It's (Not Quite) a Ballroom Blitz
by Yeah_JSmith

Summary

Three years into their friendship, Nick and Judy run into a weird INTERPOL agent at a gala, dance like several mammals are watching, stop a potential threat, and agree to a first date.

Notes
See the end of the work for notes.

There’s some hoopla about the official merge with District Thirteen, vague promises of funding and community outreach, and better police support, which is really the only reason Nick knows about this function at all. Normally he’d rather eat his own liver than go to some stuffy gala to rub elbows with Important Animals, but when Bogo says jump Judy jumps twice and Nick gives Judy a token protest speech while preparing to leap as high as he can, so to Happytown they go in a cruiser made for mammals their size.

(There’s a Podunk song in there somewhere, he knows it, but he’s not going to learn to twang a guitar just to write it.)

His partner tends to get starry-eyed whenever they come to Happytown, apparently overcome with nostalgia. It’s her country upbringing, bless her, that allows her to miss the nastier points of the area; her old lodgings in the spiral arm were “efficient” and “community-oriented” instead of “tiny” and “grossly unsafe,” the carnivals and street fairs were “sweet” and “reminders of home” instead of “the best place to get robbed,” and her neighbors...well, actually, they agreed on the neighbors. Bucky and Pronk Make a Porno was funny the first time, but gradually became more and more
uncomfortable, especially when he realized just how much (and what) Judy meant to him. At least she’s out of there now.

...Then again, she does live, alarmingly, with his mother, and although it’s touching that she wants to care for the ailing vixen who raised him, who knows what they talk about when he’s not there. Whatever embarrassing kithood secrets Nick might have been able to repress, they’re certainly out there for Judy to find.

She’s looking quite pretty in the light blue dress she got from a flea market three weeks ago. It had a hole in the side seam, which he taught her how to fix, and they had to get creative with the ripped hem, but after modification, the overall effect is some kind of sleek fairy princess who decided one day to come slum it with the mortals. Because she’s Judy, he’s almost positive she’s got some leggings on underneath. Possibly even a shock pistol. That’s all right, though. It’s not like he’s unarmed, and he doesn’t trust that they won’t get ambushed by weird mammals or the obnoxious photographers who keep mistaking Nick for Jason Biteman.

Is it legal to tase photographers?

Once they’re parked and out of the car, Nick bows low and looks up at her through his lashes, holding out one paw in a gallant gesture. “Milady?”

She rolls her eyes and says, “One time. I date a creep one time, and you have leverage for the rest of my life.”

He grins, because the point was to get her riled up. He wasn’t a fan of Dan the red panda, or any of them really. Judy loves too hard and too fast, and the inevitable heartbreak hurts him, too. It’s not like it’s a secret he’s in love with her, but thus far she seems keen to keep it platonic, and that means so is he. Part of loving someone is wanting to see them happy, even if it’s not with you.

“Maybe you should be a little more discerning,” he says lightly, straightening. He offers his arm in a more natural, gentle way, and she takes it. It’s funny that she’s so delicate with him, because he’s been on the receiving end of one of her painful jump-punches, but aside from that adrenaline-filled day three years ago, she’s never been rough with him. “Or just pick partners who aren’t into weird stuff. You would have a larger dating pool.”

“I’m into so-called weird stuff, Nick,” she sighs for the millionth time, because it’s an old argument, but not an uncomfortable one. She teases him for everything from his penchant for Tommy Bapawma to his perpetual singleness, so it’s only fair. “It’s not even that weird. Maybe if you got out a little more, you’d see that I’m perfectly normal.”

Right, a bunny cop who agrees to wear her uniform outside of the job is totally normal. Then again, it’s not like his arrest record matches the amount of times he’s been in pawcuffs, so maybe he shouldn’t lay it on too thick. “I’m just saying, Carrots. Michael Leapyear has it bad for you.”

“Michael Leapyear wants to whisk me away to the sticks and have a million kits. I’d rather give a gun a nice, juicy blowjob.”

