Partners

by SkyeLansing

Summary

Working for the ZPD is a demanding job, even more so when you are the first of your kind on the force. Although Nick and Judy make an effective team, trying to balance the demands of work while still maintaining a social life is a challenge of all its own—especially in the face of social pressures brought by living in a city still recovering from pred/prey tensions.

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Ever since Nick had accepted that he needed to move he’d begun to regret the massive number of possessions he’d accumulated during his previous, shady career. All morning he’d been tearing through his apartment, going over everything he owned. Part of the task had already been done over the previous few weeks, but because of his new job with the ZPD (and his reluctance to let go of the surroundings he’d grown so comfortable with) he’d left the bulk of the work until the last moment.

He sighed as he looked at the three piles he’d made, realizing that he’d put off the move for far too long. Without the impressive income he’d made while hustling he simply hadn’t been able to afford rent regardless of how carefully he’d budgeted his meager ZPD salary. Still, he’d hesitated. After years of living there he had simply come to think of the apartment as home, and letting go of that felt like losing a part of who he was. Out of necessity his new accommodations were decidedly more… cozy, forcing him to get rid of most of his belongings. There wasn’t any emotional attachment to majority of it, but he’d learned to enjoy surrounding himself with nice things.

Now most of that was going into one of two piles: dump, or sell. The third, made up of the few possessions he’d decided to keep, was noticeably smaller than either of the other two and mostly consisted of personal items he simply couldn’t bear let go.

He was just about to go back to sorting when there came a light, insistent knock on the door at about waist height. His ears perked as a smile found its way to his lips.

“It’s unlocked, if you can reach the doorknob,” he called out.

After a brief pause the door clicked and was pushed open by a gray rabbit with a slight huff, her purple eyes immediately taking in the room. “Oh jeez, I’m late aren’t I?”

“Don’t worry about it, Fluff,” he said with a shrug, already back to looking through the books on his coffee table. “How’d the date go last night?”

“Good,” she said brightly. “Really good, actually. We’re going out again tonight.”

Nick’s ear flicked and he tossed two of the books into the dump pile, then the third into the sell.

“Really? Two dates in a row for this one, mmm?”

“Four,” Judy corrected before she saw the fox’s smirk. Her ears began to heat up as she realized he’d already known. “W-what?”

“Oh, I’m just surprised that you’ve let this one hang around for so long after how quickly you abandoned the others,” he said and tossed another pair of books in the dump pile. “To think, Officer Hopps has found her true love and still insists she’s only dating to keep her nagging parents at bay.”

Judy rolled her eyes. “Listen, Norman is a perfect—”

“Norman? He’s actually named Norman?” Nick laughed, shaking his head. “Does he own a hotel? Creepy, vacant stare? Wants to introduce you to mother?”

“He is not a psycho,” Judy said and stomped a foot. “He’s a personal trainer, if you must know, and very sweet.”

Her statement was met with another round of laughter as Nick covered his face, shaking his head in disbelief. Lips pursed, the rabbit marched across the room and gave the larger fox a firm shove.
“What’s so funny?”

Nick made a show of wiping his eyes with a finger, still chuckling as he gave Judy a sideways glance. “The guy’s a personal trainer and you don’t see what I think is funny? Did he offer to help you with your exercises? Maybe show you a few new stretches?”

The wide-eyed look on Judy’s face set Nick to laughing again. She pulled her ears down over her eyes as the insides turned a few shades darker pink, groaning lightly. “That’s his job.”

“He makes the same offer to every pretty girl. Got it,” Nick said with mock seriousness, then drew back as Judy gave him another shove and held his hands up. “Help. Help. Police brutality.”

That last line finally made Judy give a soft laugh even though the insides of her ears were still slightly flushed. “You dumb fox. What did you need me to help you with?”

Nick pointed out the smallest pile. “Just start packing everything I’ve got over there while I go through the rest of this.”

“What about the other piles?” Judy asked as she picked a collapsed box off the ground and began folding it.

“Don’t worry about those. I’m getting rid of all that.”

Judy stopped and did a double take. The other two were nearly as tall as she was, and Nick was still adding more to both. For a moment she tried to find her voice. Granted what Nick was keeping would already be several times more than what she’d brought with her to Zootopia, but she hadn’t had very much to bring in the first place. That he was letting go of so much all at once, and so casually, was difficult to fathom.

“Nick, you can’t just throw all of that out.”

“I’m not,” he said absently as he tossed a book of ZPD regulations on the keep pile. “Selling some of it.”

“You’ve got your TV in there,” Judy said, beginning to fill the box. “It’s practically new, why aren’t you keeping that at least?”

Nick sighed and looked at the TV, his ears tilted back. “Don’t have a spot for it at the new place,” he said and reached out to pat it, then gave her a smile. “You can have it if you want.”

“If I put that in my apartment there wouldn’t be any room left for me.”

He patted the TV again, then turned back to sorting through his belongings. “You sure? Offer stands until I sell for good,” he said with a swish of his tail, then glanced back at her. “Actually, if you see anything you want feel free to take it.”

Judy considered the two large piles for a moment before she went back to packing. There probably wasn’t that much she could use; most of it was fox-sized. Besides, she could always pick through it later anyway.

Thankfully what remained to be packed wasn’t as overwhelming as she’d expected. Most of it was clothing that Nick had apparently hastily attempted to fold before unceremoniously dumping it on the floor. There was also a dining set complete with silverware—she put that into its own box—an impressive number of personal grooming supplies, and a gradually growing collection of books.
The books went into their own box as well, and she couldn’t resist reading the titles as she put them away. There were the ZPD regulations she’d seen him add earlier, of course, and a similarly bound book containing Zootopia’s laws and ordinances. Most of the rest was made up of mass market paperbacks. Most were heist novels and spy thrillers. No surprises there. The pair of horror novels was more unexpected—she wouldn’t have figured Nick was the type to enjoy that sort of thing. There was even a romance novel and she made a mental note to remember it so she could bring it up during one of Nick’s particularly insufferable moods. Considering how well-worn each one was they were clearly all favorites. She hadn’t actually known that Nick read so much. For some reason learning that made her smile.

“Looking forward to tonight?” Nick asked suddenly.


“Could tell. You seem happy,” the fox said, sighing as he looked at two books then tossed one into the trash pile and handed the other to Judy. “Of course it sounds like more fun than my afternoons.”

“Well, once the move is over you’ll have some free time again, right?”

Nick shook his head. “It isn’t really that. Back when I was hustling there was always something to do. Looking for a new scheme, or a new place to run an older one where I wouldn’t be recognized. Sometimes even celebrating a particularly good day. Now when I’m off the clock I don’t know what to do with myself.”

“I know some of the guys go out for drinks after work,” Judy suggested. “You could always go spend some time with them.”

“Yeah,” Nick said, drawing the word out as he rubbed his neck. “That would be a little weird.”

“Why?”

“Because, Carrots, they are cops. They go out to cop bars.”

Judy laughed. “Nick, you’re a cop.”

“Maybe now, but I’ve spent most of my life avoiding those kinds of places,” Nick said while slowly shaking his head. “Besides, I get this feeling when I’m around the others…”

“Nobody cares that you’re a fox, Nick,” Judy said. “And if they do, I’ll kick ’em.”

A lopsided grin formed on the fox’s muzzle. “I don’t doubt that, but it isn’t really the fox part I think. I’m pretty good at reading mammals, I had to be, and they’re all nice but… Well, it’s that professional kind of nice. They don’t hate me, but they’re wary.”

“Then go out with your old friends,” the rabbit said, then eyed Nick critically. “You do have old friends, right?”

“Even I knew better than to cheat everyone,” Nick chuckled. “I’ve got a few, but ever since I’ve jumped to the other side of the fence they need to be careful about being seen around me or it causes problems. Once everyone realized I wasn’t going to help them on the sly they all started drifting away.”

“Those don’t sound like very good friends, Nick.”

He shrugged. “Everyone wants something. They’re going to stick around with the ones they think
will help them get it.”

Judy tsked. “Nobody thinks like that.”

“Oh? So you didn’t start dating because of your mom?” Nick asked, leaning forward with that smug grin of his. “And I bet Norman, if that is his real name, invites you back to his place after your date tonight.”

The blush started to creep back into Judy’s ears, but she forced herself to meet Nick’s gaze. “I’m not going to let you bait me again.”

Nick settled back, smirking confidently. “Shame. I was eager to find out if what I’d heard about—”

“That better not be a bunny joke,” Judy warned.

The fox’s muzzle snapped shut and he made a zipping motion. The grin remained, though, and she could see the mischievous sparkle in his eye. Without giving him another warning she tossed an empty box at his face, causing him to erupt with laughter.

“What was that for? I was quiet.”

“Because you were thinking it,” Judy accused.

Nick merely tilted his head to one side, still chuckling. “And how do you know what I was thinking?”

“You were thinking it very loudly.”
A wonderful, almost bubbly feeling clung to Judy as she headed off to work, still riding the emotional high of having spent a night simply enjoying herself. It had just been another simple date spent talking for a couple of hours, but while she hadn’t been swept off of her feet Norman remained the first bunny she’d dated who didn’t seem either awkward or desperate. Perhaps it wasn’t the walking-on-air, love at first sight type of relationship portrayed in most movies, but in a way the more gradual build was nice.

That Norman had asked her out again after they parted ways seemed like a good sign. A proper date this time, not just a quick meeting over coffee. Dinner, and depending on how they felt after perhaps they could catch a show. Just the anticipation was enough to send a warm tingle through her body, starting near her stomach then spreading out to the tips of her fingers and toes. She still didn’t know what she was going to wear, the clothes she had weren’t exactly suitable for something like this, but that wasn’t anything a quick trip to the mall on the way home after work couldn’t fix.

By the time she walked in the door to the ZPD’s First Precinct the place was already bustling with activity with many officers milling around in the minutes before everyone received their assignments. Clawhauser’s usual cheery greeting and easy smile only served to buoy her mood further until she noticed Nick leaning against a wall by himself, staring down into the cup he was holding.

“They’re trying to kill me, Carrots,” he said when she got closer.

“Why would anyone be trying to kill you?”

“I have no idea—” he held out his cup to her. “—but whoever made this coffee is clearly slipping me poison.”

She tentatively sniffed the offered cup and was immediately assaulted by the almost overpowering scent of the coffee. Nick watched, not bothering to hide his amusement as she pulled back with her nose wrinkled. While she tried to fan the smell from her face he took a slow, audible sip, then made a face as he gagged dramatically and swallowed.

“Who made that?”

“I know, right? Just try to imagine how bad it smells to my sensitive nose,” Nick said and pushed off from the wall. “Believe me, it doesn’t taste any better.”

“Then throw it out,” Judy said. “I thought you foxes were supposed to be smart.”

“That would be throwing out coffee, my dear, which is punishable by death.”

“Are you even sure it’s really coffee? Just the smell was enough to make my nose burn.” She couldn’t help smiling.

“Admittedly no, but it is a risk I am willing to take,” Nick said as he took another sip.

“Rough night?”

He shrugged and looked down at the cup again, swishing it around slightly. “The new place doesn’t really feel like mine yet. Had trouble getting to sleep.” He took another drink, longer this time. “What about you? You’re practically glowing, so I take it things went well last night?”
“Was nice enough. Got drinks and talked for a couple of hours. Got asked out to dinner tonight, so now I need to worry about what to wear, but everything went great,” she said, getting a little bit of a bounce in her step until she noticed Nick looking down at her. “What?”

“Was I right? Did he invite you over to his place?”

Judy groaned. “How did I not realize you were going to ask me that?”

“I was right, wasn’t I?” Nick said, already looking supremely satisfied with himself. “So what are you going to wear tonight? A dress? I could see you in a dress. Something blue. Red is just trying too—”

“It’s semi-formal,” Judy said before he could really get going. “If I overdo it things will feel strange.”

“Ah, but you’re going to worry that he’ll be dressed up nicer than you are, and he’s going to be worried about the same thing, so you’ll both end up trying to look your best,” Nick said, finally finishing off the last of his coffee. “That’s the way these things work, Fluff.”

She made a dismissive sound and started toward the bullpen while Nick fell in line beside her. Yes, she intended to make a good impression, but that was only natural since this would be the first “date” date. A bit of excitement was normal. Plus Norman had seemed so thrilled when she said yes to dinner, and treating tonight like it didn’t mean anything would send the wrong message. It certainly didn’t hurt that she could tell he would clean up very nicely with just a little bit of work, so the least she could do was…

Her pace slowed and she looked up at Nick to find him watching her intently, giving a wink before he continued past on his way to the chair they shared. He’d done it on purpose, she was sure of it, and now the idea he’d planted had already taken root. She hurried to catch up, hopping up into the large chair with an annoyed huff.

“You must think you are so clever.”

“Like a fox,” Nick said with a light chuckle, then pulled his aviators out of his pocket and put them on. “If it makes you feel any better, someone who doesn’t dress up for you isn’t worth your time, Judy.”

Before she could answer Chief Bogo entered the room, bringing an abrupt end to dull roar of a dozen different conversations being held by the other officers. His face sported its usual scowl as he took note of who was present. Once he was sure he had everyone’s attention he cleared his throat and tapped the stack of folders he was carrying against the lectern.

“There isn’t any special business today and I can see you’re all eager for your assignments, so I’ll be brief,” the massive cape buffalo said. “Since we’ve got a lot of officers out today with that stomach flu that’s been going around we’re going to be spread thinner than usual today. Unfortunately that means I’m going to be reassigning some of you temporarily to cover the gaps.”

Judy’s ears perked up and she stood in the chair to see over the table. Ever since her reinstatement at the ZPD things had been almost exactly the way she’d dreamed, but after taking on Nick as her partner she’d mostly been relegated to Savanna Central.

There really wasn’t any reason to complain, it wasn’t like they weren’t getting their fair share of cases and Chief Bogo probably just wanted to give Nick some time to find his legs before sending them to other districts, but a change of pace would be nice all the same.

Her tail practically quivered as she heard the other officers receive their assignments for the day. As
Chief Bogo had promised, quite a few had been shuffled around. Finally his eyes found their way to her as he held out a case file.

“Officer Hopps, Wilde, I’m afraid you two drew the short straw this time,” he said. “Both McHorn and Johnson are out today, and I need you to cover for them. They were all set to stake out a warehouse we believe is being used to help move contraband into Zootopia. You probably want to head home and get a little extra sleep because you’ll both be out late.”

She blinked, practically able to feel her mind slam on the breaks. “How late?”

“It’s in the file,” Chief Bogo said simply and dropped it on the table in front of her. “Is there some problem, Officer Hopps?”

“Carrots is just upset that she’ll have to cancel her date tonight,” Nick said helpfully, oblivious as Judy looked at him with mortification. “It’ll be her fifth one in the past week. A real whirlwind romance, sir.”

Judy rested her head on the desk and closed her eyes, speaking through clenched teeth. “Would you please shut up?”

But it was too late. Chief Bogo’s ears flicked as he regarded Nick quietly for a second. “Why Officer Hopps, I did not recognize you in that absurd fox costume.”

“I’ve been working on my disguises, sir,” Nick said, tilting his head back slightly to bask in the stifled chuckles. “I’m told that I’m indistinguishable from—OW!”

Judy kicked him again for good measure and glared, but Nick’s self-satisfied grin refused to go away. “He’s right sir, I had plans this evening.”

“I am sure he will survive if you cancel this once,” Chief Bogo said. “And tell your partner that he better get that mouth of his under control before I lose my patience and assign you both to parking duty for the next month.”

“Yes sir,” she said and sank back into her seat to hide behind the table, then buried her face in her hands.

As the night wore on Judy split her attention between watching the empty street, sending text messages to Norman, and browsing the Internet on her phone while Nick droned away in the passenger seat about whatever topic currently had his fancy. Canceling the date had been difficult to do, and even though Norman had said he understood she could tell from the sound of his voice just how disappointed he was. They’d made new plans, for the weekend when she was off-duty this time, but that didn’t make it feel any less like her night had been snatched out from under her.

Every so often she glanced at the time, but whenever she did it only served to dampen her mood even more. Last time she’d looked it had been 10:45, about the time the date would have been ending had they decided to attend one of the shows Sahara Square ran at night. Since then she guessed maybe another hour had crawled uneventfully by, Norman had texted her “goodnight” a while ago, but with how she felt everything seemed to be moving slower than it should.

“Carrots, you’re killing me here. How long are you going to stay mad at me?” Nick said, the slightest
hint of a whine in his tone tweaking her ears.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes as she held it for a couple of seconds before answering. “I will stay angry until I’m not anymore. Sometimes I just can’t believe you.”

Nick leaned back in his seat and looked up. “Come on, it isn’t like I did anything new.”

“That’s exactly the problem, Nick,” she said, refusing to even look at him as her pent up frustration came pouring out. “You’re funny, everyone gets it, but there is a time and a place, and you just don’t seem to know when to stop. Chief Bogo has given you so much leeway because I vouched for you and because he sees that you do good work, but the way you behave is so unprofessional sometimes. And now it’s starting to reflect on me. Why can’t you just keep your mouth shut?”

The short rant had been enough to get her heart beating faster, and she braced herself for the quip he surely had ready for her. Something about how officer moral would surely plummet if he wasn’t there to lighten the mood, or about how Chief Bogo wouldn’t dare put them on parking duty with how heavy the caseload was right now. That was the way it always was with him. A game to prove how clever he was.

Only he didn’t.

At each second she expected him to finally say something, but the silence continued to stretch on. She heard him take off his aviator’s, heard him shift in place, could even hear his even breathing. Still, not a word.

She peeked at him and saw he was holding his sunglasses, looking at his reflection in the lenses. The usual grin that bordered on a smirk was completely gone, as was that glint in his eye, and his ears had tilted so far back they were nearly flat.

“Listen, Nick, I’m—” she started, but Nick interrupted her.

“Don’t know why, Judy.” He shook his head, lightly twirling the sunglasses by the ear piece. “Or I guess I do, but I don’t know why it’s still a problem.”

He let out a heavy sigh and ran a hand over his head, and as Judy watched she felt like she should say something. Only, what? She’d meant every word, even if she hadn’t intended to say it so aggressively. Nick honestly needed to hear it. Sooner or later his mouth would land both of them in hot water.

“It is just so unnatural. I walk into that room and it’s filled with nothing but cops,” Nick said, then gave her a sideways look. “And yes, I know I’m a cop too, Judy. I’ve worked hard for this and I’m proud I could make the cut, and I know that should change the way I feel, but it doesn’t. I’m in a room filled with cops and everything I’ve learned over the last twenty years tells me that I need to get away. That I don’t belong in there.”

“Nick, you know that isn’t true.”

“Do I? I’m not like you, Judy. This has been your dream since you were a kit.” Nick leaned back again and looked out the window. “Most everyone at the academy was the same way. Even Clawhauser is. Did you know he joined the ZPD because his father had been a beat cop? But that just isn’t me.

“And I feel like everyone in there knows it. Like they’re watching me for the first sign that this is just another scam. Worst part is I can’t even blame them because the old me would be milking this gig for everything it’s worth. Sometimes I miss my old life, the excitement of trying to outsmart everyone
around me, and I worry that if I get bored enough…”

“Hey, you aren’t like that,” Judy said, letting her ears droop behind her. “You never were, not really.”

Nick blinked once then glanced at her before putting the aviator’s back on as the smile returned to his face. “Hey, looks like my acting hasn’t gotten any worse. You’ve always been my easiest mark, Fluff,” he said before looking back out the front windshield.

“Do you think the ZPD makes every stakeout as obvious as this one, or are we just special?”

She stared at him, ears still limp, unable to fathom how he could flip that switch so easily. It was the same every time. And it always ended on some lame joke when his emotional walls slammed back into place.

“What do you mean obvious?” she said carefully. “We’re out of uniform and in an unmarked car with tinted windows.”

“We’ve been sitting in here for hours. What normal mammal does that?” Nick asked, then started pointing to the car’s antennas. “One. Two. Three. What normal sedan needs three antenna? And remember those kids we drove past? I’ll bet at least one of them was a lookout for this little operation and ran off to warn them the moment we showed up uninvited.”

“There is no way you can know that.”

“Sure I can,” Nick said, his usual confidence already back in full force. “I’ve been on the other end of this a couple of times, and it pays to be able to spot when the police are poking around. Whoever is running the operation in that warehouse knew we were here almost the moment we drove in, so we aren’t going to see anything he doesn’t want us to see.”

“Maybe the cars watching the other entrances went unnoticed,” Judy suggested, but Nick only shook his head.

“They’ll stick out just as bad. No, these guys are going to play it extra careful as long as we’re here.”

Judy groaned and bumped her forehead against the steering wheel. “Sweet cheese ‘n crackers. If you’re right this is just a waste of time. They’ll shut down for the night.” She rolled her head to the side until she could see Nick again. “I canceled my date for this.”

“Aw, don’t look so miserable. I’m sure the fine mammals living in this area feel much safer knowing we’re going to be here all night,” Nick said, looking out the windows again. “Besides, I doubt they actually shut down. They’re probably in there right now, just doing stuff we can’t see.”

“Even if they know we are here? I doubt they are that stupid,” she said.

Nick chuckled. “Most criminals are. I was a rare exception, which is why I never got caught.”

“I caught you.”

“No, you threatened to catch me. Let the record show you never actually did, thus my reputation remains unblemished.” Nick said with a wink. “Anyway, an operation like this needs a lot of support. Means asking for a pile of favors and borrowing a ton of cash. Point is, they may not have much choice, mob bosses aren’t exactly known for being understanding when delays happen. I’ll bet they have some other way to move stuff in and out. Some sort of backup plan. Maybe not the ideal setup, but enough to work when they feel the pinch.”
Judy considered everything he was saying and looked out at the building, her ears perked. If only she could get closer she might be able to hear inside to tell if Nick was right, but from where they were the only thing she could pick up was the hum of climate control units on the nearby buildings.

“That sounds like something out of a movie,” she said.

“Bet you dinner I’m right,” Nick said. “Or breakfast. Or whatever you call the meal we’ll be eating when we finally get away from this. Dinfest?”

“Nick, even if you’re right there’s no way to tell.”

“Then it should be an easy win for you,” he said. “If there’s no proof I’m right by the time we’re done we can assume you win if you want.”

He looked so serious Judy couldn’t help smiling. “Fine, but if I win then I get to pick the place.”

“Winner’s choice,” Nick agreed as he settled back in and started to hum.

She watched as he examined the building with renewed interest, no doubt eager to prove his case before time ran out. From the look on his face she could tell he was coming up with a plan. First time she’d seen that expression was the day he’d conned her into buying him a Jumbo Pop, and since then she’d learned that particular self-satisfied smirk meant he was up to something. In this case he was probably trying to come up with a way to win the bet, though how she had no clue. If these particular criminals were being as careful as he thought there wasn’t much chance he could win, short of walking up and having a conversation with them.

Which honestly sounded just like the fox’s brand of crazy. She shook her head, feeling warm at the thought, then jumped when Nick abruptly opened the door and climbed out.

“What are you doing?” she demanded. “I am not letting you take a look around inside.”

He laughed. “Relax, Carrots. I’m just going to get some coffee from that diner we saw as we came in.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Coffee.”

“Come on, I’m getting tired and we got four hours to go,” he said. “It won’t even take fifteen minutes. I need this or I’m gonna pass out.”

“The chief told you to rest up,” she said, but then he clasped his hands together and made puppy eyes. “Fine, just be quick about it.”

“Yes ma’am,” he promised and hurried off.

Judy watched him go until he vanished around a corner, then turned back to watch the street with a light grin. She considered putting some music on her phone while she waited for him to return. If the volume was turned way down it wouldn’t attract any undue attention, but she decided it was a distraction she couldn’t afford. On the off chance that something did happen she needed to be ready to pay attention, even if all they’d seen so far were random mammals drifting through the empty street while minding their own business.

She was just starting to wonder what was taking Nick so long when the passenger door opened once more and he climbed inside with a paper holder containing four cups of coffee. Unable to think of something to say right then she gestured to the cups and tsked, but Nick was too busy getting himself settled to notice.
“Jeez, how tired are you?” she asked.

“We’ve got a long night ahead of us and I don’t want to fall asleep,” he said as he fished a couple sugar packets from his pocket.

“But four? If you drink all of that you’re going to need to pee.”

Nick took the top off of one of the cups then tore the packets open, dumping the sugar inside as he looked over the rims of his glasses. “I promise not to pee in the car. Besides, one of these is for you, if you want it.”

“Just one? Gee, thanks,” Judy said. “I don’t need it though.”

“Careful there, Officer Hopps. I’m pretty sure they can fire you for saying something like that.”

Judy snorted. “Fine, but I’ll have it later.”

“Suit yourself,” Nick said and took his first sip. “Oh, and good news. I decided where you’re going to be taking me when we get off work. There’s this nice 24-hour cafe near my new place. I’ve heard they make wonderful hash browns.”

“Well if I win we’re going to this diner I know. I love their salads,” she said.

Nick took another sip and smacked his lips. “Sorry Fluff, but that isn’t where we’re going.”

“We agreed, winner gets to pick,” she said, then felt a shiver run down her spine and turned to him. “What did you do?”

“Got coffee.”

“I saw the look on your face before you left,” she said.

“Hey, that was faster than normal. You’re getting good at this, Carrots.”

“Nick,” she groaned.

The fox took an infuriatingly long slip, slurping louder than usual, then finally relented. “I just swung by that alley on the side of the building. No exits there, but I did see a fire escape, and I heard stuff being moved around inside. I was right. They’re in there. I win.”

“Were they talking?” she asked, relieved that he hadn’t done anything too insane.

“No clue. Don’t have your ears.”

“Then it doesn’t do us any good,” she sighed and slumped back. “Could be anyone.”

“Mmm, I hear percussion enthusiasts often practice during the middle of the night,” Nick said with mock seriousness before his smirk returned. “You know, most of these old warehouses have skylights to save on lighting…”

“No.”

He leaned closer. “Come on, I know you want to.”

“What I want doesn’t matter,” she said and put her hands on the wheel so she could squeeze it. “We’re supposed to watch this entrance. We can’t just abandon our post.”
“Yes. Heaven forbid we do that. I mean, just look at how much we’ve learned while sitting here. Have you seen the shirts the mammals are wearing? It’s like they are stuck two decades in the past,” Nick said. “Who in their right mind would give up this for the chance to find out at what a bunch of criminals are up to?”

He had her there, and she hated it. Whenever this happened he was insufferable for the rest of the shift. Still, that was better than sitting on her cottontail all night with nothing to show for it.

“You win,” she said, then grabbed the handheld they’d brought and keyed it. “Dispatch? This is Officer Hopps. Wilde thinks he saw something. We’re going to go check it out.”

After a slight pause the radio crackled again. “Roger, Officer Hopps. Be careful.”

“Come on, let’s get this over with,” she said as she jumped out of the car and clipped the handheld to her hip.

Nick emerged a moment later, coffee cup in one hand and the holder with the other three drinks in his other. She gave him a look, then shook her head and started to the building while he followed behind with a satisfied grin. They took their time, making sure nobody was watching them before Nick showed her the fire escape he’d found.

“Goes all the way to the roof,” he said to her as he set all the coffee down.

“You sure about that?” Judy asked, straining her eyes against the darkness to see the top. “It’s hard to tell from down here.”

“I’m sure,” he assured her, then stooped over and joined his hands. “Ready?”

With the extra boost he provided she was easily able to vault up onto the first level of the fire escape. The steel grating that made the floor rattled when she landed, but those inside gave no indication that they’d heard. With all the noise they were making in there they probably just assumed it had been related to whatever they were doing.

“Give me a second to drop the ladder,” she whispered down.

“Don’t bother, thing is so rusted it’ll make a racket if it moves. I’ll find another vantage point to look in from,” Nick said, then passed up one of the cups of coffee. “Here. And don’t you pout at me, if you’re going to be up there alone I want you to stay alert.”

Judy reluctantly accepted the cup and sighed. “You promise not to get into trouble?”

Nick only smiled at her. “No more trouble than normal.”

Which was exactly what she was afraid of, but she could see he was already in one of his moods and there was no point in trying to extract more from him, so she started up the fire escape while taking care to avoid making too much noise. As Nick had said it went all the way to the top, and a number of skylights greeted her when she jumped the cement lip that encircled the roof.

Nick watched her vanish from sight and went back to his coffee, taking a slow sip. Judy would need some time to find a good view of what was going on downstairs. He doubted she’d be able to see much with just the stars providing light, but her ears were good enough to overhear any conversation.

Once he finished his drink he headed back out to the main street, throwing the empty paper cup in the dumpster on the way. It was about time for him to do his part.
The Gift of Gab

Getting the door open was child’s play; the lock had obviously been designed to keep out casual snoops and foolish children rather than someone determined to bypass it. The door’s hinges were rusted however, and Nick knew that was by design. Grease was easy enough to come by, and a noisy door would alert everyone inside if an intruder showed up. Simply knowing that didn’t make the sudden silence any less intimidating however. No doubt they were already deciding what to do.

That didn’t leave him much time to make sure they made the decision he wanted.

“Pretty bold working in here when there are five cop cars watching the place,” he said loudly enough for his voice to carry through the warehouse. “Let me guess. You owe someone a delivery and they aren’t the type to tolerate excuses.”

There was a hushed exchange that he couldn’t make out. He hoped Judy wasn’t too busy giving him that adorable scowl of hers to listen in. Regardless, he began to work his way inside, taking it slow so his eyes had time to adjust and to make himself appear as nonthreatening as possible.

At last an answer came. “Mind your own business, fox.”

He recognized the voice. It belonged to a gruff wildcat named Conrad that, last Nick had heard, was working as muscle for petty street gangs. Apparently the feline was moving up in the world, although it was difficult to believe anyone would trust the thug to run an operation like this.

It wasn’t that Conrad was stupid—at least not exactly. He was just a little slow on the uptake. Given enough time he could find a way to deal with most problems, although the solutions he favored tended to be rather brutish. The trick to dealing with him in the past had been to show him an obvious “solution” that he liked so he wouldn’t think things over too hard.

“Oh, I am. I am,” Nick said, finally able to see the outlines of those inside. At a glance there were several sheep, a skunk, a porcupine, a badger, and several pigs accompanying Conrad. “Heard about this little operation you got here and thought I’d come by to check it out. Offer my services if I liked what I saw.”

“We don’t need your services fox, so you best get out before I make an example of you.”

“That wouldn’t be very smart,” Nick said quickly. “I intend to die very loudly, and you can bet those cops outside are going to hear. You wouldn’t want to give them probable cause to come barging in, would you?”

He could feel Conrad’s eyes on him as the wildcat sized him up. Before going in he had debated if he should muss up his fur and clothing first, but decided that wouldn’t fit the story he wanted to tell. If he looked like some common hooligan it would be difficult to be taken seriously, so he went as he was. Neat and well groomed. Possibly part of some larger, organized outfit. Unfortunately that had meant setting aside his shades, he didn’t want to oversell, but that was only a small sacrifice.

“How do I know you ain’t a cop?” Conrad asked.

“Oh yes, the fuzz is just crawling with us foxes,” Nick said, able to get a better look at the boxes he was walking past now that his eyes had adjusted fully. He held out the coffees he’d bought earlier. “Cops often show up to bring you drinks? Warn you that you’re being watched?”

Conrad’s attention shifted to the coffees and his nose wrinkled. “Already knew about them cops,” he
said. “Plus there was a whole thing on the news about a fox joining the ZPD. Could be you for all I know.”

“Pure coincidence—”

“I don’t like coincidences,” Conrad snapped, showing his teeth.

Nick flicked one ear back and considered how best to proceed. He really wasn’t eager for a fight even though he was a couple heads taller than the feline. Those claws weren’t just for show, he knew, and while he could probably take the wildcat one-on-one there was the rest of the gang to consider.

“Look, I just came to make an offer,” he said and took a slow step back, “but if you want me gone, then I’m gone. I’ll just take my coffee and leave, tell the boss you weren’t interested, and we’ll find some other group that has better business sense.”


Nick smiled. Bingo.

“Come on, you can’t be that dense,” he said. “And you’ve made it quite clear you aren’t interested so I’ll just be on my way.”

He began to leave, but only made it a couple of steps before Conrad called out again. “I said wait! What sort of offer were you going to make? You want us to help you bring some stuff in?”

“No, nothing like that,” Nick said as he turned back. “He’s more interested in offering protection. I mean, you go through all this trouble to set up a nice little operation, and the ZPD is already all over you. How long have you even been working? A month?

Two? Sooner or later they’re going to figure out your trick, and then they’ll shut you down. Are you sure that’s going to take long enough for you to pay back all those favors I know you owe?”

He could almost see the wheels turning in the wildcat’s head. “You can keep the ZPD off us?”

“Ab-so-lutely,” Nick said with a wide smile. “Not all the time, mind you. And probably only for a day or two at once, so you’d need to be sure you want it. Still, if you manage to hook a big score you could give me a call and we’ll work something out to keep you safe.”

“And how big of a cut are you going to want?”

“Thirty percent,” he said, enjoying the way the wildcat’s eyes bulged out.

Conrad sputtered for a moment. “That’s absurd. We can’t afford that.”

Nick walked back over and offered the feline a coffee. “I told the boss the same thing, but that’s the message he wanted me to bring. Between you and me, though? I think he expects you to haggle.”

“Fine, five then,” Conrad said, taking the coffee.

“No can do. We’re taking a big risk doing this,” Nick said as he scanned the rest of the gang for anyone who seemed to be looking at him too hard. “Besides, if we give you five then everyone’s going to want five. Next thing you know we’re pulling our tricks so often the ZPD has our number.”

“Ten then.”
He zeroed in on the badger and gave a toothy grin as he handed over the second coffee. “That’s still a bit low. We’d probably go for twenty,” he said, and let the offer hang in the air for a moment. “Actually, know what? I can do better. Fifteen. And, just so you know we’re on the up-and-up, I think I can convince my boss to make the first one free. That way you can be sure this is for real.”

The amended offer had clearly thrown Conrad for a loop as the wildcat only stared in response. Fifteen percent was still a lot, but if they ever needed to move a whole bunch of contraband in one night a guarantee that the ZPD wouldn’t show up to rain on the fun was as good as gold, especially if what they were moving was particularly distasteful. And an offer to do it once for free? Almost too good to be true.

But then, lots of crime bosses liked to make the first one free. It was simply the easiest way to make a smaller outfit dependent on your hospitality. Those that weren’t careful could quickly find themselves entirely reliant their benefactors.

“Assume I like this deal. What do I gotta do to make it happen?”

Nick pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket and scribbled his cell number down, then dangled it in front of Conrad’s nose. “Just call me if you need anything. I’ll see what we can do and get back to you.”

The wildcat snatched the paper. “You’ll be the one that answers?”

“Obviously. The boss likes to keep these sorts of dealings at arm’s length. I’m sure you understand.”

Conrad nodded absently as he tucked the phone number away, then looked over Nick once more, nose twitching. “You know, I could swear I recognize you from somewhere.”

Nick didn’t move, careful to keep the confident smile on his face as he met the wildcat’s gaze. “You would not believe how often I hear that. What can I say? All of us foxes look alike.”

“Suppose that’s true,” the wildcat muttered. “Just so you know, I ain’t agreeing to nothing official yet, not until I see that you can do what you say.”

“I see no reason why we can’t work on a case-by-case basis,” Nick said and dipped into an exaggerated bow. “And with that, I’ll leave you fine gentlemen to your work.”

Conrad chuckled and shook his head. “Fraid not, fox. Donno how you slipped in here without the cops noticing, but I’m not going to risk them seeing you when you leave.”

Nick froze. They’d been so eager to get rid of him earlier he wasn’t sure how to take this. “Oh?”

The wildcat pointed at a box. “Just sit your tail right there until the coast is clear,” he said, then gestured the badger over. “Gunner, since you two are such good friends now how ‘bout you keep an eye on him ‘till we’re done here.”

Nick closed his mouth, forcing his smile to remain in place. Apparently Conrad’s brain had just realized they couldn’t simply have mammals coming and going as they pleased. He considered trying to talk his way out, perhaps with some excuse that “the boss” was expecting to hear back from him, but Conrad had already eaten up the story. Anything he added now might just make the wildcat start asking questions, difficult ones Nick wasn’t sure he could answer. For all the faith he had in his ability to talk his way out of tough spots one thing he knew for sure was that there were times where the smartest move was to simply let things ride.

So he gave an exaggerated sigh and checked the time on his phone, then moved over to sit on the
box. Before the badger got close enough to see what he was doing he fired off a text to Judy: going 2 b a bit

Seconds later he received her response: You deserve it.

“What are you doing?” the badger asked.

Nick’s ears dipped briefly and he put the phone back in his pocket. “Just telling the boss I’ll be late,” he said, then gestured to the cup the badger was holding. “How’s the coffee?”

With how tired felt Nick it was difficult to maintain his usual, cheerful attitude, but that didn’t stop him from trying. Keeping up his act for so long had been exhausting, and sitting on a crate for five hours wasn’t exactly his idea of comfort. Only the knowledge that Judy was watching over him from above had kept him calm. Knowing that she was ready to call in backup if things went south was an enormous relief, although he found it difficult to avoid looking up too often. He hadn’t wanted to risk the chance that one of the thugs would wonder what he was so interested in and notice the silhouette of two bunny ears against the night sky.

The time wasn’t entirely wasted however. By listening to the gang as it tried to figure out who he worked for he’d gotten a feel for which players were big in the area right then. He’d also figured out how they were moving their stuff without being seen from outside. The building had several maintenance tunnels running under it. Someone had probably extended them out a few blocks. Not the most imaginative solution, someone at the ZPD would have figured it out sooner or later, but finding just where the tunnel went was going to take some work. His best guess was that it came out in some sort of safe house they’d set up ahead of time, either a local business that served as a front or someone’s home. Depending on just how imaginative Conrad had gotten there might even be a few exit points, which would make tracking things down even harder. Tracing the flow of goods to a single location would be fairly easy, but with a number of sources things got trickier—especially if they went through the trouble of covering their tracks.

He’d also learned what they were smuggling, at least for right now. Booze. Not the most nefarious contraband, but it let them get around the hefty sin taxes that had been levied on that particular item. The money was steady and fairly good, but he doubted this was the real game plan. Most likely every smuggler in the city was sending a little their way, testing out how secure the operation was. After enough time, if things panned out, the route would probably begin to see more questionable merchandise. Harder drugs, weapons, and other proscribed items that brought in more money but also carried significantly more risk.

When he’d finally gotten away he walked a dozen blocks while checking to make sure nobody had followed him before giving Judy a call to pick him up. He’d expected her to be angry, but by the time she arrived she looked just as tired as he felt. She’d made a few annoyed comments about his recklessness that were probably right, warned him that he could have ruined the whole investigation, but then let the incident slide without further comment. He pretended to ignore her concerns while insisting they go immediately to the cafe so she could buy him breakfast.

The place was nicer then he’d expected considering it was open all night. Outside the building was lit by the welcoming glow of a single neon sign that read “Rio Cafe.” Inside the decor was a bit on the tacky side, but that gave it a warm, homey feel that put his mind at ease. The staff obviously went
to a lot of trouble keeping the place clean even though it was almost completely empty right then. The waitress, an older otter, came to take their order almost the moment they sat down.

“Separate checks?” the waitress asked.

“No, just one tonight,” Nick said as he accepted the menus and passed one to Judy.

The otter blinked. “Oh, really? Alright, can I get you anything to drink then?”

Judy was already busy pulling out the paperwork for her preliminary report. “Just water for me, please.”

“Water for me too,” Nick said.

“Two waters,” the otter said crisply, looking between them one last time. “I’ll give you two a few minutes to read the menu then be right back with your drinks.”

Nick watched her leave and felt uncomfortable prickle along his back. When she vanished he shook his head and tried to throw off the feeling, but it continued to linger even as he attempted to relax.

“What do you think that was about?” he asked.

Judy didn’t even look up from the papers she’d begun to fill out. “What do I think what was about?”

“She hesitated, Carrots. She hesitated twice,” Nick said, not entirely sure why it upset him. “She tried not to show it, but when I said we were on the same bill her attitude changed.”

“I didn’t notice anything.”

“Only because you’re already up to that adorable tail of yours in paperwork,” he said, shaking his head slowly. “Seriously, Carrots, can’t you let yourself relax long enough to eat? You’ve got until the end of the day to turn it in.”

She glanced up at him. “Some of us don’t like leaving things until the last moment. Besides, I’m going to be interested to see how you dance around that stunt of yours. If Chief Bogo finds out what you did he’s going to skin you alive.”

Quite honestly, that had been on Nick’s mind as well and was part of the reason he didn’t want to start on his own report until after some sleep. Wording things just right was going to be tricky. No doubt Chief Bogo would realize something was up, but so long as he was careful the massive cape buffalo wouldn’t ask too many questions. Hopefully.

Rather than think about it he opened the menu and began to look through the breakfast items. A thumbnail picture accompanied each item, and everything looked delicious. He’d already intended to get their signature hash browns, but the moment he saw the picture he was completely sold. Instead of plain, shredded potatoes their dish looked more like a casserole, smothered in cheese. According to the menu it also had chopped onion and sour cream. He was still trying to decide what to get with it when the waitress returned and set down two glasses of water along with some silverware.

“Ready to order?”

Nick looked at Judy. She hadn’t even opened the menu yet, but before he could ask for a few more minutes she spoke up.

“Do you have a spinach salad?”
“No, but we do have spinach. I am sure we could whip something up for you,” the otter said.

“That’s what I’ll have then,” Judy said, finally looking up from her papers with a smile. “With tomato and olives please.”

The otter dutifully wrote the order down then turned to Nick.

“Can I have your signature hash browns?” he asked, mind racing as he looked over the menu one last time. “And pancakes. Can I get them with blueberries?”

“You definitely can,” the otter said, her pen already in motion. “Before I go, I’m afraid it slipped my mind. This is together?”

“Yeah, I’ll take care of everything,” Judy said with a sigh.

The otter paused again and Nick could have sworn he saw her eyes narrow as she gave him a sideways look, but it happened so quickly he might have just imagined it. She wrote down a couple more notes then tucked the order into her apron. “Alright. You two just sit tight until I get you your food.”

He gave Judy a look, but she was already absorbed in her paperwork again so he kept his mouth shut. It was probably nothing. Tired as he was his mind might just be playing tricks on him. Wasn’t like he could think of any reason for the behavior, so chances were it was all in his head and he should just let it go.

Easier said than done. He started to lightly drum on the table with his thumbs as he waited and watched Judy work, wondering what she would write. There wasn’t any chance she’d snitch on him, at least as long as he didn’t push things too far and compromise a case, but he always looked forward to seeing the particular spin she’d put on events. She had a surprising knack for it; not quite as well-honed as his, but more than enough to help cover his tail. Even if Chief Bogo did manage to piece everything together, which admittedly wasn’t completely out of the question, there wouldn’t be too much trouble so long as neither of them told any outright lies.

When the food came the otter set their plates down then slipped the check face down in front of Judy. Nick watched her more closely this time, but didn’t see the otter giving him any dirty looks. Actually she hadn’t looked at him at all, and this time walked away without a word. The whole thing still felt off to him, but it was late and he was hungry so he shook his head and set about opening a syrup packet.

“Food’s here.”

“I know,” Judy said, still scribbling away. “I can smell it.”

“Fluff, please. This cannot be healthy,” he said as he drizzled the syrup evenly over the blueberry pancakes. “Set down the pen and eat before you get so hungry you eat the report.”

She chuckled and finally looked up at him. “I just want to make sure I get this down before I forget anything.”

“Then we can compare notes later,” he said as he started to cut the pancakes into small triangles. “Eat. You’ll feel better, and I don’t think the report is about to grow legs before you can get back to it.”

Her eyes went to her plate, then to his and lingered on the hash browns for a couple seconds. “Fine. You’re right, I’m starving.”
Nick took his first bite of pancake after making sure to soak up as much of the syrup as possible. They weren’t the best he’d had, the blueberries were comically small and he suspected the batter had been left on the griddle a couple of minutes too long, but it would do. Judy didn’t hesitate before starting on the spinach salad, not even bothering to add dressing. After a few bites she finally pushed the papers to one side and seemed to relax.

Seeing her turn off her cop brain finally let Nick kick back and enjoy himself. He took a couple more bites of pancake and decided they definitely were burnt just a little around the edges, but he was too famished to care. Within a few minutes he’d downed them all, then paused to take a drink from his water to help wash it down.

“Hey, Judy? There’s something I meant to ask on the drive here, but it sort of slipped my mind.”

“What’s that?” she asked, then popped an olive in her mouth and chewed thoughtfully.

Nick lightly poked at his hash browns with his fork, pushing them around his plate. “Do you really want me to stop?”

“Stop what?”

“You know. What you were talking about before,” he said. “Joking around. I didn’t think it upset you that much so—”

“No, I don’t want you to stop, Nick,” she said, then sighed and looked at her food. “I wasn’t asking you to stop being you, just… Could you maybe tone it down when we’re in the bullpen?”

“I…can try, I guess.”

Judy’s ears drooped slightly. “Please don’t make that face.”

He stopped and looked up from his food. “What face?”

“You’re making it right now,” Judy said. “I know this has been a huge change for you and that you’re still getting used to everything, but trust me. This’ll pass and before you know it you’ll fit in just fine.”

With a little effort he managed to smile. “Thanks, Carrots. That means a lot coming from you,” he said and shoveled a mound of hash browns into his mouth, then swallowed and looked down at them. “Hey, you need to try these.”

Judy looked at them dubiously. “Please don’t make that face.”

He pushed the plate toward her. “No, really. They’re amazing.”

“They don’t look like they’re good for you, though.”

“They most definitely aren’t,” Nick laughed and nudged the plate closer. “Come on, just a little.”

She finally relented and speared a smaller chunk of potato. He watched as the morsel passed her lips, grinning when her eyes lit up.

“Wow.”

“See? Aren’t you glad I won now?” he asked, then noticed her reaching over for another bite and quickly pulled the plate back toward him, sticking his tongue out. “However these are mine. If you want some then order your own.”
“Come on, Nick.”

He hmmmed and tilted his head to one side. “Well… What’s the magic word?”

Judy’s ears perked up. “Please?”

“Sorry, but no,” Nick said as he took another bite. “The answer I was looking for was abracadabra. I would have also accepted hocus pocus.”

Her shoulders slumped and she gave him a look. “You are so petty.”

He pointed at her with his fork. “And that is exactly why you love me.”

Judy rolled her eyes, but couldn’t help laughing. The rest of the meal passed uneventfully while the sun gradually began to peak over the horizon. There was some talk about work; mostly what parts of their day should be glossed over in the report and which they would need to leave out entirely. Then, after the food was gone and their cups were empty, Judy checked the time on her phone and yawned.

“It’s probably time we called it a night,” she said, then waved the waitress over. “Excuse me. Miss? Do you have a discount for law enforcement?”

The otter hesitated again. No mistaking it this time. “You’re police?”

“Officer Hopps, ZPD,” Judy said proudly as she produced her badge.

“You’re that bunny cop I heard about,” the otter said, her voice going up an octave. “That must mean he’s— Oh.”

“Yeah, this is my partner Officer Wilde. Sorry I didn’t mention it earlier, we’ve both had a really long night.”

“Well then, I’ll just go ahead and take ten percent off of that for you,” the waitress said, her entire demeanor becoming instantly more friendly. “It’ll just be a moment, okay? Hope to see you both back soon.”

Nick forced himself to remain quiet and waited for Judy to pay before he headed outside, feeling that unpleasant prickle along his spine once more. “You good to drive back alone, Carrots?”

“I suppose so. Why?”

He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m just really tired and my place isn’t that far. If you’re good then it makes more sense for me to just walk home and get some sleep rather than drive all the way out there only to turn around and come all the way back.”

“Alright, I’ll catch you later then,” Judy said happily, already headed to the car. “Don’t forget to have your paperwork turned in by the end of the day though.”

“I won’t,” he promised, waving when she drove off, then turned toward home.

On the way back to his new place he noticed a pebble lying on the sidewalk. He glared at it, then checked to make sure nobody was watching before he sent it flying with a savage kick as the waitress’s surprise continued to echo inside his head.

Oh. Oh. Oh.
Weight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Judy spent the remainder of the week working on her final report for the stakeout, constantly comparing notes with Nick when off-duty as they debated what was safe to put in and what should be left out. As usual the process left her feeling torn. Omitting details on an official report brushed uncomfortably close to lying in her opinion, but during her first week working with Nick she’d learned that even if they didn’t break any rules there were some details of how Nick conducted an investigation that cast everything in a questionable light. Nick didn’t actually break rules. He bent them, sometimes to an absurd degree, but seemed to intuitively stop short of that last step. Moreover, he knew how to get results.

It was, she reflected, rather similar to how he’d operated his cons. Back then he’d gone to great lengths to ensure he stayed within the law as much as possible. She’d only just managed to nail him during an unguarded moment after he thought he’d already bested her. As an officer he frequently brushed up against the limits of what regulations allowed, always testing for new ways to get just a little more reach without actually crossing the line. His time hustling had given him an amazing eye for loopholes, which he found and exploited with almost frightening regularity. If he ever went back to the other side then his experience with the ZPD would make him a formidable criminal indeed. Not that he was that way anymore, of course.

In the end she was amazed by how much they’d decided to leave in the report. Her job had been fairly easy, and mostly involved leaving out any references to Nick’s going inside. Nick, on the other hand, had gone through tremendous effort writing his report to describe how he had ultimately gone into the building and discovered what they were smuggling and how, letting the order he told events in imply that it had happened at the very end of their shift without actually stating that was the case. Somehow he managed to make the whole thing match her report and do so without creating a nonsensical, rambling narrative—a feat that was both impressive and exactly the sort of thing that made her uneasy whenever they did this. Neither of them was surprised when Chief Bogo called them to his office after reviewing their reports.

As usual, Nick had donned his aviator’s the moment he heard and looked to be ready to try to talk circles around the larger cape buffalo. Judy wasn’t sure why he bothered. Chief Bogo was far from stupid. The fact that he’d called them to his office meant he already knew something was fishy. She supposed it was a holdover from when he’d been running scams. A rare opportunity to attempt to outwit someone, and the fact that this particular mammal just happened to be the Chief of ZPD Precinct One just made it that much more of a challenge.

“I assume you know why I’ve called you to my office?” Chief Bogo asked calmly as they took a seat.

“Well sir, the only thing we’ve worked on this week was that stakeout,” Judy said, trying to keep her cool. “I assume it has to do with that.”

“Very good, Officer Hopps. And do you know why I want to talk about that?”

“Is it because we did a really good job?” Nick asked.
“Something like that,” Chief Bogo said, then pulled a paper over and began to read from it. “Are you aware that the two of you were the only officers to see even a hint of activity last night?”

“Yes sir,” Judy said seriously. “Honestly we got lucky. Nick went to get some coffee and noticed something. We called dispatch and got permission to take a look, and while we were peeking around I was able to hear activity inside the warehouse, so I found a vantage point from which I could see inside and listen to what was happening.”

“But Nick wasn’t with you at this time, was he?”

She cringed a little. “No sir. Nick decided to watch from another location where his night vision would get him a better view of the suspects. That is why he was able to ID the ringleader. From where I was I could only see outlines and hear the conversations.”

“I see. According to dispatch you kept in touch with them via the radio. I presume that means Officer Wilde was out of contact during this time,” Chief Bogo said, leaning forward slowly.

“Officer Hopps was able to see me from where she was. I was careful to not leave her sight when I found a good spot to watch,” Nick said, cutting in. “I thought I wrote that in my report.”

“You did,” Chief Bogo said, his attention turned to the fox now. “Toward the end of your report you also mentioned that you entered the building at some point to discover what they were smuggling and how.”

“That is correct, sir.”

“Perhaps you can explain your rational?”

“Well, by the time I went in Carrots and I were aware that criminal activity was taking place inside,” Nick said carefully, his words sounding semi-rehearsed to Judy. “Because we didn’t have clearance to attempt an arrest I made sure to conduct my entrance in such a way that the perps wouldn’t spook. It seemed important for us to know what they were smuggling and how they were doing it.”

Chief Bogo snorted. “Were you with him during this, Officer Hopps?”

“No sir, I waited outside.”

He seemed to contemplate her answer, watching them both silently. Nick slowly reclined as if completely unworried, but Judy felt her heart hammering away inside her chest. He was on to them, she knew it, and at any moment he was going to explode and lay into them for risking weeks of work on a half-cocked scheme Nick had thrown together on a whim.

“So you allowed your partner to enter a building potentially occupied by criminals all by himself,” Chief Bogo said evenly, then sighed. “And I saw from the communication logs that you didn’t bother to inform dispatch about this decision. I’m going to assume Officer Wilde acted without informing you, is that correct Officer Hopps?”

Judy swallowed. “I…uh…”

“That is correct, sir,” Nick said quickly, drawing surprised looks from the others.

“Oh? So tell me, Officer Wilde, what did you plan to do if you entered the building and found it still occupied?”

“I knew Judy was watching my back, sir. If there was trouble she could call for help.”
“Because that always shows up just in time, mmm?” Chief Bogo paused to suck on his teeth. “Thank you both so much for clearing this up for me. Fortunately for everyone nothing went wrong, and I suppose the two of you managed to find enough for us to justify going in to shut this place down.”

“Sir, please?” Nick said, raising a finger. “I don’t think that is the smartest thing to do.”

Judy stared at Nick, her ears beginning to wilt as she wondered what he was about to say. She didn’t like the chief’s expression. Seeing him so calm felt unnatural. Normally Chief Bogo would’ve just brushed Nick’s suggestion aside without a thought, but instead he gestured for the fox to continue. It was almost like he wanted to see if Nick would hang himself if given enough rope.

“We already know about this operation and more or less how it works, sir,” Nick said. “That means we can keep an eye what they’re doing and swoop in at any time. This outfit is so new that nobody is really committed to it yet; they’re all just testing the waters to see if it’s safe. Shutting it down now won’t even make a dent, and I can assure you someplace new will open its doors in a couple of weeks.

“What we should do is let them run. They’re only smuggling alcohol right now anyway. Instead, let’s search for other operations and bust them. That’ll drive more business to these bozos and sooner or later they’ll begin picking up the bigger jobs. If we knock out enough of the competition they’ll basically be the only game in the area and everyone will have to use them. Then we can sweep in and catch all the bad dudes at once.”

As Nick spoke Judy’s ears slowly perked back up. She’d been expecting him to propose some sort of reckless scheme, but what he presented sounded downright reasonable. Even Chief Bogo wasn’t able to come up with an immediate protest. With what they knew a sting operation would be pretty easy to set up.

“An interesting idea, Officer Wilde, but I don’t like the idea of letting any smuggling operation run in my city,” Chief Bogo said at last. “Still, I’ll kick this upstairs and see what comes back. Perhaps they will agree with you.

“Officer Hopps, thank you for your time.”

Judy got back to her feet, unable to keep herself from smiling in relief. “Thank you, sir.”

Nick started to stand as well, but Bogo quickly fixed him in place with a stare. “I don’t recall dismissing you, fox,” he said. “Officer Hopps, I need a few minutes with your partner. You’ll have him back shortly.”

Nick looked at her and even with his glasses she could tell he was uneasy. She almost asked if she could stay, but one look at the chief’s face told her that wasn’t happening. Unable to do anything else, she gave Nick a quick thumbs up then quickly slipped out.

Nick tried to put on a brave face when the door closed behind Judy, but he doubted it was a good sign Chief Bogo that wanted to speak to him privately. It wasn’t so much that he was afraid of the large cape buffalo, not in the way he was afraid of Mr. Big at least, but knowing that one person held so much say in his future at the ZPD made it impossible to really relax. He tried sitting up straighter, but in the massive chair the effect was completely lost. Everything in the room had been made for mammals so much larger than him that he looked tiny in comparison. It was, he thought, probably
“Officer Hopps!” boomed Bogo unexpectedly. “I do not hear the pitter-patter of bunny feet returning to your desk.”

A muffled curse filtered through the closed door and Nick heard his partner scampering away as the chief’s attention returned to him. Nick sank down in his seat a little. That definitely wasn’t good. If Chief Bogo didn’t want Judy hanging around in the hall that meant he didn’t want her to overhear the conversation, and that meant he was in trouble.

The chair began to feel a lot less comfortable so he shifted ever so slightly, feeling his boss’s eyes bearing down on him. Everything had been going so well too. From the start it had been pretty clear to Nick that Chief Bogo had a good idea of what they’d done. That was to be expected by now, but Bogo had seemed mostly intent on making sure they had their stories straight. A rehearsal of sorts in case anyone else came asking, and other than that bit about going into the warehouse alone they’d apparently passed with flying colors.

“Take off those absurd sunglasses,” Chief Bogo said at last.

Nick swallowed slowly and did as he was told, taking a moment to fold them and slide them into his uniform’s chest pocket while he adopted what was hopefully a calm expression. “Chief, can I ask—"

“Shut. Up.”

His mouth snapped closed and he pressed back in the seat a little more as Chief Bogo pushed off of that massive desk with both hands and began to pace behind it. Nick recognized the technique by the cape buffalo’s posture and slow steps as he moved from one side of the room to the other. The academy had taught him to try similar things during interrogations—the instructors used the word “interview” but he knew better—and practicing it while imagining that he had a criminal squirming in front of him had been terribly fun. Finding himself on the other end of it was significantly less enjoyable.

Not good, Nick thought, swallowing. Not good at all.

