A Different Goal

by Pixiestick_cc

Summary

Like any mammal, Judy could be dumb when it came to certain things. Not because she was a rabbit, but because for a long time she’d been blind with ambition. And love … well, that was something that took a little longer to come into focus.

Notes

I am perfectly fine with this pairing as platonic, but am convinced that if 'Zootopia' had been about humans then there would have been a lead up to a romance. But of course with humans, the story would have lost its wonderful allegory. So here I am wondering just exactly how you can make a relationship with a fox and rabbit happen.
Prologue

When you want something badly, it becomes easy. Not that that means it’s actually easy. Most of the time it isn’t. But you have a goal and will fight for that goal no matter what. Failed obstacles only push you to get better. And be better. It’s easy, because you know you want it.

But when you don’t know you want something, that’s when it becomes hard. You feel that the other more important thing- your goal- is all there is. Anything else, stays hidden from your conscious, behind the fervor of your ambition. Until one day, it’s over. Your goal is in the past, you’ve surpassed it, and all that’s left are those hidden things that suddenly become less difficult to see. They climb out into the light of realization that there’s more to life than just one goal.

Things like friendship.

Although, for a long time, Judy Hopps never had time for that. It was a distraction to what she knew she wanted. What she worked her whole kithood and adolescence to get. It wasn’t as if she didn’t have friends. They were around … sometimes. But it proved hard for them to keep up with her go get ‘em attitude. They appreciated the effort she made in fighting their battles, but always scattered in the aftermath. In the end though, it didn’t matter all that much to Judy. She was just doing her best to imitate a purveyor of justice, because that’s what she wanted- to defend the little guy. But more importantly, to one day be a police officer of Zootopia- one who just so happened to also be their first rabbit on the force. If her “friends” didn’t stick around, well, at least she got to practice for her future career. It wasn’t as if those friends were going to follow her out of Bunnyburrow anyway when she grew up. So very few mammals ever left the small farming community Judy’s family was from. But she was going to. And eventually did.

Yet, Zootopia had been a little tough to swallow. Her goal of becoming a police officer was met, but not exactly in the way she’d hoped. No one took a rabbit officer seriously. And so her ambition shifted. She wouldn’t just be a police officer, she would also prove her worth by solving a case no one thought a dumb bunny ever had a chance of cracking. Only this time, it was a goal Judy conceded she couldn’t reach alone. For the first time in her whole bunny life, she had to depend on someone else for help in achieving something. Nick- a crooked fox who she discovered wasn’t nearly as crooked as he let on- came through for her in more ways than one. He not only helped her solve the case, but exposed Judy to her own hidden, just below the surface, prejudices against other mammals. A list that had unfortunately included foxes too. Nick fostered in her a new outlook on life, one that could be cynical at times, but deep down showed her that not everything was divided into wrongs and rights. There were nuances everywhere.

That’s when friendship- a need that until then had been eclipsed by the rush towards her endgame- found its way out into the light. Nick was her friend, and a real one too! Their relationship wasn't just some superficial on the surface thing like all those she’d had in Bunnyburrow. He cared about her, and Judy slowly discovered that she too had feelings for him. She could open herself up to others (or at least to Nick at first) and stop having to prove she was everything all the time. A real friend could see you at your lowest, and not hold it against you … not for long anyway. She didn’t have to be perfect. She could be just a dumb bunny to Nick. Which was a characteristic she admittedly did possess at times. But Nick never let her think that of course … not unless it was in the form of a tease.

But it was true. Like any mammal, Judy could be dumb when it came to certain things. Not because she was a rabbit, but because she’d been blind with ambition. And love … well, that was something that took a little longer to come into focus. Even after meeting the only goal she ever had growing up, the light that exposed love to Judy, was dim. It took the help of Nick fostering that emotion in her
(unbeknownst to him) for the scope of what she felt to become clearer overtime. But once Judy recognized what it was, she didn’t exactly know what to do with it. And that evolved into her next challenge, or in Judy’s own phrasing … her new goal. An aspiration that wouldn’t be as easy as the one she’d set into motion as a kit. In fact, becoming a police officer seemed easy as carrot pie when it came to something as tricky as love.
It usually took Judy ten minutes to get herself out of bed in the morning, although the time could vary depending on distractions. Not that there were many distractions in her tiny desolate apartment. But sometimes it could take her 20 minutes if she eavesdropped. It was never her proudest moment when she did this. Well, not unless her large bunny ears were overhearing a clue that would lead to solving a crime. But this was never the case during the early morning hours when the arguments of her neighbors Bucky and Pronk could be heard through the paper thin wall beside her bed. Though she detested the side of her that loved a bit of drama played out from afar, Judy didn’t hate it enough to ignore the fights. They were never serious, more humorous than anything else.

And it was during these mornings of distraction that Judy would hop into work a little later than usual (but never actually late, because punctual Judy Hopps was normally early). Of course, Nick never let it slide that he’d arrived before her, which would lead to him asking, “So what were they fighting about now?”

Judy would give him an I don’t know what you’re talking about look, trying to take the high road, but Nick was persistent, usually goading her with a turn of phrase similar, but not exclusive to, “Whatever, Carrots. You try to act like you’re above it all, but I know you better than anyone else in here, and deep down you like to swim in the gutter with the rest of us.” Then he’d put his shades on, like his statement was some deep analysis of her, and she’d ignore this too.

But one morning when Judy was feeling particularly cranky, she snatched them away and groused, “You’re inside. Stop putting sunglasses on when you don’t need them.”

“What are you talking about? I always need them. They’re part of my magnetism with the ladies.” Nick smirked, using his overly used trademarked self-satisfied smile just to annoy her, but tempering it with the playful way they had with one another. Judy knew this smirk well and had seen the meaning behind it change over the course of their friendship, from contempt to loving tease. At first she hated it, but now that it no longer was a point of contention between them, she admitted (only to herself) that it had a way of pulling her out of being upset at him.

But not this time.

“That’s not going to work on me, so stop smiling that smile.” She handed him back his glasses, and Nick promptly placed them back over his eyes. “And what ladies? I’m the only female who is willing to be around you, and that’s only because I have to. We’re partners,” she stated, but in the typical nonchalant way she had with him. Their fights were never more than a playful back and forth. At least they were now.

“Ow. That really hurts, right here.” He pulled his paw into a fist and hit his chest. “You’ve truly wounded me, Carrots.”

That was all it took. Nick could do the most generically mundane comedy routine and still she found it funny. Despite herself she giggled. And boy, did Judy hate it when she did that. As if on cue, the large eyes of another officer stared her down from across the room. Police officers did not giggle. Well, if you were Clawhauser you did, but she was convinced that was the reason the chatty cheetah had been given a desk job. You couldn’t giggle when you were the face of justice outside the precinct building.

“Funny, Carrots, that you say you’re the only female who can tolerate me, but I don’t exactly see you hanging around anyone else at the moment, or … ever. The gossip behind the walls keeping you
too interested to leave your apartment?” She ignored him, not taking the bait, which of course only encouraged Nick. “I guess since we only ever hang out with each other, you could say it’s almost like we’re married.”

“Work married,” she quickly corrected. “There’s a difference.” And not liking the sudden embarrassment that washed over her, she added, “If you’re not going to drop this- and since you’re Nick Wilde I know you won’t- they were arguing about who drank the last of the orange juice and that led to one of them suggesting- I’m not sure which one- that they were going to grow an orange tree and make their own orange juice that the other couldn’t drink.”

“Ahhhh, farming. That’s right up your alley, isn’t it? Maybe you could offer him tips.” She gave Nick a half-hearted glare, and not one to be bested, he drolly commented, “I love it when the purple of your irises turns red in anger, or is it orange, like carrots.”

Judy punched him in the shoulder, he groaned, and someone nearby muttered for them to get a room. That was the end of it. Not long afterward, Chief Bogo stormed in and her day went by like most others, ending with Judy heading back to her apartment alone.

But even if it looked like that was the end of it on the outside, to Judy it wasn’t. There was a lingering sting to Nick’s claim that she never hung out with anyone else. It wasn’t that she minded him being her only friend, but it was true that she rarely left her apartment unless it was for work, hence the reason her partner was one of the few mammals she spoke with daily. “I talk to others,” she grumbled to herself as she flopped down on her bed.

“You can talk to me, Judy,” a voice spoke through the wall. If it was Bucky or Pronk, she didn’t know.

“Leave her alone, Bucky. She obviously doesn’t want to talk to you.” Well, that answers that.

Judy shoved her head under her pillow and tried to drown out the ensuing argument taking place on the other side of the wall. For once it wasn’t a subject she was interested in hearing, and Judy only came up for air when her phone began ringing. Knowing it could be work, she extricated herself from her hiding place and went to get her phone from the desk she’d placed it on after coming home. The face that greeted her on the screen was Nick’s, and not feeling particularly interested in talking with him, she let it go to voicemail. But it didn’t deter her fox friend; no message was left, and the ringtone played again. Judy sighed, wanting to put the phone on vibrate, but at the last minute decided against it. “What?” she answered brusquely. Then realizing how it made her sound, she cleared her throat and tried to cover up her rudeness with a smile. “Hello, Nick.”

“Whoa is the apartment on fire? Speedy rabbit doesn’t answer on the first ring?”

He was right; she usually did answer right away, no matter the situation. “I was ...” she struggled for an explanation and settled on the very unspecific, “busy.”

Nick snorted. “Forget the badge for once and let your ears down.” It was a tease, but his words reminded her too much of what he’d said earlier and she cringed.

“Is there something you wanted?” Judy knew what she wanted ... to get back to her pillow cave of melancholy.

“Yeah, your favorite movie is on TV, thought I’d let you know.”

“Nick, you know I don’t own a TV. And neither do you. How are ... are you inside an electronics store?”
He chuckled and then pulled his phone back to showcase a multitude of screens behind him all playing the same film. “Yeah, but I remembered you telling me you liked this particular movie, and thought I could give you a play by play of all the romantic comedy action I see happening on these big screens. I think this upcoming part might be kiss heavy.”

Judy groaned, regretting ever confessing to Nick that her favorite movie- one of the few VHS tapes her family owned back in Bunnyburrow- was a romantic comedy. She’d watched it so many times growing up that the tape eventually broke. It didn’t matter anymore though, because if Judy wanted to, she could stream it on her phone. All her monthly data would be used up, so it wasn’t the ideal option, but if she was desperate enough she could watch it. Nick was only calling to rub her nose in the shame she felt for being a tough Zootopia officer who also had a soft spot for romantic banter. “I have to go, Nick. Goodbye.”

“No, wait. Where could you possibly be going? You never go anywhere but work.”

“Goodbye, Nick.” Her voice was a little more forceful the second time.

Nick sighed. “See ya, Whiskers,” he replied, and Judy scoffed at her new nickname.

“How is that even clever? We both have whiskers.”

“We both eat carrots,” he countered.

“No, we don’t.”

“I did that one time, to please your mom. That care package, remember?”

She thought back. Yes, there had been a time when her family sent some carrots by mail, and Judy’s mom demanded they be shared with friends. Nick had helped out when video of her partner enjoying a carrot was asked to be seen by her mom. “Okay, I concede, but I am also going. Goodbye, Nick,” she reiterated for the third time.

“Bye, Judy.” The screen switched back to her phone’s wallpaper.

Once she knew Nick could no longer see her, she smiled. It always made Judy happy when he used her given name. Nicknames were a fun throwback to when they first met, but it was nice to be reminded that he saw her not just as a sidekick. When she was Judy, it meant more. But that small measure of happiness didn’t last long, and again she was left feeling despondent by his- you never go anywhere comment.

Still sitting at her desk, Judy set aside her phone to rummage through one of the drawers, mumbling a little “aha,” as she pulled out a spiral notebook. It wasn’t in the best condition, but that was bound to happen after years of use. She traced a paw down its cover, which was a testament to her youth- a mixture of heart scribbles alongside police badge doodles, then flipped the book open to reveal the pages inside. Most were filled with goals she’d wanted to accomplish once upon a time, with all of them correlating back to the main one written in all capital letters at the age of six: Become Zootopia’s first rabbit police officer. That goal had been met almost a year and a half before, and next to it was a check mark, placed there the day she graduated from police academy.

Since then Judy had learned that there was more to life than just that one goal, a realization that led her to keeping track of other positive things she could do. All had little check marks near them and nearly half of those lesser goals pertained to Nick. But that wasn’t enough. Clearly she was missing the bigger picture. She could have her dream job and a best friend, but still lose in the end. What Judy needed was something else. But she wasn’t sure what that was, only that she wanted it. With a
sigh of mild frustration, she turned over to a blank page in her journal of goals, and pulling out a pen, wrote in bold capital letters just like she’d done all those years ago about becoming a police officer.

GOAL- FIND SOMETHING MORE.
The notifications on her phone were getting out of hand. It became so much of a problem, that after three days of non-stop dings that transitioned to vibrations that devolved into *I’m turning my phone the fluff off*, Judy relented and deleted the app causing all the ruckus. She didn’t like thinking that naivety had brought about her current situation— at least not the wide-eyed optimistic kind she’d suffered from when first coming to Zootopia. Since then, a steady diet of Nick’s savvy observations and life in the big city had given her street smarts. But internet smarts … evidently she still had a lot to learn.

Judy had been naive when downloading the app that ultimately became a thorn in her paw. Labeled as a way to meet others, she assumed the app was for making new friends. But it wasn’t lost on her that all the notifications piling up in her inbox were from other rabbits who just happened to be of the male persuasion. After going through the first few—and having to read the word *cute* several times—she’d stopped looking. Judy didn’t want to be cute. She wanted to meet up with mammals who shared her interests, and she didn’t think any of those rabbits had the same thing in mind when she stated in her profile—“looking to make new friends and try new experiences.” Judy made a face at the thought of it, and sitting beside her in their patrol car, Nick noticed. “What was that look for?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she replied airily while hiding her phone away.

Nick snorted. “Oh yeah, right. Like I believe that. Anything deserving of Whisker’s face of disgust is not *nothing.*” He was still going strong with the Whiskers bit, had been for two weeks now.

“I think,” Judy raised her brows for effect, “you were told to pay attention to that suspicious suspect on the corner and not any faces your partner might be making.” Judy then added a smile in an attempt to distract him, but she wasn’t as talented as he was in that area.

“Well, I have to say I prefer the face you’re making now over the last one, but on a side note, weren’t you given the same orders as me? Seems you’ve been staring at your phone more than you have Mr. So and So.”

“His name is Mr. Soranso,” Judy corrected. “And no, I have not been staring at my phone more than our suspect. You’re imagining things.” It was a lie, and Nick was too observant to actually buy it. That’s what made him a good cop and also a terrible person to pull something over on.

Her partner let out a theatrical sigh. “Look Carrots, are you really going to prolong the inevitable. I know something’s going on. Keeping it from me won’t work. I’ll find out anyway. I always do.” He then took a moment to pull his sunglasses lower on his snout and gave her a wink.

Judy responded with a groan. Wanting to avoid Nick’s smug expression, she stared past him sitting in the driver’s seat, and out onto the street corner where their suspect was loitering. Talking to Nick about how she’d been feeling glum lately shouldn’t have been difficult. If anything, he’d be the one person to tell, having already seen her at her lowest. So what was the big deal? Thinking back in time, Judy felt a surge of pride at having been able to pour her heart out to Nick, and admit she’d been wrong about predators. That had been her first breakthrough in accepting herself as is. In the year and a half since, he’d helped her find a balance between her drive for perfectionism and the reality that she had faults just like everyone else.

But this time, revealing what was going on would also mean telling him she’d joined a dating site without realizing it. He’d laugh, make fun of her, and she’d probably deserve it. While it was
certainly more trivial than what had happened between them before, at that moment in time, her mistake seemed so much larger in her head.

“Come on, Judy. I was only kidding,” Nick said, interrupting her reflection. “I don’t care about the weird relationship you’ve been having with your phone lately. That’s between the two of you.”

Judy still didn’t look at him, continuing to mentally debate if she was ready to admit her dumb error. The prolonged silence finally prompted Nick to ease the tension he perceived between them, by pretending to radio the precinct. “Clawhauser, Officer Hopps is currently in a catatonic state. I’m not sure what the reason is behind this, but it may have something to do with her being unable to handle my handsome face. Please, send over an uglier officer to help jolt her out of this.”

Sure as rain, his lame attempt at humor made Judy laugh, and she gave him a little shove. “You’re so full of yourself.”

Nick smiled, and pulled the radio closer to his mouth. “Never mind, seems my charm was able to revive her.” Then looking back at Judy as if he were actually talking to someone back at the station, Nick added, “Clawhauser sends his best.”

Yanking the radio from his paw, Judy shoved it back into its nook. “Okay. I’m just going to come out with it,” she stated in a much too serious voice for the subject matter. After taking a deep breath, she let her confession whoosh out in one quick exhale, “I joined a dating site.”

“What?” Nick choked. But there was no laugh like she predicted, just a long awkward pause. It seemed Judy had done the impossible and made her partner speechless.

“But it wasn’t on purpose,” she defended herself.

Nick shook his head in disbelief. “How is that something you can do on accident? You don’t exactly trip and go whoops, I’ve accidentally found myself on a dating site. Oh, dear me. I wonder if they sell carrots here.” Nick had upped the pitch of his voice to imitate Judy, something he was prone to do occasionally. It was always a harmless tease, but this time it bothered her.

“Well, I wouldn’t have done it if it wasn’t for you!” she accused.

“Me? How do I fit into this?”

“You made fun of me, said I never left my apartment and that you were my only friend.”

“When did I say that?”

“Two weeks ago.”

Nick leaned back in his seat, closed his eyelids and pinched the area between them. “Judy,” he sighed after a few seconds. “Don’t ever take anything seriously when it comes to me. Well, in the context of this job, yes. But what I say to you in between, most of it is just me being … me. It’s kind of my shtick. You should know that by now.” He opened his eyes again to look at her. “And you’re stronger than my fake insults. Why is it you were bothered enough this time to do something as drastic as join a dating site?”

Judy’s nose twitched slightly. “I’m not sure,” she answered. “But I wanted to fix the feeling you gave me, so I joined a dating site thinking it was meant for finding friends.”

This information made Nick chuckle. Well, a chuckle is better than a laugh.
“Anyway, it doesn’t matter anymore. I deleted the app. Of course, I’ll still have to get on the computer at work to delete my profile from the actual site. But at least no more messages to my phone commenting on my appearance.”

“You used your work computer to log into a dating account?” Nick’s face formed a shocked expression that was as fake as the redwood he’d once sold to some mice construction workers. “Whiskers, the rabbit who won’t bend the rules on anything … except when it comes to dating sites.”

“Oh, stop it. You got under my fur. I haven’t been myself lately,” Judy huffed, exasperated. “I’m not exactly proud of what I did.”

Nick seemed to take notice of how his teasing was bothering her and in an attempt to diffuse the fire, he turned his snark down a notch. “Why does any of what I say matter to you? You shouldn’t put so much stock in the words that come out of the mouth of a former con artist.”

“But you’re wrong,” Judy instantly protested. If there was one thing she wouldn’t stand for, it was Nick degrading himself to her. “You’re more important than you realize.”

“Well, if that’s true, and you take everything I say at face value, here’s a little fox wisdom from me to you.” He lowered his voice to a whisper as if he were giving her some confidential news. “Don’t go to dating sites. They’re a racket.”

“What? Nick Wilde, are you saying you used dating sites to hustle people?”

“No. Even I wasn’t that low. But I’ve seen it done, and with your inability to see the worst in people, you’d probably go out for a meal and get stuck footing the bill.”

Judy wanted to argue that she wouldn’t have let that happen, but had a feeling he was more than likely right. “Hey, don’t worry about it, Carrots,” Nick said, and it was then she realized she’d been frowning. “How many friends you have isn’t a sign of your worth. Take me for example; I didn’t have any for years, and look at how awesome I am.” Judy rolled her large bunny eyes, and Nick laughed. “What I mean is, I’m awesome, because I do have a friend now. Just one, and she’s the best.”

“Well, I can’t argue with that.” Now it was Judy’s turn to look smug.

Nick opened his mouth, and knowing him, would’ve given her a light-hearted verbal jab, but Judy clamped it shut with her hands before he could get a word out. “He’s on the move. Just stole a purse.”

“What?” Nick struggled to speak, and Judy let go of his snout.

“Mr. Soranso.” And with that Judy was all business. Her internal struggles forgotten as she set out to do one of the things she loved most- getting the bad guy.

Back at the station, Judy was working on a report of her and Nick’s captured perp, when she noticed her partner seemed restrained and less willing to crack jokes like normal. It was hard for her to assume it didn’t connect back to her confession in the squad car, and when Judy got him alone, she said, “Look, Nick. I don’t want it to be weird between us, because of what I told you. My problem isn’t yours. Don’t think you have to hold back, because I suddenly can’t take a joke. It’s a phase. I’ll get over it.”
Nick shrugged and went back to work, choosing to bury himself in his own computer for the rest of his shift. He was avoiding her, and by the time she was ready to leave for the day, Judy didn’t even know where Nick had gone. On her way out, she asked Clawhauser if he’d seen him. “Oh, he left early, told Chief Bogo he had an emergency. Do you think everything’s okay?” The cheetah put his paws up to his mouth in what probably look like exaggerated worry to those who didn’t know him. But Judy was aware this was just the way he reacted to everything, always giving 1000 percent of whatever emotion he was feeling.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Judy answered. “But I’ll text him to make sure.”

“Well, let me know as soon as you find out,” Clawhauser called to Judy as she left the building.

Judy did try to text Nick several times on her way home, but got no reply. It wasn’t like him to ignore her texts, and his abnormal behavior caused a shiver of worry to grow inside her. When he didn’t answer the call she eventually made, Judy was nearing a full blown panic attack. She began visualizing a wide range of horrible things that could have happened to him, from the most likely: he’s ignoring me, oh why did I tell him about the dating site, to the insane: he must be lying dead in a ditch. Judy was on the verge of turning around and leading a search party of one for her missing friend, but shunted the idea when she caught site of a silhouette standing near her apartment door. Judy’s pace slowed until the figure came into focus, then she stopped walking altogether as relief washed over her. But it didn’t last long; quickly, that sentiment transformed into anger. “Nicholas P. Wilde, where the fluff have you been?” Judy scolded as she approached.

“Whoa, easy there, Mom. When you swear like that it makes me uncomfortable,” Nick joked, but it did little to erase the scowl from Judy’s face.

“Why didn’t you answer your phone?” she demanded.

“Because I wanted this to be a surprise, and knew if I answered, it wouldn’t be. I have zero self-control.” It was then that Judy was able to look past the haze of her frustration with Nick, and notice the device in his hands. “I had to get it from my apartment, and come back here before you did. I was saving it for your birthday, but thought you might need it now.”

“A laptop?” Judy asked, astonished. “Is that for me?”

“Yeah. Hey, can I- do you mind letting me in so I can set it up for you, instead of us just standing here in the hallway? I got a few suspicious looks before you got here.”

Out of his police uniform, a fox like Nick standing alone in a hallway meant her neighbors were likely unfairly judging him. “Oh, of course,” she muttered and let them both inside.

“It’s not much,” Nick commented as he set the laptop down on her desk. “The cheapest I could find actually, but it plays movies, and when you can afford internet- Bogo has to give you a raise sometime- you can use it to get online.”

“But how could you afford this? I can’t even afford this?” Judy asked, standing beside Nick as he opened the device and turned it on.

“It wasn’t illegally acquired, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

Nick shrugged. “If anyone knows how to save money by finding a good deal, it’s a former scammer like me. And besides, I knew you’d never get one for yourself. You’re always sending money back home to your family.” A logo lit up the screen, and seconds later an image of her and Nick replaced
it as the laptop’s wallpaper.

“Nick this is … too much.”

“No, it isn’t. Not for you.” For once, Nick’s voice was absent of any tease. “You’ve done a lot for me, so this is me saying thank you.” He started to move towards the door. “Oh, by the way, I downloaded a movie on it for you. Legally bought and paid for. Had to use the wifi of a Snarlbucks, but I got it. It’s in the folder labeled movies.”

“Nick …” Judy wanted to say it was too much again, but she could see the determination in his eyes.

“No, this is one time when you’re not going to argue, Carrots, even in that adorable way where your nose twitches, your ears shoot straight up, and you repeatedly thump your foot. I’m not taking this back.” He inched closer to the door, in what looked to Judy like an attempt to escape her refusing his gift once more.

“I wasn’t going to argue. I was going to ask you to stay,” Judy said, and it was enough to get Nick to turn around. “If there’s a movie on here to watch, then why can’t we watch it together?”
Chapter 4

It had been a weird two weeks, and whatever direction Judy’s little crisis was pushing her in- first with the dating site and now for the first time ever, asking her friend to stay over- Judy didn’t seem capable of making decisions like she had before. Her whims did the talking, and this time, impulsive Judy wanted Nick to stay.

But that hadn’t been her first intention. She’d paused in the middle of another attempt to refuse his gift- a gift she so obviously didn’t deserve- when realization hit her. It didn’t matter how she felt; this wasn’t really about her.

This was about Nick.

His gift to her wasn’t just an off-the-cuff buy. He’d thought about it for a long time. Judy knew, because while starting salaries for police officers in Zootopia weren’t exactly horrible, if you lived in the city, the prices of everything else were bound to bog you down. In Bunny Burrow, Judy could make the same as she did now and have a comfortable life. Here, she had enough to live, but enjoying anything extra was an option for a rainy fund you chose to spend unwisely.

And a laptop was definitely an extra.

Telling Nick no, thank you, would be relating back to him that all his planning, penny pinching, and keeping it a secret- something she knew he wasn’t all that great at doing- wasn’t worth it. She would hurt him, and having already been down that road with Nick before in a big way, Judy couldn’t do it. In fact, she had a strong urge to do the opposite. If this was about Nick and not her, then the best thing Judy could do was thank him. But how could she without seeming disingenuous? Moments before she’d told him his gift was too much. And that was when her whim of an idea hit- ask him to stay and watch a movie. That would be accepting his gift and also enjoying it with him. But his reply wasn’t as receptive as she hoped.

“Watch a movie here?” Nick asked, and Judy thought she heard hesitation in his voice.

Inwardly, she groaned. Of course, he didn’t want to stay. In her small place? Everything was so compact, and adding two mammals to the mix just made a cramped situation worse. Not to mention Judy’s eavesdropping neighbors, who she assumed weren’t home at the moment. If they were, a comment on her and Nick’s current situation would’ve been made from the other side of the wall by now. Nothing of substance ever happened in her apartment, and even then they found reason to add their commentary. Tonight Bucky and Pronk would have pulled out the popcorn for the front row seat they were getting to something new.

Going into damage control, Judy tried to salvage the situation. “That was a stupid suggestion, wasn’t it? I mean why would you want to do that? Stay here? Watch a movie? Pfft.” Judy made a strange dismissive sort of noise that faded into a long drawn out sigh as she darted her eyes away from Nick.

“Oh fluff, that was terrible.”

“I’m confused. Do you not want me to stay?” Nick asked, pulling Judy’s attention back to him still standing near the door.

“Well, it sounded like you didn’t.”

“How did you get that from watch a movie here?” The corners of his mouth twitched upward.
“You were questioning my suggestion like it was dumb.”

“No, I wasn’t. I just repeated you to make sure I heard right.”

“Nick, you’re a fox. You have excellent hearing, and we’re standing like six feet from each other.”

“Carrots, you know my hearing was damaged during the war.”

“The war? What war?” Judy huffed, and then shook her head. “Stop turning this into a joke on me. You sounded like you didn’t want to stay.”

Nick made a salute, and said in a very serious voice, “Yes, sir, Officer Hopps!” Then he sat down at her desk, and began messing with the laptop, as if that was the end of their conversation.