Any faltering in his steps is because of the bright lights of the gala throwing him off-balance after the relative dark of the parking garage, not because Judy’s mouth caressed the word blowjob like a rich bit of carrot cake. “Yeah, I guess you have a point. The other officers have been a terrible influence on you. Little Officer Fluff with her carrot pen and clown vest would never have said something like that.”

“Actually, that one, I picked up from your mother.”
Of course she did. Back in her heyday, Ruth Wilde could charm you into giving her the shirt off your back and then sell it to you for double the original price, but in her off-hours she had a tongue like a sailor and a filthy quip for every occasion. What else is she teaching Judy?

Suddenly very worried, he asks, “She’s not trying to teach you how to pick pockets, is she?”

“Nick! Don’t be silly,” she replies with a charming grin he doesn’t trust at all. “That was the first thing she taught me. I can’t wait to know how to pick locks and use a slim-jim, too. I’ll never worry about locking myself out of the car.”

“You don’t have a car,” he groans. The whole point of becoming a cop was to leave illegal things behind, and here his partner is, learning them.

“If I get one. If we make detective, I’ll probably be able to afford one. Would make getting Ruth to her appointments easier.”

Despite the terrifying thought of Judy being corrupted by his dear old mother, Nick feels a warmth at her words. “You know, I’m...really grateful that you’re taking care of her.”

“She deserves the world,” she tells him, looking up and catching his eyes. Sometimes she looks so small and soft that he forgets the tales of her exploits in the academy. “She gave me you, after all.”

His heart pounds and for a moment, it’s just the two of them, an island of love or something equally stupid. He opens his mouth to say...well, something, anything, but then a male voice calls, “Judy Hopps! My word, don’t you look stunning tonight!”

“Jack,” she says delightedly. Nick turns to look at the newcomer, a white-furred bunny with black stripe markings on his face and ears. His suit is obviously expensive, well-made and custom-bought, accentuated with shiny sapphire cufflinks that match his eyes, because of course someone that attractive would do something that lame. In another life, Nick might try to charm him a little, but “Jack” is looking at them like a snake surveying its prey, and it puts Nick’s back up. Judy squeezes his arm, but it doesn’t really help. What does help is winding his tail around her legs, even though he knows it won’t protect her from anything, and might actually make her trip. “Look at that, you’re a full-blown agent now! Nick, this is Jack Savage, with INTERPOL. We met while you were in your second year at the Academy, and he was a trainee. Jack, this is Nick Wilde, my partner and best friend.”

“Good to meet you, Jack,” Nick lies, stretching out a paw to shake. Jack’s grip is firm but polite; there’s no challenge in it, just a direct introduction. “What’s INTERPOL doing at a gala?”

Jack grimaces. “Working, unfortunately. My partner and I have been pursuing someone for weeks now, and they’re in Zootopia. I’m in charge of mobilizing and briefing the Chief of District 13, and my hope is that she’ll get very drunk tonight and be agreeable for a change.”

“Penny Ruffstein is not a happy mammal,” Judy agrees, and Nick thinks that’s an understatement. In her defense, Ruffstein is understaffed and underappreciated, and she has more complaints than cases from citizens. “She does her best, though. You really think she’ll get drunk? In front of all these animals?”

“According to our research, she never backs down from a challenge. My partner intends to challenge her to a drinking contest momentarily.”

“How is that supposed to work? This is a function where rich animals pretend they’re planning to dance, and verbally jerk each other off, not get into drinking contests,” Nick says skeptically.
“My partner has a way with words. Trust me, it will work.”

Judy cocks her head with an expression that, even on her sweet face, just drips suspicion. “A way with words? Are you still working with Agent Khan?”

“He’s dead,” Jack says bluntly, and his general demeanor gives Nick the creeps. Nick doesn’t even like half of the mammals at Precinct 1, but he’d still be upset if they died, because they’re like siblings. Irritating, pushy siblings. “No, I’ve got a new partner now. Agent Winter and I are more compatible.”