“Until you walk out that door the only words I better hear coming out of your mouth are ‘yes sir’ and ‘no sir’,” Chief Bogo said. “I want you to listen to what I tell you, really listen, and I expect that when you are dismissed you will return to your desk and think very hard about what I’ve had to say. Do you understand?”

“Uh…” Nick started, then froze when Chief Bogo’s expression hardened. “Y-yes sir.”

“Do you think you can do that?”

“Yes sir.”

“Excellent.” Chief Bogo continued to pace for a few more moments then stopped back behind his desk and leaned over it, palms resting on top. “You assisted Officer Hopps in preparing her report. Is that correct?”

“Yes sir.”

“I thought as much. And I presume she helped with yours?”

“Yes sir, a little,” Nick said, then tried to shrink when Chief Bogo let out something that came close to a growl. “I-I mean yes sir.”
The cape buffalo glared silently for another moment before he spoke again. “In your opinion, would you say that both of your reports have been written in such a way that they are deliberately misleading? Perhaps in a manner which a defense attorney might try to take advantage of?”

Nick hesitated, but those eyes bored into him as if the chief was just daring him to tell a lie. “Yes sir.”

Bogo stood upright and came out from behind the desk, beginning to pace around Nick’s chair. “Did either of you lie in your reports, Officer Wilde?”

“No sir,” he said quickly, feeling his fur stand on end.

“Officer Wilde…”

“No sir,” he repeated more firmly.

Chief Bogo stopped pacing. “And you are being truthful with me right now?”

“Yes sir.”

“Very well. Then I presume both reports leave out certain salient details?” Chief Bogo said as he began to walk again.

Nick peeked at the chief as he fought the urge to tremble. He wondered if it would be worth the risk to mention that they’d left almost everything in, but ultimately decided against it. “Yes sir.”

“And would I be correct in assuming that this isn’t the only time you two have done this?”

“Yes sir, but it—”

“Shut it, Wilde!”

He cringed, fairly sure that outburst could be heard all the way down by Clawhauser’s desk. With almost anyone else he would be tempted to push his luck, but he kept his lips pressed together, feeling like he was twisting in the wind as the chief returned to his desk and sat down.

“Nick, do you like Officer Hopps?” Chief Bogo asked, his tone only marginally more calm.

Nick hesitated again, not exactly sure what Bogo expected him to say. “Sir?”

“Are you and Officer Judy Hopps on friendly terms?”

“Yes sir.”

“Do you think she’s a good officer?”

“Yes sir.”

“It just so happens I agree,” Chief Bogo said. “She’s a good mammal, and despite my early reservations she’s a good cop. With enough experience she could be one of the most effective officers in the ZPD. Would you agree?”

Nick nodded earnestly. “Yes sir.”

“Zootopia needs good cops, Officer Wilde. I need good cops. You strike me as someone who knows that, contrary to happy illusions cooked up by the city’s impressive PR department, trouble is always bubbling just under the surface. Without putting good men and women on the streets every day that
illusion will shatter and the good mammals of this city will find themselves waking up to a very unpleasant reality.” Chief Bogo began to tap his desk. “Do you enjoy working with Officer Hopps?”

“Yes sir.”

“You believe you make a good team?”

“Yes sir, very much so,” Nick said then realized his slip and shrank back again.

Thankfully Chief Bogo let it slide. “To my utter amazement, so do I. She’s done far better working with you than any of the temporary partners I’ve assigned her. She’s happier, works harder, and has been solving more cases. I don’t understand it, but fortunately I don’t have to. What matters most is results and the two of you get them. As long as that remains true I’m happy to leave you together.

“However you better watch yourself, Officer Wilde. You are clever, I’ll grant you that, and you have some potential I would hate to see go to waste, but sooner or later you are going to screw up and when that happens Internal Affairs is going to come down on you so hard it’ll make your head spin. They will dig through your entire life, go over every case you’ve ever worked on, and find every questionable thing you’ve ever done.”

Nick nodded silently. He’d learned about Internal Affairs in the academy. They were their own branch, separate from the ZPD, and specialized in cases of police misconduct and corruption. Those they investigated could find themselves facing anything from disciplinary action to actual jail time depending on what they were found guilty of. His instructors had made IA sound a lot like boogeymen, popping up unexpectedly with the power to end careers, and at the time he had thought it was a simple scare tactic. Then, when he finally started working at the ZPD, he realized all the experienced officers took IA very seriously. That was largely why he went to such trouble to make sure he only bent the rules.

“You don’t look surprised, Officer Wilde, so I will assume that you’ve already considered that possibility,” Chief Bogo said. “What you clearly haven’t considered is that when IA eventually looks into you, and believe me they will, they are also going to have to take a look at Officer Hopps. And they are going to have to wonder how you managed to pull off all of this without her knowing. If you’re willing to risk your career that is fine by me. I’ve seen your type before and I’ll see it again, but when the time comes you better be damn sure it all lands on you, understand? I will not tolerate you wrecking someone else’s life.”

“Yes sir,” Nick said meekly.

“What was that Officer Wilde? I couldn’t quite hear you.”

“Yes sir,” Nick barked.

“Wonderful. So here is what you are going to do. You are going to leave my office and go straight to your desk. Once you are there you will sit down, turn on your computer, and write an addendum to your report. In this addendum you will go over everything that happened as it happened, leaving nothing out, and admit that any questionable behavior is strictly your fault. When you are finished you shall email it to me. At the end of the day you will come up to my office and sign a form to certify that what you’ve written is both accurate and complete, at which point I will put the addendum in a little file that I shall be holding onto until IA comes sniffing around.”

“Yes sir.”

“Good. Consider this a regular part of your duties from now on until you clean up your act, Officer
Wilde,” Chief Bogo said as he settled back in his chair. “Now get out.”

Judy sat at her desk and wondered what she’d been thinking. Had she actually intended to eavesdrop after being dismissed? That was the sort of thing Nick would try to pull, not her. He wouldn’t have gotten caught in the act either.

Maybe he was beginning to rub off on her, and she wasn’t sure if that was a good thing. It wasn’t so much that Nick bent the rules, she was perfectly willing to do the same if that meant helping someone. That was the whole reason it had been her dream to become a police officer. Ever since she was a kit she’d wanted to help others. To make things better for everyone. Normally having rules helped with that, but she knew there were times where even well-meaning rules could do more harm than good. In those cases she was perfectly fine with bending them a little. Or sometimes it was necessary to get creative in order to do the right thing. At the end of the day she firmly believed it was the spirit of the law, not the letter, that mattered.

Nick seemed to take rules almost as a personal challenge however, and sometimes she didn’t think he was even aware of when he was testing their limits. Some days it seemed like the moment he got involved with a case things just…started happening. Locks just opened for him, in both the literal and figurative sense, and once he’d set things in motion it was easy to get caught up in the excitement. Most of the time she knew she should stop to ask questions, but she had an impulsive streak of her own that ran deep. It was the reason why she’d come to Zootopia and joined the ZPD in the first place. Why she’d taken the Otterton case, been willing to trick Nick into helping out, and even why she’d wanted him to be her partner.

“Hey Judy, the chief putting you two through the wringer today?” Officer Lowell asked from his desk.

She gave the white wolf a shrug. “He had some questions about our reports,” she said, then glanced at the staircase that led to Bogo’s office. “I think Nick’s getting grilled pretty hard though.”

As if on cue she heard Chief Bogo shouting at Nick to be quiet, eliciting a small laugh from Lowell. “Don’t worry about him. I’m sure he’ll land on his feet.”

“You’re thinking of felines,” Judy muttered.

“Foxes are like half feline,” Lowell said confidently. “Besides, Nick’s been treading pretty lightly around the chief ever since that act of his earlier this week. The whole department has noticed, so he probably has a little more slack than normal.”

“I had a talk with him about it,” she said absentely, then blinked as she noticed Lowell looking at her. “What?”

“Oh, nothing. Just kind of surprised he listens to anyone,” Lowell said.

Before she could ask what that meant someone off to her side chimed in. “Whh-pish.”

Her head swung around to find Officer Fangmeyer, a tiger, standing over her making a whipping motion as Lowell began laughing. “Really you two?”

“Hey, nothing wrong with knowing how to keep your partner in line,” Lowell said, still chuckling.
“You know what Wolford’s like. Total alpha. Sometimes that means I need to step in before he takes things too far.”

“Yeah,” Fangmeyer agreed. “Nick’s problem is just that he likes being the center of attention. Once he learns to give up the spotlight he’ll be fine.”

She looked down at her hands and considered that. Perhaps that was Nick’s problem. Maybe he just thought that if he could prove himself in some way he would begin to feel like he fit in. It would explain why he tended to act out during briefings and was willing to go to any length to close a case. But then she remembered her first press conference, something she normally avoided thinking about because of its outcome. Nick had completely refused to participate that time even before she’d managed to shove both over-sized feet deep into her mouth.

“I really don’t think that’s what is going on,” she said at last, then tilted an ear to one side as she heard the door to Chief Bogo’s office open. “I think he just got out. Could you two please be nice to him when he gets back?”

“Sure thing, Hopps,” Fangmeyer said as he gave an informal salute.

Judy smiled in thanks then turned to anxiously watch the stairs. Sure enough she soon spotted Nick walking down. He ran a hand over his head, ears flat, nearly dragging his feet. Seeing that was enough to push her anxiety almost all the way to panic. Her foot began to tap the floor for a few moments before she realized what she was doing and stopped herself.

By the time Nick reached the ground floor he’d pulled out his aviator’s sunglasses and, to her complete astonishment, reverted to something akin to his usual attitude. The usual smugness wasn’t quite there, and he moved a little more deliberately than normal, but to those who didn’t know him very well the difference would be insignificant. It really was like he had a switch in his head.

“Judy was worried about you,” Lowell said once Nick got closer. “Looks like you came through just fine though.”

Nick put a hand to his chest. “Really Carrots? I’m touched.”

“You make it sound like it’s weird to worry about my partner,” Judy said.

“And here I thought you just saw me as another pretty face.”

“Was expecting to hear more yelling from old Bogo when I heard you were in there with him,” Fangmeyer said. “You must have been on your best behavior.”

Nick chuckled lightly as he settled into the desk next to hers and turned his computer on. “What can I say? The chief has a certain charm that lets a guy know when it’s in his best interests to shut his mouth and listen.”

“Let me guess. His ‘yes sir/no sir’ routine?” Lowell asked. “I’ve gotten that one before.”

“Me too. I think everyone has at some point or another,” Fangmeyer said.

“Not me,” Judy said happily. The others all turned to look at her. “What? I haven’t!”

Lowell coughed a little. “Well you’ve only been around for about a year. Ya just haven’t screwed up badly enough yet.”

“Most mammals don’t get to hear it until they’ve been in for a three or four,” Fangmeyer agreed.
“Nice to see my partner’s the exception,” Judy said dryly.

Nick flashed her a smile. “What can I say? I’m an overachiever.”

She slowly shook her head. “You’re something alright.”

“It’s true. You solved your first big case on what? Your third day? Plus you busted the wrong guy if I recall,” Nick said and leaned forward until his pointed muzzle was nearly in her face. “I, however, did the same exact thing before I even entered the academy. Face it, Fluff, I’m way ahead of the curve. At this rate I’ll be up for promotion before you.”

A grin broke out on her face, she just couldn’t help it, and she pushed his muzzle away while both Fangmeyer and Lowell chuckled. For a moment it was almost like the meeting with Chief Bogo had never happened, but then Nick’s computer chimed as it finished booting and he abruptly turned serious.

“Sorry guys, but as fun as this is I have something that requires my attention.”

“Oh? The chief making you write an essay about the importance of following orders?” Lowell asked.

“Something like that,” Nick said. “There are just a few things I need to clarify about my last report.”

Something in Judy’s mind keyed in on that and she felt her worry return. “Oh really? Do you need my help?”

To her surprise Nick’s expression softened slightly even as he shook his head. “Thanks, but I’ve got this. It’s just an addendum, so it shouldn’t be very hard.”

She watched him began to type, certain for some reason that he was lying. Why she felt so sure was hard to pin down. Nick was probably better at lying than anyone she’d ever met, that was probably why he’d been so successful in his past life, but something didn’t fit this time. She remembered how he looked coming down the stairs, the way he’d put those walls back up before walking over. Somehow she knew there was more to it than a simple dressing down. Whatever it was, he probably didn’t want to share in front of the others. Perhaps she could get him to open up later.

“Hey Carrots?”

Her ears perked and she looked across her desk at Nick. “Yeah?”

“You up for dinner after work?”

There it was, just as she’d expected. She quickly checked the train times and then winced inwardly as she did a few mental calculations. “If it’s something quick? I was planning to go clothes shopping on my way home.”

Nick blinked. “Oh, that’s right. You’ve got that date tomorrow, I completely forgot. Never mind then. I wouldn’t want the shops to close before you get there.”

“We could just grab some wraps,” she suggested.

“Naw, you deserve to have a good time every so often, Carrots,” Nick said, then gave her a crooked smile. “Just don’t let Norman’s mom find out about you.”

Chapter End Notes
Yes, I know Fangmeyer is female in the movie, however when I wrote this I did not until I was nearly done. Unfortunately, going back and changing every pronoun referring to Fangmeyer is more work than I have time to do. Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.
Sweet Veneer

Judy slowly sipped the tropical cocktail she’d ordered while waiting for Norman to show and told herself he was just a little late. They’d both been so excited for the chance to go on a real date. She was sure that he wouldn’t stand her up. He’d just gotten stuck in traffic. Or lost track of the time. Or got lost on the way over. She was tempted to call him up to find out where he was, but was worried it would make her seem like that sort of girl. Besides, it had only been fifteen minutes. If he showed up soon it wouldn’t be that bad.

Still, she wasn’t feeling very great about things thus far…and after all the trouble she’d gone through to find a nice dress too. Nick had been right about blue. Other colors either clashed with her fur, or seemed too bright, or made her feel too gaudy. There had been a red dress she liked at first, but after seeing herself in it she quickly abandoned the idea. Red was just far, far too passionate for something so early. A dark blue though, that worked just fine.

Another sip and she looked at her phone. Another minute gone and she was still the girl drinking alone at a table for two. She sighed and considered texting Nick to complain, then quickly decided against it. Nick would be sympathetic and would probably try to cheer her up with his particular brand of humor, but although she was worried that she might begin to cry without someone to talk to it just felt…forbidden to use her partner for something that personal.

She read over their last few texts instead and wondered if it would really be a problem. He was still trying to get settled into his new place, so if she left soon there might be time for her to head home, get changed, then make her way over to his apartment to help out. Maybe order a pizza to split. Then she could complain about being stood up instead of waiting around feeling sorry for herself. Seemed like a fair trade.

Her eyes lingered on his last message that wished her luck and she smiled, then sighed and resolved to go home if Norman didn’t show by the time she finished the drink.

Just a few sips remained when Norman finally came in the door. He lingered there for a moment, gasping for breath, then spoke to a waitress and was pointed toward her table. Judy sat back in her chair and crossed her arms, quickly checking the time again as she watched him hurry over while he smoothed out his jacket.

“I know, I’m late,” he said, then slicked his tan facial fur with both paws. “I’m sorry Jude. I’ve just been behind all day and I swear I got here as quickly as I could.”

The immediate apology went a long way to making her forgive him, but she wasn’t quite ready to let him off the hook. “You could have sent me a text.”

“Jeeze, yeah.” Norman visibly winced. “Sorry for that too, I was in such a rush I didn’t even think about it.”

She regarded him for a moment. It did look like he’d gotten ready in a hurry. The shirt and slacks he’d picked out were slightly rumpled as if he hadn’t had time to dress properly and his fur was still damp as if he’d recently gotten out of the shower. Judging by how strong his cologne smelled he’d spilled a fair amount of it on himself.

“Alright, I’ll stay,” she said and sighed. “Just try to plan ahead a little better next time.”

Norman clapped his hands together and got into the seat across from her. “Thank you, Jude. I
promise to make it up to you.”

“Why were you running late anyway?” she asked as she tried to calm herself back down.

“There were a few things at work I needed to take care of,” Norman said.

Her lips pressed together as she wondered what sort of work a personal trainer could possibly have that would keep him. Whoa there, she thought. You don’t have any idea what his job involves. Stop being an officer for just one night and enjoy yourself.

“I guess I can understand that,” she said, then flagged down the raccoon waiter for some menus.

While they waited Norman began to look around the restaurant. “You know what, I’m going to start fixing things right now,” he said when the raccoon returned, giving the waiter a wan smile. “Is it okay if we move over there? By the windows?”

“I…suppose so sir, but that section is almost full. The waitress may take a little longer to get to you,” the raccoon said.

“What? No, that really isn’t necessary,” Judy said and gave Norman a look. “This table is fine. Really.”

“But by the window we’ll have a better view and I’m really in no mood to rush through the night,” Norman said, then leaned a little closer with his ears tilted forward. “Plus everyone outside will be able to see how stunning you look.”

Her face heated up from the look Norman gave her and she quickly glanced away. She really didn’t want to start an argument over something so minor, even if the move seemed very sudden. “Alright, I suppose.”

While Norman went to the new table she quickly settled up for the drink she’d bought along with a tip for the raccoon that had waited on her until her date finally showed up. By the time she reached the new table Norman was already seated and looking at a menu, smiling comfortably.

“See, isn’t this better? And I guess the squirrel tending to this area is more on the ball than that old raccoon thought. Already sent her to fetch us a couple waters and a bottle of wine.”

Judy smoothed out her dress before she sat back down, still feeling a little off. The whole night had started on the wrong foot, she supposed. His late arrival had put a damper on her attitude from the beginning, and now she just felt strange about getting another table. It just wasn’t something she’d ever done before, and despite Norman’s compliment she still didn’t really see the need. With a sigh, she opened the menu and began to peruse the Garden Fresh page only to realize her appetite wasn’t really there. More and more it was looking like she was there mostly on inertia, attempting to salvage what she could of the night.

Well, if the date was going to be like that the least she could do was try to be pleasant company. When the squirrel finally returned Judy ordered herself a small salad and allowed Norman to pour her a bit of wine. He was doing his best to smooth things over, being charming and sweet and just a bit of a flirt, but all his efforts simply fell flat. She wasn’t sure if it was him, or her mood, or if it had just been too long since she’d last dated, but as time went by she began to realize that she simply wasn’t enjoying herself.

But she’d already agreed to stay, and Norman was trying. So she smiled politely and made small talk until the meal finally came to an end. As they left he asked if she wanted to catch a show, but she begged off by saying she was tired. He offered to take her back to his place for some coffee, but she
declined again and made some excuse about needing to get up early tomorrow. When they at last parted ways she looked down at herself and all the effort she’d gone through to make herself look pretty, then sighed and shook her head before she hopped on a train to head home.

Saturday was supposed to be the day when Nick would unpack everything and make the new apartment officially his. Early on he’d decided that he wasn’t going to live in an environment he didn’t like, even if he had to settle for less space, but that meant he had a lot of work to do, relatively speaking. Focusing on that work while most of his things remained boxed up simply made sense.

It had been a good plan, and he’d even stuck to it for the most part. The very first night he’d repainted the walls mint green, then spent his free time on the following days touching up the white trim near the floor and around the doorways. He’d gotten permission to hang a few shelves on the wall and spent most of last night measuring carefully so there wouldn’t be any tilt. When Saturday finally rolled around about the only thing left for him to do was unpack.

He’d intended to, he really did, but right from the start there was something that stopped him. When he’d first woken up his mood had been so dreary that all he wanted to do was soak in the shower and think about what he was doing with himself. After what had happened with the chief yesterday that was probably to be expected even though he’d done exactly as he was told. Initially he’d worried that Chief Bogo would blow up at him after reading the addendum, but amazingly the large cape buffalo had let it pass without any comment what-so-ever. At the end of the day Nick had simply gone up to the chief’s office and filled out a couple forms swearing that everything he’d written was accurate. In all honesty he probably would’ve felt better if Bogo had chewed him out again. Simply being dismissed only made him feel even worse.

So instead of unpacking he’d gone out. No real plan, just out walking through Savanna Central. At some point he realized that he’d wandered into one of his old stalking grounds. Everywhere he looked brought back memories. The supermarket that had been particularly easy to work. A boutique that wasn’t, but that he went after anyway just to prove he could. The times he’d gotten away clean, and others that came down to the skin of his teeth.

Then he got back to the apartment only to find he still didn’t feel like unpacking. He milled about, doing small tasks that could be done at any time, never once fooling himself. More excuses to avoid biting the bullet at last and accepting that this wasn’t just a temporary thing. As if refusing to take that last step by unpacking would change anything. This was where he lived now, and no matter how much he dressed it up there was going to be something about it that rubbed his fur the wrong way. He knew right then that unless something changed he’d never be able to think of it as home.

That was almost more than he could stand and drove him outside once more. He went back to the Rio Cafe for lack of anything better to do and hoped he wouldn’t see the otter waitress from before. The more time went on the less confident he was that anything had actually happened, but he still wasn’t sure he would feel comfortable if she was around. Maybe that meant he would do best to avoid the cafe entirely, but it seemed like a shame to do that just on the off chance that something might happen.

Besides, a little comfort food would go a long way to making him feel better about everything, and the otter couldn’t be there all the time.

As it turned out the place was significantly busier during reasonable business hours and there was a
wait to be seated. He didn’t mind, it wasn’t like he had any other plans to worry about, and after maybe fifteen minutes a pretty vixen showed him to one of the smaller tables. He didn’t even need to look at a menu this time and ordered two servings of the signature hash browns with some lemonade to wash it down.

From there he set to mammal watching, content to wait until his food was prepared while he sipped his drink. The place was more popular than he’d expected given its size and it seemed the moment one group of customers left another took the recently vacated table. A half-dozen servers hurried about, busting their tails to keep drinks filled and food moving.

Other than the vixen waitress he was the only fox present, although that didn’t really surprise him. Predators were a serious minority in most neighborhoods, and foxes rarely gathered in large groups almost as a rule. Not like wolves, who always seemed to seek out each other’s company when possible.

He must have caught the end of the dinner rush because shortly after getting his food things began to slow down. That disappointed him initially, he’d been having a good time watching the faces of the other patrons and trying to figure out what was going on in their minds. Those two sheep looked like they were on a date, which made him wonder how things were going for Judy. The hedgehog looked like he’d had a bad day at work. One table had a family of beavers that were celebrating a birthday. Then he’d realized he was thinking about things the way he’d use to when looking for an easy mark.

At which point he tried to distract himself by talking to his waitress once she seemed less busy. It started out as a nice diversion, she was friendly and smart, and he noticed she was flirting lightly in an attempt to squeeze out a slightly larger tip. That was something he could admire, and he played along until she let slip that she’d just started going to college. He’d left the tip, the girl probably needed it, but departed shortly after so he could go take another shower.

Judy had no clue what she was doing. The date hadn’t been a disaster by any real measure, but it had left an unpleasant taste in her mouth just the same. Her first thought was to call home to talk to her mother or one of her older sisters, but then they’d want to know what had gone wrong and she wasn’t sure there was an explanation she could give. Norman had been late, but he’d apologized and seemed genuinely sorry and his reason had been a valid one. And, once everything was said, that wasn’t really what was bothering her. She actually didn’t know what was.

So she’d cleaned up and left for Nick’s new apartment to help him finish getting settled in. Doing something productive always made her feel better, and depending on what sort of mood Nick was in she might be willing to ask for his thoughts on what had transpired. He was great at reading others, and moreover he was a guy, so he’d probably be able to figure out what was going on to set her off. Failing that he’d tease her without mercy and give her a solid reason to be angry with someone else.

But when she knocked on his door he didn’t answer, and she couldn’t hear anyone moving around inside. She stood there for a few seconds, feeling unbelievably awkward, and wondered why she hadn’t called ahead first. Chances were he’d already finished and was out doing something else. Calling him now was out of the question, she couldn’t just interrupt his plans like that. Especially not when she was standing on his doorstep like some sort of crazed stalker.

After a minute of indecision she decided the best thing to do was retreat back to her place to save
what scraps of dignity she still had. Then she could get some rest, and if she didn’t feel better in the morning Nick would still be around for her to call. Without another thought she spun around and practically flew down the stairs.

Then promptly collided into Nick as he came around the corner at the bottom of the second flight. She landed hard on the edge of a stair and yelped in surprise as she stubbed her tail while Nick stumbled backwards a few steps.

“Fluff? What are you…” he started, then paused once he got a better look at her. “Never mind. That was a nasty spill, want someplace to sit down until it stops hurting?”

“I’ll be fine,” she said, letting out a soft grunt. She gingerly pushed herself back up and gave her tail an experimental wiggle, feeling small bolts of pain shot up her spine. Thankfully nothing felt broken. “I wouldn’t mind sitting down for a few minutes though.”

Nick led the way back up the stairs while she followed behind, taking it easy at first until the initial sharp twinges turned into a more general throb. “Where were you, anyway?” she asked. “I expected to find you here.”

“Oh, was just spending some quality time with a young vixen.”

Judy almost missed a step. “I didn’t know you had a girlfriend.”

Nick gave her a slightly toothy grin. “I don’t.”

She blinked, her ears already heating up, then leaned closer and took a cautious sniff. Nothing. Granted her nose wasn’t quite as good as his, but she was fairly certain she wouldn’t miss that. Nick watched her the whole while, probably getting a kick out of it all.

“I don’t believe you,” she said at last.

“Have some faith, Carrots,” he said as he opened the door. “My skills are vast and my conquests many.”

“You are such a liar.”

She followed him inside, eager to see what he’d ended up doing with the apartment. Her last visit had been brief, just long enough to unload his things, so she hadn’t gotten an opportunity to get a feel for the place. Nick hadn’t been lying when he’d said it was smaller: one tiny bedroom, a main room with a kitchenette, and a bathroom. Still larger than where she was staying, but compared to what he’d left the new place had less than half the space.

He’d obviously done a lot of work since she’d last seen it, and she let herself admire how well he’d cleaned it up while Nick pulled up a stool for her. All the boxes she’d helped move in remained in the center of the main room, however. Most looked like they hadn’t even been opened. Those two disparate details lent the area an unusual air, as if someone had put real effort into creating a comfortable space then abruptly abandoned the attempt.

“Nick, you’re still living out of boxes,” she said as she carefully hopped onto the stool he’d provided. “You don’t even have furniture yet.”

“I do too have furniture,” he said with mock indignity. “I’ve got a bed, and you’re sitting on the stool.”

“I meant real furniture.”
“That will come later.” He smiled at her and gestured to the kitchenette. “Would you like something to drink? I’ve got water.”

Judy shook her head. “I’m good,” she said and looked around the room again. “Where were you really?”

“What matter?”

“Yes, I mean no, not really,” she said, practically quivering with annoyance she couldn’t place. “It’s just I thought you were going to finish unpacking today and thought I could help, but it doesn’t look like you’ve even started.”

Nick sat on the ground in front of her and pulled his knees up under his chin, smiling up at her. “If I haven’t even started then you can still help.”

She blinked. “That really isn’t even the point. And you’re just trying to avoid the question.”

“Fair enough. I was getting something to eat,” he said, still smiling. “Went back to the Rio Cafe so I could have something nicer than an instant dinner.”

“What’s the place like during the day?”

“Busier. There was a decent wait before I could get a spot,” Nick said, then glanced at the ceiling for a second. “Now that I think about it, I probably shouldn’t have stuck around as long as I did taking up one of their tables.”

Judy chuckled lightly. “I am sure they didn’t mind.”

“The vixen serving me definitely didn’t.” Nick winked at her. “Though I’m pretty sure she was just fishing for a larger tip.”

“Well, sounds like you had a better time than me.”

“Really?” Nick asked. As if he hadn’t already figured it out on his own. “What happened?”

She rested her hands behind her on the stool so she could lean back and let a breath hiss out through her teeth. “I’m not even really sure. The whole date was a mess and I’m upset, but there really isn’t a good reason to be.”

His expression turned serious. “You spend most of your week putting up with me, Judy. You aren’t exactly the sort to get upset without a good reason. What happened?”

“Well…he was late,” she admitted, beginning to swing one foot. “Not just a little either. Like twenty-five minutes, and I was beginning to think I’d been stood up.”

“Not the best start,” Nick agreed.

“Anyway, he was really sorry and I guess it wasn’t his fault. Work kept him late so he had to scramble to make it at all,” she said, then looked at Nick when he only hmmm-ed in response. “What?”

Nick shrugged. “Just seems a bit strange. I know you picked today because you had it off. Would’ve assumed he did too.”

Judy’s took in a sharp breath. “He lied to me?”
“Maybe,” Nick’s head tilted to one side. “He was probably doing something else and didn’t notice
the time, but was too embarrassed to admit it.”

“You really think that’s what happened?”

“Not really,” Nick said, then gave her a teasing smirk. “Personally I believe he was busy stuffing his
last victim into a freezer somewhere.”

Terrible as the joke was she ended up snorting with laughter. “You are never going to let that go, are
you?”

“I can’t help it,” Nick said. “If he doesn’t want anyone to make fun of his name he should have it
changed.”

“Anyway,” Judy said, voice raised to speak over him. “I forgave him. He said he was sorry and
looked so sincere. Plus the wait hadn’t exactly been bad. The waiter for our table was this sweet
raccoon that I think knew what was going on because he kept checking on me.

“Then Norman decided he was going to make everything right over the rest of dinner. Got us moved
to the window area even though it was busier and I said I didn’t mind where we were, but—” Nick
hmmm-ed again, stopping her mid-sentence. “What is it this time?”

He blinked as if he hadn’t even realized he’d made a noise, then folded his ears back half way.
“Sorry, I was just thinking.”

“And?”

“You’re asking me to pass judgment on a guy I’ve never even met.” Nick chuckled lightly as he
shook his head. “I’m flattered, but even I’m not that good.”

“Oh no you don’t. No way I’m letting you pull that after all the jokes you’ve made about him,” Judy
said. “I really want to know what you think.”

Nick dipped his head in a mock bow. “As you command, though you might want to tell me about
the rest of your date first.”

“Fine,” she sighed. “So we ended up moving to the other section which I’ve never done before, and
it just kind of put me off I guess? I know he was trying to make things up to me by getting us a better
spot, but we’d already been seated and it seemed a little…” Nick

She fixed him with a light glare. “Inconsiderate. Our new waitress was fine, but that raccoon had
been wonderful to me while I waited, and moving out of his section felt sort of like we were
snubbing him.

“I did my best to enjoy myself, I really did, but my heart just wasn’t into it. No matter how hard
Norman tried I always felt like it was sort of a chore being there with him for some reason. Like I
couldn’t wait to get home. Then afterward he left this voice mail saying he was sorry and that if I’d
give him another chance he would make sure to do better next time.”

“And?”

“And I’m not sure what I should do,” Judy said, then took a deep breath through her nose. “Am I
just being too sensitive? I was really hoping that things would work out with him, but now I’m
worried I’m going to have to start this whole process over, not to mention that my mother will want to know what is wrong with him and I don’t have a good answer. Maybe this is just a sign that we aren’t compatible and I should cut my losses early, I didn’t even want to deal with all this right now, but it was sort of nice to be dating again——”

Nick reached out and tapped her nose. “You’re about to start talking in circles there.”

“Sorry,” she murmured. “I’m just conflicted.”

“Look Judy, you may not realize it, but you’re pretty good at reading others,” Nick said. “What do you want to do? If you feel like something is off about this guy then trust your gut. If you feel like he deserves another chance that is fine too.”

She hesitated. “I sort of think I owe him another chance.”

Nick’s head tilted ever so slightly for a moment, then the easy smile returned to his face. “Well, there’s your answer.”

“You really think so?”

“You tell me,” Nick said with a slight shrug. “You’re the one that’ll be dating the murderer.”

“He is not a murderer,” Judy laughed and hopped off the stool to give Nick a shove. “I swear, you keep talking like that and I won’t be able to introduce you.”

“That’s probably for the best. If he knew how handsome your partner was he’d never let you come to work,” Nick said and gave her a smirk.
Nick lightly drummed his fingers on the table, only half-listening to Chief Bogo go through the usual beginning-of-the-week business. Normally he would’ve made an effort to pay attention despite having heard it all before, but he’d felt off all weekend. There was simply too much on his mind and although he shouldn’t care about most of it he simply couldn’t help himself.

As he’d expected, getting unpacked hadn’t made him feel any better, though he was glad Judy had come over and forced him to actually do it. With everything out of the boxes the apartment no longer felt quite as hollow as it once had. That was something of a relief he supposed, but the place still felt distinctly foreign. In some ways it was like the apartment belonged someone else and he was just crashing there until his host got fed up and kicked him onto the street. He hoped that would change with time, but until then the best he could do was find something to distract himself. Like work.

“One last thing before I hand out assignments. The geniuses upstairs have decided they want to launch a new operation in the near future.” Nick’s ears perked up, though he maintained the same placid expression. “There aren’t many details yet, the op hasn’t even been given an official name, but those of you who want time off had better put it in soon. When—and I have been told it is ‘when’ and not ‘if’—this happens we’re going to be all hands on-board until everything wraps up. I expect everyone to be here as much as possible when that happens.”

A few groans went around the room, but Nick simply raised his hand. When Chief Bogo pointedly ignored him he decided to speak up anyway.

“Does that mean you’ll be throwing office slumber parties?” It was a fairly lame joke, but still got a chuckle or two.

“Oh yes, Officer Wilde. Filled with paperwork and tight deadlines.”

“Don’t forget your cheerful personality to keep us all motivated,” Nick said, earning a couple more chuckles.

Chief Bogo coughed. “Indeed,” he sighed, then looked down at his lectern. “With that let me get back to assignments…”

This time Nick did pay attention to the cape buffalo, although not because it was any more interesting. He’d decided on his own that it paid to know what the others in the precinct were doing and where they were, if only to have an idea of how long it would take help to arrive if something went pear-shaped. Without any immediate crisis demanding attention everyone’s duties were fairly typical, however. Patrols, a couple of robbery investigations, and interviews to be conducted on existing cases.

“Officer Hopps and Wilde, I’ll be sending the two of you out to Sahara Square. A residential district in that area recently had a couple of break-ins. The local precinct already has the investigations in hand, but that has left them shorthanded elsewhere. I’ve agreed to help them cover their patrols.”

Bogo handed Judy the folder with their assignment and she immediately began to read. Nick was about to get out of the chair when the chief’s eyes locked onto him.

*Here it comes.*

“Officer Wilde, my office. Now.”
Beside him Judy blinked, then put the folder down and stood up in the chair. “Sir? Why? He hasn’t had a chance to do anything.”

“He isn’t in trouble, Hopps,” Chief Bogo said, then gave Nick a sideways look. “Not exactly. I just want to have a word with him.”

Nick put on his best smile. “I’ll be fine, Carrots. Shouldn’t take longer than a few minutes, I’ll meet you in the car.”

All eyes were on him as he followed the chief upstairs. Most were probably wondering what he’d done this time. The entire department seemed to be aware that he was skating on thin ice, and he could tell some of them were just waiting for him to get fired. They’d probably be glad to see him go too. That, along with Judy’s earlier request, was the reason he’d reigned himself in. He dearly wanted to prove they were wrong about him.

The moment he entered the office Bogo strode over to a filing cabinet and retrieved a folder from the top drawer. He then dropped it onto his desk, already glaring at Nick.

“Officer Wilde, what is this?”

“It would appear to be paperwork, sir,” Nick said lightly, then wilted slightly under the cape buffalo’s glare. “Well it is. I was simply doing what you wanted.”

“I do not recall asking you for all this,” Chief Bogo said. “There is enough work for me without—”

“Actually you did ask for it, sir,” Nick said. “You told me to make sure that Carrots won’t get in trouble if IA decides to come after me. That is all of my notes from the cases where I’ve behaved questionably. I thought you would want it for the file you’re building on me.”

He relished Chief Bogo’s dumbfounded look and gave the cape buffalo a confident smile while he waited for a response.

Nick found Judy waiting by their patrol car and shot her a smirk before she could say anything. “Told you it wouldn’t be long.”

“To the surprise of everyone,” Judy said as she hopped into the car. “I got here first so I get to drive. What’d the chief want anyway?”

“He wanted to tell me about what a good job I’m doing.”

Judy rolled her eyes. “Liar.”

“It’s true,” Nick protested and settled into his seat. “Just the same, maybe we should try to do things your way for a while.”

“You really know how to fill me with confidence,” Judy said dryly.

“I’m serious, Carrots. No new problems, I swear.”

She gave him a look as she pulled out. “Buuuut?”
“But the chief may have suggested I keep it that way for a while,” Nick said and made an X over his chest. “Swear. So I’ll be a good boy and follow your lead.”

“Oh? So you’re going to do anything I say?” Judy smiled.

Nick shrugged. “Why not?”

“Prove it. Take off those silly sunglasses.”

His ears went back as he turned toward her. “Silly? I look awesome.”

“You wear them whenever we’re on duty. You even wore them for that stakeout. Why do you even have them?”

“They give me superpowers,” Nick answered as he settled back into his seat. “Plus they give me that whole tough cop vibe.”

Judy laughed, shaking her head as she turned onto the main thoroughfare connecting Savanna Central to Sahara Square. “Nick I hate to tell you this, but I think you need to be a wolf or a bear or something to pull that off.”

“You sure about that, Fluff? You used to be afraid of me.” He flashed her a toothy smile, then drew back before she could hit him.

The insides of Judy’s ears turned several shades darker pink. “Yeah, well, we’re not out there to make mammals think we’re tough. So take them off.” She paused to look up at him and smiled. “For me?”

Nick hesitated, then took off the aviator’s and hung them from the pocket on his chest. “Dirty pool.”

“Don’t pout. You look great without the shades too,” Judy assured him.

The admission mollified Nick somewhat. “Comments like that are the reason I can’t meet your boyfriend. You know that, right?”

“Can we not call him my boyfriend until I see how the next date goes?”

“I suppose,” Nick said as he leaned against the window. “Does that mean you’ve already have the next one set up?”

“Saturday,” Judy said, although he picked up a note of uncertainty in her voice. “He wanted to try again sooner, but I wanted some time first.”

“Got a place picked out?”

“Not yet,” she admitted, then sighed. “Kind of feel like maybe we should do something casual this time. Cheap. In case it doesn’t work out.”

They rode quietly for a couple minutes while Nick considered that. “You know, if that is what you feel comfortable with the city is filled with diners and cafes. I’m sure any will do.”

“I know.” Judy’s cheeks puffed out as she exhaled. “I’m just feeling guilty because I want a place where I can feel relaxed.”

“Then pick someplace you like. Surely you have at least one or two favorites. You said something about a diner with good salads last week, take him there.”
Judy pursed her lips as they continued down the thoroughfare in silence. Nick let her think, reluctant to push the conversation any more than necessary. When they finally came to the tunnel that led to Sahara Square he leaned over and cranked the AC, then held his hand in front of the vents to make sure the air started cooling down. Satisfied he leaned back once more and sighed, already dreading how much he was going to end up shedding if the chief kept them out there all week.

“Nick?”

He looked at her again. “Mmm?”

“Do you mind if I take him to the Rio Cafe?”

“What? Why?”

Judy’s ears lowered slowly. “I just…want to know if you mind. Honestly, I was already considering it, but it is kind of close to your place and I felt like that might be intruding.”

“I didn’t think you liked it that much,” Nick said as he looked back out his window. There wasn’t anything interesting to see, only the tunnel lights as they zipped past. “Knock yourself out, I’ll make sure to keep out of the way.”

They both sat quietly again, though this time Nick found the silence distinctly uncomfortable. He loosened his tie, casting about for anything he could ask. There wasn’t much uncovered ground left between them unfortunately. During those first weeks they’d spent together as partners they’d already discussed almost everything. She’d even told him enough about Bunny Burrow that sometimes he felt like he knew the place as well as she did despite never having been. Still, there had to be something.

“Hey, mind if I ask you something kind of personal?” he asked at last, still looking out the window. “Why did you become a cop?”

“Nick, you know I’ve already told you about that.”

“I know, the whole ‘Make the world better’ thing.” Nick shook his head. “But what is the real reason? I’m being serious.”

Judy took her eyes off the road just long enough to give him a look. “So am I. Ever since I was a kid I just wanted to help other mammals. Is that so strange?”

“A little, yeah,” Nick said, earning himself another look. “And I don’t mean it like that. I just mean that the world is a big thing. Much too big for anyone to really care about—”

“Well I do,” Judy said firmly, straightening up in her seat.

Nick bit the tip of his tongue for a second, then decided to try another way. “Look, let’s say I became a cop because I wanted to make Zootopia safer,” he said, then spread his hands out as if to indicate just how massive the city was. “There are millions of mammals living here, Carrots. I can’t possibly care about everyone at once. There are just too many faces. Sure they live here, but when I think of Zootopia I don’t think about any of them.

“Instead I think of my home. The places I like to go, and the good memories I have from there. Think about my mother—”

“Your mother?”
“Please, Carrots. Even us bloodthirsty predators have mommies that love us very much,” Nick said, a smile coming to his lips when Judy chuckled. “What I mean is that although I care about Zootopia the idea is just too huge for me to really get my mind around. It’s too abstract. I have to take these small, personal things and wrap them around that larger idea. I care about the city, but I care about it for the smallest and most personal reasons.

“So when you say you want to make the world a better place what are you really thinking about?”

This time Judy took her time before she answered, her left hand lightly brushing over her cheek. “There was this time when I was younger when I got into a bit of a scuffle with the school bully.”

Nick perked his ear. “Really? You must’ve given him a beating.”

She smiled faintly. “I gave him a pretty good kick,” she said, then returned her hand to the wheel as they came out the other end of the tunnel. “The other kids were impressed with how brave I’d been, but the truth was I didn’t feel very brave. At the time I felt small and helpless. I didn’t even really mean to hit him, it just kinda happened by reflex.

“That feeling stuck with me, I guess. I know there are mammals out there that try to intimidate others to get what they want, and it just isn’t right. So I suppose part of the reason is that I want to make sure nobody else has to feel the way I did back then.”

“Part of the reason?”

“Well you did spring a really big question on me all at once,” she said, smiling again. “Can’t expect me to think my way through it that quickly.”

Judy was beginning to regret having convinced Nick that they needed to leave the car behind to patrol on foot. He’d wanted to stick with cruising along their route in air conditioned comfort, but she was pretty sure part of the reason why Chief Bogo gave them so many patrols in the first place was because some politician somewhere wanted to showcase the Mammal Inclusion Initiative’s successes. What better way to accomplish that then parading the first bunny and fox police officers in front of the citizens at every possible opportunity?

Unfortunately Nick had apparently been serious about his intent to follow her lead today. She’d been skeptical at first, but after she overruled his concerns he’d just given in. No arguments, no sarcastic comments.

She’d forgotten that the forecast had predicted unseasonably warm weather. The sky was completely clear, and without any cloud cover the sun was free to beat down on the city without mercy. By itself that would’ve made for an uncomfortably hot day, but with the massive heaters that kept a hot, arid wind blowing across Sahara Square the temperature rose from merely harsh to outright punishing. Twice she’d drained the small water bottle she’d thought to bring and was well on the way to emptying it a third time.

The one saving grace was that the day had proven rewarding thus far. Sahara Square was home to most of the city’s recreational attractions and that made it an attractive vacation destination. Theme parks, luxury hotels, resorts, shopping malls, and casinos all grouped together. And, unlike other districts, night only brought more activity as concerts, operas, comedy houses, and other stage shows opened their doors. At any given time a large portion of the population was merely visiting, which
meant they weren’t necessarily familiar with the dangers associated with the heat.

Both she and Nick had helped escort tourists inside before they could suffer from heat exhaustion, and on one occasion she’d heard a baby beaver that had been left in a car. The doors were locked, so she had Nick bust the window to get the poor thing out before the cabin turned into an oven. Then they’d called an ambulance and waited to have a word with the parents. After some water and a chance to cool down the kid was fine, so she’d let them go with a warning. Mostly they just gave out directions when mammals asked however. Sometimes she still needed Nick’s help to remember where things were located, but she was getting to the point where that was rarely necessary any more. Even after a tour bus emptied out in front of her and she’d been swarmed by visitors looking for this or that attraction she’d been able to give directions without any problems. In another month or two she might not need Nick’s help answering questions at all. While she couldn’t imagine working with anyone else, the satisfaction that gave her made the sweltering heat slightly more tolerable.

When she finally finished handling the latest batch of tourists she looked around for Nick, wondering where he’d wandered off to while she was busy. She spotted him about a quarter block up the street. As she watched he suddenly stepped out into the middle of the road and held out his hand, forcing an ice cream truck to pull over before he walked over to the ordering window.

“Oh for the love of…” she muttered and hurried over. “Nick, what the heck do you think you’re doing?”

He didn’t even bother to look at her, already pulling out his wallet. “Abusing my authority to buy ice cream. It’s hot out here, Carrots.”

“You can’t just do that.”

“Oh I believe I can,” Nick said as he handed over the money. “In fact, I just did.”

She began to tap her foot impatiently. “Nick, officers don’t eat ice cream when they’re on duty.”

He was smiling again. “Really? Well if you don’t want yours I’d be happy to take care of it.”

Her foot came to a stop. “What?”

The leopard working the truck handed Nick a pawpsicle and a chocolate ice cream bunny. Nick’s grin widened as he took both, then dangled the bunny in front of her by the stick.

“I know you want it, Carrots.”

It was always infuriating when he was right about things like this. She sighed as she accepted the bunny then pulled the clear plastic wrapper off. It was so hot out that a single dribble had already started to run down the side. She barely had time to catch it with her tongue.

“Why did you get me a bunny?” she asked.

Nick took a few licks of his pawpsicle. “Because seeing you reduced to cannibalism amuses me.”

“Sometimes you have a sick sense of humor,” she said.

“If you like we can trade, though that would mean letting me devour a helpless frozen bunny in front of all these fine mammals.”

“You are lucky that I’m your partner,” Judy said after a few more licks. “I doubt anyone else would
be willing to put up with your antics.”

“As if I’d want to work with any of them. Have you seen that dopey look Lowell gets when he’s concentrating on something?” Nick asked, then opened his eyes wider, tilted his ears forward, and puckered his lips.

Judy laughed. “You’re one to talk.”

“Oh?”

“Whenever something startles you I swear it looks like you’re trying to swallow your tongue,” she said. “Plus your tail puffs out so it looks kind of like a bottle brush.”

Nick glanced back at his tail and frowned. “It does not.”

“Yes it does!” She took a bite of ice cream. “And then afterward when you try to play it off like you weren’t scared you just end up looking silly.”

“Well your nose twitches,” Nick said. “Can’t say it makes you look silly—”

“I know,” Judy said, throwing him a smug smile.

“—but it really does make you look—”

Her smile vanished. “Nick, you better not.”

“—adorable,” he finished, then bit down on his pawpsicle.

“I should hit you for that anyway,” Judy said.

“Relax. I was only teasing,” Nick said. “You should be happy; I only tease mammals I like.”

“Nick, you tease everyone.”

“I like a lot of mammals,” Nick said as he licked his stick clean, “but I don’t tease everyone. Some I insult.”

Judy took another couple licks of the ice cream bunny, trying to catch the dribs before they could reach her hand. With how quickly it was melting she knew it was a losing battle, but she managed to catch all but the smallest drips.

“And what would the difference be?” she asked.

Nick popped the stick into his muzzle and sucked on it as he considered the question. “Well, when I tease someone I’m just trying to tweak their whiskers a little. Insulting someone is more about pushing buttons I know will hurt them or make them furious,” he said, then dipped his ears. “Um… like when we first met.”

“Ah, yeah.” Judy felt her ears droop slightly at the memory. “I suppose you knew exactly what buttons to push.”

“Only because you were such a wide eyed idealist. Still are, in a way.” He quieted down for a moment. “At the time it really got on my nerves.”

“Really? I would have thought it was the fox repellent.”
“Honestly? That just made it a normal day for me,” Nick said with a light laugh. “Sure it hurts to see someone carrying that stuff, but you weren’t the first bunny I saw with a bottle close at hand. You won’t be the last. Your attitude was just unbearable though.”

Judy finally managed to get the last of the ice cream into her mouth, then spent a few moments licking her fingers clean. “I wasn’t that bad, was I?”

“You reminded me of myself when I was a kid,” Nick said, seeming to look everywhere but at her. “I couldn’t believe anyone could reach adulthood without losing that. Made me think you were some ignorant bunny with a sheltered upbringing. Maybe I envied you a little.”

“Trust me, there isn’t anything about my life while growing up worth envying,” Judy said, rubbing her arm. “I was just the weird kid with impossible dreams.”

“Maybe, but you didn’t give up did you? Even with all my antics. It really started to get to me. Began to feel guilty, which I blamed on you as well.”

Judy looked up at Nick. “Why would you even care?”

“Because,” he said, giving the tip of her ear a light flick. “I did give up. Unless you did too I couldn’t go on believing that was just the way the world worked, and that would mean I’d been lying to myself for most of my life.”

“And now here you are,” Judy said, then lightly bumped against Nick. “So does that mean I was right all along?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Nick said and bumped her back. “Besides, you did end up going home, so technically—”

She chuckled and shook her head as Nick continued to talk, then looked around to make sure nobody needed them. Fortunately it seemed the afternoon rush was already past. Most of the tourists were either already at their destinations, or had decided to remain indoors until the temperature began to come back down.

Just as she was about to put a stop to Nick’s smug rambling she spotted a group of mammals emerge from an alley. There weren’t too many of them, but that wasn’t what caught her attention. At first glance they all appeared to be made up of wildebeests, and she had rarely seen them travel in groups smaller than several dozen. Even that might have slipped her notice if not for one thing: a lone fox seemed to be accompanying them. It was such an unusual sight she came to a stop without realizing it.

“Hey, what do you think of that?” she asked. Nick’s head swung around, his lips pressing together the moment he locked eyes onto the other fox. “What?”


“Old buddy?” she asked, trying to read Nick’s expression.

“I ran with him a couple times,” Nick admitted, “but I wouldn’t call us friends. I was only interested in making money, but I think he got off on trying to completely ruin lives. Surprised he isn’t in jail.”

Judy lightly bit her lip, then thought back to how much Gideon had changed. “Maybe he’s cleaned up his life?”

“Maybe,” Nick said, although he didn’t sound terribly convinced. “I don’t suppose you saw him
selling anything? One of his hobbies used to be dealing drugs.”

“No, just noticed him coming out of the alley with those wildebeest,” Judy admitted, beginning to grow concerned now.

“Figures.”

“Do you think we’ll catch him doing something if we follow him?” Judy asked.

Nick only shook his head. “He isn’t that stupid,” he began, then cut off as Flip turned and looked right at them.

Without a word the other fox raised one hand high in the air and extended his middle finger while looking directly at Nick. His gaze held steady briefly, then gradually drifted to her. A second later she saw a white flash of teeth.

“Oh look, he sees us,” Nick said, sounding almost bored. “And now you know why he’s called Flip.”

“He does that to every cop he sees?”

Nick shook his head again. “No, only to mammals he hates. Don’t suppose there is some way we can bust him for insulting an officer?”

“If there was I would’ve locked you up the day we met,” Judy said as Flip finally turned to leave. “Let’s just keep an eye on him. Maybe he’ll make a mistake.”

“Might as well.”
Ten Fifty-Four

Just three days of being assigned to Sahara Square had Judy ready to return to Savanna Central. The first day had been the hottest, but just that morning she’d spotted the first signs that her fur was beginning to molt. At the rate things were going she was going to need a fresh brush just to make sure she didn’t look like some poorly groomed vagrant, and then she’d have that annoying itch that always seemed to happen when her fur first started to grow back in.

The one silver lining for her was that the heat seemed to be hitting Nick even harder. He did his best to act like it wasn’t a big deal, but his fur had thinned out so much that he actually looked physically smaller. Part of her wondered just how much trouble he’d had brushing out that coat of his, especially with that plush tail of his. She could almost imagine a pile of fur large enough to make a completely new fox lying in one corner of his new apartment.

But the heat was only the most minor annoyance. Yes, it was constantly there, but after that first sweltering day she’d started to adjust. The real problem was just the sheer amount of activity that swirled around the district both day and night. With so many vacationers there was rarely a break in the flow of bodies, and maintaining any level of vigilance was an exhausting undertaking.

Added to that, Nick seemed to be growing more restless and irritable with every passing day, and she wasn’t really sure why. Perhaps he was feeling the heat more than she was, though given his familiarity with every corner of the city she doubted it was that much of a problem for him. Or maybe his attempts to keep his head down were beginning to wear on him. All week he’d been almost the picture of the ideal officer with the exception of a few inconsequential indulgences. He’d even chosen to keep his aviator’s sunglasses tucked into his breast pocket without her having to tell him to put them away.

Or maybe it had to do with Flip. That first day they’d managed to keep tabs on what he was doing, but as Nick had predicted the other fox hadn’t done anything questionable in their presence. To Flip’s credit he knew an impressive array of rude gestures to send their way. Each time he always went to the trouble of looking directly their way, as if to make sure they knew he was doing it just for them. And there was always that flash of teeth when his eyes met hers. She told herself it was just Flip’s attempt to frighten her; to say that he was still a dangerous fox and if she wasn’t careful he might decide to take her as prey.

She’d love to see him try. She’d dealt with a panther infected with the Nighthowler toxin. Compared to that an ordinary fox was next to nothing.

Nick seemed to take the encounters more personally however. From time to time she’d caught him glaring at Flip, his fur practically standing on end. When she’d asked he gave her some line about how foxes generally didn’t get along too well, but she didn’t buy it. It certainly didn’t help that after the first day they seemed to keep running into Flip, and with every encounter she could feel Nick’s frustration grow.

“Relax,” she told him when they saw Flip yet again. “He’s just trying to get under your fur.”

“It’s working,” Nick said, his lips drawn back half-way to a snarl. “He’s up to something, and he’s rubbing my nose in the fact that I can’t do anything about it.”

Judy reached over and gave Nick’s sleeve a tug. “If you’re right about that then you’re doing exactly what he wants by getting upset.”
Nick sighed, then nodded and let her lead him away. Every few steps he looked back in Flip’s direction however. Once the other fox was completely out of sight Nick finally began to relax. That, in turn, made something inside her uncoil as well, relieving a tension she hadn’t realized was there.

“Thanks.”

The terse comment made her glance up at Nick, worried that he was still feeling upset, but instead she found his ears folded back. A moment later she realized his tail was tucked partly between his legs as well.

“You’ve done the same for me before,” she said.

And it was true. Of the two of them she was the one that normally let herself get carried away by the moment, and most of the time Nick was there to pull her back. Her first impulse was always to try to fix everything at once. Having Nick around to force her to be practical probably kept her out of more trouble than she realized. Granted he had a knack of dragging her along into trouble of a different sort, but that was merely some cosmic scale seeking balance.

“You looked like you were about to take a swing at him,” she ventured after a bit more time had passed.

“Was considering it,” Nick admitted, then gave a sheepish shrug when he noticed her reproachful look. “Don’t tell me there isn’t anyone you hate enough to punch.”

“There isn’t.”

Nick squinted as he looked at her, then slowly smiled once more. “You know, I actually believe you.”

“I’m surprised there’s anyone that can get to you that much,” Judy said. “I’ve seen mammals shout worse to your face without getting a reaction.”

“That’s because I have amazing self-control.” Nick’s tail slowly swished over to one side.

“But Flip is different?”

He took a deep breath and nodded. “Flip is different. After we went our separate ways there was an unspoken agreement to avoid each other. Apparently that isn’t the case anymore.”

“Look on the bright side. Soon we’ll be back to our normal patrol and he won’t be our problem anymore,” Judy said.

That seemed to banish the last traces of Nick’s foul mood, so Judy looped their path around the next block to bring them back to the patrol route. As they neared the location where they’d last seen Flip she sensed a hint of tension coming from Nick, but once it became clear that the obscene lowlife had moved on Nick immediately went back to his normal self, full of quips and lighthearted teasing.

At first Judy worried they would run into Flip again after turning a corner; that had been the way of things every day thus far. For now they seemed to have lost the other fox however, and before long she was bantering along with Nick and able to fully focus on the reason they were out in the first place. It still mostly involved giving tourists directions, but that was a huge improvement in her book. She far preferred to deal with regular citizens, at least until she could think of a way to trick Flip into making a mistake. That had worked on Nick, after all.

The rest of their shift almost seemed to fly along. There were minor bumps here and there. Breaking
up a few arguments before they became actual fights, something that was surprisingly easy to do while in uniform since there were few mammals willing to risk an assault charge over some petty disagreement. Once they caught a fawn about to tag a wall. Judy had confiscated the can of spray paint, leaving it up to Nick to give the kid a warning accompanied by a particularly toothy smile. They had just gotten back into the patrol car, exhausted and ready to head home, when one final call came over the radio.

“Dispatch to Officers Hopps and Wilde. Are you still on site?”

Judy gave Nick a look that he answered with a smile before picking up the radio. “Wilde here. What’s up?”

“We’ve got a report of a disturbance in your area,” the radio crackled. “Noise complaint involving a private residence. Possible domestic. 2011 Acadia Street.”

“Affirmative, dispatch,” Nick sighed. “We’ll swing by before heading home.” He set down the handset and gave her his most innocent smile. “I bet you this is just someone watching a movie with the volume cranked.”

“Har har,” Judy said. “You seriously want me to put money on the chance that someone is getting beat up?”


Judy considered that as she shifted into gear. “How much?”

“Only got five on me right now,” Nick confessed. “Buying you ice cream all week has been expensive.”

She snorted at that, but agreed as they made their way through the city until they found the right neighborhood. The whole time she was tempted to hit the siren, but doing so without a confirmed emergency went against protocol. Fortunately, it wasn’t too long before they turned onto the street and began reading address numbers.

