunch. You know Chief Bogo hates food in here. I could smell it all the way down the hall."

Nick let out a put-upon sigh. "And here I am, working through my lunch hour. There's just no appreciation at the ZPD these days."

He flicked a cricket at the animal sitting across the table from him. The fried insect hit the rhino's cheek, leaving a small streak of spicy seasoning behind.

"Ah, geez I'm sorry about that," said Nick. "That one got away from me. Must have been
undercooked. Another important lesson in fried cricket eating. Here, let me." He swiped at the rhino's cheek, smearing the orange dust around even more. The rhino might have been carved from stone for all that he reacted.


"Wha—goading? Me?" spluttered Nick, falling back into his chair dramatically. "I am the epitome of professionalism! We were just having a nice little chat together."

Howle looked doubtfully at the rhino. "You finally got him to talk?"

"Well, not with words so much. But you'd be surprised how much can be conveyed through the eyes alone." He tapped on the empty legal pad in front of him. "I just know we're about to make some significant headway."

Howle looked back at the rhino. Not a flicker of emotion appeared in those small, cold eyes.

Nick smiled and popped another cricket into his mouth.

The wolf sighed. "Right. Can I speak with you for a moment, Wilde? Outside?"

"Sure thing." Nick hopped off his chair, hobbling only a little. It had been a miracle that he hadn't broken anything in the fall. At least that's what the doctors had all said. Just two severely sprained ankles and bruising across half his ribcage.

Nick thought 'miracles' shouldn't hurt this much.

To the rhino he said, "Hold that thought, will you? I'll be right back."

He followed the wolf down the hall to the break room. Inside it was empty, but you could tell lunch hour has just passed from the strong smell of coffee in the air and the fact that water still dripped from the dishes in the sink.

Nick climbed onto the counter so that he was more or less eye to eye with Howle. It took longer than usual and he was breathing heavily by the time he made it up, but he still managed it. He leaned against the cabinets and crossed his arms over his chest, pressing against the pain that pulsed there.

He saw Howle note the gesture and immediately dropped his arms. He stuffed his paws into his pockets instead. "So, you got some juicy gossip you want to dish about or something? I am a bit busy with actual work at the moment, if you hadn't noticed."

"Are you?" Howle challenged. "Because that's not what it looked like from where I was standing."

"Hey, a fox's gotta eat."

"That's not what I'm referring to and you know it."

"Look," said Nick, "my interrogation strategy is a delicate and complex thing. Just because it seems strange at first doesn't mean it's not—"

"Bull crap?"

Nick grinned. "I doubt Chief Bogo would appreciate the phrase, but sure."

Howle did not smile back. He cocked his head at Nick the same way all canines did when they
were confused. First one way and then the other, as if that slight difference in angle would help him figure things out. "What are you doing, Wilde? After what happened at the stadium, I thought we were going to have trouble holding you back on this case. I heard you even begged the chief to let you handle the interrogation."

Nick coughed. "Begged is a little strong—"

"—But now it's like you're not even trying. Have you been wasting time like this all week?"

"Who's wasting time? As you can see, I'm even working through my lunch hour, and you know how much I love lunch."

"The trial start in five days," said Howle. "And that rhino is the only lead we have left. If we can't get him to talk before the judge sentences him, we may never solve this case. Do you want that?"

"Of course not," said Nick. "I want this case solved more badly than anyone."

The wolf looked at him, gauging Nick's sincerity. After a moment, he seemed to accept it. He nodded. "Good. So then you should agree that it's time to let someone else try to interrogate."

Nick straightened. His paws fisted and his eyes went flat. "Over my dead body."

"Be reasonable, Wilde," said Howle. "Clearly your 'strategy' isn't working. It's nothing to feel bad about. You've been through a lot lately. It's only natural for you to be a bit off your game—"

"My game is perfect," Nick bit out.

"That interrogation you have going on right now is a farce and you know it."

"A farce!" Nick barked a laugh. "Remind me never to team up against you in Scrabble."

"This is serious, Wilde." The first hint of impatience crept into the wolf's tone. "It's not like I don't sympathize with what you're going through. But even so, I can't just sit back while you ruin our best chance at solving this case. The way you're acting now, It's like you don't even want the rhino to talk."

"That's right, I don't," said Nick.