Judy grumbled under her breath, and came to stand behind Nick. She wasn’t imagining it; he’d sounded hesitant. But then again, she hadn’t exactly been herself lately. Whether real or imagined, Judy decided to let the subject go, and peered over Nick’s shoulder. He was clicking on a file labeled- When Hare met Bunny, and her heart sank into her stomach. Oh, no! Not that one! “Oh, Nick. I didn’t know that was the movie you downloaded. I’ll never hear the end of it if you watch When Hare met Bunny with me.”

“No take backsies.” Nick gently patted the paw she’d placed on his shoulder. Judy pulled it away to cover her face and groan.

He’d known exactly what movie to get her, and somewhere deep inside Judy- in a place not currently being occupied with dread- there was an appreciation for the gesture. It showed he actually listened to her when she talked. But it also wasn’t lost on her that Nick probably had another motive. Giving Judy the movie she was most ashamed of loving was also another opportunity for him to tease.

“Would it help if I promised to approach this movie with an open mind, and not watch it just to have material to throw back at you later?” Nick swiveled in the chair so that he was facing her.

“I’m not so sure that’s possible with you.” Judy frowned down at him, sulking.

“Scout’s honor.” He raised his paw and made the well-known signal used to state you wouldn't break your word. But Judy knew it had deeper meaning than just him making a promise to her. To Nick- the fox shamed out of the Scouts’ program as a kit for being a predator- it was a reference to the time he let Judy in on a part of who he was ... to when they first became friends.

Her face softened. “Okay,” Judy gave in and sat down on the side of the bed so that Nick would be able to watch the movie next to her once he scooted his chair back. Then she took his paw that was still raised, and squeezed it in her own. “Let’s watch some romantic comedy drivel.”

“So, tell me, Carrots, why this movie over something more up your alley?”

“And what exactly is up my alley?” She didn’t mean to respond defensively, but sometimes Judy couldn’t help it. After years of expecting others to judge her a certain way just because she was a rabbit, her reactions could become instinctive preemptive strikes if she felt someone was about to stereotype her.

“You know, like maybe a cop drama. Something where guns go off, and the good guy,” he paused,
gave her a once over, and then enunciated his next words, “or gal saves the day. You told me that’s all you ever thought of when you lived in Bunnyburrow.”

After giving his question some thought, Judy finally tore her eyes away from the laptop screen to look at Nick. “I think it must go back to my initial obsession with all mammals living together in harmony. Remember that Carrot Festival play I told you about, the one I put together all on my own? That wasn’t about wanting to become a police officer. That was about the ideal of Zootopia.”

“And how does that connect to a movie about two rabbits. I count only one species taking up most of the screen time.”

“It’s an allegory for predators and prey,” Judy stated, like it was so obvious. “Look, they hate each other in the beginning of the movie, right? But over ten years Hare and Bunny find it’s their differences that make them perfect for each other. They complement each other’s weaknesses, and it’s enough that they fall in love and get married.”

“Did you just give away the ending? Whiskers! Spoiler much?”

“Like you’re even watching.”

“Oh, I am. I’m very invested in Bunny and Hare’s story, especially the-”

“Shhhh,” Judy interrupted, softly nudging his snout. “This is my favorite part, and you’re not going to ruin it with your sarcasm.”

Nick held his paws up in mock surrender, and Judy would have laughed if she hadn’t been so absorbed with two rabbits kissing. He didn’t say anything for a bit, letting Judy enjoy her moment, and when she finally looked back at him, he was watching her. “What?” she asked, feeling slightly strange at having caught him staring.

“Telling me this movie is somehow linked back to your utopia idealism for predators and prey doesn’t seem to work as an argument when you stare giddily at two rabbits kissing. Do you know what I think this is actually about?”

Judy sighed testily. “No, but I suspect you’re going to tell me.”

“Yes I am, and you know I’ll be right. I’ve spent the last year and a half memorizing all that makes Judy Hopps tick.”

“Oh, really?” she challenged, and Nick leaned in closer.

“Here’s my theory. See, I think deep down you really just like watching this movie for the romance.”

Judy scoffed and had a denial waiting to go, but let it dissolve on the tip of her tongue. There was no point in- as Nick always put it- *prolonging the inevitable*. “And so what if there is a part of me that likes this movie for that reason too? I’m normal like everyone else and have faults. Isn’t that what you’ve been trying to convince me to do for a while now, accept myself for who I am … flaws and all.”

“Romance is a flaw?”

Judy’s brow furrowed as Nick’s question gave her pause. She wasn’t sure why she’d labeled it that way. “Well, I guess I wouldn’t know. I’ve never …” she began, but let her sentence hang unfinished in the space between them.
“Never what?” a suddenly very curious Nick inquired.

“Nothing,” Judy replied, even if it hadn’t been. Never having discussed her love life (or to be more accurate- lack thereof) with anyone before, the subject made her feel self-conscious. Nick casually eased away from her and Judy wasn’t sure if the disappointment she saw pass briefly across his face was real or imagined. “Let’s just ... let’s just finish the movie,” she suggested.

“Sure, Judy.”

It was quiet then, except for Hare and Bunny’s nearly continuous romantic banter coming from the laptop. But instead of watching them as she’d mentioned to Nick, Judy’s mind wandered, thinking about the L word she’d been so set on not mentioning to him.

Why though? If he was her best friend, why was that subject off limits? Was it really worth keeping this one detail of her life from him? Was she simply too embarrassed to mention that romance and all that came with it, hadn’t ever been a priority?

Judy’s mental distractions continued on through the movie, and when the credits finally rolled, Nick had to wave his paw in front of her face to get her attention. “What happened to the giddy reactions? You barely made a sound during that wedding scene.”

“Huh? Oh, sorry,” she said, not offering up an explanation.

“So, I guess that movie wasn’t so bad,” Nick commented, making another attempt to pull her out of her thoughts. He was being diplomatic; she knew he’d been bored through most of it.

“Well, maybe next time you can pick a movie more up your alley,” she repeated his phrase from earlier. “Something with a little less kissing.”

Nick’s ears perked up. “Next time?”

She'd meant it as rhetorical, to tease him, but after seeing Nick’s reaction, Judy decided to let it stand as an invitation. “Sure, next week. Same time?”

Nick looked noncommittal. “Oh, well, you know, I’ll have to check my busy schedule. Not sure I can fit you in.” He stood, and pulling out a fake notebook from his back pocket, began to flip its imaginary pages. Judy snickered, but her friend remained in character. “Looks like I have an opening for you after all,” he said, and with an imaginary pen, Nick spoke as he wrote, “Movie night with Judy.”

“You know nowadays most mammals just use a smartphone to keep track of events.”

Nick smirked and put his fake notebook away. “Well, it’s getting late, Carrots. Think I’ll take off.”

He headed towards the door, but she hopped to her feet and stopped him with a hug. Impulsive Judy was at it again. “Thanks for the gift,” she said into his chest. There were many other things she wanted to say to him at that moment, but for now another thank you was all she could offer.

Her partner patted her head, but it didn’t feel condescending. “Thanks for inviting me to stay.”

After he left, Judy flopped onto her bed and stared up at the ceiling, examining its cracks and the area of discoloration caused by water damage. Her mind began wandering again, but she jerked with a start when a brash voice from the other side of the wall abruptly said, “Wow, Judy. Nick is such a nice guy. I can’t believe he got you that laptop.”
“I know. He’s so great,” another voice replied to the first.

“Are you kidding me? Have you two been there this whole time listening?” Judy yelled, not trying to hide the anger in her tone.

“He’s a keeper, Judy,” one of them answered back, and she exhaled noisily.

Engaging her nosy neighbors in an argument would only encourage them, and Judy fell silent, choosing instead to move over to her desk. Sitting down in the chair Nick had occupied for the last few hours, she closed her new laptop and pulled out her goal journal. Flipping over to the page she’d written on two weeks before, Judy picked up a pen and began to write something down next to her goal of find something more. But she only managed one letter before losing her nerve and closing the notebook.

Even to her journal she wasn’t yet ready to admit what her new goal should be. But the heart doodles on the book’s cover seemed to taunt Judy, and eventually she opened it back up to the same page. Swiftly, the word was finished- a word that until recently hadn’t been a part of her vocabulary. But it was a goal now, and a determined Judy would do her best to try and change that.

The movie parodied in this chapter is When Harry Met Sally.
“What’s going on with you, Carrots?”

Judy opened her eyes and right away felt that her head was leaning against something. It took her only a moment to guess what that something was. She jerked upright. How long had she been dozing on his shoulder? A wave of self-consciousness washed over her and only intensified when Nick moved his face closer to hers. “Uh, nothing’s going on,” Judy answered, then under the guise of stretching her limbs, she pressed her paw into his snout and shoved him away.

Nick smiled. “Nothing but you drooling on my shoulder.”

She glanced at the laptop screen, which was now rolling credits over some melodramatic music. From the sound of it, the movie must not have had a happy ending. “I didn’t drool,” she argued. But not entirely sure, Judy turned her head and discreetly dabbed the side of her mouth. Meanwhile, Nick brushed his paw over the shoulder she’d been sleeping on, and made a face as he pretended to wipe something away.

“Ha ha,” Judy montoned a laugh.

“No, but really, what’s going on with you, Carrots?” Nick repeated the question that had stirred her awake, and she reiterated her answer from before.

“Nothing’s going on.”

Never able to pass on an opportunity to bring up Judy’s past dating site debacle, Nick replied to her denial with a smug, “You’re not staying up too late using the wifi to visit dating sites are you?” And like always, whenever her friend went down this path of teasing, Judy looked witheringly back at him.

After barging in with their opinion on Nick and Judy’s first movie night, Bucky and Pronk had offered up their wifi password. She couldn’t understand why her neighbors- who never had any interest beyond fighting with each other, and poking fun at her life via the shared apartment wall- had suddenly found common ground when it came to Nick. But she also didn’t want to look too deeply into something that worked in her favor. Judy had accepted it without question.

Yet she couldn’t help wondering if it worked in their favor too. Glancing at the wall juxtaposed with Bucky and Pronk’s apartment, she imagined them at that moment listening on the other side. But her vision was forgotten when Nick said her name- Judy’s actual name- and she looked back at him.

The way he spoke it was reminiscent of the reproachful quality her mom’s voice took whenever Judy had avoided farming chores as a bunny. But in this instance, Nick was using it to let her know she couldn’t pull one over on him. “That’s the second time I’ve caught you sleeping today. First at work and now here. Are you really going to prolong-”

“The inevitable,” Judy finished for him, trying to imitate his voice like he sometimes did hers.

A few seconds of quiet passed between them while his eyes studied her face, and Judy thought she saw a bit of the humor they’d held earlier, fade. “Well, are you?” he prodded.
No, Judy wasn’t going to prolong the inevitable, but she wasn’t comfortable telling him here either. “Nick … I …” she began, but paused to glance towards the wall again. Then looking back his way, she jerked her head in the wall’s direction. Nick understood right away, having stayed over enough now to hear and also be part of Bucky and Pronk’s conversations.

“Do you want to get some coffee? By the looks of it, you need some.”

Even if it was late, coffee sounded good to Judy’s ears and she nodded. Nick stood from his chair and went to fetch her jacket. He helped her put it on and then grasping his own, Nick led Judy out of her apartment.

They stopped at a diner not far from the precinct building. It was a place her and Nick frequented during their long workdays, and occasional weekend night shifts spent inside a patrol car. Most times one or the other would go in and bring coffee back to the vehicle, but now they sat at a table and ordered.

“So …” Nick drew out the word, once their waitress walked away. He was across from Judy, his paws folded on the cheap plastic tabletop. “You want to end this mystery of the falling asleep rabbit for me?”

Judy gulped, even if there was no need to. Her secret wasn’t exactly earth shattering. Actually, no one but her would’ve considered it secret worthy at all. But Judy being Judy, had kept it to herself, going over the details endlessly in her head while her new goal was put on hold. She and Nick had done four movie nights in the past month, and from her perspective things were going well (even with Bucky and Pronk adding their two cents to the mix now and again). But after some bad news from home, Judy couldn’t think in selfish terms like that elusive L word anymore. What she wanted wasn’t as important.

When Judy didn’t respond right away, Nick spoke her name- more like a soft plea than the reprimand he’d used back in the apartment- and his paws began to inch across the table. Instinctively, Judy shoved hers out of reach into her lap and stared down at them. She could only handle so much, and right now, holding paws with Nick- even in a comforting platonic way- gave her heart too much flutter. Now wasn’t the time.

“Whatever it is, you can tell me,” he tried prompting her to speak.

Even with her eyes lowered, Judy could still feel Nick’s stare. “I know I can, and honestly it’s nothing.”

“It can’t be nothing if you’re acting like this. It’s not like you. I should know, I’m the only mammal you ever hang out with, remember … work married and all.” It was a tease going back to the one that had kick-started her current muddled state-of mind regarding him, and Judy let out a chuckle, finally bringing her eyes back up to his.

“Because you’re so insufferable, and you know me and challenges,” she replied. “I can’t ever let anything go until I’ve fixed it.”

“Fix me? You’re out of your mind. I’m perfect, and you know it.”

At that moment, their waitress returned with two coffees, and asked if they needed anything else. Nick declined for both of them, while Judy took a sip of the black liquid placed in front of her. She liked her coffee dark and rich, while Nick always put too much cream and sugar in his.

“All right,” Judy sighed as her friend tore open four packets of sugar simultaneously and poured
them into his coffee. “It all started with this extra work Chief Bogo has been putting on me for the Soranso case.”

As it turned out, Nick and Judy’s little purse snatcher hadn’t been only that. He had ties to a larger criminal network, and working with the detectives who’d been assigned to the case had added to her workload. “I want to make detective someday, and it’ll look good for me,” she stated when Nick asked why she’d taken on so much.

“Then share the load. I’m just as up to speed on So and So as you are,” Nick suggested.

“Soranso,” Judy corrected.

He ignored her, and said, “You gotta stop taking on so much.”

Judy acknowledged his criticism with a nod. It’s what he was constantly reminding her. Sometimes she had to step back when she felt overwhelmed. Judy couldn’t solve all the world’s problems on her own. She couldn’t even figure out her own. “I’m sorry. I should have told you, but I just get so wrapped up in these things and then it snowballs.”

“Yeah, that sounds like you. But I gotta say, I think you’re not telling me the whole story.” He took a sip of his drink. “What else is going on, Judy?”

She grimaced. Of course, he knew. “Okay, that’s true,” Judy admitted with a sigh. “There is something else.”

“And that is?”

Her nose began twitching, and Judy momentarily scrunched up her face to get it to stop. “My mom called me a few days ago, and my dad … he was hurt in an accident with some farming equipment. He’s okay … relatively speaking. Lots of bed-rest, which is driving him crazy. But mom’s having difficulty keeping everything together- my brothers and sisters, the farm- you know, since my dad can’t work for the next few months. Plus, their insurance is giving them the runaround and it’s all a big mess. I’ve been thinking about it a lot, and haven’t been able to sleep.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Nick asked in mild exasperation.

“I didn’t want to remind you of your mom.”

He blinked, as if he couldn’t believe Judy. “What does this have to do with her?”

“I thought if I brought up what happened to my dad, it might remind you of your mom’s accident.”

Nick’s father had walked out early on, leaving his mother alone to care for their only kit. A few years afterward, when Nick was just entering adulthood, she’d died in a car crash. It was an event in his life he’d only mentioned to Judy a few time. But she knew it was a painful subject for him, even if he did always try masking his sadness with a quick quip that diverted the conversation.

“I know it bothers you to talk about her,” she added when Nick stared back at her in stunned disbelief.

It took him a moment to recover, and then taking a deep breath, he let it out as a sigh. “Carrots, you know your empathy for others is so deep it’s dumb sometimes.”

“Dumb bunny?” she said quietly, but Nick shook his head.
“No. More like bunny who cares too much it affects her judgment. Look, I want to know what’s going on with you. You can’t keep all this to yourself, and who better to tell than your closest friend. That’s what I’m here for. So, stop trying to take on the world all alone or worrying what I can handle. If it’s for you, I can handle it.” Then before she could register what he was doing, Nick stood, and dragged his chair beside hers. The sound of its legs scratching across the linoleum floor caused a few patrons to look in their direction.

“You seemed perfectly comfortable with my left shoulder back in the apartment, maybe you’d like to give this one a try too,” he said sitting down again, his side pressed up against hers. “And I gotta tell ya, honestly, after you drooled on the other one, this one,” he shrugged the shoulder nearest her, up and down, “felt left out. So, how ’bout it. Need a shoulder to lean on?”

Judy’s first instinct was to decline his offer, her eyes darting to the faces still turned their way. But after a few seconds of indecision, her anxiety deflated like air escaping a balloon. Impulsive Judy was back and she wanted what Nick was offering.

Her week had been trying to say the least, and a friend’s shoulder to lean on seemed about the right prescription to ease her troubled mind … even if it did add a butterfly or two to her stomach. “Thank you,” she whispered, resting her head against him.

“Anytime, Whiskers,” her friend replied, and then on impulse Judy let him grasp one of the paws she’d hidden underneath the table earlier. Having Nick’s support was more important than the conflicted romantic feelings she’d been having for him lately, or the fact that predator and prey were being so comfortable together out in the open, causing others to stare.

Judy was unaffected. Nick was what mattered at that moment, and tonight he was exactly what she needed.

The next morning dawned bright and early, with Judy feeling rested for the first time in days. Nick had been able to temporarily fix her insomnia, and even if anxiety over her family’s troubles was still taking up space in the back of her mind, at least for now, it was quieted down to a murmur.

Judy even managed to get ready for the day without stopping to listen to her neighbor’s usual morning arguments. Although, she did say “hello” to one of them when they greeted her through the wall.

“Did you have a nice time getting coffee with Nick last night?” he asked, his voice hinting at something Judy chose to ignore.

“Sure,” she replied, and then walked out the door before he could say anything else.

There was a hop and a skip in her step as she headed to work. Today didn't feel so overwhelming; she had Nick to thank for that. And while musing over their conversation from the night before, Judy had the idea to buy her partner some coffee as a thank you. But just as she was about to cross the street in the direction of the diner, a familiar ringtone went off. Assuming it was Nick, she stopped and instantly went to grasp her phone. A smile spread wide across her face; Judy had a tease just waiting to go- something about Nick’s disgusting habit of putting too much sugar in his coffee. But the paltry insult froze in her throat when she saw it wasn’t her friend calling, but someone else entirely. Judy swallowed as a dread began building a cold shell around her heart.

“Hey, mom. Why are you calling so early? Is everything okay?”
Even a story that's mostly fluff has to have some angst to push the plot forward. ((sorry!)) Also I know it's canon that Nick's mom is alive, but I decided to tweak that detail for the purpose of my fic. Thanks for reading.
Chapter 6

Judy felt dislocated from her body as it walked, moving forward in a world that had taken on the consistency of mushy stewed carrots. She was vaguely aware that she’d made it to work, albeit late—or so Clawhauser mentioned in an overly concerned voice, followed by him asking what was wrong and if maybe a donut would make her feel better. He held out a pastry box that from the looks of it had already been thoroughly picked through. Shaking her head, Judy raced past him, needing to get to Bogo as soon as possible to explain her tardiness (and grovel at his hooves if need be). She’d never been late. Not once. Even when suffering that terrible cold last year, Judy had made it in by the skin of her teeth, looking more dead than alive. But still, she’d gotten there on time.

Today was different. She was faced with something that couldn’t be solved by swallowing ample amounts of cold medicine. And Judy’s characteristic determination did her little good when the only thought she’d been able to process after ending the call with her mom was Bunnyburrow being a million miles away. Judy was aware her mind had exaggerated the distance of her hometown, but that was due to her current mushy perception of reality. Judy was a million miles away, because she felt a million miles away, unable to be there for her family.

“Carrots?”

One of Judy’s ears twisted in the direction of Nick’s voice, and she skidded to a halt just outside Bogo’s office. Her partner’s tone was worried. And why shouldn’t it be? Punctual Judy Hopps was for once not punctual. Maybe he’d tried texting her. She hadn’t paid any attention to her phone after saying goodbye to her mom.

Before turning to face him, Judy dabbed the corners of her eyes, attempting to wipe away any remaining tears she may have missed. As it was, she’d only stopped crying seconds before entering the precinct building, and everything Judy saw still lacked a defined outline. But when Nick stood in her line of vision, getting there before she could angle his way, the world lost all its texture. His face became a blur of orange as tears began to well, eventually spilling down Judy’s face, onto her uniform, and then wetting Nick’s when he pulled her into a hug. She didn’t know why seeing him had caused her to breakdown again, but there Judy was in the middle of work, being an emotional rabbit—a stereotype for all to see. Her voice was a weak sob into his chest, “My Dad’s in the hospital. He’s—”

“Heeeey,” Nick said, talking over her. He was familiar enough with Judy to know that despite her current state of mind, she would later regret being so vulnerable in front of her work colleagues. “Let’s go somewhere away from here and then you can tell me what’s going on.”

“But I—I have to tell Bogo I’m here,” she sniffed, rubbing her nose onto his uniform

“You’re already late. I don’t think it’ll matter much if you take a few more minutes, at least until you can get yourself together. And come on, Whiskers, my shirt isn’t a tissue.” His tease felt out of place with the sadness currently overwhelming her, but admittedly, it was also a familiar comfort.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, pulling herself away, suddenly becoming aware of the stares of those around them. Some were being overtly rude about it, while others were sneaking sideway glances.

Nick responded by reaching into his pants pocket and pulling out what looked like a red handkerchief. “Here, blow all the bunny snot you want into this.” Judy took it and wiped her eyes and nose, then handed it back, but Nick shook his head. “Keep it.”
Without waiting another second, he took her paw, leading Judy outside towards the garage where the squad cars were kept. When he found theirs, Nick ushered her inside, and then sat himself in the driver’s seat. Now it was only the two of them. “Wanna tell me what’s going on?”

Outside the car, two officers walked past; Judy eyed them until they were out of sight, then she balled the handkerchief in her paws. “My mom called while I was walking to work, and Dad … he was admitted into the hospital last night. H-he had a heart attack trying to do too much when he should have been in bed. Looks like all the stress isn’t just keeping me up at night.” Judy groaned miserably, and then blew her nose into the handkerchief again.

“Is he going to be okay?” Nick took one of her paws into his.

“He’s stable for now, but that could change.” Judy let out a heavy sigh, and turned away to stare out the passenger side window.

“Carrots…” Nick gently squeezed the paw in his grasp.

“You know, I never once regretted my decision to leave home. Even when I quit the force last year, I still knew farming wasn’t for me. But now … I’m the oldest, Nick. I should’ve been there for my parents. I feel responsible.” Judy turned back to him; she was a whisper away from crying again.

“This isn’t your fault,” he spoke reassuringly, but Judy’s sensitive ears detected a firmness alongside it. Nick wasn’t about to let her wallow in self-blame. “You’re just one rabbit- an insanely determined one- but even that isn’t enough sometimes. Do you actually think being there would’ve made a huge difference?”

“Maybe not, but the point is, I wasn’t there. I’m still not there.”

“Okay, then let’s get you there. Don’t look at this from all angles. Just figure out today and what needs to be done right now. That’s all you need to do.” Letting go of her paw, Nick pulled out his phone. He tapped the pads of his paw against its screen a few times, and before Judy could ask what her partner was doing, his phone was put back away. “You have a ticket for a train leaving tomorrow morning. I tried to get one for tonight, but at such short notice that wasn’t an option.”

“What? Nick did you just buy me a ticket to Bunnyburrow?”

He didn’t answer her question, continuing to talk as if she hadn’t said anything. “What you need to do right now is tell Bogo you’re taking time off for a family emergency. Then go to your apartment and start packing. I’ll come by later, after my shift.”

“Nick, there’s no point in going back to my apartment. If I can’t leave till tomorrow, I might as well do something. I’m already here.”

“And you’re in no condition to work. Look, Carrots, I’m calling it. You’re taking the day off.”

Judy had never seen Nick take charge in anything concerning her before. At work, they put their heads together to solve cases and catch criminals. Outside office hours, Nick offered his advice every so often, but even then it was always handled with a light touch, given in the form of the good-natured banter they shared. But he never flat out told Judy what to do in a tone that showed there was no room for argument.

“Okay, I’ll go home and pack,” Judy agreed, giving in without a fight.

“I’ll try to get out of here early if I can,” he offered and then briefly placed his paw against the side of her face, before letting it fall down to her shoulder. “You’re gonna get through this.”
Judy couldn’t be sure, but it sounded like Nick wasn’t just speaking about her, but was trying to encourage himself as well. It was an odd thing to hear and think—her distress was enough to produce Nick’s own anxiety.

But maybe it was to be expected, considering how connected they were, and for a second, she thought about him in the context of her most recent goal. She couldn’t hold onto that idea of him for long though, not when there were far too many other thoughts muddying the waters of her mind. But for Judy, seeing Nick as not just a friend, but something deeper, was a single moment of clarity in a morning that until then had been experienced through a thick mush.

Judy must have fallen asleep, because she woke with a start, struggling through a groggy mental fog while trying to take stock of her situation. A quick sweep of the bed she was resting on, revealed that it wasn’t her own. The comforter was a different color and smelled musty, not at all like the lavender scented laundry detergent she always used. This bed didn’t stink, but whoever it belonged to wasn’t in the habit of cleaning their sheets as often as she did.

Glancing to her left, a haze of light streamed through a nearby window, signaling a low sun on its way to setting. Piece by piece memories began coming together inside her head, trickling to Judy in the form of images from a day so exhausting, a late afternoon nap had been needed to recover.

She was in Nick’s apartment. With him living closer to the train station, it seemed like a practical choice to stay over. Plus, her partner made it clear he didn’t think she should be left alone in her current state.

“Are you really awake this time?” Judy heard Nick say from somewhere, and after rubbing her eyes, she sat up to take a closer look at her surroundings. Her friend was sitting in a chair across the room.

“What do you mean this time?”

Nick smirked. “You’ve said things, here and there, over the last hour. I stopped responding after the first three times you fooled me.”

“What did I say?” Panic pulled at Judy’s heart. Maybe she’d revealed something or other about a certain goal involving him. But sensing her dread, Nick came to the rescue.

“Don’t worry. It was mostly about carrots. All the different ways you can cook them, like you were some chef on a very boring cooking show.” He made a repulsed face. It was no secret to Judy that Nick disliked the main produce of her family’s farm.

“Guess I’m the only carrots you can tolerate,” she remarked, and Nick snickered.

“The only acceptable carrot I know.”

“Just don’t tell my parents. I’ll have a hard time defending you. Not liking carrots is downright immoral to them.” Judy softly laughed at her joke, but the sound she made ended on pathetic note, transforming into a sad sigh. Thinking of them made her remember what would be waiting for her when she returned home. Nick noticed the change in Judy’s mood and dragged his chair across the room, placing it beside the bed.

“Hey, none of that. Let’s try to get through the next few hours without thinking serious things. They’ll be plenty of time for that later.”
“What do you suggest?”

“Well, I ordered us pizza— and before you even ask, yes, your side has carrots— so until that gets here we can, uh …” Nick jumped from his seat, and began moving around his apartment, in search of a conversation starter.

His place wasn’t much larger than Judy’s, but it actually felt smaller, because of all the extras Nick owned. Since her friend had eight more years of adulthood on her, it meant he’d had more time to accumulate junk. Plainly put, Nick was a fluffing slob. She rarely came to his apartment for that reason. But now she didn’t have a choice, and as he swam through his mass of useless knick-knacks, Judy suggested, “How about we look through that photo album you never let me see.”

“Hey, you know that’s off limits,” he reminded her, popping his head out from underneath the small table where he’d been searching. Judy smiled ruefully, but didn’t back down.

“Please. Do it for me.” Her plea was presented as a whine, an act she was none too proud of. But it did have her desired effect. Nick hesitated for a moment, then shrugged with nonchalance.

“Whatever … I don’t have anything to hide.”

He stood and walked over to a stack of mishmash containing books, magazines, and newspapers. Judy watched as Nick began dismantling the tower, going over each piece before tossing it aside, and adding to an already disarrayed room. It was a sight she wanted to take him to task over, but Judy held back her derisive remark, knowing it might keep Nick from doing something she’d asked of him several times since they became friends.