As it turned out the neighborhood was lower-middle class. Every house was single story and looked to be one of several identical floor plans squeezed into lots just slightly larger than the houses themselves. After another few minutes they found the place and pulled to a stop. Judy’s heart sank a bit as she realized the door frame for the front entrance was in splinters, the door itself barely hanging by its hinges.

Reluctantly, she keyed the radio. “Dispatch? This is Officer Hopps. We’ve arrived at 2011 Acadia. Be advised, the front door has been forced open.”

A pause, and then: “Roger, Officer Hopps. Proceed with caution.”

“That means don’t go charging in blind,” Nick said with a lazy smile.

She gave him a dirty look. “I know what the word ‘caution’ means, thank you,” she said, trying to ignore the tiny knot in her stomach. “Okay, we’re going to secure the outside first, then find out if anyone is still inside.”

“You’re the boss. Taser or tranq?”

That was a question Judy hadn’t even begun to consider. Each option had its problems. The tranq pistols could be fired in quick succession, but against larger mammals it could take several shots
before the drug cocktail took effect and there was sometimes a delay between when a target was hit and when they went out. More troubling, sometimes there were bad reactions to the tranquilizers, and they couldn’t be used on smaller suspects at all. The taser could have its voltage adjusted on the fly which made them generally safer, but it had a much shorter range and needed to be reloaded between shots. It also rarely knocked a target out, instead paralyzing the subject as long as the current was applied, so continued resistance could sometimes be an issue.

Judy eyed the home and bit her lip. “Taser. Doesn’t look like there’s a crowd.”

Once they were ready to approach the house Nick clicked his tongue twice to get her attention, then pointed at the front door. She raised her taser, worried that he’d seen someone inside, but the entrance hall looked completely empty. Then she realized the door had been forced open from the inside, practically torn off its hinges which was decidedly…odd.

They carefully cleared both the front and back yards. Along the way they tried to look inside the windows, but most rooms had the blinds drawn. The few peeks they did manage revealed the interior was completely trashed, as if there had been some sort of riot inside, leaving little question about what had caused the initial complaint. Whatever had happened, the place sounded relatively quiet now. All she could hear was the house’s AC struggling to keep the house at temperature even though the front door was wide open.

“Smell anything?” Judy asked as they made their way back around to the front.

“There was a group here earlier. Can’t tell if anyone’s still around though,” Nick answered, then rapped on the wall when they got back to the front porch. “Hey! Anyone home?”

She listened intently, counting off the time by her heartbeat. One…two…three…then came something she thought sounded like either a groan or a snort. Something crashed to the ground inside, then nothing.

“Dispatch, this is Officer Hopps. The area looks clear. I think we have a party that got out of hand,” she said into the radio, feeling a touch of relief. “It looks like everyone’s already bailed, but I think I hear someone hurt inside.”

“Roger. Do you need an ambulance?”

“We haven’t gone in yet, so I don’t know how bad it is,” she started, then stopped short. “Correction, why don’t you send one just to be safe? We’ll head in to make sure they’re okay.”

“Must have been one hell of a party,” Nick commented, securing his taser to his belt as he stepped through the door.

Judy followed him in, careful not to step on anything as they made their way to the living room. Everything inside had been smashed. Several of the walls even featured fresh holes. Whatever had happened, things had gotten really wild.

“Something like this happened around Bunny Burrow when I was in high school,” she commented as she surveyed the damage. “Parents gone for the weekend. Kids invite some friends, who invite their friends, who invite their friends. Next thing you know everything is out of control.” She paused, remembering the scandal that had accompanied the event. “I think the damage was so bad that the parents ended up having to buy a new house.”

“If it was as bad as this I’m not surprised. Looks like someone set off a bomb,” Nick said, slowly shaking his head. “Kind of upset I wasn’t invited.”
“Uh huh. And why would you want to be at a party filled with teenagers?”

Nick smirked. “A bunch of kids convinced they already know everything about the world? I’d be able to hustle them even easier than I did you, Fluff.”

The kitchen was nearly as bad off as the living room. The table and chairs had been reduced to splinters. Crushed beer cans and empty pizza boxes lay everywhere. About the only thing that remained intact was the marble counter, and even that looked like someone had been dancing on it. They were just about to move on when Nick suddenly came to a stop, then backed up once more.

“Find something?” she asked.

“I smell blood,” he said as he turned in place. “Faint, but it’s fresh.”

She moved closer to him, her nose twitching as she tested the air, but of course she couldn’t smell a thing. All at once she was glad that an ambulance was already on the way.

The next rooms were an office and a bathroom. Both were completely wrecked. Even the porcelain toilet bowl had been shattered. Scattered through both was an impressive collection of drug paraphernalia. Needles, lighters, razors. They even spotted several baggies filled with pills and powder. This time she let Nick make the report while she moved on to check the bedrooms.

“She tentatively knocked on the door. “Are you okay in there?” she asked. “I’m Officer Judy Hopps, ZPD. If you’re injured we can help.”

More movement and a grunt, but no answer came. She could feel Nick’s eyes watching her as she reached for the doorknob and slowly twisted it. Still nothing, so she gave it enough of a push to swing it fully open.

The horns of a wildebeest filled her vision, coming so quickly she barely had enough time to process what she was seeing before she dove out of the way. The wildebeest slammed into the wall behind where she’d been standing, his horns briefly lodged in the drywall. A jagged gash down his side oozed blood, though if it bothered him at all he didn’t show it. With a jerk he wrenched his head free, very briefly staggered, then spotted Nick as the fox fumbled at his belt to draw his taser.

“Look out!” she cried.

Her warning came just a moment before the wildebeest charged once more, careening ahead on all fours. Nick got his taser free, but his shot was rushed and only one of the prongs stuck. At the last moment he dodged by throwing himself into the office.

Judy was already back up and running by then, her heart pounding in her chest as she chased after the wildebeest. The mammal was running like…like an animal. Memories of the Nighthowler incident immediately filled her thoughts as she drew her own taser and fired, only to miss high when the wildebeest staggered and fell.

Without hesitation she seized on the opening. Several bounds brought her over to the fallen mammal
and she quickly cuffed his wrists together. It wouldn’t be enough to stop him, not if he really was under the influence of Nighthowler toxin, but right then she was willing to settle for keeping the threat contained. She then immediately hopped back out of range as the wildebeest began to thrash about to free himself.

“Dispatch, we found an injured wildebeest,” she panted as she backed away. “Suspect is extremely agitated. May be under the influence of Nighthowlers.”

Before an answer could come the wildebeest managed to get back up, staggering now that the cuffs made it more difficult for him to move around on all fours. Their eyes locked and she saw a mixture of pain and rage so intense that she nearly froze in place. Then the mammal charged again, the entire mass of his body surging recklessly toward her with such surprising speed that she barely managed to leap over his back in time.

“Backup is on the way, Officer Hopps,” the radio crackled.

She was too busy trying to reload her taser to answer. Back in the academy she’d been drilled mercilessly on how to properly insert a new cartridge. The instructors had assured her that in the heat of the moment seemingly simple tasks often became shockingly difficult. She’d thought she understood, but now that her body was pumped up with adrenaline she had a difficult time keeping her hands steady. Twice she failed to slot the cartridge in place, then finally managed to slam it home just as the wildebeest began to get his feet under him once more.

A quick pull of the trigger sent both of the prongs into the wildebeest’s back and she heard the tell-tale rapid pops as current was sent through the wires. Her thumb quickly dialed up the voltage until she saw the wildebeest tense up, then collapse.

Nick finally reemerged from the office just in time to see her give the wildebeest a second jolt when it tried to rise. He groaned lightly, rubbing his side as he leaned against the door frame for a moment.

“Nick, you okay?”

“Yeah,” he said, although she could hear a hint of pain in his voice. “Just didn’t get out of the way quite fast enough. Luckily the ground was there to break my fall.”

She rolled her eyes. If he was able to make a joke he couldn’t be that bad off. “Then could you go back to the car and get the tranqs out of the trunk before the ambulance arrives?”

“And here I thought you had everything under control.”

“You know, Carrots, if you wanted to see me with my shirt off this badly you could have just told me,” Nick said as the elk EMT checked out his side. “I have policy of doing that for pretty ladies that ask nicely.”

Judy couldn’t help chuckling and decided to let the comment slide. She’d insisted he get looked at when the ambulance finally arrived despite his protests that he felt fine. Growing up working on the family farm with her many brothers had taught her a thing or two about the male ego. For some reason they always seemed reluctant to ask for help, and always tried to play off their injuries as not a big deal. She wasn’t sure how hard Nick had gotten hit, he claimed the wildebeest had just clipped him, but there was no way she was going to risk him brushing a cracked rib off as nothing in some display of macho bravado.
“Just hold still and let them look at you,” she said.

Nick was about to say something else, only to yelp instead as the elk began to palpate his side. “Hey, careful!”

The wildebeest had already been taken away for treatment, although she wasn’t sure how long it would be before they gave him the Nighthowler antidote. First they’d need to make sure there wasn’t anything else in his system considering just how many drugs they’d found, and until they could question him there was no way to tell how he’d been exposed to Nighthowlers in the first place, assuming that was indeed the cause.

She hoped it wasn’t the same nonsense that had happened in the wake of Bellweather’s incarceration. Emotions had been running so hot at the time that despite all the evidence against her there had been a very vocal segment of the population that believed she was innocent, and that the Nighthowler toxin was just a convenient excuse to downplay incidents of predators going savage. Some of her supporters had the brilliant idea of exposing themselves to the toxin intentionally in an effort to debunk the case with predictable results. The worst incident had happened in the Meadow District when a dozen sheep had somehow managed to get their hands on the concentrated version of the toxin. After just how badly that went she’d assumed everyone had come to accept that Nighthowlers really were dangerous.

“This counts as being wounded in the line of duty, right?” Nick asked. “Does that mean I get a medal or something?”

“You’re thinking of the military,” Judy informed him. “For us it just means extra paperwork.”

“Paperwork.” Nick made a face. “Criminals don’t have that. I’ll bet you that’s why they’re always one step ahead.”

Before she could respond the EMT lightly prodded Nick’s side with several fingers, drawing a sharp wince from the fox. Her ears perked up in concern, but the elk didn’t seem worried so she tried to reign in her worries. Clearly he would be fine given enough time, even broken ribs would heal eventually, but she’d grown so used to his company since they’d become partners that the idea of working with someone else while he was forced onto medical leave made her uncomfortable.

Of course there was the option to work alone while Nick recovered, but if she opted to do that Bogo would almost be forced to assign her the most boring duties. Not out of malice, of course. The boring work just happened to be the safest type of assignment that could be given to an officer that was working on their own. She had a brief flash of being stuck doing parking duty for weeks and dealing with irate citizens.

Chief Bogo wouldn’t dare. Probably. Most likely she’d end up taking interviews, or directing traffic, or even wind up in the records room which always seemed to need some TLC. Each was dull in its own way, and without Nick to keep her company it wouldn’t be long before she was bored out of her mind even if the chief did his best to mix things up. At the end of the day, it wasn’t Bogo’s problem if she found her assignments tedious.

Pondering the odd limbo her near future was in had set her to pacing at some point. She took a deep breath and told herself to let it go. Nick was fine. He was fine. The easy expression on his muzzle made that obvious, and the way she was acting practically guaranteed that he was going to tease her about it during the drive back.

She stopped with her back turned to him and deliberately crossed her arms over her chest, her foot lightly tapping the ground. Far from perfect, but better. She could still hear Nick’s stifled protests as
his injury was examined however, so she began to scan the onlookers in an effort to distract herself.

She’d heard that the guilty always return to the scene of the crime. It was the type of melodramatic drivel that played well in detective novels, but there was a grain of truth in it. Arsonists often hung around to watch their handiwork for example, and often times shoplifters targeted places near where they lived—the same ones they normally shopped at. If the house really had been the site of a wild party there was little doubt that seeing the wildebeest go savage had been what caused everyone to bail, and in that case some of the party-goers might be curious to see what had happened to their friend.

After several minutes she gave up. Apparently the entire neighborhood had turned out to see what the commotion was now that the scene had been taped off and police cruisers were blocking all traffic. She didn’t really know what to look for in the first place, and the sea of unfamiliar faces all jockeying to get a better look was overwhelming.

She was about to give up and check on Nick once more when a flash of russet caught her eye. At some point a fox had wandered over and pushed his way to the front. After just a second his eyes settled on her and he gave a toothy grin as he casually extended his middle finger.

All she could do was stare, wondering what he was doing here. Pure chance? That seemed unlikely. Had he followed them somehow? He didn’t seem the type to own a car of his own, so that was a reach as well. So either he’d gotten word of what happened remarkably fast and decided to show up on a whim or…

Or he’d already known that something would happen.

His grin widened, then he turned to walk away. She longed to go after him, to arrest him as a person of interest, but there simply wasn’t anything proving that he was linked to what had happened. Any lawyer in the world would have him released in under an hour. As far as the law was concerned, he was completely clean.

“Well, Officer Wilde, you got amazingly lucky,” the elk said from behind her. “One heck of a bruise, but otherwise you seem to be in one piece.”

She turned to find Nick grinning in that infuriating “I told you so” way he did whenever he was right. He winked at her confidently as he began to button his shirt back up, his tail giving a satisfied swish.

“See? Nothing to worry about,” he said, then got a better look at her face. “Is something wrong?”

Judy bit her lip, then gave her head a shake. “I was just worried about you.”

Nick’s head tilted, then he gave her a crooked smile. “Aw, you really do love me.”

She managed a small smile, but couldn’t help feeling a stab of guilt even though it was best if he never found out.
Nick sat, twirling a pen in one hand while tapping on his keyboard to scroll through social media posts with the other. The bruise on his side pestered him with a dull throb, but so long as he focused on work and was careful not to move in the wrong way he could mostly ignore it. Fortunately Bogo hadn’t been able to send them back out to Sahara Square today—regulations forbid him from putting them on the street for several days—so he was free to jot down notes on the legal pad he had balanced on his knee.

“What the heck do you think you’re doing, Nick?” Judy demanded. The sudden outburst made him jump in his seat and he lost control of the pen, sending it flying across the room until it struck the far wall.

He gasped for breath and willed the fur on his tail to lay flat once more. “Jeez, Carrots, don’t do that when I’m focusing on work.”

“Is that what you call it? Because it looked to me like you were checking Furbook while on the clock.”

“This is an investigation,” he said, turning his monitor so she could see. “Seems like every kid uses this nonsense. I’ve been searching hashtags to see what I can learn about that party last night.” He paused to hold up his notepad. “Already got about three dozen names.”

Judy’s ears stood a little straighter and she hopped from her chair to get a better look at the pad. “That’s brilliant.”

“All my ideas are brilliant, thank you for noticing.”

“I bet with this we’ll be able to track down everyone that was at the party,” Judy said eagerly. “You should really take this to Bogo so we can get their addresses.”

“Already got most of their addresses,” Nick admitted.

“You did? How?”

“Because they post everything,” Nick said and tossed the notepad back onto his desk, then scrolled up until he found a post that he began to read with his voice pitched a little higher. “OMG, I got totes wasted last night and flashed some guys on the street.”

Judy snorted a little bit. “I actually have a sister that did something like that.”

“Did she talk about it where the whole world can see?” Nick asked, already scrolling again.

“No! Are you insane? My parents were afraid of the web back then. We weren’t allowed to go online without someone looking over our shoulder.”

“Well, believe me that last one was pretty tame,” Nick said, then gave her a sideways look as he found another one. “They post pictures, Carrots. Pictures! Of themselves drinking illegally and doing drugs. Then they tag everyone in the picture and brag about how wild things got.”

“Well, when officers show up to have a few words with their parents maybe they’ll straighten out. At the very least they’re making our job easier,” Judy said.
“I’ll bet we could solve a lot of cases just by keeping an eye on this stuff,” Nick said, watching the posts scroll along again. “Of course that assumes you can read it all before your brain leaks out your ear.”

“It isn’t all that bad. I use it to keep in touch with my family.”

Half a dozen arguments sprung to Nick’s mind almost immediately, but he pushed them off and gave an exaggerated sigh. “Oh no,” he muttered, slowly shaking his head while Judy looked on curiously. “I don’t understand what all the cool kids are into anymore. Soon I’ll be spouting archaic slang in an attempt to prove I’m still hip and with it.”

“You realize that Furbook was just getting started around the time you turned 20, right?” Judy asked.

Nick went back to scrolling through the messages. “It was all college kids back then, and that wasn’t exactly my crowd. I was more worried with trying to make ends meet since I was out on my own.”

“I can only imagine,” Judy chuckled. “Trying to scrape by on two hundred a day at that age. What a struggle.”

“Please don’t tell me you actually bought that line.”

“Well yeah,” Judy said. Nick could feel her eyes on him once more. “That’s what you told me when we met. Two hundred a day since you were twelve.”

“You’re more gullible than I thought.” He paused in his search long enough to give her a teasing smirk. “Hustling takes time to learn, like most everything. When I was twelve I had trouble bringing in ten or twenty a week. I barely knew what I was doing.

Looking back, I think most of my marks just felt sorry for me. Still, it was enough to help with the groceries as long as I made sure my parents didn’t realize where the extra money came from.” He paused again, his ears slowly dipping down as he remembered the time he’d gotten caught sneaking money into his mother’s purse. “Actually dad knew. Never said anything though. Probably felt guilty that he and mom couldn’t bring enough in to support us without the help of my dirty money.”

For just a moment he found himself reliving those early attempts. He’d tried his hand at pickpocketing first only to discover that he wasn’t any good at it. He got caught almost every time, but to his amazement found that if he just returned the wallet and claimed they’d dropped it he was almost always let go. Sometimes they’d even toss a couple bucks his way as a reward. Then there was the first time his mark hadn’t bought it and called security. He’d been so afraid he was about to be sent to jail that he began bawling like an infant. The scene had been so pitiful they’d just let him go with a warning.

Judy’s eyes were on him again, so he forced his ears back up and gave her the usual easy smile as he went back to scanning the posts. “Anyway, I wasn’t averaging two hundred a day until I was twenty-six.”

Judging by the expression on Judy’s face she’d noticed the lapse. She’d been getting so much better at reading him recently that she continually surprised him. It was a bit unsettling really. For years he’d practiced maintaining a facade so he couldn’t be hurt, but she seemed to be finding every crack. Clearly he had some sort of tell she’d found. She never pushed though. He wasn’t sure if that was because she already knew, or if she just didn’t want to pry into thoughts that made him uncomfortable. Either way, he welcomed the space.

He was so distracted that he was scanning on autopilot until Judy gave him a nudge. “What was
Nick blinked, then scrolled back a couple posts until he saw a video. The title simply read: Crazy F-ing Drugs. Without thinking he clicked to start it playing and was treated to the shaky footage of someone trying to record a party with their phone. It was immediately obvious that whoever held the camera didn’t know the first thing about cinematography. Every few seconds they swung the camera around, barely giving it time to focus before they were on the move once more. Half the time they were zoomed in far too much, and the other half he wasn’t actually sure what he was supposed to be looking at. Worst of all they apparently didn’t even know to hold their phone sideways.

Just three minutes in and he was about to give up on the video, but then the cameraman was through the main party to the back rooms. Nick immediately recognized the office, although seeing it intact made him uncertain it was the same place at first. Perhaps intact wasn’t quite the right word, there was already plenty of damage, but the desk and bookshelves hadn’t yet been turned into scrap.

As they watched the camera focused in on a group of four teens gathered around a card table they’d set up in the center of the room with an impressive collection of drugs laid out. Nick couldn’t tell what any of it was. The popular drugs had changed quite a bit from when he was a kid it seemed.

“There’s our Wildebeest,” Judy whispered.

Nick only nodded, unable to look away as the kid joked with one of his friends while he crushed some sort of pill into a fine dust, then laid it out in a neat line. He nearly paused the video, already knowing what was about to happen. It played past in an instant in his mind while the video crawled along at a snail’s pace.

The wildebeest inhaled the entire line with one snort then began to sputter as he wiped his nose with the back of his hand. Some of the other youths teased him while others were already asking to know what it was like. “Weird” was the only answer they got before the kid grimaced and rested his head on the table, eliciting another round of jeers from his friends. Then the room got quiet as the kid started to gasp for air, his whole body convulsing for a moment. Someone asked if he was okay, but the question was only met with a snort as the wildebeest doubled over.

Judy stopped the video there, her eyes wide. “Drugs? They put it in drugs! Why would anyone do that?”

“Probably thought it would make the high more intense,” Nick said, drawing an incredulous look from Judy. “I know, but there are all sorts of stupid stories about this kind of thing. Finnick is full of stories about it.”

“He’s an addict?”

Nick snorted. “No, but he used to deal a long time ago. Before I started working with him.”

The bunny pursed her lips for a moment, ears lowered half way. “I’m not sure how I feel learning that your hustling kept anyone from doing something worse.”

“That’s me, an unbridled force of good.”

Judy wasn’t in any mood for his jest however. “We need to tell the Chief. Right now.”
Chief Bogo watched the video without comment, his expression gradually growing darker as time went on until it finally ended. To Judy’s surprise he wordlessly restarted it and watched through from the beginning, occasionally pausing once the drugs were in view. A heavy sigh slipped and he closed his eyes, rubbing them for a moment.

“I’ll tell the crime lab to have the confiscated drugs tested. It’s a good thing you brought this to me, it may be the reason the antidote hasn’t worked on that kid yet.”

Judy’s ears perked up and she glanced over at Nick. “It hasn’t worked?”

“No,” Bogo said bluntly, grinding his teeth. “No it hasn’t. The doctors think he may have gotten a particularly large dose, which I suppose is possible, but if he mixed it with his drugs who knows what could be going on.”

Beside her, Nick coughed. “We also managed to get names of individuals who likely attended the party. Questioning them might tell us more about what was going on, assuming they don’t clam up the moment a ZPD cruiser rolls up to their door.” He handed the list of names over to the chief and they watched as the cape buffalo put on his reading glasses.

“We can get a court order compelling them to make a statement,” Bogo said. “If this is about to be the next problem I’d rather get ahead of it while we have a chance. Good work, both of you.”

“Nick found it on his own,” Judy said happily, feeling a rush of satisfaction. “He came up with the idea of checking Furbook. I just happened to be there when he scrolled past the video.”

Nick’s ears folded back. “Actually I scrolled right past the video. You’re the one that pointed it out.”

“Spare me,” Bogo grunted, his ears flicking in annoyance as he set the list down. “Before you pat yourselves on the back too much I should mention that I’ve already read your preliminary reports on the incident. Both of you are extremely lucky.” He paused to give Judy a look. “Some luckier than others.”

“Sir, I’m not sure what you are implying,” Judy said, her whiskers quivering lightly. “We were expecting to deal with a noise complaint. At worst we were expecting a domestic disturbance. Nobody could’ve expected what we encountered.”

“Which is exactly why we have procedures, Officer Hopps. Ones designed to keep officers safe when facing the unknown.”

“Give us a break,” Nick said. “Nothing bad happened, and we were able to get the kid under control and into a hospital without hurting him.”

“Officer Wilde, could you please touch your ear tips?” Bogo asked calmly. When Nick hesitated Bogo folded one ear back and tilted his head. “Well?”

Slowly Nick did as he was told, wincing once his hands came above his shoulder. He quickly touched his ear tips and lowered his hands again, then rubbed his side lightly. Judy watched, her ears starting to droop behind her long before Chief Bogo’s gaze settled on her once more.

“Don’t worry, Hopps, neither of you are in trouble,” he said evenly, “however I expect both of you to come in this weekend to review the proper procedures of clearing a building. Understood?”

“Yes sir,” Judy said quietly.

“And I want you both to practice at the range for an hour before heading home tonight,” Bogo
continued. “I expect my officers to be able to hit their mark on the first shot, especially at such close range.” He glanced at Nick. “And especially when missing means they might hit their partner.”

Judy blinked, wondering how Bogo had found out about that since she’d left it out of her report. She cautiously looked Nick’s way and was surprised to find that he didn’t appear surprised, instead wearing a properly chastised expression. Her lips pursed and she considered defending her partner, Nick had only been trying to stop the rampaging wildebeest after all, but right then the chief didn’t seem to be in the mood to ease up.

At least he wasn’t angry. No lectures about duty or safety came, he merely dismissed them with a pointed suggestion that they head to the indoor range sooner rather than later. They both scurried out and immediately found their way toward the back of the building to check-out a pair of tasers and several boxes of practice cartridges.

After a quick round of rock, paper, scissors to determine who would go first Nick went to the firing line and started to take aim while she observed. He went through several shots before she spoke up to tell him that his arms were too stiff. His reloading technique was impressive though. Definitely faster than she could manage when at her best, although his aim wasn’t as on point.

“So…” she started when he was between sets. “How did the chief find out you took a shot when I was behind the wildebeest?”

Nick paused long enough to look back at her, ears dipping briefly. “I might have accidentally let it slip.”

Her ears perked up at that admission, her surprise that he would make such an obvious mistake rendering her briefly speechless. A second later she tilted her ears back as she noticed the way he avoided looking at her. He was lying?

She wrestled with the realization, an ache blooming in her chest as she stared at him. “You accidentally let it slip,” she repeated.

“Sooner or later I was going to make a mistake,” he said as he started into the next set. “I was on my best behavior so I just wasn’t thinking about trying to gloss things over.”

“Nick…”

He glanced her way between shots, then blinked and pressed his lips into a thin line. He looked away again just as fast, going back to his shooting without comment. The ache in her chest intensified. She began to wonder if she should let it go, or demand an answer, or…or she didn’t know what else there was.

“The truth is, I didn’t see the point in lying,” he murmured almost under his breath. “I rushed the shot without thinking, Judy. Then I missed. I could have hit you…and what if it hadn’t just been a taser?”

“You can’t really be blamed for that,” she reasoned, stepping a little closer. “I mean, you were just reacting when there wasn’t time to think.”

Nick gave a dry laugh. “That makes it better? I trained at the academy for nine months specifically so that sort of thing wouldn’t happen. I want to be good at this, Judy, and if that means bending rules here or there to close a case then fine. But I screwed up, even if nothing bad happened. I’m not going to lie just to cover that up.”

“Well, could you maybe let me know not to cover for you next time so I don’t make a fool of myself?”
“I appreciate the thought, but maybe it isn’t worth the effort anymore. The chief kind of already knows everything,” Nick said, his ears tilted back half way. It took a moment, but she realized he was embarrassed.

“I seriously doubt that, after all the trouble we’ve gone through,” she assured him.

He glanced at her again, his ears staying down. “Yeah. Yeah I suppose you’re right.”

Judy blinked and watched him finish out the next few shots, unable to shake the sensation that he was keeping something from her. Her foot began to tap in annoyance and she crossed her arms, waiting until he called the target forward again before speaking again.

“You told him everything, didn’t you?” she said, unable to keep the accusatory tone from her voice.

Nick set down the taser and turned around to look at her, his head cocked to one side for a moment. “It’s getting really hard to slip things past you.”

“Nick…why would you tell him about everything?”

His ears folded the rest of the way down and he rubbed his neck. “Because Bogo gave me a lot to think about and made me realize that I won’t be the only one to get in trouble if one of my tricks works out badly.” He sighed, then shook his head. “Sorry I didn’t tell you.”

Her annoyance practically withered away and she glanced to one side, genuinely ashamed that she’d assumed he hadn’t had a reason. She took a deep breath, then let it out slowly before giving him a smile.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said as she nudged him away from the table. “Can you teach me how you’re reloading so quickly? I can’t figure out what you’re doing.”

“Hmmm?” Nick said and perked his ears, then moved to stand behind her. “Sure. Show me what you’re doing first.”
Judy had difficulty standing still as she waited for Norman at the transit station, unable to stop herself from checking the time every few minutes since she half-expected him to be late again. It wasn’t so much that he was running late as that she had arrived early, driven from her home by a low-key anxiety that was difficult to place. Twice already she’d caught herself pacing, her ears perking up each time another train rolled in, watching for her date step out only to be disappointed every time.

Some part of her had already decided that the lunch was going to go badly. A tiny, nagging voice that sounded suspiciously like Nick, only instead of cracking jokes about Norman being a serial killer it gently cautioned her that something had felt off ever since last week. That if she wasn’t careful she was going to end up getting blindsided and hurt.

She almost hoped he’d show up late, as vindictive as that made her feel. At least then she could feel justified in making a clean break. Life had a way of wrecking plans in the least expected ways, so his extreme tardiness last time could maybe be forgiven.

Twice in a row would be another matter entirely.

The crazy thing was she didn’t even know what she’d do after. All morning she’d been bracing herself for him to screw up somehow, so she doubted letting go would be very difficult. In a lot of ways it would make things much easier, she’d have a clear reason to give her parents for why she’d ended the relationship and could use it as an excuse to table dating completely for the near future. Then at least she’d be free to focus on work for a few months before her mother began pestering once again.

But then another train arrived and she saw Norman stepping off with a full five minutes to spare. To her surprise his punctuality actually annoyed her more than if he had been a bit late, but she took a deep breath and told herself that it wasn’t at all fair to hold that against him. With a little effort she put on a smile and waved.

Fortunately he’d taken her insistence that today be a casual date to heart and was wearing a simple pair of slacks and polo shirt. She’d been worried he would arrive overdressed for the cafe, making them stick out among the other patrons. Then as he stepped up he reached behind him and produced a single long stem rose.

“I wanted to apologize for being late last time,” he said as he offered the flower. “I know I already said sorry, but I felt like I should actually do something to show it.”

She eyed the rose, feeling the flower choice was a hair on the presumptuous side, then reluctantly accepted it even as that tiny voice openly wondered if this was just some scheme to get back in her good graces. The stem was fresh cut however, and neither the petals nor the leaves showed a hint of wilting, so if it was just a play to get back in her good graces he was at least willing to make a proper effort.

“Thanks you,” she said and gave it a sniff, letting herself enjoy the mellow fragrance. Afterward she sighed and closed her eyes, rubbing her forehead. “Look, just so you know I’m still feeling off about last time, but I decided you deserve a second chance.

“I don’t want to lead you on either though, so if I’m still not feeling things after this I’m going to end things, alright? I know we seemed to click when getting drinks, but now I’m kind of wondering if I was just doing this to keep my mom off my back, and that isn’t fair to either of us.”
Norman’s ears wilted slightly. “Ah…well thanks for the warning,” he said, then licked his lips nervously. “What if we have a good time?”

Judy pursed her lips, a little surprised he didn’t protest more. She wanted so badly to give him the “it’s not you, it’s me” line.

“In that case I’d want to do this again,” she said cautiously as she rubbed her arm. “Just casual outings until I feel comfortable. I don’t know, maybe I’m just not in a place where I can enjoy all the fuss involved in going out to a nice restaurant right now.”

“Fair enough,” Norman said, then took a deep breath and made a little show of putting on a smile as he offered her his arm. “So, where are we going? I was a little surprised when you asked me to meet you out here.”

She hesitated just a second before resting her hand on his arm, beginning to walk out. “My partner lives near here. There’s a diner he dragged me to that actually isn’t bad. I’ve only been at night though, and wanted to see what it is like during the day.”

“Your partner? The fox?”

“He’s a fox, not ‘the fox’, ” Judy said testily, shooting the other bunny a reproachful look. “And his name is Nick.”

“Well he is kind of the only fox in the ZPD, right? That kind of makes him the fox, doesn’t it?” Norman said, as he checked out the surroundings. “Kind of surprised they decided to pair the two of you up.”

“I was the one that suggested it,” Judy said proudly, ignoring the startled look Norman gave her. “I think the chief was a bit skeptical at first, but the higher-ups loved the idea. I guess that after the mess with Mayors Lionheart and Bellwether the city was really looking for ways to prove they’re serving the citizen’s needs. Making us partners apparently makes the Mammal Inclusion Initiative look good, and by extension all of the program’s supporters too.”

Norman didn’t answer immediately. She caught him watching her from the corner of his eye, though he looked away quickly.

“Something wrong?”

“Just not sure what to say,” he said, though his words sounded insincere.

*He’s lying.* It was Nick’s voice again, practically whispering into her ear. She considered pressing him, but what would be the point? He’d just deny it and she couldn’t actually prove he wasn’t being honest.

“So…tell me what this place you’re taking me to is like,” Norman said. “They got anything good on the menu?”

She pursed her lips, then took a breath and forced herself to let it go. “It’s a typical diner type thing. I didn’t actually look at the menu last time, but their hash browns are quite good and they seem okay with custom orders…”
The last time Nick had been in Finnick’s van had been before he left for the Zootopia Police Academy, but other than some subtle wear and tear it was almost exactly as he remembered it. Calling up his old scam partner had been more difficult than he expected. Other than the occasional texts they rarely talked anymore. It was simply too risky to hang out. Nick didn’t want there to be any reason to question if he’d really gone straight, and on Finnick’s end there was always the possibility of being branded as a snitch.

Unfortunately he didn’t have any choice. Judy had been right, his new space did need furniture and he couldn’t afford to have anything delivered. Technically he couldn’t even afford the furniture either, but thanks to the wonderful world of online ads he’d found a number of listings from other mammals trying to get rid of old couches that were willing to give them away for free provided he transported it himself.

He’d been surprised when Finnick agreed to help, but apparently the little guy missed him too. Plus it was supposed to be an easy chore. They would just go out, get the first couch that wasn’t infested with fleas, then drag it back to his place.

Only it turned out a little more difficult than that. The first three they looked at had been in such bad condition he doubted they could be moved without falling apart. Others were too big to fit up the stairs, or didn’t match the room at all, and in one case had previously been owned by a skunk. After that last one he’d decided to change tactics and search for cheap instead of free.

Through it all Finnick remained remarkably good natured, at least as much as he was good natured about anything, but Nick could tell it was wearing on his old friend just the same. They both wanted to talk; only there wasn’t much they could talk about safely. Old friends were definitely off limits, and neither of them could safely talk about work. That mostly left remembering old capers, and they’d already covered all the good ones.

“Ya know, lots of mammals think you’re must be talking about things ya shouldn’t now that you with the ZPD,” Finnick commented.

Nick winced a little, but he wasn’t all that surprised. “If I was then Mr. Big would’ve iced me months ago.”

“I tell ’em the same thing, but they’re worried,” Finnick said. “They’re worried someone like you will see turning on them as an easy way to get promoted.”

“Ha, as if things worked that way. Promotions mostly involve how long you’ve been in,” Nick said, slowly shaking his head as he gave a dry chuckle. “Sure you need to do your fair share, but pulling more doesn’t move you up any faster. If it did Judy would already be running the whole show.”

“Yeah, well ever since Edmond and Sebastien got busted everyone’s been keeping their heads down and—”


“They tried to bump over a convenience store. The fuzz showed up sooner than expected and got them for armed robbery.”

“Poor fools. If I’d been around they’d still be out,” Nick muttered as he shook his head, then noticed Finnick giving him a look. “What?”

“Do you know how messed up it is to hear a cop say that?” Finnick said. “You ain’t supposed to feel sorry when criminals get busted.”
“Yeah, well I know how things can be,” Nick commented, then stopped himself short. He’d very nearly admitted just how badly he missed the way things used to be. “Their families going to be okay?”

Finnick gave him another look. “You know I can’t talk about that shit, Nick.”

His ears folded back, though Finnick had given him all he needed to know. Mr. Big, or some other boss, was probably stepping in to make sure everything would be “fine” until the twins got out again. And of course there would be favors to be repaid after. And more jobs, probably much riskier than what had gotten them busted in the first place. He sighed.

“Sorry, I know…” he muttered, then ran a hand over his head. “Hey, want to give up this fool’s errand and check out Itreea instead?”

“Might as well,” Finnick said, brightening up for a moment. “You sure though? Thought you didn’t want to spend much.”

“Itreea isn’t that expensive,” Nick assured him. “I can just tighten up my belt until the next paycheck.”

When Nick had told her that the Rio Cafe was busier during normal hours he hadn’t been kidding. Judy had specifically timed their arrival so she and Norman would get there a little before the usual lunch hour in an attempt to beat the rush, but there was already a sizable crowd. Apparently the place was popular enough that mammals were willing to show up early to secure a table.

To her surprise the clientele was pretty mixed, which was fairly unusual. Before she’d moved to Zootopia she’d assumed predators and prey mixed freely within the city, and while that was usually the case the differences in diet meant that the typical restaurant tended to cater specifically toward one group or the other. There would be a few options available for those who fell outside the usual customer of course, but usually they amounted to little more than pre-packaged salad or frozen crickets reheated at the last moment.

The Rio Cafe, by contrast, seemed to be popular with predators and prey alike. She hadn’t actually looked over the menu last time; she’d simply assumed that anyplace Nick wanted to go would mostly feature fish and fowl. Now she found herself regretting the assumption as she looked over the sheer variety of dishes being served.

Norman seemed significantly less enthusiastic, his gaze lingering on a plate of fish that had been set down in front of a coyote until the carnivore began to eat. “You…uh…didn’t mention you were taking me to this sort of place.”

“I didn’t really know what to expect,” she admitted, standing up on her toes to get a better view of the next set of plates coming out of the kitchen. It looked like an assortment of fruits. “Can’t believe how different the place feels during the day.”

He didn’t respond, though she could sense his discomfort as they continued to wait. She wondered if the sight of meat had thrown him off that much, that sort of aversion wasn’t at all uncommon among prey. Several of her siblings and her father were the same way, and she’d heard that in some cases it could be serious enough to be considered a phobia, but when she checked on Norman he didn’t seem particularly upset. Just cautious. Like he was on guard against something.
At least the wait wasn’t terribly long, the staff was surprisingly efficient when it came to getting orders delivered and customers back out the door. Within about fifteen minutes a pangolin informed her that they’d be given a table soon. Remembering the last date, Judy made sure to ask to be seated at a window table in the hopes that a view outside would help Norman calm down a little. A couple of minutes after they were shown to their seats and given menus to look over until the waitress could get to them.

“I’ve never eaten at a place like this,” Norman admitted as he opened the menu.

“Me either,” Judy said happily, then blinked. “Well, I suppose I was here that one time, but that was the middle of the night so it shouldn’t count. Nick and I were the only ones around.”

Norman shivered a little. “Well, at least they have normal food.”

Something about the way he said that tweaked her whiskers, but she shook it off and began to browse. The entire first page was dedicated to salads of all types, ranging from the house salad, to Cesar, to Greek, and even fruit salads. The pictures beside each item all looked delicious, and she noticed a small note at the start of the section that mentioned that there was an option to add meat for an additional fee.

She leafed through the menu, curious to see what accommodations they offered for predators in the other sections. Most dishes had the option to add fish or fowl meat for a modest surcharge, which she supposed was to be expected. At the back of the menu, however, she found an entire section dedicated to fish and poultry.

Her ears perked and she stared for a moment, her eyes flicking between the selection of dishes. The fish hadn’t actually been much of a surprise. She’d already known that many predators preferred eating actual meat to other protein sources like crickets.

The chicken came as a shock however.

All of the dishes looked so neat and tidy, but when her eyes settled on the roast chicken breast her mind immediately went to the chicken farm just adjacent to her family’s carrot fields. She’d always assumed they were raised exclusively for eggs, something that she’d come to accept. Maybe it was a strange distinction to make, but cooking eggs seemed somehow different from actually butchering the animal itself.

With a shake of her head she turned back to the salads then looked up to find Norman watching her. His ears dipped to one side, a tight smile on his lips.

“Yeah, I noticed that too. You’d think they would have a separate menu for the carrion. Surprised seeing it didn’t make me sick.”

Judy rolled her eyes at him. “It isn’t that bad. Besides, they kept it to the last page so it isn’t like you have to look at it if that sort of thing upsets you.”

“I guess,” Norman said, lifting his menu in front of his face again. “At least the rest looks good.”

Again Judy felt as if her whiskers had been tweaked and shifted uncomfortably in her spot while trying to shake off the tone the other rabbit had used. That was much harder to do than she expected, a small part of her wanted to check to make sure none of the predators present had overheard. But then, if some had, what could she really do?

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen rabbits come here,” said a voice off to the side.
Judy looked over to find a vixen at their table side. A quick glance at Norman let her know that the other rabbit was staring, his mouth part way open, so she gave him a firm nudge under the table and smiled politely.

“I came once at night,” she said then looked around. “Not during the day though. Everything is much more lively when the sun’s up.”

The vixen chuckled, a high throaty sound, and shifted her weight over to one side while her tail swished in the other direction. “Isn’t it though? I tried covering the night shift once since the pay is better, but the place is just dead. Kept falling asleep it was so boring.”

“So…um…you’re our waitress?” Norman asked.

“Got it in one.” The vixen beamed as she pulled out a pad and pen. “I’m Abigail, and I’ll be your host this evening. Are you two sweethearts ready to order, or shall I just go get you some drinks while you consider your options?”

Judy glanced at Norman, but he seemed to be at a loss so she spoke up instead. “Can we have a few more minutes before ordering, please? As for drinks, can I get a raspberry tea?”

Abigail scribbled on the pad and gave Norman a sideways look. “And you, sir?”

“Just water for me,” he said, then shook his head. “Oh. With lemon. And ice.”

Again Abigail dutifully took a note on her pad before tucking it away, then practically flounced away from the table. Judy stared as she left, watching the smooth swish of that tail, perfectly able to believe that Nick had been flirting with the vixen last time he’d been. The fur on her neck began to stand on end in annoyance. She’d been so sure he’d made it all up even after he’d explained they had only talked.

Why do I even care?

“She seems friendly, considering,” Norman said, breaking her out of her thoughts.

“Yeah, I suppose,” Judy said absently. “Have you decided what you want?”

“Actually, I just realized I’m not that hungry.”

Judy’s tilted her head to one side. “Really? Just now?” she asked, feeling her ears beginning to droop.

“I mean, I suppose I could get something. I just don’t feel like I need to.”

She pursed her lips slightly and glanced at the time. All morning she’d been so anxious that she’d decided to skip breakfast and it was already beginning to catch up with her. Being the only one eating, though?

“Would you like to split an order of hash browns then at least? I promise you they’re very good.”

Norman frowned a little as he looked back at the menu, then made a bit of a face. “Dairy doesn’t really agree with me,” he said, then forced a smile. “Though I suppose I can get a side salad or something.”

Her ears drooped further and she bit her lip. Why couldn’t he take her up on even that simple offer? Sharing a dish was romantic, wasn’t it? And she’d been hoping to find an excuse to try the hash
browns again, but eating all of them by herself seemed like one of the least healthy things she could
do. She took a deep breath, then blew it out again all at once.

Abigail came back full of bright, bouncy energy that only annoyed Judy because with every passing
moment she felt more sure this second date was a mistake. There was nothing there, she should have
known after that first bad time, and now she was becoming more and more sure this was just a pity
date, and when did those ever end well? And as they ordered she watched the vixen, slowly
becoming more sure that Nick had been wrong. That she hadn’t been flirting just for a better tip, and
his total obliviousness to that simple fact just piled on because he was supposed to be the one that
was good at reading others, though she had no clue why that should matter.

She ended up ordering the house salad, then on a whim got the hash browns as well. Nothing said
she had to finish them and now she just wanted something to look forward to. Norman got the Greek
salad, which left her feeling even more off for some reason. Thankfully the drinks had come as well,
so she took a slow sip before trying to start an actual conversation.

Of all the things she could have picked she asked him about work, perhaps the dullest topic in
existence. True, she found her job fulfilling, but the best parts were the ones she wasn’t allowed to
share. Talking openly about suspects or victims was strictly forbidden, and the same went for case
details. That pretty much left the worst bits, the paperwork and reports and routine patrols. The sort
of things that made her life sound like the dreariest police procedural ever imagined.

As for Norman’s job…well, helping others get back into shape was admirable. It wasn’t exactly the
most entertaining line of work though. She kept fit for work, not out of any desire to be the strongest
or fastest, so all his talk about the finer points of squatting or using the different equipment was just
lost on her.

It was better than sitting in awkward silence, but only just. She’d hoped once they got talking the
conversation would at least move on to something more interesting, but they just seemed to circle
around without making any progress. Norman related some anecdote that she was sure he’d shared
before, and gradually she realized all her stories from the ZPD seemed to involve Nick in one way or
another—a fact that was clearly starting to annoy Norman. She tried to think up other stories, about
the few times she’d been paired up with McHorn or Lowell or Fangmeyer, only to draw a blank.

When Abigail finally came back with their food she wasn’t sure if she should be relieved that the
date was that much closer to being finished or miffed by the way the vixen sashayed about.
Everything looked great though, and she made herself give the waitress a big smile as she said thank
you while Norman silently picked up a fork and cautiously began to poke at the salad.

“Something wrong?” Judy asked once the waitress stepped away again.

“Just making sure there wasn’t a mistake with my order,” Norman said, probing the salad with his
fork for a few moments longer before he seemed satisfied and took a bite.

Judy privately wondered what type of mistake he thought they could make with a salad. The worst
they could do was bring him the wrong type perhaps, but just judging by the feta cheese and olives
they hadn’t gotten his order wrong. She gave her head a shake and tried the hash browns, finding
them just as delicious as last time. A genuine smile returned to her lips and she took a few more bites,
then made herself switch to the salad before she stuffed herself on the fattening dish.

She skewered a particularly large leaf and stuffed it into her mouth, then looked around the room
again. It was still surprising to see so many predators and prey mixing in the same restaurant, the sort
of thing she’d come to expect only from fast food joints.
There wasn’t much intermingling, just a few tables here and there. Before long she found herself wondering if there were other places like it, and made a note to ask Nick later.

“So, what do you think about the restaurant now that you’ve seen it during the day?” Norman asked.

“It is different than I expected,” she admitted, still smiling. “Almost like what I imagined Zootopia would be like, back when I was an innocent farm girl.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean now I know better, but this is sorta the dream of the city right?” she said, finally turning back to find Norman giving her a look she couldn’t decipher. “What?”

He looked down at his salad, picking carefully around the feta cheese as he got another fork-full. “It’s nothing.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

Norman looked up at her, then around the restaurant, and sighed softly as he set his fork down. “Fine. I’m a little surprised you are so comfortable around predators.”

He spoke softly, but there was an edge to his voice that made Judy want to make sure nobody had overheard. She tilted her ears back and leaned forward, lowering her voice as well.

“Why in the world would that surprise you? I work with them on the force all day. My partner is a fox!”

“Of course you work with them, you’re too nice for your own good,” Norman answered, “and from the sound of it your partner is one of the good ones.”

“One of the—” Judy started, then stopped herself before she got too loud. “I can’t believe you would say something like that. You can’t just assume those sorts of things about predators.”

“Lose the holier than thou attitude, Jude. I saw your press conference.”

Her entire body froze. He’d seen her press conference? Of course he had. The whole city had seen it. She felt her eyes begin to sting and blinked furiously, refusing to cry even as Norman reminded her that the single most shameful event in her life had been broadcast live.

“You listen to me,” she said, wishing she could growl. “What I said then was ignorant and hateful, and I was too blind to realize just how bigoted it was. Anyone that thinks those sorts of things is no better than Bellwether—”

“Don’t you dare lump me in with that piece of trash,” Norman said, his voice growing so cold it shocked her to silence. “Yes, being around preds makes me uncomfortable. I admit it, and I know it is wrong, but I. Can’t. Help it. And when I found out what that sheep was doing I—”

He stopped abruptly and clamped his mouth shut for a second, shaking his head. “Never mind. Just never mind. I’m sorry Jude, but this isn’t going to work.”

Before she could find her voice again he stood up and threw several bills onto the table before quickly leaving the restaurant. She stared after him, so stunned it took her another couple of seconds to realize that some of the predators sitting near her table were conspicuously trying to avoid looking in her direction.
A short distance away she spotted Abigail, and for a moment wondered if the vixen was going to try and use Norman’s outburst to milk out a larger tip. Shame at the thought immediately followed and she looked away, but the waitress was already walking over so Judy sighed and forced herself to meet the lady’s gaze.

“Sorry about that, I honestly didn’t know he was…” she started, feeling her eyes beginning to burn again as her voice cracked.

“No, hey, thanks for...you know,” Abigail said softly. “I just wanted to see if you were going to finish your meal or if you would like a box or anything else.”

Judy bit her lip and looked down at her mostly uneaten lunch. She was still starving, but suddenly felt uncomfortable with the idea of eating in the diner. As if her presence would remind everyone of the things Norman had said.

“A box please?”

“Sure thing, hun.”

As it turned out, the trip to Itreea had been almost perfectly timed, but Nick still was still trying to decide if he had made the right choice. On the one hand he had been able to convince them to give him some floor models at a steep discount. Matching up against the outlet’s employees had been a treat, salesmen were basically just hustlers of a different type in his opinion, and he’d been able to walk away not only a couch, but a coffee table and TV stand as well.

There were just a few minor things that bugged him. Most obviously he didn’t own a TV anymore, though he hoped that would change sooner or later. Another small minus was the modern metal and glass styling of the tables. They were sleek and attractive he supposed, but wood was more to his taste.

And then there was the couch. When sat on normally it was comfortable enough, but Nick had always enjoyed sprawling—one bad habit his mother had never been able to break. Whenever he laid across the couch he could feel the metal supports digging into him. There simply wasn’t enough padding for them and he was trying to devise a way to correct that. Perhaps if he got some foam pad to wrap around them…

He was still sprawled across the length of the couch, feeling the middle support press almost painfully into his back as he tried to decide what he wanted to do when there came a light knock at his door. For half a second he thought Finnick had returned and looked about his apartment, wondering what the little guy might have forgotten, but didn’t see anything. Besides, Finnick had been itching to get away from his place and would probably have just sent a text asking him to mail anything that had been left behind.

“Who is it?” he called out and sat upright.

“It’s me,” answered a small voice.

He blinked and glanced at the clock. “Judy? I thought you were—” he began, but stopped abruptly and bit on his tongue. Stupid. “Just a second.”
He hurried to the door, silently cursing himself for almost saying something careless. Judy’s lips twisted into a forced smile when he opened the door, but the effort was so half-hearted it only accented how miserable she looked. Ears hanging limp and just a hint of red showing in the whites of her eyes.

“I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” she asked as she stepped through the door, take-out bag in hand.

The scent of spices, cheese, potato, and some sort of vinegar-based dressing hit his nose all at once. “Well, I was about to start a staring contest with the ceiling.”

Judy tsked lightly and shook her head, not even able to muster a pale chuckle. “Sorry, I was going to head home, but I’m starving and didn’t want to wait that long before eating,” she said, running her free hand over her head and down the length of her limp ears, then lifted the take-out bag slightly. “Can I just hang out long enough to finish?”

“Take as long as you need. I’ll get you a fork,” he said, gesturing to the new couch before he went to the kitchenette.

He heard Judy move to the couch and take a seat as he rummaged. “You finally got furniture,” she said, then hmmed. When he turned back around he saw her examining the coffee table as she unpacked her take-out bag.

“Oh, yeah. I was able to rope Finnick into letting me use his van today, so it seemed like it was time,” he said, handing her the fork. “Just got what I could afford.”

“I like it,” Judy decided, accepting the utensil. “It goes well with the rest of the room.”

Nick settled into the spot beside Judy and leaned back. Perhaps she was right about that. “Glad to have the Carrot seal of approval.”

Judy began to idly prod her salad with her fork, leaving him to ponder what to do or say. Actually, he wasn’t sure he should say anything. Just the fact that she was in his apartment told him everything he needed to know. There was no need to pry, but what if she was hoping he could take her mind off of whatever had gone wrong?

“You know, the other box has those hash browns you like,” Judy said and took her first bite of salad. “You can have them if you want.”

The offer made Nick smile, but he shook his head. “Already ate. I owed Finnick lunch for helping me out earlier.”

“I kind of expected to split them when I got the order.”

Nick bit the tip of his tongue lightly to force himself to think over his reply. “I…suppose I could manage that. Let me get a couple of plates.”

He could feel her eyes following him as he went back into the kitchenette once again. Once there he moved deliberately to play for time while Judy ate. When he stepped back out, two plates and another fork in hand, her purple eyes looked up at him.

“You haven’t asked what happened.”

“Things didn’t work out,” Nick reasoned and set the plates on the coffee table. One for her, one for him. “Besides, all that matters is that you are upset.”
“Well, what if I want to talk about it?”

“Then we can talk. I just didn’t want you to feel like you had to.” He opened the other box and divided the hash browns between them, his tail slowly swishing.

She took another bite of salad, then poked at her food again while she chewed. “I’m not sure where to start.”

“How about we go with what’s got your ears all twisted up.”

Judy nodded, then took a deep breath and set her salad and fork down as she began to talk. He listened silently, though as she got closer to the end he found himself grimacing. And finally she told him that Norman had brought up her press conference from all those months ago, her voice choking off for a second as she rubbed her eyes with the back of one hand.

“You know, that is all most of the city knows about me,” she continued once she found her voice again. “I didn’t realize that before, but after the things Norman said…”

Nick folded his ears down and briefly considered tracking that bunny down. Handling this sort of thing would be so much easier if he didn’t have to follow the rules anymore.

“I doubt anybody thinks about that press conference these days,” he said, giving her a light pat between the ears. “Even if they do, hardly anybody is going to care about what you said.”

“Come on, Nick. You don’t think predators care that the things I said practically handed Bellwether what she wanted?” Judy said harshly.

“Okay, they might,” he admitted as he traced a finger down over one ear. “But anyone can see that isn’t who you really are. Heck, most of the city is prey. Most of them probably think nothing about what you said back then.”

“And you don’t think that’s a problem?”

“It is a problem, Judy, but it’s the same problem that’s been around since before you showed up.” Nick shrugged. “Busting Bellwether helped a lot, it opened a lot of eyes, but you can’t expect things that have been going on for so long to change that fast.”

“Doesn’t feel like it,” Judy admitted, stabbing several leaves of lettuce with her fork and shoving them into her mouth. “And I’m still worried that one moment is going to be how everyone remembers me.”

“Probably,” Nick said, drawing a sharp look from her. He smiled back. “Well, it is kind of hard to remember how you changed without remembering the dumb bunny up in front of all those reporters.”

“Gee, thanks. You make it sound so wonderful.”

“I think it is,” Nick said honestly. “What was it you said at my graduation? ‘We all make mistakes’?”

Her ears perked up a little and she smiled a little. “You were paying attention to that, huh?” she asked, then shook her head and sighed. “Still, I don’t suppose most mammals have their mistakes broadcast live on the news.”

“Nope. Which is why I plan to let you handle all press conferences in the future.”
She elbowed him lightly. “Oh no. If it happens again I’m dragging you up there with me.”
Judy let out a sigh of relief as they finished the final video on the proper methods for securing a
building. Beside her, Nick groaned as he got to his feet and stretched. Fortunately, Chief Bogo’s
decree simply required they get a refresher, a simple review of materials rather than complete
retraining. Long as the day had been, having everything crammed into a single day was far
preferable to being shipped back to the Zootopia Police Academy for a week-long course.

“I had forgotten how bad those videos were,” Nick said as he walked up to the VCR and ejected the
tape, waving it about dramatically. “Don’t we have a training budget or something? You’d think
they’d at least make the switch to DVD. Maybe re-shoot everything on modern cameras so it doesn’t
look completely dated.”

She gave him a look. “Please don’t tell me that’s all you took away from this. I don’t think I can go
through it again.”

“Trust me, Carrots, the grainy videos had my undivided attention,” Nick said, then dipped his ears
sheepishly. “Actually, I was surprised by how much I’d forgotten.”

“I know what you mean,” she said, briefly reflecting on just how many mistakes she and Nick had
made clearing that house. “So…I guess next time we stick together and keep the tasers in hand until
the building is completely clear.”

“And avoid standing directly in front of the door as we open it,” Nick added teasingly.

Judy blushed. “That too,” she said and hopped from the chair, going up onto her toes as she arched
her back. “You got any plans for the afternoon?”

“Only heading home to get a nap,” Nick said. “Can’t really afford anything else right now since I
just bought all that furniture.”

“I don’t mind paying. Sort of owe you for all that ice cream anyway.”

“Tempting as that is, I’m actually pretty tired from getting up so early,” Nick said. “Used to sleeping
in on my days off.”

She rubbed the back of her neck, wondering why she felt so self-conscious. “Another time then?”

“We could do something next weekend if you like,” Nick suggested, then paused when he saw the
light wince on Judy’s face. “What? Already got plans?”

“Not really,” Judy said, drawing the words out as she turned to one side. “Just after everything with
Norman I know my mom is going to be pushing me to go on dates again, and I decided it is a bad
idea right now. She isn’t going to accept that unless I’m there to explain it to her face so…” She took
a deep breath. “So I figured I’d head home next Saturday so I can do that, and as long as I’m there I
might as well take off enough time to see my whole extended family since it has been awhile.”

Nick blinked. “Really? When was the last time?”

Judy practically cringed. “Um, back when I quit the force. Haven’t seen them since I rejoined.”

“That was over a year ago! What have you been doing with your time off?”
“Closer to two years,” she admitted, rubbing her arm. “And I really haven’t taken any time off. So yeah, I’m kinda overdue.”

“I hope you have a wonderful visit,” Nick said, his tail swishing slowly.

“You’re assuming my leave will be approved,” Judy reminded him.

“You really think the chief would do that to you, Carrots?” Nick shook his head, chuckling. “He likes you, as much as he is capable of liking anyone. I’m sure you’ll be approved when he sees your request.”

Her ears heated up slightly. “I…um…still need to fill out the request for leave,” she said, the blush deepening as Nick gave her an incredulous look. “I should probably go do that now, huh?”