It was hard to catch the wolf officer off-guard, let alone in any way that was visible, so the open surprise, then confusion, then disappointment that swept across the canine's face was satisfying in a way, until a moment later when it all coalesced into a quiet anger. "Explain yourself."

"Think about it," said Nick. "Even if an officer does get that rhino to speak, nothing he says will help us. I don't know if he just naturally psychotic or if he was brainwashed by someone, but I know nothing we do will get anything useful out of him."

"At least it would be something we could work with," said Howle. "How is silence any better?"

"The real question you should be asking is, why is he choosing to stay silent in the first place?"

The wolf frowned. "Because it's like you said. He doesn't want to help us."

"There's that. But then why did he also waive his right to an attorney?"

"That's…" There went the cocked head again.
"It's doesn't make sense, right?" pressed Nick. "As much as I hate to admit it, it's not like he doesn't have a case. What he did... even a halfway decent attorney could argue it was self-defense, or even a duty to rescue."

"You don't seriously believe he was trying to save you and Judy on that stage."

"Of course not. I'm just saying that it's possible for a defense to be made for it. At the very least it would save him from receiving the most severe sentence, which is what he's facing as it stands now."

"Exile." The word came out a murmur.

Nick nodded.

"So you want to make sure he stays silent so that he receives the maximum punishment." Howle's tone turned admonishing. "It might make for a more satisfying revenge, but that means letting whoever else he might be working with go free. That's pretty short-sighted of you, Wilde."

"On the contrary, this is what my old friends in the business liked to call 'a long con.'"

"How d'you figure?"

Nick held up a paw. "You still haven't answered my earlier question: Why isn't the rhino talking? I know why I want him to keep his trap shut, but why is he? Why not plead his case? Rotting in jail should still be better than dying alone in the Wildlands, right?"

"Maybe he's doing it out of a sense of loyalty?"

"He could still claim self-defense without giving away anything about his group. No, he wants to be exiled."

Howle shook his head. "That can't be right. Nobody wants to be exiled. It's a death sentence. A solitary death sentence. Every criminal in Zootopia fears it."

"Not this one."

"So what does that mean? You think he wants to die?"

Nick snorted. "Please. An animal like that isn't just going to quietly take his punishment and disappear into the Wildlands to die alone."

"But he'll have no choice if that's his sentence."

"That just it." Nick gestured outwards, to the distant edges of the city. "There's no real security to keep anyone out of Zootopia these days. There's nothing out there to need security for. Just the occasional exile. And the last time that happened was over fifty years ago. Kits are constantly daring each other to jump over the walls, just to see what's out there. You think that rhino couldn't find his way back in if he really wanted to?"

"He'll be tagged with a tracker."

"That tracker will fail, trust me. He's going to return, and when he does, he's going to go straight back to whatever flea-ridden underground den his group is hiding out in. That's the moment that we need, Howle. That's when we'll catch them. All of them."

There was silence as the wolf absorbed all this. Nick, who was starting to regret having climbed
onto the countertop, was dying to get off his feet. His ankles were really starting to throb from standing on them for so long. He was going to have to ice them again tonight.

Finally, Howle said, "You're making a lot of leaps here. You have no evidence to back up any of these theories."

"I can feel it in my gut. That's all the evidence I need."

"That's not how the law works," argued Howle. "Which bring up another concern: The ethics of all this are gray at best. Dark, dark gray."

Nick shrugged. "It's not like I'm not breaking any laws. I'm not doing anything really. Just letting the pieces fall where they may."

"Inaction is just as much of a choice as any action," said Howle.

"Nice quote. You come up with that yourself?"

"Be as sarcastic as you like. I still think we should do our best to get the rhino to talk. Even if it's just something small, that might be enough—"

"You're not listening. Nick stalked towards the wolf. "That won't work. If you convince him to talk, all you'll succeed in doing is getting him a comfy jail cell, and we won't get any answers from him there. And I need answers, Howle. I need to know why he did what he did. I need to know where he came from, who he works for, what they're planning next. You can call me unethical all you like, but it's the way I need to do this."

"And if you're wrong?"

"If I'm wrong you can turn me in. I'll be right there waiting with my resignation papers, I promise. But for right now, please, take a page from that rhino's book and stay quiet."