Ever since flipping through Nick’s photo album while waiting for him to get ready one evening— only to have it rudely snatched away— Judy wanted a chance to get beyond the first few pictures of him as a kit. What had life looked like for Nick growing up in Zootopia? She was dying to know, and he was always so annoyingly secretive about his past.

It took Nick destroying half of his pile for him to finally find the album, and returning to the bedside with it, he grumbled, “Only for you would I do this.”

Judy grinned at Nick as he took a seat back in his chair, but she wasn’t about to wait for him to hand his photos over. Quickly, her paws snatched the book before he could change his mind. “And your sacrifice is greatly appreciated.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Nick folded his arms across his chest like he was pouting.

Inside, Judy discovered there wasn’t really anything that screamed embarrassing for Nick, and she wondered why he’d been so reluctant to let her view his pictures. He was just like any other mammal going through the phases of life— from enthusiastic kit, to annoyed don’t take my picture teen, and lastly, a proud Nick standing beside his mom on graduation day. There weren’t any more pictures after that, and Judy didn’t need to ask why. Nick’s mom had been the one to keep track of things like photos of her son. When she died, the photo album stopped being updated.

“Alright, Carrots, you’ve gone and seen all there is to see about me,” Nick said, trying to take the album back, but Judy promptly held it out of reach before he could grasp it.

“Hey, I didn’t know there was a time limit.” She stood on the bed and hopped to the other side. Nick looked like he was about to put up a playful fight, but after rising to his feet, he backed down when there was a knock at the door.

“This isn’t over, Hopps,” he darkly threatened.
“I’ll take these pictures to my grave,” she sneered, but just as soon as the words were out of her mouth, Judy lost it and began laughing, causing Nick to break too. It was a good feeling, being able to find humor in something when most of her day had been filled with a sense of helplessness.

Another knock- louder and more irritated sounding- distracted Nick, and he left to answer the door while still chuckling to himself. Judy meanwhile, sat back down, and opened up the album again. She breezed through a few pages, before stopping on one that had several pictures of Nick dressed in his scout’s uniform. Judy felt a twinge of sympathy for the little kit with wide green eyes, who was smiling brightly for the camera. She thought about Nick in that setting, so proud, and how not long afterward, he was reduced to tears. It wasn’t a pleasant image, and not wanting to feel sad again, Judy went to turn the page. But she stopped when her eyes fell on a spot of red among the light green making up Nick’s uniform. She hadn’t looked closely enough before to notice, but now saw that he was wearing a neckerchief, and it looked slightly familiar.

Sweeping a glance towards the door, she saw Nick’s back was to her, his tail swishing as he paid for their pizza. Taking advantage of him being otherwise occupied, Judy pulled out the handkerchief he’d given her earlier in the day, and after comparing it with the neckerchief in the photo, Judy was forced to swallow a huge lump that had formed in her throat.

The two were a perfect match, making them not actually two, but only one.
Nick giving Judy a memento from such a poignant time in his life didn’t seem like it was a well thought out decision. Not like when he’d bought the laptop anyway, and in the time it took Nick to set up his table with paper plates and drinks for them, Judy came up with two theories. Either the neckerchief wasn’t as important to him as she thought and he’d just shoved it off on her like the no big deal that it was. Or the neckerchief meant something, and she was so connected with him that it didn’t matter to Nick if it was now hers.

She wanted to believe it was the latter, but to make sure, Judy tried pulling the real story out of him while they sat across from each other eating pizza. “So, Nick, what’s up with that red handkerchief you gave me?” Attempting to act casual, Judy propped an elbow on the table, and rested her chin in her paw.

“What’d you mean,” Nick replied between chews.

“Well, what I mean is ... it’s red. That’s such a weird color for a handkerchief.”

Nick’s eyes narrowed.

Not your best work, Judy.

“For someone like you to carry around.” She tried working her approach from another angle, but only made things worse.

“Someone like me?”

“Uh, yeah. Red is, uh, it’s kind of … you know, a feminine color.” Even as the words were leaving her mouth, Judy knew they sounded terrible.

“Wow, Carrots, never knew you’d be the type to stereotype genders.” Nick leaned back in his chair, eating the last of his pizza slice, and licking his paws to remove the grease left behind.

“Well, when you think about it, who actually carries around a handkerchief now-a-days. It’s so old fashioned. Who are you, Mr. Darcy?” Judy joked, but her Pride and Prejudice reference went way over Nick’s head, landing hard with a dud.

“Well, when you think about it, who actually carries around a handkerchief now-a-days. It’s so old fashioned. Who are you, Mr. Darcy?” Judy joked, but her Pride and Prejudice reference went way over Nick’s head, landing hard with a dud.

“Who’s that? Does he- is he the guy who works the food truck outside work? I love his tacos.”

“No,” Judy sighed. “He’s a fictional character from a long time ago.”

“Well, I don’t know about this Mr. Darcy, but I am eight years older than you. That’s pretty old fashioned if you ask me.” Judy could see Nick was enjoying himself; his mouth twitched trying to hide a smile, and she let out a harsh breath of defeat.

“You know, Whiskers, for a cop you’re kind of terrible at leading your suspect into a confession.” Nick gave her a lopsided grin.

“Says the fox I got to admit felony tax evasion,” Judy challenged, raising a brow in satisfaction.

“Touché,” Nick replied while adjusting his tie, an act that made it look more crooked than before.
Rising from his chair, he gathered the pizza box and plates, walked over to his trash can, and threw them in. Judy was just thankful he hadn’t tossed it all on the floor. “But let’s not turn this into a game of persuasion,” Nick continued, turning back around to face her. “Just ask me the question you’re not coming right out and saying.”

Judy refrained from playing off his use of the word *Persuasion*, in another attempt at a Jane Pawsten novel reference that would undoubtedly be lost on her friend. “The handkerchief you gave me this morning ...” Judy reached into her pants pocket and placed the red cloth onto the table. “Is this the neckerchief from your scout’s uniform,” she asked, and Nick tilted his head questioningly. “The photos in your album, of you in your scout’s uniform, the neckerchief looked similar. I thought ...”

“Detective Judy, never takes a day off does she?” To her relief, Nick sounded impressed rather than upset.

“I’m not a detective yet,” she demurred.

“No, but I’m pretty confident It’ll happen someday.” Nick sat down in his chair again, and gazed at Judy meaningfully. “But you’re right. It’s the same. I sometimes carry it around.”

“Why?”

Nick rubbed the fur on the back of his neck like he was uncomfortable. “It reminds me of my mom.” He paused for a moment, and Judy took the opportunity to scoot her chair closer to his. “The story you told me about your dad last night ... it did remind me of her.”

“Oh, Nick, that’s why I didn’t want to tell you-”

He lifted his paw. “I’m fine. It’s okay if I think about her. Most days I try to block what happened out ... and that usually means shutting out memories of her too. It’s just easier that way. But sometimes ... I want to remember.”

“Is that why you don’t like looking through your photo album ... because of your mom?” It made sense, and Judy wondered why it hadn’t occurred to her already.

“Well, that and you’re always putting your bunny nose into my business. I gotta draw the line somewhere.”

“I only do that because I care about you,” Judy defended herself, causing Nick to chuckle. It was a sound that riled her. “And why is that funny?” Standing, she put her hands on her hips, and the repetitive thump of a foot against the floorboards began. Reaching out, Nick tugged her paw, and gently guided Judy back to her seat, his own paw lingering briefly before he pulled it away.

“I was teasing, sensitive bunny.”

“Oh.”

“Obviously I don’t find you *that* annoying.” Nick gazed at her steadily and Judy’s nose began to twitch. He took notice, and grinned. “See, nosey.”

She tapped her nose a few times to get it to stop involuntarily moving, and Nick’s smile grew wider, eventually manifesting as a laugh. Feeling shy under his amused scrutiny, Judy redirected her friend back to the topic they’d been discussing. “If that neckerchief is so important, why did you give it to me?” Judy’s theory echoed in her mind as she waited for Nick to reply.

“Because you’re important to me too, and I guess, in your weird bunny way ... you’ve taken her
Judy didn’t want to feel offended. From another point of view his perception of her was endearing. But on the other paw … he thought of her like his mom? It wasn’t the answer she’d hoped for. Not at all. “You think of me as a mother figure?” Judy tried to keep the disappointment out of her voice.

“Not exactly that way. But it’s no secret I wasn’t living the best life after her death. Even if I was jaded to how others saw me, my mom always told me to push past that close-mindedness. You’re more than what they think, she’d say. That didn’t mean I listened, but she was the only one challenging my cynical take on things. And you do the same, Carrots. Any of what I’ve accomplished in the last year and a half, only happened, because I … well, met you.”

“That’s not true. You had it in you all along.”

“But I needed someone to believe in me.”

“Someone like your mom?”

“No, someone like you- the only mammal in my life right now that has my best interest at heart. You, Judy Hopps, are very important to me.”

“Nick.” She couldn’t think of what to say; Judy was truly touched.

“Anyway,” Nick said, dragging out the word, a signal that he was about to change the subject- that he was becoming uncomfortable with sharing so much about himself. Judy didn’t push him for more. She was glad for the little window he did give her into who he was underneath all that sarcasm.

“Thank you for telling me that, and for the neckerchief,” she said, placing her paw over his. They shared an affectionate look, and then the moment abruptly ended. Nick cleared his throat, stood and went to grasp Judy’s laptop, which was leaning against her suitcase.

“What are you doing?” she asked, while neatly folding his neckerchief to place back in her pocket.

“Well, we can’t use Lucky and Honks wifi, but this thing still has When Hare met Bunny. How ‘bout it, Carrots. Feel like watching your favorite movie?”

Judy chuckled at Nick’s intentional murder of her neighbor’s names, and then taunted, “What? Once wasn’t enough? Didn’t know you were such a fan.”

“Uh, not particularly, but maybe I can find some deeper meaning the second time around.” Nick set the laptop on the table, and Judy repositioned her chair, so they were both sitting in front of it.

As Hare and Bunny began their two hours of romantic banter- speaking lines Judy had memorized long ago- she noticed that Nick seemed curiously absent. Normally, she would have blamed it on his boredom with the movie itself, but a deeper intuition whispered that this wasn’t the case. Nick was preoccupied with his thoughts, and because of this, so was Judy. Was he thinking of his mom? The temptation to ask was strong, but having already decided not to push Nick on the subject, she remained silent.

When the movie ended, sleeping arrangements were made with Judy getting the bed, and Nick clearing a spot on the floor, where he laid down a few blankets for himself. They settled in and made small talk until Nick began nodding off. His responses began making less and less sense, and after he answered ‘blue’ to a question about taco toppings, Judy gave up. Feeling bored, she began examining Nick’s ceiling (just as many cracks as hers, but no water damage).
Taking a nap earlier in the day had seemed like a good idea when she was exhausted from all her crying, but now, Judy was wide awake with only her thoughts for company. Naturally, they turned towards her dad in the hospital, and then took a dark twist from there as anxiety reminded Judy of all that could go wrong; she wished her brain had an off switch.

As a distraction, Judy rolled to her side and stared at Nick just below the bed. He was on his back, chest rising and falling with each breath. “Nick,” she whispered, but he didn’t stir, and Judy continued to stare, wondering what he might say if his eyes opened. Would it matter so much if he caught her staring? Judy decided she didn’t care. Little things like worrying Nick might guess what goal had been on her mind for the last month- at least until the bad news from home had taken its place- were slowly fading in the wake of his confession. She was important to him, and it was the first time he’d said it out loud and not tip-toed around the subject with his casual humor.

A small smile pulled at her mouth as she continued studying his features. It was a strange feeling admitting to herself that she found Nick attractive. Before her new goal, Judy had simply viewed Nick as Nick. It wasn’t that she didn’t think he was good looking. It was that she never viewed life through that lens before. But after realization hit her that she sort of maybe might be falling in love with her best friend, it was like a third eye opened. Judy was able to see him from a completely different angle.

And yes, he was handsome.

And yes, he was a fox.

Even if interspecies relationships weren’t as frowned upon as they once were, dating a different species from your own still carried with it the weight of going against the norm. Was she willing to set foot in a relationship that wouldn’t be accepted by everyone?

Was Nick?

Because not only were they different species, but if anything ever did happen between them down the road, they would be the even unlikelier pairing of predator and prey. It was a tricky path to navigate, and no matter how driven she was, Judy still had reservations about how to approach it in the right way without harming their friendship.

With a sigh, Judy reached under her pillow and pulled out the neckerchief she’d shoved there when Nick wasn’t looking. Now with him sleeping, she squeezed the fabric against her chest, remembering how great it felt to hear him say she was important to him. But Judy also made a mental note to wash the neckerchief when she arrived in Bunny Burrow. She couldn’t keep holding the cloth so close knowing her nose had been wiped on it more than once. That was just unsanitary.

After a time, Judy put the neckerchief back and tried sleeping again, doing some tossing and turning, before finally succumbing sometime around 1 AM. Unfortunately, it wasn’t a restful sleep. Several times, she jolted awake from vivid dreams about her family, and briefly forgetting her whereabouts, panicked. Then Judy’s memory of why she wasn’t in her own apartment would slowly come back, and she’d try sleeping again. It was a frustrating cycle, and by the time Nick’s phone alarm went off at 5 AM, Judy was already awake, having been pulled from sleep by another dream.

Nick noticed her exhaustion, and as they headed towards the train station later that morning, he suggested stopping at a Snarlbucks. It did the trick. Once Judy had caffeine in her system, she became more alert. But not Nick. Aside from his coffee idea, he was quieter than usual- a holdover from the night before- and it wasn’t until they were saying their goodbyes that her partner became himself again.
“I’ll miss you,” Judy admitted, trying to ignore the crowd of mammals coming and going around them at the busy station.

Nick’s shoulders relaxed some. “Come here you sentimental rabbit.” He pulled Judy into a strong embrace that lasted longer than it should considering she was only leaving for a week. “You know, I think you’re just going to miss movie night and shoving all those romantic comedies down my throat,” he said, after releasing her.

It was only a tease, but it sparked an idea in Judy’s head. “Well, there’s no reason why we still can’t do movie night while I’m away.” She lifted up the case with her laptop inside. “Take this. Stay at my place and use the wifi. We can watch the same movie at the same time while we’re on the phone together. I don’t actually need this laptop anyway. My parents have a computer.”

“What?” Nick's brow furrowed. “Don’t you think you'll be busy with other more important things?”

“Not all the time, and honestly I’ll probably need the occasional distraction from what will be waiting for me once I step foot in Bunnyburrow? This is how you can get me through this even with you being here and me there.” Judy forced Nick to take the laptop case and then fishing her keys out, she tossed them his way. He caught the keys in his paw. “Besides, Bucky and Pronk will be ecstatic. Their favorite fox will be their neighbor for a week.”

“Uh, okay,” he replied, looking confused, but Judy knew he’d figure it out.

The train whistle blew just then and Judy hopped in surprise. “I have to go. I’ll text you when I get there.” She quickly hugged him again, waved goodbye, and left to board the train.

Nick Wilde was a fox with many words. A whole lot of them that he confidently said to turn any situation to his advantage. It was a trait he used liberally ... until recently. For months, Nick had been at a loss for what to say. He couldn't find the right way to explain to Judy exactly what he was feeling. Buying the laptop had been a form of communicating his emotions to her, but he still couldn’t say it outright.

And then telling her didn’t matter anymore, because it was no longer the right time. Circumstances being what they were, he’d have to wait. For how long, Nick didn’t know. Only that he would. He’d wait for Judy.

For now, telling her how important she was to him would have to be enough. But it was small potatoes compared to all he really wanted to say. And then Nick had to laugh, because he’d made a food analogy, something that was completely influenced by a certain bunny who was now leaving him for a week. Well, at least it was potatoes and not carrots.

Chapter End Notes

For the most part, this is Judy's story. But a small look into Nick's POV will happen from time to time.
As the days passed with Judy back in Bunnyburrow, a routine was able to form out of the initial chaos that greeted her homecoming. Every morning Judy woke, said goodbye to her mom leaving for the hospital, and from there would try (try being the keyword) to manage a house full of too many bunnies.

Oh fluff, there were so many bunnies.

Judy had been an anomaly-born from a litter of only herself. One bunny pregnancies weren’t unheard of, but they weren’t all that common either, and it gave a sort of reverence to her birth, like she was special. That mindset followed her as she grew, and Judy’s obsession with becoming a police officer was lumped in as one of her “special” traits. “Well, that’s just our Judy, ya know. So different, she had to go it alone inside Bonnie,” her dad had said more than once throughout the years- sometimes even to total strangers, much to Judy’s mortification- and like a typical kit, she’d rolled her eyes at how lame he was.

After Judy, her mom never repeated the one bunny birth and as a result, there were far too many members of the Hopps family to keep track of. As the oldest kit, she’d accepted that her lot in life up until adulthood would be playing second mother to all her siblings. She did love them, although, never particularly cherished the responsibility that came with her eldest sibling role. Now with her mom occupied at the hospital most days, Judy was once again taking on the challenge of replacement parent.

And oh boy, was the whole experience harrowing.

How was it possible she could fearlessly face the criminals of Zootopia and yet, be afraid of a multitude of little bunnies living inside one house? It didn’t add up, but it stood as fact, Judy was overwhelmed by her many brothers and sisters.

And yet, despite the difficulty playing mom presented, it was also a welcome distraction from worrying about her dad. Judy was home without having to be consumed with the thought of him, and how frail he looked when she first visited his hospital room. Four days had passed since then, and it was now Wednesday. Her dad was being discharged the next day, putting Judy on a mission to make sure his return was as stress free as possible.

After shuttling her older siblings off to school, Judy went to work cleaning while also trying to occupy the younger bunnies in her care. The two often didn’t mix, resulting in her finishing a chore, only to have three or four little ones come bounding in as if on cue to ruin all she’d accomplished.

At some point around noon, Judy was arms deep in a toilet bowl, scrubbing the inside, when her five year old brother Thomas hopped onto the lid and smashed it down on Judy’s head, forcing toilet water to splash all over her. Sitting upright again, she turned just in time to see the culprit escaping the bathroom. “Come back here, Tommy! I’m going to kill you!” she yelled, but paused after becoming aware of the other bunny eyes staring up at her. Apparently, Tommy wasn’t the only one who’d felt the need to intrude on his older sister. “Heh … that is, kill you with hugs … lots and lots of hugs.” She laughed pathetically.

Ugh, I make a lousy mother.

Pulling off her plastic cleaning gloves, Judy washed her paws, and went to usher the remaining siblings out of the bathroom, when a ringtone distracted her. Assuming it was her mom calling for
her daily check in, Judy went to grasp her phone from the sink counter top she’d placed it on before starting to clean, but her paw came up empty where the phone should have been.

“Hey look! There’s a fox on this thing,” a little bunny said. Whirling towards the voice, Judy saw Tommy was back and also holding her missing phone.

“Give me that, you little thief!” Judy said, her tone threatening. Tommy stuck out his tongue, and went to bolt, but he wasn’t so lucky this time. Judy managed to snatch the device from her brother, and unceremoniously boot him out of the bathroom. Then taking a second to pull her face from the scowl Tommy had provoked, Judy smiled and greeted Nick with a friendly, “Hey!”

“Hey,” Nick repeated back, and then asked, “Who was that?”

“Just Tommy. He’s trying very hard to get on my last nerve.”

Nick chuckled, and bringing his face closer to the phone, he squinted while examining Judy. “Are you- why do you look like you just took a stroll through a downpour?”

“Toilet water,” she grumbled, shaking her head.

Nick’s smile turned crooked. “Well, I know things are done a little differently out there in the country, but can’t say I ever thought toilet bathing was something you folks did.” Judy wanted to give him a sardonic line back, but couldn’t muster the strength. Exhaustion had zapped her ability to give as good as she got, so she just stared blankly back at Nick. “Oookaay, guess that wasn’t my best joke,” he backtracked.

“No, sorry. It’s me. I’m stressed. Trying to clean and also take care of so many bunnies is just … it’s draining.” Judy heaved a heavy sigh. “And my mom called this morning to tell me Dad is getting released tomorrow, hence the cleaning and hence the toilet water all over me due to a certain annoying little brother.”

“Well, that’s good news about your dad,” Nick encouraged, and Judy agreed.

“I just want it to go well. No more stress for him, so he can avoid a repeat of last week's events.”

“Since he’s coming home tomorrow, we could cancel tonight. That is, if you needed the time to do something else,” Nick suggested, but Judy balked.

“Cancel movie night? No way! Trust me, Nick, I need this. And I’m looking forward to educating you on who Mr. Darcy is.”

“The food truck guy again?”

“No, the character from Jane Pawsten’s *Pride and Prejudice*.”

Nick raised a brow, like he didn’t think that was such a great idea. It didn’t matter though; Nick had offered the movie choice up to her in a text from the night before. “Can’t say I’m too familiar with her work; only that it’s in line with the type of books I was told to read in high school, but didn’t.”

“Which is exactly why you need to watch a movie adaptation. Your perception of her work is narrow minded. Just make sure to download the latest version, okay? That's the DVD I have and I'll watch it on the TV in my old room, so we can have some privacy.”

“Sure, Whiskers,” Nick said, not sounding too enthused.
“Hey, who ya talking to?”

Judy glanced down to see her little sister Annie hopping in an attempt to look at the phone’s screen. When that proved fruitless, she jumped onto the toilet seat and then onto Judy’s shoulders. “This is Nick, Annie,” Judy answered. “He’s my partner back in Zootopia. I’m sure mom’s talked about him. I sent her a video of him eating a carrot once.”

“Your partner?” Annie climbed even further up onto Judy’s head, forcing her sister’s ears down.

“Nice to meet you.” Nick waved.

“Are you married to Judy?” she asked matter-of-factly, causing Judy to let out a strangled laugh. Grasping Annie, she plopped her back on the ground.

“Who is that?” another little sister of Judy’s asked as she hopped over to them.

“Just Judy’s partner. They’re married, I think,” Annie answered.

“Oh, no we’re not,” Judy denied, and then turning back to Nick, she grimaced. “Sorry. Leave it to little brothers and sisters to make things awkward. Be thankful you don’t have any to put a damper on your life.”

“It’s not awkward, Judy,” a nonplussed Nick replied, which for some reason made things worse. Why wasn’t he embarrassed like she was? “Does it bother you if some little kits think we’re together?” he asked.

“No, I guess not,” she said, after a few seconds. “I was more embarrassed thinking you were. That second hand embarrassment thing. Too much empathy, remember?”

Nick was quiet for a moment, before he replied, “You might not be able to understand, but from my point of view, it’s nice to see your sister could even form that thought in her head.” He took a deep breath. “Being a fox, it’s not something I would expect.”

“We’re not like that around here, Nick. You know that.” At least they weren’t anymore.

“I know, but it’s still nice when I see it. How can I be embarrassed when a normal mammal would just assume a bunny and fox couldn’t be friends, let alone a couple?” His voice had hardened, and it caused a little ache in Judy’s chest. She didn’t like being reminded of all the prejudices that stood in their way; it hadn’t been on her mind since the stress of pretending to be a mom had taken precedence over her goal.

Nick must have noticed the change in Judy’s mood, because he was back to his old teasing ways a few seconds later. “Anyway, Carrots. I need to get back to work- lunch break is almost over- and I guess you should get back to your toilet bath. Don’t forget to scrub behind those big bunny ears.” A smile settled across his face, and a challenge for a retort was in his eyes.

Judy wanted to give him something that would help erase whatever negative emotions he was trying to conceal, but her attention was diverted by a sudden scream of happiness followed by the sound of splashing water. Looking away from her phone, Judy yelled exasperatedly, “Cheese and crackers! What are you doing?” upon seeing Annie inside the toilet.

“The fox said you were taking a toilet bath. Why can’t I?” Annie replied innocently, and splashed some water out of the bowl onto Judy.

Sensing she was on the verge of losing it, Judy went to end the call with Nick, but paused when the
sound of his laugh shot her ears straight up. She darted her eyes back to the phone, and in between snorts and guffaws, Nick managed to say, “Looks like your family sure knows how to have a good time, Carrots.”

“Well, they certainly aren’t boring,” Judy chuckled despite herself. She could no longer be upset at Annie, because her wacky little sister had gotten Nick to laugh, and there wasn’t anything Judy loved hearing more than that.

After her mom arrived home later that day, Judy hopped into the shower and was finally able to wash away her toilet bath from earlier. She would have gone back out of her room after changing into new clothes, but exhausted, Judy laid down on her bed to take a short nap that accidentally turned into a much longer deep sleep. It wasn’t until Judy’s mom shook her sometime in the evening that she even stirred at all. “What time is it?” she groaned groggily.

“Past dinner,” her mom responded, and it was then Judy noticed the plate of herb roasted carrots and peas in one of her mom’s hands.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I should have helped you with that,” Judy bolted upright, but her mom kept a hand on her daughter, refusing to let her stand. “It’s okay, you’ve done enough already. The house looks great, and all your brothers and sisters are still alive I see. I’m impressed.”

Judy smiled at her mom’s joke. “I’m just happy Dad’s coming home tomorrow.”

“Me too.” Her mom placed the plate of food on a nearby nightstand, and then made a face like she was suddenly remembering something. “Oh, you missed a call. Try not to leave your phone in the kitchen, Judy. Thankfully, I rescued it from Annie who was educating your partner on princess movies.”

“Oh, no,” Judy said, taking the phone her mom was now holding out for her to grasp.

“We talked for a bit and I told him as soon as I could, I’d send a package of carrots his way. I know how Nick likes them.” Judy didn’t have the heart to tell her mom the truth, and clearly Nick hadn’t either. “Well, you just take it easy tonight, okay? They’ll be plenty enough to do tomorrow.”

Her mom left, and Judy quickly ate her food, before calling Nick back, who of course, went straight into a joke about his conversation with Annie. “So, I got a few movie recommendations from your sister. Looks like this Wrangled movie, about a princess horse with very long magical hair, is a winner.”

Judy snorted. “Mock if you must, but I’ve actually seen that one and it’s not so bad.”

“Of course you have, Carrots.” Nick’s voice was playfully condescending.

“Living in a house full of little girl bunnies, you’re bound to see a few princess movies now and again.”

“Riiiiight, and all those little bunnies held you down and forced you to watch. Just like they forced you to put up that boy band poster.”

“What boy band poster?” Judy asked, and Nick pointed behind her.

“That one.”
Judy twisted her head to see four boy bunnies striking a pose on the wall, and she inwardly groaned. The new addition to her kithood room had gone unnoticed. She’d been too preoccupied with everything else since coming home, that examining new decor hadn’t been on her list of priorities. “This isn’t my room anymore, Nick. As soon as I left for Zootopia, Mom and Dad gave it away, and it looks like my sisters Mary and Julie have hit the boy band phase.”

“Did you have that phase too, Judy?” Nick asked her as a tease, but she could tell he was fishing for more.

Closing her eyes, Judy sighed. That wasn’t an area of her youth Nick would be allowed access to anytime soon, and when she let her lids open again, Nick received a warning glower. Judy was non-verbally communicating that going down that line of questioning was off limits. “Your only concern should be tonight’s movie,” Judy cavalierly said.

“Yes sir, Officer Hopps,” Nick replied, letting the boy band question slide for now, but Judy was positive it would come up again later. Her friend was far too persistent to give in, especially when it involved something embarrassing for Judy.

“So, did you download it?” she asked.

Nick nodded. “And I gotta tell ya, Carrots, you were right. I misjudged Jane Pawsten.”

“Really?” Judy was hopeful.

“Yeah, I didn’t know she’d written about zombies. Maybe if I’d paid attention in school, I would have learned that.”

Judy’s face fell. “Zombies?”

“Yeah, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. Why do you sound surprised?”

Judy felt disappointed, but only in herself. She was the one after all who told Nick to download the latest version of the movie, and that *was* the latest version- a mucked up interpretation of the book, but still, it had been the newest release.