Nick didn’t waste any time leaving the precinct, eager to be away while he tried to ignore the way ache he felt from turning down Judy’s offer. He was actually surprised that his line about being tired had worked; Judy was getting steadily better at spotting that sort of nonsense.

And nonsense was exactly what it was. He couldn’t say exactly why he was leery of spending the afternoon with her beyond his discomfort over having to let her pay. The otter waitress’s reaction from the last time Judy had done so still weighed on his mind. He wasn’t even sure why it bothered him so badly, but until he figured it out avoiding any other misunderstandings seemed like the way to go.

Although if he was being completely honest with himself there was more to it. The mess with Norman had hit Judy harder than he would’ve believed possible. A lot of that probably had to do with what the jerk had said, but there was also the simple fact that Judy had wanted to make things work. That made for a volatile mix of hurt and disappointment, and he worried she was just trying to hold it off by finding something new to cling to. If he were a bunny he would probably be worried she was trying to rebound on him.

His walk slowed as he wondered just where that thought had come from, his ears folding down. It was the sort of bad joke he normally laughed at, but for some reason he couldn’t even muster a self-depreciating chuckle. The idea that Judy would use him as a rebound was surprisingly distressing. But that was absurd, because of course she wouldn’t. And of course he wouldn’t. Only if it was so absurd why did that entire train of thought sting as sharply as it did?

He could almost hear the alarms going off in his mind to warn him off. Danger, do not open. As if it was some sort of Pandora’s box. The smart thing to do was just set the thought aside and forget he’d ever had it, which was unfortunate. He wasn’t very good at ignoring those sorts of things, only at burying them deeply enough that others didn’t notice.

“Ah, Nick, just the fox I was hoping to see,” called a voice he’d hoped to never hear again.

All at once he pushed everything else aside and took a deep breath, then slowly turned. Keeping himself from snarling was more difficult than he expected. Then again it was Flip, and Flip had always been a special case.

“What are you doing here?” he asked the other fox. He couldn’t quite manage his usual easy grin, so
he settled for keeping his expression completely neutral.

“Oh, I was just out for a walk,” Flip said, apparently unconcerned by how transparent the lie was. “You know, I actually didn’t believe the stories until I saw you in blue for myself.”

*Does he really think he can bait me that easily?* Nick wondered.

If so, Nick intended to be a disappointment. Rather than answering he turned and began to walk once more. Flip watched him silently for a couple steps before hurrying to fall into place on his left.

“There are a lot of mammals worried that you’ve really gone straight, you know,” Flip tried, apparently unconcerned that they were on a public street. “I know better obviously, though I can’t see why you bother keeping up the act with me.”

“Why do you even care?”

Flip gave him a sideways look. “Because, I like you Nick—” he started, then abruptly cut off and shook his head with a harsh chuckle. “Sorry, I had to try, but who am I kidding? I would love nothing more than to see you skinned alive.

“I do respect you though. For all my years on the street, you are the only one to really get the better of me. What you managed was masterful, and I never even suspected until it was too late. You did me so bad I spent most of a decade rebuilding, and sometimes I still run into problems.”

Nick only half listened to the other fox as he walked, maintaining a brisk pace as he headed toward the nearest train station. “My heart bleeds.”

Flip continued with barely a pause. “I hate to admit it, but all that was just business. And maybe I had it coming. So if you’re willing to help me out with one job I’m willing to let everything go.”

That caught Nick’s attention. From the corner of his eye he tried to take measure of Flip. To say something like that Flip must’ve needed help desperately, assuming the offer was genuine. He didn’t look particularly concerned though.

“You really think I am stupid enough to believe that?” Nick asked. “Or did you upset some mob boss and are looking for a way out? Hard to believe any of them would be willing to work with you.”

“They aren’t,” Flip said through clenched teeth.

“I didn’t think so.”

“This is something I pulled together on my own over the last year,” Flip said, his ears flicking. “Happened into a stroke of luck, you could say. I don’t want to work with you, Nicky, but whatever you got going right now has put you in a good place to help me.

Not going to try moving in on you. All I want is a favor, and you had better believe I wouldn’t even consider that for just anything.”

Nick stopped and turned to Flip, a slight growl edging into his voice. “Maybe there isn’t anything you can offer that would make me consider working with you. The fact that you even thought there was a chance proves that you don’t know me half as well as you think. Did you ever consider that the word on the street about me was right?”

“I refuse to believe that,” Flip growled back.
“Why?”

“Because I can’t believe you would be working with them after everything they’ve done to you,” Flip said, his growl deepening. “You of all mammals, Nicky.”

“Things change, Flip. There isn’t a ‘them’ anymore. Maybe there never was.” He chuckled at the other fox’s startled expression, then turned to leave. “Don’t let me see you around here again.”

He made it a dozen paces before Flip mustered a reply. “Whatever you say, Nicky. Give your father my regards.”

His ears pinned and he spun in place just in time to see Flip walking in the other direction, middle finger held high above him.

_____________________________________________________________________

After submitting her request for leave with mammal resources Judy decided to stop by her desk on a whim. Several officers that served over the weekend shifts greeted her along the way, drawing her into short conversations before work called them away again. She didn’t mind the distraction. Even though it was her day off she didn’t actually have plans. Nick hadn’t ever turned down an opportunity to spend time with her before, so she was actually completely unsure of what to do with herself now.

Upon reaching her desk she was rewarded by the sight of a manila folder. She immediately scooped it up, glad to find that her hunch had been right. Turnaround times in the precinct’s lab were normally quite slow thanks the sheer amount of work that got sent that way, and the Chief was one of a few mammals that could give something a rush order. As she’d hoped, Bogo was concerned enough by the new Nighthowler incident to do just that.

From experience she knew the bulk of the report would be beyond her understanding, so she flipped straight to the results and began to read through to the end. As she did her ears tilted forward slightly and she narrowed her eyes, even going so far as to re-read the entire section to make sure she hadn’t misunderstood.

“Inconclusive? That can’t be right,” she said under her breath.

Flipping back to the earlier pages didn’t help her understand any better. She gave a frustrated huff, annoyed that the lab reports never seemed to be written so a normal mammal could understand. There was nothing else to do but head down to the lab to ask for help.

Judy hurried over even though they would be open until six in the afternoon and found her way to the lead scientist’s desk. As usual the old rat was busy, hopping across the desktop as he read test summaries and filled out supply requests. Knowing better than to interrupt, she stood quietly, lightly tapping her foot until he looked up.

“Dr. Rodentberg, I need someone to explain what these results mean,” she asked, holding up the folder so he could see it.

“Hmm? Oh, the Nighthowler workup that Chief Bogo wanted. Of course,” he said, then scurried over to a list of assignments. “Looks like Red was the one to do that. You’ll need to ask her.”

“Red?”
Dr. Rodentberg chuckled. “Sorry, that’s my nickname for Miss Zhu. You should find her over in chemistry.”

Judy thanked the rat profusely and found the proper room, then cautiously let herself inside to find a red panda preparing a tray of test tubes. Once again she waited quietly, but this time found herself watching as time slowly slipped away while the red panda seemed no closer to finishing. Twice she thought maybe the woman was wrapping things up, only to be proven wrong as she began adding yet more reagents to the test tubes.

A full fifteen minutes passed before Judy cleared her throat, taking a step forward. “Excuse me, are you Miss Zhu?”

“I’m very busy,” the red panda said, rubbing her eyes. “What do you need?”

Judy took another step closer. “Dr. Rodentberg said you were the one to run the tests on my case,” she said, handing over the folder. “I was wondering if you could explain the results to me.”

Miss Zhu took one look at the folder. “They were inconclusive. There really isn’t much else to tell you.”

“That is what I don’t understand. How can it be inconclusive?” Judy asked, fighting to remain patient. “It is either Nighthowler toxin or it isn’t. And it has to be Nighthowlers. I saw the kid, and I’ve seen that look before.”

“I suppose you have,” the red panda said and sighed. “So the wildebeest kid was savage? That wouldn’t surprise me, given the binding assay results, but I still cannot say for sure that this is Nighthowler toxin.”

“Why not?”

“Because the assay results are similar, but not identical,” Miss Zhu said, already back to her test tubes as she explained. “Nighthowler toxin binds to a number of receptors in the brain. That is how it is able to cause such extreme aggression while also suppressing higher cognitive function. This new compound binds to all the same targets.

“However in the presence of the antidote the Nighthowler toxin cannot remain bound to those receptors. That is why the antidote works. This new thing does not appear to behave in the same manner.”

Judy blinked. “So…maybe the drugs it was mixed with just messed with it somehow? Or maybe it is different for some other reason, making this antidote not work?”

“That is unlikely, but I thought the same thing so I ran another sample through Chromatography. I’ll spare you the details, but this new compound is around twenty percent larger than vanilla Nighthowler toxin. If it had bound to the drugs in some sort of novel way I would expect it to be significantly larger. If it was just a weird strain, I would expect it to be roughly the same size. Neither is the case, however.”

“Then where does that leave me?” Judy asked, her frustration beginning to show through.

“You are looking for someone with an intimate knowledge of how the Nighthowler toxin works. I should think that would narrow the field of suspects significantly,” Miss Zhu said placidly.

Most of Judy’s frustration vanished, though she remained annoyed that the red panda hadn’t seen fit to just come out and say so. She was right though. There couldn’t be that many experts on the
Nighthowler toxin; only a few individuals had enough access to really study it, and most of them were involved in creating the antidote. Doing background checks on them would be quite easy.

And there was at least one other that probably knew enough, one of the loose ends from the missing mammals case. The sheep Doug never had been apprehended. He was one mammal who definitely had the knowledge to pull something like this off.

The encounter with Flip had prompted Nick to take the train to one of the older parts of town. Unlike the meticulous care put into maintaining the city’s impressive transit system everywhere else, the trains that ran that particular loop showed clear signs of age and wear. The station he got off at was in even worse shape, ten years overdue for a renovation and with styling that clashed with the more modern, sleek trains.

There were places in Zootopia that always seemed frozen in time. It wasn’t so much that nothing changed; there were always differences to be found if he looked for them, but the feel always remained the same. Things that just couldn’t be covered up short of bulldozing everything and building something new on top of the rubble. That wasn’t always a bad thing, there were several areas he had only fond memories of, but this particular neighborhood was such a mix of good and bad that he couldn’t ever figure out what to make of it.

He kept an eye on the few children he saw playing in the street as he walked past the low-income housing. Here and there he saw signs of work being done on the street medians to add fresh landscaping, so apparently the city had decided to give the area another face lift. From experience Nick knew it was a lost cause; little more than an empty gesture in the face of barred windows and doors that were bolted at night.

Over in Savanna Central where everything was clean and polished it was easy to forget Zootopia had its run down areas as well. Nick had heard others call the neighborhood a slum before, mostly by the types of mammals that hadn’t even seen the place. It wasn’t really, at least not in his opinion. He preferred to reserve the words slum and ghetto for the few truly dangerous neighborhoods in the city. Then again, one of the really bad parts of town was practically a stone’s throw away, and it was easy enough to wander in without intending to.

At last he came to an older, red brick building that provided rent-controlled housing. Three floors up, apartment 303. He lightly knocked on the door then leaned against the wall to wait as he heard the distinct creak of rusted couch springs.

“One moment, just let me—” came the voice from inside as he heard the lock disengage and the door swung open, his mother’s graying muzzle poking out accompanied by the faint scent of lavender.

“Nickolas? Is something wrong? You usually call before visiting.”

Nick smiled and let his ears dip back. “Sorry. I had the sudden urge to visit and wanted to surprise you. Mind if I come in?”

His mother moved out of the way and he immediately walked to the window. The apartment had seemed so much larger when he’d been growing up. Technically it was slightly bigger than his current place thanks to having a second bedroom, but he lived on his own. At one point this apartment had held a family of three, and somehow he’d never realized just how absurd that was until after he’d moved out.
With one finger he pushed the curtains aside and peered out, quickly scanning the street. Everything looked clear; few could afford a vehicle of their own so most of the traffic was just passing through. He breathed a little sigh and let the curtain fall back, then slowly walked around the main room while making sure everything remained in its proper place.

“So, what happened?” his mother asked after she locked the door.

“Mom, do I really need a reason to come visit you?”

“Of course not, but you have one,” she said and made her way back to the couch, then let out a groan as she settled onto it. “You think you are oh so clever, but you’re still my son. Tell me what happened.”

Simple denial never had worked well on her. He slowly shook his head and decided to change tracks.

“Just ended up having a talk earlier that got me thinking,” he said as he made his way to the living room shelf. All it held was a single urn and a pair of family pictures. Without thinking he ran his hand over the aged wood. As usual there wasn’t even a trace of dust. “Have you ever considered moving away from this place, mom?”

She laughed. “I’ve lived here for over three decades. I wouldn’t know where to go.”

“You could move closer to me,” he suggested, looking back at her. “I know you worry about money, but if I ask around maybe some of my friends will be able to find a place willing to give you a deal.”

“Nicholas, you know I don’t want help from those sorts of friends,” she warned.

That stung more than he cared to admit. “I was actually thinking there might be someplace to give you a discount because I’m on the force.”

She watched him silently for a couple of seconds, then waved a hand. “Sorry. Sometimes I forget you’ve turned over a new leaf.” Her paws rubbed at her muzzle a couple times. “I’ll need to thank that bunny cop again sometime. Barely got a chance to talk with her during your graduation.”

*And thank God for that*, Nick thought. *If Judy hears half the stories you’d share I’ll never hear the end of it.*

“If you move you’ll be close enough that it would be easy to bring her along for a visit,” he said.

“You are really pushing that,” his mother said. “Why do you want me to move so badly?”

Nick folded his ears and decided it was time for a touch of honesty. “Because you’re living out here all alone, mom. What if something happens to you? It could be days before I even hear about it.”

“I’m not all alone, Becky comes to visit almost every day,” she said with a huff.

“Becky is older than you are,” Nick reminded her.

“And she still lives by herself,” his mother said. “I’m only fifty-nine, Nicholas. You don’t need to worry about me yet.”

Nick clamped his mouth shut, knowing better than to argue once his mother had dug her heels in. He turned back to the shelf and picked up the picture on the right. It was one of the yearly family photos,
and the last one to have all three of them. The next couple he had skipped out on, much to his parents’ dismay. But he’d been young, and just starting to fall with the wrong sort, and in all his youthful wisdom had known there would always be opportunity the next year. Until there wasn’t. He set the photo back down before he reopened old wounds, turning back around to face his mother once more.

And found her watching him with a concerned expression. “You know, your father would be proud to know that this is where you’d eventually end up.”

“No, mom. You know exactly what he was like. He’d demand to know what took me so long,” Nick said, then looked up at the ceiling. “We rarely saw eye to eye toward the end.”

She got up and walked over, brushing a hand along his cheek. “He was just hard on you because he hated to think that you were going to waste your entire life like so many of the other kids around here,” she said, smiling lightly. “How about we stop talking about this and I cook some supper before you head back out?”
Leads and Tracks

That morning the news finally leaked that another mammal was suffering from exposure to Nighthowler toxin. By itself that might not have been much of a story, but the antidote’s failure to reverse the wildebeest’s savage state was more than enough to ensure that shrill headlines dominated the front-page news and morning talk shows. As expected, public officials urged calm while stating that it was too soon for them to make any definitive statements. A few sources that didn’t wish to be identified were willing to speculate that whatever drugs the kid had been on might be interfering with the cure, which got every pundit on the air discussing the dangers of drug use and the recklessness of teens in the modern world.

Nick already knew from the lab results that it was just a smokescreen to keep everyone calm, Judy had been able to explain that much to him before they reported to receive their weekly assignment. Chief Bogo had decided to keep them both off the street in favor of having them stay at the precinct to interview the kids whose parents they’d been able to contact. That was one silver lining of having the news break, there was suddenly political pressure to get the problem solved now, so the courts had moved quickly to produce the necessary documents to compel testimony.

The chief claimed his decision was based on their existing involvement in the case, but Nick suspected the cape buffalo really just wanted to make sure his injury had time to fully heal. He appreciated the consideration, the bruise he’d gotten had spread over most of his side and gradually turned sickly yellow under his fur. It wasn’t quite as tender anymore, but his fur had just started to grow back in so his whole body itched. Just that morning he had shocked himself awake while thoughtlessly scratching and nearly doubled over from the pain.

Judy took being sidelined quite a bit harder, though she didn’t try to protest. Apparently she had some sort of lead that she wanted to run down, not spend an entire week conducting interviews. Once they had gotten out of the bullpen she had launched into a mini-rant about the injustice of it all. It made for an adorable scene, but Nick couldn’t stand to see her so frustrated so he’d offered to take on the bulk of the interviews so she could sniff out whatever she was after.

Which had been fine up until one kid showed up in the company of the high powered lawyer his family apparently kept on retainer. The extravagance of that nearly left Nick speechless. Most parents simply brought their kids, who had already been properly chastened, and prompted them to answer everything. The process took maybe five minutes since most didn’t know anything useful. In each case they were let off with a warning to watch their behavior in the future.

In contrast, the young wild dog’s lawyer, a camel from Humpfry&Humpfry, absolutely forbid the kid to answer any questions about the party. Nick had tried every single trick he knew to get the camel to let up, but any time the conversation began to drift toward the day of the party or the details surrounding it the camel always stopped the kid from talking. The excuse was always the same: he wasn’t going to allow the police to trick the kid into incriminating himself.

The lawyer wasn’t better than him, that simply wasn’t possible, however he did have a much better grasp of the law. In fact, the camel probably knew the law better than Judy, though Nick supposed that was to be expected. He wasn’t used to coming up against mammals able to put such a wall in front of him, but there were better ways to get past a wall than trying to ram his face through it. He just needed to find another way around it, and that meant picking a softer target.

So he set his phone on the table and sat back quietly, silently watching the kid for the remainder of their time together. The lawyer was clearly unimpressed by the tactic, but the younger wild dog got more and more uncomfortable the longer they sat in silence. Several times the kid tried to speak to fill
the empty space, but his lawyer always immediately stepped in to silence him.

Which was perfectly fine, because it wasn’t the kid Nick was after. It was his parents, currently observing the interview behind the two-way mirror with the chief. Parents were by their very nature protective, and judging by the lawyer these ones were especially so. Give them enough reason to be concerned and they’d jump to give him anything he wanted if it meant keeping their child safe.

“Officer Wilde, as pleasant as this experience has been you seem to be wasting my client’s time,” the camel said as time inched closer to the end of the interview.

“Oh, I’m really not,” Nick assured the lawyer, putting on his most confident smile. “Just waiting on a text from my partner.”

At last the camel began to look concerned, but Nick continued to sit in silence while keeping an eye on the kid. With just five minutes to go his phone chimed, a reminder he had set previously to make sure he didn’t let time get away from him. He quickly scooped it off the table and looked at the notification, silencing it as he gave a bigger smile.

“And there it is,” he said, chair scraping across the ground as he stood. “Thank you so much for your cooperation. I’ll just be a moment.”

“And then my client will be free to go?” the lawyer asked.

Nick smirked. “Sorry, but no. I need to check with the chief to make sure I’m clear to book this little guy,” he lied.

The kid jumped out of his chair. “What? What do you mean?”

“Well, not everyone’s mommy and daddy can afford a big expensive lawyer when their special snowflake lands in hot water,” he explained, slowly swishing his tail. “Seems your friend was pretty quick to roll over on you once my partner cut him a deal.”

The camel pushed the kid back into his chair and hushed him before turning back to Nick. “What friend?”

“Why not ask your client? I’m sure he can tell you.” Nick then glanced back at the kid as he headed out of the room. “Don’t worry. I’m sure your parents will be able to make bail. You’ll probably only be locked up for a day, at least until your trial.”

“Wait, I want a deal too! I know—” the kid started, but the lawyer quickly spoke over him.

“Be quiet!”

Nick quickly left and immediately headed to the observation room, pleased to see he had been right. The parents both looked scared out of their wits as he politely informed them that they could go be with their kid while he talked to Chief Bogo. As he’d hoped they quickly did as he suggested, leaving him alone with a very annoyed cape buffalo.

“Wilde, what are you doing? There isn’t anyone else being interviewed right now.”

“They don’t know that,” Nick said, watching as the parents entered the room. The mother quickly went to comfort her son while the father began arguing with the lawyer. “As long as they think their son is going to be locked up if they don’t cooperate they’ll do anything to cut a deal.”

As if to emphasize his point the father began to yell at the camel, saying that they had paid him to
keep their kid out of jail while the lawyer did his best to calm both of the parents down and urged them to wait until they had more information. That, obviously, didn’t go over very well with either of them.

“You can’t arrest the kid,” Chief Bogo said, clearly uncomfortable with the scene unfolding in front of him.

“I don’t think I’ll need to. They’re going to be begging for a deal the moment I walk back in.”

“What kind of deal can you possibly give them?” Bogo demanded. “You can’t arrest him in the first place.”

“Don’t you know chief? I’m going to be selling them something they already have,” Nick said, slowly swishing his tail. “That is the best type of deal we could possibly hope for.”

He checked the time and decided he’d given them just enough time to panic, but not enough to think things over too much, so he quickly returned to the interview room. The moment he stepped in the room went silent, so he motioned for the young wild dog to stand while reaching for the handcuffs hanging at his belt. He made it all of two steps before the lawyer spoke up again.

“My client has decided, against my legal advice, that he is willing to speak with you,” the camel said, giving the parents a reproachful look. “However he wants blanket immunity first.”

Nick released the cuffs, walking over to the table so he could lean against one of the legs. “Bad time to be cutting a deal. How do I know you can tell me anything we don’t already know?”

“I know where the drugs came from,” the kid said before anyone else could speak, eliciting a groan from the camel.

Nick felt his ears perk up but kept his expression neutral. “Well, that is a little interesting.”

“That was not an admission that he was involved,” the lawyer said sharply as he glared at the kid. “Before my client talks I want a guarantee of immunity. One that doesn’t depend on your ability to make an arrest or prosecute this case.”

“I think we may just be able to work something out.”

Judy had been buried up to her ears in the ZPD’s database all day thanks to Nick’s generous offer to handle the interviews. The morning had been spent looking into everyone who had knowledge about the Nighthowler toxin and its antidote, but as “Red” had predicted the field was vanishingly small. All told, there were perhaps a dozen with twice that many interns and assistants. Running background checks on all of them would take some time, but from what she had been able to find from publicly available data they were unlikely to be the ones she was looking for.

That let her focus all her energy on the only remaining suspect: Doug the sheep. The last time he’d been seen by anyone had been when she and Nick had found his lab in the underground rail line. Since then he had simply vanished, most likely to some sort of prearranged safe house, and despite the city-wide hunt they hadn’t found a single trace of him.

She had been able to participate in that investigation, and considered its failure one of the rare
blemishes on her otherwise exemplary case record. Time hadn’t brought in any fresh leads, but she hoped reexamining everything from square one might give her new insights. At the very least refreshing her memory might help her make a connection if Nick’s interviews happened to turn anything up.

Right then she was looking at the plans for the underground track Doug had placed his hideout on. It was an older line that had connected Savanna Central to the Nocturnal District, intended to serve as a major point of traffic between the city surface and those areas built into the limestone caverns below. The traffic had never been high enough to justify the expense however. Eventually the city had decided to shut down the line to help trim the budget. Now all that connected the areas was a network of elevators and a couple of subterranean roads.

The initial investigation had already combed through the obvious places: the stations along the route in both Savanna Central and the Nocturnal District. Nothing had turned up; in fact, nobody seemed to have seen anything despite Doug being perhaps the most wanted mammal in Zootopia. At the time the investigation had concluded that he had merely managed to slip out unnoticed somehow, although the cameras that watched the entrances to the stations had failed to spot him, and as far as Judy knew the cameras covered every exit.

And that was exactly what she was trying to confirm, though it was slow work. In addition to the underground rail line there was a tangle of maintenance tunnels that came into contact with one another at various places along the line. Tracing every one to find every possible exit was no small task, but once she was finished she would know for sure if they had left any out.

So far that didn’t appear to be the case, but Judy wasn’t particularly surprised. Arresting Doug had been a high priority before the trail went cold, so the ZPD had no shortage of resources to throw at the problem. She had gone over these same plans with several other officers back then, so it was unlikely they had missed anything. Only Doug was still missing, so obviously something had been overlooked.

Her eyes began to blur so she stopped and rubbed her face roughly with both hands, then took a break to watch the surveillance footage she had running on her computer. There wasn’t anything of note to see, she just had it playing in the hopes that she might see something that would give her ideas. It wasn’t working, unfortunately. Mostly she just found herself wondering how Nick would try to pull a vanishing act like that. He would probably say she was simply overlooking something, but she was already well aware of that.

With a sigh she looked back at the diagrams and wondered what else there was. Every station along the line had been searched, even the ones that had been shut down. A couple stretches of the track were still used, but trying jump onto a train that was already moving at full speed was suicidal, and the unused sections had been cleared multiple times. That left the maintenance corridors. Theoretically someone could hide there, but they definitely weren’t intended for it. Cramped spaces without room to do more than stand for an animal as big as a sheep. Judy couldn’t imagine it was comfortable enough to sleep down there, and there definitely wasn’t a way to get enough food for an extended stay in without drawing attention. Somehow he had gotten out without being noticed, but everything she looked at told her that they’d covered every possible exit.

Even Nick needed something to work with to pull off one of his hustles. When they’d met he’d been playing off her sympathy and naivete, and then during her second encounter had zeroed in on her self-doubt. With Mr. Manchas he’d hinted they had the answers to the questions that had been plaguing the black jaguar. And then against the then Mayor Bellwether he had helped her take advantage of the sheep’s overconfidence thanks to a simple swap. But even Nick couldn’t make an escape route simply appear where there was none.
That thought made her stop for a second. No, that was thinking about everything the wrong way. A careful criminal didn’t try to make an escape route when things went wrong. Nick hadn’t forged paperwork on the spot when she’d questioned him. He had fully prepared and legitimate documents at the ready just in case. From the beginning they’d assumed Doug had parked his mobile drug lab where he did because it would be difficult to find, and maybe that was a factor, but who said it had been the only reason?

So he already had a way out just in case things went bad. One that avoided the street cameras. He couldn’t have dug it out himself; everything had been built of solid concrete. It had to be something that was already there and just hidden so it would be missed during a search. But she had the plans right in front of her. There wasn’t anything—

“Cheese and crackers…Bellwether,” she muttered under her breath.

Mayor Lionheart had given the sheep access to practically everything so he would be free to focus on his political career while pushing off most of the work onto her. Moreover, as long as she got everything done he didn’t see any need to keep tabs on what she was doing. The conniving ewe had every opportunity to alter the records to help keep her conspiracy safe. The more Judy thought about it, the more convinced she became. Only problem was, how could she prove it?

Nick’s conversation with the kid, or more correctly his conversation with the young wild dog’s lawyer while the juvenile whispered into the camel’s ear, had been productive. There hadn’t been any case-breaking revelations, but there had been some useful information and that was all he had really expected.

Saying that the youth knew how the victim got the drugs was a bit of a stretch. It would be more accurate to say that he had been told about some sort of new designer drug that was going to be coming out by a dealer, and had been given a number in case he was interested. The victim had apparently been one of his school friends, or a friend of a friend, or something like that. Whatever the nature of their relationship, he had given the wildebeest the phone number. And now Nick had it as well.

A quick check told him the number belonged to a pre-paid flip phone. He sent a request for information about the purchase just to cover his bases, but already knew it would have been paid for in cash. A burner phone, an old favorite. Still, perhaps the manufacturer could tell him where the phone had been sold. With any luck there would be footage of the transaction. It would take at least a week before the company could get back to him though, so until then the best he could do was wait.

Which sadly meant he needed to return to his desk until another kid showed up for an interview. Judy’s seat was empty when he got back, the top of her desk covered in confusing schematics and town hall records. One look was enough to dissuade him from trying to make sense of whatever it was Judy thought she had, so he settled into his chair and put his feet up while keeping an eye on the clock.

Eventually Francine walked past, so he waved the elephant down. “Hey, Trunks, do you know where Judy got off to?”

“Don’t call me that.”
Nick blinked, then folded his ears back. “Oh, sorry. Didn’t think you’d mind,” he said. “Judy?”

The elephant waved vaguely upstairs. “I think she’s talking to the Chief.”

He went completely still, the fur on his neck standing on end. Slowly, he pulled his feet off of his desk and sat properly, looking up at Bogo’s office as he wondered what was being talked about in there.

“Are we in some sort of trouble?”

Francine snorted lightly. “Why do you think I know?”

His ears folded back and kept his mouth shut, deciding it was best to leave her alone for now. He lightly drummed on his desk for a second, then scooted over to his computer as the sudden urge to look busy took him. With a resigned sigh, he settled in to summarize the interviews he’d conducted so far. Out of habit he created two separate documents, one for the official report and a second to serve as the special addendum he’d be writing for Chief Bogo. He hadn’t done anything questionable, not since the stakeout at least, but the chief hadn’t told him to stop writing them yet so he figured it was best to tread on the safe side.

One thing Nick could say about playing everything straight: while it might be boring it certainly made doing the paperwork less of a headache. The report almost seemed to write itself as he simply related the events that had happened during each interview.

The end result was a much drier read than what he usually turned in, there was simply no need for his usual flair unless he wanted to deceive someone, but he was well on his way to being finished when he heard a familiar scampering and looked up just in time to see Judy bounding down the stairs in five large hops, a massive grin shining on her face.

“Careful there, Carrots. Keep smiling like that and mammals might think you enjoy your job,” Nick commented even as he felt his worries melt away.

Judy barely even slowed, grabbing the keys off her desk. “Get up, get up, get up! The chief agreed to let us check on my hunch, but we only have until the end of the day.”

Before he could say anything she grabbed the schematic that was covering her desk and ran toward the precinct’s garage, a noticeable spring in her step. Nick watched her disappear with a bemused smile, slowly shaking his head as he saved his work and stretched, then followed her out.

While driving to Doug’s last known location Judy explained everything to Nick. After so much frustration it all seemed so obvious that she just had to share her revelation. Bellwether had the records changed, either when she was assistant mayor or after Lionheart had been shuffled off, and all they needed to do was take a look until they found something that was out of place.

Chief Bogo was a bit skeptical of course. It wasn’t that he thought her idea didn’t have merit, but he had calmly explained that one hunch wasn’t enough to justify a complete re-survey of Zootopia’s underground infrastructure, and that even if she was right it wasn’t uncommon for there to be discrepancies between building plans and the final result. Sometimes there were factors that hadn’t been accounted for by the architects, or the foreman on site decided to handle things differently. Still, he’d given her a day to see what she could find.
As they walked the final stretch Judy noticed the tattered remains of police tape—DO NOT CROSS—that someone had failed to take down when the previous investigation had concluded. She’d been back a couple of times since she and Nick had tracked down the location of Doug’s mobile lab in the company of other officers, but this was the first time she’d been back with Nick at her side. She almost expected to see the train car sitting on the tracks, waiting for them to find it again.

“Well, now that we are here, I think it is time I told you something,” Nick said as he pulled a flashlight from his pocket. “I don’t want to get in any more train wrecks.”

Judy rolled her eyes at him. “No trains, I promise.”

“In that case, this is your show. Where are we headed?”

She had been wondering that exact thing the whole drive over. What would someone like Doug consider a safe escape route? Obviously not out the way they’d come in, he would have assumed that any police to show up would come from that direction. And not toward where the tracks reemerged above ground. That was another direction the police would have covered. That just left one option.

“Come on,” she said, pulling out her own flashlight as she followed the tracks deeper underground. “Let’s check this way first.”

They stayed on the maintenance walkway just along the tunnel wall while Judy kept track of their progress by referencing the tunnel markers against the schematics. At regular intervals a train barreled past, moving so fast it was reduced to a sleek blur, and they both had to cling to the safety railing to avoid being sucked off. One time Nick dropped his flashlight and it rolled off the walkway to be smashed under the train wheels before he could catch it.

“Carrots, I know I’ve never said this before, but I liked it better in the precinct,” Nick said over the rail at the ruined remains of his flashlight.

Judy ignored him as she kept pressing on. According to the schematics the ventilation access was only a quarter mile away, and that was as good a place as any to search first. It wasn’t that far. If the city would only bother to send someone down with a bunch of new lights to replace the ones that had burned out it wouldn’t even be that bad.

She almost missed the door on the other side of the tracks; she’d been so busy tracking their progress against the schematics that Nick had to point it out. At first she’d been confused, wondering if she had made some mistake. There wasn’t supposed to be anything on that side of the tracks until they were far deeper, but a quick check of the nearest tunnel marker confirmed she hadn’t gotten their position wrong.

A smile broke out on her muzzle and she hopped over the safety railing, quickly running to the door while Nick scrambled to keep up. The ground near it was covered in a thick layer of dirt that had been kicked up by the passing trains. She tentatively reached out and gave the knob a gentle twist. It turned.

“Someone left this door unlocked,” she said, looking back at Nick.

“That’s great,” Nick said anxiously, peering into the tunnel. “Can we hurry inside before a train decides we’d look better spread across several miles of track?”

“Oh just clam down—” she said, though the laugh died on her lips as she gave the door a push only to find it didn’t move. Her ears perked up a little and she tried again, this time putting her weight
against it. Again nothing. “It’s stuck.”

“What?”

“The door is stuck,” she repeated. “It won’t budge.”

Nick glanced down the tunnel again, then lightly pushed her out of the way and tried it himself with no better success. Then he threw his shoulder into it, this time forcing the door in ever so slightly though he staggered back with a yelp.

“Did you hurt yourself?” Judy asked anxiously.

“Just used the wrong shoulder,” Nick grumbled before he threw himself against the door again, leading with his other shoulder this time. “Keep forgetting about the stupid bruise.”

After several more attempts he opened a gap just big enough for her to slip inside while he continued to work the door open. The moment she was through it became obvious why the door was stuck shut. Someone had moved a sizable storage locker to barricade it.

“I think someone didn’t want to be followed,” Judy called outside as Nick continued to work the door open.

“I hadn’t noticed,” Nick grunted, finally able to squeeze his larger frame in. “Keep up the fine detective work and you’ll be in command of the ZPD in no time.”

She started to shine her light around the room they’d found, keeping one hand on the wall as she moved into it. “Do you smell anything?”

“Only hydraulic fluid and oil,” Nick said, moving the other direction. “If this is the place, then our wanted sheepie was careful to make it impossible to track him by scent.”

Judy wasn’t sure what she expected to find. The room was fairly bare however. Other than the locker there didn’t wasn’t much of note. A few hooks on the wall. A light with a broken bulb. The place was clearly intended to serve as a temporary storage of some sort. She’d nearly made her way to the far wall when she stepped on something cold, then looked down to see a metal hatch under her foot. A quick look at the schematics confirmed that, like the storage room they were currently standing in, there wasn’t supposed to be anything nearby that would require an access point.

She stepped off the floor panel and heaved it open with a soft grunt. The metal clanged sharply when it landed against the cement floor, but the noise was quickly drowned out by a train as it thundered past the door outside.

“What have you got there?” Nick asked, walking over to peer inside, then quick took a step back. “That is disgusting.”

Judy didn’t disagree as she stared at the tangled mass of partly decomposed white fluff. A bunch of small bugs seemed to have made the mess their home and quickly scurried out of sight when her light fell on them. Apparently Doug had sheered himself.

“That is wool,” she said finally as she angled her light to shine on the crawlspace they’d uncovered. “I’ll bet he needed to do it so he could fit in there.”

Nick sighed. “Just great. Well, after you.”

“Excuse me?”
“You’re the one that found it,” he said.

“Exactly,” Judy agreed. “So now it’s your turn to do something.”

“Ladies first.”

She turned and tilted her ears toward Nick. “Age before youth.”

“We’re both going to get fleas,” Nick muttered before he jumped down. The moment his feet touched the floor he made a retching sound. “Oh God, it feels even worse than it looks. Smells worse too.”

“Then stop standing in it and get moving!”

Nick made a face as he stooped low and started into the crawlspace. The moment he was out of the way Judy tucked the schematics away and jumped in after him. Unfortunately Nick hadn’t been exaggerating. She didn’t waste any time getting out of the disgusting mess, and tried to imagine how difficult it must have been for the sheep to wiggle his way through. Even small as she was, she had to move while hunched over, while Nick had shifted to crawling forward on all fours.

High voltage cables were strung neatly along the wall on either side, hooked into what she assumed were fuse boxes at regular intervals. The best Judy could tell, they were headed roughly parallel to the track, though she thought the shaft was angling gradually away. That was just an educated guess, however. There was no way to track how far they’d traveled in there. At least they were making relatively good time.

“I think my ancestors are turning over in their graves,” Nick commented from up ahead.

Judy looked up at his fluffy tail, the very tip of it swaying several inches in front of her nose. “Why?”

“Because, I must be the first fox ever to be followed down a hole by a bunny,” he said, then huffed as he scooted forward another few feet. “Pretty sure it was always the other way around before.”

She watched as the tip of his tail continued to dance in front of her, slowly shaking her head as she smiled. “Yeah, well that wasn’t very good for us bunnies. I think I like it better this way.”

“You know, I do too.”

The tip of his tail kept bobbing and weaving almost hypnotically before it suddenly bopped her right on the nose. She stumbled back a couple steps, eyes closed as she shook her head, then let loose a series of sneezes that set Nick to laughing.

“That wasn’t funny,” she huffed and rubbed her nose.

“No, maybe it wasn’t,” Nick said as he leaned over just enough to peer back at her. With only the light cast by her flashlight his eyes almost seemed to glow. “It was adorable though. Your sneezes are cute. They sound so tiny.”

“Nick, you know I don’t like being called that.”

“Relax Carrots, I wasn’t calling you cute. Just your sneezes,” he said and started crawling once more. “I promise not to do it again.”

Judy huffed lightly. “Thanks.”

“At least not today.”
She would have glared if Nick had still been looking to appreciate it, but all she could see was that impressively fluffy tail once more. The spot where it had brushed over her nose still tingled lightly, that distinctly foxy scent lingering even as he moved away, so she rubbed vigorously at her nose for another second. When that failed she simply shook her head and hurried to catch up before Nick got too far away.

“We’re almost at the end,” Nick said after another few minutes. “I can see the hatch just ahead.”

She tried to see around him, but again all she could see was that tail. For an instant she regretted not going first, this was exactly the sort of thing Nick did when he wanted to get on her nerves. Then she heard Nick let out a frustrated huff and the clink of metal on metal.

“Is it locked?” she asked anxiously.

“No, something is over the hatch,” he said. Another huff followed by him flopping over onto his back. “Really heavy. Seems our sheepie was really worried that someone might follow him.”

He pushed again, using both hands this time, and she heard something shifting up above. Then he settled and panted for a second. “I don’t suppose you’re going to let us turn around after all this, huh.”

“Nope.”

Nick gave a dry chuckle. “Think you can squeeze up here then?” he asked and took a deep breath. “I think I can lift it enough for you to squeeze through.”

“I probably can,” she said, eying how much space there was with Nick pressed against the floor like that.

“Then get up here. Not sure how long I can hold it up and I’d rather not drop it on you.”

The fit was slightly tighter than Judy expected, and it took a bit of squirming before she was in place. She planted her feet against Nick’s body and waited, tail flicking until she noticed Nick watching her.

“Fancy meeting you here,” he said, giving her that sly grin. “Do you come often, or is this just—”

“Nick, please…”

“What? I just got comfortable,” he said, managing to pull off a surprisingly innocent expression.

She lightly shoved his muzzle away, grinning in spite of herself. “Stop goofing off and get this open.”

“You’re no fun,” Nick said, then took a deep breath and grunted as he pushed up with both hands.

The hatch lifted slowly, but there was just enough space for her to see outside. Standing up on Nick’s chest, she tried to help and drew a light rumble of protest from the fox. Together they managed to lift it just enough for her fit, and she scampered through the gap before Nick let the weight fall once more with a sharp clang.

This room was similar to the one they’d come from, though noticeably closer to the surface. Her ears could just make out street noise up above. A heavy steel drum that had been re-purposed as a trash can had been dragged over the hatch. It took a bit of effort, but Judy was able to knock it onto its side and roll it out of the way to release Nick.
“So, where are we now?” Nick asked as he pulled himself into the room and brushed himself off.

Judy pulled the schematics back out and looked them over, shaking her head slowly. “I have no clue.”

Fortunately they weren’t locked inside the room. Outside was one of the main maintenance halls and within a few minutes of walking Judy was able to figure out where they were. This particular hall wasn’t supposed to connect to the main tunnel in any way according to the diagrams, and as she’d already suspected they weren’t that far underground anymore.

“Do you think Doug went for the closest exit, or kept running for a while?” Judy asked.

Nick considered the question. “He didn’t exactly look like he was in the best shape. His friends were the ones that chased after us, he didn’t help,” he decided at last, “and most criminals prefer a fast escape unless there is a very good reason to go with something more complicated.”

“Speaking from experience there?”

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re implying,” he said. “Which way do we go to get out of here?”

As it turned out, the nearest exit wasn’t very far at all. Around the first corner was a narrow staircase that brought them up into an alley. The moment they stepped back outside Judy was almost blinded by how bright the sun was. Nick merely pulled his sunglasses out and put them on, looking supremely pleased with himself as he started to check out the area.

“Hey, I know this place,” he said once he’d regained his bearings. “There’s a bookstore with a Snarlbucks just down the street.”

“I’m not going to ask why you’re so familiar with the city’s back alleys,” Judy said, squinting against the sunlight as she looked for any traffic cameras that might have a view of where they were standing. There were none, of course. “Do you think Doug had a getaway car waiting here?”

“Just sitting unattended in an alley? I doubt it. Something like that draws attention; at best it would’ve been stolen.”

“Then he probably called someone to pick him up,” she reasoned. “He wasn’t about to go walking out in the open. Someone would have noticed a freshly sheered sheep. Maybe if we pull the footage from the cameras in this area we’ll be able to figure out who helped him.”

Nick didn’t look too hopeful, but he nodded anyway. “At least now we know how he gave the ZPD the slip.”
Always the same.
The heavy thud of work boots, hushed conversation, then creaky hinges and sudden sliver of light.
Scent of dust and mud and sweat. Normally strong voice soft with concern.
“Hey Ace, sorry I’ve been gone all week…
“…heard about what happened, do you want to talk…
“No, you don’t have to…
“Why don’t you come out of there?
“I know… I know…
“Don’t worry, I intend to have a serious conversation with…
“You can’t let these things… Oh, you’re sure?
“No, it’s okay, you don’t have to… Don’t worry about the money…
“It’s okay… It’s okay… Some mammals think things that aren’t true…
“I won’t tell anyone, I promise…
“Here, let me teach you something…
“Now remember, you aren’t really supposed to do this…
“Only when you absolutely have to…
“Promise me. Only to keep someone from hurting you or someone else, okay?”

Nick’s eyes fluttered open and he stared at the ceiling as he tried to remember when he’d last had that dream. Years, he thought. Still as vivid as the first time. Always the same sequence of events. And, as usual, the flashing lights had appeared just before he woke up.

A soft groan slipped from him as he pushed away the pillow he’d curled around, then sat up in bed. Just enough light filtered in from the window for him to read the clock on his wall. Another groan slipped free. Two Sixteen. He wasn’t supposed to be awake for another two and a half hours at least.

For several minutes he sat there, waiting until his body decided what it wanted to do. He could almost feel the seconds zipping past, his eyes burning and head lightly throbbing due to the early hour, until he finally accepted the inevitable and stood.

He didn’t bother to turn on the light as he headed right to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water, then opened the freezer and grabbed a handful of ice cubes to drop in. With barely even a pause he drained the whole thing, crunching one of the cubes between his teeth as he refilled his cup. This time he drank more slowly, aimlessly wandering the room in the dark.

Sleep already felt like a lost cause, he could still feel the old memories as they wormed their way painfully through his thoughts. Before the move he would’ve found some dull infomercial to watch in the hope that boredom would exhaust him, but that wasn’t an option any more. Watching anything was difficult without a TV.

Going back to bed was always an option. He could curl up around another pillow and pretend to sleep. Just closing his eyes might help his mind rest despite the images that were already playing through his brain. It wouldn’t be sleep, not really anyway, but at least he could fake normalcy. He might even manage to drift off, though from experience he knew how rarely that happened. Most likely he would simply end up dwelling on things better left alone.

Or he could give up on sleep entirely. Accept that the day would be a miserable, caffeine-fueled drag. A small price to pay really. Until then he could go for a jog or hit the local gym—keeping up with Judy was difficult enough so putting in a bit of extra effort was never a waste—or he could curl up on the couch to read, or just kill time on his phone playing stupid games until the sun decided to
rise.

He emptied the cup again and took a deep breath, then left it on the unused TV stand before he almost threw himself onto the couch. One of the supports dug almost painfully into his rear until he scooted off of it with a grumble. That really was something he needed to fix soon. Later. Until then, he could just make do.

His thoughts drifted lazily back to Judy and he found himself wondering if she was feeling any better about everything with Norman. She hadn’t mentioned the other bunny since showing up so unexpectedly that Saturday, but then she had practically thrown herself at her work. That was typical of her, he supposed. It was how she handled most anything. And yet.

What in the world had made him think Judy would rebound on him? He was tempted to blame that otter that had been their waitress at the Rio Cafe. The whole experience had been confusing and upsetting, and he had tried to push it aside but now that he really thought about it he was sure she assumed he had been dating Judy. Which was absurd. Clearly. Not that odd pairings didn’t sometimes happen, he was almost certain that Judy’s noisy neighbors were a couple for example, but there were certain…lines that weren’t crossed. If she took a fancy to a hedgehog, or hare, or beaver, or just any number of mammals, it would simply raise a few eyebrows. Heck, she could probably take fancy to an elephant without suffering through anything worse than whimsical comments. But a fox? Absurd.

Except he was sitting awake thinking about just that. Not just thinking, outright worrying.

“Get it together, Nick. You’re being silly. And now you’re talking to yourself apparently. Goodie.”

He gave his head a shake and grabbed his phone off the coffee table in an effort to distract himself. Then found himself at Zoogle and before he had a chance to second guess himself typed in a quick search. That…was a mistake.

“Oh…” he whispered, eyes wide as he skimmed the results. Without thinking he opened the first one. “Ooooh no.”

Zootopia’s extensive traffic camera system was both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it was quite difficult for criminals to move around without having their movements spotted. In theory that was one of the primary benefits of having so many scattered throughout the city, and both the city council and the ZPD itself frequently pushed that angle whenever the system’s effectiveness was called into question. At times it could be a little weird knowing that anything you were doing could end up recorded in some government databank, but Judy had to admit that on more than one occasion the cameras had helped break a case. When everything was recorded sometimes solving a mystery just meant reviewing the footage.

Of course that assumed one knew when and where to look. Without knowing both the system was as useless as if it didn’t exist, there was just too much to review to ever find relevant details by simply checking at random. Occasionally the ZPD still tried to do just that, often with the assistance of some fancy new facial recognition software, but while that might be the way of the future every officer to ever use the tools knew they were always just another five years away from being actually useful. No doubt the archived videos contained footage of numerous crimes that would never be solved just because no officer knew where to look.
The situation was almost worse knowing where to look, but not exactly when. In this case there was a much better chance of finding something useful, but doing so was labor intensive. They had pulled footage from every camera near the alley Doug had escaped into, and every second needed to be reviewed. That had become Judy’s private hell over the past couple of days, one Nick had been dragged into by virtue of being her partner. Even when the video was sped up the process took forever, and a moment of inattention could mean rewinding several minutes to start all over.

Nick was annoyed that he was involved, she could just feel it. This was his first time dealing with the clunky system, and for the past two days he’d been bored near to tears. And today he was uncharacteristically quiet as he stared at the screen and sipped from what must’ve been his tenth coffee. He claimed to be tired, that he hadn’t slept well during the night, and she might have accepted that if he was anyone else.

She knew Nick well enough to understand that he didn’t get grouchy when he was tired, but today he practically exuded a standoffish aura. He didn’t use a clipped tone, or speak passive aggressively, or anything like that. It was more like he went out of his way to avoid talking altogether, always polite and considerate, but saying exactly what was necessary and nothing more in such a way that he completely shut down any further conversation.

It wasn’t the first time she’d seen him pull back like this. She’d seen how uncomfortable he’d been last Sunday, and even if he had been looking forward to a nap Nick wasn’t the type to turn down a free meal. Whenever they made a bet for dinner or lunch he was always the one to initiate it, and half the time he already had some plan to help ensure his victory. At the time she’d just put it down to him having an off day, but to see him this way again so soon had her concerned.

Actually today was worse than the last time. Normally Nick was quite talkative, although he didn’t try to dominate a conversation like some of the chatterboxes in her family. Nick was perfectly happy to let others speak or decide on the topic of conversation. He just seemed to enjoy hearing his own voice, and seeing him so quiet all day made her uneasy.

What if she’d done something to upset him?

With a start Judy realized that she had gotten so wrapped up in her worries that she couldn’t remember any of the footage she’d just watched. She hissed through her teeth in frustration and paused the video, ears falling limp behind her, then slipped out of her chair.

“I need to get something to drink,” she said and headed for the media room’s door.

Nick yawned lazily and gave her a listless wave without even looking over. “See ya.”

She bit her tongue and hurried out, headed straight for the water cooler in the main foyer. There were closer ones, but right then she needed the excuse to move around. As long as she kept her body in motion it was easier not to think about…things. She snatched one of the paper cups and filled it almost to the brim, then started pacing as she slowly sipped it and told herself that she needed the break anyway to keep her mind sharp. After several circuits around the front desk she noticed Clawhauser watching her.

“Trouble in paradise?” he asked.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, just curious about why you and Nick are fighting,” the large cheetah said, leaning forward until his head was resting on his hands. “Everyone’s been wondering when you’d have your first real bad one.”
So the other officers had noticed something was off too. Judy shook her head and forced a smile.

“Why would anyone think he and I are fighting?” she asked.

“Do you really want to know? Well for one something is clearly upsetting him. I don’t think I’ve ever seen that fox so quiet. Even the Chief commented on it,” Clawhauser said, counting off on his fingers. “Two, I’ve never seen you take this many breaks before either. Usually it’s like you two are attached at the hip—”

“No we’re not,” she protested.

Clawhauser gave her a look. “You go on breaks together, take lunch together, and grab dinner after work together half the time.”

“We aren’t that bad.”

“Then I guess you haven’t been trying to set his tail on fire with your eyes when he isn’t paying attention either?” Clawhauser said, ticking off another finger. “It’s fine that you guys are having a tiff, I just wanna know what it’s over. The whole precinct is wondering.”

_Great. The whole precinct has noticed_, Judy thought.

“We aren’t fighting,” she insisted with a huff. “Nick just didn’t sleep very good last night. He’s been guzzling coffee like you wouldn’t believe.”

The cheetah settled back in his chair and crossed his arms. “Uh huh.”

“Look, I need to get back to work. Just trust me, everything is fine.”

Clawhauser still looked skeptical, but she wasn’t willing to spend time trying to convince him. Not when she wasn’t really sure if he was wrong. She hurried back to the media room and tried to avoid making eye contact with any of the officers that were hanging around, wondering just how many of them were thinking the same things as Clawhauser. Anytime there was drama in the air the stories always spread like wildfire. No doubt there was already at least one betting pool going.

Half-way back she slowed down and wondered if it was possible to have a fight without both mammals knowing. She was already concerned that she’d done something wrong. What if she had and this was just Nick’s way of letting her know? If that was the case, was it best to wait until he cooled off? Or would a delay just make him assume she was ignoring him? But if she brought it up without knowing what was wrong wouldn’t that be worse somehow? He was her partner; surely she should know what was bothering him without needing to be told.

She rested one hand on the door back inside, wavering between asking him or seeing how things went. It wasn’t much of a contest. Ever since she’d been young she had been almost incapable of sitting idle when something felt wrong. Even after a few bad experiences taught her that it wasn’t always right to jump immediately into action she still had difficulty taking the wait and see approach. Maybe doing something wasn’t always the right choice, but in the end it was always the one she could live with.

Her eyes closed for a moment as she mentally braced herself, then took a deep breath and walked inside to find Nick leaning back in his chair. One of his ears tilted toward her and he turned, an exhausted smile on his lips. It was such a shift from how she’d left him that she very nearly tripped.

“I found him,” Nick said before she could even speak, gesturing to the monitor he’d been watching. “Got a clear shot of him in the passenger side of this beat up sedan.”
“Nick, I was wondering if—” she started, then blinked and looked at the screen.

Sure enough Doug was sitting in an old, brown sedan that had definitely seen better days. Without the wool covering his body he looked quite strange, bordering on silly really, but she recognized his face and the cold gleam in his eye. The driver was clearly a wolf, but a glare on the windshield made it impossible to get a good look at his face.

“Were you able to get the plates?” she asked, leaning closer to the screen.

“Yep. Already ran them too,” Nick said, though his tone became considerably less bright. “They’re stolen though. Belongs to a pickup, not a sedan.”

That figured, she supposed. Whoever Doug had called to pick him up wasn’t likely to make things easy on them. Still, they had the car and could try to track it. Maybe now they could get some idea of where Doug had gone.

Then she shook her head, realizing that she’d gotten side-tracked. “That’s great, but I…” she took a deep breath and looked off to one side. “Nick, are you angry at me or something?”

He started to answer, then stopped with his mouth half open, blinked, and closed it again before looking at her. “Angry? What…why?”

His clear confusion practically washed over her, her tail giving a little flick as she calmed down. Not upset. She had that at least.

“You’ve been weirdly quiet all day. The whole precinct has been talking about it,” she said, looking off to one side as she rubbed her arm. “I thought maybe I upset you or something since it seems like you didn’t want to speak with me.”

“I’m just tired,” Nick said, his ears folded half back. “Aaand…there might be a few things on my mind that have me distracted.”

“You make it sound so ominous.”

Nick cracked a tight smile. “Well, it definitely feels ominous.”

“Would you like to talk about it?” Judy asked. “We can go grab a pizza or something after work and…”

“Pretty sure that is a bad idea, Fluff.” Nick avoided looking at her as he spoke. “There really isn’t even a problem. I just had some stupid ideas popped into my head, and like an idiot I let myself think about them.”

“If it makes you that uncomfortable we don’t have to talk about it,” she offered, but Nick still seemed reluctant so she took a step closer. “Please? You’ve ducked out of this since Sunday and tonight is my last chance. I need to pack tomorrow, and I’m leaving really early Saturday morning.”

She watched Nick blink, his ears slowly coming back up. “Oh, that’s right.”

“So can we spend a little time together outside work before I have to take off?” she asked.

Nick looked at her, then at the almost empty coffee cup on the desk, and for a second she thought he was about to beg off again. But then he smiled, and she nearly jumped in celebration.
“When does your train leave,” Nick asked as they waited for their food.

The energy drink he’d downed before was keeping him alert, but just barely and he could already tell the steady influx of caffeine he’d been relying on all day had taken its toll. Even though they were simply sitting at a table his heart was still racing.

He’d gone along with Judy’s idea to get a few slices from the pizzeria just a half-block from the station, mostly because they had a reputation for being quick and he wasn’t sure how long he had before the caffeine ran out and he became dead on his feet.

They’d been there a couple of times in the past, simple proximity to the precinct made that an inevitability, which had been another reason he’d agreed. The staff already knew who he and Judy were, and the fact that they were both still in uniform would help prevent any misunderstandings.

*Thoughts like that are exactly why I’m in so much trouble*, he mused quietly, wrestling with the sudden rush of doubt.

“Five in the morning,” Judy said, tracing one finger along the patterns in the tablecloth. “So I probably need to be up by four at the latest.”

“Ouch. You weren’t kidding about leaving early,” he said. “Didn’t think any trains ran at that hour.”

“It’s the first one,” Judy confirmed. “I’m actually really excited to see everyone again, now that I’m not a failure like last time.”

Nick leaned against the side of the table, keeping an eye on their server so he’d see when their food was coming. “When have you ever been a failure?”

“Mmm?”

“That campaign was never even announced,” Judy said, eyes wide. “The only ones to know about it were Bellwether, the Chief, and me!”

“And the city’s PR team, the city council, and probably most of the top brass in the ZPD,” Nick added.

“Well yeah, but—”

“Also I found a box of posters with you on them in the storage room back at the academy,” he continued, smiling lazily. “Turns out they don’t really appreciate backtalk during training.”

Judy giggled. “No they don’t, but how did you know that is when I resigned?”

“I asked McHorn about it,” Nick said, his ears perking up as he finally saw the waiter headed their way. “He heard it from Fangmeyer, who heard it from Clawhauser, who heard it from Wolford, who probably heard it from Chief Bogo. Or something like that.”
“Great, so everyone knows about that too,” she said, though the moment their food and drinks arrived she brightened up. “Well, I didn’t feel like I deserved it since it was sort of my fault that everything just fell apart.”

“That might be for the best.” He paused to enjoy the scent of his pineapple pizza and licked his lips as he picked up one of the straws the waiter had left for their drinks. “Bellwether probably hoped that making you the public face of the police would alienate us preds even more. In fact, I’d put money on that.”

“Yeah, well I couldn’t do it,” Judy murmured as she peeled the wrapper of the other straw and rolled it into a tiny wad. “I just—”

She was cut off when Nick blew through his straw, sending the wrapper flying across the table to bump into her nose. Her snout wrinkled and she gave her head a shake, then glared at the fox as he pointed her way and clicked his tongue.

“Bullseye.”

To her credit, Judy tried valiantly to maintain her scowl and managed to hold it for a full two seconds before she cracked into a grin and began giggling. “If this table wasn’t so large, I’d kick you.”