Howle shook his head and sighed. "It seems like my initial worry was correct after all."

"Worry all you want. Just stay out of my way."

The wolf looked at him, measuring, weighing. "You know… what happened at the stadium was hard on all of us."

"Don't," said Nick. "I've already done my therapy sessions, ok? I don't need this speech from you too."

"I'm just saying," persisted Howle. "All this you're doing now… it won't make you feel any better if you don't also let yourself grieve."

"Grieve?" Nick's shrug was stiff. "It's true that a lot of animals were lost. I guess it's only natural to feel down about it—"

The wolf looked him dead in the eye. "I'm taking about Tibor."

Nick recoiled as if blasted with in the face with fox spray. He gripped the edge of the cabinet, breathing in through his nose. To call this feeling 'pain' was too simplistic. What he felt was too amorphous. It was more like a parasite, something he couldn't even feel until it started writhing inside him, stealing the air from his lungs and squeezing it's dark tendrils around his heart. Worse, he swore it was growing, as if it were eating up something inside of him and would one day engulf
him completely.

Nick rallied himself and glared at Howle. "Would it have killed you to play dumb, just once? Read the mood, wolf."

Howle just looked at him, and Nick hated the solemn understanding in his eyes.

"Tibor was your partner," he said, ignoring Nick's flinch at the name. "You're entitled to feel—"

"He was a monster," said Nick flatly. "And I would be a monster too if I felt even an iota of remorse for what happened to him."

"You thought of him as a friend. You have every right to mourn the loss of that relationship."

Nick had had enough. He jumped off the counter, stumbled and caught himself. Not even the pain that shot up his legs could slow him down. "Right. Thanks for the advice. I'll be heading back to work now. Those fried crickets aren't going to eat themselves."

"Wilde."

Nick braced himself before turning back.

Howle pushed away from the counter. "I won't tell anybody about this plan of yours. On one condition."

Cold hard conditions Nick could handle. "Let's hear it then."

"The moment your suspicions about the rhino are confirmed, you must promise me that you'll tell Chief Bogo and the rest of the ZPD. Something this big could put the whole city at risk. We'll need to work together if we want to protect the animals of Zootopia."

"Done."

"And you should talk to someone," said Howle. "When you're ready. It doesn't have to be a therapist. Just… someone."

"You said one condition," said Nick. "And I think I've dumped enough onto Judy's plate already, don't you?"

"Have you seen the news lately?"

So he could keep reliving the nightmare? "Can't say that I have."

"The news is starting to respond to Hopps' interview. You might want to check it out."

Nick was pretty sure that he didn't.

He left Howle to make more coffee and made his way back to the interrogation room. The rhino sat right where he was. Not even the angle of his head had changed.

He didn't so much as glance Nick's way as the fox slid back into the chair across from him and pulled out his phone.

It didn't take long for Nick to find the articles.

*BUNNY OFFICER DENIES RELATIONSHIP WITH FOX CO-WORKER!*
"You know things are bad when staring at your ugly mug is the easiest part of my day," Nick said to the rhino.

No response.

"My point exactly," said Nick.

The temperature inside Mr. Big's estate was arctic. Judy didn't know why she was so surprised. The mansion might have been decorated in warm, rich reds and fresh jungle greens, but there was a reason they were able to keep such elaborate ice sculptures on display in every room without worrying about them melting. Even the wood flooring with its copious amounts of thick rugs hid a bed of ice just beneath.

Judy shivered and pulled her coat around her tighter as she moved from room to room. Mr. Big's estate had been built to polar bear specifications. Every doorway, bed, table and chair had been made for a polar bear's height and bulk. Judy thought it was probably because of how many polar bears Mr. Big had working for him on the premises.

Nick thought it was all ego.

Still, there were signs that a much smaller-sized family lived here if you looked closely enough. Tiny balconies ran along the bookshelves in the study. Sweeping staircases spiraled around table legs and around the side of doorframes. And elegant ramps carved into the ceiling beams led from room to room, giving those who traversed it a bird's eye view of the goings on below.

But the most telling, and what Judy searched the most carefully, were the tiny miniature recreations of the house that sat front and center in every room, either on a table or some other elevated platform as a clear focal point. Like a deconstructed dollhouse, each one of these models mirrored the room it was in perfectly, right down to the tiny, shrew-sized furniture and working appliances.