It was a disappointment that swept past quickly though. Deep down Judy could see the humor in their miscommunication and she burst out laughing so hard that tears formed in her eyes. She felt a bit hysterical and thought all the stress of the past week and a half was finally breaking her.

“Why are you laughing?” Nick asked, and Judy tried to straighten her face.

“I uh ... that’s … not the right movie, Nick.”

“But you said-”

“I know ... what I said, and ... it was ... wrong,” Judy replied through giggles. She had to cough several times to get them to stop. “The version I meant for you to download came out about ten years ago. Your version, while related to *Pride and Prejudice*, isn’t actually based on the original book by Jane Pawsten. Someone just took that world and added their own ideas to it. Ideas like zombies.”

“I knew it was too good to be true,” Nick snorted. “Well, what do we do to fix this?”

“We can’t … at least not tonight. I don’t have that DVD, and my parents’ internet speed here is ancient. It would take forever to download, and then I’d have to watch it in the computer room … in front of all my brothers and sisters. No, thank you.”
“You country folk and your backward ways,” Nick derided, but with a smile to let her know he wasn’t serious. “I could just download the version you actually meant me to, but it’ll take a little while.”

Although not as slow as her parents’, Bucky and Pronk didn’t exactly have high speed internet either.

Judy eyed Nick for a moment, and then glanced again at the poster on the wall behind her. “Well, I could tell you about the time I went to a Backstreet Bunnies concert,” she said looking back at Nick, and his eyes widened. “But there’s a catch.”

“There always is.”

“I’ll tell you only if you share something equally embarrassing.”

And so they did.

Judy and Nick swapped stories that until then had been kept secret. For Judy it was her boy band phase, and for Nick it was his stint in marching band. His excuse was that he used it as a way to get out of school without actually having to put in the effort of playing a sport. But his trumpet playing was half-assed at best, and he’d only lasted a year. At that point in the story, Bucky and Pronk demanded Nick play the next time he visited. “Uh, guys, I pawned the trumpet years ago,” he replied.

“Why weren’t there any photos of you playing trumpet in the photo album?” Judy inquired.

“Oh, those were all stolen.”

“Stolen?”

“Yeah, by me, so I could throw them in the trash.”

Judy laughed.

But unlike Nick, she had no excuse for her time spent worshiping five bunnies who danced only a little bit better than they could sing. Nick to his credit, didn’t tease through her story. He seemed genuinely interested in a part of her past she hadn’t mentioned before.

And with that came other shared stories between them. Judy was relishing Nick finally opening up about his past; she didn’t want the night to end, but when it was close to midnight, awareness crept up on her that she would need sleep to get through tomorrow's big homecoming. “I should go, Nick. My dad’s coming home tomorrow and I don’t want to be too exhausted to help.”

“And I have work. Not looking forward to it though. You should see the rookie they've put me with. Timber Wolf. He’s already howled five times for no reason.”

Judy snickered. “Now, Nick. Don’t stereotype.”

“Fine, but I’m counting down the days till you get back. The worst you give me is a thumping foot.”

“Well, my thumping foot will be home soon enough. Just hang in there.”

“Text me and let me know how it goes tomorrow,” Nick said.
Judy yawned as she replied, “I will.”

“Bye, Judy.”

“Bye, Nick.”

As soon as he faded from her phone, Judy reached under her pillow to pull out Nick’s neckerchief. Only a few more days until she could see him again. Judy hadn’t really taken the time to think about how much she missed her partner until tonight. The sensation felt like half of her was missing, and she needed that other half back.

After placing the neckerchief under her pillow again, Judy left her room to get a drink of water before bed. But while creeping down the hallway towards the kitchen, she heard a sound, like a muffled sob. Judy paused, and then moved through the archway leading to the kitchen, where she saw her mom leaning over a counter. “Mom?”

At the sound of her name, she glanced at Judy and mouthed, shhh, before saying, “Don’t wake the kits.”

“What are you doing in here?” Judy approached, and placed a comforting paw on her mom’s shoulder.

“Just having a moment. Feeling overwhelmed, thinking of your father coming home tomorrow, which I am happy about, but also worrying what happens once he’s here. How to take care of him, your brothers and sisters, the farm.” Her mom looked away, almost as if she was ashamed that she couldn’t handle it all.

“But I’ll be here till Saturday to help,” Judy reminded. “Don’t worry, Mom. It’ll work out.”

She nodded solemnly and then brought Judy in for a hug. “Thank you for staying here this week. You’ve been so helpful.”

“Of course. I’ll always be here anytime you need me,” Judy replied, but felt a lump beginning to form in her throat, thinking that maybe a week wasn’t going to be enough for her family. Maybe she’d have to stay longer.

And if that was the case then how would she tell Chief Bogo? What would that mean for her job? But more importantly, what would that mean for her and Nick?
Chapter 9

Judy was at her work computer, attempting to catch up on the Soranso case. She should have been excited to be back on something she wasn’t even assigned, but was asked to help with, because the department knew her value.

She should have been. Maybe two weeks ago Judy would have been.

But today her mind kept wandering.

Back to her dad. Back to her mom. Back to their thinly veiled worry as they said goodbye. “We’ll be okay, Judy.”

“I could stay another week,” she’d told them.

No, she couldn’t. Bogo had made it clear during Judy’s call to him from Bunnyburrow that they needed her back on the Soranso case ASAP.

“You have your own life to get back to,” her dad said from his bed- anxious once more while he waited for his injured back to heal. “Your mom and I appreciate all you’ve done already.”

“I’ll come back as soon as I can.” It was a promise that echoed in her head as she stared at the computer screen, unable to work and unintentionally blocking Nick out.

“Hey, did you hear me?” Her partner rolled his computer chair over to hers and began prodding Judy’s shoulder with a pen.

“What? Did you say something?” Looking away from the computer, Judy snatched Nick’s device of irritation, but made sure to lightly jab it into his arm a few times in retaliation.

“What movie did you pick for tonight?” Nick swiped his pen back.

“I, uh …” The question caught her off guard. She honestly hadn’t thought about it at all. Was it Thursday already? “I thought we were watching that zombie movie.”

“But you didn’t want to watch it when I suggested that yesterday.”

Had Nick suggested it yesterday? She couldn’t remember. Each day was bleeding into the next- a string of hazy moments that weren’t as clear as her need to get back to Bunnyburrow. “I’m sorry. I have a lot going on inside my head, and movie night just isn’t at the top of my list of things to think about right now.”

“Oh. Well, that’s fine. We don’t have to do movie night this week. It’s not that important.” There was a slight disappointment in Nick’s tone that told Judy otherwise, and she felt disappointment too … in herself.

Swiveling her chair so that her much smaller knees bumped up against Nick’s, Judy gave him her full attention. “No, it is important. Hanging out with you always helps me when I’m down and that’s what I need right now. Tonight’s still on. I’ll decide on a movie before the end of the day.”

Judy saw Nick’s eyes give a quick sweep of the room, and she wondered what he was looking for.
When he leaned forward seconds later and grasped her paw, she assumed he’d been making sure they had privacy. “Are you okay, Judy?” It was a question Nick asked at least once every day since she’d been back. Not always in the same form though. Sometimes it was simply a concerned look. Other times it was him casually asking, “Hanging in there?” But now his voice was gentle- a sign to Judy that he viewed her as fragile- and that old urge left over from kithood, the one that told her she needed to prove she was more than just a weak bunny, pushed to the front.

“As well as to be expected,” Judy replied, standing. Then extricating her paw from his, she used it to softly punch Nick’s shoulder. “I’m still tough though, so don’t mess with me.”

He exaggerated a pained expression, rubbing the spot where her punch had landed- just like she knew he would- and Judy smiled. But walking away, it faded as tears pricked the corners of her eyes, and she had to hurry before Nick saw them. “Where’re you off to speedy rabbit?” he asked.

Judy didn’t turn around when she answered. “I have to see Mammal Resources about something.” She didn’t want to elaborate, and left the room before Nick could inquire further. Her visit to MR was to investigate an idea she had been mulling over for two days now, and Judy didn’t think her partner would approve.

And in the end, if she followed through … he would find out soon enough anyway.

Judy wanted to tell Nick as soon as he arrived at her apartment later that evening holding a pizza box and proclaiming in an uppy accent, “Dinner is served, Madam.”

She wanted to explain to him that so much of her success in life was tied back to her parents and their support. Time and again they had been there for her, even during her long struggle to graduate from police academy. Her parents weren’t particularly happy with Judy’s career choice, but they always supported their daughter, and now it was her turn to repay the favor.

She wanted to tell Nick, but the more he joked and laughed in his obvious attempts to cheer her up, the more Judy wavered, saying nothing to him beyond the normal conversation between two friends sharing a pizza while watching a movie together.

It was Pride and Prejudice and Zombies. Judy was too preoccupied to come up with something else, and also knew watching it was what Nick wanted to do anyway. His happiness was important to her, and if Judy could see him filled with that emotion for a little while, then it would make dropping her secret on him less painful. She hoped so anyway.

It wasn’t until the movie faded to black and the credits began rolling that Judy found the courage to finally bring up the decision she’d made earlier in the day. “Nick?” Her voice sounded so small, and she hated it. Why couldn’t she be brave?

“Hmmm?” He had just finished closing the laptop, and turned his head to look her way. “You sound nervous. Did all that gore get to you?” Nick began making guttural groans and stuck out his arms, imitating a zombie, before returning back to his normal self. “You know, I would eat your brains, but rabbits have such small ones. Not even worth the trouble.” Nick’s grin was smug, but Judy only shook her head in response, unable to appreciate his joke.

"What? Not even the zombie routine gets a smile? You're starting to affect my confidence, Whiskers." Nick feigned a frown.

"No, it's not ... it was funny, but ..."
"But what?"

Taking a deep breath, Judy tried to be as straightforward as possible. Best to treat their situation like a bandage; rip it off and get the pain over with. "Look, I don’t know how to say this, so I’m just going to come right out with it."

Nick snorted. "You sound just like you did when you confessed to joining that dating site. Is that what’s happening here? Come on, Carrots, you have to control your insatiable need to meet strange mammals on the internet.” The edges of his eyes crinkled with amusement and Judy hated that she was about to take that humor away from him.

Sinking her face into her paws, Judy let it rest there for a moment. But she couldn’t bring herself to meet his eyes after eventually letting her paws fall into her lap. So, Judy stared down as she anxiously wrung them. “Nick, I’m taking a leave of absence from work. I’m allowed three months away without pay before they can fire me ... I-I’m going home to help my family.”

A few seconds of silence passed between them before Judy had the courage to look up again. When she did her heart plummeted. Nick was grimacing. "What?” he said, but didn’t add anything else, no argument trying to get her to stay. Just a mixture of confusion and dejection written on his face.

It became so quiet that Judy thought she heard some moving around from Bucky and Pronk’s apartment. Probably them repositioning to hear better, and knowing they were listening made her feel worse.

“You can’t leave,” Nick said, finally broke the silence. "What about your apartment?"

“Well, I can’t afford to keep it while I’m away. I’ll have to move out. If I come back to Zootopia in three months, I’ll find another place. Hey, maybe I’ll move in with you and be your maid. It doesn’t take a genius to know you need someone to clean up after your sloppy self,” Judy tried to tease, but Nick wasn’t having it. His face remained serious.

"If?" He nearly choked on the word.

She was hoping he hadn’t caught that. “It’s not a strong if. I fully intend on coming back, but life’s unpredictable … something might keep me there.”

“And then what? You lose your job? I no longer have a partner? You stay in Bunnyburrow as a carrot farmer? You hate farming!” Nick stressed his last sentence, making him sound combative, something Judy hadn’t anticipated. Sad maybe, but not mad, and she bristled.

“Stop being like this. None of those things are going to happen if my dad gets better, and he won’t unless I’m there.”

“I feel like,” Nick took a deep breath, as if he were trying to rein in whatever emotion wanted to spill over. “I feel like I should support you. A part of me wants you to follow your instincts, but I can’t help thinking this is a mistake.”

“A mistake? Helping my family is a mistake?” Judy’s question came out disbelieving.

The apartment suddenly felt so small around them. He was looking at Judy with the same expression he’d worn a year and a half ago during a police press conference. It was a face she didn’t like remembering, and didn’t especially like seeing now.

“So much empathy you can’t see beyond your cute little bunny nose. You aren’t this savior that can just swoop in and fix the world. You have a life too, Judy. What about your job? A job you love. A
job you worked your tail off to get. A job you’re so amazing at, detectives with years of experience over you are asking for your help.”

It was a reiteration of what he was always attempting to get her to admit. She couldn’t do it all. But, this time, Nick didn’t say it with a wink and smile. He was upset, and let that emotion seep into their discourse.

“I told you I don’t intend to quit,” she repeated, but Nick continued on as if he hadn’t heard her.

“And what about me?” His tone softened. “Isn’t our friendship worth staying for?”

“Nick, stop acting like this is the end of the world. It’s only three months.”

“Only three months until it isn’t. Until you decide your family can’t get by without you, and you stay there. Which, let’s be real, Judy, will probably happen, since you think nothing can be fixed unless you’re personally involved.”

Judy let out a frustrated sigh. “I’m going to try my hardest not to let that happen. Why can’t you understand that?”

Nick opened his mouth like he was going to continue arguing, but snapped his snout shut seconds later, and grasping his jacket, he walked towards her door. Judy went after him, but he turned back around and said, “I have to be alone for a while. Please, don’t follow me.” Then his back was to her again as he reached for the door handle.

“Nick,” she said his name timidly. “Please, don’t be angry. I can’t stand it.” This wasn’t how she thought the evening would to go. He’d been so understanding and helpful when she originally left to help her family, Judy assumed it wouldn’t take him long to turn around and support this decision as well. She expected push back, but not on this level.

Nick paused momentarily, his paw idling on her door handle, his shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry, Carrots, but you can’t ask me how to feel.”

He said goodbye, and the tears Judy had been holding back finally flowed freely. The closest thing to catch them was Nick’s neckerchief- which she kept in her pocket most days now. Pulling it out, Judy covered her eyes with the red cloth and fell down into the chair Nick had been sitting in. It was still warm.

He wasn’t being fair to Judy, especially since his anger stemmed more from his failure to just say the words he’d been wanting to for so long now. Nick knew he’d been an incredible jerk to her, but couldn’t bring himself to turn around and apologize.

He should have told her that first time, when overworked, Judy had fallen asleep at her computer. Chuckling, Nick had gone to wake her, but stopped when he felt his amusement with the situation turning into a sort of admiration for her.

He should have said something then.

And now it was too late.

_Dumb fox._
Sorry for the angst. If it helps, the next chapter is something to look forward to.
Rain began falling against Judy’s window a short time after she laid down in bed. Already cried out, she hoped sleep would rescue her from thinking anymore about Nick. So much had gone wrong that evening, and Judy didn’t want to agonize over it anymore- at least not until the morning when work would force her and Nick back together. Until then though, Judy wanted sleep, and focused on the lulling quality of the rain- a soft pitter patter that ultimately pulled her down into the nothingness of a dreamless world.

But it didn't last long. A few hours later, Judy was jerked from her respite by a knock, and when she reached for her phone, its screen told her it was 2 in the morning. With a yawn, she sat up in bed as another knock perked her ears. Judy wasn’t completely awake yet, but was alert enough to ask, “Who’s there?”

She assumed this early in the morning, a friendly visit wasn’t waiting for her on the other side of the door. Plus, her apartment complex wasn't exactly in the best neighborhood either, and quickly Judy scanned her memory for the place she'd put her dart gun after coming home from work. Same as always, it was under her mattress.

“It’s uh ... Nick,” a hesitant voice answered through the door.

A little alarm sounded inside Judy and hopping out of bed, she went to let her friend in. But after opening the door, it took a moment for her to register what she was looking at. Judy rubbed her eyes with the back of her paws to make sure what she saw was actually reality. Nick was standing there soaking wet. His fur and clothes were dripping so much that a little puddle had formed around his feet. “Hey,” he mumbled.

Judy shook her head to pull herself from the last of what her sister Annie always called the groggies, and then tugging on Nick’s arm, she brought him inside. Without a word, she reached into one of her dresser drawers and tossed him a random T-shirt from inside. “So, out for a 2 AM stroll in the rain?” she casually asked a minute later while he dried himself off with her shirt. Judy didn’t want to get her hopes up that maybe Nick had come back to reconcile, but she couldn’t think of any other reason he would be at her apartment at such an odd hour.

“No, I took a toilet bath,” Nick deadpanned back.

Judy was slow to grasp Nick's reference to her own toilet dousing the week before, but after it registered in her brain, she let out a relieved sigh. He was teasing, which maybe meant he wasn’t angry anymore. “Oh, I hear those are refreshing,” Judy played along.

Nick chuckled- another sign to her that he wasn’t upset anymore- and after vigorously rubbing Judy’s shirt all over his head, he lowered it to look at her. His fur was sticking up in every different direction and she had to resist the urge to go over and smooth it down for him. “So, where were you really?” Judy inquired. “Since, you know, toilet baths are only for us country folk.”

A look of guilt passed across Nick’s face. “I was at Finnick’s for a while, and then the rain decided it would have a little fun at my expense and attacked me as I was on my way back over here.”

Judy wasn’t able to suppress her sigh of condemnation. Yes, Nick’s former partner in scams was a
reliable informant of illegal activity for them, but that also required them to look the other way when it came to his petty crimes. Sometimes you cut deals to catch the bigger criminals. And while she was fine with Nick having a business relationship with Finnick, Judy disapproved of her partner hanging around his old friend when it didn’t pertain to a case. Which he sometimes still did.

“It’s not what you think, not this time anyway,” Nick said, trying to ease away the glower in Judy’s expression. “I was asking him for advice.”

“Advice … what exactly could the current con-artist tell the former con-artist that he wouldn’t already know?” Judy’s paws rested against her hips.

“Finnick has a lot of insight into a certain area that I haven’t always been successful in.”

“What? You mean there are things you can’t talk your way out of?”

“This isn’t something I want to get out of.”

“Oh?”

Nick swallowed. “No.”

Something in his expression made her heart do a flip-flop. “And what did Finnick tell you?” Judy asked.

“He told me to stop being a damn idiot.”

“Well, typically I would agree with him on that, but what does that mean? What are you being an idiot about?”

“It means …” Nick exhaled, and was about to toss Judy’s shirt aside, but stopped abruptly to stare at its front. “You have a Backstreet Bunnies shirt?” He let out a hard laugh and turned the shirt around to showcase its brightly designed front featuring the five bunnies Judy had crushed on during high school.

Her jaw dropped. Of all the shirts she could have grabbed, it had to be that one. “I uh ... well, I told you I went to their concert like seven years ago. That’s not new information, Nick,” Judy defended herself, holding her head up high with dignity. She wouldn't let him shame her for this.

“But you still have it!”

“So,” Judy huffed. “It’s a memento from my youth.”

Grinning, Nick shook his head slowly. Then dropping Judy’s shirt, he moved closer to her. “I love that you have a tough exterior on the outside, but deep down you’re the type of rabbit who goes to a Backstreet Bunnies concert and comes back with a shirt- a shirt you still have seven years later.”

Judy tilted her head to the side in confusion. Was he mocking her? “That’s what you love about me? Nick, did you and Finnick drink alcohol before you came back here?” She leaned in and sniffed, but smelled only the same musky cologne he always wore.

“No- I ...” He shook his head. “Let me finish, Judy.”

“There’s more?”

“Yes, there’s more.” Nick cleared his throat, and asked, “May I?”
Judy nodded.

“I love that you always drink your coffee the same way, with nothing in it, and still you have to take a spoon and stir it- like what are you even stirring? It doesn’t make sense and still I love it. I love that your nose starts twitching when you're looking at me like I'm nuts- like right now. I love that after I spend the day with you, I can still smell you on my uniform, and you always smell like all those gross carrots you eat, so that’s saying something. And I love that you are the last person I want to talk to before I go to sleep at night. And it's not because I'm lonely, and it's not because you’re leaving and might not come back. I’m here right now because I realized a long time ago I wanted to be with you, but I couldn’t say it. I was afraid of scaring you off. Well, I don’t care anymore. I’m saying it. I want to be with you and I want to start that as soon as possible.”

Judy stared back at Nick in shock, not especially over his confession (although it had been pretty shocking), but for how he’d gone about it. “Nick.” Her eyes narrowed. “Did you memorize Hare’s speech to Bunny from the end of *When Hare met Bunny*?” It wasn’t exactly the same; certain words had been changed or added to fit Judy better, but there was no denying he’d lifted the majority of his confession from the climax of her favorite movie.

“Yes!” Nick said with such intensity that Judy hopped in surprise. “It is, and do you know why? Because I watched that dumb movie every night you were gone. I watched it so much I memorized it.”

“But why?”

“Because it reminded me of you and because I am Hare and you are Bunny. Not that we’re actually them, but you can’t say there aren’t similarities between us and their love/hate relationship. I hated you and you hated me. Now I …”

He stopped short, but Judy wasn’t about to let him get out of saying what she thought he was about to say. “Now you what?” she calmly prompted.

“Now I … don’t know.” Nick stared down at his feet, but it was only for a second. When he brought his eyes back up, something had changed in them. There was resolve behind his green irises. “No, actually I do know. I love you, Judy.”

“You love me?”

“Well, yeah, didn't I just say that?” Nick’s voice was sheepish.

Judy snorted, but not derisively. She was in disbelief. It felt as if she were still in bed and dreaming their whole interaction up. When Nick left her apartment, him coming back and confessing his love was the last thing she expected. It wasn’t even on the list of possibilities, and she’d come up with a few while worrying about him.

No, Judy had to be dreaming and if that was the case then she might as well go along with it. “You see? That is just like you, Nick. You say things like that, and you make it impossible for me to hate you, and I hate you, Nick. I really hate you. I hate you.”

“You hate me?” Nick looked genuinely gutted, and Judy laughed. Although, it probably wasn’t the best reaction to have, as it caused her partner’s furrowed brow to deepen.

“No, you silly fox, that’s Bunny’s line to Hare. I thought- I thought you said you memorized the movie.”

“Oh, I did. I was just caught up in the moment. It’s not every day I tell someone I love them.
Actually you’re the only mammal I’ve said that to since, well … my mom.”

“There you go again with the mom comparisons. Is that how you love me? Like a mom,” Judy giggled.

“No, I love you as Judy Hopps.” Nick was intently gazing at her, and she had an inclination that he might lean in and express just exactly how his love for her differed from his love for his mom. Feeling flustered, Judy glided out of his reach and over to her desk.

“There’s uh … something I should show you before you say or do anything else.” Judy felt Nick move to stand directly behind her, and her heart began racing. Suddenly she wasn’t as confident in what she was about to do. Nick had caught her so by surprise with his confession that Judy hardly knew how to handle herself.

“What’s that?” she heard him ask from over her shoulder, and twirling around Judy held her goal journal out for him to see. He arched a brow in response. The goal journal wasn’t new to Nick, although she hadn’t shown him it recently, not since her last few additions. “That thing? I just told you I loved you, and you want to stroll down memory lane?” Nick was being his typical sarcastic self, but knowing him as well as she did, Judy could hear the disappointment laced into his words.

“No, I’m not going to show you all my goals. Only the most recent three. The first I made the day you told me I had no other friends, and the second was on the night you gave me the laptop. And from there it just sort of grew into something bigger. Well, you’ll see.” Judy flipped the pages, searching for her goals pertaining to Nick, and once found, she held them out for him to see.

“Goal,” he began reciting, “find something more. Goal: Find love. Goal: Find a way to tell Nick …” he hesitated on the last line. Judy had written it after coming home from their night at the diner two weeks before. Nick's eyes widened and then shifted upward to stare into hers. “You love me?” The question sounded amazed, as if he couldn’t believe it was possible for her to love him back, and despite not wanting to ruin the moment by becoming overly sentimental, she teared up.

“I think a part of me has always loved you; I just didn’t know how love felt- the romantic kind anyway. I’ve been wrapped up in my goals for so long that I never took the time to investigate what it was that I felt for you. But I know now that it’s love. It’s been love for a long time. It just took a while to come into focus for someone like me who’s so goal orientated. I had to make you a goal for me to realize it … a different kind of goal.”

Judy was full on crying now, and Nick reacted to this by snatching the journal away, tossing it on the desk, and then cradling her face in his paws. “All this time I wasted, because I was afraid you’d run the other way if I told you. How could a rabbit love a fox? I didn’t see it ever happening. Finnick told me I was an idiot for not at least finding out. But I didn’t want to lose your friendship.”

Nick paused to stare deeply in her eyes like he was searching for something, before asking, “That was never going to happen, was it?”

Judy shook her head, and Nick gently wiped away her tears. His face loomed closer, his paws slowly bringing her up towards him as he leaned in. She knew what was happening and a charge of excitement flowed through her like electricity. For a moment, Judy thought she might let him kiss her. She entertained the thought of what her first kiss might feel like- a kiss with someone she loved- but it collided head on with the reality of their situation. Judy was still leaving for three months, and like a light switch being turned off, her desire drained in the face of an uncertain future. “Wait,” she breathed.

Nick’s paws stilled, and his eyes opened. “Wait?” he echoed, but in a huskier tone than hers. He looked confused, like she had jolted him awake.
“I can’t do this right now,” Judy whispered, but when his face fell, she was quick to add, “I want to though. I really do, but it’s just so complicated, Nick. I don’t want to start a relationship and not be there for you completely. I’m leaving for three months.”

He didn’t let go of her face, but tipped his forehead down to touch hers. “Carrots,” he sighed, his breath filling the space between them. “You have 275 brothers and sisters that are there to help your mom and dad. What makes you think adding yourself to the bunny pile will change much of anything?”

“I’m sorry, Nick, but this is who I am. I have to help. You listed all those things you love about me. Well, this is another part you’ll just have to love too … even if it makes you crazy.”

“It does make me crazy.” He lifted his head away from hers, and gazing at Judy, he let his paws fall. “So, what do we do?”

“We take it slow,” she replied. “We don’t tell anyone yet, and let three months of a long distance relationship pan out.”

Nick crossed his arms. “Well, I don’t care what you say, I’m moving into your apartment.”

“That’s the opposite of taking it slow, Nick,” Judy countered, although admittedly the thought of them living together did raise the temperature of her body by a few degrees.

“If you’re not here, then it is slow,” Nick explained. “And that way when you come back- and you will come back- you’ll still have your old place. I’ll move out of my apartment this weekend, and keep this as a home for you, because this is your home, Judy. You need to remember that.”

She wasn’t entirely sure about his suggestion, but didn’t want to disappoint Nick further after having denied him a kiss, and so Judy nodded yes. “Okay, you can stay here, but when I come back I better not find that you’ve drowned this place in garbage.” She feigned a glare, but Nick was unaffected.

“Well, you just said you’re coming back and if that happens, Carrots, I promise to take a vow of sloblessness,” Nick stated, giving her the scout’s salute. “But you have to come back or I’ll continue my slovenly ways and you’ll only have yourself to blame for that. Are you really willing to take on that sort of guilt?”

Judy smiled. “I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

The When Harry Met Sally scene parodied in this chapter

Chapter End Notes

This was the first chapter I wrote in my head, and what I based this fic around. I came up with it when I watched ‘When Harry Met Sally’ a few days after seeing ‘Zootopia’ and realized Nick and Judy were very similar to Harry and Sally. Hope you enjoyed it. There is still more to this story, a few more chapters to go, so hopefully you’ll stick around till the end.
Chapter 11

On the same night of their confessions, Judy let Nick sleep over. But not in the way a couple dating might. Being in the same bed together offered too much temptation Judy wasn’t ready for, so they repeated the sleeping arrangements of when she stayed at his place ... with one small change. This time, Judy scooted to the edge of her bed and took Nick’s paw in her own. At 3 AM, both were too exhausted to talk, but let the small intimate moment of paw holding be their first nudge into what Judy assumed would grow to become more.