“Really? I haven’t gotten to play footsie in years!”

She tossed her wadded straw wrapper at him, but an air current blew it pathetically off course. Nick watched as crumpled paper hit the table well short of him, then gestured at it with both hands.

“Someone still throws like a bunny,” he said before flicking it back at her. This time she managed to dodge out of the way.

“Stop that, you’re making a mess.”
Judy liked to consider herself an early riser. It was a side effect of growing up on a farm where there was always more work to do than hours in the day to do it. All of the older kids were expected to pitch in so everything got done. She considered it a mark of pride that there were few days when she didn’t show up for work bright eyed and with a healthy bounce in her step.

That said, “early” usually meant getting up with the sun and not when the stars were still out. The screech of her alarm dragged her ruthlessly from the wonderful dream she’d been having, all full of autumn colors and earthy scents and warm feelings that put butterflies in her stomach. For a couple of seconds she tried to ignore the intrusive noise, pulling her pillow over her head even as she groaned with the realization that she needed to get moving. Then she heard her neighbors start yelling at her to “shut off that racket” while demanding to know if she realized what time it was.

“Sorry guys,” she answered, then stifled a yawn as she went to her desk to silence the alarm.

A quick, cold shower helped shock her awake, and she found that she almost couldn’t wait to get going as she dried her fur with the small hand dryer she’d bought. Everything was ready to go. She just needed to make sure she didn’t accidentally leave any of it behind. Her clothing was laid out, just a simple outfit that would fit in back home, and an envelope with enough cash to last the week. Other than that there was her phone, her keys, her tickets, and of course her bag.

She was actually surprised by how much she’d be leaving behind. When she’d first moved to Zootopia it had all fit into her tiny suitcase, but in the time since she’d bought more clothing—mostly stuff that fit in with the urban environment—along with various odds and ends to make her meager apartment more comfortable. None of it was fancy, even with a few raises under her belt there wasn’t much left after she’d dealt with rent, utilities, and other necessities, but all of it was hers along with the simple satisfaction of knowing she’d built this life by herself.

After checking herself in the mirror she finally got out the door, only pausing long enough to make sure she’d locked it properly. She took the stairs in twos and threes all the way down, then skipped her way out the front door.

“You sure seem eager to get away from this place, Carrots. Not even going to pause to say goodbye?”

She spun in place, startled to see Nick leaning against the wall next to the door with that smile of his. “Sweet cheese and crackers, you startled me! What are you doing here?”

“Thought I’d see you off,” he said as he walked over. “Seems kind of lonely, going on a trip all by yourself.”

“I’m going to visit my freakishly huge family, I’ll be anything but lonely,” Judy assured him, then paused and tilted her head. “Although something tells me you weren’t talking about me.”

The look on Nick’s face was priceless, and his ears quickly dipped back in a blush. “You really are getting good at that, Fluff,” he said with a slight chuckle. “It’s kind of scary actually.”

“What are you talking about? You do it all the time.”

Nick ambled over and they began to walk as he looked down at her. “Exactly. I do it,” he said lightly. “Not used to having someone do it to me. You’re pretty much the only one.”
“Pretty much?” she asked.

“My mother can sometimes,” Nick admitted, “but you’re already better than she ever was. Other than that, nobody worth talking about.”

“At least I’m in good company then,” Judy said. “Not sure why that would frighten you.”

She felt his eyes on her and glanced over to find a thoughtful expression on his face. “Because you…well, you see me Judy.”

“Of course I see you. You’re standing right there.”

“Mighty bold words for the bunny that ran past me,” Nick said, “but not what I’m talking about.”

Judy looked up at him expectantly, but Nick seemed momentarily at a loss for words. She thought about telling him it was fine, but just watching she could tell it was something that had been on his mind so she held her tongue and waited until he spoke up again.

“What I mean is that you see past the facade I put up to distract everyone. I’ve spent most of my life throwing up this image to show the world what it expects to see, because if I can do that I can push a little here and nudge a little there, and next thing you know I’ve got what I want.” He shook his head and gave her a sideways look. “But you see me.”

“Is that a bad thing?” she asked.

“I hope not, it’s kind of nice in a way,” he said softly, then abruptly came to a stop. “Oh, just one second. We need to do one thing before you leave.”

Before Judy could say a word Nick hurried into a coffee shop not one moment after the staff had flipped the sign from “Sorry, We’re Closed” to “Yes, We’re Open”. A minute later he strode back out with a steaming cup in both hands, each with a custard pastry balanced on top.

"I know you skipped breakfast, so no excuses,” he chided her and offered the smaller cup. “You’ve got a busy day ahead and I doubt you’re going to want to slow down long enough to grab a bite later.”

She accepted the cup reluctantly. “How would you know I skipped breakfast?”

“Because you always eat that cinnamon shredded wheat stuff, and I don’t smell any cinnamon on your breath.”

Given Nick’s love of coffee she expected that to be what he’d gotten, but was pleasantly surprised to find that her cup contained hot tea that smelled like a blend of berries. She immediately took a sip and let it warm her body, then turned on the pastry with gusto.

They walked as they ate, and the conversation naturally drifted to her family. She began to tell Nick about her many siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other relations while he asked questions and struggled to keep their names straight. That was perfectly fine, he’d never met any of them and most mammals had trouble just envisioning how large a traditional rabbit family could be, but it was amusing to watch him try and endearing in its own way.

The conversation and breakfast combined to help the time pass smoothly. Soon they were at the station, which was practically deserted other than the few morning staff that were getting it ready for the morning rush. Judy couldn’t calm down enough to sit, so they stood on the platform and Nick listened to her gush about everything she wanted to do the moment she got home. There was the
farmer’s market and the crafts stores and the swimming hole and the numerous little hiking trails that wound their way through the hills. Half of her wished she could bring Nick along to show him everything, though she doubted he’d really see the attraction of any of it. He was very much a city fox after all. At last the time came, and as her train pulled into the station she found herself fumbling for the proper goodbye.

Nick beat her to it. “Have a good time, Fluff. Try not to bring down any conspiracies without me. I wouldn’t want to feel left out.”

She laughed then hopped closer and threw her arms around him, pressing her face into his neck. “And you try to keep the city from burning down while I’m gone.” When she stepped back again she gave another laugh and quickly wiped her eyes. “Don’t worry, I’ll take all sorts of pictures for you.”

She then hurried onto the train, immediately heading for the observation deck while Nick stood motionless on the platform. As the train pulled out he waved until it vanished from view then took a step back and felt his neck before looking down at his hand, still trying to find his voice. He checked, glad to find nobody had been watching, then quickly left for home.

Was that a hug…or was it a nuzzle? he wondered numbly, not quite able to wrap his mind around it. Why can’t I tell?

By the time the train reached the final leg of its trip into Bunny Burrow some of the edge to Judy’s excitement had worn away. She still stood right by the stairs so she could get off the moment the doors opened, although there wasn’t any need. Only a few others had been picked up at other stations on the way out of Zootopia and she was the only one getting off at this particular stop. Everyone else seemed to be continuing on until they reached the next city (or, as one especially loud Zebra had put it, “actual civilization”).

The moment Bunny Burrow’s modest little platform came into view she felt a burst of excitement, already able to see the crowd that was gathered to welcome her back. It wasn’t until the train pulled close enough for her to get a good look that she realized something was off. She’d been expecting most of her family to turn out, or at least her immediate family, but from the looks of it only her mother, along with the youngest of her brothers and sisters, had come. That still made for a sizable crew, but it was still a far cry from what she’d imagined. It was a small thing, there was any number of reasons that the others might be busy, but it dampened her mood ever so slightly.

That didn’t last long however. The moment Judy stepped off the train she found herself mobbed by smaller bodies all climbing over each other as they competed to be the first ones to get a hug amid cries of “Me first, me first!”, “No, me!”, and “No, I’m her favorite!” She did her best to handle them all at once before a tussle broke and was nearly knocked over at one point by their excitement. Before long she was laughing as she tried to give enough hugs to satisfy the horde, still feeling warm and fuzzy when they began to subside and she was finally able to talk to her mother.

“Welcome home, bun bun.”

Judy smiled and gave her mother a hug as well, squeezing tightly. “It’s wonderful to be back,” she said, then took a step back. “Where is everyone else? Did something happen?”
“Oh everything is fine, someone at the dam just made a mistake and let a bunch of water out,” her mother said. “Your father has the rest of the family down checking the levees, or helping the Warrens with their flooded fields.”

“The Warrens lost their fields?” Judy asked, eyes wide with worry. “Are they going to be okay?”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine, they didn’t lose everything. Only those clover fields they keep near the river. They just happened to see the worst of the damage since the water hit them first,” her mother said. “Sorry things just happened to ruin your big visit. I assure you that everyone is eager to welcome you back, though honestly we were kind of expecting you’d bring that young buck with you. Norman?”

Judy was glad she had already begun the process of rounding up all the younglings to leave when her mother brought the hateful rabbit back up. Her mother wouldn’t be able see her grimace when her back was turned.

“That is part of the reason I came to visit,” she said, cringing a little at the way her mother’s face lit up in anticipation. “He and I aren’t a thing anymore.”

“Really? What happened?”

“Oh, we broke up,” Judy said, doing her best to sound cheerful as she rocked up onto her toes. “Just…realized things wouldn’t work between us.”

“When did this happen?”

“Last Saturday,” Judy admitted, feeling a stab of guilt.

“You never said anything,” her mother said, shaking her head a little. “Oh sweetie, I’m so sorry. I thought you really liked him.”

“I thought I did too, mom,” Judy said, then exhaled hard enough to puff out her cheeks. “Come on, if we don’t get moving we’re going to have to round everyone up again.”

“So long as you tell me all about it,” her mother said, already herding the children in roughly the right direction. “And no dates since then?”

_Here it comes._ “No mom, after Norman I decided to give it a rest.”

“Don’t be like that, bun bun. One bad apple isn’t any reason to throw out the whole bushel. Why, there are a few eligible young bucks around here that I just know you’d love to meet and—”

“It isn’t like that mom. I just decided to take a break from dating and focus on work,” Judy said. Some of the younglings had already run ahead and were in the process of piling into the back of the pickup. “Juggling work and a relationship is just too hard right now, and I don’t want to risk dating another asshole just because I’m too distracted to pay attention to the signs.”

“Judith, watch your language around the kids,” her mother said sharply.

“S-sorry,” she stammered, actually surprised at herself, wondering where that venom had come from.

“You better be, because if I hear any of them using that word I’ll know exactly who to blame.” There was an uncomfortable pause, then her mother finally let it go. “And I still think you should be trying, dear. If you don’t get it out of the way then you’ll never
find a good time to do it."

"Get it out of the way? Mom, this isn’t some chore! It’s a relationship. I can’t treat it like I’m at the market trying to pick out a melon."

"No, but I find it difficult to believe that a smart, beautiful, successful young doe can’t find a nice young man for herself. Wait too long and all the good ones will be taken."

"I didn’t realize it was a race," she said.

Her mother took a moment to make sure everyone had gotten into the back before she answered. "It isn’t, but I want to see my grandkids."

"You already have grandkids."

"Well I want to see yours," her mother said, headed toward the driver’s side door. "You’re the oldest one still without a husband, dear. Even some of your younger sisters are getting ready to start having kids."

"And I’m very happy for them, mother, but that just isn’t what I want right now."

All at once her mom stopped, then turned back. "Are you a lesbian?"

She could feel her ears as they turned a bright shade of pink. "What? Mom, of course not!"

"Because if you are, you don’t have to hide it from us. Your father and I both love you no matter what."

Judy groaned as her ears managed to go from pink to red. "Oh my God, mom! I am not a lesbian!"

"What’s a letsbean?" asked a small voice from the bed of the pickup.

Judy promptly pulled her ears down in front of her face and prayed for death to claim her as her mother attempted to explain. "It means she doesn’t like boys, dearie."

"I don’t like boys either," said another little one.

"Boys are icky."

"Are not!" protested one of her younger brothers.

"Are too, cuz they eat boogers," came the answer, followed by a particularly loud proclamation. "I’m a letsbean too."

"I-it isn’t quite like that," her mother stammered as most of the young girls voiced their agreement while the boys let it be known that they thought girls were the icky ones.

Seeing the tables turn so rapidly set Judy to laughing while her mother tried to quiet the younglings down before they started attracting attention. "That one’s all on you," she said and tossed her bag into the truck’s cabin, "so I’m just going to walk home and let you deal with all of this, okay mom?"
By the third day of Judy’s visit almost every one of her sisters under the age of eight had decided that they were a “letsbean” and happily told anyone that would listen about it before launching into a speech about how icky boys were. Almost everyone but her parents found the situation hilarious. Sooner or later the fad would blow over, but until then Judy enjoyed discretely egging them on with the help of a few of her litter mates. Anything that would give her mother one more distraction so she could avoid that embarrassing conversation again.

She’d spent most of her time outside the house, helping the Warrens repair the breeched levees along with her father. The physical labor was a nice change of pace from walking the beat where she always felt the need to keep alert. As her mother had said, most of the Warrens’ fields had come through. The worst of the damage was contained to the areas where they grew clover to harvest the flowers for sale. The areas where they grew more staple foods—lettuce, beets, carrots, etc—had come through mostly unscathed, and with the help of the community what little damage those fields had suffered had been patched up.

Working on the repairs gave her a chance to talk with most of her siblings and catch up on everything she’d missed while in the city. True she called her parents most nights, but there was only so much she could hear about in a fifteen minute conversation. Of course there were plenty of questions for her as well, many of her brothers and sisters were curious about what Zootopia was really like now that she’d been away for so long. And of course there were a few that were envious that she got to live the glamorous life of a girl in the big city. Nothing malicious, but a couple of them confided their intentions to move off the farm sometime as well.

The rest of the time she spent outdoors on her own, jogging over the trails that had served as an impromptu training course back when she’d been getting ready for the Zootopia Police Academy’s entrance exams. Along the way she’d stop at each of her favorite secret places, the ones she retreated to whenever she needed to escape from everyone’s skepticism or let out all the doubt she felt where nobody would see. At each one she took a selfie that she promptly texted to Nick. Without fail Nick replied with a photo of a burning building accompanied by a plea that she hurry back before the city was reduced to ashes.

Today was going to be a change of pace however, because Tuesdays were market day and she’d been looking forward to it ever since she’d returned. On market day her family collected whatever surplus they’d harvested over the week and brought it to the local farmer’s market. As a teen she had hated it because it meant one less day in the week during her breaks from school, but now it was her best chance to see old friends and really mingle with the rest of the town.

Nothing could have prepared her for the deluge of questions she received, everything from wondering how expensive living in the city was (very), to how dangerous it was (perfectly safe), to if predators and prey really got along (usually). At one point an elderly goat even asked if it was true that the ZPD frequently had to stop the predators from making prey animals their lunch, a misconception that Judy was all too happy to shut down.

Unfortunately with all the mammals coming to talk to her about Zootopia her family’s booth was so inundated that actual customers had trouble placing their orders. After a couple of hours her parents had asked her to step aside and bring the crowd with her so they could actually make their sales goal for the week. She took a few of her younger sisters with her, figuring that the least she could do was help keep an eye on the little ones so her parents could focus on making up the lost sales.

Eventually the crowd thinned out to just a couple of her closest girlfriends, the ones she wanted to catch up with the most. It was a little more awkward than she had expected, her time in the city had changed her in subtle ways she hadn’t noticed until she found herself conversing with old friends and realized that some of the things she used to enjoy now seemed rather…dull next to city life. The local
acting troupe that worked out of the old church couldn’t hold a candle to the shows put on in Sahara Square, and seasonal festivals seemed insignificant next to the most casual celebrations held in the city.

It wasn’t that she didn’t like those things any more, her heart ached any time she heard about them through her family as she remembered how much fun she’d had while younger, but it all seemed so very quaint now. A tractor ride was difficult to get excited about after having ridden on a real roller coaster. Her image of the perfect date no longer involved sitting out by a pond to watch fireflies, but riding a ferris wheel to see the city lights from high above. And as she tried to share it all she began to worry that maybe they would take it the wrong way. Look at that Judy Hopps, too fancy for us country folk now that she’s moved into the big city.

So she focused on talking about all the ways she got to help mammals while on the job, and all the ways things were different from what she’d expected. Not exactly the dream come true she’d imagined while growing up, but she was respected on the force, had her own place, and was paired with the best partner she could ever hope to have. Maybe everything wasn’t the way she imagined, but in a lot of ways it was even better.

She was so engrossed in everything she was sharing that she didn’t even notice when one of the Warren boys approached until he cleared his throat. “Hey, Judy? I, um…I wanted to thank you for helping my family get things back in order despite it being your vacation and all.”

“Keith, right?” Judy asked. She almost didn’t recognize him, while growing up he barely seemed able to put two words together when talking with girls. “Don’t worry about it. Believe it or not, it’s sort of the thing I wanted to do during my visit.”

“Well, for one thing I guess the city must be really different huh? To tell the truth I’m sort of thinking of heading out that way. Your mother suggested that I find out what it’s like from you first. I guess it would be nice knowing someone else out there too, when I finally take the plunge.”

“Oh she did not,” Judy thought, hardly able to believe her mother would pull something like this. “I’d be happy to tell you everything you need to know, though I should probably warn you that work keeps me busy. I doubt I’d be around much at all.”

“What’s going on?” Keith asked.

“Hey Judy? Why ya talking with that boy?”

She looked down to see Meredith, one of the ringleaders of the recent “letsbean” movement. Before she could answer Keith knelt down and rubbed the little bunny’s head right behind the ears, drawing out a dramatic gag of protest and a chorus of “eeeeew” from the other young girls that were watching the exchange.

“Your sister not allowed to talk to boys for some reason?” he asked.

“No, but mama says Judy’s a letsbean.”

“Okay, that is enough of you. How about you take your sisters and see if there are any extra blueberries dad needs someone to eat,” Judy said, promptly stepping in to shuffle the young bunny off before turning back to Keith and her friends. “I’m really not. Mother is just upset that I’m not dating, but I’m just taking a break from it after a bad experience.”

“Judy said he was an asshole,” Meredith called out before she scampered off with the others.

“Don’t let mom hear you say that!” Judy shouted. It was probably already too late, though.

The other’s watched the exchange, stealing glances to each other, but before she could ask what was
up Samantha Bell (a sheep with rich, black wool) took a small step forward and dipped her head slightly. “So, you really aren’t one?”

“Please, not you too.”

“Sorry,” Samantha said, seeming genuinely embarrassed. “We just all kind of assumed, you know?”

Kate, a heavier brown bunny, chimed in as well. “You just never seemed interested in boys.”

“I went on dates,” Judy reminded them.

“Yeah, but never more than once with the same guy.”

Judy’s foot began to tap. “What about Jimmy Fields?”

“What about him?” Samantha asked.

“We dated for like six months,” Judy said, waving her hands above her.

Kate looked at Samantha, ears back. “Oh yeah, I forgot about that,” she said, then shrugged. “He’s gay though.”

“Wait…he is?”

“That’s right, you weren’t around last fall when he came out,” Keith said. “Ol’ Jimmy’s shacked up with one of them leggy hares a couple counties over now.”

“Most everyone already knew by then though. I always just assumed you two were just keeping up appearances? I mean, you two didn’t exactly seem passionate about the relationship,” Samantha said.

Judy’s voice failed her.

“My family all assumed the reason you wanted to be a cop in Zootopia was so you could find a nice lady to move in with,” Keith admitted.

“You too? I’ve never dated another girl before, I’ve never flirted with one, and I certainly never kissed one. Why is everyone so surprised to find out I’m straight?”

“Well, you’re kind of…you know,” Kate said, then vaguely gestured to up and down at Judy’s body.

“What does that mean?”

“You look like you could beat the snot out of every buck within a hundred miles,” Samantha said.

“My brother Mark is into kick boxing,” Keith said. “He might be able to take her.”

“Isn’t Mark seven years old?” Kate asked.

“My older brother Mark,” Keith amended.

“I’m a cop,” Judy said, resisting the urge to shout. The last thing she needed was to cause a giant scene in the middle of the farmer’s market. “I can’t afford to let myself go even a little bit. They forced me to spar against a rhino at the academy.”

They all stared at her. Keith was the one to finally break the silence.
“Maybe my brother can’t take her.”

She looked at them all, her ears beginning to droop. “Can we please, please, please talk about something else?”

“Oh, sorry sure,” Samantha said as the entire group seemed to finally realize just how uncomfortable she felt. “Keith wanted to know what it’s like moving to Zootopia. How about that instead?”

Keith nodded. “What was it like your first day? Were you scared?”

Judy breathed a sigh of relief. “Not really, I was too excited. It was a little overwhelming though, there was so much to see that I completely wore myself out before I even got to my new apartment.”

“What’s your place like?” Kate asked, her tail wiggling in excitement. “Do you have a nice view? What about the kitchen?”

“Places with a nice view are way too expensive for me right now, I’m afraid,” Judy said. “Actually everything is expensive in the city. I barely have anything left after rent and all that, and my place is basically a closet. There isn’t a kitchen, so I eat out a lot.”

“Come on, it can’t be that tiny,” Samantha said.

“Yeah, we’ve seen what things are like on TV,” Kate added.

Judy couldn’t help laughing. “Oh, it is very tiny. Just about…” She made a mark on the ground with her foot and paced out a few steps before making another. “This big. Thin walls too. My neighbors are kind of crazy so I hear them arguing all the time.”

They were staring at her again. In Bunny Burrow privacy could be hard to come by, at least in a rabbit home, and because everyone knew everyone else it was almost impossible to keep secrets. Space was never a problem however. Every plot was large and finding more room was as simple as building a new addition to the house.

Again Keith was the first to speak up. “That sounds terrible.”

“It is all I can afford on my salary. Officers don’t make very much until after a few promotions,” she said just a touch defensively. “If you get a roommate or a job that pays more you can easily afford better. Plus it isn’t as bad as it sounds. There is a ton to do in the city, so having a small place isn’t that big of a problem.”

That seemed to address their concerns and also gave her an excuse to talk about just how much there was to see and do in the city. Truth be told, she still had only seen a fraction. Many of the venues in the city were far outside her price range. The only show she’d managed to see had been at a less expensive theater, and it had still taken an entire month for her to save the money, but the experience had been worth every cent and she hoped to one day have the chance to get into one of the high class establishments that catered mostly to the city’s elite despite Nick’s warning that a larger price tag didn’t necessarily mean a better show.

Of course there were more reasonably priced ways to spend time, many of which her friends were already familiar with. Bunny Burrow wasn’t a complete backwater; it had bars, a movie theater, a shopping center, and a bowling alley. Most of the difference came down to selection and polish. The town’s local movie theater only had four screens and was over three decades old, while most places in Zootopia had at least a dozen screens and received a renovation every few years. The local bar had that rustic, country charm, however Zootopia had bars that covered every imaginable theme and catered to every imaginable group. And while Bunny Burrow had several restaurants, they were all
either road diners or fast food joints, a stark contrast to the number of places she could get a meal back in the city.

“So your partner is that fox though, right?” Samantha Bell asked. Judy nodded. “How does that work then?”

“I’m not sure what you mean. We just get sent on assignments together and keep each other safe.”

Samantha shook her head. “No, not that. I mean you normally eat out, how do you two pick where to go?”

“Oh. Usually we just switch off, although sometimes we make a bet of it,” Judy said.

“But how does that work out when he gets to pick?” Kate asked. “I mean, can you even eat his sort of food? Can he eat yours?”

This time she hesitated before answering. “Well, sorta. I mean, Nick really enjoys fruit and such,” she said, and gave a reassuring smile. “I’ve never actually seen him eat meat. Not even crickets or anything. Even if he did, most everywhere has some sort of salad on the menu, so I just order that.”

Keith nodded thoughtfully. “But he has taken you to places with meat before, right?”

“Well, yes, but usually we’re out on patrol so we just get takeout and eat in the car. Sometimes we eat in a restaurant, but most of the time that ends up being pizza or soup or something like that,” Judy explained. “You’ll see fish and crickets at those places, but it isn’t that bad and after a while you just kinda get used to it. It isn’t like anyone expects me to try it.”

“Fish and crickets aren’t so bad,” Kate agreed. “I remember seeing Gideon eat those at school.”

“Yeah, but I heard his family also cooks up a goose for their holiday dinners,” Samantha said, and once more Judy found herself the center of attention.

“I’ve only seen fowl a couple of times, and only once with any detail. It isn’t all that bad. I was expecting things to look all bloody and stuff, but it is actually…neat and tidy I guess?” she said, watching as their eyes got a bit wider. “No really! Like have you seen tofu? It looks sort of like that only…meat.”

They looked at each other, then back to her, and she could tell by their faces that she had lost them so she just let it go.

That evening Judy found her parents sitting out on the porch sipping wine coolers as they watched the kids play in the yard. She lingered in the front door before joining them outside, having dreaded this conversation all day since she finally got away from her old girlfriends, but the stunt her mother had pulled with Keith wasn’t something she could just let go. Doing so would undermine the whole point of her visit.

“If it isn’t Jude the Dude,” her dad said, raising his bottle to her before he took a sip. “Why don’t you come sit with us and take a load off?”

The affectionate nickname rubbed her fur the wrong way, reminding her of just how all of her
friends had simply assumed she was a lesbian and the way Kate had simply gestured at her physique as the reason. Once she’d gotten home she had looked at herself from every angle she could think of in the mirror in an attempt to see what the others had, thinking that perhaps her build was too butch or whatever. She had muscles, that much was true, but that was just a side effect of growing up on the farm. Hers just happened to be a little more developed because she put so much effort keeping in shape for work, it wasn’t like she was a fanatical body builder or anything.

Oddly Nick had unintentionally helped keep her from getting too depressed. She’d sent him a picture of her friends and Keith. Nick’s first reply had been to ask “who’s the boy.” His second was to ask if she intended to bring him back to Zootopia for dinner, followed by an animated gif of a fox dressed as the devil with flames for a background. She’d laughed hard enough that she had to hide the screen for fear that someone else would wonder what was so funny and take the sarcastic fox’s text at face value.

“Thanks dad,” she said and pulled up one of the lawn chairs. “How did we do at the market today?”

“We did just fine. Things picked right up once Gideon brought us a dozen of his pies to sell,” her mother said, then sat up to yell at the kids. “Hey, drop those sticks before someone loses an eye!”

Several of the kids froze in place and sheepishly did as they were told before darting away. Judy watched them go, wondering how long it would take them to find a suitable replacement sticks once they got out of sight.

“Mom, can we talk about something?” she asked.

“You know I’m always here for you sweetheart. Did you have a good day?”

“It was mostly fine,” she said and took a deep breath. “Although I wish you hadn’t pushed Keith Warren at me that way.”

Her mom took a sip from her bottle and chuckled. “Oh stop overreacting.”

“Mom, I told you that I don’t think dating is a good idea for me right now,” Judy said, careful to keep her tone in check. “You think I wouldn’t notice what you were doing when you ‘just happened’ to suggest to Keith that he should talk to me about Zootopia?”

“Now bun bun, I don’t expect you to do anything if you don’t want to, I just noticed that you two had a lot in common and thought you would appreciate the chance to talk to him,” her mother said.

“Mom, I know how you think, and I appreciate what you are trying to do. I realize you are just trying to help me, but I do not need it. I swear that if I do you will be the very first one to know,” Judy said.

“Oh don’t be like that, it really isn’t any trouble at all.”

“Yes, mom, it is. For me. Everything is fine, I’m perfectly happy, and just want to feel like I have a handle on my life before I go looking for new complications,” she said, speaking more firmly. “I don’t need or want help finding a boyfriend. Don’t push any more boys in my direction. Please! I swear to God, I’ll marry Nick before anyone you pick out for me.”

“Judy!”

“Mom!”

Her parents looked at each other, then back at her as they tried to find their voices. “Alright, you made your point Jude,” her father said at last in an attempt to keep the peace. “We’ll give you your
space hun.”

She got up to give her father a hug. “Thank you daddy.”

“I suppose I’ll live for now,” her mother said with a slight huff. “So long as you don’t keep me waiting forever.”

Judy went to give her mom a hug as well. “I promise not to turn into a spinster. Just for you.”

Gideon’s bakery wasn’t much to look at from the outside. He didn’t have a proper storefront—not even a sign. The building itself had been converted from an old barber shop and still had the blue, white, and red barber pole out front. Of course he didn’t actually need a storefront, most of his goods were sold at market booths or at local restaurants by the mammals he had partnered with. Even so, finding his business was about the easiest thing in the world: just follow the smell.

When Judy walked inside, the door rang a small brass bell that had been hung from the frame. Most of the shop had been separated by a divider, creating an improvised waiting area away from the main kitchen. The scent of baked goods was so powerful that her mouth started to water almost immediately.

After about a minute Gideon’s head poked around the divider, his face lighting up upon seeing her. “Hey there, Judy. I heard you were back in town this week. Sorry I haven’t stopped by, but I’ve been so busy with all this baking lately I can hardly get a moment away from the shop.”

“Don’t worry about it. I know what it’s like to get lost in work,” she said, trying to peek around the side. “What are you making today? It smells wonderful.”

“Just some fancy pastries for a wedding that’s happening next week,” he said, then held up his hands as she started moving to head into the back. “Woah there, this is a clean space. I can’t have you coming back here when I’m cooking without brushing out your fur first. I’d offer to let you use my comb, but I doubt you’d wanna on account of it being full of fox skuzz.”

“Oh, maybe during my next visit then.”

“Sure. Just let me know before you show up so I’ll be ready,” Gideon said. “Speaking of, what brings you ‘round my neck of the woods?”

“Well, I was hoping I could get you to bake me one of your famous pies to take back to Zootopia with me,” she said, feeling a touch of heat creeping up into her ears. “I know that isn’t something you usually do, but I have this friend. A fox! And I thought he’d just love the chance to try something you’ve made.”

“You want one of my pies to give to an actual city fox?” Gideon asked, standing up just a little straighter. “Well, I’d just about be tickled to death. What kind did ya have in mind?”

“Can you do blueberry? Maybe with some berries from my family’s farm? It’s about his favorite fruit in the world.”

“Can do. When do you need it?”
“Any time before Friday afternoon,” she said. “My train leaves at nine.”

Gideon walked over to a clipboard and quickly started writing the order down. “Should be easy as pie. Ha. I’ll get it to you right before you leave so it’ll still be fresh when you give it to him.”

“That sounds great. How much do I owe you?”

“Aw Judy, I can’t take your money for something like this. Consider it a gift,” Gideon said. “Although do let me know if he likes it. It’ll give me something to brag about to grammy.”
Absence makes the heart grow fonder. That was the oft-repeated cliche touted by every couple forced apart by circumstance even as they clung to the relationship. It was, in fact, one of the central themes of the only romance novel Nick had ever taken a liking to, and a common plot device in the few chick flicks he’d seen.

But Nick subscribed to the competing philosophy: out of sight, out of mind. He’d seen too many friends attempt to have healthy long-distance relationships. When two mammals were apart it was just too easy for eyes to wander. Inevitably someone decided they wanted a more tangible physical connection from their partner, usually resulting in an explosive conclusion. That was exactly how his first real relationship with a pretty vixen had ended. She’d gone off to college and he hadn’t. A few months later it all came apart. Deciding to call everything off had been a “mutual” decision.

He’d thought Judy’s vacation would give him a chance to pull apart what was going on in his head, hoping that the distance and time apart would help. That had all flown out the window in the final moment before she got on the train. He’d been prepared to feel a bit down when he’d seen her off. She’d become his best friend—better even than Finnick. Instead he’d been left completely numb, feeling so lost that it was a wonder he managed to make back to his apartment.

And, despite his best efforts, he couldn’t get Judy out of his mind. The scent of her, mingled with whatever brand of floral shampoo she used, had clung faintly to him for what felt like hours. He’d managed to resist calling her, but often found himself sending her texts despite his best intentions. In an attempt to distract himself he finally committed to fixing the cushioning problem on the new couch, and had gone to the store to buy a set of foam pool noodles and duct tape. The fix worked, but unsurprisingly it hadn’t been enough to keep her off of his mind.

By the time the weekend came to an end he found himself wishing that he could’ve gone with her, and that was something he never would have considered before. His entire life had been spent in the city, but Judy had started sending him pictures of herself in different places. He’d spent hours looking at them, trying to determine what was so special about them that she’d decided to share. A tree with a tire swing. A secluded pond. A rundown barn. A grove of trees on a hill. A cluster of rocks about twice the size of him near a fire pit. Even after so much time he couldn’t figure it out, setting off a whole new chain of doubts in his mind, and he was too afraid to ask about something that she apparently thought was obvious. The only thing he could imagine was that actually being there, where he could hear and smell and feel, would somehow make him understand.

His response was the same every time, different images of burning buildings taken off Zoogle. It seemed fitting, considering her parting request, and gave him an opportunity to beg for her to hurry back in a suitably over-the-top manner. That probably wasn’t something he should be doing, all things considered, but he couldn’t resist.

It didn’t get any better when he returned to work. With Judy out he expected the Chief to give him something distasteful for the week. Parking duty. The records room. Counting the hairs on the back of a caterpillar. That turned out to be impossible however. The ZPD’s top brass had apparently decided it was time to launch the big operation Bogo had warned them was coming, and a large chunk of the precinct’s officers were being assigned to bust smuggling operations that had been identified with the help of informants. Those that weren’t involved in the busts were needed on the street covering the usual patrols, so he found himself assigned to Officers Lowell and Wolford, much to the dismay of everyone involved.

He didn’t dislike either of the timber wolves, but his problems with fitting in were only magnified
when those two were together. They possessed that innate understanding all wolves seemed to have about how to work together flawlessly. It was one thing he envied about wolves, he was willing to admit that. Each wolf seemed to have a natural grasp of where they belonged in the larger group. Problem was that didn’t leave much space for an outsider like himself. His fears were proven the entire first day as he was left feeling about as useless as a concrete parachute.

As for the wolves, they clearly felt singled out by the chief. Together they had about a decade and a half of experience, so they must’ve expected they would be participating in one of the raids. Neither of them took their frustration out on him, they were decent enough to realize it wasn’t his fault that Judy was away, but their disappointment lingered in the air.

So he’d spent all of Monday walking on egg shells while feeling like a third wheel. There was plenty for them to do, with so much of the force occupied they ended up being one of only a few units able to respond to calls, but the whole time Lowell and Wolford seemed to immediately take control of everything which left him with nothing but the scraps. Already Tuesday was looking to be no better.

Sometime early Tuesday morning a warehouse had burned to the ground despite the combined efforts of seven separate fire stations. The best the fire crews had been able to do was contain the inferno while the whole complex was reduced to a charred husk. Once the flames had been extinguished the fire marshal had determined that the cause appeared to be arson, at which point he handed the scene over to Chief Bogo for a criminal investigation.

Wolford and Lowell got out of the police cruiser the moment they arrived at the scene and went to talk with the officers that had been on-site during the fire without even saying a word to Nick. He watched them go, not terribly surprised after yesterday. They already had a thing that worked and probably didn’t even realize they were excluding him. A wolf pack didn’t have much room for a fox, even if the pack in question only had two members.

Nick considered tagging along just so he could observe the two more experienced officers at work, that was probably what Bogo expected out of this arrangement, but he couldn’t stand feeling useless. He briefly considered waiting with the car, at least then he could text with Judy until the wolves were done. Apparently she was going to be at some sort of town market all day and was looking forward to being able to mingle with childhood friends, and Nick couldn’t help feeling curious about who she was so keen to spend time with. Probably old school friends, unless he missed his guess, but what kind of friends?

He was on the clock though, so he decided to case the scene instead. The area had been secured long before their arrival, but he’d noticed that things which seemed obvious to him were frequently overlooked by the other officers. It was, he thought, a difference of perspective. By default most cops tried to solve a crime by figuring out what the perp had done. Nick, by contrast, tried to think about what the criminal had wanted, and from there thought about how he would have tried to get it.

In his experience everyone wanted something, even if they didn’t realize it at the moment.

From what he’d heard most arsonists enjoyed the spectacle their fires caused. Flashing lights from the engines, the scramble of mammals to contain the blaze, the heat from and crackle coming off the building as it was consumed. A real life drama they could watch unfold, and they were its architect. That was why they often stuck around. Sometimes they even offered to help the investigation by posing as a witness just for the chance to be involved.
Which was what led him to look for traffic cameras. A live performance was good, but any footage of the fire would eventually make it onto the news and be leaked online. The ZPD was pretty good at keeping bystanders out of the way, so it was unlikely a news crew on the ground would capture anything exciting. Aerial video was always a possibility, ZNN had several news choppers, but those would be careful to fly at a safe distance. Not the sort of close, intimate footage an arsonist would enjoy re-watching. A traffic camera with a good view, however...

“Hey! Wilde! Wolford wants to know what you think you’re doing,” Lowell said, walking over from where Wolford was still busy talking with several firefighters and a snow leopard that apparently worked the night shift.

“Was just checking if any of the traffic cameras had a view of the show.”

“Ah. Yeah, that could be helpful. Find any?”

“There is a couple, but I don’t think they are going to give us much,” Nick said, smiling to himself. Lowell’s head cocked to one side. “Why not?”

“For one, the lenses are in desperate need of cleaning,” he answered and gestured at the nearest one. The white wolf moved to get a better view, then cursed. “What the heck is that?”

“Best guess? Paintball.”

Lowell cursed again. “Do you know how expensive these things are? You wouldn’t think vandals would hit the freaking cameras. If this becomes a regular thing it’s going to cause us headaches. City hall is going to demand we do something about it.”

“Bet someone proposes we put up new cameras to watch the existing ones,” Nick chuckled ruefully as he followed Lowell back to the others. “Of course, the vandals can just hit those first, but that just means we’ll have cameras to watch the cameras that watch the cameras…”

“Ha. That sounds like the sort of thing the politicians would go for.”

Nick nodded his agreement. “Welcome to Zootopia. Come for a vacation and let us handle the family videos.”

To say that Wolford didn’t see the humor of the situation was an understatement. When they finally headed into the building the large wolf began to complain about how they could have the case wrapped up in a day if some thoughtless vagrants hadn’t decided to play target practice with the cameras. Nick decided it was probably best if he didn’t point out that whoever had knocked out the cameras probably didn’t care about the investigation at all.

The warehouse had been reduced to a charred husk. Nick didn’t know much about fires, but even he could tell this had been a bad one. The entire roof had collapsed and steel supports had been warped by the intensity of the heat. Everything was covered in a thick, black slush—water mixed with soot and ash—that threatened to soil anything it touched. There wasn’t even a trace of whatever the warehouse had once contained. Not a trace of anything organic remained.

“Fire Marshal says the fire started near the back entrance,” Wolford said. “They’re certain an accelerant was used though. A lot of it, judging by how quickly the building went up. The place must have been drenched.”

“Gasoline,” Lowell said, his nose twitching as he sniffed the air.
“Yeah, that’s where I’d put my money too. Could smell it almost the moment we stepped inside.”

Nick took a deep breath, but only noticed the faintest traces of smoke. “I don’t smell anything.”

The pair looked down at him. “Well, our noses are just a tiny bit more sensitive than yours,” Wolford chuckled. “Honestly I’m surprised we can smell it. Usually it is all washed away by the fire hoses, or burned off in the blaze. Our culprit must have used a ton of the stuff.”

“Doesn’t look like the sort of place to store fuel,” Nick said, noticing a distinct lack of steel drums. “Brought it in himself?”

“Seems like. Must have been a busy little bee all night,” Wolford said.

“Lucky too,” Lowell added. “Place must have just been filled with gas fumes by the time he finally tossed the match. Whole building could have just exploded. Made sure everything caught on fire, though.”

Nick took another look at the ruined warehouse and tried to imagine just how much fuel it must have taken to coat everything. As far as warehouses went, this one was middling in size. That still made it pretty big.

“What did they even keep here?” he asked.

Lowell pulled out a notepad and flipped back a couple of pages. “Um…produce. Kale, seaweed, clover blossoms, you get the idea. That fancy stuff prey like to eat. All really flammable.”

He frowned, not at all pleased by the odd picture that was coming together. It made sense for an arsonist to target a building that was likely to burn, and they often used accelerants to make sure the fire took, but why bother taking things to such an extreme? True the fire had been impressive, but a single jerry can probably would have done the job just fine for much less trouble. Why would the perp pick a building with cameras watching it, but then fail to notice that the lenses had been obscured? Or maybe he’d done it himself, but if that was the case why not just pick a building that didn’t have traffic cameras pointed at it?

The breast pocket of his uniform vibrated.

Checking to make sure the wolves were busy talking to each other, he quickly pulled out his phone and unlocked the screen to find that Judy had sent him another picture of a black sheep and two bunnies, one male and one female. His ears folded back as he looked at the picture, staring at the male bunny, and sent a reply before he could think about what he was saying: Who’s the boy?

The reply came almost immediately, informing him the bunny was from the next farm over. This time he hesitated, unsure of how best to cover for his earlier slip, then decided to go all in. A quick Zoogle search got him a suitably excessive gif and he fired off another text asking if the bunny would be coming to Zootopia for dinner, then put his phone away before he dug himself in any deeper.

“I don’t think this was an arsonist,” Nick said once they got back in the car.

“Wilde, someone set that building on fire. That is pretty much the definition of arson,” Lowell said.
“What I mean is this doesn’t seem to fit what the typical arsonist would do,” he said, folding his ears back. “Nothing makes sense.”

“So?” Wolford said. “Sometimes the things mammals do don’t make sense. Spend long enough on the force and you start to learn that.”

“No, things always make sense,” Nick countered. “Maybe not to you or to me, but they made sense to whoever was doing them. If it didn’t make sense they wouldn’t have done it.” He bit his lip, then shook his head. “Arsonists like to watch their show, but I don’t think that was motivating our guy.”

There was a moment of silence as Wolford started up the cruiser and pulled out. “What makes you say that?”

“Because what arsonist goes to the trouble of picking a building with cameras pointed at it, but forgets to check if they’re actually going to see the show he puts on?” Nick answered. “Plus why use so much gasoline? If I’m burning down a place I’m just running in with a bottle of lighter fluid, finding something that looks like it will catch, and calling it good. Our guy apparently decided the entire building needed to be doused in fuel despite being full of stuff that will be happy to catch fire for him? How long do you think he spent prepping the place to go up?”

“So what do you think this is then?” Lowell asked.

Nick rubbed his hands together and thought for a moment, looking out the window to watch the city go by. “I don’t know. My first instinct is to say it was a side effect of something else, only I don’t know what. Even if the owner was trying to get insurance money you would think he wouldn’t bother going to such extremes. Feels more like trying to cover something up.”

“Oh?”

“It’s like sleight of hand. If I want to pick your pocket I can’t have you paying attention to what I’m doing,” Nick said. “So I move your focus somewhere else. Maybe look someplace to draw your eyes away, talk to you about it so your mind is busy, then slip my hand into your pocket. This fire feels kind of like that. Someone went to a lot of trouble to make sure that was a really bad fire. It makes me wonder what I’m supposed to be ignoring.”

“Or maybe our guy just doesn’t know what he is doing,” Wolford said thoughtfully. “Sees this big building, and decides he needs to work really hard to make sure everything goes as planned.”

“And the cameras?”

“Didn’t even notice them and happened to have a lucky break. Most crimes are pretty straightforward,” Lowell said.

That was true, Nick supposed, but even so the scene didn’t sit right with him. He kept thinking about it, still looking out the window as his tail flicked in annoyance. “Assume this is the guy’s first attempt, why is he so good at it? Nobody noticed anything until the building was in flames, he knew exactly when to hit, and he managed to avoid blowing himself up. That doesn’t sound like an amateur to me.”

“He does have a point there,” Lowell conceded.

Point or no, he wasn’t able to come up with a better explanation for the crime scene. In the end the report showed that the arsonist was an individual who favored liberal application of gasoline and was probably inexperienced. Nick had added a line that the crime might have another motive beyond simple arson despite Wolford’s skepticism, but had been forced to admit he had no clue what that
might be. The most he could do was point out what he felt were inconsistencies, and as Wolford had said those might be the result of an inexperienced arsonist.

The problem plagued him all day until he finally made it home and forced himself to put work down. He checked his phone, but there wasn’t anything new since Judy had informed him that she had apparently managed to convince her mom to back off. That was something, he supposed, though he couldn’t exactly decide what.

He milled about his apartment aimlessly as he munched on a few protein bars and changed out of his duty clothing into something more comfortable. After a time he reached into his pocket and pulled out the replacement novelty carrot-pen he’d bought on his way home before flopping onto his couch. Earlier that day he finally accepted that he’d never be getting the original back—it was probably tucked away in an evidence locker somewhere so Bellwether’s confession wouldn’t be lost. The number of looks he’d gotten when buying this new one had been amusing.

His thumb slipped over the record button and gave it a press as he started to talk. Ramble really. He hadn’t bothered to think about what he wanted to say and the words just fell out as they came into his mind. Not the way he normally approached talking, usually he was busy reading who he was talking to and trying to pick his words to get the reaction he wanted. Doing it this way was surprisingly liberating though. His eyes drifted closed and he continued to speak until, five minutes later, a soft beep informed him the pen was full.

He’d been cut off mid-sentence so he sat silently, his eyes gradually opening, then thumbed the rewind button and replayed it from the start. Just ten seconds later he frowned and erased the whole thing with a sigh. He sounded like an idiot.

Then he tried again. And again. And again. Each time he deleted it, disgusted by his inability to say what he wanted. After half an hour he gave up and set the pen down on his coffee table.

As usual Wolford picked where they were having lunch. Although Nick had gotten used to that by Wednesday he still found himself bracing for it. The wolves probably didn’t even realize there might be a problem with where they always ended up. The three of them were all predators after all. Fortunately, he had started coming prepared. The energy bar in his pocket couldn’t replace a proper meal, but it would tide him over until dinner and could go to a place with food he could eat.

Not that he completely snubbed the place the wolf had picked; he got a small fruit smoothie to sip on while Lowell and Wolford enjoyed their grilled chicken sandwiches. Considering how much junk he tended to eat he supposed skipping a meal wasn’t that terrible, but he was still glad that tomorrow would be the last day of this awkward arrangement.

“You spend an awful lot of time looking at your phone,” Wolford said between bites of his sandwich.

Nick looked up as he sent his phone back to the home screen. “I haven’t had all that much to do all week. You and Lowell have been doing everything, leaving me to just watch.”

Lowell licked his lips, then shot his partner a knowing grin. “And I suppose I didn’t just see you staring at your text messages. Expecting to hear from a pretty lady?”

“What makes you think that?” he asked even as he put his phone away, suddenly worried they had
noticed he was waiting to hear from Judy.

“You might want to pick up a more heavily scented shampoo,” Lowell said and leaned against the table. “What do you think? He got a new girl?”

“Definitely thinking about one,” Wolford said with a chuckle. “Quite a bit too.”

Nick’s ears wilted and he closed his eyes. Great. I have a scent. Every wolf and bear in the precinct has probably noticed.

Lowell elbowed him lightly. “So, how long have you been dating, Wilde?”

“Guys, I assure you that if I was going on dates I would be bragging about it to the entire world.”

His comment caused Wolford to let out a whoop while Lowell groaned. Without a word the white wolf retrieved his wallet and counted out several bills before handing them over. Nick watched the exchange, feeling a knot form in the pit of his stomach.

“It is bad form to bet on a mammal’s personal life.” The words came out just a touch testier than he intended. “Seriously, I better not find out there is some sort of office pool about this.”

“Nope, just us as far as I know,” Wolford said. “Dingbat here thought you were already involved.”

“Hey, you smelled the same thing I was. It was a reasonable assumption.”

Wolford grinned at the white wolf. “You rely on your nose too much. If he was already dating he wouldn’t be staring at his phone sighing all the time.”

Nick looked from one wolf to the other, trying to decide how best to handle all of this. He decided the wisest course of action was to keep his muzzle shut lest he accidentally let something damning slip. Lowell didn’t seem ready to let it go though.

“Come on, it is all in good fun,” the white wolf said. “We didn’t mean anything by it.”

“It isn’t that,” Nick said, not really sure if he was lying or not. “I’m just not really good at all this.”

“This?”

“Coworkers,” he explained, one ear tilted back. “Before I basically worked for myself.” More or less.

Wolford finished the last bite of his sandwich and started to pick at his teeth with a claw. “You seem to get along with Hopps just fine.”

Nick didn’t really have an answer with that. The best he could do was shrug. “Carrots is easy to get along with.”

“She was pulling pretty hard to have you brought in,” Lowell said thoughtfully. “Some of us were pretty sure that was a mistake.”

“Were?” Nick echoed, his head cocked to one side.

The white wolf glanced down. “Fair enough, though honestly you keep to yourself more than anyone else on the force. Even Judy’s gone drinking with us occasionally, but you just head home. Makes everyone wonder what you’re up to.”
“You mean it makes them wonder what I’m scheming.”

“Well, nobody but Hopps really knows anything about you,” Wolford pointed out. “Clawhauser says that you seem fine, which is plenty for me, but a lot of officers like to get a feel for things themselves.”

“Clawhauser? Really?” Nick asked. “Far as I can tell, he likes everyone.”

“Don’t let the soft exterior fool you. He is a mammal’s mammal, but that means he is really good at judging whoever walks in the door,” Wolford said. “There probably isn’t a secret in the precinct that he doesn’t know, and he’s been pretty reliable at picking who can cut it and who can’t.”

Nick considered that. “He thinks I can cut it?”

“Why not ask him yourself?” Lowell suggested, looking to Wolford. “Thirsty Thursday, right?”

“Yeah, a bunch of the guys are going to Hornton’s later. You should tag along,” Wolford said.

All of Nick’s protests that he was more of a coffee drinker fell on deaf ears, and he knew well enough that skipping out on this particular offer wasn’t likely to reassure anyone that had doubts about him. Best thing to do was show himself for just long enough to say he was there, then call it an early night and head home.

He’d never been to Hornton’s before, even he hadn’t been cocky enough to push the envelope that hard, but he knew a fair amount about it just by reputation. The owner put a lot of effort into keeping the place clean, and it was famous for its hot pretzels.

The pretzels were, in fact, the only type of food the bar served, though there were several different varieties that could be ordered in a range of sizes.

Just standing in the parking lot was enough to make him feel uneasy, but he fell back on the lessons he’d learned while running cons and forced himself to get through the door before either wolf. Trying to hang back in an effort to escape notice would only attract more attention. In his experience the best place to hide in the city was right in the midst of everything. Mammals tended to ignore anyone that was just standing out in the open.

There were just two small problems. First, there weren’t nearly as many cops at Hornton’s as he’d expected. He’d thought the place would be packed with uniformed officers out to grab a beer or two after their shift, but in reality there were just two tables near the back. The uniform alone made him stick out, and of course there was the whole fact that he was a fox in uniform. Very nearly everyone in the bar was watching him within a few seconds of his entrance.

The second problem was more difficult to overcome: both Lowell and Wolford seemed intent on making his presence known to the other cops. They immediately headed for one of the tables that was already occupied by Fangmeyer and Clawhauser, waving to the pair as Wolford called out across the room.

“Look who we managed to drag along.”

Clawhauser was half way through a mouthful of pretzel, which he quickly washed down with beer.
“Wilde? Never thought I’d see the day. How’d you get him here?”

“In a car,” Nick said, in an attempt to head off any ribbing.

“Kicking and screaming the whole time,” Lowell said as he claimed the seat next to Fangmeyer.

Wolford pulled up a chair as well. “Snarlof running late tonight?”

“Wouldn’t count on him showing,” Fangmeyer said. “Our bust got a bit messy and his vest caught a couple slugs. Expect he’s home with the missus.”

Nick paused half way into his seat, then finished pulling himself into place. “Is he okay?”

“We were in full kit, so I’m sure he wasn’t even bruised,” Fangmeyer said. “A few cracked ballistic plates, nothing more. Just gave him a healthy respect for how easily things can go bad is all.”

The table quieted for a moment until the server came over to take their orders. Nick only half paid attention to what the others were getting as he considered how lucky Snarlof was. The body armor for larger officers was significantly better than what was worn by their smaller peers. Francine or McHorn’s duty vests could stop surprisingly large projectiles, and when fully armored up they were little different from miniature tanks. Smaller mammals couldn’t carry nearly as much weight however. Although Nick was fairly sure his own duty vest would probably stop a bullet or two, he wasn’t likely to feel very good at all after the fact. Judy had it even worse. Her vest needed to be made thick just so the impact of a round hitting wouldn’t kill her outright, and that made it impossible to wear the vest under her uniform. Even then it couldn’t protect anything more than her most vital organs or it would restrict her movement too much.

He shivered.

“Hey, Wilde, the waitress is trying to take your order.”

Nick blinked, looking up at Fangmeyer, then shook his head. “Sorry, um…just whatever is on tap,” he said, rubbing over his head, then remembered he’d skipped lunch as his stomach began to complain. “And can I get an unsalted pretzel?”

“Never thought you’d be the quiet type, Wilde,” Fangmeyer said as the deer wrote down his order and departed. “Seems like you’re always mouthing off in the bullpen.”

“Just been a rough week is all,” Nick said. “Had a lot on my mind.”

“He’s been staring at his phone all week pining after some mysterious lady friend,” Lowell said.

Clawhauser’s eyes lit up. “Oh, really?”

“I am not pining. I just…” He sighed. “I just need to work some things out in my head so I can move on.”

“Pining,” Wolford repeated with a chuckle, then tapped his nose. “Hard.”

Nick tsked. “Where’s a skunk when you need him?”

The others erupted with laughter, but better that then having them pry. Some friendly teasing followed, but otherwise they left him in peace as the conversation gradually turned to how their weeks had been. Nick did his best to participate, although the best he could offer was that he’d spent most of his time observing Wolford and Lowell, balancing his time between speaking and attending
to his pretzel.

After the very first bite he was glad his beer had arrived at the same time. The dough was soft and warm, but much more dense than he’d expected and quickly soaked up every trace of moisture in his mouth. It took him several sips from his glass before he was able to get it all down, only then realizing that Clawhauser was eating his pretzel with some sort of marinara dip. From then on he made sure to take much smaller bites, and gave his mouth plenty of time to moisten once again before taking another.

And to his surprise the little meet-up wasn’t shaping up to be quite the miserable experience he’d feared. He still felt awkward and out of place, and from time to time caught a hint of blue moving out of the corner of his eye that made his heart leap up into his throat, but he could see the allure. It wasn’t all that different from when he and Finnick would hang out with some of their acquaintances to talk shop, only instead of getting pointers on how to pull a job he was mostly listening to inter-office gossip.

Apparently the city had decided to embed a news crew with one of the bust teams, and the reporters had latched on to Anderson. The older polar bear was apparently a little annoyed that he’d been given “babysitting” duty, but he’d been put in front of the camera enough over the week that he was becoming something of a closet celebrity. Up in Tundra Town someone had started a minor political movement to bring Anderson over to head up the local force. Time would tell if anything came of that, or if his celebrity puttered out like a typical flash in the pan.

Lowell also happened to bring up the arson case they’d investigated earlier in the week, which of course eventually led to Nick’s disagreement over the motive. He didn’t mind much, even if they did end up finding out he was wrong it was only work, but in the time since he’d only become more convinced that they shouldn’t be looking for a typical arsonist. A mammal was always nervous when pulling any type of crime for the first time—that was one fact he was intimately familiar with—which naturally led to rushing things. That didn’t always mean making mistakes, but it did mean trying to do things in the quickest manner possible.

Spending an hour or so to drench an entire warehouse in gasoline just didn’t fit that profile. He could maybe see an experienced arsonist going to that sort of trouble in order to really up his game, but in that case there should have been a number of arson cases leading up to this one so that theory was out. The only other possibility he could see was the guy had brought help along, which either meant he had a few friends with very similar interests or was able to entice them to play along some other way. So what was in it for this guy’s crew? Arsonists, being all about destruction, didn’t have much to offer the typical crook.

He explained his thinking the best he could, feeling more self-conscious than he had in quite a while. There were too many gaps for him to fill in, but his gut told him that whoever had set the warehouse on fire had wanted something. The fire was just a convenient cover intended to distract the investigation, disguise the theft, or both.

“You know, the fox makes an absurd amount of sense,” Clawhauser said once Nick was finished talking.

Fangmeyer nodded and leaned forward, elbows resting on the table. “That he does, but I see one problem with it. Why cover a simple theft with arson? I mean, you rob a place and you get a couple of years, but burning a building down? That’s a serious crime.”

“Which is the part I don’t really get,” Nick admitted. “It would need to be something big, or something they didn’t want us to know they took. Can’t really put produce into either category.”
“You got a good head on your shoulders, Wilde, but sometimes you gotta accept that the things mammals do just don’t always make any sense,” Wolford said.

“I suppose.”

Nick went to take another drink only to discover his glass was now entirely empty, so he began to search for their server so he could order a refill. His phone began to vibrate first, and he fumbled slightly to get at it before the call went to voice mail, thinking that perhaps Judy was calling to tell him when she’d be getting back tomorrow. The number wasn’t one he recognized, however.

“How?”

“Huh. Half expected this number to be bogus,” came Conrad’s voice. “You that fox I spoke to a few weeks ago, right?”

“I can confirm I am indeed still a fox,” Nick said as he made a cutting gesture across his throat to silence the others at his table. “I assume you’ve had some time to think about our little conversation?”

“Yeah, cops have been busting places left and right and we got an important job coming up.”

*That happened a little faster than I expected,* Nick thought, tapping the table with one finger. *Didn’t expect Conrad to spook so easily.* “I’m kind of in a bar right now. Mind if I call you back at this number?”