All that was missing were the shrews.

Judy stared at the scaled-down dining room table that sat upon its full-sized counterpart. Silverware had been set out, each utensil tinier than her pinky claw. Some of the chairs were pulled out, as if whoever had been sitting there had left in a hurry.

But why had they gone? And to where?

"Well the cameras are still up and running." Nick limped into the kitchen and took a seat at one of the bear-sized chairs. "I definitely heard it zooming in on me as I was going through Mr. Big's office."

"If they still have someone keeping an eye on security then they haven't abandoned the property entirely," said Judy. "That could be a sign they're planning on coming back."

"Possibly," said Nick.

"And in the meantime…" Judy pointed to the small camera in the corner of the ceiling. "Do you
think we could find the location of these feeds?"

Nick nodded, grimacing as he reached down to rub at his ankles. "I can make some calls later."

"Thank you," said Judy. She knew he had to be hurting. She was feeling pretty sore and tired herself. But she hadn't been able to stop worrying about Fru Fru. She hadn't seen or heard from her friend since the night Fru Fru had left to go do something with Mr. Big. Now all of Judy's calls went straight to voicemail. She had visited Fru Fru's apartment, Marian's restaurant, the entire shopping district of Little Rodentia. No one had seen her. Fru Fru and her entire family were just… gone.

"Maybe they went on vacation," suggested Nick. "Like a last minute thing."

"Fru Fru wasn't dressed for vacation," said Judy. "And she'd looked… worried. Something's happened. Something to do with her father."

"Well I checked every report starting from the day before she came to see you up until yesterday," said Nick. "If Mr. Big did anything that scared him into running off with his entire family, the ZPD hasn't found out about it yet."

"When did you have time to go through that many reports?" said Judy, surprised.

Nick shrugged one shoulder. "I've had a lot of time to kill lately."

While he had been guarding that rhino, he meant.

Judy took a seat next to Nick at the table. "He still hasn't spoken?"

"No." Nick leaned forward in his chair. "Do you think I'm being crazy about all this too?"

"Too?"

"Howle called me out today. I told him my theory. He thinks we should try harder to get the rhino to talk."

"But you said that would be a mistake," said Judy.

"Yes, but apparently I'm emotionally compromised right now."

Judy let out a shocked laugh. "Did Howle say that?"

"More or less." Nick rapped his claws against the table in an agitated beat. "Do you think I'm wrong about this?"

Judy pondered that.

"I don't know," she answered honestly. "The situation is troubling. There's definitely more going on here than we know. But if your instincts are telling you that this is the way we should play things right now then…" She shot him a smile. "Emotionally compromised or not, I will follow your lead."

"And if I lead you nowhere good?" Nick asked.

Normally a line like that would come with a cheeky wink and a cocky smile. But Nick's expression stayed grave.
Judy leaned in and bopped her shoulder against his, desperate to lighten his mood. He had been serious far too much lately. "Then at the very least, I know it will be somewhere fun."

That got a tiny snort out of him.

Judy smiled. She took one more look around the dining room, both the big one and the small. She sighed. "I guess we should go. Short of tearing down the walls, there's nowhere else for us to look here."

Nick eased himself out of the chair and Judy hurried over and took his arm. He leaned against her gratefully. She wanted to chide him for walking around so much, but he had been insistent on coming when she'd told him where she wanted to go, and honestly, she had been grateful for his company. After everything that had happened, she'd been a little apprehensive about searching for her missing friend alone.

"I wouldn't worry too much about Fru Fru," Nick said to her as they made their way back through the empty palatial halls. "She's tough. And clearly her and Mr. Big knew enough to get away. Whatever is wrong, I'm sure they're somewhere safe."

It was impossible not to believe him when he said it with such confidence.

Feeling a bit better, Judy steered them into the front entryway.

"Should we order in tonight?" she asked. "I don't think I have the energy to face any more reporters today. You might hate being holed up in interrogation all day, but it does have its perks during times like now."

Nick's weight left her. He stopped and Judy stopped too. "Is something wrong?"

Troubled eyes met her own. "I saw the interview you gave this morning."

The solemnity of his voice sent butterflies through Judy's stomach. She laughed nervously. "You really must be bored if you're taking the time to look at that."