For his part, Nick didn’t tease or offer up any innuendos about being a couple spending the night together. He was unusually coy about the whole thing, and Judy wondered if he was entering their new relationship just as inexperienced as she was. He’d mentioned Finnick giving him advice, and that advice being in an area Nick hadn’t always been successful in. Was it possible her new boyfriend wasn’t the smooth moves fox she always imagined him to be? Since entering her life, Nick had remained single, but Judy always assumed there was a checkered dating past he kept quiet about for her benefit.

Nick was charming to a fault. Yes, it was all smoke and mirrors, but Judy didn’t doubt he’d used that false charisma to land dates. How many ladies were suckered into his single dad story just like she’d been? Judy didn’t want to think about it. The idea of him with anyone else made her jealous, and that wasn’t an emotion she was used to feeling. It wasn’t pleasant.

Dating, let alone love, was all new to her and the difficult thing about being in a relationship when she'd never been in one before, was knowing how to navigate it. Judy had that problem, but after choosing to keep her new status with Nick a secret, another layer to that problem had been added.

How did you have a relationship and also make sure no one else knew? Judy didn’t think it would be difficult once she was away in Bunnyburrow, but she’d given herself a week to get her life in order before leaving. That meant a week with both her and Nick working together, while also secretly dating.

The next day at work, Judy thought she was doing well at not blowing their cover, but Nick was another story. He’d tried several times to hold her paw. “Not while we’re in the building,” she stressed under her breath at one point. Judy had been getting herself coffee from the break room and he’d slid up beside her. Discreetly, Nick ran his paw down the length of her arm and then attempted to grasp Judy’s paw. Although, their height difference had created a situation where he appeared hunkered down and very conspicuous- not exactly keeping things casual- and Judy had to rebuff him. Nick shrugged with an apology in his eyes, and walked away.

But, Judy soon realized she and Nick weren’t exactly fooling everyone. When you worked with cops, you had a group of mammals assembled that were well trained in noticing details. It was how cases were solved; you had to take in everything. But when you were a cop who also lived for the drama of reality television that focused heavily on romance, the two together were bound to create a perfect storm of intuition about Nick and Judy’s secret.

Clawhauser knew, yet, didn’t say anything until two days before Judy was set to leave. She was sitting at a table in the break room, finishing her carrot sandwich, when on his break as well, Clawhauser sat down across from her. “Where’s Nick?” he asked. The question wasn’t uncommon. Nick was her partner, and good cops usually kept track of those they worked closely with.

“He went home on his break. Trying to finish up the last of his packing. He wants to move into my place before I leave, and boy does that fox know how to hoard. I’ve gotten into so many arguments
with him after he’s refused to throw something away.” Judy shook her head and chuckled remembering the stack of comic books Nick just knew would be worth something someday.

“Not when you haven’t taken care of them. This one’s even missing its cover,” Judy had chided. Into the trash it went along with all the others.

By now everyone at work knew Nick was staying in Judy’s apartment while she was gone. No one questioned it, because it was common knowledge they were close friends. But Clawhauser seemed to think Nick’s actions held a deeper meaning.

“That was really nice of Nick to move into your apartment for you, so you could keep it,” he mentioned. “He must care a lot about you.”

Judy shrugged, and replied, “I guess,” while trying her hardest to sound nonchalant.

“So tell me Judy, how’s this going to work with you leaving for three months?”

Clawhauser eyes studied her intently, and Judy got an odd sensation in her gut. It forced her out of her chair and she wandered over to the coffee pot for a distraction. “What do you mean?” Judy asked while pouring herself a cup.

“You know with you two dating now. How’s it going to work when you’re away? Will Nick visit you on weekends?” Clawhauser finished his question with a giggle as if he couldn’t contain his glee at finally asking what he’d most likely known from the start.

Judy whirled around, spilling her coffee in the process. “We’re not dating. Where would you get- I’m not- that’s ridiculous- you’re crazy.” It wasn’t exactly her most coherent refute, and inwardly Judy groaned. She should have practiced a denial speech with Nick. Why hadn’t they come up with a line to say in case of emergency? The truth was she’d been too confident in her ability to go undercover.

*I guess it’s not the same thing when you’re trying to hide love.*

Clawhauser made a high-pitched noise that was half excitement, half disbelief. “You’re keeping it a secret?! That is so like what happened on *Keeping up with the Klawdashians*!”

“Please, don’t-”

“Oh my goodness! This is so interesting!” He leaned his elbows on the break room table and rested his face in his paws, like Judy was some exciting show. “Friends to secret lovers. My favorite!”

“We're not- we haven’t- Clawhauser stop looking at me like that,” Judy sternly ordered. Then glancing towards the open door, she raced to press it shut with her back and stayed in that position so no one could enter without her knowing first. “We’re not lovers. Please, don’t say that word. For fluff’s sake, we haven’t even kissed yet. We only just started dating, and want to keep it secret, so please, please, please don’t tell anyone. Especially Bogo. I’m not sure he’d be okay with two partners dating. He might move me to another precinct.”

And there it was, the truth, out in the open for someone else to hear. Judy felt a sense of dread and hoped she hadn’t opened up a can of worms. “Oh, don’t worry Judy, I won’t say a word. I’m just glad it finally happened. Oh you two.” He made that excited noise again and Judy shushed him.

“What do you mean finally?” she added.

“Well, any dum-dum could pick up on the chemistry between you two. I even have a bet going with
Officer McHorn on how long it would take. Let’s see, Nick was in the academy for nine months, and has been on the force for six, and you met him three months before he joined the academy. So a year and a half. Hmmm I thought it would take at least two. But since you’re keeping a secret maybe I won’t have to pay him.”

“You were betting on us?” Judy said, shocked after listening to Clawhauser quote her and Nick’s history like they were some team in a fantasy football league.

“Hey, why is this closed?” an irritated voice suddenly asked through the door, and unable to hold back the rhino Judy knew was on the other side, she eased away to avoid being crushed.

“Not a word,” Judy earnestly whispered to Clawhauser before the door swung open and a small group of their co-workers walked in.

Clawhauser nodded back, and reaching up, imitated his mouth being a zipper he was closing. Judy hoped it would remain shut … at least about her secret. But then seconds later he unzipped it and raising his voice, said, “Hey, everyone let’s take Judy out tonight to-”

Her body tensed for a millisecond as she wondered if Clawhauser was about to break his promise.

“Say goodbye.”

She sighed in relief.

The few other cops in the room agreed, and before the end of the day, word spread that there was to be a goodbye party for her at the local watering hole the department frequented. It didn’t matter that Judy told them she didn’t drink. She was required to show up or, they told her, she would never live it down.

“Ugh, I don’t want to go,” Judy grumbled.

Nick, who was crouched on her apartment floor in front of an open cardboard box, clucked his tongue. “Come on, Carrots. Let them say goodbye in the only way they know how.”

And then Nick was behind her, his touch suddenly materializing against her back, causing a shiver to travel down Judy's spine. He’d taken away dress zipping duties from her after watching her struggle to reach the zipper on its back. Not wanting to show how flustered the intimate gesture made her, Judy went back to complaining. “No, they just want to get me drunk, so I’ll spill the carrots about us. Or at least Clawhauser does.”

“No one is going to get you drunk. I’ll be there to protect you- your fox in shining armor. I am here, m’lady, to defend you against unwanted alcoholic beverages,” Nick spoke as if he were Mr. Darcy, and Judy knew he’d done it for her benefit.

Snickering, she turned around to see him bowing to her. “Please, rise my subject. Your courageous battle against the alcohol is greatly appreciated.” They both laughed, and then Judy lightheartedly insulted, “You’re such a dork.”

Nick winked. “Hey, you chose this dork. And uh, how come I’ve never seen you wear that before?” Judy glanced down at her sleeveless purple dress. “Because I haven’t put in on since graduating high school. It was for my graduation party. Mom forced me to take it to Zootopia, because she seemed to
think I would need it if I ever dated.”

“Well, I’m dating you, and I like it. The purple matches your eyes.”

“Take one long look then, because this is the only time you’ll see me wearing it.”

Nick playfully frowned.

“Well, if you’re going to protect me, Sir Wilde, I suggest you change your shirt. We’re going to be late,” Judy said, waiting for him to pull on something a little nicer than his usual green shirt, striped tie combo.

Nick found a white dress shirt and black tie inside one of his boxes and Judy tried not to stare while he changed into them. Although, she wasn’t quite successful. Then paw in paw they left her apartment just as Bucky or Pronk (one day she would be able to discern who was who) told them to have a good time.

Later that evening, with his arm wound tightly around her, Nick tried helping Judy walk into her apartment. She wasn’t drunk, or at least she didn’t think she was. Two drinks couldn’t possibly affect someone badly enough to make them drunk. But of course, Judy didn’t know, because she’d never had a drop of alcohol before tonight. “Why did you let me drink?” she groaned to Nick as he maneuvered her through the maze of boxes on the floor.

“Let you?” Nick asked with a hard laugh. “I tried to take them away, but you refused.”

Was that true? She couldn’t recall. She’d been having so much fun, and the night sort of got away from her. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t supposed to drink was I?”

“Don’t apologize. You were having a great time, and I admit it was fun watching you let loose- something that’s okay to do every now and then.” Leaning down, Nick helped Judy into her bed and then once standing again, he rubbed the back of his neck. “Guess I’ll take off. Still more packing to do.”

“Nick, it’s late. You don’t have to leave. You can stay here,” Judy offered, and then yawned.

He did a quick sweep of the room which was still littered with his unpacked boxes. “There’s not really any spot for me to lay down.”

“You don’t have to sleep on the ground.”

It took only a moment for Nick to get what she was implying. “Oh, no, Carrots. You’ve been drinking. I don’t think you’d be saying this if you were sober.”

“Oh, stop. I haven’t had that much. I might be tipsy, but I know what’s going on. Just stay here. We can share the bed. It doesn’t mean anything. It’s just so you won’t have to go back home tonight. I promise I don’t mind.”

Nick looked indecisive, so Judy took it upon herself to be more forceful. “Nick Wilde, get your fluffy tail in this bed right now!”

He laughed, shrugged, and seated himself down next to her. Then leaning over Judy, he gently ran the pads of his paw down the side of her face. “Are you sure?”
She nodded. “Perfectly.”

Nick climbed in beside her. The bed was small, and there was no getting around them touching. But Judy didn't think there was any reason to pretend they weren’t in an intimate position anyway. Turning her back to him, she reached for Nick's arm, and draping it over her, Judy pulled his body against hers. Their fingers entwined and Nick sighed happily into one of her ears. Judy laid still, feeling his chest rise and fall against her back as he breathed.

“Nick,” Judy spoke into the stillness of her apartment a little while later, feeling emboldened by his nearness and the little bit of alcohol running through her system.

“Yeah?”

“Did you date anyone before me?”

Nick snorted. “What a thing to ask your boyfriend the first time you invite him into your bed.”

“I’m serious,” Judy replied, squeezing his paw.

“Judy, I …” His voice was uncertain.

“Because I haven’t,” Judy admitted, hoping it would get Nick to open up. “And that’s okay. I’m fine with you being my first everything.”

Her boyfriend sighed, but not like before. This time it was more disgruntled. “It’s embarrassing.”

Judy shifted around to look at Nick. “And what, like it’s not embarrassing for me to admit I’ve never had a boyfriend before?”

“You’re comparing apples to oranges … or in your case, apples to carrots.”

Not appreciating his joke when she was trying to be serious, Judy's mouth turned into a grim line.

“Okay, okay. So you want to know if I’ve ever been with anyone before … in all honesty, no. But if you want to get technical about it, I have gone on dates. Those never went anywhere beyond just that, which was probably my own fault.”

“Why?”

“Because I never wanted to let anyone get close. What’s the point when they always leave? My dad left, and my mom died. You open up to others and in the end they only hurt you.”

“That’s a sad story.” Judy frowned.

“Hey, you were the investigative rabbit having to get all the details.”

A quiet passed between them as Judy concentrated on Nick’s face. “So why me? Why did you let me in?” she finally asked.

“Why you? Because you made me see life as possibilities and not just scams. You pushed me even when I pushed back. You didn’t give up. And that’s what I admire about you. Your tenacity. Come on, Whiskers, I already gave you a list of things I love about you. Are you really so greedy for more. Narcissist.” He grinned and tapped her nose. Judy brushed his paw away.

“Okay, well, how about I give you a list. Seems only fair,” Judy suggested.
Nick's smile turned crooked. “I’m not gonna say no to that.”

Judy placed her paws against his chest, gently forcing Nick to roll onto his back, and after resting her head against his chest, he gathered her into his arms. She closed her eyes, breathing in his cologne. “I love that you have this tough exterior on the outside, but inside you're a marshmallow.”

“Hey, you stole that one from me!” Nick accused, but Judy could hear the smile in his voice.

“And you stole yours from Hare. So, you don’t have a leg to stand on.”

“Fair enough. Please, continue inflating my ego.”

Judy chuckled. “I love that despite you being a terrible hoarder, you actually do hold onto things that have meaning to you, like my carrot pen and your neckerchief. I love that when I’m feeling down you try your hardest to bring me back above water, even if it pulls at your own sadness. And I love that you joined the marching band, because it proves you were a nerd just like me in high school.”

“How dare you!” Nick used his paws to lift her until they were staring face to face. “I told you that in confidence.”

A bubble of laughter left Judy’s mouth. “And I love that you were gullible enough to believe I wouldn’t bring it up again.”

And then suddenly it happened. Caught up in the moment, Nick kissed Judy. But it lasted only a second before he pulled away, stuttering, “I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean- I know you wanted to wait, and you’ve been drinking-”

Judy didn’t let him finish, but pulled his snout back to her mouth and kissed him again. The sensation was better than anything she could have imagined, and it was then that she knew. There was no more if about her coming back to Zootopia. She could never leave Nick behind. No matter what happened during her stay in Bunnyburrow, Judy would come back for Nick. They’d make it work, because she wasn’t willing to lose him for anything.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Judy left, Nick was only able to hug her goodbye at the train station- an action that suggested theirs was simply a platonic friendship … nothing at all odd to see here between the bunny and fox saying so long to each other. But it didn’t matter much to Nick how little he could show his affection for Judy at the train station, because he’d already gotten his fill back at her (now his) apartment.

After getting through Judy’s agonizingly slow last day of work, they’d rushed back to her place and picked up right where they left off the night before when Judy surprised Nick by kissing him back. While still technically taking things slow, kissing was now allowed. Although, Judy wanted to continue keeping their relationship under wraps until she came back from Bunnyburrow.

If Nick had his way, they’d have told everyone already. But Judy felt differently and he went along with her plan for them, because at that point, she could’ve told him to jump into the middle of rush hour traffic and he wouldn’t have blinked an eye. Nick was that pathetic. If Judy wanted to keep their dating a secret, he would give her that, because she’d given him something he never thought possible … her heart.

And so it was that Nick the overly confident fox who never let anyone get to him, had turned into one of those easily manipulated saps he’d taken advantage of time and again during his years running scams. Nick hated being reduced to a chump … but also loved it, because he loved Judy. And in all honesty she could manipulate him all she wanted. He was hers to control.

Not that Judy would. Her intentions in everything she did always came from a need to help others, not manipulate them. It was one of her admirable qualities among many that made Judy who she was. But it was also the reason she was now gone, which essentially made her empathy a two sided coin. To date Judy, meant having to let her be who she was- a bunny with an insatiable need to fix the world. And at the moment she was currently trying to fix her family. Of course, Nick didn’t think her going home was necessary, but what could he do about it? He had to let Judy be Judy, because those were the sort of things you did when you were in love. Well, that’s what Nick thought anyway. Not that he had much experience with it. But he was trying.

In the weeks after Judy left, Nick split his time between slowly unpacking, going to work, talking with Judy on the phone, and continuing their weekly movie night. When Judy was still around, he’d wanted to hurry along the move into her apartment. It was his way of showing her he was capable of living life outside his usual squalor. But Nick found himself apathetic to the whole process after taking Judy to the train station and watching her leave. With her went his motivation.

He couldn’t drag it out forever though, and as Nick removed his photo album from the bottom of the last box, and placed it alongside some books Judy had left behind, he heaved a heavy sigh. There was now one less thing to distract himself with, which gave him more time to miss Judy and also more time to stew over how unbearable work had become without her. He liked his job just fine, but realized his happiness with it had been heightened by him enjoying Judy’s company. When Nick didn’t particularly like his partner, it made for a long work week.

It was a problem Nick took to Bogo the next day, but the response he got wasn’t all that helpful. “No, no, Wilde. I can’t put you with another officer. Everyone else is partnered up. Howls is the only one available.” Bogo pounded his fist on his desk.
Nick had tried arguing his case for a different cop to work alongside, but saw that it was going nowhere. Still, he couldn’t stop himself from pushing just a little more. “But he’s terrible. What idiot thought this guy deserved to graduate from the academy? He ruins every stakeout with his need to howl every five minutes. You know there’s a reason he’s called Howls. Because he’s howling bad.”

Bogo glared down at Nick.

*Okay, not my best joke, but Carrots would’ve laughed.*

“I was the one that decided he should graduate.”

A tense silence passed between them as Bogo’s glower grew darker, and perceiving he’d stepped over the line, Nick pulled out his hallmark charm, attempting to smooth things over. “What I meant to say is, you are an excellent judge of character. And by the way, did you have your horns polished? If I may say so Sir, you are looking very sharp today.”

Bogo’s glare turned into an eye roll. “Look, Wilde. We all miss Hopps. But you’ll just have to deal with your new partner until she gets back. Now get out of my office before I assign you parking duty.”

“Got it. I’m gone. I wasn’t even here, and as always, it’s been fun.” Nick stretched his arm out to signal he was waiting for a paw shake, but Bogo kept a straight face and didn’t move. “Oh okay, just gonna leave me hanging, buddy? I get it,” he said and then lowering his voice, added, “Can’t let the others know we’re friends. Smart idea. Wouldn’t want anyone to think I’m getting special treatment.” Nick winked.

Bogo exhaled loudly, and knowing he’d gone too far, Nick raced out of the office. He should’ve kept that last part to himself, but it had almost become an automatic reflex to try and get a reaction out of others. Nick just wanted to make his days less of a slog, and finding humor in every situation was the only way he knew how to do that.

Boy did he miss Judy.

As Nick walked into work the next morning, his mood was at an all-time low. Early on in his life, he’d built up a wall around his heart and it had only grown taller after his mom died. Now those walls were torn down because of Judy, and emotions Nick hadn’t experienced in a long time were coming back up to hassle him. He felt under siege, and it was awful.

On top of that, Judy’s birthday was a week away and Nick didn’t have the funds to surprise her with a visit like he’d planned. Seemed when you spent all your money on a laptop, a train ticket for your girlfriend, and moved into an apartment with a slightly higher rent, you lacked money for anything extra.

“There might be a way I could help you out with that,” Clawhauser told him during lunch later that day. Nick had pathetically spent his hour break complaining about his situation.

Clawhauser was the only mammal Nick could confide in due to him managing to get around Judy’s rules. That didn’t mean he told the cheetah everything, but feeling especially miserable that day, Nick couldn’t stop himself from spilling his guts when Clawhauser asked what was wrong. Apparently, feeling emotions again meant he’d become an open book just like Judy was to him.

“How’s that?” Nick asked in response to Clawhauser stating he could help, and then joked, “You gonna loan me the money?”

“Not all of it, but I think I can start a fund going,” Clawhauser replied, and Nick raised a brow.
“A fund for me to visit Judy? I’m not some charity case, you know?” He was slightly offended. Nick may have been many things, but what he wasn’t, was a beggar.

Clawhauser shook his head vigorously. “Oh no, it wouldn’t be like that. Just, you know, Judy’s well liked. Everyone wants her to come back. I hear it all the time. And some might think sending you- her best friend- out there, would remind her of what she has here. But to sell it, I’ll have to tell everyone you’re dating.” Clawhauser made that face Nick recognized as him trying to keep his excitement from gushing out.

“Nah, I don’t think so. Judy doesn’t want to tell anyone, remember?”

“Oh, Nick, Nick, Nick, Nick, you don’t think everyone will find out soon enough anyway? Look how easy it was for me.” He giggled, but Nick wasn’t sure what Clawhauser thought was funny. Maybe he was just proud of being the first one to figure out Judy and him were dating. “So what if we streamline the process to help you and Judy out? Everyone wins. You get to visit Judy and they get some juicy office gossip.”

Nick shook his head. “I can’t. If Judy ever found out- and she would, because she’s Judy- I’d never hear the end of it.” Having been on the receiving end of her anger in past situations- mostly all taking place before they became friends- Nick wasn’t sure he wanted to go down that road again. Or worse, break her trust in him.

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Despite telling Clawhauser no, Nick did think about it, and wrestled with the dilemma for the rest of the day. He wanted to visit Judy, but didn’t want to break his promise. His flip-flopping on the issue was made worse when Judy called that night and began telling him about a funny thing that happened with her brother at the carrot stand. Something that involved a fox named Gideon and Tommy spilling a bunch of this guy’s pies. It might have been the mention of another fox or just Judy’s mood being the exact opposite of his. Maybe both. But it caused Nick to go into the work the next day, find Clawhauser, and say, “You’re on.”

The worst thing about being away from Nick was watching his mood deteriorate with each phone call. At first he’d been himself- teasing, making Judy laugh, and sweet-talking her. Although the sweet-talking part was a new phase in their relationship. She’d seen Nick do it before, usually when he was trying to haggle the best deal out of someone or fix a crumbling situation. But this time it was different. When Nick flattered Judy, it was a genuine sign of his love. She enjoyed this new part of interacting with him, but sometimes had to shush Nick when he took things a little too far. In a house overflowing with bunnies, there was a high probability that some of them were eavesdropping with their big bunny ears. Judy wasn’t ready to tell any of them about her and Nick yet. And she definitely didn’t want them to find out by overhearing Nick describe in great detail all the things he found attractive about her.

But as Judy’s first month away wore on and then turned into two, she noticed Nick becoming distant with her. It was nothing someone unfamiliar with their relationship would have picked up on, but Judy could tell. It didn’t matter how positive she tried being either. Telling him stories of her day, spinning them as fun and not the disaster they’d actually been, didn’t work. Nick never seemed to let her positive energy seep into him. She’d even tried turning a situation with her brother destroying half of Gideon’s pies as funny. But no one was laughing when her parents had to pay for all the food Tommy destroyed. After that mishap, Tommy was banned from helping at the carrot stand.
Judy's lowest point came on the morning she turned 26, when Nick didn’t even call to wish her a happy birthday. She felt a tightness in her chest while getting ready for the day, and to combat it, Judy reminded herself that he was most likely at work. Nick would call her that evening, just like he always did. But still, the lack of anything from him— not even a text—stung.

A little birthday celebration was planned with her family after work on the farm was finished for the day, but Judy couldn’t even muster excitement at the prospect of eating carrot cake. She was in a glum mood, and as she drove to the carrot stand on the edge of her family’s farm, Judy began crying. She couldn’t be positive anymore.

She missed her job.

She missed Zootopia.

But most of all, Judy missed Nick, and was afraid that her absence had created a rift between them.

Judy’s tears only stopped flowing when she reached the carrot stand and knew it was time to put on her professional face. Yanking the brim of her sunhat low to hide her red eyes, she exited her parent’s truck and walked over to the stand. With it being mid-morning, the stream of customers was slow, which unfortunately gave her plenty of time to wallow in misery. Judy thought about texting Nick and reminding him it was her birthday, but ultimately decided that would make her look weak. If she had to jog her boyfriend’s memory of what important day it was, then it wasn’t worth the acknowledgment he’d give her for it. Judy wanted a happy birthday wish to come from Nick himself, and not because she had prompted him.

A little while later, when Judy’s phone dinged the notification noise that told her she had a text, her heart jumped. Instantly, she went to look and see if it was from Nick. Judy faintly hoped that all her worrying had been for nothing. Sure enough the text was from him, but the message wasn’t exactly what Judy wanted to see.

Hey I think I found a great place to buy carrots. Think I’ll go get some

Judy stared down at the words on her phone’s screen and reread them three times. She felt confused and just a little bit miffed. Still no birthday mention, but more perplexing was Nick doing the very un-Nick like thing of buying carrots. Deciding to give him the benefit of the doubt about her birthday, Judy texted Nick back with a tease.

No carrot will ever compare to those from the Hopps Family Farm. Now that’s the best place to buy a carrot :)

A few seconds ticked by before Judy got a response.

Yeah, but this bunny selling them sure looks good. I want to go talk to her

A flash of anger shot through Judy and she glared at her phone. Not only did Nick forget her birthday, but he was joking about another rabbit’s looks—most likely to get a rise out of Judy for his own amusement. Maybe he thought it was funny, but she certainly didn’t. Pushing her phone aside, Judy huffed, not trusting herself to text Nick back until her temper subsided. With how she currently felt, Nick might not be getting a reply from her till tomorrow.

Yet despite her anger, when she heard a customer approaching moments later, Judy went back to business. Forgetful and insensitive boyfriend or not, Judy had to maintain an image that said she was happy to be selling carrots, and she made sure to force a smile before looking up. “May I help—” Judy’s happy greeting morphed sharply into a gasp.
Standing in front of her, looking just as smug as ever, was Nick. “So, my girlfriend tells me this is the best place to buy carrots,” he said, pulling his sunglasses down and winking.

Chapter End Notes

In the timeline of this fic- a year and some odd months after Zootopia ends, I figure Judy would be turning 26, since she was 24 in the movie.
Judy felt a weird combination of emotions. Anger, joy, and shame all fought for dominance inside her little bunny body.

*I shouldn’t have doubted Nick*—Shame.

*But he tricked me*—Anger.

*None of it fluffing matters, because he’s here*—Joy.

In the end, joy eclipsed the other two. Judy was happy. Nick was here, not back in Zootopia ignoring her and growing distant. Without thinking, the impulsive Judy that sometimes emerged when Nick was around, vaulted herself over the stand’s counter and into his arms. Surprised, Nick took a few stumbling steps backward as she clung to him tightly. When he regained his balance, his arms wound around her, and in a rare moment of sincerity from the fox who most often spoke in sarcasm, he whispered, “I missed you so much.”

But then Judy pulled away from his chest to stare up at him. “Nicholas Wilde, why are you such a jerk?!” She’d indulged her joy; now a tiny bit of leftover anger prodded Nick for answers.

He chuckled uneasily. “Uh, kinda giving me mixed signals here, Carrots.”

“You made me think you forgot my birthday,” she explained.

“Oh, that,” he snickered, making no attempt to hide his pride in fooling her. If anything, he reveled in it. “Wasn’t that great?”

“No, it wasn’t.” Irritation colored Judy’s retort.

“Look at it this way, the surprise of me being here made it better. Why eat the parsnip when you can have the carrot?”

Judy tilted her head to the side, expressing confusion. “What does that even mean?”

“It was a food analogy, thought you’d appreciate that.” Nick gave a sly smile that would have looked cute if he made any sense.

“So, am I the carrot?” Judy tried her best to understand.

“No, I am. Me being here is the carrot.”

“I … don’t get it.”

“Me calling and telling you I was on my way, is the parsnip.” Judy’s expression must have still conveyed her confusion, because Nick added a bit exasperatedly, “Just go with it, okay?”

Judy shook her head, but smiled all the same. “Okay, I’ll go with your convoluted analogy, but just so you know, parsnips aren’t all that different from carrots.”

“I’ll make sure to log that away in things to remember when I’m never eating one,” Nick replied.

She laughed and followed that with a contented sigh. Judy missed this. She missed him making her laugh and it not being through the screen of a phone. She missed the smell of his cologne as he held
her like he was now.

And she missed his kisses.

Before Judy’s brain could shoot her a reminder that kissing Nick in public was a sure-fire way to alert everyone around that she was involved with a fox, her mouth was against his. She’d been the instigator, lost in a moment of bliss that only ended when a forced cough to her right brought Judy back down to reality. Nick’s arms instantly relinquished their hold, and she slid to the ground.