“Compatible, like…” Judy makes a ring with her left paw and jams a finger through it, making Nick rest his forehead in his own paw. She made him less uncomfortable back when she wasn’t so quick to make jokes like that. Is he really such a prude, or...oh God. He’s the straight mammal in this partnership.

At least Jack looks uncomfortable too. “Officer Hopps, I don’t even know how to respond to that...that...vulgar...my relationship with Skye is no one’s business but ours, and...oh, you clever thing. You really are a menace.”

“I do my best,” she chirps.

“And you, Officer Wilde.” Jack focuses on Nick’s eyes directly, and Nick has the overwhelming, unreasonable desire to punch the rabbit in the face. He doesn’t act on it, because he’s not an idiot. “I have heard only good things about you, thanks to our mutual friend here. Are you taking care of her?”

Nick glances at Judy, who seems perplexed at the question. So is he, if he’s honest. “I’m pretty sure Officer Hopps can take care of herself. But I’ll always have her back, if that’s what you mean.”

“It is what I mean. I grew rather fond of her last time I was in town. I’d hate to have to murder her boyfriend for failure to perform. She’d be vexed with me, I imagine.”

“Don’t be a creep, Jack, it’s weird,” Judy scolds. “Also, he’s not my boyfriend.”

“No?” The white bunny looks legitimately surprised as he looks at Judy’s paw on his arm and the way Nick’s tail has reflexively tightened around her legs. “My mistake. You know what they say about assumptions.”

“They — and I quote — make an ass out of you and me? That’s not something I ever thought I’d hear out of your mouth after you told off Chief Bogo for speciesism.”

Jack blinks at her. “Is that the rest of the phrase? Really? I thought it ended with they’re foolish or something like that. That must be why that kiang from Purris won’t talk to me anymore.”

So, not quite a creep, just more socially unaware than Judy was when they first met. He wants to call Jack cute, but pushing his buttons is not worth earning Judy’s ire. So he says nothing, and then loses his chance entirely when Jack asks, “Judy, would you join me for a dance?”

“I’d love to,” she replies warmly. “Nick, tell your tail to let go of me. I know my legs are soft, but honestly.”

He removes his tail rather reluctantly, but before she moves away, Judy grasps one of his paws and nuzzles it with her chin. “I’ll be right back. I expect a tango out of you.”
Well, then, he thinks fuzzily. He catches the boggled expression on Jack’s face and wonders what he’s missing. He watches in slight amusement as Judy leads Jack in a waltz around the dance floor — because of course she would dance lead — and puts his lip-reading skills to good use. He can’t see Judy’s face, but he can see Jack’s, and that will probably be more enlightening anyway.

_He lets you mark him?

_Don’t you something something to others?

_Is that a country something?

_Something much more something something suggesting.

_Don’t be embarrassed, Judy, just aware. He something something something.

Something something of all right, isn’t he? You had something something someone else does.

_You may want to validate that.

_If you and Skye team up, I’m certain this something something live.

Nick thanks his lucky stars that Jack’s faint accent makes him enunciate. If he were a mumbler, Nick wouldn’t have nearly as much information — ammunition? — as he does now. How very convenient. He slides his eyes over to Penny Ruffstein. The wolf is wearing some sort of pinstripe ensemble that looks like someone took apart a suit and sewed it back together, but the wrong way. She’s talking with an Arctic fox with dyed red fur — weird, usually foxes don’t come to these things, because why would anyone who didn’t have to — who seems to have painted on a little black dress he’d do unspeakable things to see Judy wearing. The vixen leans close and lays a paw on Ruffstein’s arm, and... wow.

Ruffstein _smiles._

“Ah, good, she’s making our move,” says Jack from beside him. To Jack and Judy, one dance truly does mean a dance until the end of a song. Good to know.

Judy makes that noise that means she’s trying, and failing, not to show excitement. “That’s your partner? Oh, Jack, you _tease,_ you should have told me! She’s gorgeous!”