Nick didn't laugh with her. "Why did you say the whole thing was a con job?"

Fear and hope. In this moment, Judy felt as if she were made up of nothing but these two emotions. She hadn't planned on bringing up these conversations so soon, though she had been dying to ask him about it. Nick might not be emotionally compromised but he was definitely still hurting. She had wanted to give him some time. But for him bring this matter up himself, and so soon? Never in a million years would Judy have expected that.

Nick was still waiting for her answer. Judy gave herself a mental shake. In what she hoped was a calm, reasonable tone of voice, she said, "Because that's what I promised you back when you agreed to go along with all this. Did you really want me to confirm what you said on stage?"

Because I love her.

The confession hung there in the silence between them. Nick watched her with hooded eyes. Judy tried to read the emotions there, but there were too many to make sense of.

"You know I wasn't conning anyone." The quietly spoken words pushed against the silence, and Judy felt the challenge in them.

Well she knew how to challenge too.
"It doesn't matter what I think I know," she said. "You haven't told me anything. And I won't assume. Frankly, we both deserve better than that."

Pain flickered in Nick's eyes before it faded back into that dark maelstrom of emotion. How was it that he could look so alone when she was mere feet away?

Judy stepped closer. "I'm not saying this to push you, Nick, or to guilt you. I know the whole idea of an 'us' scares you. As long as I can stay by your side, I'll wait patiently until you're ready."

He made a sharp scoffing noise. Judy sheepishly amended, "Well, maybe not patiently. But I will wait."

Nick closed his eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath. He held out his paw and Judy didn't hesitate. She slipped her paw into his and he gripped it tight.

"Do you know why I keep having nightmares?" he asked her.

"Because you're afraid something might happen to me," said Judy. "Like what happened to your mother."

"There is no might. Bad things will happen if we go down this road." He shook his head. "It would be damning enough if we were just an interspecies couple. But hey, we're a pretty big deal these days. Most animals would probably look the other way. But a predator-prey couple? That will be much harder for mammals to swallow. Doable, but neither of us will be winning Officer of the Year anymore. But a bunny and a fox couple? If you take me as a mate, Carrots, that's it. It'll be game over. Forget about losing awards; we'll be lucky to keep our jobs. And all that respect we fought so hard for? Poof, gone."

"Is that what this is about?" asked Judy. "You're worried about how animals will view you?" She couldn't say it wouldn't disappoint her, but how could she blame him if that was the case? Nick had wanted his whole life to be recognized and trusted, as a citizen, predator, and a fox. To lose all the acceptance he had fought so hard for…

But Nick just scoffed. "Whether society loves me or hates me, I'll manage either way. I always do. That's not the issue here. Didn't you see what happened, Carrots? Animals were killed. You were almost killed. Just for liking the wrong species."

"Do you think I'm not aware that it will be hard?" demanded Judy. "Do you think I'm that naive? Give me a little credit, Nick. Just because I didn't grow up in the city doesn't mean I don't know the risk I would be taking by dating you. I lived in a small rural town. Interspecies dating isn't just frowned upon there. It isn't done. Period."

"You still don't understand." And he looked genuinely pained that she didn't. "You might know the cost intellectually, but you've never lived it. My father left when I was six. Do you know why? Because my mother believed we had the same right to be a part of society as every other species, and she refused to back down on it no matter how much it upset the status quo."

"She sounds like an amazing fox," said Judy.

"She was." The words were thick with both pride and sadness. "More than once I heard my father say how much he admired her bravery and cleverness. It still didn't stop him from leaving though. What you're after, Judy, it comes with a very steep price. My mother lost her husband, she had very few friends, even I—" Nick's voice cracked. "That night she died… I had been out looking for a new place to live. Somewhere where I wouldn't have to put up with whispering neighbors and the
dirty looks. Even I had given up on the idea of deserving better. If you do this, you'll lose friends, Judy. Maybe family. You'll never stop being judged, and the possibility of danger will be with you, always."

"So this is about my safety."

But Nick shook his head again, more vehemently this time. "That's not why. My nightmare… I don't keep having it because I'm afraid of what could happen to you. I keep having it because I feel guilty for not caring enough about the danger to let it stop me from wanting you. That's how selfish I am, Carrots. Even knowing the risks we'd face, I would gladly put us both in danger if it meant being with you."