The rudely-coughing bunny in the dirty overalls wasn’t someone Judy recognized. Most likely, he’d seen the stand from the road while on his way somewhere else, and for that she was glad. If one of her regulars had seen the less than platonic exchange between fox and rabbit, it would’ve caused a chain reaction of blabbing bunnies. Judy didn’t need a game of telephone traveling from bunny to bunny about what scandalous thing Judy Hopps had been doing with a fox at her family’s carrot stand. Thankfully, this first-time customer (and possibly last by the way he eyeballed Judy and Nick) made no mention of the kiss, bought some blueberries, and left.

“So, why is this called a carrot stand if that guy just bought blueberries? Seems like false advertising if you ask me,” Nick asked, leaning against one of the poles holding up the stand’s roof, and seemingly unfazed by the whole incident. He grasped some blueberries in his paw and began tossing them into his mouth, completely at ease. She envied his ability to just let the judgment of others slide off his back, but then again didn’t relish how he’d cultivated his defense system.

“Hmmm, seems a former con-artist like yourself would know all about false advertising,” Judy teased.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Nick popped a few more blueberries in his mouth, and Judy slapped his paw when he reached for more.

“Carrots are our main produce, but we dabble in other areas,” she answered his question from before.

“Just like you dabble in other areas.” Nick winked, and Judy smirked.

“I’m not dabbling, I know exactly what I want,” she said, moving closer to him and snaking her arms around his torso.

“Is that so?” Nick responded, and for a moment it seemed they might kiss again, but Judy shook off the pull of desire and let her arms fall away.

“Yeah, I do, but …” She paused to pull in a breath, and the exhale that came next hinged on sounding melancholy. “Let’s try and keep things casual while you’re here. Don’t want the town to treat you badly if they find out we’re dating. There hasn’t been an interspecies couple in Bunny Burrow since like ever. Hard to do that when the majority of mammals living here are rabbits.”

“Oh, I know the rules, Carrots. You don’t need to repeat them. I’m just here in whatever capacity you need me to be,” Nick replied, popping some more blueberries into his mouth and ignoring Judy reproachful stare. “It’s your birthday.”

“For how long?” The thought of him leaving, made her heart ache.

“How long is your birthday? Usually those last only a day. Hence the word birth-day.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Three days,” he answered. “Friday to Sunday. My train leaves Sunday afternoon.”
“Three days,” Judy repeated. Not nearly long enough, but still, she tried being positive. “Well, we’ll just have to make the most of it.”

“Oh, I fully intend to.” Nick raised his brows a few times and she rolled her eyes, but in a playful, *I love you, but you drive me crazy* sort of way.

And so, Nick spent his first day in Bunnyburrow sitting alongside Judy, helping her at the stand. Some of the regulars already knew Nick as her partner, but others recognized him as the, “Hey, aren’t you that fox from Bonnie’s video, yeah, the one eating the carrot?”

It soon became clear that Judy’s mom had shown her video of Nick eating a carrot all around town, and to most that stopped by the stand that day, he wasn’t the famous Nick Wilde who helped crack the Night Howler case. He was the- *Foxes, they’re just like us. They eat carrots too-* guy.

“That’s what I get for helping your mom out. See if I ever do anything nice for her again,” Nick teased with a grumble after one too many bunnies had pointed out his video fame.

“Look at it as a positive.” Judy playfully tugged at his shirt collar. “You’re famous. Around here, a fox liking a carrot is very progressive. You’re their fox hero. Standing up for rabbits everywhere.”

“If only they thought the same about me dating a carrot.” Nick’s eyes gleamed with the very obvious hidden meaning behind his cheesy line.

“Dating a carrot, now that’s just weird. What do you even call someone like that? A vegetable lover?” Judy let out a single hard laugh, and slapped her knee at her own joke.

“Ugh, that was terrible,” Nick mumbled.

“You’re just mad you didn’t come up with it first.”

“Suuuure,” he replied, his tone indicating that actually wasn’t the case. But then Nick smirked like maybe he was a little impressed with her quip after all.

And for some reason this caused Judy to start giggling- a sound so infectious, Nick soon joined in, and as their joy swelled around them, Judy had the sensation of being drunk in love. The feeling was so palpable, that she leaned over and briefly kissed Nick. Just a peck, nothing significant. But even so, it made her lightheaded.

“Hey, I thought we weren’t supposed to do that,” Nick said, reaching over with his paw to stroke the side of her face.

Judy shrugged. “It’s okay when no one’s looking.”

And no one was looking inside the truck.

After closing the stand down for lunch, Judy led Nick into her parents’ truck to get some food other than the blueberries he kept swiping from time to time. But they didn’t get far before impulsive Judy pulled off onto the side of a narrow dirt road and parked the truck. Nick asked what she was doing, but Judy decided actions spoke louder than words and pounced on him sitting in the passenger seat. He made a little surprised groan that transitioned into a softer happier sigh as their mouths moved together. Then for a good ten minutes, Judy made up for the month and a week they’d gone without a single kiss.

“Think your parents will be happy knowing what we just did in their truck?” Nick asked after Judy extricated herself from his arms and started the engine again.
She twisted her neck to look into Nick’s green eyes, hazy from the all too brief intimate moment she’d shared with him. His mouth attempted a smirk, but was unable to fully form it, and Judy wondered if she actually had the power to keep Nick from producing his favorite facial expression. He couldn’t quite produce sarcasm in the face of genuine happiness. “Were you planning on telling them?” Judy asked, and then clearing her throat, she did her best Nick impression. “Hello Mr. and Mrs. Hopps. Remember me? Nick Wilde? Guess what? I just made out with your daughter in your truck.”

Judy giggled so hard she snorted, and Nick nodded. “Yes, that’s exactly what I’m going to say to them.”

But he didn’t.

When Nick and Judy finally showed up at the Hopps family homestead sometime after five in the evening, her boyfriend was downright reserved. His confidence had shrunk in the face of seeing her large family. “I don’t want to screw this up,” he confided to Judy as they sat inside the truck after she’d parked it just outside her home. Nick’s shoulders were hunched forward as he stared out through the windshield at the large house with what looked to Judy like a handmade birthday banner hung over the door.

“Nick, you’ve met my parents before. They visited me last summer.” Seeing him being so vulnerable over her was touching, and Judy reached out to squeeze his shoulder.

“But that was in my territory. Now I’m entering their space. Not to mention we weren’t secretly dating back then. And to be honest, Judy ...” Nick drew in a long breath, and after exhaling, he turned to clasp her paws in his. “I’m still trying to process how I lucked out with you. Sometimes I think I’ll blink and everything that’s happened between us will turn out to be something I hallucinated after eating bad takeout. Which for me is possible. I sometimes kept that stuff in my mini-fridge for months. Maybe you’re the best food-poisoning dream ever.”

Nick had added that last part as a way to cover his sincerity. Tell something deeply personal, follow up with a joke to deflect- it was Nick’s MO. But still, he was giving her more than he ever had in the past, and it was quite the experience watching him go from Nick the friend that rarely opened up to Nick the boyfriend who let her see straight into his heart.

For years, Judy had told everyone within earshot exactly what she wanted to do with her life. She’d known with absolute certainty the path she was taking that would lead her to Zootopia. No question about it. Judy would become a police officer in the big city.

But what Judy found with Nick hadn’t been a part of that plan and took her completely by surprise. The best kind of surprise. The kind that created an ache deep inside her chest for him. It was powerful, like they could take on the world together despite the prejudices facing them as an interspecies couple. Fluff mammals like that stupid overalls wearing rabbit from the carrot stand! Judy would fight him and anyone else who stood in their way, because Nick had given her something she’d never had before, and it created a fire inside Judy larger than that kithood desire of joining Zootopia’s police force.

For her, love was by far the best thing she’d ever experienced.

Judy wanted to let him know exactly how she felt, that he never had to worry, because it didn’t matter what her family thought or anyone else that might judge their relationship. She’d always be with him. But Judy also didn’t want to get sentimental and chance crying. She was acutely aware of her family waiting inside to celebrate her birthday, probably wondering why she still sat in the truck. No, this was a conversation for another time. She would postpone it until after the party, when they
had a moment alone.

“Don’t worry, Nick,” Judy finally said. “If all else fails, we’ll just replay them mom’s video of you eating a carrot, and remind everyone of your celebrity status.” She suppressed her emotions into a simple tease, because it was the way they spoke—their own special language—and it would have to do for now.
With the space of two medium sized mammals between them, Nick and Judy slowly approached her house. It was the farthest apart they’d been since his surprise visit that morning. In fact, when he exited the truck, his first instinct had been to hold her paw as they walked. But Nick held back, not wanting to give the wrong impression to Judy’s parents. They liked him well enough, but if he was going to play off his relationship with their daughter as strictly friendship, then Nick needed to think like he had before his 2 AM confession over a month ago, back when the thought of a rabbit and fox together was just a figment of his daydreams.

He glanced down at Judy’s paws, wrapped around her upper body, unconsciously hugging herself. She did that sometimes. Nick knew because he paid attention, spending the last few months pretending he wasn’t staring when he actually was. And it was a well-known fact to him that nervous Judy fiddled with things, and also wound her arms tightly around herself. Nick forced his eyes to look away, otherwise he thought he might try and pull her into a comforting hold, and that wasn’t how he had to play the game this weekend.

He stared at Judy’s home instead, which now appeared a little more dilapidated than it had from the truck, but it wasn’t enough to make him worry about the living conditions inside. It just held the wear and tear of a place that had seen one too many bunnies running in and out its doors, and from what Judy told him, her family’s farm was old as fluff.

Nick hated stereotyping, but couldn’t see any way around it with Judy’s parents because when it came to them, rabbits did love multiplying. 276 bunnies! And it wasn’t even weird for a rabbit family to have that many kits. He figured that’s why most lived out in the country, enough to have a whole town named after them. The idea that you could somehow fit over 200 bunnies inside a tiny city apartment was laughable. It didn’t matter that Judy's parent’s house was huge either. As Nick looked it over, he got the sense that the inside would feel very cramped. Especially for someone like him, who’d spent most of his life alone.

According to Judy, The Hopps family farm had gone through several generations of large Hopps families, before Judy’s dad had inherited the house and business from his father- Judy’s grandfather, who was also going to be at her birthday party. “GrandPop is a little old fashioned, and grumpy since we put him in that retirement home, so you’ll have to ignore him if he says anything offensive.”

“Well, I’m a little offended by the grammar on this banner. Is he the one who made it?” Nick pointed to the homemade sign just above the door, and chuckled. “Family Love Judy?”

“Don’t tease. It was probably put together by my little brothers and sisters.” But Nick saw the smile Judy tried to suppress. That was good enough for him. As long as he knew she’d wanted to.

Judy then looked at the door bracingly and her nose twitched.

“Hey, hey, I thought I was the one that had to be nervous here,” Nick said, and after a pause tacked on the good-natured tease of, “Stop making this all about you, Carrots.”

Judy’s eyes flicked over to him. “Huh?”

He pointed at her nose, and Judy frowned.

“Oh this stupid thing,” she grumbled and then bopped the center of her face a few times.

“You’ll never be able to hide from me when you’re upset. That nose is always a dead giveaway.”
Judy shrugged. “I’m fine, really, just worried about how you’re feeling after what you said in the truck. I don’t want you to be overwhelmed.”

“What, me? I’m fine.” Nick lied. He actually felt like he might throw up some blueberries.

“You sure?”

But before Nick could answer, the door swung open and Judy’s mom emerged with a young bunny attached to her hip. She looked questioningly at them both, and then grasping the situation, her eyes grew larger and she smiled. “I came out here to see what was taking so long- we all heard the truck pull up- but now I see why. Nick, how nice of you to visit Judy on her birthday. Come here.” And then Nick was thrust into a one armed embrace with Judy’s mom. Her other arm still held her kit, which was now close enough to drool on Nick’s shirt. “Well, don’t just stand here on the porch you two. Come inside, so we can start eating,” she said, after letting him go.

And with that, the ice was broken before it even had a chance to form.

When Nick entered alongside Judy moments later, a roar of excitement from the large group of bunnies nearly deafened him. At first it was for Judy, but once she introduced Nick, the attention switched over to him.

And then there was suddenly a little bunny around his ankles, stating he had to watch Wrangled with her because he’d promised. That must have been Annie. And then there was another who threw mashed carrots in his direction after Nick sat down at the largest table among several that had been set up for the event. “Tommy, get out of here!” Judy shoved her brother away, then from her seat beside Nick, she took a napkin and tried her best to remove the orange mush now staining his shirt.

“So, that’s the notorious Tommy?” he asked.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Judy apologized as she cleaned. “But at least it’s not toilet water.”

“Well, if he wanted to insult me he sure knew the right vegetable to throw,” Nick joked, and as Judy pulled away, she paused briefly to smirk.

As far as the rest of Judy’s siblings, Nick wasn’t sure he’d be able to memorize all the names of those he was introduced to. But for Judy’s sake, he’d try to memorize at least 50 before leaving.

Near the end of Nick’s meal that consisted of far too many vegetables, Judy’s dad, who was walking again but still limited in what he could do, braved the crowd angling for Nick’s attention. After a quick greeting, he asked where Nick was staying while visiting. When he mentioned his motel- the cheapest in Bunnyburrow- Judy’s dad waved him off, insisting that he stay with them. Judy gave a little nervous laugh that ended with the word no, and her dad eyed his daughter curiously. “Now Judy, do you honestly want him staying in that place?” The way he said that place didn’t give Nick the best impression. Having walked straight to the carrot stand from the train station, he hadn’t yet checked it out.

“No, of course I don’t, but Nick’s not used to so much- to so many- do you actually want to stay here with all these bunnies, Nick?”

Judy appeared to be glowing from embarrassment and excitement. She was wearing a homemade paper crown given to her by one of the millions of bunnies running around, and it was skewed to the side. Her ears were down and her nose was twitching. If they’d been anywhere else, Nick might have kissed her, but instead he did the much safer thing of turning to Judy’s dad and saying, “Yeah, sure, if you could stand having a fox in your house until Sunday, Mr. Hopps. I’d love to take you up
on your offer.”

“Please, call me Stu.”

“Okay, Stu.” Nick stopped just short of joking if he could call him Dad. Judy wouldn’t have found that funny.

“We’ll always appreciate how you helped out our Jude the Dude here by solving that Night Howler case with her. She was so depressed after leaving her job. We didn’t know what to do to get her back on-”

“Okay, Dad, I don’t think Nick needs to hear all that,” Judy interrupted, trying to laugh off the reveals about her personal life.

“Hey, did you know she was born from a one bunny pregnancy and she’s the only one of our kits that has her own birthday. With 276 it’s hard not to have some overlapping. But not Judy, she’s always wanted to do things her own way. Like having a fox for a partner. Oh, I think it’s just swell you two are such good friends, and she’s always talking to us about you.”

“Dad!” Judy’s tone was drenched in embarrassment, and Nick muffled a chuckle with his paw.

Stu seemed to finally get that his daughter wasn’t happy with him, and said, “Oh, sure. I’ll leave you alone to finish your food. I think Bonnie’s just about to bring the carrot cake out anyway. Don’t wanna miss that.”

After he walked away, Nick couldn’t help himself. The opportunity to tease was just too ripe. “So, Jude the Dude, I guess we’ll be housemates for the next few days? Can I borrow your toothbrush?”

Judy glowered at him. “Don’t start with me.”

He usually read Judy well, but this time Nick wasn’t sure what was going on inside her head. Was she teasing or serious? “What? You don’t want me to stay?” he asked, leaning in so only she could hear.

Judy moved in even closer. “Nick, I don’t think you have any idea what living with all my brothers and sisters- even if it’s only for a few days- will be like. Not to mention my grandfather is staying till Sunday. I think you’ll be miserable and I don’t want the short time we have together ruined.”

She looked genuinely concerned for him, which only increased Nick’s need to prove her wrong. “Hey, I put up with you. I can handle a few extra Hopps in my life.”

Judy sat back up straight and adjusted her crown. “If you say so,” she said in a tone that meant she didn’t actually think he’d be able to take on her large family. Well, he had two days to prove her wrong, and Nick would, because he knew that to be with Judy meant taking in every aspect of her, including her many brothers and sisters.

“Oh, and by the way. If you ever call me Jude the Dude again, I’ll kill you,” Judy added in the sweetest voice Nick had ever heard her use.

Ever since she and Nick had entered through the front door, the crowd around them remained steady and it kept freaking Judy out. Nick seemed at ease about it, but she also knew how well her boyfriend could fake his cool and collected vibe, and Judy didn’t think he was above wearing a mask
of calm just to make her happy. But she didn’t have complete faith in him to hold onto that facade for two more days, especially staying in a house with all her siblings. Not to mention her grandfather. Judy didn’t even want to entertain the worry of him saying something against foxes, considering he’d been the one to foster that fear in her dad growing up. Thankfully, Judy had formed her own opinion on foxes (and predators in general) early on, which eventually pushed her parents into a more inclusive way of thinking- to the point that her dad was now inviting Nick to stay the weekend. And it made her wonder if he would’ve given Nick the same offer had he known their new fox house-guest was also dating his daughter.

Her gaze traveled from Nick sitting beside her and over to the front door. Judy inhaled loudly. Maybe if she forced Nick to follow her she could get him into the truck and drive to his motel right now. But the idea didn’t even have time to sit around and get comfortable before Judy tossed it out of her brain. No, she couldn’t do that to him. Her dad was right in not wanting Nick to stay there.

Bunnyburrow didn’t have any back alleys so to speak- no dark corners to turn where you would meet up with the dregs of society. The most that ever happened that could constitute as a crime was when young kits destroyed crops for fun. But the motel Nick had planned to stay at was just off the main road and attracted a lot of questionable mammals that were just passing through. Bunnyburrow’s only murder had happened there. It was before Judy’s or even her parents’ time, but it had been between a fox and bunny. No one had to guess which one was the victim.

No, Nick would have to stay with them, and after coming to this conclusion, Judy tried her best to be positive. It was what she did anyway, take the worst and stare at it from another sunny point of view. So why was this time any different? Nick staying in her house wouldn’t be terrible. She’d make the most of it, while keeping her family at arm’s length … if that was at all possible. Well, of course it was, because she was Judy Hopps and she could take on anything- even her crazy family.

“Are you going to finish that?”

Judy looked up to see Nick staring at her, and then her eyes fell down to the piece of cake he was pointing at. She’d only managed a few bites before her mind had become a tangled web of anxiety. Feeling better now, she narrowed her eyes at Nick. “I thought you didn’t like carrots.”

“Shhhh,” he replied. “Don’t blow my cover.”

“You know Nick, sooner or later you’ll have to come clean. Tommy isn’t going to throw all the carrots at you, and as a family we eat a lot of carrots if you haven’t noticed.”

“Well, if it’s in the form of carrot cake, I don’t think it’ll be too hard to stomach,” Nick replied with a smile.

Judy softly laughed and scooted her unfinished cake in his direction. At least they’d finally found something to agree on when it came to food.

The party winded down sometime later, when little bunnies began dropping like flies. Even the sugar rush of cake wasn’t enough to keep the youngest of Judy’s family awake, and after helping her mom tuck the 30 or so little ones into their beds, Judy went to find Nick who she’d last seen being swept away by a crowd of bunnies. She spent a few minutes searching, before the sound of a familiar movie playing caught her attention, and taking a peek inside the TV room, Judy found her boyfriend sitting on the couch watching Wrangled. A few of her siblings were scattered across the room, all zonked out … but not Nick. He was wide awake and seemingly invested in the story playing on the TV of a horse princess locked inside a tower.

Judy wanted to mock him, remembering how he’d done it to her when she’d mentioned seeing the
movie, but after approaching the couch, her need for retaliation vanished at the sight of such a poignant scene. Leaning against Nick was Annie. She’d fallen asleep while watching her favorite movie.

When Judy let out a little *awww* sound, Nick turned his head and placed a finger against the front of his snout, indicating she should keep quiet. Then he patted the seat on the other side of him and Judy nodded. Quietly she sunk down onto the couch cushion beside Nick and leaned into him. Reacting to Judy’s nearness, Nick made a move like he wanted to reach around her shoulders- a typical seating arrangement for a dating couple watching a movie together- but he hesitated.

She understood his waffling. The rules of what was acceptable for them inside her parent's house weren’t clear, and so Judy made Nick’s choice for him. Reaching for his arm, she pulled it completely around her shoulders. Then after a quick glance around the room to make sure all the kits were actually sleeping, she returned her gaze to him and gave Nick a quick kiss. She was being a bit impulsive and maybe also reckless, but Judy couldn’t seem to keep herself from responding to the mood that was set. It had the feeling of being dully domestic, but altogether comforting, and more importantly, exactly what she needed.
In the nearly two years Judy had known Nick, he’d spilled the carrots over anything and everything from the endings of movies she hadn’t yet seen, to the deepest darkest secrets of others- apparently Officer McHorn had a deep devotion to *Candy Crush* and it was ruining his marriage.

Nick’s laptop surprise had come a whole three months before Judy’s actual birthday, despite it being a birthday gift. He explained this discrepancy away by stating she needed cheering up, but deep down Judy suspected it was just an excuse. She had little doubt, he'd been itching to find some reason to give the gift early, because that’s what Nick did. He was hopeless when it came to keeping things under wraps.

So, it came as a surprise to Judy, that despite his initial failings at hiding their relationship (resulting in Clawhauser now being in on the secret) Nick managed to be a different kind of fox in front of her family. He kept his cool and didn’t mess up once. Judy, on the other hand … well, it came as an even bigger shock that it was her slip-ups rather than his that put the reveal of their relationship in a precarious state.

It began with her kissing him in the TV room his first night visiting, followed by an out loud “I love you,” after Nick made her laugh at breakfast the next morning. Judy had quickly transitioned the phrase into “you-rrr shirt,” after her mom tilted her head, giving that look she did whenever something was a little off- a product of mother’s intuition.

Sitting beside her, Nick shot Judy a sideways glance as he stuffed some carrot pancakes in his mouth. Probably because Judy wasn’t actually a fan of Nick’s brightly colored shirt and on more than one occasion had tried to convince him to stop wearing it. “Well, I’ll make sure I put this one on more often now that you’ve said that,” Nick had commented with a wink after he’d swallowed his mouthful of pancake.

“I love your shirt too!” Annie called from across the large dining room, and then everyone else agreed that yes, Nick did look nice in his blue and yellow shirt with the swirl patterns, forever ruining Judy’s chances of getting Nick to toss the ugly thing in the garbage where it belonged.

The only voice of dissent came from Judy’s grandfather who grumpily stated, “That shirt is too loud. Just like a fox, trying to make himself the center of attention.” But no one paid much attention to his snide comment.

Judy was a little shaken after her slip-up, but in a family as large as hers there was always some distraction waiting right around the corner. And sure enough, the discussion over Nick’s shirt was soon overshadowed by pancakes that began zooming across the room. One of her little brothers had thought it would be fun to pretend they were Frisbees.

But unfortunately for Judy, her bumbling only continued during breakfast. When her dad asked how apartment living in the city was going, he made mention of Bucky and Pronk as those rude antelopes who always talk through the wall and added, “I hope you don’t have to deal with neighbors like that, Nick.”

Without thinking, Judy answered, “Oh, for some reason Bucky and Pronk like Nick. It actually makes my life a little easier when he stays over. Usually they’re so interested in eavesdropping that they keep quiet.” Judy chuckled, not realizing her words could be construed to mean something else.

Judy’s mom stopped spoon feeding chopped pancake bits to one of her youngest kits, and turned to
stare at her eldest. “Stays over?” she repeated, and there was a strained quality in the way she said it.

Judy froze, having been thrown off balance by her mom, and struggled to come up with a fix for her mistake. “Uh, well ... what I mean to say is … that he … and I, we both-”

“What Judy’s stating here so eloquently is that I sometimes stay over to watch movies with her.” Nick swooped in to rescue a flailing Judy, and discreetly elbowed her in the process. “We have movie night at her place once a week. She didn’t tell you?”

Judy’s dad nodded. “Oh sure, we know all about that, and think it’s great you two have found a way to keep your little movie club going while Judy’s here with us. Every week she goes down to that movie rental place in town and gets herself a new videotape.”

“They don’t have tapes there anymore, Dad,” Judy said, thankful for Nick intervening when she so desperately needed it.

“Say, has she made you watch When Hare met Bunny? Judy used to play that movie over and over. Remember that, Bonnie?”

“Oh yeah, she watched it so much the tape broke. She came in crying one day with it in her paws, the ribbon hanging out and ripped to shreds,” Judy’s mom replied, and then both her parents laughed at a memory Judy didn’t recall being all that funny.

And with that, the conversation veered away from dangerous territory and onto Judy’s love for romantic comedies- a topic she wasn’t happy with, but admittedly liked better than her parent’s dissecting the meaning of what Nick staying over actually meant.

Even if it was a Saturday- the busiest day of the week for the carrot stand- Judy was told by her dad not to work. While Nick was visiting, she was off the hook. So, in need of some fresh air after her disastrous breakfast, Judy decided it was a nice enough day to take Nick for a walk around the farm, and much to her relief, managed to escape the house without any sibling stragglers. Although, it wasn’t without effort. Before they were allowed to leave, Annie had to be placated with a promise from Nick to watch another princess movie with her, otherwise she wouldn't agree not to follow them.

“I think you’ll probably be suckered into watching a few more princess movies before you leave, that is if we want to get anymore alone time. Annie seems to want to be your shadow,” Judy said with a chuckle.

Walking alongside her, Nick shrugged his shoulders like what she’d mentioned wasn't a big deal, and it caused Judy to wonder if maybe he enjoyed Annie’s animated movies about princesses or even possibly liked interacting with her siblings. If either of her theories were true, Judy couldn’t see a negative. Both exposed the softer side of Nick she already knew existed deep underneath his thick layer of sarcasm.

And then they spent a few minutes of their walk going over all the possible movies Annie might pick for Nick to watch. Judy suggested he avoid Floatzen, because the story of two otter sisters had made her tear up the first time she saw it, but Nick dismissed her with a wave of his paw. “If I can handle Wrangled, I can handle anything,” he boasted, but then after a pause, broke away from the topic of princess movies to ask, “So, what was the deal with you at breakfast back there?”

Judy peered at him from under her sunhat. “I don’t know what you mean,” she replied airily. Judy
actually did know, but was trying to deflect, not wanting to admit her shortcomings. “I’m perfectly fine.”

“Well, define perfectly fine for me, because I don’t think we’re reading from the same dictionary here. The way I see it, you’re so off your fine game, I could place a banana peel on the ground and you’d go out of your way to slip on it. Admit it, Whiskers,” Nick removed Judy’s sunhat, hunched down to her level and whispered, “Being out here has made you soft.”

Judy scoffed while snatching her hat back from him, and after placing it on her head again, she threatened, “Don’t tempt me to prove just how tough I still am, because you’ll be sorry.” She brought her paws up and then balled them into fists, like she wanted to punch him.

Nick snickered, and then playfully shoved her fists away with ease, before grasping one of them in his paw. But it was a short-lived moment of affection. As if remembering the rules set for them while he was visiting, Nick let go and then absentely ran his other paw across the stems of a group of sunflowers they passed. He seemed distracted which prompted Judy to say his name. Nick glanced her way, and smiled, but when he spoke again, his voice had sobered. “Look Judy, I get why you want to keep you and me a secret while I’m here. But, after that kiss last night, and you saying you love … my shirt,” he stopped talking to emphasize a wink and Judy rolled her eyes. “It’s all making me confused about what’s allowed and what’s not. And what was the deal with you telling your parents I stay over at your place. Granted we’ve only ever slept together in the sense that we were actually sleeping, but still you slipped.”

“What are you getting at?” Judy asked, not sure she wanted to know the answer.

“What I’m getting at is, I want to be with you, but I feel like there’s always something keeping us apart. First you go away, and now that I have you back, I can barely touch you without worrying about breaking the rules. Why is it so important to keep your family in the dark? Can’t we just tell them and get this tiptoeing over with?”