“You have a fox of your own, why on earth would you want Skye as well?”

Judy looks at Nick in confusion. He gives her a shrug, like _what can you do,_ and she rolls her eyes. “Remember what we talked about last time? My partner or my friend doesn’t mean Nick actually _belongs_ to me.”

“Yes, I remember your lecture,” Jack returns, eyes on the vixen who brings her glass of sunflower ale to her muzzle, “but I have observed that he is yours anyway. You collect mammals, Judy. You steal and hoard them like precious jewels.”

“Yes,” she says placidly, obviously fed up with the other bunny’s weirdness, “because I am a dragon.”

“Well, that’s just silly. Dragons don’t exist.”

Apparently, missing the point is an art form that Jack has perfected. Nick might find it impressive, if he would just let go of Judy’s paw. As it is, he has the uncharitable urge to kick Jack right in the
scut. He’s not usually the jealous type, but none of her dates have ever been this...well-put-together. He’s sure Sylvia the raccoon was a kleptomaniac, and the less said about Pablo the bunny, the better. Not that they’re dating, or anything, because Judy never dates anybody who’s actually a reasonable match, and Nick would have heard of Jack before now if they were. Nick just wishes he’d step away.

“This might take a while,” Nick says, watching in morbid fascination as Ruffstein sips her own ale. “I hear Ruffstein regularly out-drinks mammals twice her size.”

“Good thing you owe me a tango,” Judy replies, tugging on his paw. “Come prove you’re not all just talk.”

He can’t help but be nervous. When he mentioned to Judy several weeks ago that he only knows one dance, he assumed she would decide not to dance with him. But of course she knows how to tango, because why not? Actually, wait. “You know how to tango, Judy? Really?”

“I was on the TBU ballroom team. My university didn’t have a smalls cheer squad, but I’ve always liked dancing,” she tells him. “Granted, I did dance lead, so my knowledge isn’t complete. I’m not sure I’ll be a good follow, but I do know how it’s supposed to work. And I trust you not to step on my toes, which is more than I can say for the three males on the team.”

“Ah,” he says, since apparently anything more intelligent is beyond him. They take position — after some adjustment, anyway — and they’re off with a simple walk. Judy backleads. Aggressively. The music is nice and Nick’s just happy to have her in his arms, so he forces a half-pivot and lets Judy take lead, and tries not to think of this dance as a metaphor, because that’s lame. And sentimental. (And accurate.)

Their dance isn’t impressive. Neither have practiced in a long time, it’s clear. Nick knows how to lead, and he knows the theory of following, but theory and practice are not equivalent. So they stick to the very basics, counting beats and staying aware of their feet, and it’s not as intimate as it could be because their focus is on the dance and not each other, but Nick likes it anyway. Doing anything with Judy is fun, even watching paint dry. Which they have, in fact, done, when they were trying to help renovate the Grand Pangolin Arms. The amount of puns exchanged that day would make even the daddest dad cringe.

“What are you thinking about,” Judy asks quietly, looking at his face.

Nick tries not to be distracted by the glitter in her fur — sometimes he gets the impression that Ruth’s relentless mothering of Judy is good for both of them, and other times he gets the impression that she’s deliberately hassling his partner, and he knows from experience that glitter in fur is the latter — and instead looks into her eyes. He decides to be honest and romantic and sappy and say the first thing that comes to mind. “I’m thinking about that time we watched paint dry.”

...Or he could be the opposite of romantic. That works too.

“That was a fun day,” she replies, and see, this is why he likes her. She’s as weird as he is, but she’s not ashamed of it, so it’s easier for him to be himself around her. Also she’s just great, really, but that first thing is important.

He nods and agrees, “It was.”

There’s a strange silence — not heavy, but full of something — and then Judy says, “Nick, I’ve
been thinking.”

“I wondered where that burning smell was coming from.”

“I’m not the one who absentmindedly caused the entire station to be fumigated,” she scoffs, referring to The Incident, which Nick calls the funniest thing he’s ever done and the rest of his brothers in blue ominously call the Time of Spiders.