Judy felt like her heart was spinning. That was the baldest confession Nick had ever made, and yet she was more confused than ever.

"But if you're not trying to protect me, then what's holding you back?"

Instead of answering, Nick looked down at their clasped paws.

Lost, Judy looked down at them too. And she watched as Nick slowly… deliberately… let go.

He didn't pull away. He stayed just as he was with his arm slightly raised, Judy's grip alone keeping them connected. He looked at her small gray paw clutching his with an expression Judy could only interpret as a sad kind of marveling. As if he couldn't quite believe it; as if he already missed it.

"It's because I know how this will end," said Nick. "If I hold onto you like I want to, if I put you through all that hardship… eventually you'll realize what a bad deal it is. Worse, you'll try to tough it out, because that's the kind of bunny you are. But slowly the resentment will eat away at you. And then one day you'll wake up and you won't be able to stand it anymore. You'll leave me. And by then everything will be so broken between us... Being partners? Staying as friends? It will be impossible. And the thought of that happening is worse than any nightmare I could ever have, Carrots."

Judy looked down at her paw still holding tight to his, letting the words wash over her. She'd known Nick had had his reasons. She'd laid awake so many nights, coming up with possible rebuttals for his arguments of why they could never be. Not once had it ever occurred to her that he might be hesitant because of her. Did he doubt her feelings that much? Or did he think so little of her? Judy had never in her life given up on anything she wanted, and she had never wanted anything in her life more than Nick, so why was he so sure she wouldn't succeed at this when he trusted her to come through on everything else?

She looked up at his face, trying to push past the hurt in order to understand. The raw emotion he had displayed so openly just a moment ago was already gone, swept messily away behind a blank mask as he braced himself for her response. No doubt he expected her to argue, maybe even curse him. She certainly felt like calling him a few choice names.

But how could she when he already looked so defeated? His shoulders were slumped, his eyes downcast. His paw was still outstretched. Who knew how long he would stay like this if she let him. Until his poor abused ankles finally gave out? If she was so lacking, why even bother to wait for her to let go? Why not pull away now?

Nick had never doubted her abilities even in the most dire of situations. If she decided to do something, he was always the first one to stand back and let her do it, no matter how crazy the
scheme. So what was the difference here?

*Because it's not about me.*

The realization dawned slowly, like a sunrise on a stormy morning. She took in the defensive hunch of Nick's shoulders, the resignation in his eyes. None of that was the look of someone who had judged her and found her lacking. On the contrary, it was the look of someone who felt lacking in themselves. Nick didn't believe he was worth holding onto, therefore he didn't believe Judy would be willing or able to do it. It was as simple and heartbreaking as that.

Judy had gotten mad when she'd thought Nick believed her to be naive, but it turned out she was naive. Not about the risks she knew they would face, but about Nick himself. Had she really believed that all that cynicism and self-loathing Nick had harbored when they'd first met had just... gone away? She should have known better than to think that a couple of awards, a good job, and a few friends could erase years of trauma of Nick being told he wasn't good enough. That he was, in fact, unwanted in every respect.

"There's nothing I can say that will convince you differently about this, is there?" she asked him, already knowing the answer. "You really believe I'll give up."

He said nothing, but she felt the tremble that went through him.

She looked down at the paw she held. So much bigger and stronger than her own, and yet refusing to hold on despite how easy it would be.

"This won't work then," she said.

She met his eyes, letting Nick read her intent there, giving him a moment to prepare for it.

Then she let go.

Nick's eyes fell closed and he swallowed hard. His dropped his arm, clenching and unclenching his paws as he fought to keep that blank mask of his in place.

He really was a dumb fox, Judy thought.

Then she stepped forward and hugged him.

Nick's breath hitched and he went stiff in her arms. "C-carrots? What're you—"

"Since words aren't going to work with you," said Judy. "I'm just going to have to convince you with actions instead." She gave him a little squeeze, taking care with his sore ribs. "This is me choosing you, Nicholas Wilde. And I will keep choosing you. Every day I am going to choose you, and stay with you, and love you, to the best of my abilities, no matter what struggles we face, for as long it takes that stubborn fox heart of yours to realize you are worth every bit of it, and even after. I will always stay by your side."