“Sure thing. Just don’t keep me waiting all night.” The line abruptly went dead.

“Who was that?” Lowell asked in a teasing tone. “Pretty vixen?”

“Wildcat,” Nick said absently, his mind already racing. He looked to Clawhauser. “Hey, you can get hold of Bogo right?”

Fangmeyer gave an incredulous snort as the cheetah cringed slightly. “Ooooh, that isn’t a good idea. The chief doesn’t like being bothered after he gets off duty unless it is really important.”

Nick smiled. “Trust me, Clawhauser. He isn’t going to want to miss out on this.”

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Clawhauser had been right; Chief Bogo had been extremely upset that he’d been called back to the precinct. His temper had calmed ever so slightly when Nick had explained why he was needed however, and he ultimately did return. Within the hour he had arranged to have Nick’s cell tapped so the call could be recorded, and was already waiting impatiently for the chance to head back home.

“This had better be worth dragging me back here, Officer Wilde. Without my beauty sleep I won’t be able to maintain my pleasant demeanor,” the chief said.

“He sounded pretty shaken up on the phone, Chief. I’m sure this will be worth your time,” Nick said anxiously, then glanced over at Clawhauser who was still fiddling with the electronics. “Are we ready to go now?”

“I…think so,” the cheetah said. “Yeah, that’s got it. Make the call.”

Nick gave Clawhauser a skeptical look as he brought up his phone’s call history and instructed it to
call Conrad back, then put the cell on speaker so everyone could hear. One ring… two… And on the third the wildcat answered with a gruff hello.

“Sorry about earlier. Figured you wouldn’t want me talking about your business where just anyone could listen in,” Nick said, beginning to pace. “Sounded like you wanted some help?”

“You could say that,” Conrad said. “With the blues running all over the city lately I got a guy who’s gotten skittish that we’ll lose his product. Your offer still good?”

“Of course. I just need to know what you want me to do,” Nick said, glancing at Clawhauser to make sure everything was working. The cheetah quietly gave him a thumbs up.

“See, I’m not really sure yet. There are a bunch of details to work out.”

“Well, I can’t really do anything unless I know what’s up.” Nick paused to let the wildcat consider that for a moment. “What sort of details are we talking about?”

“Mostly stuff on my end, but this guy is going to want assurances,” came the answer.

Nick paused again to consider how best to proceed. He didn’t want to seem too eager, that was one mistake he’d seen a lot of cops make when working the other side—it was easy to get greedy when things appeared to be going your way even if the slow approach would ultimately bring more.

“Still there?”

“Yeah, just thinking. Does this guy of yours know I’m a fox?” Nick asked.

“Why would that matter?”

Nick leaned against Bogo’s desk and swished his tail. “You’d have to tell me. When I showed up to make my offer you looked about ready to twist my head off.”

“Only cuz you showed up unwanted and unasked for,” the wildcat said, sounding a touch defensive. “Anyway, there won’t be any problem. I can assure you of that. Just wants to know who’s going to be keeping his stuff safe. I’m sure you understand.”

Add a touch of flattery. “All the smart ones do. When does he want to meet?”

Behind him Chief Bogo started moving around, so he covered the receiver just in case the mic was sensitive enough to pick up the noise.

“How about Tuesday?”

Nick glanced at the Chief who was holding up a calendar, shaking his head and pointing to Wednesday. “Sort of have an engagement I can’t miss that day, if you catch my drift. Got some bozos I can blow off Wednesday however. Where are we doing this?”

“Donno yet. I’ll call you then with a time and a place. Keep your phone handy.”

Before Nick could get in another word Conrad hung up. “Well that was rude. Not even a goodbye.”

“Looks like we got all of that,” Clawhauser said, beaming. “You want me to make a couple of copies, Chief?”

“You do that,” Bogo said, his expression turning thoughtful. “I hope you are pleased with yourself, Wilde. Thanks to you I’m going to be busy all weekend arranging for a specialist to assist us on this
little adventure you’ve set up.”

Nick gave an exaggerated salute. “My pleasure, sir.”

“Don’t get too comfortable, fox. You are going to be very busy come Monday.”
Leaving Bunny Burrow turned into more of a production than Judy anticipated. Her parents and younger siblings ended up clinging to every last moment they could get before she boarded the train, so she’d had practically no time to herself after waking up that morning. As the day wore on she found herself willing time to move faster so she could get back to her apartment for a little privacy and (relative) quiet. One more thing the city had changed about her, she supposed.

Her father cried when she got on the train, setting off many of her younger siblings, but her promise to return for the harvest festival helped to quell some of the waterworks. Luckily Gideon had showed up not only with her pie, but several trays of small chocolate chip cookies as well. The baked goods proved to be enough to distract the younglings, leaving her father the only one left sniffling on the platform.

After hugging her parents she’d hurried up to the observation deck to watch the stars as the train sped across the darkened landscape. The hassle of getting packed and saying goodbye to her entire family had left her a little worn out, but excitement was enough to keep her awake despite the late hour and long ride ahead of her. True, she’d seen the city’s glamor from the observation deck before, but never at night.

The view didn’t disappoint. As time dragged on she began to see the city’s glow, but the city itself remained completely hidden until the tracks came around a hill. All at once the impressively tall buildings came into view, the city lights gleaming against the night sky, and its mirror image shimmered and rippled on the surface of the surrounding water. Judy stared at it all, genuinely struck speechless, only able to admire the scene before her as the train raced ever closer to home.

Even as she had that thought she felt an odd ache and looked back in the direction of Bunny Burrow. Before when she thought of home the image to come to mind had been the house where she’d grown up filled with her many brothers and sisters, but apparently that wasn’t true anymore. Brief as the visit had been, it made her realize she didn’t really fit in there anymore. She could fake it if need be, but it was like a bur that had worked its way into the seat of her pants just waiting for her to move the wrong way to give her an uncomfortable poke. The city had changed her, seeing it was enough to put her mind back at ease. But despite that she couldn’t help feeling like she’d lost something in the process.

A small laugh escaped her and she wiped the moisture from her eyes. If Nick had been there to see her getting all misty like her father he would make a crack about emotional bunnies. She had every reason to be happy. A fulfilling career, friendly coworkers, and worthwhile goals to fight for…even if Nick had made her realize that fighting for a better world was a bit vague.

As the train drew closer to the city she expected to lose interest in the unfolding scene, thinking that without the whole city visible there wouldn’t be much to see, however with every district the train pulled through she found her eyes drawn to the individual buildings. So many had been constructed with an eye to how they would look when illuminated at night, and the area around each gave produced an entirely unique atmosphere. Sahara Square featured so many lights it practically lit up the night. In Tundra Town the snow caught the light and reflected it back, glittering like thousands of tiny diamonds. In contrast, the thick foliage of the Rainforest District only allowed the light to come peaking through, hinting at the structures present and coyly trying to draw her closer.

Only upon reentering the familiar surroundings of Savanna Central, with its gleaming towers reaching into the sky, did she finally pull herself away from the spectacle. She grabbed her suitcase
and the box that contained Gideon’s pie, then made her way to the lower level as she waited for her stop. The moment she stepped off the train she sent her parents a text to let them know she’d made it, then made her way back to the Grand Pangolin.

As Judy walked she quietly debated if she should tell Nick about the pie, or make it a surprise. Surprising the fox was by far the more satisfying option, although she wasn’t really sure how to go about it. The simplest option was to just show up unannounced, but that ran the risk that Nick wouldn’t be home. Simply telling Nick about the pie, on the other hand, would virtually assure that he would show up at her door. The other option was to just arrange a meeting, that wouldn’t seem too unusual since she’d been gone for a week. Truth be told she had genuinely missed his antics and was eager to see him again.

Before she even entered the apartment complex she could hear Bucky and Pronk arguing with each other over whose turn it was to do grocery shopping in the morning. Judy rolled her eyes, wondering why they bothered when inevitably they’d both end up going. Perhaps it was like Pop Pops said. It takes all kinds.

“You two still at it?” she asked, trying to balance the pie box while fumbling with her keys.

“Finally back Judy?”

“Of course she’s back, you moron. You’re talking to her.”

“Hey, I’m not a moron. You’re a moron.”

“No, you’re a moron.”

“No, you are!”

“No—wait, shut up.”

“No, you shut up!”

“SHUT UP! We need to tell her about the fox!”

Judy blinked, her key hovering in front of the lock. “Fox? Nick came by?”

“That must be him. Saw him when we were on our way out a few days ago.”

She mmmmed, wondering if he had stopped by to bring her something for work. If so it must not have been very important. Normally Chief Bogo wouldn’t stand for having documents slipped under a door.

“Thanks guys,” she called out as she unlocked her door, though the pair were already busy arguing again.

It took a little doing, but she managed to turn the knob enough to nudge the door open, then grabbed her bag and pushed her way inside. Once her suitcase was clear of the door she reached out and flicked the lights on.

She dropped the pie.
Howlson, one of the wolves that worked nights for the ZPD, was the one to respond to Judy’s call. He barely fit into her room, but did his best to help her sort through the damage. According to him there were faint traces of a fox’s scent, though he was confident it wasn’t Nick. Neither detail was especially enlightening, Judy hadn’t for a second believed that Nick was the cause and had no reason to think that Bucky and Pronk would lie to her.

Considering the damage Judy had trouble believing that nobody had reported a disturbance. Practically everything that could be shredded had been—with a knife judging by the clean cuts. Bed, clothing, towels, even the toiletries she’d left behind. What couldn’t be shredded was smashed. And the few family photos she kept…those had been burned. When Officer Howlson interviewed the other tenants he found that most everyone had been out around the time the fox apparently showed up. The few that had been present simply tuned it out.

Her petty cash tin was, unsurprisingly, missing. Worse still, there was no sign of her dress uniform, service blues, and badge. New ones could be ordered of course, but she was the only bunny on the force. There wasn’t a surplus of gear in her size just on hand; she would need to wait until replacements could be made. Even after that there would need to be a flag on her file until the missing uniforms and badge could be accounted for.

For the entire preliminary investigation Judy sat in the apartment complex’s “lobby” and fretted over what she was going to do. A robbery she could understand, but given just how much damage there was she couldn’t help feel like she’d been specifically targeted. Did someone really hate her so much that they had waited until she was gone to violate her room? And if so, just how safe did she feel sleeping in a place that had already been compromised?

The Landlady was apoplectic, though Judy thankfully escaped the armadillo’s ire, and promised that the room would be fixed up and given new locks even though it would take some time. Judy appreciated the gesture, but couldn’t help wondering if it would really make any difference. She already had one of two keys to the room and the landlady had the other. Clearly that hadn’t done anything to stop the fox.

“Well, I think that about covers what I can do, Hopps. We’ll send some CSI’s in to see if they can get any hairs or anything, though honestly I doubt this is really going to go anywhere,” Howlson told her once everything had wrapped up. “On the plus side, can’t imagine that there will be too much trouble to come from the lost uniforms and badge. It’ll be pretty obvious if another bunny suddenly appears on the force.”

“Thanks for coming out. I know this has been a hassle,” she said, barely speaking louder than a whisper.

“Eh, it’s what cops are for,” the large wolf said, tipping an imaginary hat. “I’ll talk to dispatch about getting someone stationed around here for a few weeks. Hopefully that’ll help things get back to normal for you.”

“Thank you so much, but you really don’t need to,” she began, but her voice started to falter so he swallowed the rest of the words and forced a smile.

“Don’t worry about it, Hopps. Consider it a precaution, in case this is the work of a stalker or something,” the wolf said.

Her voice failed her again. She’d never considered that possibility. The mere idea made her feel exposed, and she caught herself looking outside to check if there was anyone watching her. Howlson noticed, but politely didn’t say anything.
“Well, I need to go report what I found on the off chance that it’ll lead something,” he said and headed for the door. “Watch out for yourself, ya hear?”

She watched him leave, then peeked out the window again. For a moment her whole body trembled and she closed her eyes, giving herself a vicious shake. A slow, deep breath and she was able to push the surging tumult back once more.

As he had done every night since buying the new carrot-pen, Nick sprawled out on his couch and talked. Every five minutes, when the pen was full, he’d play back the message and delete it. His current attempts weren’t nearly as bad as his first ones, the words came easier and he rambled less, but in the end he always sounded moronic. There was so much trying to push its way out at once. Inevitably he always ended up saying far too much.

Thankfully the pen was a superb listener, although he could feel it judging him. Silently wondering why he hadn’t moved on yet. Why he had saved every picture Judy had sent of her vacation and stared at them right before bed, as if there was some meaning in them waiting to be deciphered. Why he practiced every night as if he actually intended to say something one day. But there he was, losing track of time as he tried to find the right words, growing gradually more frustrated by his inability to get it right.

When his phone rang in the middle of one of his speeches he nearly jumped out of his skin, then scrambled to answer. He’d been expecting a call from Judy almost all day, but with how late it had gotten was just starting to believe the moment wouldn’t come. Sure enough, it was her.

He closed his eyes, then unlocked his phone. “Hey Carrots. Make it back in one piece?”

“Thank God, I was worried you were already in bed.”

“Come on, you know I stay up late when I don’t have work in the morning. Like I would go to sleep before you got back,” he assured her, then blinked as he heard a sniffle over the line. “Hey, are you okay?”

He heard her breathe in and sniffle again. “No. Someone broke into my apartment while I was away. Everything is trashed.” Her voice cracked slightly. “They took all my uniforms and my badge and anything worth stealing and just tore up the rest and…”

Nick blinked again and his mouth went dry, ears folding slowly. He’d seen his share of burglaries during his younger years, but not from this end. “Have you already called the police? Do you want me to come down?”

“I already called,” she said. “I just…I need somewhere to stay until they change the locks because I just don’t… You don’t mind, do you? I promise you won’t even notice I’m there.”

“Of course you can; don’t worry about it.” He glanced at the time, surprised to see it was edging toward midnight. “Do you want me to come get you?”

“No. I’ll just call a taxi.” There was a pause. “Thanks Nick. I owe you one.”

When the call ended he stared dumbly at his phone for several minutes, then realized he should probably wash the dishes before Judy showed up. Her place wasn’t that far away, a taxi could have
her on his doorstep in fifteen minutes. And of course the moment he got the dishes rinsed and drying he noticed a half dozen other small tasks that needed doing. Putting his books back on the bookshelf, putting his clean laundry away, actually making the bed for once, and of course he found a nice hiding place for the carrot-pen. Shortly after he finished arranging the pillows on his bed there came a knock at the door and an exhausted Judy practically dragged herself inside.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled.

“Hey, you don’t have to—”

“I keep showing up miserable like this,” she said, then closed her eyes. “You shouldn’t have to put up with all my problems.”

“You’re just having a run of bad luck. It happens.”

Judy pulled her bag up next to the couch. “And I dropped the pie I brought from home for you,” she sniffled, hopping into a seat.

“I’m sure it was delicious,” Nick assured her. “It isn’t that important, don’t worry about it.”

She laughed once, rubbing her eyes with the back of one hand. “I can’t help it. It’s all I can think about because everything else is just…and Gideon was so excited to hear what you thought about it too and…” She groaned and threw herself against the back of the couch. “I need to tell my parents still. They are going to have a conniption.”

“Then don’t tell them.”

“Are you insane?” Judy asked.

Nick chuckled. “Sources say yes, but that is beside the point. Why in the world do you need to tell your parents?”

“They call me almost every day; the only reason they haven’t tonight is because I was getting in so late. So when they call me tomorrow they’re going to recognize that this isn’t my place and want to know where I am,” she said, practically able to hear her parent’s questions already. “And besides that, they have a right to know.”

“Are you for real? Judy, you’re an adult. The only things anyone has a right to know about you are the things you decide to share,” Nick said and made his way over to the couch, settling into the spot next to her. “If you want them to know that is one thing, but you shouldn’t feel obligated. You don’t have to lie, just tell them there was a problem with your place and you’re staying somewhere else until it gets straightened out.”

She sighed in response, turning her head to look at him. “I’m sorry about the pie.”

“You are really hung up on that pie.”

“Gideon made it for you. He’s the fox my parents partnered with,” Judy explained. “I thought you’d enjoy the chance to try his baking; he won like a third of the contests during last year’s tri-county fair. He must have worked on it really hard because it looked and smelled amazing.”

Nick looked down at her. “Will you feel better if I forgive you for ruining it?”

“It was blueberry. The berries came from my farm.”
He blinked. “Ah…I see…” His tail swished upwards, then lightly bopped Judy on the head. “Consider yourself reprimanded for ruining perfectly good blueberries. I forgive you.”

Judy was awoken by the sound of traffic and tried to roll out of bed only to find even more bed in the way. She could still hardly believe that Nick had insisted on taking the couch. They had, in fact, had an argument about it while she got ready for the night—or at least what counted as an argument in the bleary state-of-mind that came so late—but when she had emerged from the bathroom Nick was already sprawled across the entire couch and refused to budge despite her best efforts. She knew he was only trying to be a good host and make her comfortable after everything that she had come home to, but it made her feel like even more of an intruder.

That hadn’t stopped her from falling asleep almost immediately, however.

She stared at the window and watched motes of dust drift through the light that leaked in through the blinds, trying to figure out what she wanted to wear. Everything in her suitcase was already dirty, she’d been expecting to have several changes of cloths waiting for her when she got back so she would have time to do laundry. Getting her clothes washed obviously needed to be a priority, but she had no clue if there were facilities in the building for that sort of thing or if she was going to need a laundromat. Either way she’d have to ask Nick, but she couldn’t hear him moving around yet and was reluctant to disturb him.

With all the noise coming from the street there wasn’t any chance of getting back to sleep, so she scooted to the edge of the bed and slid herself to the floor. According to the clock hanging on the wall it was already nine, so she went to her bag and started to sort through its contents. Only a few pieces were visibly soiled, but everything was wrinkled from having been simply tossed inside. It was all dirty anyway, so why bother to fold anything? After a cautious sniff she set anything that was noticeably ripe aside, and eventually picked out a pair of jeans and a loose fitting white blouse.

After she changed and re-made the bed she carefully opened the door to the main room. Nick was still sound asleep as she expected, though instead of being sprawled across the entire couch like she’d last seen he was curled up nose to tail. She watched him for a solid minute, taken by how peaceful he seemed, before she realized she was staring at him in his boxers and hurried her way to the kitchenette to see what there was for breakfast. She’d be lying if she said that the idea of looking into a predator’s fridge didn’t make her slightly nervous, but she found a grocery bag on the counter that hadn’t been there last night and a box of the cinnamon sprinkled shredded wheat she normally ate for breakfast. Apparently Nick had gone out during the night, though she couldn’t fathom how he’d managed to do so without waking her. She must’ve been even more tired than she realized.

“Did I get the right kind? I wasn’t sure.”

She spun in place so quickly she nearly dropped the box, eyes wide as she looked up at Nick. “When did you wake up? I didn’t hear you.”

Nick’s ears folded back. “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

Judy took a deep breath, shaking her head. “No, you just startled me. Nobody’s ever snuck up on me like that before. I always hear them coming.”

“That’s sort of my thing,” Nick said, still looking abashed. “Fox.”
“Do you think clothes could be your thing too? You’re still in your boxers,” she said lightly, then smiled as Nick glanced down at himself then scampered into his bedroom. “You got the right cereal though. How did you know the brand?”

“I didn’t,” Nick called back. “Had to go by scent, but there were two different kinds that smelled the same so I just guessed.” She could hear him rummaging around in the bedroom as she filled a bowl with the cereal, then got the milk from the fridge. “The clerks gave me some weird looks at the checkout.”

She made her way back to the couch and sat down, already beginning to eat as her ears swiveled so she could hear Nick as he dressed. The sound of cloth brushing across fur and the slight jingle of keys as they went into his pocket. Until just then she hadn’t realized just how much she’d depended on those subtle audio cues to keep track of the fox. When Nick finally re-emerged he was wearing the same leaf-patterned green shirt and tan slacks he had when they’d first met, and was already in the process of putting on his tie.

“Spent last night thinking about your uniform problem,” he said as he carefully threaded the blade of the tie through the knot and pulled it clear. “Think I might have a solution, if you don’t mind doing a bit of shopping today.”

If Judy’s mouth hadn’t already been full she would have laughed. As it was she had to fight to keep from spitting all over Nick’s furniture. With some effort she managed to swallow, then coughed once.

“Nick, they don’t exactly sell police uniforms in department stores,” she said. “And before you suggest buying a costume, I doubt Chief Bogo will be amused if I show up dressed for Halloween.”

“They do sell blue dress shirts, however. I doubt they have anything in ZPD Blue, but I’ll bet we can find something close, and then get you a pair of navy slacks. It won’t be an exact match, but it should be close enough,” Nick said.

“Close doesn’t exactly cut it when it comes to uniforms,” she reminded him.

“No, but the fact that you are trying will make a good impression,” Nick said, finally pulling the tie knot up into place and sliding the tie’s tail through the keeper loop. “Might be enough to convince the Chief to let you go out in plain clothes for the week.”

Her ears stood up straighter and she blinked. “That would be amazing. You really think he’d do that?”

“The last thing Bogo wants is to have you sidelined. He might not give you anything too important, but it’ll be better than getting put in records for the week.”

“I could maybe follow up on some older investigations,” she said, mulling the idea over between spoonfuls. “Couldn’t hurt, but if we’re going to do that can you smell me?”

Nick sputtered. “C-come again?”

“I don’t have anything clean to wear, it all needs to be washed, and I don’t want to go out if I stink. Could you please give me a sniff test?”

“I’m not sure you should be asking me that,” Nick said cautiously.

Judy tsked. “Why not? Your nose is better than mine.”
“Well yeah, but you pretty much always smell great to me,” he said.

At first Judy was sure it was another of Nick’s jokes, but then she caught him looking away self-consciously. Her ears quickly heated up. “O-oh.”
Monday morning got off to a rocky start as Judy discovered that her routine clashed with Nick’s, but they managed to get out the door without running too far behind. Nick had set his alarm to wake them up at his usual time, forgetting that now both of them that needed to use the same spaces get ready, so it had been a mad scramble for both of them to clean up and get dressed as they constantly got in each other’s way.

Judy had been in such a rush that she almost hadn’t noticed that Nick had put a Junior Officer sticker on the breast pocket of her improvised uniform at some point. The sight of that golden sticker was enough to break through her worries about dealing with all the sympathetic looks she’d be getting back at the precinct. She’d spent nearly a solid minute giggling. Chief Bogo was unlikely to appreciate it however, so after thanking Nick for the gesture she’d carefully peeled it off and put it on her wallet instead.

Truthfully, she hadn’t expected to feel so much better so soon after the break-in, and attributed a lot of that to Nick. Being able to stay in a place that felt safe until she could move back into her apartment had done a lot to calm her nerves, and having a willing ear to listen helped draw out the worst of the pain. He’d even helped coach her on how to get around telling her parents what had happened, something she ultimately decided was for the best since letting them know would only cause needless worry.

Telling Gideon about the ruined pie had been much more difficult. She’d let him know the truth about everything that had happened after extracting a promise that he wouldn’t breathe a word of it to her family. He’d been very understanding about it all, brushing aside her apologies for ruining all his hard work, and offered to have another mailed out to her. Kind as that was, she’d turned him down. There was no reason he should have to pay so much in shipping just to cover for her carelessness. Besides, he’d already given her one pie for free. She couldn’t possibly accept a second.

Nick split off once they arrived at the station to get his usual cup of coffee, so she did her best to act like everything was normal while she waited. Several of the other officers gave her sympathetic looks on their way to the bullpen, but otherwise she was left alone until Clawhauser noticed her.

“Hey, I heard what happened,” he said, then handed her a box. “Here. The weekend staff said the Chief spent practically all Saturday and Sunday yelling on the phone to make sure this would be ready when you got here. He was really pissed when he found out what happened I guess.”

Judy opened the box to find a new badge with a different serial number and was immediately besieged by a hoard of conflicting emotions. She covered her mouth with one hand and shook her head, blinking her eyes to hold back the tears that were trying to leak out. “Thank you,” she whispered, then swallowed as her ears drooped. “I’m not in trouble, am I?”

“Hah, you know ol’ Bogo isn’t that heartless. He’s mad at the guy that robbed your place. Been hearing stories about how he was threatening to find whoever did this himself so he can wring their neck,” Clawhauser said, then gestured to the new badge.

“Well? Put it on.”

She did as she was told, taking care not to prick her thumb as she pinned the badge into place. “I’m a little afraid I’ll look silly.”

“Nonsense, your outfit is close enough to the standard duty uniform that nobody will notice unless
they look closely,” Clawhauser assured her. “Surprised you have something like that on hand.”

Judy looked down at herself, trying to decide if the cheetah was just humoring her, but came to the conclusion that the match was pretty close. “Actually I got these Sunday so I could try to fit in. It was Nick’s idea. He helped me pick them out.”

“Where did you end up going? Please tell me it was a bunny boutique and that you made him hold your purse. I would kill for a picture of that.”

“Sorry, we went to a big-box store,” Judy said, grinning as she imagined the sort of scene Nick would make if she had done that to him. “If I ever rope him into something like that I’ll be sure to get some proof.”

“Proof of what?” Nick asked as he returned.

“Nothing,” Judy said quickly, then puffed out her chest slightly. “Clawhauser was just giving me my new badge, see?”

Nick leaned over to take a look as he sipped his coffee. “Shiny, but I liked the one I gave you better.”

Unfortunately, because they were running slightly late there wasn’t enough time to leisurely chat with Clawhauser. Nick downed his coffee so quickly that Judy wondered how he managed to avoid burning his tongue just before she hurried into the bullpen with him following just behind. On the way in Judy noticed an officer she didn’t recognize, a female snow leopard tucked away in the back corner of the room.

Chief Bogo came in before she could dwell on the newcomer for too long, although the large cape buffalo seemed to be preoccupied as he didn’t immediately command the room to silence once he reached his lectern. Instead he took a moment to put on his glasses and shuffled through the morning’s notes.

“All right, quiet down everyone,” he said at last. “We’ve got too much ground to cover to waste any time. First off I will remind everyone that our current operations require all hands on deck, so I will not be approving any time off, and if you call in sick I expect to see a death certificate on my desk the next day.

“Now that’s out of the way, some of you may have noticed we have a new face today. Not that it matters, but this is Lieutenant Asha Uncia—” The snow leopard stood up briefly, then returned to her seat. “—who will be heading up one of our operations.

Depending on how well things do or don’t go, she may be here for a few weeks. She knows what she is doing, and I expect those assigned to her unit will treat her with respect.

“Finally, we have had a higher than usual number of injuries this last week. Thankfully none of them have been serious,” the chief continued, pausing briefly to give Snarlof a pointed look. “I am sure some of you think that is to be expected considering the little blitz we’ve been running. I do not. When I send officers out I want them to come back. No excuses. If you even think that you need help I expect you to hold and call for backup.”

Judy lightly nudged Nick and leaned a bit closer. “What is he talking about?”

“The ZPD has been raiding smuggling operations starting last week,” Nick whispered back. “Several officers got knocked around during one of the raids.”
“What? When were you going to tell me about all this?”

“I didn’t want to distract you from your vacation,” Nick said, keeping his eyes forward as he spoke. “It just slipped my mind. I’m sorry.”

She huffed lightly and gave Nick a quick glare, but by then Bogo had noticed the exchange so she bit her tongue before they drew the cape buffalo’s ire. He’d already moved on, warning everyone that they couldn’t let up because city hall wanted the opportunity to promote the ZPD’s success in shutting down so many smuggling operations at once during Founder’s Day, and that everyone should expect to have their assignments for the celebration by Wednesday of next week.

From there the Chief began to hand out duties, and she quickly noticed that most of the precinct was being broken up into one of four assault teams, leaving few bodies to carry out routine tasks. Follow-up interviews and most investigations had been put on hold, and the usual patrols would be covered by only a few squad cars. Once the operation was concluded the entire department would be left scrambling to catch all the different balls it had been forced to drop while conducting the blitz.

“Fangmeyer, Snarlof, the two of you will be assisting Lieutenant Uncia undercover,” the chief said, then sighed and took off his glasses to rub his eyes. “I cannot believe I am saying this, Officer Wilde, but since you somehow managed to be productive last week you shall be with them.”

“Sorry sir, I promise to be completely useless from now on,” Nick said almost automatically.

The chief ignored the comment, his eyes settling upon Judy. “Hopps, my office. We need to discuss what to do with you this week. Everyone else, dismissed.”

Judy told Nick that she’d be right back and stared after the chief as he promptly left the room amid the sound of chairs scraping against the floor. For his part, Bogo practically ignored her until they reached his office.

“Sir, you aren’t splitting us up, are you?” she asked, speaking up the moment she stepped inside.

“Relax, Hopps, it’s only temporary,” Chief Bogo said. “Until you get a replacement duty uniform, which I expect will happen by the end of the week if I have to go down to the quartermaster and watch him stitch it together himself.”

“I appreciate that sir, I really do, but isn’t there some way to keep us together?” she asked. “What is this Lieutenant Uncia doing here anyway? If it’s another raid I’m not about to let my partner go into danger without me there to watch his back.”

Chief Bogo sat at his desk and gave her a hard look, his lips pressed together. “I will retire before I put either you or Wilde on the line in a raid, Hopps. Your partner is simply going to be assisting with a little undercover work. That is all I can say.”

“That doesn’t exactly sound like the sort of thing that needs a uniform, sir,” Judy said with a nervous laugh. “Surely there’s some way I can help?”

“I very much doubt that. You are a fine officer, Hopps. You’ve got a sharp mind and admirable work ethic—”

“Thank you sir, but I don’t see—” she began, but the chief raised his voice to talk over her.

“But you are too cleanly pressed and too eager to jump into action for this sort of thing. The way you carry yourself just screams cop. I don’t personally think it is a bad trait, but there it is. For all of Wilde’s many, many faults he has no shortage of guile which makes him well suited to this sort of
task.”

Judy lifted her chin. “With all due respect sir, I don’t think you are giving me enough credit. And you are forgetting that I know Nick better than anyone else on the force. If something goes wrong I know how he is going to react, and I can assure you he’ll feel much more comfortable knowing I’ve got his back.”

“You are going to fight me on this, aren’t you?” Bogo asked.

“Yes sir.”

He heaved a sigh and tapped his desk. “I can’t send you into the field with him. You understand that?”

“I appreciate that, sir, but surely there is something else I can do to help. Back at command? Or as support?”

Bogo sighed again, then pulled out a legal pad. “I am going to let Lieutenant Uncia decide this,” he said, writing a quick note. He then tore the page free and folded it in half before handing it over. “You can try to convince her, but if she decides you are out that is it. Understand?”

“Yes sir. I promise sir,” she said, then hurried back out to rejoin with Nick.

Nick remained quiet as he watched the snow leopard prepare to hold a meeting, silently hoping that Judy would manage to convince Bogo to let her join them. Going without her for one week had been trying enough; he didn’t look forward to doing it again and depending on how long this little operation went for they could quite possibly be kept apart for much longer. He doubted Bogo would want to risk causing problems by adding a new officer to a project that was already underway unless there was absolutely no other choice.

It didn’t help that Nick wasn’t particularly fond of meetings. Lieutenant Uncia seemed to love them, if her eagerness to get everything set up was any indication. She’d already pulled over a white board and was busy organizing some papers that were covered in handwritten notes. That didn’t bode well. Unless he was wrong, he’d be finding himself in meetings practically every day until everything was wrapped up. He sighed.

The problem wasn’t that he disliked plans. He loved them. A solid plan was the foundation of every good hustle, but the type of plans he favored were loose with plenty of room to wiggle around. Something that made it easy to make changes on the fly when things inevitably didn’t go as expected. Plans put together in meetings were the exact opposite. Sure they might be able to handle more situations, but they were also much more complex. That made it much easier to forget specific details, and making changes to account for unforeseen complications became significantly more difficult. And in his experience the sorts of mammals that favored complicated plans were the ones to spout cliche lines like “stick to the plan” once everything began to go south.

Before he could follow that train of thought too far Judy returned, a determined gleam in her eye as she walked up to the feline and handed her a slip of paper. “Hello, Lieutenant, I’m Officer—”

“Judy Hopps. Yes, I know,” Lieutenant Uncia finished crisply, unfolding the piece of paper and giving it a quick read. “There aren’t many bunnies on the force.”
Judy smiled a little. “Well the chief said that if you give the okay then I can—”

“No.”

Judy held still for a moment, then took a deep breath. “You didn’t even let me make my case.”

“Because I don’t need to, Officer Hopps. I’m sure you are very good at your job, but the simple matter is that right now I don’t need your help,” Lieutenant Uncia said. “I cannot have too many officers undercover in the same area or it’ll spook the perps. If I need heavy hitters I can yank one of the assault teams Chief Bogo has formed. My mammals are already collecting intel on this Conrad. I’m sorry, but there isn’t a spot that needs filling.”

“I was hoping to help by providing outside support,” Judy said, speaking more firmly. “Either back here or in the field. Nobody here knows Nick better than I do, and nobody can handle him like I can. You’ll regret not having me around.”

Nick could already see the feline had made up her mind, so he spoke up first. “Lieutenant, I’d feel more comfortable knowing Carrots is around.”

“You call her Carrots?” Uncia asked, giving Judy a bewildered look.

Judy sighed a little. “Among other things.”

“What does is that she was watching my back when I convinced those smugglers to trust me. She heard the whole exchange and I wouldn’t be surprised if she remembers it better than I do.”

The Lieutenant looked from him to Judy and back, still clearly considering turning the rabbit away until Judy spoke up once more. “Listen, I promise not to get in the way and do everything you tell me. If that means you keep me here to watch the radio or provide details about our stakeout that is fine. I’ll consider it a chance to observe and learn how to run an undercover operation.”

Lieutenant Uncia closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then waved Judy toward a chair. “I can see it isn’t going to be worth the effort to shuffle you off. Have a seat, Officer Hopps.”

Instead of going to one of the many remaining empty chairs, Judy immediately made her way to where Nick was seated and hopped up to join him. Just having her on-board made much of Nick’s dread about the coming meeting dissipate. She smiled as she settled in beside him, looking quite relieved herself.

“Thanks,” she whispered.

“Any time.”

Lieutenant Uncia gave them a stern look. “I hope that will be the last surprise I have to deal with,” she said dryly. “As Chief Bogo said earlier, I am Lieutenant Uncia. He specifically arranged for me to help run this little shindig, which ought to be enough to make all of you accept that I know what I am doing. I have over a decade of experience, with most of that spent in Tundra Town conducting operations against Mr. Big’s syndicate. While I don’t claim to have a perfect track record, I can confidently say that the operations I have taken part in are largely responsible for limiting most of the Big Family’s influence to Tundra Town.

“Compared to that a small time smuggling operation is barely worth my notice, however Chief Bogo has filled me in on the little plan the top brass have chosen to throw their weight behind and it is ludicrously ambitious. For there to be any hope of this working everyone will need to step extra
lightly at all times or the target will spook and all our hard work will be ruined. Now then…”

The snow leopard walked over to the white board and grabbed one of the markers. “I am going to
tell you all about what the brass hope to accomplish, and then we are going to work on how we can
make it happen. Understand? Good.”

By the time Lieutenant Uncia finally released them Judy was very close to regretting her decision to
force her way into the undercover operation. To say that the snow leopard ran a tight ship would be
putting it mildly. That didn’t mean she was domineering or dismissive of input, in fact quite the
opposite. Although the feline made it clear that the final decision was always hers, she actively
encouraged them to give suggestions or input.

However Lieutenant Uncia wanted everything done by the book, a book which she had practically
written herself, and expected them to have a plan in place despite the fact that they couldn’t be sure
where Nick’s meeting would happen—or indeed if the smuggling operation would actually call him
back on Wednesday. That alone might not have been so bad, but since that was only two days away
the lieutenant had decided there was enough of a time crunch that the plan had to be finished
immediately, and it had to cover every angle possible despite how little information they had about
the actual meeting.

The ensuing discussions had been mind-numbing, and Lieutenant Uncia had shot down well over
three quarters of the suggestions she’d received outright for various reasons. Nick had fought tooth
and nail to be sent out without a wire, arguing almost non-stop for a full hour. In the end his points
that it wasn’t likely to be necessary this early coupled with how dangerous it would be if he were
actually checked for one made the feline relent. His protests over having his phone bugged until the
op was concluded were met with considerably less success.

By the time they’d finally satisfied the Lieutenant it was already well past sunset and Judy was ready
to simply collapse, and when her phone chimed shortly after she boarded the train she half expected
instead she was pleasantly surprised to find a message from her landlady informing her that the damage to her room had been
repaired and the lock would be changed Tuesday at 11:30am. Just knowing that soon she would
regain that part of her life elevated her mood considerably.

“Hey,” she said, elbowing Nick lightly and turning her phone so he could see. “Good news. You’ll
be getting your bed back tomorrow.”

Nick yawned and smacked his lips lightly, then looked down and squinted at her phone. “Mmmph?”

“They’re changing the locks in the morning. After work I can just grab my stuff out of your place
and move into my apartment again,” she said brightly.

Nick’s ears perked up and he smiled. “That’s great news, but don’t feel like you have to go if you
don’t want to. I don’t mind the company.”

To her surprise, Judy found herself seriously considering the offer. No real progress had been made
on finding who had wrecked her place, and according to Officer Howlson it was unlikely anyone
would ever be arrested for it despite the fact that she appeared to have been targeted. The new locks
were a nice precaution in case the perpetrator did somehow get his hands on a key, but if the lock
had been picked the change probably wouldn’t make any real difference. Of course, if some creep was targeting her at least now she knew and could take steps to keep herself safe.

“That’s really thoughtful, but I can’t let this get to me,” she decided finally, putting on a brave face as she smiled up at him. “If the point of this was to scare me then whoever did this wins if I go hide.”

“You’re braver than me, Fluff,” Nick commented as he gave her a light pat on the head. “But then, what else is new?”
Do I Wanna Know?

They were halfway down the stairs when Nick came to an abrupt stop and flicked his ears back. “Hey, I just remembered there’s something I forgot to do.”

“Nick, we’re already running late. Again,” Judy said, practically quivering with annoyance. “Can it wait? We don’t have time for this.”

He winced, shaking his head. “No, it’s kind of important. You go ahead. I’ll catch up if I can.”

“Just don’t take too long. You know the chief expects everyone to arrive on time, and I doubt Lieutenant Uncia is any different.”

Nick traced an X over his chest with one hand and held up the other. “My honor as a fox.”

Judy just rolled her eyes and began to hop her way down the remaining stairs while Nick turned back and returned to his apartment. Once inside he went to the window and peered outside, waiting until he saw Judy walking down the street. What he was about to do was difficult enough without worrying about the possibility that she might overhear.

He went to the shelf above his couch and pulled the carrot-pen out from behind the books he’d hidden it behind, smaller ones so the spines wouldn’t stick out and give away that something was behind them. Without thinking he wiped the memory, not even able to remember what he’d put on there last, then took a deep breath and tried to clear his mind. This would be his only chance; he didn’t want to risk getting it wrong.

His tail flicked about when he finally hit the record button and began to talk. He hadn’t expected Judy’s stay to feel so…right. Nor her departure to leave such an ache. She wasn’t even really gone yet but he could already feel the hole she’d filled. Learning that she would be going today had shocked him into action however, and he’d spent over an hour last night contemplating what he would say.

When he was finished he played back the message and put it against his harshest inner critic. Thirty seconds long, much too short to include everything he wanted. But it did say everything he needed, so it would have to do.

Heart pounding, he walked into his bedroom. Judy’s suitcase was sitting in the corner, already packed and ready to go. With care he set it down then unzipped it, and quickly laid the carrot-pen on top of all her clothing before immediately closing the bag once more.

He then pushed aside the urge to retrieve the pen and left, breaking into a jog once he was out the door.

Judy paced in the station’s foyer, her eyes darting nervously between the clock hanging from the wall and the front door. She’d expected Nick to catch up with her at the transit station, but when the train had pulled in she’d been left with the uncomfortable choice of either waiting for the next train, or going on ahead alone. That hadn’t been much of a decision; if she went ahead there was a chance she could cover for Nick if he turned up late, but if she waited around for too long then she would be
late too and they would both land in hot water.

She still ended up second guessing herself the entire ride to the precinct, and with each minute that slipped away she worried more and more. Twice already she’d considered calling him to ask what was taking so long, but what was the point? He could tell the time just as well as any mammal, and being pestered by her wasn’t likely to make him show up any sooner. The best it would do was make her feel better at the cost of stressing him out even more.

With just eleven minutes to spare Nick finally appeared, running up the front steps before he slowed to a quick walk and entered the building while still panting. The moment he was inside his eyes went to the clock and he visibly relaxed.

“What took you so long? I thought you were supposed to be right behind me,” she demanded.

“Train left just as I got to the station,” he said and began straightening out his uniform. “Had to wait for the next one, which of course showed up late.”

“Is that the story you made up in case you were late, or is that really what happened?”

Nick looked genuinely offended. “Carrots, if I was going to make something up you can be sure the story would at least be entertaining.”

“You know perfectly well that the trains are almost never late Nick,” she said.

“Except for when they are rotating them for maintenance, which I’m sure the city is doing right now to make sure everything is running smoothly come next week.”

She started for the meeting room Lieutenant Uncia had claimed yesterday. “What’s going on next week?”

“Really Carrots? Founders Day.” Nick gave the back of her ear a light flick and chuckled as he followed her. “The news has only been breathlessly covering all the preparations for it since last week. The chief spent some of yesterday talking about it right before he handed out assignments.”

“Well I was gone last week, and have been a little distracted since I got back,” Judy reminded him, feeling a touch of heat creep into her ears. “I didn’t realize it was such a big deal.”

“It comes and goes,” Nick said, wiggling his hand in front of himself a couple of times. “City Hall must be pushing it harder than usual this year to try and put the mess with Bellwether behind everyone. Bet they’re scrambling to get everything back on track considering what happened last week with the fire.”

Judy stopped and turned to the fox. “Fire? I thought all those pictures you sent me were jokes.”

“They were,” Nick said quickly. “Someone just decided to burn down a warehouse. Had a lot of expensive prey food in it, so now there’s a shortage and the city is looking for alternate sources so there won’t be any problems when the festivities kick off.

Nobody was hurt, everything is fine.”

“Well that’s good at least,” she said, slowly shaking her head as she began to walk once more.

“What got burned up?”

Nick hmmmed softly, his ears folded. “Um…fancy stuff like I said. Kale I remember. Seaweed? Why would anyone eat that stuff?”
“Lots of vitamins and a unique taste and texture. I think some mammals even believe it has curative effects.”

“ Weird. Anyway, Wolford has the full list, so talking to him would be best. I only know those two and those white flower things I see used as garnish for cakes and salads at all the fancy prey restaurants.”

“Clover flowers?” Judy asked.

Nick shrugged. “Probably. You’d know better than me.”

Judy mentally winced. If the city was looking for another supply of clover flowers they’d end up calling the Warrens sooner or later. She could just imagine how much it would hurt for them to turn down the contract after just losing their clover fields. Normally it was considered best to lose speculative crops first, that was why the clover fields had been closest to the river’s flood plain in the first place. Staple crops like carrots, lettuce, and spinach brought in less money usually, but it was reliable money. Prices on the luxury foods had a habit of fluctuating wildly with the economy. Still, the money a deal like this could have brought would be more than enough to cover the damages and still have some left over.

“You okay there?” Nick asked just before they reached the room.

“Yeah, just feeling bad for some friends that had a stroke of terrible luck.”

“No such thing as luck, Fluff,” Nick said, his tail flicking about. “Just stuff that happens, and mammals that either know how to take advantage or don’t.”

She didn’t bother to argue. It wasn’t the time for it anyway. The lieutenant was already in the room and gave them both impatient looks as they made their way to their seats, glancing at the clock as her tail flicked rapidly behind her.

“I was beginning to wonder if you two would actually show,” she said. “Anyway, I know everyone thought we were busy yesterday, but you haven’t seen anything yet.”

Lieutenant Uncia hadn’t been kidding when she said they would be busy, but this time it was at least interesting. The day had started with a brief lecture on things to avoid while in the field, although most of that had been directed specifically at Nick. The lieutenant didn’t spare any words as she explained the importance of avoiding actions or comments that could be used for an entrapment defense since he would be the one actually meeting with Conrad’s mysterious client.

Afterward the lieutenant had them role play different scenarios while she watched, making sure that Nick didn’t slip up. Nick loved every moment of it since it allowed him to run his mouth and attempt to speak circles around the others. He only messed up twice. The first time, with Fangmeyer, he misspoke and opened the door for an entrapment defense. The second had happened while interacting with Judy who, having grown accustomed to his style of banter, was able to catch him in a lie. Even Uncia seemed impressed by the fox when they had finished.

They’d been dismissed two hours before the day shift officially came to an end to make sure they showed up well rested early the next morning. Lieutenant Uncia didn’t seem to think they would get the call that early, but she expected them to be ready just the same even if the only goal right then
was to make contact. As they left Judy couldn’t help walking with a pronounced bounce as her excitement threatened to bubble over.

“In such a hurry to leave me and head home?” Nick asked as he tried to keep up.

She laughed, shaking her head. “Just excited about tomorrow. I know that I’m probably going to be kept at the precinct, but this is our first undercover operation. How can I not be excited?” She bumped against Nick playfully. “How come you’re so calm? This is all because of you after all. Once this is finished I’m sure you’ll have an easier time fitting in.”

His ears perked as his expression turned thoughtful. “I suppose. Maybe. Spending all last week with Wolford and Lowell helped a little, after all,” he said, then shrugged. “And I am excited, but in my last life I was basically doing this type of thing every day. Just more used to it, I guess.”

She should have expected that answer, but she could tell Nick was more anxious than he was letting on. His tail wasn’t quite as active and during the train ride back to his apartment he was quieter than usual, always glancing at his phone or out the window instead of at the other passengers as he usually did.

That was probably to be expected. Back when he was running cons the only rules he needed to follow were his own. A police investigation had a litany of requirements however, and while he had adapted his style well the couple of times he did make a mistake during the practice session seemed to have surprised him. He would never admit it though.

So once they got to his place she assured him that he would do wonderfully tomorrow, and that Lieutenant Uncia wouldn’t send him out if that wasn’t the case. He’d smiled in response and assured her that he wasn’t worried at all, although she could still see that anxiety lurking just behind his eyes. While she’d still been wondering if she should press the issue or leave well enough alone he got her bag and told her to stay safe on the way back to her apartment.

She gave him a hug on the way out the door and thanked him for putting up with her intruding all weekend before she went downstairs to wait for her taxi. Not twenty minutes later she was back at the Grand Pangolin, and the landlady was waiting with her new key. With no small amount of trepidation she climbed the stairs to her floor, then hesitated just outside the door to brace herself before walking back in.

It was almost like the scene she’d found last Friday had been erased. The walls had been repaired and repainted, the mattress replaced, and the tattered remains of her belongings disposed of. Of everything that had been destroyed her family photos had hurt the most, but now that everything was returning to normal she could simply ask her parents to send new ones. She spent the better part of ten minutes checking the room over to make sure nothing major had been overlooked before she finally decided the time had come to unpack.

She put her suitcase on the bed and gathered her hangers, intending to use the new mattress as a makeshift table, but when she unzipped the bag the first thing she saw was a novelty carrot-pen recorder. The sight of it made her chuckle and she picked it up, wondering when Nick had slipped it in with her things. Or when he’d bought it for that matter. The stores that sold the novelty pens certainly didn’t cater to foxes, so he must have gotten quite a few looks while making the purchase.

At first she simply turned it over in her hands, noticing the slight differences between the one she had used on Nick and this newer one. They were subtle—button placement, the feel of the plastic, the location of the speaker—so either this version was made by another company or the design had been altered in the months following that first case. It didn’t matter; she appreciated the gesture just the same.
On a whim she decided to make a recording of herself, but just before she pushed the record button she noticed the small LED that indicated there was already something stored in memory was glowing and she stopped. Head cocked to one side, she pushed the play button. A second of silence, then Nick’s voice came out of the tiny speaker.

“Carrots—Judy, sorry for making this weird, but I can’t think of another way to say what I need without losing my nerve. Been trying to figure out how to put it for so long, and I always end up babbling incoherently. End up trying to say too much at once. Decided it’s better to say too little and just… Well, hope I guess.”

There was an uncomfortable pause and she heard him sigh. “I think I…um…love you. And I’m not sure what to do about it, or if I even should do anything. So…that’s it.

“Uh…thanks.”

As the recording played she moved to sit in the chair by her desk, staring at the pen and trying to think, but her mind refused to cooperate as it struggled to recall any time she’d heard Nick sound so awkward. She pushed play again, her ears burning.

“Carrots—Judy, sorry for—”

After Judy left Nick began to pace, his tail flicking anxiously behind him. The whole train ride home he’d fretted over how stupid and inadequate his plan was and had very nearly taken the carrot-pen back after getting home despite how bad of a mistake that would be. He couldn’t go on hiding his feelings, he knew from experience that would only make him feel worse. Besides, Judy was getting so good at reading him that she’d notice on her own soon enough.

Better to tell her before it got too bad. Let her shoot him down and rip a small piece of his heart, then take the rejection and let himself begin to heal before his feelings grew so intense it would ruin their friendship. Then he could call up Finnick, go to a bar, and get blackout drunk. Or find a pretty vixen for a one night stand. Or spend the weekend trying to kill himself with comfort food. Or, most likely, all of the above.

He went to his bed, intending to lie down, then stopped as he realized he could still smell Judy all over the sheets; just strong enough that he could imagine she was still staying with him tonight. Imagining her tucked in under the covers was far too easy.

A miniature war erupted inside him. One side demanded that he allow himself the small comfort of leaving the bed as it was so he could enjoy her scent for as long as it remained. The other thought that sounded too stalker-ish and wanted him to wash everything immediately. He started to pace again, wishing he could put off the decision, but the side calling for him to wash it all won out. The idea that Judy would find out and think he was a creep just struck too close to his heart. He gathered up his bedding and brought it down to the building’s washing machine, then went back to his room and practically collapsed on the couch.

Fifteen minutes. Surely she’d gotten back to her place already. He itched to send her a text and make sure she’d made it okay. Instead he reached up onto the shelf and pulled down the first book his fingers fell upon. There wasn’t actually any need for him to read; he already knew every book he’d kept by heart even if he didn’t have the words memorized.
He skimmed over the first few sentences before the text blurred. He set the book down and closed his eyes. He picked it back up and tried again.

Twenty minutes. He kept checking his phone to make sure that it wasn’t silenced even though he already knew he had it cranked all the way up. Of course there was a chance that she wouldn’t call, she might not notice there was a message or decide to ignore it or put it off. He actually wasn’t even sure he wanted her to since that would mean it was time to face whatever was coming, but he most certainly didn’t want to miss it if she did.

Twenty-seven minutes. His phone rang, the distinct chime he’d assigned to Judy’s number filling the room so suddenly he nearly fell off the couch in his rush to answer.

“Judy? I take it you got home alright?” he asked, swallowing the question he really wanted answered. Did you listen to it?

“Oh, yeah. I’ve been here for a few minutes,” she said, her distracted tone giving him his answer. He leaned back against the couch again, physically bracing himself. “I found the thing you left in my bag.”

Please, please don’t make me ask, he thought. “Sorry, I know I shouldn’t have been in your things, but I just—”

“I’m not angry,” she said. An uncomfortable silence followed.

He could feel each second as it ticked by as he waited for Judy to say something else, then cracked. “Look, I’m not expecting…I just thought you deserved to know, because sooner or later you’d find out and I thought you should hear it from me. I understand if it freaks you out and you don’t want to work with—”

“Nick, stop, please,” Judy said, interrupting him once more. “It isn’t like that. This is all just so unexpected. I feel like I’ve just put Norman behind me and I don’t know how to react.”

He nearly kicked himself. That was right. The whole point of her visit to her family was because she wanted to explain to her mother that she wasn’t looking for a relationship right now. How could he have forgotten that detail? Because it was inconvenient, that’s why.

But before he could apologize Judy started to talk again. “Would you like to talk about it right now? Because I think I might need to.”

Nick closed his eyes, slowly shaking his head. “No. Not on the phone.” He barely managed to whisper the words. “If we’re going to talk I would like it to be face to face.”

“I can do that,” Judy agreed.

“Sometime soon. Is tomorrow after work good for you?”
Old Friends

That first night back home Judy had difficulty sleeping. The small, paranoid part of her mind kept wanting to check out the window to make sure nobody watching her. It seemed like a small thing considering she’d learned how to deal with fear during her time in the Zootopia Police Academy, but the only threats she was used to dealing with were those right in front of her. Easy to identify and act upon. The possibility that some unknown mammal had it out for her, that she could walk past them on the street and never even know it was them, was new.

She’d been so sure she was over it. Getting to sleep over at Nick’s place hadn’t been a problem, though she supposed that was at least in part because the fox knew how to distract her. And, if she was being completely honest, simply knowing he was near made her feel safer. Even the way his scent seemed to fill his home helped put her mind at ease.

Both of those facts, coupled with Nick’s sudden confession, gave her a whole load of new things to worry about on top of the break-in. He loved her—or rather he thought he did—and seemed actively…apologetic? Frightened? Embarrassed? Whatever it was struck a stark contrast from how she was used to seeing him: smugly confident, as if he had every mammal in the world dancing to his tune. It was all an act, she’d known him long enough to see just how many doubts plagued him, but it was an act he was eminently good at maintaining. Almost as if he believed that presenting the proper image to the world would allow him to avoid ever having to appear weak.

Privately Judy thought it must be a heartbreakingly lonely way to move through life.

And it raised a question she never even knew existed. Did she feel the same way? Could she? She certainly liked him, he was the closest friend she’d ever had, but a relationship would be a big step to take even if he was another bunny. Even though interspecies relationships happened they were rare, and in her experience were largely viewed similarly to being gay or a lesbian which she wasn’t entirely sure she was comfortable with.

Her ears began to heat up as she imagined the sorts of jokes that would get thrown their way. “She would be the one to pick a ‘Wilde’ partner.” “So, getting eaten by the fox tonight?” “How far down your rabbit hole has he gone?” But despite all that she felt stunned more than anything. Maybe she was still too off-balance from how sudden this all seemed.

Although it did cast Nick’s recent behavior in a new light. His response to the picture with Keith Warren: Who’s the boy? Yes it had just been a text, but now she found it difficult to believe that she’d missed the clear jealousy that lurked just behind the words. But how long had he been trying to deal with this? She hadn’t thought to ask before hanging up.

Everything jumbled together as she slept. Her dreams hadn’t exactly been bad. Chaotic was a better description. Chaotic and confusing, pulling her emotions from breathtaking giddiness to sorrow to concern and back. Autumn colors and the greens of spring, warm and comfort blasted away by sparkling brilliant white. And when she finally woke, a tangle of blankets held her in place until she kicked her way free.

She didn’t wake up tired, but even as her dreams melted away into vague colors and scents and sounds her thoughts continued to be cluttered, constantly running off on unexpected tangents. It was probably a good thing that she wouldn’t be in the field. She wouldn’t want to risk making a mistake because her head wasn’t 100% in the game. All through the morning she kept stealing looks at Nick when he wasn’t paying attention and wondering how he was doing.
At a glance he seemed to be holding up well enough, but she supposed he’d had enough time to get used to dealing with whatever he was feeling. Or at the very least enough time to hide it behind that mask of his. A few sarcastic comments while they tested to ensure the tap on his phone was still working, a lazy smile as he waited for the target to call him, and all his usual complaints about the quality of the coffee in the break room. Only now, on the rare occasions that their eyes met, she could see the question peeking out at her, bringing a fresh flush to her ears and putting a nervous flutter in her chest.

If there had been any work to distract her she would have felt much better, but she was still waiting on the background checks she had requested for the scientists that had worked on the Nighthowler antidote. All that remained was to sit and wait, silently reviewing the plan until the call finally came. Fortunately her restlessness didn’t stand out. Even Lieutenant Uncia seemed to be anxiously waiting for Nick’s phone to ring.

It finally happened just as they were beginning to think about lunch. Everyone immediately went silent while Nick took the call. The lieutenant listened in on the call with a headset, her eyes narrowing as Nick was given the meeting location and time. The moment the call ended Uncia cursed under her breath. Even Nick didn’t seem particularly pleased.

“Somebody get me a map,” Lieutenant Uncia asked.

Judy walked over to Nick and gave him a nudge. “Something wrong?”

He looked down at her, ears back half way. “The meeting is at a place called Lonely Pine Cemetery.”

The Lonely Pine Cemetery was located in the Alpine Quarter, north of the Meadowlands and far outside of Nick’s usual stomping grounds. With the mere hour notice Conrad had provided he’d been forced to get changed into civilian clothes and depart immediately if he was going to make it on time, which meant trusting that Lieutenant Uncia and Judy would figure something out before he arrived. Either way, all the careful planning had just been thrown out the window, so whether the lieutenant realized it or not he’d just slipped free of the leash she’d tried to put on him.

While building the plan Uncia had assumed that the meeting would be held somewhere close to the warehouse Conrad was operating out of—at the very least somewhere within Savannah Central—and that it would be kept indoors. Both were reasonable guesses, but that didn’t make them any less wrong. The preparation was useless and now the entire team was scrambling to keep everything together. Well, everyone but him.