“City Hall needed to fix that problem long before even you got there, and anyway, they never proved that it was me.”

“I still can’t believe I lied for you.”

“I never asked you to.”

She gives him a fond look. “What makes you think you have to ask?”

When he catches himself grinning like a total sap, he coughs and asks, “So...what were you thinking about?”

“Well...I know you don’t usually do...the dating thing,” she says carefully, avoiding eye contact. Nick’s stomach sinks. She’s going to try to hook him up with someone, isn’t she? “In fact, I don’t think I’ve seen you even look at anybody since you and I met. So don’t feel obligated to say yes, but I can’t just not try. I like you, Nick. You’re my best friend, and…”

She trails off. Nick sighs and brings them to a halt, and maybe it’s kind of weird to stand there at the fringes of a crowded ballroom, but at least they’re not doing their awkward tango where they’re in real danger of tripping over each other. “Fluff, I’m flattered-”

“What the heck — who is that,” Judy hisses, cutting off Nick before he can finish. Nick turns around to see someone in all black clothing, with a black hood and a black face mask obscuring their features. Even their tail is wrapped. Another figure hops down from the open window, and then another. They’re all holding...

“Those are tear gas grenades,” he says, panicking immediately, because that’s exactly what a police officer is supposed to do. “Oh my God, this is gonna hurt so bad, we-”

Judy leaps, uses his shoulder as a springboard — which, ow — and shouts, “Stop where you are, and put your paws in the air!”

One of the figures shouts, “For the pack! For the straw!” One of them screams in a way that reminds Nick of the piglet they once saved from an oncoming truck. The third tries to run.

Directly toward Nick.

As is the norm in times of crisis, Nick notices several things very quickly while his body, almost mechanically, prepares to do the things he trained it to do in the academy. The vixen, Skye, comes flying in from somewhere, shock pistol drawn, and lands next to the screaming one. Judy and Jack are already working in tandem to get the for the straw weirdo on his knees. Penny Ruffstein is looking between Skye and the screamer with disbelief. The partygoers, most of whom are politicians, are mostly crowding along the edges of the wall, trying to escape. They’re probably panicked. Nick sure is, but he’s about to do something dumb in the name of justice or whatever.

When the runner approaches, Nick takes a leaf out of Judy’s book and leaps at him, knocking them both to the floor. The first thing he does is take his claws to the stupid-looking tear gas grenade
bandolier (seriously? Why so many? And what does this guy think this is, Star Claws?), and the first thing the figure does is take his claws to Nick’s chest. Thankfully, Nick’s already leaning back trying to tug the bandolier off the jerk, but it has the effect of ripping nick’s suit diagonally down the middle, popping all the buttons. Nick’s opponent tries to push him off, but Nick is much smaller, so the end result is Nick clinging sideways while the mammal (Nick thinks this is a wolf) stands and tries to shake him off.

If this were a crappy martial arts movie, the wolf’s pants would fall down and he’d frantically try to pull them back up while someone waited to smugly punch him in the face. Since it’s not, Nick just holds on tight to the wolf’s arms and hips and tries not to be weirded out by the face full of crotch he’s experiencing. This is not how he expected tonight to go, like, at all.

“Get...off,” the wolf growls, wiggling like one of those horrifying air dancers they place at car lots.

“No can do. I’m not the one waving my crotch in someone’s face,” Nick grunts stubbornly, wishing Judy were nearby to laugh at his brilliant comeback.

Fortunately, help does arrive in the form of a very sloshed Penny Ruffstein, whose suit skirt is ripped up one leg. She gets the wolf in a headlock before either of them can process just how quickly she moved, and Nick takes a moment to reevaluate her. There’s a reason she’s the Chief of Police in District 13.

Then, just as he releases the criminal’s hips and steps back, the criminal takes the opportunity to lash out with his foot. It connects solidly with Nick’s head, and lights out.