Judy was jolted by the sudden change in Nick; he’d gone from teasing to serious in a flash. When before she’d wanted to avoid his question because she was embarrassed about her mess-ups, now it was because she was afraid. She’d barely had time to emotionally digest his surprise visit, and now he was catching her off-guard again. Judy’s shock compelled her to stop in her tracks as she tried to form a reply. But the words never came, and as a result Nick appeared to lose his nerve. “You know what, I-I don’t know why I said that. You wanted to take things slow and said that after three months we’d decide what we’re doing here, so just forget all that. I didn’t mean to push you. Let’s just … not worry about it.”

Nick looked nervous and small, so very unlike how he usually was. It reminded Judy of his confession from the night before, and how she’d resolved never to let him feel like he wasn’t more important to her than the opinions of others. A sense of urgency to fix the situation before it spiraled downward, washed over her. “Nick, it’s not like that. You just shocked me, that’s all. I wasn’t expecting to discuss this part of our relationship yet, but I’m not opposed to it.”

“I said don’t worry about it, Judy,” he spoke over her, and began walking again. She recognized the signs of Nick emotionally shutting down- a defensive response left over from his youth. If he didn’t open up, he couldn’t get hurt. Judy wasn’t happy with this outcome at all, and feeling stymied by him walking away, she did the first thing that came to mind. She caught up to Nick and pushed him as hard as she could, which caused her boyfriend to stumble a little before falling backwards into the large sunflowers. “Ow! What was that for?” he asked, clearly surprised by what Judy had done.

“I was showing you how tough I am.”
“Well, thanks for that. The tail I landed on appreciates your show of force against it,” Nick groaned.

Instinctively, Judy went to apologize, but stopped to let her impulsive side take control. She was trying to make a point, and wouldn’t let Nick cloud her intentions. “I did that to show you I’m tough enough to take on the world with you. I’m the only rabbit to graduate from Zootopia’s police academy, and you’re the only fox that’s done the same. If we can take on them and win, we can certainly take on anyone who might judge our relationship. Even my parents.”

Nick’s eyes lit up and he opened his mouth to speak, but Judy didn’t give him the chance. “You know, now that I think of it, I never actually met my goal when it came to you,” she said, letting her knees sink down into the soil next to Nick. “I may have said I love you, but what do those three words really mean if I’m not willing to share how happy you make me with others? Hiding our relationship was wrong. I shouldn’t have forced you to go along with it.”

"Judy," Nick said her name softly. “I don't want you to do this because I'm making you. We can wait if that's what you're comfortable with.”

But she shook her head. “Please, let me finish.”

Nick closed his mouth and nodded.

"I'm not doing this because you're making me. I'm doing this because you're an unfinished goal, Nick, and you know me and my goals. There’s no room in my book for going halfway. I always go the distance.” Then without warning, she kissed him. Not just a peck, but a real, long, genuine show of love. Nick made a surprised grunt, but after the initial shock of Judy's affectionate ambush wore off, his arms wound their way around her tiny frame. Together they leaned back into the dirt, knocking some sunflowers and Judy’s sunhat over in the process. And then time slowed around them as Judy tried to make up for all the hurt she’d caused him.

"I'm sorry for what I did,” Judy apologized, when they finally separated a little while later. She wasn't sure if it was for pushing him over or for the limitations she'd placed on their relationship. Maybe both. “I’m so determined to fix the world, but can’t even figure out my own issues.”

The corners of Nick’s mouth twitched up slightly. "That’s why you have me around to keep you in check,” he replied, but then his expression and voice turned serious. “Judy, I have to tell you something.”

“What?” Her heart constricted, bracing herself for the bad news it sounded like he was about to deliver.

“I love you-rurr shirt.” He tapped her nose, which per usual, was twitching.

Judy smirked and then giggled. "I love you-rurr shirt, too,” she replied.

They kissed again, but this time Judy kept it short, her mind already forming a strategy for them. “Let me tell my parents privately before we say anything to anyone else. I’d like to ease them into the idea so it’s easier for both of us. I definitely don’t want to have another Clawhauser moment where I’m caught flailing around trying to explain what we are.”

"Yes, well, you already met today's quota for flailing during breakfast anyway." Judy ignored his tease, still focused on her plan of action. "Then when I get back to Zootopia, we can tell everyone at work together- that is unless Clawhauser hasn’t already done it for us. Hopefully, Bogo won’t have an issue with us dating.”
“Yeah, about that …” Nick appeared to grow uncomfortable and sat up.

“Oh, sorry, I’m just prattling on. Did you want to add anything to this? You are half of this relationship after all,” Judy asked, sitting up beside him.

Nick reached out and brushed away a few sunflower petals pressed into the pink fabric of Judy’s shirt. “There’s something I should tell you about how I was able to afford my little visit to Bunnyburrow.”
Chapter 16

After Judy ran out of places to show Nick around the farm, the two began retracing their steps back to the house for lunch. Along the way, Judy told Nick how as a kit, she’d walked through the same fields they were passing, and pretended to be a cop on patrol. Back then, Judy had arrested many stalks of corn for physically assaulting blueberry bushes (because it was a well-known fact corn and blueberries were bitter enemies).

“And what about carrots?” Nick asked. “They seem like pretty sketchy vegetables if you ask me. Probably started lots of fights.”

“Carrots were actually what made up the police department I reported back to,” Judy informed with a proud smile.

Nick responded by dropping his jaw in mock surprise. “Hey, would you look at that. A carrot being the hero of a rabbit’s fantasy.” He then smacked his forehead like her reveal was blowing his mind, when in fact, the opposite was true.

“You should just be happy that I haven’t reported you to the carrots for telling the whole precinct about us. The carrot cops take gossiping very seriously. It’s a felony charge in the vegetable world, you know.”

Nick’s smugness vanished and he hung his head, but it was more for show than any real sign of contrition. Judy had forgiven him not long after he’d confessed; her mention of his blabbing back at work was just a way to rib Nick. Being angry wasn’t even an option Judy considered. It would be hypocritical to be upset with Nick over breaking a rule she’d already acknowledged as wrong? If anything, he’d gotten a head start on something she should have realized weeks ago. “Don’t worry, Nick. I’ll tell the carrots to go easy on you,” Judy offered with a wink.

Then they rounded a corner, finding themselves back at the place of their earlier roll in the sunflowers, and as the indentation of where their bodies had bent and pushed the flowers down came into view, Nick snickered.

“What was that for?” Judy looked up at him. “Are you really that immature?” she griped. For her, them kissing there was a sign of progress in their relationship, not an instance for him to make crude jokes (which by his snicker, she assumed he was about to do).

“To answer your question ... yes,” Nick replied, raising his paws just high enough in the air to produce a gesture that was half surrender and half shrug. “But in this particular instance of arrested development, I was wondering if maybe we murdered those sunflowers. Will the carrot cops come and take us away?”

Judy gave a small laugh and shook her head. “No, but my mom and dad won’t be too happy with us destroying them. Maybe we don’t have to say anything, and they’ll just assume some random kits were looking for trouble.”

“Seems close enough to the truth. I’d say you were looking for trouble when you kissed me the way you did.” Nick winked.

Judy had to admit the experience between them in the sunflowers was pretty intense, but nonetheless, she nudged him and pretended to be offended by his lame joke. “Yeah, well, that isn’t anything I want my parents to know ever. We’re trying to ease them into the idea of us. Not give them a play by
“You okay, Carrots?” Nick asked, always attuned to her mood shifts.

Judy nodded. “Yeah, I’m more than okay. I’m about to finish a very important goal.”

Nick’s expression softened and his eyes glistened enough that he briefly looked away. “How I got so lucky with you, I’ll never know?” he said, after glancing back. “But what I do know is that I don’t deserve you.”

Judy wondered if seeing Nick’s mushy side would ever not amaze her. Once upon a time, this sans sarcasm Nick had been as rare to see as a rutabaga in a lion’s lunch box. Now it showed up several times a day, and the experience always sent a thrill through her. “Oh, don’t try and talk your way out of this, Nick,” she teased. “You’re stuck with me, so you better get used to the idea that you deserve me, because it’s the truth. We are two opposites meant for each other.” Then she leaned into him, and he wrapped his arm around her.

And for a moment Judy was brought back to the memory of that little bunny she’d once been— the one who’d run around arresting crops. That kit wasn’t so different from the adult she was now. Back then, Judy had been full of aspiration for a life that wouldn’t be easy, but she knew was worth living.

And now Judy found herself in a similar place. Telling her family that she and Nick were together and not just work partners, was another direction in life that wouldn’t be easy, but in the long run would be worth it. To Judy, all the hardships she and Nick would encounter as an interspecies couple felt so small when compared with what she would gain by having Nick as her boyfriend out in the open and not just behind closed doors.

Because now she knew love was the most important goal she would ever accomplish.

The plan was for Judy to tell her parents before lunch and not spend another moment playing the pretend platonic game. But when that proved impossible, it shifted to Judy telling her mom while they prepared lunch together. That too was thwarted after she was unable to work her dating a fox naturally into the conversation. And when Judy emerged from the kitchen with a plate full of carrot sandwiches in each paw, she was forced to shake her head at Nick when he sent her an expectant look. Disappointment momentarily crossed his face before they sat down to eat with her family, still not out as a dating couple.

Judy whispered to Nick (as he secretly transferred his carrots onto her plate) that the plan was now to tell her parents after lunch. But when Judy’s dad hobbled over to their table once the food was all cleared away and asked what sort of adventure she had planned for Nick that afternoon, Judy shrugged. “Maybe go into town.”

Nick made an exasperated face that she interpreted as- why are you stalling? “Or you know, we could maybe stay here and hang out with my cool parents.” Judy chuckled uneasily.

“Oh, Nick doesn’t want to hang around us old folks. But, we could play a game of cribbage after the
kits are in bed tonight. Do you play, Nick?”

Oh, he played alright. Nick played every card game there was. And cheated. It was part of a con-
artist’s resume to know how to hustle people out of their money via card games. Judy would have to
warn Nick not to follow his less than honorable instincts when it came to playing cribbage with her
dad.

But when Nick opened his mouth to answer, he was interrupted by Judy’s grandfather. “I sure as
heck will not be playing cribbage with a fox. They always cheat!” he rudely remarked from his chair
not far away.

“Don’t worry, Pop. You’ll be asleep already when that happens.” Judy’s dad shook his head
apologetically to Nick. “Take Nick into town and get him away from here,” he whispered, indicating
his father with a slight lean of his ears in the old rabbit’s direction. Then he slid the truck keys across
the table. “Show him the sights.”

“Oh, and while you’re at it, could you take these lunches up to your sisters at the carrot stand?”
Judy’s mom came over and plopped down two large sack lunches next to the truck keys.

“Sure, we’ll take these up to Susan and Katie,” Judy agreed, but then hesitated after catching Nick’s
eye.

Be brave, Judy. You’ve got this.

“Actually, before we do any of that, I’d like to talk with you and dad … privately.”

“Privately?” Her dad’s brows shot up, temporarily unnerving Judy. He’d always been the more
anxious of her parents. She’d never forget the fox taser he’d tried to offer her before she left to live in
Zootopia.

“No, actually just Mom.” Judy shot from her chair. “Mom, can we talk … in your room. Alone?”

Her mom spent a few seconds studying Judy intently, before asking, “You okay, Judy? You look
like-”

“Like a daughter who just wants to have a chat with her mom? Yes, that’s me,” Judy cheerily
chimed in before her mom could say something like “a rabbit in love with a fox.” That’s what Judy
heard ringing in her ears anyway.

Her mom nodded, and as Judy moved past Nick's chair, she felt him grasp her paw. They shared a
quick smile before the link between them broke and she walked away with her mom.

"Do you know what this is about?” Judy heard her dad ask Nick before she exited the room.

"Not a clue,” Nick lied, and Judy had to suppress a laugh.

The inside of her parents’ bedroom was tiny when compared with the other rooms in their house. All
those needed to fit several bunnies inside, but in here there was only one bed, a dresser, and two
cribs- one for each of Judy’s youngest siblings. A few pictures decorated the light blue walls, with a
prominent one of Judy placed directly above the bed’s headboard. It was of Judy and her parents,
taken on the day she graduated high school. After that, it took Judy several years before she reached
her goal of joining Zootopia’s police force.

But that was then, and if everything went as she hoped it would, today would mark Judy reaching
another important goal. And this time it wouldn’t take her years to arrive there.
Judy exhaled and found a seat for herself on her parent’s bed, which was covered with a quilt she remembered from her kithood. Before her mom had become overwhelmed with too many bunnies, she’d sewn as a hobby, and the quilt was something Judy had watched her mom slowly make over the course of a few years. So many pieces of fabric were brought together to make it. The one Judy looked down at now just happened to be from an old dress of hers. Yellow with black polka-dots.

“So, what’s going on, Judy?” Her mom's voice tore Judy away from her reverie.

Startled, she glanced up from the quilt and nibbled the corner of her mouth, while trying to gather her courage. But Judy wasn’t able to get a word out before her mom beat her to it.

“Oh no … Judy, you didn’t.” Her mom sucked in a breath, and Judy’s mouth went as dry as the sands of Sahara Square. She didn’t know what might come next, only that it probably would resemble something close to the truth … mother’s intuition and all.

Only it didn’t. Not even close.

“You’re pregnant!”

“I’m what?!” Judy was speechless for a moment, but once the shock wore off, she squinted at her mom in disbelief. “Are you serious? I’ve been with you and Dad for the last month and a half. And I visited a week before that. Don’t you think I would have shown signs by now if I were having kits?”

“Well, I don’t know. You could have met some rabbit in town. Someone you’re afraid to tell me about. It’s Jeremy Thump isn’t it? That boy from the video store. Oh, that’s why you go there so much. I should have known. He’ll never amount to anything, Judy. I’m telling you. He’s 27 and still works at that store.”

Judy was mystified. Freaking out was usually her dad’s approach to most situations. Why had her parents suddenly decided now was the time to reverse roles?

“Mom, when would I ever have found the time to have …” Judy couldn’t bring herself to say the word. “I’m always either here or at the carrot stand. If I go to the rental store it’s only ever to get movies, not see Jeremy. And Mom, you know me better than that. I’d never date someone like him. He’s the fluffing worst.”

“You watch your language, young lady.” The reprimand was stern, and it shocked Judy into silence. But then she saw regret flash across her mom’s face. “Oh, I’m sorry, Honey. I shouldn’t have said that,” she apologized, and then sat down beside Judy, the old mattress groaning under the added weight. “It’s only … I know that you’re in love. I guessed it a while ago and assumed you’d tell me when you were ready. But then when you wanted to talk to me and only me, it reminded me of … well, it’s exactly the way I told my mother when I found out about my unexpected you.”

“What? Mom are you saying? You and Dad? Am I the reason you got married so young? Oh, cheese and crackers! I don’t want to hear this.” Judy’s ears fell and she flattened them against her head, trying to block out all sound. But when her mom placed a comforting paw on her back, Judy felt compelled to look her way, and at the sight of her mom’s twitching nose, Judy let go of her ears.

“I just want you to be honest with me, Judy. If you’re pregnant … or I don’t know, anything like that, you don’t have to worry. I’ll always love you. Your family will always love and support you. You’ve done so much for us, how could we not?”

Judy’s heart swelled at her mother’s offer of parental support, and reaching down into her pant’s
pocket, she grasped Nick’s neckerchief and pulled it out. The sensation of the cloth in her paw was a familiar one. She often took Nick’s neckerchief out when she was missing him, or needed a physical reminder of that day he opened up to her back in his apartment- the first time he expressed just how important she was to him. It had taken Nick a year and a half to reach the point where he could share his heart with her. And now she would return the favor.

“What’s that?” her mom asked, bringing Judy back to the present.

“This,” Judy held up the red fabric, “was Nick’s when he was a kit. It’s an important piece of his past that connects back to his mom who passed away when he was 18. But Nick gave it to me because he said I was important to him. And well, he's important to me too. So very important.” Judy glanced down at the quilt again and examined its many different patterns juxtaposed with one another. Just like her and Nick. Two wildly different patterns combining to make a new one. And then she imagined making a quilt herself one day and using Nick's neckerchief as a starting point. “I love him, Mom,” Judy finally confessed. "Like love him, love him. Like love him so much it makes me crazy and ... we’ve been dating for almost two months.”

Judy couldn’t look up. She kept staring at the quilt, afraid of the disappointment she might see in her mom’s expression. Then unexpectedly, tears pricked the corners of her eyes. She sniffed as their wetness traveled unchecked down her face and dampened the patch of yellow and black that had once been her dress.

“Oh, Judy. You’ve been dating him for that long and didn’t feel comfortable telling us?” And then her mom’s paw slid under Judy’s chin, tilting it upward until they were staring face to face. There was no disappointment written in her eyes. Only concern. “I’m sorry that he's made you this happy and you didn’t think you could share that with your father and me. How lonely that must have been, especially with him in Zootopia and you here. No wonder he came to visit you for your birthday.”

“Y-you’re okay with me dating a fox?” She had been hopeful for this reaction, but was still stunned to see it playing out before her, and was shocked even further when her mom suddenly gathered Judy into a strong embrace.

“He’s not a fox, Judy. He’s Nick, and that’s all there is to it. If you love him, then who am I to judge?”

“You judged me when you thought Jeremy had gotten me pregnant,” Judy reminded her.

“Well, Jeremy isn’t Nick, is he?”

“You say that like you think I’d be better off in an interspecies relationship than in one with another rabbit.”

“I say that like I see the way Nick makes you happy. I see how you two are around each other. He’s good for you, Judy. It doesn’t matter if he’s a rabbit or not.”

“Or that he doesn’t like carrots?”

“What? Nick doesn’t like carrots?” Judy’s mom relinquished her hold, and stared at her daughter questioningly.

Judy decided not to tell the truth. Only one big reveal at a time. “Heh, just kidding!” She grinned.

“Oh, Nick really has gotten to you. That’s exactly like one of his jokes,” her mom chuckled. “You nearly got me with that one.”
“So, you're actually okay with this? Me dating a predator?” Judy pivoted back to the more serious subject at hand.

Her mom nodded. “You don’t ever have to ask that again. From this point on you and Nick have my full support. And your father’s too. I’ll talk to him later while you two are in town.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Judy said, and they shared another hug.

She couldn't believe at how easy it all had been. But just as she was feeling hopeful for everyone else to know about her and Nick, Judy pulled abruptly away from her mom at the sound of a loud shout from somewhere outside the room. She shared a brief look of surprise with her mom, before hopping to her feet, and running towards the door. Once Judy stuck her head out in the hallway and could hear better, her heart plummeted. The words fox and kiss were being thrown around along with some other adjectives and nouns that weren’t so nice or kit friendly.

And they were all coming out of her grandfather’s mouth.
It used to be that Nick was too jaded to give a damn. For too long he’d lived in a bubble of prejudice. He had seen too much of it, and dealt with too many idiots projecting their judgmental views onto him, not to have learned how to shrug it all off. He did what he wanted and didn’t listen to or care about anyone. It was just easier that way.

But then of course, Judy wormed her way into his heart and changed everything.

She was his polar opposite- caring for absolutely everyone … including him. And for whatever reason, Judy had fallen for Nick’s newly reformed con-artist self. Now he could no longer not care, because he loved Judy, and come to find out, love made you care a whole lot.

Sometimes the emotions that came with love were a real pain. They made you feel and do strange things. But Nick wanted to be with Judy and there was no going back to that jaded fox he once was. He’d just have to get used to a whole new spectrum of emotions filling up his days.

And currently, his new emotional gamut decided he should be worried about Judy. Sure, Nick could fake calm (a poker face was second nature to any scam artist worth their salt), but every now and then his laid-back mask would slip as he eyed the hallway Judy had disappeared down. He hoped it all was going okay for her.

“And then Judy ate a whole sunflower, petals and all because …”

Sadly, Nick's anxiety made it impossible for him to pay close attention to the embarrassing stories Stu was sharing of Judy as a kit. Nick regretted that he wouldn't be able to save any of them for future sarcastic remarks, but his mind was just too full to take in anything new. And Judy's dad reminiscing was the least of his concerns. But it wasn’t a big deal to Stu. He loved to yak, and all Nick had to do was nod here and there to contribute to the conversation.

But the mention of a sunflower sparked Nick's interest and caused his stomach to turn. Never mind the weirdness of hearing that Judy had eaten one. He was more concerned with the flattened dozen or so outside. Realistically, this was likely a fluke. A coincidence that meant nothing. Stu wasn’t aware of those. But for peace of mind, Nick felt compelled to steer the conversation in another direction.

That’s what he would have done if somebunny hadn’t hopped into the conversation at that exact moment by enthusiastically shouting, “Hey! I know about sunflowers!”

Twisting his head towards the chipper voice, Nick saw Annie bounding their way, and when she reached the table they were sitting at, her smile was bright as she greeted, "Hi, Nick."

"Hey," Nick responded, feeling his anxiety twist into a big ball of nerves. A hunch had entered his brain. A hunch that he hoped was dead wrong.

“And what do you know about sunflowers?” Stu asked Annie as she climbed into her father’s lap.

“Oh, I know they’re bright and sunny and Nick and Judy were kissing in them. Judy pushed him down. They broke some. I counted how many.”

Nick gaped at his hunch, sprung from his head and sitting right in front of him. Annie had followed along on his walk with Judy despite her promise not to. And as she began counting on her paw just how many sunflowers had been destroyed, Nick pulled two options from his head that could
possibly fix this- manipulate a little bunny into questioning if she’d actually seen what she thought she had (it wasn’t kissing, we were just wrestling) or admit the truth and tell everyone he loved Judy, even if she wasn’t there to support him.

Old Nick would’ve chosen the first option, because it was easier for him to lead a witness than admit the truth. But that wasn’t who he was anymore, and his quick mental debate over his options ended once shame at the thought of twisting Annie’s memory, sunk in. Sometimes- despite his best efforts- Nick couldn’t completely shake his past.

For his part, Stu seemed surprised, but didn’t appear to be completely losing his marbles over the kissing news, and as they both listened to Annie counting, it occurred to Nick that maybe Judy’s dad didn’t think the story was true. Maybe he could drag this thing out until Judy got back. Nick could only hope.

But that hope was dashed when another rabbit made it pretty clear that he did believe.

It wasn’t exactly a secret that Stu’s father hated foxes. Judy had warned Nick the night before that her grandfather was kind of an old-school fox hater. But the few grumpy retorts about foxes Nick had overheard since then were nothing compared to seeing the old rabbit’s hard lined opinions in full force. Apparently a fox kissing a bunny was what flamed the intolerant in him.

And as soon as Annie finished counting (nine sunflowers, according to her), good ol’ Grandpop stood from his chair where he’d been quietly reading a book. That book was now splayed on the floor where he had chucked it. It seemed, despite his age, Grandpop still had a good throwing arm.

“I knew you were trouble. I told Stu letting Judy bring you into the house was a mistake. Now you’ve gone and taken advantage of her.” Judy’s grandfather was attempting to cross the room with a look in his eyes that told Nick he might get a cane whacked across his muzzle. Considering what he’d done to the book, Nick didn’t want to assume there was anything elderly about what the rabbit was capable of. He seemed pretty spry even with a cane.

“Now Pop, calm down,” Stu said, rising from his chair, while letting Annie hop down to the floor. The little bunny then glanced at Nick with a worried expression. It took her only a moment to decide that her new friend needed protection from Grandpop and she ran in front of Nick with her arms spread wide.

“Get away from him, Annie!” Grandpop ordered. “Don’t you know foxes kill bunnies? I’m gonna have to knock some sense into that crooked fox, thinking he can do that to Judy.”

For some reason, kiss and kill were closely related in Grandpop’s confused mind, and it seemed like the cane idea was another of Nick’s hunches about to materialize. Before this assumption could leap from Nick’s head into reality, he stood, grasped Annie, and moved out of the way. Judy’s grandfather may have had a good throwing arm, but his aim wasn’t so great. The cane came down hard on the table, nowhere near where Nick and Annie had been.

After uttering some unsavory words at having missed his target, Judy’s grandfather lurched at Nick a second time, and once again the fox was forced to move- this time with Annie clinging to his leg. “Come back here you sneaky fox!” he said, and probably would have charged at Nick a third time if Stu hadn’t taken his dad’s cane away. “Give that back. That fox needs a lesson. He kissed Judy.”

And then as if hearing her name, Judy came racing into the room, looking just as upset as Annie. When her eyes fell on Nick, she ran over to him asking, “What’s going on?”

“Get away from him! He might attack you again!” her grandfather ordered using the same tone he
had with Annie. He edged towards them, but Stu grasped his dad’s paw and forced him to sit down.

“Be quiet!” This time it was Judy’s dad giving the orders. “All this nonsense over nothing. Can’t you see Annie’s obviously fixated on Nick enough that she’s making up stories about him? Why would you take anything a four year old said at face value?”

“What’s all this shouting about?” Judy’s mom had now entered the scene, along with a slew of other bunnies, all who’d heard the commotion and wanted to investigate.

“Nothing, Bonnie;” Stu sighed. “Just Pop here taking things way too seriously and offending our guest. Thinks Annie saying she saw Nick and Judy kissing is true.” He then turned to Nick. “I’m sorry Annie made that up and obviously for my dad’s reaction to it. That kind of display of hate is not acceptable in my house. We’re a tolerant family.”

Nick wasn’t sure how to respond. If he accepted the apology it would be the same as accepting the lie that there hadn’t been a kiss, and he turned to Judy for guidance. Her brows were furrowed together and her nose twitched as she stared around at her family. Nick gently spoke her name, and when Judy glanced at him, her mouth lifted into an uneasy smile that told him their secret was about to be cracked wide open. “Are you sure?” he whispered.

“Yes,” she replied, and then shocked him and the room by grasping Nick’s snout, pulling him down to her level and planting a passionate kiss on his mouth. A few bunnies made noises of surprise (which was to be expected), with Annie being the odd-sibling out. She was clapping her paws, and it warmed Nick’s heart. At least they had an ally in her.

“Disgusting!” Judy’s grandfather shouted, slicing through the moment, and forcing Judy to pull away.

“Yes,” she replied, and then shocked him and the room by grasping Nick's snout, pulling him down to her level and planting a passionate kiss on his mouth. A few bunnies made noises of surprise (which was to be expected), with Annie being the odd-sibling out. She was clapping her paws, and it warmed Nick’s heart. At least they had an ally in her.

“Disgusting!” Judy’s grandfather shouted, slicing through the moment, and forcing Judy to pull away.

“Maybe to you, but not at all to me;” she stated, and then shifted her attention away from Grandpop and over to the many shocked faces still staring at her and Nick. “Not at all,” she repeated to herself, wearing an expression Nick recognized as her mulling over an idea. An idea that was enacted seconds later when Judy moved over to a nearby chair and stood on it. “Yes, that was me kissing Nick, and it may come as a surprise to most of you, but it’s not the first time that’s happened, or even the second. Truthfully, I’ve kissed Nick many times, because ...” She took a deep breath. “I love him.”

Then speaking over a protesting Grandpop (who was quickly silenced by Judy’s brothers and sisters), she began telling the tale of a rabbit and fox who’d gone against the grain and fallen in love. Some of the more personal portions of their love story were omitted, but all the important moments stayed intact, from the original hustle that brought them together to the night they both confessed their love.

And as Judy spoke, Nick looked at her. Like really looked at her, and noticed there’d been a subtle change in Judy. She seemed older. Not that she’d aged much since they met; it was more in how she held herself. Judy wasn’t that wide-eyed optimist who thought she could fix the world anymore. She had lost that naiveté. But still, that didn’t stop her from standing up for what she believed in.

Judy was well aware how hard it would be for them, and that for every supportive Clawhauser, there would be a close-minded mammal like good ol’ Grandpop just waiting to voice their opinion. But it didn’t matter to her. She’d fight the good fight to defend their relationship.