She paused there. The poor fox didn't even seem to be breathing. But she could hear his heart, pounding out a rapid beat where she pressed against his chest.

"But I can't do it all on my own," she told him, and though she tried to keep her voice strong, a thread of insecurity made it wobble just the tiniest bit. "I need you to choose me too. I need to know that you'll stay. That you won't run away. That you want me to be there next to you. Can you do that?"
Judy waited. It was only when she started feeling lightheaded that she realized she was also holding her breath now. Hugging Nick might have been the more impactful gesture, but it certainly limited her view of his reaction, and she was dying to know. He wasn't moving, he wasn't speaking, and when she tried to glance up at his face to get a peek at what he might be thinking his big, fox chin was in the way.

Should she let go? Was he still thinking about it or was this his way of saying no?

She felt Nick shift, a barely imperceptible adjustment in his stance. And then he reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. It was awkward with Judy wrapped around his middle, but when she made to pull back his other arm came down around her shoulders, hugging her to him.

That seemed promising. Judy's heart gave a hopeful leap.

He dialed a number.

"Hello, is this head office for *Vanity Fur*? This is Officer Nicholas Wilde from the ZPD. You may have heard of me."

Judy heard what sounded like a chipmunk's excited squeal, followed by a string of chatter too high-pitched to catch.

"Actually," said Nick, "I'm calling about an article your magazine released online earlier today about my partner, Judy Hopps. I believe it was titled 'ZPD's Sweetheart Bunny Sly and Single Again.'"

He waited while the chipmunk chattered a response.

"I'm sure it has gotten a lot of hits," said Nick. "Unfortunately, it also contains a huge error that needs to be corrected immediately. What error, you ask? Well, I would have thought I'd made myself clear about this a week ago, but if your journalists need a reminder: The ZPD's 'sweetheart' bunny is only *one* of the things your article is claiming that she is. And while I admit that her slyness is one of her best charms, I don't think there's really a need for you to dedicate a whole article discussing it, is there? In fact, I would be extremely grateful if you would just take the whole thing down."

Nick made a noise of disgust at whatever the chipmunk said in reply. He held the phone down to Judy. "Carrots, will you please set these animals straight so that I can move on to the next one? Thanks to your interview I've got about fifty more of these calls to make befo—oomph."

The phone clattered to the floor as Judy leapt up, grabbed the collar of Nick's shirt and yanked him down into a kiss.

Nick didn't hesitate. He wrapped his arms around Judy, scooping her up so that her feet no longer touched the floor. If it bothered his injuries he didn't show it. It certainly didn't affect his abilities at kissing. And *cheese and crackers*, did the fox know how to kiss!

It was to Judy's great dismay when Nick broke away only a minute later. "Hold on, Carrots. I've still got to call *Good Horsekeeping*—"

"I don't care."

"—and *Snorts Illustrated*—"

"Nicholas Wilde, stop teasing and kiss me," said Judy.
"But I'm trying to show you with my actions how much I—"

"Try some different actions," she suggested.

Nick was happy to oblige.

They didn't get back to making phone calls for a very long time.

________________________________________________________________________

Luther sat in his cell and waited.

There was no clock in his cell. Just a cot and a toilet and a barred window too narrow for a weasel, much less a rhino, to ever slip through. But that was fine. He didn't need to know the time or take in the view.

He shared the cell with no one. It had been made for larger animals, but not one quite so large as him. That was fine too. He didn't need to move around or speak.

Once a day he was taken to the interrogation room where the fox would pretend to question him. Mostly the fox would ignore Luther while he played on his phone, throwing the occasional barbed comment his way lest the rhino forget how much he was hated. These days, the fox liked to sing Gazelle songs, loudly and off-key. The more obnoxious he could make himself sound, the better. He seemed to be in a brighter mood these days, Luther noticed.

The bunny tended to visit more now. Her eyes were sharp. Possibly sharper than even the fox's. Luther noticed that too.

The rest of the time he was in his cell. That was fine. The wolf often dropped by. Not speaking to him, just watching. There was the lion who always hissed at him when he passed by, the coyote who brought him his meal.

It was all fine. Luther had done his job. Now he just had to wait.

Not long now, he told himself. Just a little while more and all would be put to rights soon.

The Natural Order would be restored soon.

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