Nick’s never been the star of a ride-along, so he doesn’t awaken slowly in a hospital bed with a saline drip in his arm and worried costars — coworkers, rather — surrounding his bed. Instead, he’s on a cot being wheeled to an ambulance. He raises his head up slowly, despite the EMT’s insistence that he not do so, and watches three wolves get loaded into some police cruisers.

What did they think, honestly? Crashing a party where there would be off-duty cops on the dance floor?

His eyes find Judy, who’s nearby, pretending to listen to whatever Jack Savage is saying. Her ears are both turned in Nick’s direction, though, and he knows enough about bunny culture to know that’s really impolite. Aww, she’s worried about him.

“Excuse me,” she says to Jack. Nick knows this because once again, his experience with lip reading has come in handy. Before Nick can figure out what’s going to happen next, he blacks out again.

Hospital bed, yes; IV, no. Nick made it safely to the hospital, and after a long, boring wait and probably an obscene bill, he now knows that he has a sprained shoulder. So that happened. He’s awaiting his discharge papers when Judy bursts through the door, wraps her arms uncomfortably around his belly while he’s sitting up in the bed, and shouts, “Thank goodness you’re okay!”

“Yes, and now the whole ER knows,” he replies, gesturing with his good arm at the general area. He hates the smell of hospitals, but at least Judy’s here to distract him with her scent. “What happened back there?”

“We made an arrest. They were planning to attack some pigs over a scam involving substandard home foundations.”
“Wait, what?” He looks down at her, dumbfounded, and sees the angry expression on her face when she pulls back. “Come again?”

“They weren’t even trying to get us,” she explains, irritated. “Zoogle Maps took them to the wrong hotel! Our night off — the night I was going to ask you out — and it got ruined by the most inept criminals in Zootopia!”

Nick will, later, blame it on the bump on his head, but it takes him a while to put together the string of words, and once he does, his smile is so big his cheeks hurt. “You were going to ask me out?”

She closes her mouth with a click. She looks embarrassed, but she doesn’t back down; instead, she puts her paws on her hips and asks, aggressively, “So what if I was? I’m not ashamed of my feelings. Even if you don’t return them after all.”

Even if he doesn’t what, now? Is he concussed? Is she? Confused, he says, “Who says I don’t return your feelings, Carrots? I haven’t been this unsubtle about anything since I was seven. I think even Little Judy knows, and she has yet to learn that foxes aren’t bears just because we have big teeth.”

“Oh. I just…” She huffs and looks away, obviously embarrassed. She doesn’t seem to know what to do with her paws. “You said you didn’t want to date anyone else, and I know you got burned before, and I had this whole thing planned out where I was going to make sure you knew I didn’t expect anything, I just didn’t want to hide anything from you and make you think I was...but I guess that’s pointless now. I mean, I don’t expect anything from you. But if you’d like to get dinner — officially, not as tired cop partners — then I’d love to have you.”

“Judy, you are one of the most irritating mammals on the planet,” he tells her sincerely, softly cupping her cheeks in his large, wide paws. She looks up at him in hope. “I was giving off so many signals you could use me to direct an entire city’s traffic. I thought you didn’t want me. And I was trying to convince myself it was for the best. We’re work partners, we...I can’t think of another negative, but that’s a pretty big one. But I wasn’t lying. I don’t want to date anyone else. Just you. So...now that we have that established...can we get to the part where you kiss me senseless?”

“You are injured,” she says pointedly. She tugs on his ugly hospital gown. Leans in. Whispers, “But if you promise to be good for the doctors, I’ll play nurse until you feel better.”

“That might take a long time,” he says solemnly, trying not to laugh.

“I’m a talented nurse,” she shoots back. They’re sharing air. Finally, she gives in and pecks him on the nose. “Hurry up and get better, my poor, broken fox.”

“It’s a sprained shoulder, I’ll be fine-”

“-so that you can have a full range of motion after our first date,” she finishes.

Well, he thinks, there’s no misinterpreting that.

End Notes

...Yeah, I'll see myself out.
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