Normally such dramatic vindication would have him feeling good, but ever since he’d gotten off the phone with Judy last night he’d been nauseous. Usually when he felt sick like that chewing on a piece of ginger helped calm his stomach, it was a remedy his mother had sworn by when he was growing up, but this time it provided barely any relief. Just two bites into his breakfast and he’d nearly vomited. Looking at Judy made it even worse and seemed to rob every ounce of strength he had as he wondered just what she was going to say when they got together later.

When the train finally reached his station he disembarked and checked the time. He was cutting it close.
Outside the air was noticeably crisper than it had been in Savanna Central. The entire quarter occupied the artificial mountain range that marked Zootopia’s northern border, arranged vertically up the slope as much as it was spread in every other direction. It was far from Nick’s favorite city district since he had a minor issue dealing with heights. There were only two main streets that always ran in opposite directions as they crisscrossed their way up numerous switchbacks to the peak. Buildings were almost exclusively located on the north side of the roads with little more than a safety rail on the southern edge to keep mammals from falling to their deaths.

Fortunately his phone’s GPS kept him from losing his way despite the confusing streets. As he walked he pulled up Judy’s number and hit dial, his tail twitching anxiously as he counted the rings. On the third she finally answered.

“Nick, what are you doing? You’re supposed to call the lieutenant,” she scolded.

“I forgot her number,” he lied, smiling when he heard the bunny’s annoyed huff. “Did you two work something out? Because I’m about to get there and I didn’t get the impression that Conrad is in a mood for me to show up late.”

“We did as much as we could. Fangmeyer will be in there with you pretending to visit a grave. Snarlof managed to find a parking structure with a view, so he’ll be taking pictures from there,” Judy said. A moment later he heard her talking to someone else.

“Yes, sir, it’s Officer Wilde. He wanted to know—”

Someone grabbed the phone and a moment later the Chief’s voice came booming over the line. “Wilde?”

Nick gulped, knowing that tone. “I’m here, sir. What are you doing there?”

“Observing,” the chief said, still speaking quite loudly. “I am not in the mood for your nonsense, Wilde. Call Lieutenant Uncia.”

Before Nick could say any more the chief hung up. He stared at his phone, then sighed and went back to the contacts list. Despite the chief’s warning he almost called Judy back anyway, but thought better of it. Groaning, he scrolled down to Lieutenant Uncia’s number and hit it instead.

“Officer Wilde, I see you’ve found my number,” the feline said after she picked up, her voice so cold it sent a shiver down his spine even over the phone.

“The chief helped me remember it,” he said sheepishly. “Judy says that everything is ready? Because I see the place just ahead and if I wait any longer I’ll be late.”

“Yes, now pay attention. Don’t worry too much about getting them to say anything incriminating, without a wire on you everything will boil down to your word against theirs, so just focus on getting them to trust you. If they want something specific don’t make any commitments and tell them you’ll need some time to make it happen. Understand?”

“What if they demand an answer now?” he asked.

“Don’t give them one. Officer Hopps claims you’re good at that sort of thing.”

“Good doesn’t mean perfect,” he said, a little annoyed, then shrugged. “Alright, I’ll try. The chief’s there right? If they don’t take it I’ll just text Carrots and he can make a decision.”

“That isn’t—”
“Goodbye!” he said brightly, pretending he hadn’t heard, and hung up.

As he tucked his phone back into his pocket it chimed lightly, notifying him that he’d just received a text from Judy. He almost read it, then decided he didn’t want Conrad to wonder who he was talking with. Besides, she was probably just letting him know he’d pissed off the lieutenant. That was something he could deal with later, right then he needed to bend his mind to the task at hand.

Lonely Pine Cemetery was located on one of the sections of the mountain where the slope shallowed out until it was nearly flat. In the center stood a single, ancient pine that apparently gave the place its name. Nick wondered what the tree’s significance was. Perhaps it marked the location of the first grave. Or maybe it was just a gimmick the cemetery’s first owner had thought up. Whatever the case, the lone tree standing watch over so many headstones lent the whole area a suitably somber air.

Officer Fangmeyer was off at one end of the cemetery just as Judy has said, slowly meandering through the gravestones as if he was searching for a particular name. On the opposite end of the cemetery he could see the parking structure. He spent a moment watching it, trying to figure out where Snarlof would be before he realized it was probably bad form to risk drawing attention to the guy with the camera. And at a stone monument about half way to the tree was Conrad, looking entirely out of place as he scowled, casting suspicious glances at the few other mammals visiting the deceased.

Nick made a show of checking to make sure he hadn’t been followed, Conrad would like that, then walked over and gave the wildcat a tight smile. “Mammals are going to know something fishy is going on if you keep frowning like that.”

“I don’t care what mammals think. I’m just here to make sure you showed up by yourself like you was told,” Conrad said, already pulling out his phone. He quickly dialed up a number. “He’s here. Came alone like you said.”

Nick strained his ears to hear the response, but whoever was on the other end merely hung up. “Not going to keep me waiting long, I hope. Went to a lot of trouble to make it here on time.”

“He’ll be here in a minute.”

While they waited, Nick slowly worked his way around the side of the monument so that Snarlof would have a completely unobstructed view from the parking structure. Conrad followed close behind, practically snarling as he maintained all the subtlety of a drunken rhino. It was exactly the reason why the wildcat wasn’t usually trusted jobs that required any sort of finesse, and why Nick still had trouble believing that he’d been placed in charge of the smuggling operation.

But true to the wildcat’s word, a car with heavily tinted windows pulled into the cemetery and began to make its way along the narrow, one-lane road. The outfit the wolf at the wheel wore reminded Nick of something from the last decade: a plaid dress shirt, brown vest, and blue jeans. As the car pulled up and the wolf got out Nick approached and extended his hand, leaving Conrad behind.

“I assume you’re the one I’m here to meet,” he said, but the wolf looked away at the back of the sedan. Nick followed his eyes just in time to see Flip climb out.

This is going to be bad, he thought without bothering to hide his surprise. New plan: escape.

He spun around to face Conrad, ears back as he growled lightly. “You brought me here to meet him? Are you insane? There is no way the boss—”

“You’re wasting your breath, Nicky. He works for me, and I’ve already told him that you’re a cop,”
Flip said, amusement coloring his tone.

“Of course I’m a cop,” he shot back, turning to face the other fox. “How do you think this protection works? Bribes? Ha, right. Me and a couple others fix the shifts so that we’ve got the right ones, then we just don’t show up.”

“Nicky, would you please just listen?”

“No, if the boss knew he was going to be helping you he would’ve never sent me to make the offer —”

Apparently he’d worn through the other fox’s patience because Flip began to growl back. “Shut up, Nicky. I’ve got something important to say.”

He leveled a glare at Flip and crossed his arms. “What?”

“Thank you,” Flip said, sighing heavily. “His left side.”

The comment confused Nick for a moment, until he realized Flip wasn’t looking at him but rather just behind. Conrad. He began to turn once more, but the wildcat had already grabbed his shoulder. A second later an elbow slammed savagely into his ribs, landing almost square on what remained of his bruise. The pain seemed to reach deep inside him, twisting his guts as the air rushed out of his lungs and he began to heave.

Maybe it was a good thing that he’d skipped breakfast after all.

“Wilde just showed up,” Fangmeyer said over the radio.

Judy glanced at Lieutenant Uncia, but the feline seemed content to let her continue to handle communications for now as she remained seated next to the chief, looking over a map of the area. Both she and the chief still seemed to be annoyed by the stunt Nick had tried to pull. No doubt he was in for another visit to Bogo’s office once he got back.

“Keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn’t do anything foolish,” Judy answered after keying the radio. “Snarlof, try to get a picture of the mammal he meets. Should be a wildcat.”

“Got one wildcat right now, Hopps. He’s been there giving everyone who walks in the stink eye since I got into place,” Snarlof said. “Looks like he’s making a call. Sending a picture now.”

Judy glanced at the screen over by the lieutenant and watched it slowly load the picture. The time delay was an annoyance, but the pictures the polar bear could get with the HD camera and telephoto lens were absurdly detailed. The image that finally came through captured both Nick and the wildcat he called Conrad.

“Wilde’s leading him around that big-ass monument. I’m about to lose sight of him,” Fangmeyer said.

Snarlof spoke up again. “No worries. I have a clear view from here.”

Her foot began to tap anxiously as she waited, wishing that it had been safe to send Nick in with a radio as well. Or that he had agreed to wear the wire. Anything that would let her know what was
going on even if it was a little more dangerous that he would get caught. She hoped he’d seen that last text wishing him luck.

“Car just pulled in. Blue sedan, tinted windows,” said Fangmeyer.

Snarlof responded almost immediately. “I got it. Wilde sees it too.”

“Can you get a picture of the license plate?” Judy asked.

A pause, then: “No, not from this angle. Maybe when it heads out.” Another pause. “Looks like we got a wolf… wait, no the wolf is just the driver. Fox too. Sending another picture.”

Lieutenant Uncia looked up from the map and tilted her head. “A fox? We might have just lucked out. If Nick’s half as good as you claim he shouldn’t have any trouble establishing a rapport. Birds of a feather and all that.”

Judy agreed absently as she watched the next picture come in, her ears tilted toward the radio, so engrossed that she jumped when Snarlof’s voice came back. “Um… they’re arguing.”

The lieutenant strode over and grabbed the mic, keying it. “Is there something wrong? Fangmeyer, what does the situation look like.”

“Still don’t have eyes-on. I’ll try to get a better angle.”

The picture finally finished downloading and Judy was out of her chair, moving for a closer look to be sure as she felt her heart skip a beat. “Lieutenant!” she said. “Lieutenant, there’s a problem. That’s Flip. He knows Nick. He knows he’s a cop.”

“What?”

“He’s seen us both in uniform while on patrol.”

The feline cursed, but before she could send another transmission Snarlof was on the line again, voice filled with alarm. “That wildcat just hit Wilde. They’re grabbing him.”

“Can’t you do anything?” Lieutenant Uncia demanded.

“You gave me a camera, not a sniper rifle,” Snarlof said. “Fangmeyer?”

“I’m moving.”

Almost immediately after Snarlof came back on, “Too late. They’re gone.”

In a few short minutes Nick found himself adding a number of new items to his mental list of “Things I Hate.” Having his head stuffed into a burlap sack. Being searched by Conrad, who was not at all concerned about how many times his claws caught flesh in the process. The way the wolf’s aggressive driving made his head spin and threatened to make him begin dry heaving once more. But if he had to pick only one the winner by far would be the sensation of having Flip press a pistol into his side.

Nick was actually surprised that he was still breathing, though maybe Flip was concerned about
witnesses. Or maybe he still had a chance to talk his way out. Until he knew which the best move seemed to be keeping his mouth shut at least he inadvertently give them a reason to want him dead. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say “give them more of a reason” considering Flip’s involvement.

“He’s clean, boss,” Conrad said after several moments.

“Well, there is one very small point in your favor, Nicky,” Flip said. Nick winced as the gun pressed into his side was nudged painfully against his now fresh bruise. “So you just stay on your best behavior, because I am really just looking for an excuse.”

Nick continued to keep his mouth shut until the gun barrel jammed against him again. “Ow! Okay, yes, I got it.”

“That’s what I like to see,” Flip said, jabbing the gun into his ribs once more. “You know what your problem is Nicky?”

“Well, I seem to have a bag over my head and a gun pointed at me.”

Flip gave a harsh laugh. “That was good. I’ll let you have that one.” Another prod to his side, this one hard enough to make him yelp. “No, Nicky, your real problem is that you’re a coward. You always have been, and there isn’t anything that’s going to change that.

“Daddy came down on you for your after school activities, so instead of handling it on your own you came running to me. You decided I had to go, so you worked things out so every mob boss in the city would be eager to off me for you. You didn’t have the stomach to do what was necessary to run my little operation yourself, so you handed it all over to Mr. Big.”

“Is there a point to all this?” he asked, subtly shifting position so the next point wouldn’t land on such a tender area.

“My point, Nicky boy, is that you told me off a couple of weeks ago and I believed you. Never saw it coming either. That tells me one of two things: you got a heck of a lot better at lying while I wasn’t watching, or you were telling the truth.

“Which puts me in a difficult position, because caution tells me that I ought to deal with you while I have you dead to rights, but if you really are working for some mob boss I’m about to open a whole mess of problems I’d rather not deal with right now. I’ve kind of grown fond of not having every mobster in the city out for my blood.”

The sack over Nick’s head was beginning to make it difficult to breathe. He coughed once and shook his head, taking a deliberate breath. “Well how about you just let me go and—”

Once again the gun dug into his side. “Ah ah ah, I already trusted you once Nicky, and look where it got me. No, we’re going to do this my way. In just a bit we’re going to go for a walk while you try to get your boss on the phone. Fifteen minutes sounds generous. And I hope for your sake that I recognize whoever you get on the line.”

Judy stood frozen in the room, waiting for Lieutenant Uncia to tell her what they should be doing even though the feline looked completely lost as well. She was only dimly aware of Fangmeyer
reporting that the sedan had turned to continue up toward the summit. Otherwise the room was entirely quiet while the three of them absorbed the news.

“Lieutenant Uncia, one of my officers has just been abducted. I presume you have a plan for such an emergency?” Chief Bogo said, his voice tightly controlled.

The pointed question seemed to snap the snow leopard back into the moment. “I…yes! I’ll contact the local units. Just give me a moment.”

“You do that, lieutenant. I expect my officers to make it back.”

Judy closed her eyes, mentally beating herself up for not insisting that she go out as well. Yes, part of the deal had been that she would be acting as support in the precinct, but when the plan had come apart at the seams before the op had even really began that deal had started to make less and less sense. If only she had been there she knew there was something she could’ve done to help. At the very least she wouldn’t have let Nick out of her sight for even a second, and of everyone on the force she was by far the fastest so…

She took a deep breath and tried to swallow the lump that had formed in her throat, wishing that she didn’t feel like someone was crushing her heart with their bare hands. All she could do to help was tell Uncia what she knew about Flip, which was pitifully little. They knew each other from before Nick had become an officer. The other fox apparently hated Nick. The feeling was mutual. She had no clue why. There were so many questions she didn’t know the answers to. Eventually the snow leopard just gave up.

Her phone chimed. Then again. And again. And again. The lieutenant was already glaring at her as she frantically pulled it out to silence it, certain that her parents had accidentally tagged her in a group text again. She didn’t have the patience to tell them off today, so she just glanced at the screen to make sure it wasn’t an emergency and her heart promptly jumped into her throat.

“Lieutenant, it’s from Nick!”

Chief Bogo walked over to see the screen. “Is he okay?”

Judy bit her lip, shaking her head slightly as her eyes darted across the text. “He says Flip wants to talk to his ‘boss.’ And that if Flip doesn’t recognize the voice on the phone it’ll be bad for him.” She blinked, staring at the final words. “H-he says they’re giving him fifteen minutes.”

Bogo began to grind his teeth, then looked over at Uncia. “You’re running out of time lieutenant.”

“Is that really Officer Wilde?” Uncia asked.

“Does it matter?”

Lieutenant Uncia pressed her lips together. “I could call the penitentiary. There may be an inmate that’s willing to help us. He’s going to want a deal though,” she said, her ears splaying as Bogo gave her a hard look. “I’ll see what I can work out.”

Judy watched the snow leopard head out of the room as that terrible pressure in her chest returned. It was possible there was someone who could help them in the penitentiary, but deals required the district attorney’s approval. That took time, much more than they’d been given, and she couldn’t believe any criminal hardened enough to land in the pen would agree to help on the mere faith that he’d been given a favorable deal.

Of course, there was another way as well.
“Chief?” she asked, not sure how she managed to keep her voice steady. “I could use some air.”

“I understand, I’ll handle the radios until you get back Hopps,” Bogo said and lightly nudged her in the direction of the door. “Just be sure to come right back if you get any more texts from Wilde.”

“Yes sir. Thank you sir.”

She hurried on her way out of the station, ignoring the mammals that tried to stop her on her way out to ask what was going on. Once outside she made her way to the central plaza just across the street and found a quiet corner, then pulled out her phone and scrolled down the contact list until she got to Fru Fru’s number. Three minutes down, no time to second guess herself. As the phone rang she began pacing.

“Judy, it’s been forever since I’ve heard from you. I’m out with little Ju-Ju right now so I really can’t talk for long. Do you think—”

“I’m sorry, Fru Fru, but I really don’t have much time right now either. I really really really need to talk to your father. Do you know where I can reach him?”

Fru Fru took so long to answer that for a moment Judy thought the call had dropped, until the little shrew finally spoke up once more. “I never thought—are you sure Judy? Did something happen?”

“Please, I don’t have time to explain myself right now, Fru Fru,” Judy said, keeping her voice down so it wouldn’t carry. “I just need to talk to him.”

“Alright. But honey, make sure you want it first, okay?” Fru Fru said. “I’ll give him your number and tell him to call.”

The way Fru Fru said it sent a little shiver down Judy’s spine and she closed her eyes. “Thank you.”

Another minute and a half. She stopped pacing and stared at her phone, waiting for Fru Fru to come through for her as she tapped her foot anxiously. Still, the shrew’s warning danced through her thoughts. Was she sure? Technically she’d worked with Mr. Big before, but both times had been very different. At first, he’d been the one who owed her, and with Weaselton it had been in the mob boss’s best interests to help (not to mention she wasn’t a cop at the time either).

This would be completely different. Mr. Big didn’t owe her anything now, so if she wanted his help again then she was going to end up owing a debt to the mob. But what choice did she have? There was no way she could live with herself if someone died—no, if Nick died—when all she needed to do to save him was pick up the phone.

Soon enough her phone began to ring. Judy’s finger hovered the answer icon briefly, the weight of the decision seeming to settle onto her shoulders all at once, then pressed it.

“Hello?” she asked, voice quivering.

“Judy, it’s been so long since I’ve heard your voice. My daughter’s been following your career, you know. She talks about you almost constantly. How are you doing, my dear?”

“Not very good, sir,” she said, deciding it was best to err on the side of being too polite. “I need a favor. A very small one, you’ll only need to—”

“Slow down there. Now Judy, I don’t normally do this, but you are a friend of Fru Fru’s so it is only fair to warn you. I can’t show favoritism, not for this. Others would see it as weakness and try to take advantage of my generosity. It’s bad for business. There are no small favors for cops.”
She squeezed her phone more tightly. “I understand.”

A slight creak came across the line as Mr. Big shifted in his seat. “Alright. Fru Fru said you didn’t have much time. Tell me what happened.”

“Nick, he’s my partner now, and he was undercover today to meet someone. Only when the guy showed up it was this fox he already knows, Flip, and…”

Mr. Big interrupted her. “Nicky’s dead? My condolences. There is no love lost between Flip and I, so rest assured that I’ll send my men out to take care of him.”

Judy stammered for a moment, her voice caught in her throat. “No! Don’t kill anyone! Nick’s still alive, but Flip knows he is a cop and wants…he wants to talk to Nick’s ‘boss,’ and says that he better recognize the voice.”

Another pause on the line. Judy checked the time, cringing at how little remained. Her heart was beating so fast it was practically the only thing she could hear.

“You want me to call Nicky?” came the response at last. “And pretend that he works for me? To help your investigation?”

“If it isn’t too much to ask.”

The moment Mr. Big agreed she nearly collapsed from relief and hurriedly gave him the number, urging him to call immediately before the deadline passed. Her heart was still racing as she ran back into the precinct. Lieutenant Uncia had apparently beaten her back, so she slipped inside quietly, not wanting to interrupt whatever discussion she was having with Bogo.

“The DA says he isn’t going to approve that sort of deal on such short notice, and frankly I don’t blame him,” the lieutenant was saying. “He doesn’t want to be the one to sign off on a deal that knocks a decade off a known killer’s sentence without giving it a long, hard think first.”

“So? He’ll still have plenty of time in the system. You call the DA back and tell him that if he doesn’t approve this immediately he’s going to have a dead cop on his hands. Let him think about how that will look for his reelection,” Bogo said.

Lieutenant Uncia growled softly. “You think he hasn’t already considered that? I’m telling you there’s nothing I can do to make it happen. Our best hope right now is that one of the local officers finds the car so we can get a standoff, that way Officer Wilde will be worth more as a—”

“I’m back,” Judy said, interrupting as she made her way back to the radio. “Sorry, I just… I needed to gather my thoughts.”

The lieutenant barely acknowledged her return, giving a light grunt and a nod, while the chief gave her a reassuring smile. “Nothing to be ashamed of, Hopps.”

She reclaimed her place managing the radios, keeping one eye on the clock as time began to press up against the deadline they’d been given. She could hear reports from the officers in the Alpine Quarter as they gave updates as they unsuccessfully canvased the area for the blue sedan. Then, with just two minutes to go, there was a chirp from the room’s computer. Lieutenant Uncia immediately went to check on it, both ears pinned back, then sucked in a breath when she saw the screen.

“Why is Mr. Big calling Officer Wilde?”
Flip had them abandon the car shortly before Nick had been permitted to use his phone to contact Judy. Thankfully that meant that Nick no longer had the hood over his head and could see they’d brought him to the mountain summit, though knowing that didn’t do him much good. He couldn’t pass the information along to his partner while being watched so closely, and Flip made sure to keep them moving anyway.

Within several minutes they had reached the district’s aerial tramway that connected the mountain peak with the base, bypassing everything in-between. Since it was the middle of the day there was a respectable line waiting to head back down the slope which momentarily gave Nick hope that he could get away. Foxes were common enough out there that he might be able to get lost in the crowd, and if Flip did anything to cause a commotion the ZPD would be called in short order, but while he was waiting for his chance Flip simply led them to the front of the line and they were let through by the middle-aged cougar that was manning the gates. Conrad and the wolf shoved him onto the tram, then left after Flip got on with him.

Once they were away and alone again Flip pulled his gun back out, lightly waving it from side to side as he looked at his watch. “Tick-tock-tick-tock Nicky. Time’s running out. You better start worrying.”

Nick watched the pistol’s barrel, the ache in his abused side momentarily forgotten as his mouth went dry. Flip had been right earlier. He was a coward. It was difficult to imagine Judy allowing herself to get grabbed without putting up a fight. And after she would have bolted at the first chance that she could get away. He’d thought his time in the academy had cured him of his fears, but right then all he could do was stare at the gun’s muzzle and imagine just how eager the other fox was to pull the trigger.

“Aw, now don’t be like that Nicky. How can I enjoy myself if you just give up?” Flip said. “The kid I knew loved to talk. You remember all our old conversations, don’t you Nicky? The ones where you assured me that I could trust you?”

Against his better judgment, Nick took the bait. “What could we possibly talk about?”

“How about that bunny partner of yours,” Flip said, leaning back against the side of the tram car. “Surprised that you seem to be all buddy-buddy with her considering she was Bellwether’s accomplice in trying to get all us preds locked up.”

“Accomplice?” Nick could hardly believe his ears. “She’s the one that got the nasty little sheep arrested.”

Flip grinned. “Ah, but only after Bellwether tried to get rid of her.”

“Excuse me?”

“See, several weeks after her big press release it seems that little bunny foo-foo was hopping through the station when a certain sheep called her into a meeting. When she came out again she wasn’t an officer anymore.”

Nick snorted. “She resigned her post.”

“Oh, is that what she told you?” Flip asked.

“Everyone in the precinct knows,” Nick said, annoyed that Flip was even trying to play this game with him. “The chief wasn’t super tight-lipped about it.”
Flip laughed. “Ah, the buffalo right? A bunny, a sheep, and a buffalo walk into a room. There’s a
joke for you. Listen to one who knows, Nicky, if you get a bunch of prey into a room where nobody
can see what they’re doing then the only thing that’s coming out of there is hate. Thought you’d
already learned that lesson once.”

Nick might have found Flips absurdly over-the-top rhetoric amusing if not for how earnestly it was
delivered. He could deal with Flip trying to feed him lies, it was exactly the sort of thing he’d come
to expect and trying to turn him against Judy was right up Flip’s alley. Admittedly he couldn’t
always tell when Flip was lying, he just tended to assume it was always, but there were a few rare
moments where the other fox had been completely honest. And just then he saw that same
expression of Flip’s face.

He really believes this nonsense.

The realization sent an ominous through Nick’s body, making his tail puff out. Flip continued to
watch him expectantly, no doubt awaiting his response, but Nick had no clue what to say. His phone
saved him, its ring breaking the silence that had descended between them.

Flip grinned and raised the pistol. “Aren’t you gonna answer, Nicky? Hope it’s your boss.”

Nick pulled his phone out, frowned at the unfamiliar number, and picked up. He then quickly put it
on speaker just to be safe, watching Flip cautiously as he tried to decide if he was willing to risk
jumping.

“Hello?”

“Nicky, my boy, I hope this is important. I was in the middle of eating a cannoli my darling daughter
cooked for me.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Big. Sir,” Nick said, his mind racing. Oh God, Judy, what have you done?

“You know I would never intrude on your private family time unless it was a matter of life and death, sir.”

Flip’s muzzle contorted in frustration, but he kept his mouth shut as Mr. Big spoke again. “Yes, I
heard you let yourself get kidnapped. I’m very disappointed in you, Nicky. I expect better from the
mammals that work for me.”

“It won’t happen again, I assure you.”

Mr. Big practically purred into the phone. “So, do I need to ice anyone?”

Nick enjoyed the way Flip’s eyes bulged, at least until he realized the pistol was now pointed right at
his face. “Uh, no sir. I think this call has cleared everything up. Thank you very much sir. I promise
not to trouble you with this sort of thing again.” He quickly hung up, looking back to Flip. “Are we
good?”

Flip snarled at him, but put the gun away. “No, Nicky, we aren’t ‘good,’ but you get to live a little
longer.”

He could’ve died from relief. “So what do you need me to do, anyway?”

“Next week I need to move a bunch of product into the city,” Flip said as he re-arranged his clothes
to hide the pistol once more. “Need to get it all in before the big Founder’s Day celebration or I’m
not going to be able to move it.”

Nick decided he’d earned enough leeway to push a little. “Mr. Big will want me there to see what
you’re bringing in. That’s part of why he’s offering this deal to smugglers, he wants to know what everyone else is moving.”

As he spoke Flip’s lips pressed together and the other fox gave him a sideways look. “I’ll just bet. Tell you what, how about first we make sure you can do what you say. I’ve got some less valuable merchandise to bring in on Monday. Ten-fifteen at night. I want you keep the cops out of a ten block radius until we finish. Make that happen and we can start talking about the real deal.”

Nick’s ears folded back. “You sure? You’re going to use up your freebie on cheap stuff?”

“You’ve always been so fixated on money, Nicky. That’s why you’re still miserable and alone. Sometimes a mammal needs to know when to have some fun,” Flip answered.

“Yeah, well smuggling operations don’t exactly run on fun, do they?”

Thankfully, the ride wasn’t much longer. Nick could hardly wait to get his feet back on solid ground. He was still amazed that he was more or less in one piece, and tried to leave Flip behind so he could call Judy and let everyone know that he was alive. Once again Flip had other plans and tagged along.

“You know Nicky, now that I think about it I’m quite happy with how things worked out.”

“Because you were so torn up over if you should shoot me or not, right?”

“No, see if you had taken my first offer I would’ve had to put everything behind us,” Flip said, sounding genuinely pleased with himself. “But this way? Why, now you have to help me and I still get to do things like this.”

Without any warning Flip punched him in his left side again, pushing him up against a building as the air was driven out of his lungs. Fortunately Flip wasn’t nearly as strong as Conrad, so this time Nick managed to keep his legs under him even as gasped.

“Oh I am so looking forward to spending time with you again, Nicky,” Flip whispered into his ear before he backed away and continued on alone, extending his customary finger as he went. “By the way, tell that miserable partner of yours that her apartment is a disgrace.”

Lieutenant Uncia was livid as she demanded to know if Bogo had known that Nick was on Mr. Big’s payroll, while the Chief insisted that she stop jumping to conclusions and wait until an actual investigation could be conducted before she began casting aspirations on his officers. Judy sat quietly through it all, eyes closed and kicking herself for having forgotten that Nick’s phone was bugged. She’d been there when they made the decision. She’d watched as they installed the software. Why hadn’t she remembered before calling up Mr. Big?

Of course, it wouldn’t have mattered if she had. Her decision would’ve been the same.

Eventually the lieutenant stormed out, swearing she would look into the matter personally. Judy simply continued to handle the radio, wondering if she’d just gotten Nick fired. Or, for that matter, if her efforts had been completely wasted and Flip had simply killed him anyway. That had been what Mr. Big had assumed after all; surely he had a good reason to jump there first.
Her phone rang and she wasted no time answering it, practically trembling when she saw it was from Nick. “Hello? Nick? Where are you? Are you okay?”

“Slow down a little there, Carrots. I’ve had a rough time,” Nick said, his voice tense. She thought there was just a hint of a wince in his tone. “Could you please let everyone know I’m okay?”

Judy blinked, then looked up at Bogo. “It’s Officer Wilde sir, he says—”

“My ears work just fine, Hopps. I don’t need you to repeat everything he says. Where is he?”

“The chief wants to know where you are,” she relayed. Her entire body felt so light she could hardly believe it.

“On my way to catch a train back.”

The chief hmmmed, then spoke up again. “Tell him I want him to head straight home. It’s best if he stays out of Uncia’s way for now, he can come in to be debriefed tomorrow,” the chief said.

Once again she relayed the message to Nick. She expected him to be happy to have the chance to head home after his ordeal, but judging by his tone he was simply too exhausted to feel much of anything. He simply acknowledged Bogo’s order and promised he’d have his report ready for tomorrow before letting her go.

“I want you to stay out of Lieutenant Uncia’s way for the rest of the day as well, so you had best head home too,” Bogo said after the call ended.

She froze, slowly looking up at him. The moment she saw the hard look in his eyes her ears wilted.

“Sir, I can explain—”

Before she could finish the Chief spoke over her, practically shouting. “I believe I gave you an order, Officer Hopps,” he said before his voice dropped to a more reasonable volume. “There will be plenty of time tomorrow to discuss any foolish actions my officers may or may not have taken. Dismissed.”
The Alpine Quarter was far enough away that Judy had plenty of time to return home and change out of her improvised uniform before going to meet Nick at the station nearest his apartment. Just by looking at him as he disembarked Judy could tell he was both physically and emotionally exhausted. His normally immaculate appearance was marred by his rumpled clothes, although she could tell he'd made an attempt to clean himself up. Even so, his expression brightened ever so slightly once he spotted her. She immediately ran up to him and held up the duffel bag she'd brought from the station.

“Your uniform and gear,” she informed him as she handed it over, watching the way Nick gingerly slipped his arm through the strap. “Are you okay? What did they do to you?”

“Do you mind if we don’t talk about that, Carrots?” he asked, one hand going to rub his left side. “I’m going to have to think about it enough when I do the paperwork. Besides, there’s already something we need to discuss. Remember?”

She felt a little color re-enter her ears and glanced around. “Right now?”

Nick shifted his grip on the bag slightly. “No, there’s a park with a Snarlbucks just across the street from it not far from here.”

Judy knew the one. It was on the way to Nick’s apartment so she’d walked past it every time she went to visit. There wasn’t any rush to get there so they stopped at the Snarlbucks to buy drinks first. Nick got some sort of iced coffee, but Judy found herself overwhelmed by the sheer selection offered. She rarely ever drank coffee, while growing up her parents had always insisted it wasn’t healthy, so she mostly restricted herself to a single cup while working late or when Nick was particularly insistent and got some for her. In the end she asked if they had any tea, and was given a much smaller menu to pick from.

In the park they found a quiet spot under a tree and Nick promptly dropped the duffel bag then settled onto the grass with a sigh, looking down at his drink. “This was so much easier when it was all in my head,” he said.

Judy sat across from him and tucked her knees up to her chest. “Do you want me to start?”

For a second he seemed to consider it, then shook his head and took a deep breath. “No, though there’s really something I should tell you first. I’m like ninety-nine percent sure Flip was the one who broke into your place.” He paused to let that sink in. “He didn’t exactly say anything specific, but after some of the comments he made…just…you might want to consider moving.”

“Isn’t that a bit much?” she asked, resolutely ignoring the knot that had formed in her stomach. “Now that we know it’s him we can just send someone to arrest him.”

“If we can find where he is, or link him to the crime.” Nick took the top off his cup and looked into the dark liquid. “He hates me, Judy. Enough that he was going to kill me if you hadn’t convinced Mr. Big to call. Thanks for that by the way.

“But despite how much he hates me it wasn’t me he went after. He went after you, and maybe that was just because he knew it would hurt me, but some of the things he was saying about prey scare me. He’s convinced you were in on Bellwether’s plot, and I’m worried that maybe he wants to make
some sort of point.”

She shivered a little. “I renewed a year lease just a couple of months ago. If I break the contract I’ll lose the deposit.”

Nick frowned, but didn’t say anything immediately. “Alright, I guess. So about the other thing.” He sighed again, then took a sip from his drink. “To be honest, I was sort of expecting you to just tell me off. It would have made everything a lot easier, and in a couple of years we could laugh about how stupid I was.”

“And what makes you think you’re being stupid?”

He flopped onto his back, looking up at the tree. “Too many things to put into words, even if we leave out all the obvious bunny and fox jokes.”

“Like?”

“Like what happens at work?” Nick asked, rolling over onto his side so he could look at her. “There has to be some sort of regulation about this. Do we still get to be partners if we’re dating? I’m not sure I want to work with anyone else.”

She scooted a little closer as she considered that. “The regulations are a little vague. I think it would be up to Bogo,” she said before taking a sip of her tea. “What’s written down says relationships cannot be allowed to impact performance. Only relationships between superiors and subordinates are expressly forbidden.”

“Do you think Bogo would give us new partners?”

She shrugged slightly. “I don’t know. Even if he does it doesn’t feel right to decide something like this based on what decisions Bogo might make. Next?”

“Well, I’m a fox.”

“Oh no, how could this happen?” She smiled at him teasingly. “Do you think there’s a cure?”

“I’m serious Judy. You know foxes don’t exactly have the best reputation to begin with, and mammals like Flip aren’t exactly doing much to change the perception. Lord knows I’ve done more than my fair share to reinforce it. Believe me, it isn’t great to see those questions in a mammal’s eyes when they first meet you, but I’ve gotten used to it. Had to. But if you and I…if anyone finds out I’d be dragging you into all of that.”

“So? I’ve had to deal with mammals looking at me and just seeing a small, weak, frightened bunny my entire life,” she reminded him. “Sometimes I feel like everyone that doesn’t know me just thinks I’m some sort of mascot for the ZPD. It’s infuriating.”

Nick’s ears dipped slightly. “Can’t say I know what it’s like to be a bunny, but you do have one leg up on us foxes. Mammals trust bunnies.”

“I guess.” She took another sip of her tea and looked up at the leaves overhead. “You said ‘if’ anyone finds out. You don’t want anyone to know about us?”

She heard him wince and shift position. When she looked over again Nick had pushed himself up.

“I swear it isn’t like that. You’re amazing Judy. Really. You’re smart and nice and beautiful and—”
“Beautiful?” she repeated, a rush of heat flowing into her ears as she noticed just how intently Nick was looking at her. She quickly looked down. “You really think so?”

“Oh, just because I’m not a bunny I can’t be a good judge of how you look?” Nick asked, chuckling lightly. “You take better care of yourself than anyone I’ve met, sweetheart, but if you prefer I can talk about your winning personality instead.”

The blush in her ears deepened. “No, it’s just that when I was visiting my parents some of my friends commented that maybe my body isn’t really soft enough.”

“Soft?”

She shifted uncertainly, looking away from him. “You know. Feminine.”

For a moment Nick didn’t answer her and she felt her ears begin to droop behind her. Then he moved, his hand finding hers and giving it a light squeeze until she looked back at him. Friendly green eyes met her gaze.

“Judy, I don’t know what bunnies or prey consider attractive, but you are sleek and quick and…and a bunch of things I probably shouldn’t say out loud while we’re in public. And I know I’m coming dangerously close to sounding like that’s all I care about, but I assure you: you are very desirable.”

A slight tingle ran down her spine and she looked down at his hand. All at once Nick seemed to remember himself and drew back, blushing almost as much as she was while he gave an anxious cough.

“Isn’t that the moment when you’re supposed to kiss me?” she asked lightly.

Nick breathed out through clenched teeth, letting the air hiss as it went while he laid back once more. “You have no idea how much I would love to do that, but it’s one more thing that probably isn’t a good idea right now.”

Judy was half-way to taking another sip when Nick said that, then blinked and slowly lowered her cup. “Okay, am I missing something? Because you just went from giving me one of the nicest compliments I’ve ever gotten to acting like you’re ashamed to be seen with me.”

“Sorry, I don’t mean to be that way,” Nick said, still looking at the sky. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t just a little worried about what other mammals would think if they see…us. Together. But I’m more worried about what they’ll do.”

“Wait. Are you worried it will be like what happened with the Junior Ranger Scouts?” she asked and joined him in laying on the grass, watching the way the leaves swayed peacefully in the breeze. “Nothing like that’s going to happen.”

Nick’s ears remained down as he looked her way. At first she expected him to say something, but he kept his mouth shut and simply watched her so she reached out and took his hand again.

“Things have changed since you were a kid. We’ve got the MII now. You’re a cop. And if we do this I can just feel that there’s this space where ‘us in public’ goes, and we can’t let fear keep us from putting something there,” she said, then took a deep breath and tried to smile reassuringly. “Look, I’m willing to try, but that means you need to as well. I promise, nobody’s going to muzzle you just because we’re together. I won’t let them.”

Nick gave her hand a light squeeze back, then released it. “Judy, how many interspecies couples have you seen?”
“A few. They aren’t super common.”

“Right, okay, so what were they?”

Judy closed her eyes and sighed. “Um…well there’s Bucky and Pronk.”

Nick chuckled. “The fighting neighbors? I’d been wondering about them. Are you sure?”

“They say knowing how to fight is an important part of any relationship,” Judy said, feeling her ears heat up. “And yes, I’m very sure. Thin walls and bunny ears.”

Nick blanched. “Ew, forget I asked. Any others?”

“I think there was this pig and a beaver lady.”

“An odd pairing to be sure. Keep going.”

“There was this wolf and a hyena I thought were dating. And a mouse and a squirrel,” she paused, glancing over at Nick. “Is there a point to this?”

He lifted his hands in the air as if holding two invisible balls, weighing them. “Pred-pred. Prey-prey. Prey-prey. Prey-prey.”

“Well, yeah,” she said, then missed a beat. “I mean, I assume prey and predator pairings are just really rare right?” She bit her lip, ears beginning to droop as she tried to remember ever seeing it. “You aren’t trying to tell me it hasn’t happened, are you?”

“Oh it happens, but predator/prey couples try to hide the relationship,” Nick said softly, now looking at her fully once more. “I…uh…found some information about it online. It didn’t exactly give me fuzzy feelings inside.”

Judy pulled out her phone and brought up Zoogle, lightly typing out her search. “So ‘predator + prey’ then?”

“Relationships,” Nick added quickly, sitting upright. “That last word is very important. Don’t forget it!”

She almost set her phone back down, looking at him wide eyed. “Did you find porn?” Nick looked away, ears pinned down. “You did! You accidentally found porn!”

“That’s not what I’d call it, but yes,” Nick said uncomfortably. “Trust me; you don’t want to see it. I wish I didn’t, and hope what I saw was all fake blood.” Judy’s eyes got wider. “Which, judging by what I read elsewhere, is kind of what most mammals think pred-prey relationships are all about so…”

With a swallow, Judy added the word ‘relationship’ and sent the search, then began to scan over the results. Pages for churches, ministers, and political organizations all came back. Unsurprisingly the church and minister pages all decried any notion that predator/prey relationships were acceptable, with conservative political groups pushing to pass new laws that would make any such relationships punishable by a fine or imprisonment so the individuals in question could be given treatment. What did surprise her was just how many liberal political groups kept their distance from the issue, giving only tacit support while they held it at arm’s length.

As she skimmed through it all Nick must have seen her expression drop because he spoke up. “I’ve already read through it. Mostly just empty words.”
“Empty words?” She could hardly believe her ears. “Nick, some of the things these mammals are saying are terrible.”

“Not so eager to jump into it now, are you?” Nick said. When she looked over he had a sad smile. “It’s okay. It was the same for me after I read all that, but then I realized I couldn’t really help the way I feel about you. So I had to tell you. That’s why I said it would have been easier if you just shut me down.” He closed his eyes for a moment. “There’s a forum on the third page of the search results. It’s kind of an anonymous support group thing. That’s where I learned the most: reading everything I could see without actually registering. I figure it’s only fair that you have a chance to do the same.”

“Nick, I—”

“It’s okay Carrots, really.” He gave her another smile. “I probably went through most of whatever you’re feeling right now.”

She spent a few seconds finding her voice again. “How long?”

“However long you need. Just try to remember I’m waiting for your decision.”

“No, I mean,” she struggled to find the right words. “How long have you felt this way?”

When Nick didn’t answer her immediately she sat back up, watching him as he thought. “I honestly don’t know,” he admitted at last. “Looking back, it isn’t like there was a moment where everything changed. It feels like it was always just there and I never noticed.

“What about you? Just your being here tells me you think there’s something. When did you—?”

Judy took a deep breath. “When I heard your message I was mostly just too surprised to think straight, but I didn’t have that immediate ‘no’ reaction so…” She closed her eyes and rubbed her head lightly, then forced herself to look at Nick again. “But then today, after things went bad it was like everything else stopped. And I got your texts, and nothing the lieutenant or the chief could do was going to help. And I asked myself what I’d be willing to do to get you back.”

Nick started to say something, then apparently reconsidered and closed his mouth again. With a light grunt he picked himself up, brushed the grass from his clothes, then grabbed his duffel bag and cup. After, he smiled down at her and reached out to her.

“I’m getting a little hungry. Would you like to go get dinner someplace?”

A little shiver ran through Judy again when she accepted Nick’s hand and he helped her up. Once again he squeezed lightly. She returned the squeeze, then reluctantly let go.

It was already past nine by the time Judy made it back to her apartment at the Grand Pangolin and she found herself wrestling with such a complex tangle of emotions that she wasn’t sure if she could ever sort through it all. They had indeed gotten dinner together, after a brief stop by Nick’s place so he could change out of his rumpled clothing. That had gone by far too quickly, so at her suggestion they went to a movie after—a dumb action flick that merely served as an enjoyable excuse to see explosions. And then they had walked the streets until somehow they’d ended up at her place and Nick took his leave, but not before they’d held hands ever so briefly once again.
Her fingers still tingled where they’d touched and she found herself wondering if they’d just been on a date, as absurd as the notion was. Dinner had somehow been exactly the same as every other time they’d eaten together despite the movie that had come after, yet at the same time it felt altogether different. That ought to mean something, she thought, though what she didn’t know. Obviously all of their previous get-togethers couldn’t have been dates. Could this time count as one, considering that neither of them had said it was? Some part of her clearly felt that way, yet she’d just told her mother that she wasn’t interested in dating for the moment.

Taking a cold shower while she listened to Bucky and Pronk argue over whose turn it was to cook did little to calm her nerves and banish the fluttering sensation in her stomach. After she’d dried off she called her parents, then practically threw herself onto her bed. She stared at the ceiling for several minutes before finally retrieving her phone from the desk so she could visit the forum Nick had mentioned earlier.

Everything about the message board, even the name “Lifeline,” was nondescript. It wasn’t until she opened an information post labeled “Read First” that she found a description of the site’s purpose: *Lifeline is a message board that serves as a community support group for mammals in predator/prey relationships, or that believe they are interested in such a relationship.* The post then went on to explain that such relationships were perfectly healthy and, despite entries in the DSM (whatever that was), not an indication of mental illness. It then ended with a link to the board’s rules and a FAQ.

The rules obsessed over maintaining anonymity while using the site and strictly forbid posting any identifiable personal information including species, place of residence, occupation, name, and even stories that were specific enough that someone who knew the poster might recognize them. Soliciting personal information was a banning offense, as was outing anyone. The board also forbid posts by members seeking relationships (Lifeline is not for hook-ups!), although asking for relationship and dating advice was permitted in the proper areas.

While the rules stressed the importance of anonymity for safety’s sake, the FAQ was largely preoccupied with differentiating predator/prey relationships from various sexual kinks. The sheer number of them was enough to make Judy blush, but once she got past them there was general advice on every topic from how to approach a romantic interest to if/how to come out to one’s family. All the more specific questions listed simply stated that more information could be found by registering for an account and looking in the relevant sub-forums.

Altogether the publicly available posts were both more informative than anything else she’d found during her (admittedly brief) search, but also remained frustratingly vague any time the topics strayed close to the sorts of questions she so desperately wanted answers to. She struggled with the feeling as she read and re-read several of the more informative topics that sought to reassure her that things weren’t as bad as they often seemed. Before she even knew it her eyes were sore from staring at the small screen for so long and her phone’s battery was beginning to run out, so she made a snap decision and registered for an account. The moment she was finished a pop-up notified her there was a 48-hour waiting period to discourage trolls.

That was fine. Her questions weren’t likely to go away before then, so she simply plugged her phone back in and tried to slow down her thoughts enough that she could sleep.

Chapter End Notes

To those that are curious, DSM stands for Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders, and is a book which attempts to classify mental disorders in order to make
recognition and treatment of them easier. It also has an unfortunate history of classifying things as disorders based on social perceptions. For example, homosexuality was listed as a disorder (in one form or another) until 1987. This isn't even a unique example (at one point sexually active individuals may have ended up with a diagnosis of nymphomania, and then later that was dropped but replaced with a different diagnosis for individuals who didn't desire sex), as it seems there is some difficulty in separating out mental conditions with negative impacts on someone's life from what society thinks is "normal."

This isn't an attempt to critique the "evils" perpetuated by the DSM. Trying to classify mental issues for treatment is very difficult. Some people do suffer from serious mental conditions which in many cases are difficult to differentiate between. At its best, the DSM assists doctors in helping these individuals.

Rather this is to give background context, and show how society's perception of what is "normal" is easily mistaken as "healthy" and can lead to attempts to "fix" individuals who are in fact perfectly fine.
If Nick had thought that having his preliminary report ready to hand over first thing in the morning would be enough to calm Lieutenant Uncia down he was sorely mistaken. She’d accepted it without comment and taken the time to read every page while she waited for Officer Fangmeyer to arrive. If anything he’d written down had an impact it didn’t show. Her expression remained stern, and her tone when she spoke stayed frigid.

He probably should have expected that. When he’d been told that Bogo wanted him to go home and stay out of Uncia’s way yesterday it hadn’t been difficult to figure out why. The feline had spent a large fraction of her career pushing back against the Big Family, and then she sees Mr. Big himself calling one of the officers she’s working with out of the blue. There wasn’t any world where that was going to go over well.

When Fangmeyer finally showed up the Lieutenant got to her feet and went to the head of the table. Nick felt her eyes on him the entire time. Fortunately he was very good at acting innocent. Just one more gift from his past life.

“Officer Wilde, since I presume everyone in the room has already heard about what transpired yesterday do you mind if bring attention to our obvious problem?” Lieutenant Uncia asked.

“No, ma’am.”

The feline’s posture was stiffly formal, her hands folded behind her back. “You received a call from Mr. Big yesterday.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“A call that convinced your captors to release you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The lieutenant paused, her tail flicking from side to side. “I’m going to be blunt, Officer Wilde. Do you have any connections to the Big Family?”

Nick resisted the urge to look at Judy and sighed, slowly shaking his head. “Lieutenant Uncia, I assure you that nobody was more surprised about that call than I was.”

“So you have no idea how Mr. Big himself got your personal phone number?”

“I certainly didn’t give it to him,” Nick said, his ears folded back. “And I definitely didn’t call him to ask for his help.”

Lieutenant Uncia’s eyes practically bored into him, then she sighed and relaxed. “Fortunately for you, the records I got from your phone company corroborate that story, Officer Wilde. Chief Bogo suggested that this might be some attempt by Mr. Big to make you feel indebted to him, which I suppose is possible.” Her eyes went to the others present. “Whatever the case, this is a problem. Somewhere there is a leak, and the only ones who knew about what was going on—excluding Chief Bogo—are in this room. I haven’t managed to turn anything up on my own, so tomorrow I’ll be handing this over to IA and let them decide if it is worth looking into.”

“Thanks for the warning, Lieutenant. I’m sure everyone will prepare their butts,” Fangmeyer said.
The attempt at humor was killed by the way Uncia glared at the tiger. “You do that, because if IA finds anything I assure you that you’ll wish that you’d come to me first,” she promised, looking at each officer in turn. “But for now, we need to get ready for Monday. In spite of yesterday’s fiasco, Officer Wilde managed to gain enough trust that we can move forward.”

_Oh no, more meetings. Now I almost wish Flip had shot me_, Nick thought. One look at Judy was enough to change his mind.

Lieutenant Uncia started them off by having everyone give a report on the previous day’s action, something that didn’t leave Judy with much to do since she’d merely tended to the radios the entire time. She paid attention mostly out of a sense of duty and tried to imagine how they could have done things differently. Specifically she thought about how she would have handled the situation had she been there, and wondered if it would have changed the outcome at all.

Just before Nick began to give his report the Chief slipped quietly into the room, his usual glower fixed on his face as he listened to what Nick had to say. Lieutenant Uncia regularly butted in on Nick’s report to ask questions that Nick did his best to answer. She was particularly fixated on Flip, and seemed frustrated by how little the fox could tell her. Or was willing to tell her perhaps. Given Flip’s connections to his past, Nick was probably wary of revealing too much least he renew the lieutenant’s suspicions.

Hearing everything Nick had gone through was more difficult than Judy had thought it would be. She couldn’t imagine being hooded. Or having a gun trained on her for so long. The whole time Nick avoided looking at anyone and spoke in a clipped tone, his tail occasionally lashing the air behind him until he finished.

Before Lieutenant Uncia could move the meeting along the Chief cleared his throat. “Do you mind if I borrow Officer Hopps for a bit? Her new uniforms just came in and I suspect she would appreciate the opportunity to change.”

“I suppose we’ve made enough progress to take a half hour break,” the lieutenant said.

“Very well, Hopps? They’re currently in my office, so if you would accompany me.”

For a moment Judy was struck speechless, and looked to Nick briefly before she hurried to follow the chief. True Bogo had said he was going to lean on the quartermaster to get her replacements before the end of the week, but she’d been a bit skeptical it would happen. At most she’d expected them to arrive Friday—maybe even Saturday.

Sure enough, when she entered Bogo’s office her eyes immediately fell on two boxes. With the chief’s permission she quickly opened both and checked the sizes by holding the clothing against herself. The first box held a complete dress uniform, tie and socks included. In the second, a couple of duty uniforms and new vest. She could hardly believe it.

“Thank you, sir. I’ll put this in my locker and get changed right away,” she said, already gathering the boxes up.

“Before you do that, perhaps we can talk about yesterday’s events.”

She stopped, then slowly set the boxes down once more. “Sir, I know you’re probably very upset
“On the contrary Hopps, I wished to commend you for noticing that you needed a break during a stressful situation and stepped aside to collect yourself,” Bogo said. He didn’t sound particularly pleased however, and his eyes were hard as he looked down at her. “I know none of the officers under my command would ever take an action on duty that they would be ashamed of later.”

Judy held her tongue. That was true, in a manner of speaking. She certainly wasn’t ashamed of having called Mr. Big, not when the alternative meant Nick would be dead. She desperately wanted to tell that to the Chief, to explain herself and apologize for compromising herself and possibly making his precinct look bad in the process, but the way he seemed to look right into her made her realize he didn’t expect an answer. He already knew.

Without a word Bogo went to sit at his desk, then turned to face the wall as he leaned back in the chair. “I’ve had to attend the funerals of nine officers since I joined the force, Hopps. Four since I became chief,” he said, speaking more quietly now. “That doesn’t count the ones I’ve seen forced into retirement after being injured in the line of duty. It never gets easier. Every loss is keenly felt, and I dare say that after each one I watched Zootopia become a little more evil.” He took a deep breath and held it, then looked at her. “Do you know what it takes to be a good chief?”

“At least fifteen years of experience, sir. Twenty is preferred,” Judy said, standing up a little straighter as she remembered the relevant regulations. “A clean background check performed by IA, exemplary service record, and to have demonstrated command capability by—”

“Those are the requirements, Hopps. Anyone who stays on the force long enough will meet them, but that doesn’t mean they will be a good chief.” Bogo lightly tapped on his desk, then repeated his question. “What does it take to be a good chief?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

Bogo’s ears flicked back. “A lot of mammals think the best chiefs are the smartest officers. Or the ones with the best arrest record. Or the ones with the most political connections. All of those things help Hopps, sometimes a lot, but they aren’t what determine how good or bad a chief will be. Would you like to guess why my predecessor selected me as his replacement?”

Judy considered the question for a moment before answering. “Because you impressed him, sir? You’re very…” She found herself reaching for the correct word. “…exacting. You want the job done, and you want it done right, sir.”

“I am hardly the only one to fit that standard, Officer Hopps. You could say the same things about Lieutenant Uncia, but while I have no doubt she could fill my role very effectively that would not make her a good chief,” Bogo said as he leaned over his desk and looked right into her eyes. “Uncia’s problem is that she has made it her mission to bring down the Big Syndicate, and that is always her top priority. Admirable. Necessary even. But it holds her back, and I believe that on some level she is aware of that because she has turned down numerous offers to transfer into work that will propel her career upward so that she can stay where she is, fighting against Mr. Big.

“When my predecessor handed the precinct over he took me aside and told me why, out of all the candidates, he had recommended me. He said it was because, above everything else, I loved being a cop.”

“That’s it?” she asked.

“That’s it.” The chief leaned back in his seat once more. “I didn’t understand at first, not until I lost
my first officer. You see, Hopps, a good chief is a good cop. Sounds simple, but it’s actually a trap. Because a large part of being a good cop is loving the job, and that means loving the force. Loving your fellow officers. They’re your brothers and sisters in blue, and you learn to respect and trust them.

“A good chief needs that, Hopps, because a good chief needs to always remember what those under their command deal with every day. You need to be aware of the difficult choices they are faced with and take that into account even when you question their judgment.”

Judy swallowed. “Sir, I—”

“I wasn’t finished,” the chief said, speaking slowly as if each word was a weight he needed to lift. “A good chief is a good cop, Hopps, and a good cop loves his fellow officers. But then they promote you, and give you a nice mahogany desk, and suddenly it’s your job to sit behind that desk while you send everyone you care about into harm’s way. Every day you wonder if this is the day something goes wrong. The day when you’ll have to write another eulogy. And no matter how long you do the job you can feel in your bones that that day will come again and again and again, and when it finally arrives you cannot rush out to help despite how much you wish you could.”

As he spoke Bogo suddenly looked unbelievably wary. For just an instant she could see the toll the years had taken on him. She’d never asked how long Bogo had been in command of ZPD Precinct One; she hadn’t even looked it up. The way the other officers talked about him made it sound like he’d always been there. A permanent fixture that the rest of the force had been built around. On some level she’d known he was just another mammal like anyone else, but to see it clearly in front of her was unnerving and Judy didn’t know if she should say anything or try to comfort him or simply remain silent.

The chief took the decision out of her hands. “I’m sure you know by now that Lieutenant Uncia had decided to bring IA in to address yesterday’s unexpected events.”

“She told us that they will be notified tomorrow.”

“Indeed,” Bogo said, suddenly seeming like his normal self once more. “There’s a chance IA will decide there isn’t enough to go on, but normally they take potential cases of officer corruption very seriously and move quickly. Of course, even if they do investigate they might overlook something.”

Judy shifted uneasily in place. “Sir…why are you telling me this?”

“Because this precinct hasn’t found itself under IA’s gaze for about six years now, so you haven’t had the pleasure of suffering through the process before.” Bogo looked her in the eye. “First they’ll conduct a preliminary investigation to see if anything shakes loose. Unless they find something there’s a good chance they’ll end things there.”

“And if they do find something?” she asked nervously.

“Then they zero in on it until they’re satisfied,” the chief said, “at which point they determine how serious the infraction was and impose disciplinary action and criminal charges as they see fit. Care to hazard a guess on what they are likely to do if they determine someone was involved with Mr. Big?”

“Dismissal?”

“And likely a jail sentence,” Bogo added. Judy felt her heart miss a beat. “At least under normal circumstances. This time there is a major mitigating factor. They will take that into account.”

Because I probably saved Nick’s life, she thought as she let out a sigh of relief.
The chief gave her a critical look, but didn’t comment on her lost composure. “In instances like this there is a good chance IA will just take remedial actions, assuming an officer has otherwise kept her nose clean. That is still a hefty ding on a service record, enough to stall a career for three or four years, and afterward the officer can expect to be on IA’s radar. That might be in the officer’s best interests.”

Judy hesitated, then took a tiny step closer. “Sir? Why is that?”

“Because the mob has learned that trying to exert pressure on those IA is already watching rarely ends well for them,” Bogo said simply.

Her mind began to race along those lines and she took a deep breath. “So should…um…would it be in the officer’s best interests to cooperate fully in the investigation?”

This time the chief didn’t answer immediately. He looked down at his hands for several seconds.

“That would be for her to decide,” he said at last, then looked up. “Though if she doesn’t I would hope that after the IA investigation is concluded that she would have the good sense to tell her superior officer if Mr. Big tries to call in the debt.” His eyes went to the clock on the wall. “But we have already talked for too long, Hopps. Get changed and return to your assignment. I expect Lieutenant Uncia is impatiently awaiting your return.”

When Judy had gotten back Nick was overjoyed to see her back in uniform, and privately noted that proper ZPD blue really was her color. Shortly after, Lieutenant Uncia sent them both to the records room to search for any information the ZPD had on Flip despite his insistence that it was a waste of time. It was a chance to be alone with Judy however, so he didn’t fight it too hard, and once they were alone she told him about everything the chief had said. Then, to his bewilderment, she told him about her intention to come clean to IA.