It was how it would always be for them. A fight. Never easy, but worth it. And he promised himself then and there that she’d never feel the full brunt of it all on her own. Nick would try his hardest to be her equal in their fight against those small minded pinheads like Grandpop who saw only one way
to love.

And he’d start right now. Nick was the one who’d pushed Judy into telling everyone. Even if she told him it was part of finishing her goal, he thought that if there hadn’t been that little nudge from him, they’d probably still be pretending to be something they weren’t.

With his passion outweighing his pragmatic side, Nick followed his heart and jumped up on a chair besides Judy’s. But when he got a full view of the bunnies staring back, it dawned on him that he hadn’t thought through what he would do after this part. And when the room grew quiet—waiting for him to say something as one might do after they stood on a chair and faced an audience—all Nick did was wave and say, “Hi.”

“Hi, Nick!” he heard Annie say from the crowd.

And then someone else was saying his name. It was Judy, and when Nick’s eyes met hers, he could see suspicion in her stare. “What are you doing?” she whispered.

Okay Nick, think. No one can scam like you can.

This wasn’t a scam, but he was trying to steer others into seeing something a certain way for his benefit. The same rules applied. Only this time his aim was a little more respectable. “I just wanted to say …” Nick began, clearing his throat and turning back to face his bunny audience, “That I hate carrots.”

There were audible gasps from all around the room that combined together to create a noise that sounded way worse than what was reasonable for Nick’s confession.

“Nick,” Judy spoke his name under her breath, but despite the lack of volume, the harshness of her tone was very clear. Nick continued on anyway. He knew what he was doing.

“Yes, your celebrity star of fox who eats carrot video fame is a fraud. And look at that right there. The response I got from this room should show you just how much Judy is putting herself on the line to tell you our story. Bless her little bunny heart, she loves not only a fox, but a carrot hater as well. Now, you may ask, Why did you do it, Nick? Why did you lie to us? Well, I’ll tell you why. Because I wanted to make Judy happy. Even before we began dating, I had this need to make Judy happy, and that included eating a carrot for the lovely Mrs. Hopps here.”

Nick gestured her way in one fluid motion. “Yes, there she is. Take a bow, Mrs. Hopps. Doesn’t she look lovely, everyone?” Briefly, Judy’s mom glanced away as if bashful, and then with a dip of her head, she gave the barest indication of a bow.

Before continuing, Nick caught Judy’s eye to gauge how his speech was going from her point of view, and when he saw her timidly smiling, it added a little extra charge to his cajoling. “When Judy told me her dear mother wanted a video of me eating a carrot, I didn’t even think twice. I did it and knew what I was doing. I forced myself to eat that gross carrot, because not only did I care about Judy, but I wanted her family to like me. I know how much Judy loves each and every one of you. Yes, even you, Grandpop.”

There was a little grumble with a slur against foxes from somewhere in the crowd, that Nick chose to ignore.

“I wanted to be a part of that family, because being with Judy means being with you all too. And I would love to have your approval with our current dating status, but even if that never happens, I’ll still love Judy and hopefully she’ll still love me. I’m in this for the long haul. I’m not going anywhere
unless she tells me to. Even if I have to eat a million carrots, I will do that for her, because I’ll never stop trying to make her happy. That is a Nick Wilde guarantee.”

Judy stared at Nick with tears shimmering in her eyes. In some ways his speech to her family was better than the one he’d appropriated from Hare, because this one was all his own- spoken in exactly the same manner Nick would talk to anyone. There was no Hare in this speech. Only Nick.
For the rest of the afternoon, all anyone could talk about was the crazy scene that had played out between Nick and Grandpop, which led to the reveal of Judy and Nick’s relationship.

And much to Judy’s relief, when all was said and done, there was little scandal to be had over her new boyfriend. None of them cared if she was dating a fox. Some were even thrilled with the new pairing, with Annie leading the charge. From her very first phone conversation with Nick, Judy’s little sister had been his biggest fan and was now their loudest cheerleader.

Only Grandpop took issue with the interspecies relationship between his granddaughter and a fox, but he’d been driven back to the retirement home not long after Nick’s speech, leaving Judy free from his judgment. It was at Grandpop’s request. He didn’t want to stay in the same house as Nick anymore knowing he was dating Judy. But she wasn’t too sad over it. They had never been especially close and Judy assumed her dating a fox would only deepen that divide.

Still, as Judy watched him leave, she felt a fleeting ache knowing he’d never come around. When you were that old, time set you in your ways. And Grandpop had decided long ago that the action of one fox killing a rabbit at a motel, would forever color his worldview on that particular predator. He’d always see foxes in a negative light.

Judy wouldn’t let it get her down though, because contrasting with Grandpop’s bleak outlook on life, was her strong love for Nick. And now with them out in the open, they could do things like kiss and snuggle on the couch. Although, Judy quickly learned her bedroom was off limits. It didn’t matter that she was 26. She wasn’t married, and there would be no going behind closed doors. Her mom had mentioned this after Judy (trying to escape her many brothers and sisters) led Nick inside her room so they could watch *Pride and Prejudice* (the one without the zombies). This certain house rule was rooted in old fashioned country morality, and it made Judy long for Zootopia’s more modern ways of thinking. It seemed hypocritical anyway considering the other big revelation of the day- that she’d been a surprise for her parents. Apparently they hadn’t followed the door rule.

“What if we leave it open?” Judy asked, and after a moment of hemming and hawing, her mom agreed. But she made sure to tap the wood grain of the door a few times as a reminder to Judy exactly which way it was supposed to stay.

Unfortunately, an open door policy meant her siblings were free to come and go as they pleased. Which didn’t make Judy’s room all that private. Yet despite this, she took the opportunity, because it made her feel like an adult. Fluff it! She was going to watch a movie in her room with her boyfriend, and no one was going to tell her, no.

And that was exactly where Judy’s dad found her after he came back from the retirement home, leaned through the doorway, and said, “You can have the truck now if you still wanted to- you know- go into town with Nick.”

Judy glanced at Nick sitting beside her on the floor. Currently, Tommy was banging on a toy drum next to him and testing Nick’s commitment to his speech about wanting to be a part of her family. She could see the misery in his eyes. “Yes, that would be great. Thanks.”

Judy stood to take the keys from him, but her dad hesitated. “Mind if we have a talk first? Go for a
walk with your dear old dad?"

She gave him a once over. “Dad, you’re not supposed to be walking so much. Why can’t we just talk in here?”

“I’d like us to have some privacy,” he explained, and it dawned on Judy then that with all the commotion of the afternoon, she hadn’t yet had a one on one with him about Nick.

“Oh, sure,” she agreed. “Let me just kick everyone out of here. We can talk in the room.” It was something Judy had been wanting to do anyway; now she finally had a reason. And when Nick offered to go for a walk outside until they finished, it made getting rid of her siblings all the easier. They eagerly ran after her boyfriend, who sent her a grim look of despair. It was an expression Judy couldn’t help but laugh at. “Have fun!” she teased, while closing the door.

Then Judy sat on the edge of her bed, briefly glancing at the poster of the bunny boy band behind her. Not too long ago, her sisters had asked to take their room back, but at the time, Judy couldn’t relinquish the privacy it offered. She needed a space away from her family during her phone conversations with Nick. Not to mention their movie nights. But now that they were dating out in the open, maybe she should relent and share with Mary and Julie again.

“So, you really are all grown up, aren’t you?” her dad said, bringing Judy’s attention over to him.

“I thought you realized that when I moved away, or at least you were supposed to?” Judy replied, swatting his paw away after he tried to pat the top of her head.

“I take these things one bunny hop at a time. You dating is just another one of those hops.”

“Dad, I’m not the first kit you’ve had that’s gone off and dated. Betsie’s even married, and Caleb has been dating Holly for over two years.” There were more, but Judy didn’t feel like going down the long list of all the Hopps who’d fallen in love.

“But you’re the only one who doesn’t live here, so I can’t keep an eye on you and make sure you’re behaving yourself.”

“Daaaad,” Judy grumbled, embarrassment prompting her to stare down at her paws.

He chuckled and sat down next to her. “So Judy, tell me something. If all those things you told us about Nick today are true, why are you here?”

It was a question with an obvious answer and Judy wasn’t sure why he’d asked it. “I’m here for you,” she said, looking back up at him.

“But, I’ve been doing okay for a while now. I’m not back to what I used to be, but I’m getting there.” He made an exaggerated display of flexing his nonexistent biceps and Judy laughed at his lame dad humor. “But seriously, Judy. Your mom and I appreciate all you’ve done since the accident, but maybe it’s time you gave Nick a break.”

“Give Nick a break?” Judy repeated, a little confused over what exactly that meant.

“Yeah, I’d say it’s his turn to have you back. He’s a decent fellow. Seems over the moon for you and he’s waited long enough.”

“Wow, Dad. Never thought you’d be so eager to get rid of me.” Judy was half teasing, half serious. It hurt some that he didn’t need her. Fixing her family after his accident and heart attack had been a goal just as real as the one concerning Nick.
“No, I’m never eager for that,” her dad said, his voice waveriing a little. He paused, attempting to
assuage his emotions, and seeing his distress, Judy placed a consoling paw over his. It took him
clearing his throat a few times, before he was able to continue. “But, you’re also an adult now with
your own life ... and a boyfriend who shouldn’t have to wait another month and a half to see you
again, especially when we can manage here just fine. I know how much you like to feel needed, but
in this case, your kindness would be put to better use back in Zootopia with Nick.”

Judy was momentarily struck by an overwhelming sense of love. She was deeply heartened by her
dad pushing her to go home with Nick. By doing this, he was not only telling her he accepted their
relationship, but that he thought it was better for her to be with him than them. That morning when
she decided it was time to tell her family about Nick, Judy worried that it wouldn’t go over well. And
it hadn’t with Grandpop, but he was in a resounding minority when it came to her family. They were
all so amazingly supportive, and guilt for ever having thought it would be any other way, pulsated
from her heart.

“I’m sorry I kept Nick a secret from you,” she apologized. “I don’t know why I was so worried.”

“Judy Laverne Hopps.” He tugged her ear as a tease, knowing Judy hated her middle name. “You
never have to worry about coming to me or your mom about anything. No matter what it is, we’ll
always support you. That doesn’t mean I won’t worry like heck about you for the rest of my life. It’s
my job. But I feel better knowing Nick has your back. He’s a good guy, Judy.”

She smiled and leaned into her dad. “Yes, he is,” Judy agreed, realizing the decision had already
been made. Tomorrow she would be going home with Nick. “Well, I guess I’ll go make Mary and
Julie’s day and let them know they’ll soon be getting their room back.”

Nick stared out the truck’s windshield; his expression unreadable. But Judy could sense his nerves
flowing just below the surface by the way his paws fidgeted in his lap. Without speaking, she
removed one of her paws from the steering wheel and reached across the gap between them to still
his. Nick’s were so much larger than hers. Sometimes she forgot when they weren’t nearby for
comparison. “A penny for your thoughts,” Judy broached.

“Huh?” he responded, shifting his attention away from the rows of crops they were passing, and onto
Judy.

She smiled at him before facing the road again. “Just your paws.” She squeezed them. “They keep
moving like you’re nervous. What’s to be nervous about? Things are finally looking up for us. If
anything, we should be celebrating.”

Nick’s mouth twitched, but instead of answering, he just sighed and leaned his head back. It was a
reaction Judy didn’t like. “Okay, some carrot cake for your thoughts,” she offered, and to this Nick
laughed.

“Can you follow through with that promise?” he asked.

“Believe me, my family always has the ingredients for carrot cake on hand. Making you one when
we get back will be …” she paused for dramatic effect, “a piece of cake.”

“Wow! You’re getting worse with the food analogies,” Nick groaned. “That wasn’t even original.”

“Well, they’ll only get worse if you don’t tell me what’s going on with you. I have a whole bag of
them just waiting to annoy the carrots out of you,” Judy playfully threatened as she pulled her
parent’s truck into the empty parking lot of her old school. With it being Saturday, the only other mammals around were two bunnies tossing a ball back and forth in the small field where school sports were played.

“Come for a walk with me and then you can spill your guts about what’s going on,” Judy suggested, not giving Nick a chance to reply before she exited the truck and hopped over to the passenger side door.

“What here? At a school?” Nick asked, stepping out of the truck. Then his mouth quirked up mischievously. “You wanna go make out under those bleachers like some up to no good teens?” He jerked his head in the direction of the rusty and rickety looking ones the two rabbits were playing ball near.

“Is that what you did when you were a teen?” Judy’s brows rose, and Nick shrugged noncommittally in a clear attempt to say yes, without actually uttering the word. It was a jab that got under her fur and she rolled her eyes, making sure Nick saw her irritation.

“Don’t worry, Carrots. It was only once, and it was because I was a loser band geek and she felt sorry for me. She actually told me that. And pity make outs don’t count. You’re the only mammal I’ve kissed where it actually meant anything.” A rueful grin spread across his mouth, as he leaned down and gave her a soft kiss. Nick’s roundabout apology was enough for Judy to mentally shelve her jealousy … for now.

“Come on, lady killer, let’s get moving,” Judy mocked, and grasping his paw, she guided him past the two rabbits tossing their ball, and over towards the school. “I wanted to show you my past,” she explained as they walked. “Thought you might like a peek into where my fevered need to fix the world sprouted from.”

Nick nodded solemnly as he scratched the fur on the back of his neck. It was such an apathetic response that she wondered if he was even paying attention. His mind seemed faraway, focused on some other thought, and it reminded her of the paw fidgeting from earlier. “Nick, are you going to tell me what’s going on with you? Remember there’s some carrot cake in your future if you do and some vegetable puns if you don’t. Choose wisely which door you will enter.”

Judy tried using humor to get him to open up. Nick did chuckle, but remained quiet as they continued wandering around the school. Then a few moments later, he released Judy’s paw to lean his back against the school’s brick wall. “I’d forgo all the carrot cake in the world if it meant I didn’t have to leave you tomorrow. I hate that I have to go back to only seeing you on my phone’s screen.”

Nick looked down at his feet. "I don’t think I'm strong enough to last another month without you."

Sighing, Judy moved to stand in front of Nick. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. She'd hatched an elaborate plan for how he would discover she was coming home with him, but it was a surprise meant to become clear right before he got on the train. Judy was so proud of how clever it all was. Yet sadly, it didn’t seem like a scheme she could follow through with anymore. By the way Nick looked, Judy knew he needed some good news, and this was when she reminded herself that life wasn’t like a romantic comedy. Sometimes gestures didn’t have to be grand. They could be simple, and still pack an emotional punch. That was the case now.

“So,” Judy began, causing Nick's eyes to flick back up to her. “I had this big setup for tomorrow. I was going to drop you off at the train station and come back like five minutes later with my suitcase. It would’ve been so cute. Like a Bunny and Hare moment. And I would’ve loved to actually be the one to trick you for a change, but that’s never been my strength. I’m Judy Hopps. I get directly to the point without any fuss. And with that said, I thought you should know that tomorrow, I’m getting on that train with you and we’re both going home. Together.”
It was a wonderful sensation watching Nick’s expression change as he slowly grasped what she was saying and it made Judy no longer care that she’d tossed aside her perfect surprise. Because just like him, all Judy ever wanted to do was make Nick happy. And at that moment, her boyfriend was very happy.

“You sly bunny,” Nick complimented. “That would’ve been something else, seeing you con me. But to be honest, I probably would’ve figured it out. Naturally, I would have faked surprise for you. I’m not a monster. But yeah, you’re such an easy read, Whiskers. No way this would’ve gotten past me.”

Judy shot him a dirty look.

“Hey, I just call ‘em like I see ‘em, and you are an open book.”

“If that’s so, Mr. Know-it-all, then what am I thinking right now?” Judy asked, inching forward and tapping his chest with her paw.

“Oh, you’re feeling sad that you didn’t get your romantic comedy ending at the train station. But you know, maybe I can help you with that.” Then in one svelte movement, Nick scooped her up and proceeded to twirl Judy, before pulling her in for a kiss. He wasn’t gentle. It was a type of kiss she wasn’t even aware existed, and her whole bunny body hummed in response.

Their moment of intimacy lasted so long that even the bunnies in the field took notice, and began shouting suggestive phrases at them. It was enough of a distraction that Nick pulled away and snickered. “Looks like we have an audience.”

Judy was lost in a haze as he placed her back down. She didn’t respond, but instead stumbled into the wall.

“Whoa there, clumsy, looks like you need to walk it off,” Nick joked, taking Judy's paw and leading her away from their taunting viewers. But once he rounded a corner to the other side of the school, he stopped and turned to stare at Judy. “Wait. What about your apartment?”

“What about it?” Judy replied.

“I’m still living there.”

“So?”

“Does this mean … are we?” The area between Nick’s eyes crinkled. “Do you want to move in together?”

Judy smirked. “I thought you would have figured that out by now, or is it possible you can't actually read me like an open book.”

“Heh. I’m a little off my game. It’s been a busy day. Got in a fight with an old rabbit. Did you hear about that?” Nick laughed, and then shook his head in disbelief. “If we’re not supposed to go behind closed doors, then what the hell will your parents say when they find out we’re living together?”

Judy shrugged. “They don’t have to know … at least for now. Let’s just enjoy this thing that’s our own, starting a new life together without anyone else’s baggage weighing us down. I don’t care about what they think. I only care about you.”

Nick’s reaction was to kiss her again; shorter than their last, but just as intense. “And I care only for you, Miss Bennett.” Nick was mimicking *Pride and Prejudice* for her and she giggled.
“Oh come now, Mr. Darcy,” Judy affected an accent similar to his. “You’re such a scandalous fellow. Let’s put that to good use and destroy some more sunflowers.”

Chapter End Notes

And so I’ve reached the ending. An epilogue should follow within the next few days. Thanks for sticking with me through a fic that got so much longer than I intended, because of all my amazing readers. Thank you.
When Judy moved back to Zootopia after the Night Howler case, apartment hunting had- amazingly enough- led her straight back to the same small room with two noisy neighbors who never kept their opinions to themselves. Price range was the main reason she found herself back in the same apartment- the, it’s not a slum ... yet, packaged deal. But it dawned on her that it might have also been because of Bucky and Pronk. An average mammal could only stand their antics for so long before bolting, making Judy’s apartment frequently vacant ... except when it came to her, because Judy knew how to drown them out. It was a skill developed after having spent so many years living alongside a large bunny family. She never had privacy growing up; why did it matter if she didn’t have any as an adult?

But as her relationship with Nick progressed, so did Judy’s need for privacy. She’d tolerated Bucky and Pronk’s comments during movie nights (they let her use their wifi after all), but once Judy was back in Zootopia with Nick, her patience wore thin. She could no longer grin and bear it. Judy had a live-in boyfriend now, yet Bucky and Pronk made it impossible for her to experience what that meant. How could she and Nick be intimate when they had an attentive audience pressed up against the shared wall of their apartment? The short answer was, they couldn’t.

It took her and Nick only two weeks before they agreed it was time to find a place that was truly their own and not some weird shared living experience between them and two antelopes. With Clawhauser’s help, they found an apartment in the same building as his, which essentially meant they’d downsized from two loud supporters to just one. But at least Clawhauser lived down the hall and not next to them. The most he ever did was occasionally tag along on their work commute. And if they were forced to hear all the latest gossip about The Real Housewolves of Zootopia until they reached the precinct, well, it was less intrusive than someone listening in on their life.

Some other positives of their new place were the little kitchenette and bathroom it came with, giving Judy a sense of having a real home with Nick. Seems when you combined salaries, you could afford a little more out of life, and after a few days in their new apartment, she and Nick fell into a routine. Judy did most of the cooking, while Nick dealt with anything needing his charm. Most of their bills had been reduced by at least some percentage due to his swindling. It wasn’t illegal to haggle or flatter, therefore Judy was okay with him sometimes employing his old scam-artist skills.

Nick even managed to keep his promise of cleaning up after himself. Although, he wasn’t perfect and every once in a while, Judy would find pieces of his life (a tie, a container of food, or a magazine- there really was no rhyme or reason behind what she found) in an odd place. She never nagged him though. If Nick could tolerate her imperfections then she would give him a break over his. That’s what you did when you were in love. You accepted all the parts that made them who they were … even the slightly maddening ones.

And through their mutual support for each other, Nick continued opening up, giving Judy access through doors he’d sealed off long before they’d met. He was changing for her and she was there to help him pick up the pieces of who he’d once been.

One of Nick’s bigger reveals happened a month after they moved into their new place. It began when he suggested they go out and celebrate their anniversary. Naturally, Judy was skeptical. When you lived with a fox who loved to tease, you always second guessed everything. And this smelled suspiciously like one of Nick’s jokes. “Go out for our one month apartment anniversary? I thought I was the sentimental one?”

“When it comes to you, I’m always sentimental.” Nick’s voice was silky smooth and didn’t contain a
hint of irony as he slid up beside her on the couch they’d recently acquired from a flea market.

“But I’m actually getting good at this.” Judy shot him a glance before focusing back on the pieces of fabric in her paws. “I think I’ve hit my stride. If I stop now, I’ll just go back to poking my paws with the needle again.”

Judy had recently begun work on her quilt project. It was a slow work in progress, but things were beginning to come around. The day before, she’d managed to connect Nick’s neckerchief with a piece of her police costume from the Carrot Festival. Now she was attempting to add material from her Backstreet Bunnies shirt.

“Oh, can’t you press pause on this domestic granny bit you’ve been doing lately, and go put on that purple dress I like so much. Let me take you out for dinner.”

Judy snorted and looked back up at him. “Maybe I should just cut that dress up to use in this quilt. Then you won’t be able to ask me to wear it again.” The dress request was a common one from him, but Judy was stubborn. She hated dressing up.

“Well, it is what you were wearing when we had our first kiss. I suppose that’s meaning enough for you to add it to your quilt. Would you like me to fetch you your fiber while I’m off getting your dress?”

“Ha Ha,” Judy monotoned, not looking up. “You know all these jokes about me being old, because of my new project, don’t hold weight when you compare it to your actual age.”

“Fair point, and to that I would say,” he cleared his throat, and when he spoke again his voice had altered into that of an elderly mammal’s, “Can you humor an old fox and go out on a date with me. I don’t think I have much time left. Show me a good time in my final days, dear? Would you?”

Judy laughed- a real one this time- and the distraction caused her to jab one of her paws with the needle she held in the other. Hissing, Judy pulled the tiny torture device out and laid her sewing aside as red formed a little stream down her paw.

“Again?” Nick asked.

“Again.”

“Well, we’ve been through this before,” he stated and then disappeared into the bathroom, returning moments later with some gauze. “You know, I think maybe we should check out some resale shops for a sewing machine,” Nick mentioned while winding the bandage around her small wound.

“Oh, but that’s cheating,” Judy sighed. “My mom did her whole quilt by hand.”

“Well, you gotta admit you are the odd one when it comes to your family. You’ve got more cop instincts in you than sewing. Why not just stick with what you’re good at?”

“Because I never give up. This quilt is my new goal.”

“Oh, I see,” he said, exaggerating a mournful sigh. “So, I’ve been replaced with a needle and thread?”

Judy chuckled. “No, you’re an ongoing goal. There’s always new opportunities to work on you.”

“So, why not work on me, right now? Let’s go out,” Nick tried his request again, using that sly smile that always made her feel fuzzy inside.
His paw was still holding hers even though he’d finished wrapping the gauze, and there was something in his eyes that told her this wasn’t just some simple request. He needed to take her out, and that was enough for Judy. If this was important to Nick then she would give him that. “Okay, if we go out, promise me you’ll take off that shirt and put on something better.” He was wearing the one she hated, blue and yellow swirls combining in a kaleidoscope of ugly. “Because I promise you, what you’re wearing right now will not be making its way into our quilt.”

“If you get to dictate what I wear, then I’m going to turn that around on you.”

“The purple dress?”

Nick nodded. "You know it."

Judy finally relented with a sigh. “Fine, but only for you.”

An hour later, they were both ready to leave, and had just enough time to make it to the restaurant before the dinner rush. But Nick surprised Judy when he stopped her from hailing a cab, and mentioned he wanted to take a longer walking route. When she asked why, Nick told her there was someplace he wanted to visit first. They then turned down a few blocks, and ended up at a flower shop. Judy assumed he was there to buy her some, but after purchasing a bouquet of daisies, Nick kept them to himself, never mentioning who they were for. It all felt a little off, but Judy’s intuitiveness told her to not pry. Whenever she suspected her boyfriend was in a reflecting mood, it was better to find an indirect way to the reason why. Asking outright sometimes shut him down.

“You’re being quiet,” Judy commented with just the right amount of vagueness to not alert him.

Nick smiled, and put his arm around her shoulders. “Sorry … just thinking,” he replied.

“About what?”

“My mom … just wishing she were still alive to meet you.”

Judy leaned into him. If Nick was thinking of his mom, then he really was reflecting, because despite all the headway he’d made with opening up to her, that was still an area he sometimes kept guarded. “I wish that were possible too,” Judy soothed. “But you’re still here and through you I’ve gotten to know her.”

“Well, I thought maybe there could be another way.” He stopped walking, and it was then Judy recognized where they were. The last time she’d been to this place, the day hadn’t been happy. An officer from their precinct was killed in the line of duty, and now Judy was back at the same cemetery where his body had been laid to rest.

“Oh,” was all Judy could think of to say as realization hit her.

“Is this okay, can I …” Nick trailed off, and gestured towards the large archway with the cemetery's name written across the top.

Judy nodded and stroked his forearm comfortably. “Yes, of course.”

Nick was quiet as he led her through the archway, past several graves, until they reached a specific one. It wasn’t fancy; just a cement rectangle in the ground, with a name and two dates. Nick hunkered down next to the grave marker and placed the daisies in front of it. “I stopped coming here after about the first year. Figured it didn’t do me any good when I was trying my hardest to not be the fox she wanted me to be.” Although he was speaking to Judy, Nick kept his eyes focused downward. “But something happened after I met this super annoying bunny with a need to fix
everything she saw. I started coming here again and- now I know this sounds crazy- but it helped to talk to her about you.” He paused, as if waiting for Judy to laugh. But she couldn’t. She was too busy trying not to cry. “I needed someone to confide in and my mom had always been a good listener when she was alive. Maybe if she hadn’t died, I would’ve figured out that telling you I loved you wasn’t going to end our friendship. We could’ve been happier sooner.”

Nick stood again and reached over to tug on Judy’s paw, bringing her closer to the grave marker. “So, Judy Hopps, I wanted to introduce you to my mom. And mom, this is Judy, the girl I’ve been telling you all about.” Nick gave Judy a small smile, almost like an apology. “Mom’s not very chatty. You’ll have to do all the talking.”

Judy chuckled, even as she was silently weeping, and after sniffing a few times, managed to regain her composure enough to say, “Hello, Mrs. Wilde. I just wanted to say that you have a great son. He’s pretty amazing, actually. Has done so much for me, and I know that you’d be so proud of all that he’s accomplished. I know I am.” Judy looked up at Nick. “Was that okay?” she nervously asked, lowering her voice as if his mom could hear her.

Nick tapped her twitching nose. “She thinks you’re a bit of a Nervous Nellie, but overall gives you a passing grade. Welcome to the Wilde family, Carrots.” He then wiped away the remaining tears lingering on her face.

They stayed there for a long while, Nick holding Judy while he told her stories of his mom. She wasn’t sure how much time passed, but was dimly aware that it had grown dark enough for the lamps inside the cemetery to be switched on. Finally, when he’d run out of things to say, Nick drew away and leaned down near the grave again. From there he pulled one of the daisies from its bouquet, and handed it to Judy. “She wanted you to have one,” he stated and then gently taking her paw in his, Nick guided Judy towards the cemetery archway with a promise that they would return for another visit soon.

A few mentions of things that helped inspire this fic:

This song, which became Nick and Judy’s theme for me while writing.

And all my readers who ever gave me a kudo or wrote a comment, you were constant motivators in helping me finish this story. Thank you. And if you’ve reached the end and like what you’ve read, please let me know. It may just inspire me to write more for this pairing.

Sequel now complete

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!