“Are you insane?” he demanded. “There is no way I’m letting you do that, Fluff.”

“Keep your voice down!” she snapped back. “The chief said it might be the best outcome I could hope for.”

“Might be,” Nick stressed. “It will also limit how high up the ladder you can climb, Carrots. You know the higher ranks require IA to give you a clean review. That’s never happening if they give you a black mark for having mob connections now.”

She chuckled dismissively. “Nick, I’m flattered you think that, but most mammals don’t make it that far. There isn’t enough room at the top for everyone.”

“No, but if anyone’s headed there it’s you.”

“I’m still a wet behind the ears rookie,” Judy said. “I doubt anyone thinks—”

“Bogo does. Why else do you think he told you all that stuff about what makes a good chief?” Nick said. He gestured at her with both hands. “You love being a cop more than anyone here, Carrots. The chief probably expects that you’ll have your own precinct someday. Maybe even this one.”

At last he saw realization light up in her eyes. “But he told me I should cooperate.”
“You completely misunderstood him. He wanted to reassure you that even if IA discovers what you did then it won’t be the end of the world,” he explained, swishing his tail about behind him. “But there is a chance they won’t find anything. That’s why he told you he’ll be there to help you when Mr. Big finally calls on you to repay your debt. What the chief wants is for you to keep your head down, your mouth shut, and to hope that nothing turns up.”

“Do you really think the chief will be able to do anything to help with Mr. Big?” she asked.

That was the question, wasn’t it? On the one hand, who knew how many resources the chief could call on if needed. On the other, doing so too obviously was sure to draw a lot of attention and cause some questions to be asked. Then there was the little problem that criminals didn’t necessarily have to play by the rules while the police did.

“I don’t know,” Nick admitted, his ears tilted back. “But I can. I’ve dealt with the Bigs before. One phone call and I’m sure they’ll let me work out something with them that will keep you in the clear.”

Judy’s expression darkened. “Nicholas Piberius Wilde, you will do no such thing.”

The fur along Nick’s spine stood on end and he froze in place. Full name; she’s serious. God why does that trick work?

“Judy, please. This isn’t something—”

She cut him off again. “This was my doing, it is my responsibility, and I will not allow anyone to take it on themselves. Especially not someone I care about.”

He held his breath a second before letting it out. “If that is what you really want.”

“And I better not find out you tried to go behind my back on this either,” she added sternly.

Nick folded his ears back and held up his hands. “Carrots, I promise the thought never entered my mind.” Drat. She’s getting way too good at that. “But Judy, you shouldn’t have to worry about this. You saved my life. What kind of sick world punishes a mammal for that?”

“So you expect me to lie to IA about it? Nick, I can’t do that just because one day I might have what it takes to be chief.”

“Of course not, but it doesn’t mean you have to crucify yourself either,” Nick said. “If they ask the right questions then you tell them what they want to know. Just don’t be in a rush to set your future on fire, okay? Here, let me see your phone.”

Judy blinked, then handed it over automatically as he’d hoped she would. “Why?”

He was already clearing her call history as he answered. “Just covering your tracks a little,” he told her, then went into her contacts list and found Fru Fru’s number. A couple of seconds later that was deleted as well.

“You’re what?” she hissed, then grabbed her phone back. “Nick, that’s destroying evidence!”

“No, it is keeping my partner from getting punished for doing the right thing,” he said firmly. “Listen to me, Judy. You’re right, maybe you won’t make chief. I don’t know what the future holds, but I know you deserve the opportunity. You’ve saved the city once, and my life twice. You’re owed at least that much.”

“You’re forgetting the little matter of my owing a favor to the mob.”
“So? You don’t know if Mr. Big is ever going to call in that debt. He’s not exactly young any more, Carrots, and once he’s out Fru Fru will be taking over. I seriously doubt she’s going to do anything to put the godmother of her daughter in a compromising situation,” he said. Finally he saw Judy beginning to reconsider. “Even if she does you’ll have the chief there to help. And me. Between the three of us I’m sure we can work something out.”

Judy looked down at her phone thoughtfully. “It doesn’t feel right to obstruct an investigation.”

“I don’t like it either,” he assured her, then tweaked her ear so she’d look up at him. “Look, if you decide to come clean I obviously can’t stop you. I just don’t want you to do it without thinking about what you’ll be giving up. We can talk about it more this weekend if you like, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” she sighed, then put her phone away. “Come on, we need to finish going through these files.”
Friday had been a disjointed series of events that had started almost immediately once Judy had gotten to work. The first thing Lieutenant Uncia did that morning was hand out several forms and command everyone to fill them out. Page one had been simple background information, mostly involving place of residence, personal and professional references, and similar details. Page two was a questionnaire that focused on involvement in illegal activities. Every page after that was blank aside for simple instructions at the very top asking for a personal account of the day Nick had been abducted.

It was, Judy realized, the very first steps of the coming IA investigation. Apparently Bogo hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d said they would move quickly. All at once she found herself facing a monumental decision, one she had been hoping to have more time to consider. Did she come clean, or remain silent and try to survive the investigation?

Every time she looked at Nick his eyes were on her. She knew which choice he thought was best, and a lot of what he said made sense. Her deal with Mr. Big hadn’t been about personal gain. She hadn’t taken a bribe. She’d saved a life, and so what if it was the life of someone she cared about? Even if she cared about him deeply. Any system that could fault her for doing that didn’t seem fair.

At the same time she understood why IA would want to take extra care to ensure that someone like Mr. Big didn’t hold influence with any of the ZPD’s officers. It wasn’t like the ones conducting the investigation made the rules, they were simply doing their jobs—just like her—and anything she put down would be considered sworn testimony. Telling lies simply didn’t sit right.

So she tried to pick the middle ground. For her personal account she simply told the truth, but left out specific details that might get her in trouble. She admitted to calling a friend, but left out that the friend in question was Mr. Big’s daughter and skipped over her talk with the crime boss entirely. All the times she’d covered for Nick in the past made it easy, though she was under no illusions about what she was doing. Simple omission was still profoundly dishonest even if she wasn’t actually telling outright falsehoods.

From that they went right into planning for Monday’s operation. And an argument between Nick and Lieutenant Uncia. Nick was insistent that they take the opportunity to arrest Flip on Monday, arguing that the other fox was too dangerous to leave on the loose. The lieutenant dismissed his proposal because, in her words, Nick was too emotionally involved to give an unbiased judgment. She was convinced that Flip was a middleman who could lead them to more dangerous criminals, and as such it was too soon to make any arrests.

So they would be out fishing for information again, although this time Judy was going to find herself in the field. Fangmeyer and Snarlof would be kept in reserve to act as heavy backup if necessary, which left it up to her to handle observation. Besides, she was small enough to get in unnoticed and already knew the different vantage points the warehouse’s skylights provided.

Just half an hour before the day ended Chief Bogo posted assignments for Founder’s Day. She’d been so exhausted that she’d considered just going home, but all the other officers seemed eager to find what they’d been given so she’d taken a look as well. That was when she’d learned that roughly half of Precinct One was apparently slated to take part in a parade, while everyone else was expected to maintain order. She and Nick, as the most junior officers on the roster, had been tasked with ensuring that no revelers who happened to overindulge in drink crossed the boundary into Little Rodentia.
Come Saturday the first thing she did after waking up was go for her usual weekend jog. Setting out so early, with just the first hints of light beginning to peek above the horizon, filled her with no small amount of apprehension. The break-in still weighed heavily on her mind and sometimes she peeked out the window just to make sure nobody was trying to watch her, though more often she just kept the curtains closed now. Nick’s warning that she might want to move didn’t do much to calm her worries, but there no way she could afford to lose her deposit. While she was out she crossed paths with two foxes, and both times she’d done a double take just to be sure it wasn’t Flip.

When she’d gotten back she immediately took a quick shower, then checked her email and saw that her account on Lifeline had been approved. A new sort of nervousness took hold of her as she went to finalize the registration, afraid of what she would find despite her desire to explore the entire forum. Immediately after her account activated she received several messages. The first was a simple welcome and a reminder that she should read and abide by the board’s rules. The second was a reminder that personal information was forbidden on the board, and provided advice on how to avoid common mistakes. Finally, there was a message informing her that her account was currently on a probationary period, and as such some of the boards would still remain hidden from her.

She didn’t know where to start. What had been a couple of sub-forums viewable to the public was transformed into over thirty, covering topics from dating to current events to general advice. With so many choices she ended up just drifting from board to board, simply reading any thread with a tagline that caught her interest.

Compared to everything she’d seen thus far it was an incredible deluge of information, and was at once reassuring and terribly frightening. Being unwillingly outed to family, friends, or at work was the collective nightmare, and there were numerous threads begging for advice after the poster had been unexpectedly confronted about their sexuality. About half those stories ended with the poster being disowned or otherwise driven away, and most of those with “good” endings amounted to little more than uncomfortable acceptance. One poster told the horror story of having been forcibly enrolled in religious conversion therapy.

Perhaps unsurprisingly the community was desperate for role models it could look up to, and although it seemed to be frightfully close to outing the off-topic forum frequently featured posts that speculated about different public figures. Gazelle came up numerous times, largely because of the provocative shows she gave with her tiger backup dancers. Most of the board seemed to believe she was, at most, a potential ally—after all she was a celebrity and causing controversy was just another way to maintain popularity. Still, there were a few die-hards who drew hope from the idea that she was “one of us” and used any fresh gossip as an excuse to resurrect the topic.

Half an hour passed before she stumbled upon a topic that made her stop. Children. Obviously predator/prey couples (like most interspecies pairings) were incapable of having children of their own, but there were a few options open to those who wanted to raise a family just the same. Adoption would have seemed like the easiest, but to Judy’s surprise very few couples had any success with that route. The problem, it seemed, was that adoption required the adoption agency’s approval. In many instances court approval was necessary as well. Those involved in the approval process apparently tended to be fairly conservative and frowned upon interspecies couples adopting for fear that it would cause a child to grow up confused. Predator/Prey couples had it worse still, and the few successes Judy found generally involved having only one individual sign up for the adoption as a single parent—a route that took additional steps and ultimately meant the other partner didn’t have parental rights which could obviously cause headaches down the line. It also put the arrangement at risk if the adoption board ever decided to review the case.

Artificial fertilization with a sperm donor had more successes, but similar problems. A sympathetic fertility clinic was almost a requirement, and sometimes a bad experience with the wrong physician
caused couples to find themselves blacklisted from many clinics at once. Beyond that, a few posters admitted to having regrets that the child was only related to one parent. A few even reported that their child had trouble with being picked on at school, and in many cases the faculty was appallingly unhelpful in addressing the problem.

There was one more possibility that was suggested, though the wording was so circumspect that at first Judy didn’t realize the posters were suggesting what amounted to a series of bar crawls ending in one night stands. With so many obvious risks to that solution she could barely believe anyone would actually take things that far, but apparently it was considered the method of last resort by those that had explored other possibilities without success. She had trouble imagining just how desperate someone must be for children to take things so far.

But at the same time she found herself lingering on the topics regarding children, revisiting them over and over. Ever since she’d started to dream about being a cop she’d been steadfast in her insistence that she wouldn’t make compromises when it came to her future. She’d wanted to be a cop, and a real one at that. Not a mall guard. Not a member of some private security force. A real cop, serving in the ZPD. It had been her unwillingness to compromise that gave her the drive to work and struggle and fight until she finally reached her goal.

Now she was coming to realize there were other parts to the dream she hadn’t ever thought about. They’d just been assumed. Of course she was going to get married someday, and even if she didn’t want to have too many kits she certainly wanted to be a mother. It was just another phase of her life she taken as pre-ordained, but now…

For some reason she found she could close her eyes and see herself living a happy life with Nick, but doing so made any hint of kits fade into mist—no longer the certainty she’d always believed they would be. Or she could look at her future babies until they came into focus once more, but Nick suddenly vanished into nothingness to be replaced by some bunny she didn’t know and certainly didn’t love. Either path she took meant giving something up, and the realization tore at her. She continued coming back to the question time and time and time again, gradually working herself into a knot of roiling emotions as she tried to find some third way that just didn’t seem to exist.

Then her phone rang, nearly scaring her out of her skin. She almost dropped it as she fumbled to answer, her train of thought scattered as she recognized the precinct’s number. There was only one reason for them to call during one of her days off: they wanted her to come in.

Nick wasn’t terribly surprised to see Judy was already at the station when he arrived. If they had called him in it only made sense that she would be as well, but because he preferred to sleep in when possible he’d needed a good half-hour to make himself presentable. There was no doubt in his mind that Judy had risen early, so of course she would beat him.

What did surprise him was that he also saw Snarlof. And Fangmeyer. And Lieutenant Uncia. And the Chief. And a half-dozen mammals in suits wearing sunglasses that he’d never laid eyes on before. One look at the strangers told him they were there in some official capacity, the way they carried themselves was full of self-important purpose. A sour taste filled his mouth.

*I’m just going to guess that they’re IA,* he thought as he took out his own sunglasses and put them on. *Guess they really do move quickly.*
He didn’t have very long to take stock of the situation before everyone was informed that they were officially under investigation, and that IA would be interviewing them each individually. They were then immediately broken up, and Nick found himself sitting in one of the station’s interview rooms with a rather stern looking buck whitetail deer. Without any explanation the deer sat and began to flip through a file, reviewing the contents silently. Although Nick couldn’t read the pages from where he sat he recognized a few of the papers as the forms he’d filled out yesterday.

“Do you actually need me here, or did you simply want me watch you catch up on your school work?” Nick asked.

The deer paused for a moment, then took out a pen and wrote something before he spoke. “Officer Wilde, I recommend that you take this investigation seriously.”

“Oh I am, believe me,” Nick said, leaning back in his chair. “I take anything that drags me out of bed on my day off seriously. Especially when it then starts to waste my time.”

A pause, a sigh, and the deer took his sunglasses off. In his eye there was a disdain Nick hadn’t seen for quite some time, the type that most mammals reserved for when they were confronted with something particularly distasteful like rotted food or raw sewage. Or, in this case, a fox.

“Very well. I am Agent Forester. Officer Wilde, you are officially under investigation for suspected corruption and criminal connections, specifically to Mr. Big and his syndicate. As this is the criminal phase of the investigation you are entitled to representation by a lawyer, provided by yourself or the Police Officer’s Union. Any statements made by you, verbal or written, are hereby considered evidence and sworn testimony that can be brought against you during trial. Moving forward, any and all actions you have taken while in uniform, or otherwise acting in official capacity, are open for review. Do you understand?”

The buck fired off the statement so rapidly that Nick wondered just how many times he’d said similar things in the past. “I do.”

“Would you like to make a statement before I begin?” Agent Forester asked.

“No, I just want to get this over with so I can head back home.”

Agent Forester’s eyes closed and he tilted his head, swinging his antlers first to one side and then the other as he popped his neck. “I’m going to be up front with you, Officer Wilde. I’ve made you the focus of this investigation—— Big surprise. —so I would recommend that you treat myself and my fellow agents with all of the respect we are due.”

Nick paused to consider the deer, noting the agent’s stiff posture and condescending expression. Three points on each antler. Cleanly pressed outfit without a trace of dirt. Freshly laundered, judging by the scent. Wedding band on the left hand. Family man. Career man. Just enough experience to be confident he’d seen it all. Even his pen was one of those expensive, designer things. Arrogant.

“What makes you think it was me?”

“Because you are the only one I can see who had anything to gain from Mr. Big’s intervention, Officer Wilde,” the deer said as he began to flip through the file again. “To say nothing of the many questions that I have regarding your past. You put down on your ZPD application that you were self-employed? Yet according to your tax records you had no earnings for…fourteen years. That can’t be true however, as the residence you’ve just moved out of was extraordinarily nice for someone with no income.”
How many times was that going to come back to bite him? At least this time he was prepared.

“All the forms are accurate. Technically. I put down self-employed because I did not have a job at the time,” Nick said. He leaned back in his chair and put his feet up. “I tried to do odd jobs, however that didn’t really pan out.”

The deer took a few more notes. “Then how did you pay your rent, Officer Wilde?”

“Pan handling,” Nick lied, yawning a little bit. “With a good corner and the right act you can make a surprising amount in a day.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“Not particularly, but it’s the truth. I partnered up with a few smaller mammals, the cute ones everyone mistakes for children, and split what we made at the end of the day,” he said with shrug. “Everything we got was a gift, which is tax free under a certain amount, and since no one mammal was handing us fat stacks of cash…”

“I think I get the picture,” Agent Forester said. “You wouldn’t have kept any records of this, would you?”

Nick rolled his head back to look at the ceiling. “Of my begging? Was I expected to hand out receipts?”

“Never mind, that was a stupid question—”

“Yes, it was. Are we done?”

“No.” Agent Forester gave him a stern look. “Frankly I am a little confused about why someone like you would suddenly decide to become a cop, Officer Wilde.”

“I thought it was time I tried doing something productive with my life. Seems like the sort of thing the city would want to encourage.”

“Actually I was talking about your family. Specifically your father,” the deer said, turning to a new page in the file. “According to city records, your father was incarcerated for drug possession with intent to distribute.”

Nick clamped his jaw shut and took his feet off the table. “He was innocent.”

“Really? Because according to the police report a fox was seen selling drugs in your neighborhood, and at the time of arrest your father had over a kilo of—”

“That wasn’t his,” he said, ears folded back.

“Oh?” Agent Forester clasped his hands together. “I suppose he just found it on the sidewalk then. And that his confession was just a silly misunderstanding on our part.”

“My father worked at the western quarry and was away for weeks at a time because he couldn’t afford to take the train home every day. How the heck was he supposed to sell drugs when he wasn’t even in the area?” Nick said, looking right into the deer’s eyes. “But the prosecution didn’t care about that, because possession over a certain amount automatically becomes intent to distribute. His public defender said a jury would only see a fox accused of selling drugs to kids—prey kids—and convinced him to take a plea deal since it was his first offense.”
Agent Forester was writing again. “I see. Well, there are no other arrests on his record, however you didn’t provide your father’s contact information. Are you currently estranged?”

“No,” Nick said, crossing his arms. “Are we done?”

“Officer Wilde, I will inform you the moment we are finished,” Agent Forester said. “I have been more than patient with you, and your attitude is beginning to make me suspect you have something to hide. This investigation requires I look into all of your past connections, including your ex-con father. Now, you will give me a way to contact him, or I will have you arrested for obstruction.”

*Moron*, Nick thought as he pulled out his phone. Without a word he dialed his mother’s number, then slid the phone across the table to the deer. “Knock yourself out. Please.”

The agent stopped the phone’s slide with the file and gave him a curious look before he held it up to his ear. “Hello? Oh, no Mrs. Wilde, this is not your son. My name is Agent Forester,” the deer said. “I’m with Internal Affairs and was wondering if you could assist me. I’ve been looking for a way to contact Officer Wilde’s father and—excuse me? … No, ma’am I— … Forgive me, Mrs. Wilde, I was unaware. I’m very sorry. You have my sincerest condolences.”

Nick couldn’t help snorting at that last bit, his eyes rolling when the deer finally ended the call. “You want to know why I suddenly decided to join the force? Fine. Because a bunch of halfwits like you arrested an innocent man, threw him in jail, and then couldn’t be bothered to make sure he made it out alive. Because he looked like me. I wanted to make sure that never, ever happens again.”

“You could have simply told me your father is deceased,” Agent Forester sniffed.

“Please, like it isn’t written down in that file of yours somewhere,” Nick said. “Besides, I wanted your investigation record to show how eager you were to assume the worst of me right from the start.”

“I do not appreciate the implications you are making, Officer Wilde.”

“And I don’t appreciate being interrogated by a bigot that’s glued a couple of tree branches to his head,” Nick shot back. “Are we done?”

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At the beginning of the interview Judy had been nervous the IA agent assigned to her would aggressively grill her, but Agent Gat (a soft spoken ocelot) remained quite friendly as he walked her through the whole process. They started with a review of her service record, addressing several complaints that had been entered against her during the days she was assigned parking duty in the process, before they reached the matter at hand.

And to her surprise things had gone smoothly. Agent Gat seemed mostly interested in verifying that the information she’d written was correct, so they stepped through the paperwork one item at a time while she verified her answers were accurate or occasionally provided additional information where requested. She was just beginning to believe that she was home free when the one thing she’d been hoping wouldn’t come up was asked.

“One last question, Officer Hopps,” Agent Gat said, looking over the rims of his sunglasses. “In your written statement you mentioned that you stepped out for ‘a few minutes’ to collect yourself after Officer Wilde was abducted. During this time you called a friend?”
“Yes, sir. That is correct,” she said, fighting to keep her nose from twitching. “I wanted to talk to someone.”

“I trust that you didn’t divulge any details of your investigation over the course of this call?”

This time she had to think about her answer carefully. “I don’t think so, sir. I did mention that my partner was in trouble, but that’s all.”

Agent Gat wrote a few words, then smoothed down the top page of his notebook. “I also noticed that you did not provide your friend’s name. Would you be willing to do so now?”

Judy swallowed hard, her ears folding back a little. “Oh, sorry. It’s…um…everyone just calls her Fru Fru, though that might just be a pet name her father gave her.”

She braced herself, waiting for the bomb to drop, but the ocelot simply hummed neutrally and went back to writing. As time crawled on without anything resembling an accusation she began to relax. Maybe Fru Fru was a common enough name that she shouldn’t have been worried in the first place.

“And how long did you talk to this Fru Fru?” Agent Gat asked as he continued to write.

“Not long. Two or three minutes.”

“I’m going to need her phone number for the investigation,” Agent Gat said absently.

Her mind raced, trying to remember her friend’s number, but it had been so long since she’d entered it into her phone. After a couple moments the ocelot looked up at her, clearly awaiting an answer. “I can’t remember it off the top of my head.”

“That is perfectly fine, Officer Hopps. I don’t mind waiting while you look it up on your phone.”

She took a deep breath, wondering how she was going to explain this in a way that wouldn’t land Nick in hot water. “To tell the truth, sir, the problem is that it isn’t on my phone any longer,” she said, smiling nervously. “I’ve been waiting for the next time she calls me so I can save it in my contacts again.”

Agent Gat’s head cocked to one side. “Phone problems?”

“Yes, I’m very sorry,” she said, seizing on the excuse. “Although I’m sure if you check the call records you can get her number from there.”

The ocelot smiled. “And with that we are done. You are now free to go, Officer Hopps. Thank you for your cooperation.”
Visitors

Nick forced himself to stay still as he sipped the coffee he’d gotten from the break room, his tail twitching from side to side as he watched the IA agents and worried about Judy. He’d expected to have the weekend to coach her on the finer points of talking without saying anything of substance, but the surprise interrogations that morning had neatly ended his plans.

At first he told himself that the wait was to be expected since he’d managed to make the arrogant deer so uncomfortable that they’d rushed through the rest of his interview, but then Snarlof and Fangmeyer came out as well and there was still no sign of Judy. She was probably in there helpfully answering every question she was asked because that was what a good, law abiding mammal would do.

When she eventually did emerge Nick watched her stop at the door to shake the ocelot IA agent’s hand. He had to finish his coffee in one go to keep himself from scowling at the feline, a light warning going off in his head as the ocelot made his way to the other agents and they began to talk. By the time Judy found her way over to him he’d regained his composure.

“How’d it go?”

Judy rocked up onto her toes briefly. “Good, I think. I was worried things would be really tense, but Agent Gat was very friendly. We just ended up going over everything while I cleared up a few details that were confusing him.”

 That son of… He asked her to be helpful.

“How about you? Why are they still keeping you around if you’re done?” Judy asked, pulling his thoughts back to the moment.

“It went as well as can be expected, I guess. They decided to hold us all until everyone was finished just in case anything needed to be cleared up,” he said, looking down into his empty cup. After a moment he raised his voice, calling out to the deer that had interviewed him. “Hey Branches! We free to go now?”

Agent Forester turned stiffly to glare at him. “Officer Wilde, I have told you repeatedly not to call me that. I suggest you cease immediately before I—”

“Before you what? Demand to speak to my dad again?” Nick crushed the empty cup and tossed it into the rubbish bin. “Go right ahead. I’ll call up my mom and tell her to set the phone next to his urn.”

As he hoped, the outburst drew the eyes of nearly every mammal in the room to them. Rather than answer, Agent Forester pinned his ears back and turned quickly away. Nick continued to stare after the deer for a moment longer, until he felt Judy tugging on his sleeve.

“You shouldn’t antagonize him like that,” she cautioned.

She was right. With some effort he restrained himself from making any further comments until they were finally let go. The moment they received word that they were free to go he practically stormed out of the precinct, eager to get away before any more of his day was wasted. Judy was, of course, hot on his heels and caught up long before he even made to the street.

“He didn’t really ask to talk to your father, did he?”
“He was upset I didn’t provide my father’s contact information,” Nick said, slowing to a more normal pace. “Got so excited over my father’s arrest record he couldn’t be bothered to read anything else.”

Judy was silent for a few steps. “Your father was arrested?”

“Carrots, can we please not?”

His question caused Judy to briefly stop before she quickly hopped back into place at his side. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. I was just surprised because you never said anything about it before.”

Nick’s ears tilted back as he looked down at her. “I know. It just isn’t something I like to discuss.”

“No, I understand,” She smiled up at him. “Though if you ever need an ear I’ve got plenty to spare.”

“Maybe when I’m in a better mood. Right now I just want to get out of this uniform so I can enjoy what is left of my weekend.”

“Oh? You had plans?”

Nick shook his head. “Not at first, but after that…I should probably go see my mother so I can apologize.” Without a word Judy hopped in front of him, blocking his path. “What?”

“Mind if I come with? I haven’t seen your mom since your graduation,” she said, then tilted her ears back a little. “Maybe after we can go out?”

Something tickled its way up Nick’s spine. “Go out?”

All at once the inside of Judy’s ears turned bright pink as her eyes strayed away from him. “Someplace quiet? I finally got to do a lot of reading this morning, and now I think I have a better idea of everything you were worried about.” Her arms hugged around her chest. “And I think I would really like to talk about it.”

After a brief separation to head home and get changed back into civilian clothes, Judy met back up with Nick at the ZTA’s central station before they boarded a train headed for the southern edge of Savannah Central. She didn’t expect the trip to take very long considering how little distance needed to be covered, but as it turned out they needed to go into the downtown area before switching lines to double back in the direction they actually wanted to go.

Half an hour later they arrived in a section of the district that Judy wasn’t familiar with. The buildings were packed together so tightly that their walls almost touched. That wasn’t anything new, the Grand Pangolin wasn’t much better off in that regard, but there weren’t any children living near her. Here she saw kids out playing on the sidewalks or walking together in small groups. Where they could be headed she couldn’t even imagine. The city was clearly doing its best to keep the area in good order, but judging by the barred windows and traces of graffiti it was a losing battle.

She found herself trying to imagine growing up in such an area. There wasn’t a trace of foliage unless she counted the trees that were planted here and there, but they looked so small and sickly. Parks were a common sight elsewhere in the city, but she doubted there was one anywhere near this
neighborhood. If there was, surely the kids would be spending their time playing there instead of on
the hard concrete.

Nick led the way into a complex that seemed indistinguishable from the others from outside, then up
several flights of stairs before he knocked lightly on a door. “Mom? We’re here.”

Through the door Judy could hear the sounds of someone shuffling about and panting, followed by
an exhausted voice. “Come on in, Nicholas, the door is open. I just need to finish cleaning the place
up.”

Nick looked down at her, his ears folded back, then quickly entered and went to his mother. Judy
followed in behind, making sure the door closed properly as she watched her partner try to herd the
older vixen over to the couch.

“Mom, sit down. The place looks great. You shouldn’t work yourself so hard.”

“Nonsense,” his mom said, trying to wave him off. “I’ve barely cleaned all week. I can’t let company
see this mess.”

Judy smiled as she moved her way through the space, admiring how well the aged furniture had been
cared for. “Mrs. Wilde, please don’t bother yourself on my account. Your home is perfectly lovely.”

“See?” Nick said, finally able to make progress. “Trust me, if there was even a speck of dust Judy
here would notice in an instant.”

Mrs. Wilde gave a little huff, but let Nick help her into her seat. Once seated, she took a moment to
rearrange her dress before turning her attention to Judy with a smile. “Forgive my boy. He seems
convinced that I’m going to drop dead at any moment and doesn’t seem to understand a little work
never hurt anybody,” she said, lightly chuckling. “It’s good to see you again, Officer Hopps. I’ve
been hoping I’d have another chance to sometime.”

Judy glanced at Nick. “Please, Mrs. Wilde, you don’t have to call me that when I’m not on duty.”

Mrs. Wilde folded her hands in her lap. “Judy then. Thank you so much for keeping an eye on my
boy. I know that keeping him out of trouble is a full-time job.”

Nick rolled his eyes and gave an exaggerated shrug before he walked over to the window and
peeked outside. The sight made Judy tilt her head slightly, watching curiously as her partner looked
down on the street for a moment, then backed away and began to drift through the room.

“Ah, it’s no trouble at all. Nick is a wonderful partner,” she said. “When he told me that he was
going to visit you it seemed like a good chance to see how you’re doing. We barely got to talk at the
graduation.”

“You’ll have to forgive me for that. These old bones don’t travel very well any more.” The vixen
gave her head a shake, then hissed at Nick. “Watching you pace like that is making me tired.”

Nick grinned at his mother, his ears folded back in feigned contrition. “I had no idea your condition
was so delicate, mom. If you’re getting winded that easily maybe it’s time we started thinking about
getting you into a retirement home.”

His mother huffed. “You’ll have to drag me out of here first. If you insist on standing at least make
yourself useful and go to the kitchen. I’ve got some berries that I’m willing to share with you two.”

“Well I better go get them,” Nick said, then promptly headed into the kitchen.
Judy watched him step aside, unable to help smiling. “Let me guess, blueberries?”

“Mmhmm. Raspberries and cherries too,” Mrs. Wilde said. “Nicholas won’t touch them, but they’ve always been a favorite of mine.”

“He doesn’t like the way they taste?” Judy asked as she watched Nick.

“Oh, no nothing like that. When he was little he’d just gobble them right up, but when he was…ten? Eleven? It’s been so long I can’t remember. Anyway, one day he came home from school and asked me to stop packing them in his lunch.”

Nick reemerged from the kitchen with several bowls in hand that he promptly set down on the coffee table. As Mrs. Wilde had promised there were not only blueberries, but cherries and raspberries as well. Judy immediately reached for the raspberries and found that it was frozen nearly solid, but was pleasantly surprised when she popped it into her mouth. All the sweetness she’d expected was still there, and the added chill made it almost like a frozen desert.

“Mom, you tell that one to every visitor,” Nick said as he got a few blueberries for himself. “Aren’t there any other stories you’d like to share?”

“One of the many joys of children is being able to embarrass them once they’re older,” Mrs. Wilde said, carefully using her claws to pit one of the cherries. “Judy, would you like to guess why he only wanted blueberries so suddenly?”

“I have no idea. Why?”

Nick turned away, his ears already folded in embarrassment by the time his mother began to talk. “Well, like most boys his age he just vacuumed food up which made him something of a messy eater. He was concerned that if he got raspberry or cherry juice on his muzzle fur that some of his schoolmates would mistake it for blood.”

“And he never got over it?” Judy asked, enjoying Nick’s clear discomfort.

“No, though by now I’m sure blueberries really are his favorites,” Mrs. Wild said, then paused to eat the cherry she’d pitted. “He was always fussy about what he ate, though I blame his father for that.”

“Mother, please,” Nick said.

“Don’t you ‘mother’ me. You know how much I like to share stories about you.”

“Can you at least pick ones that won’t get me laughed out of the ZPD?”

The old vixen hmmmed quietly to herself, a light twinkle in her eye, then turned back to Judy. “No, I’m enjoying this too much. Let me tell you about what a disaster his first date was next…”

By the time they were headed back out a little more than an hour had passed. An hour filled with humiliation as Nick listened to his mother share some of the more embarrassing moments from his childhood. The best he’d been able to manage was to keep his mother from bringing the photo albums out, so he’d thankfully been spared having Judy see his baby pictures, but the visit had no doubt given the clever bunny ammo to use against him for years. He’d need to devise a way to meet
Judy’s parents someday if he wanted to level the playing field, but that was easier said than done.

After they were back on the street, and after Nick managed to shoulder aside the last of his embarrassment, he looked to Judy. “I hope you enjoyed that, because next time I’m going to think twice before bringing you along.”

“That’s fine. Now that I know where she lives I can visit her any time I like,” Judy said, grinning up at him.

“Yes…well.” Nick coughed once. “You said you wanted to go somewhere quiet. Did you have anything specific in mind?”

Judy lightly bit her lower lip, her ears tilting back. “Not really. I figured you could pick the place. You know the city better than I do anyway.”

Nick started them back toward the transit station, turning the different possibilities over in his mind. Tundra Town’s ice gardens seemed to fit the bill almost perfectly, but his fur coat hadn’t finished growing back in after that week in Sahara Square. There were also several art museums downtown that tended to be quiet, only that didn’t seem like the best place to hold a private conversation. They’d already done a park, so trying that again seemed like cheating. That was one of the problems with the city, now that he thought about it. Plenty of things to do, but strikingly few that didn’t involve being in close company with other mammals.

“How long do you have?” he asked finally.

“I didn’t have any plans, so I guess I’m free all day.”

He pulled out his phone and looked at the time, then did a quick check to find that sunset was still several hours off. “Have you gotten to do the Cat’s Walk yet?”

Judy’s ears tilted toward him. “Maybe. What is it?”

“That’s a no, Carrots. You’d remember this, believe me,” he assured her, smiling. “Don’t want to spoil it, but it is the closest thing the city has to a nature trail. Takes about an hour to walk the entire length, and you get the best experience around sunset.

“So that in mind, I propose you pick something for us to do until dinner, then we can grab a bite before going to the Cat’s Walk so we can talk in private.”

In retrospect he probably should have realized that asking Judy to pick what they would do to pass the time was a sure way to end up exhausted. At her insistence he found himself playing a “few” rounds of basketball. Initially he was able to abuse his superior height and reach to make a respectable showing, and his training at the academy meant he could almost match Judy’s speed. As they continued to play, however, her youthful energy continued to carry her effortlessly through the later rounds while he struggled to simply keep up. By the time the little gray bunny was finally satisfied the early lead he’d taken had been completely obliterated, and he needed a good fifteen minutes just to catch his breath while Judy teasingly suggested that he ought to consider doing more cardio if he couldn’t keep up with her for couple of hours.

By the time he’d fully recovered there wasn’t much time to waste, so they stopped by the nearby sandwich shop before catching a train headed for the Rainforest District. The whole ride Judy kept trying to get him talking about where they were going, but he steadfastly refused to spoil it for her. To his delight she remained completely oblivious even once they got off the train and followed a stairway up around one of the larger trees. Only once they breached the canopy did she begin to
understand.

“Here we are,” he announced once they got to the suspended walkway that wound its way through the highest branches of the larger trees. “To tell the truth, the walk is always enjoyable so long as the weather is nice. I just happen to think the atmosphere is that much nicer when the sun begins to set and you can see the city lights coming on as well. Best of all, hardly anyone comes up here once the sun’s going down since the wind picks up.”

At first Judy said nothing, taking in the scene with wide eyes. Nick let her gawk and began to walk, enjoying the way the breeze was just strong enough to ruffle his fur this high up. Overhead several puffy clouds were beginning to build as the air cooled. A couple of them were darker than he would have liked, but from experience he knew it would be well after the sun had gone down before the rain began to fall.

“I didn’t think any place in the Rainforest District had this kind of view,” Judy said at last. “That has to be where the station is over there. And there’s the Zootennial Stadium.” She paused and tilted her head. “What’s that mist that’s rising out of the trees?”

Nick pointed down at a camouflaged pipe that ran along a tree branch. “They constantly release steam up here to keep the district nice and humid,” he said, swishing his tail as he watched the bunny lean over the rail to peer down. “It runs almost all day. That’s why there’s almost always a rainbow over this section of the city, if you know where to look for it.”

Judy watched for a few seconds before pushing back with a smile on her face. “That’s amazing,” she said, then blushed. “Though I suppose we didn’t come here so you could show me the city’s plumbing.”

“No, but I don’t see any reason to rush you. We can start when you’re ready,” Nick assured her.

“I am. At least as ready as I can be.”

They continued on in silence for a few minutes. Every couple of steps Nick looked down at the smaller bunny and watched as she struggled to say something.

“You don’t have to force yourself, you know,” he said once he sensed Judy was beginning to feel frustrated.

“I know, but I’ve already kept you waiting long enough,” she said, then took a deep breath. “Okay. I can do this. The thing is you kind of ambushed me with your confession. I understand why, but the timing was really kinda...bad.

“But at the same time I can’t deny that I feel...I don’t know. When I was growing up I dated, but only a little. And only because everyone else seemed to expect it. All my girlfriends would talk about how their crushes gave them these bubbly feelings in their stomachs, but that wasn’t ever something I experienced. At least, not until recently.” She looked at him, ears back, and gave a weak smile. “It’s scarier than I thought it would be.”

Nick smiled back. “You know, it is sort of hard to imagine you growing up without having every buck in the school chasing after you.”

“I was just that weird girl that was too busy to bother with boys,” Judy said as she rubbed her arm. “So I’m not very good at any of this, but when I look inside and ask ‘Do I want this?’ the answer is always yes.”

“I’m sensing there’s a big ‘but’ attached to that.”
Judy gave a tiny nod. “I was reading the forum you told me about and so many topics focus on how much better things are getting, but it feels sort of like they’re trying to convince themselves because at the same time they’re all so frantic about hiding their relationships. It’s like they’re ashamed of themselves, Nick, and I don’t want to be like that. I don’t want feel ashamed because of who I love.”

“Trust me, I understand.”

She smiled at him again, then scooted closer to hug his arm. “I do trust you. But you were right about something during our last talk. I’m only used to being dismissed. Just imagining being hated because of who I am…I’m a little afraid I won’t be able to take it. So on the one hand I don’t want to hide, but on the other I’ve got this fear I can’t shake and after reading so many stories I really started understand…and it makes me feel like a coward, because I just want—”

Nick lightly tapped her nose. “Judy, when I told you to read I didn’t expect you to try and figure everything out on your own.”

“I can’t help it.” She squeezed his arm more tightly. “I know this is something I want to try, but keeping everyone in the dark about us feels wrong. How can I possibly deal with everything all at once?”

“You don’t have to,” Nick said, slipping his arm free so he could take her hand instead. “Not all at once. Not by yourself either.”

For the next few minutes they walked in silence and watched the sky shift from blue into orange and red. The temperature began to dip noticeably, but Nick didn’t particularly mind. He gave Judy’s hand a squeeze, as if the slight pressure could keep the moment from slipping away.

“I’m scared too,” Nick admitted. “About our jobs. About what your family will think when they find out—”

“Pretty sure they’ll be fine,” Judy said, pressing against his side. “Mom and dad at least. My older relatives might not be as understanding.”

“Are you sure? I thought your parents were the ones that gave you the fox repellent.”

“They did, but they’ve gotten a lot better since then,” she said, her fingers beginning to stroke over his hand. “Their closest business partner is a fox now.”

“There’s a minor difference between doing business with a fox and letting one spend the night with your daughter,” Nick pointed out.

“I’ll bring them around,” Judy insisted with a light huff. “What about your family?”

Nick hummed as he considered the question. “My family was never as close as yours. As far as I’m concerned it’s only mom, and she gave up on me having a serious relationship years ago.”

“Oh, so this isn’t serious?”

“This is the most serious I think I’ve ever been,” he said quickly. “What I meant was I think she’ll be happy to find out I’ve found someone.”

Judy’s grip tightened. “She doesn’t pester you about grandkids?”

“Never,” he said, then looked into her eyes. “Isn’t it a bit early to be worrying about that?”
“Yeah, but it is something I know my parents expect so…” She rested her head against his arm as they walked. “I just wasn’t sure if you’d thought about it at all.”

“I haven’t,” Nick admitted. “Why don’t you tell me what’s on your mind?”

They’d stayed out on the Cat’s Walk talking until well after the sun had fully set, only departing when several maintenance mammals arrived, clearly surprised to find that anyone was still up there. The vantage point they’d had didn’t provide a view of the whole city, but the downtown area was clearly visible and Judy had watched intently as it lit up the night. Perhaps it wasn’t a ferris wheel, but all the feelings she’d only ever heard about came flooding in just the same.

The moment’s abrupt end felt distinctly unfair. The entire ride home she found herself worrying if maybe she and Nick were sitting too close together, or if she was looking at him too long or too often, or if the times they briefly touched hands gave away too much. It was ridiculous, especially after all she’d said about how she didn’t want to hide…but at the same time she found herself remembering all the stories she’d read on Lifeline. Was that what her convictions came down to? Mere words that scattered at the first whiff of confrontation?

She desperately wanted more time, but now that she found herself questioning how her every move might be judged she wasn’t sure that she’d be able to enjoy anything they ended up doing. Fortunately, circumstance intervened. The wind continued to pick up as Nick walked her back to her apartment complex, and one sniff was enough to tell her that rain couldn’t be far behind. Seizing on the excuse, she invited Nick up to her room so she could lend him an umbrella. They might not be able to talk, she wasn’t ready to test how Bucky and Pronk would feel about this sort of thing, but at the very least she could hold Nick for a few moments before he had to go. If they were going to have a relationship then they deserved to be able to hug at the very least.

Nick didn’t need much convincing.

As soon as the door closed behind them she threw her arms around him and pressed against his chest. He hesitated only briefly before his arms wrapped around her, and all at once she wished time would just stop. She risked looking up and their eyes met, scattering all her thoughts. She wondered if he was going to kiss her. She wondered if she should kiss him.

Tap-tap-tap-scrape.

The light sound just outside her window caught both their attention and they came apart, leaving her leaning against the wall as her heart raced. Nick had a foolish grin on his muzzle, his ears folded back.

“Expecting visitors, Carrots?” he teased, gesturing to the window. “Go let them in so you can introduce me.”

The light tapping returned, along with the groan of the wind. “Something just got caught on the fire escape,” she told him. “It happens sometimes when storms roll in.”

She sighed lightly, annoyed that they’d been interrupted by something so stupid, and quickly strode over to the window to take care of the noise. With a firm yank she pulled the curtains open. Dull vacant eyes stared at her. A startled yelp erupted from her mouth and she jumped almost clear across the room before she realized that the thing was simply swinging in the wind, bumping against her
window. Still, she stared at it for several long seconds before she understood what she was looking
at.

Someone had gone to the trouble of making a crude, life-sized stuffed bunny with gray felt for fur,
and then dressed it in a ZPD uniform. No, not a ZPD uniform—her duty uniform. The one that had
been stolen complete with the bulletproof vest. All that was missing from it was the badge. Her ears
folded back and she took a deep breath, then started back for the window only for Nick to grab her
shoulder and pull her away.

“Let me go,” she said, trying to shrug free of his grip. “I can’t just leave that horrid thing up there.”

Nick squeezed tighter. “Judy stop. Look.”

He pointed at the stuffed rabbit. At first she wasn’t sure what he was trying to show her, but then the
thing twisted in the wind and the light caught it just right for her to see. Four holes punched into the
protective vest.

“I’m calling the police,” he said, continuing to keep her away from the window.

She didn’t argue.
After Nick called the police Judy expected that Officer Howlson would be the one to respond, not the half-dozen officers and CSIs that appeared at her door. Perhaps she should have realized. Barely a week had gone by since the ZPD had last been called out to her place, but although the disproportionate response was probably supposed to make her feel safer it mostly just upset her even more. The large stuffed bunny was obviously an attempt to intimidate her and send her scampering for cover—the message couldn’t have been more clear unless her name had been written on the ruined vest—and with so many uniforms crawling over her apartment building they were telling the wretched mammal who’d done this that he’d been successful. Knowing that they were giving a criminal exactly what he wanted had her quivering with anger that was so strong it almost overcame her self-loathing.

Because the shock she’d felt upon seeing the effigy of herself had very quickly turned into the sort of fear she always swore to herself that she’d never feel. And when she’d been informed the thing had been hung by a noose and that the holes in the vest had been made by bullets? Dread settled into her stomach like a lump of ice, so intensely cold she went numb all over. The one, tiny blessing was that there was no evidence anyone had been in her room, so after the CSI’s had finished documenting the scene and securing the stuffed bunny they were finished. Officer Howlson asked if she wanted a patrol car posted out front, but she politely declined.

Next thing she knew Nick had her suitcase out and was beginning to pack her clothing into it. At first she was still too numb to react, but once her mind caught up she grabbed his arm.

“Stop that! What do you think you’re doing?”

“Getting you out of here,” Nick said, already reaching for another shirt until she gave him a firm tug.

“I am not running away,” she said firmly, then took a deep breath and looked him right in the eye. “This is just a pathetic attempt to frighten me.”

For a moment Nick seemed unable to find his voice, his ears slowly folding back before he yanked his arm free and went back to packing. “Don’t be stupid.”

Her ears came up in shock and she stared at him, then stood up a little straighter. “I am not stupid.”

“No, you aren’t. So don’t act like it.” Nick paused between outfits to look back at her. “This place isn’t safe right now.”

“You’re overreacting. I can handle—”

“No, you can’t!” Nick said, standing up to face her. “You're right; Flip is trying to scare you. He’s also sending you a message that he wants you dead, Judy.”

“Well I’m not about to give him what he wants. I intend to teach him that he shouldn’t underestimate me just because I’m a bunny,” she said and stomped her foot. “You shouldn’t either.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

She stomped. “Everything. He’s just a bully trying to pick on someone smaller than him. The only way to deal with his type is to show you aren’t going to be intimidated.”

“Flip isn’t some punk that’s going to run off after you give him a good kick,” Nick said, leaning
forward to jab her chest firmly with two fingers. “He’s a psycho with an ax to grind. One who knows where you live and has come over to visit. Twice. Sticking around isn’t going to show him how brave you are. All it’s going to do is tell him you’re a dumb bunny with a—”

“I am not a dumb bunny!” She shoved Nick hard enough that he stumbled back and hit the wall.

There was a firm bump from above followed by a shout. “You two pipe down! I’m trying to watch TV.”

“We’re not the ones fighting this time,” Bucky shouted back.

“I know. I wasn’t talking to you, moron.”

“You’re a moron!” Pronk yelled back.

Judy froze, her ears wilting, her anger evaporating as she stared at Nick’s shocked expression. After a moment she managed to find her voice again. “I—I’m so—”

“It’s fine, I’m sorry for calling you dumb,” Nick interrupted, then sighed and rubbed his head. “Look, I know you don’t want to run away, but staying here is stupid. Flip just sent you a message saying he wants to kill you, and that he has a gun that makes your duty vest look like tissue paper. If you stay here you might as well just press yourself against the muzzle and tell him to take his best shot.”

Her ears started to come back up, but she took a deep breath and forced her temper away before answering. “I appreciate that you’re worried about me, but I can take care of myself.”

“Judy, I never doubted that for a second. The sergeant at the academy showed us the video of you KO-ing that rhino, but you know what I noticed about that fight?”

She swallowed a little. “What?”

“When he threw a punch, you didn’t just stand there and wait for it to hit you,” Nick said, giving her a look. “Right now that’s what you’re doing. Waiting to get hit. Leaving this place doesn’t mean you’re running away, it is just getting out of the crosshairs until you have your chance. Okay?”

As he looked at her she finally noticed the slight quiver in his voice and the look in his eye. Nick was frightened. All at once she remembered how he’d held her back from the window until help had arrived, refusing to let her go despite her protests.

“Please, Judy, don’t make me have the station call the Chief,” Nick pleaded. “You know he’s going to be angry about being woken up, and he’s going to side with me anyway. It’s only temporary. I promise.”

“Alright, we’re here,” Nick said as he pushed open the door to his apartment, his tail still twitching about anxiously behind him. “First thing tomorrow we should go to the station and see if they have any policies for this sort of thing. Maybe they can set you up in a safe house until this blows over.”

Judy groaned lightly. “Is that really necessary? Can’t I just crash here?”

“No. He found you easily enough. I’m willing to bet that he can find me too.”
“And you think some protection program will change that.”

Nick bit his tongue. He wasn’t sure. “It can’t hurt things, I know that much.” He sighed and turned to Judy. “The sooner we get you someplace safe the better I’ll feel.”

Although she hated to admit it, Judy couldn’t help agreeing.

Once again Nick insisted that she take the bedroom, leaving her some privacy to get ready for the night. She didn’t have it in her to argue right then, so she changed into her night clothes before stepping back out to find that Nick was once again sprawled across the entire couch.

“Scoot over.”

The larger fox looked at her, a slow grin forming. “Fluff, you’re not getting the couch. I told you last time: my house, my rules.”

“Nick, please, we need to talk and I want to sit,” she said.

He hesitated. “Talk about what?”

“Flip.”

Another moment of hesitation, then he slowly sat upright so she could jump up and settle in next to him. He sat quietly for a few seconds, watching her from the corner of his eye before speaking again. “I don’t really like talking about him. Talking about Flip always comes back to a lot of things I don’t like to remember.” He looked down at his hands.

“Nick, if you’re right and he really is coming after me…if he really is as dangerous as you say then I think I’m entitled to know what I’m dealing with.” His fingers flexed lightly as he watched them. “There’s also a bunch of things I’m not really proud of doing.”

“Please?” Judy rested her hand on his arm and squeezed. “I swear I won’t tell anyone.”

His eyes closed and he took a deep breath. “No, you’re right. You deserve to know.

“I started…”

I started making bad decisions at a young age. Money was always tight, but around the time I turned twelve the economy tanked and dad was forced to take a pay cut to keep his job. On top of that I was hitting that age where I was just eating anything in sight. Mom would joke that I was going to eat us out of house and home, and would tease me about my appetite, but I actually did worry that maybe I was doing just that. Every month I was watching my parents try to decide which bills they needed to pay and which ones they could let go for the month without getting services cutoff.

Dad was already away most of the week working, and mom had a part-time job at the library so she could be home when I wasn’t at school. I felt like it was my responsibility to do my part to bring in some money too. Only nobody’s going to give you a real job when you’re twelve, and the normal sorts of odd jobs a kid might be paid for aren’t going to be given to a fox. Everyone just assumes you’ve got some sort of ulterior motive. Even other foxes sometimes.

After a few weeks I got impatient and gave up trying to do things the right way. There were these
other kids at my school who’d brag about doing this or that with their gang, and how it was easy money. Well, I wasn’t part of anything like that, but with how impossible the right way seemed the easy way started looking better and better.

Started getting into trouble as a result, though I was mostly able to worm my way free and the few times I was successful let me help out without mom noticing. Sneaking the money into her purse, or using the little bit of money I’d gotten to buy a new loaf of bread or something.

Anyway, months go by and I’m starting to get a little better. Not good, but I don’t land in trouble as much. And I’m also starting to notice when others are up to mischief. And one day I’m out looking to swipe a few things. Can’t even remember what, but while I was still trying to decide how to do it this other fox walks in. Early twenties, confident, acting like he owns the whole city. And I immediately know he’s up to something.

He walks right up to the beaver working the till and asks if they can make change for a large bill. Cashier says sure, takes the bill, makes sure it is real, then starts counting out change. After this fox counts it out again, only from where I’m standing I see him swap one of the twenties with a one, then point it out. Of course the beaver was very sorry, and quickly corrected his “mistake” while apologizing. The fox then left and pulled the same trick at a dozen more places.

In an hour he made more money than I could do in a month. I’d robbed a few places, usually for something petty. Usually they either don’t notice, or they end up screaming for the cops while cursing you. But this guy? He walked in and robbed them, and they smiled at him while he did it. Maybe he didn’t take that much, but I doubt they figured out what happened to that money either.

At once I knew that here was a guy that knew things that I needed to learn, so I tried to follow him. He noticed almost immediately, only instead of getting angry he asked me what I was up to so I told him I’d seen what he was doing in an effort to impress him. Only he just laughs. Then he says he won’t let some punk blackmail him and pulls out a knife, but before he can do anything I tell him that I wouldn’t do anything like that. That I want him to teach me to do it too.

And he pauses long enough for me to tell my sob story about how my family can’t afford anything, then for some reason agrees if I give him a cut. Next thing I know he’s made me part of his crew and I’m learning to do things I never pictured myself doing before. Everyone just called him Flip, and the pecking order was pretty much determined by how much you could make him.

Fast forward a couple of years and I’ve gotten very good. Not quite the best, but I’m on my way, and Flip and I are on favorable terms. He’s also moved me from doing simple scams and petty crime to really questionable stuff. Actual breaking and entering jobs mostly. Stealing electronics to resell was pretty popular. And I’m a stupid teen who doesn’t realize that he likes me because of how much money I’m making him. End up telling him things I wouldn’t tell anyone else, like about the Junior Ranger Scouts, and he tells me that he understands. So I think we’re friends, and when he gives me a chance to get even I don’t even question it.

He ends up telling me that there is a way I can get back at those prey that hurt me, and since I’m a dumb, angry kid I go along with it. I’m introduced to some mammals he knows that deal drugs, and he says that if I can get those ranger scouts hooked then I’ll be able to make money off them while ruining their lives. Of course I’d need to buy the drugs I’m selling, but this is the easiest way to get even.

For the first time I found myself questioning if this was something I should even consider. It’s really easy to pretend like you aren’t hurting anyone when all you are doing is taking money or stuff, but I knew drugs were bad news. And I knew my parents would just kill me if they ever found out, but Flip was my friend and I didn’t want to disappoint him. And a little payback sounded just too good to
pass up.

So I agreed, and within a few months I’ve got some steady customers. It still doesn’t sit well with me, especially since most of the mammals buying never did anything to hurt me, but it made so much money that now I’m almost Flip’s favorite and...

Well, the inevitable happened. Dad found out. Saw me on his way home from work one day. I’d never seen him so angry; he practically dragged me home by the scruff of my neck and took a belt to my rear, demanding to know what the hell was wrong with me. He told me that if he ever caught me doing that again he’d turn me in himself.

I panicked and ran to the only mammal I thought could help. Flip. I didn’t want dad to tell mom. And I didn’t want to go to jail.

Flip listened to the whole thing, then told me to keep my head down until dad came home again in a couple of weeks. Then told me that I should just give my dad the drugs and promise not to do it anymore, and then once things calmed down I could try to think of ways to get back into the game without him noticing. That seemed like good advice, so I took it.

Next time dad was home I gave him the drugs, told him I was sorry, and promised to be a good kid. By then I was pretty good at lying, so he believed me. Thanked me for coming clean and told me he was proud of me. Then maybe half an hour later the cops show up with a no-knock warrant because of an anonymous tip that someone in the house was dealing to minors. Dad hadn’t gotten the chance to dispose of everything yet, so they found it in his stuff and...

Well, that’s when mom found out what I’d been up to. Dad took a plea deal since it was his first offense. Mom wanted him to fight it because there was no way dad could’ve been the one dealing since he was away for weeks at a time, but my father was worried that if he won it would make the cops look at me instead. Was only supposed to be six months, and if mom started working full time we could make it work.

The close call scared me to death, I assumed that someone had figured out who I was and called the cops on me at the worst time, and I felt so guilty I could’ve died. Ended up going completely straight almost all at once, even without mom riding me. Thought that if I could show whoever was watching me that I could turn around and be a good kid that it would make up for everything. That I’d get my dad back and everything would be okay again. Magical thinking of a stupid kid.

Two months into dad’s sentence there was a prison riot and he got caught in the middle. Mom was devastated. She blamed me for everything and for weeks after would barely even look at me. She still doesn’t quite trust me. And I knew she was right for thinking that, because everything was my fault. By then the neighbors knew why dad had been taken away, so there wasn’t much support coming from outside. They all thought we had it coming. Typical foxes getting what they deserve.

Then Flip reappears, approaching me when I’m headed back from school. He tells me that I’ve kept up the good boy act long enough and that now that dad’s taken care of it should be safe for me to come back. That’s when I realize that Flip was the one who had tipped off the cops, and that his plan had been to set my dad up from the start. He was never my friend, I was just some tool that was making him money, and he was willing to do anything necessary to protect his investment.

I told him I wasn’t interested anymore, by then I was already pretty committed to keeping on the straight and narrow so realizing all of that just steeled my resolve. Only then Flip tells me that he understands that I’m pretty shaken up. That losing a father is a terrible thing, but you know what would be even worse? If something unfortunate happened to mom as well. And like that I’m working for him again.
But this time I’m fifteen and good at this whole business. More importantly, I know it and have all the hatred a young boy can muster. So I come up with a plan to take care of Flip and for the next two years play the good little follower until I’m his number two and running everything almost as much as him. Always paying him more than the normal cut. He assumed it was because I was worried about what he would do to mom, but really I just wanted to make sure nobody else had a chance to replace me.

Before long, I knew enough about how things worked to put my plan into action. Payments I sent to the mob would arrive just a little late. Any payments we were getting would be delayed at the worst possible times, putting Flip in difficult situations. Because I was acting as the middleman I got to mess with the lines of communication. When the mob demanded to know what was going on I would shrug and tell them that Flip was just becoming really erratic. And of course when the mob sent new demands and

Flip wanted to know why I would tell him they hadn’t said anything.

With everything going wrong all at once Flip became even more ruthless than normal, lashing out at pretty much anyone to bring him bad news. He burned a lot of bridges in a couple of weeks, at which point a lot of the gang started to think maybe it was time to abandon Flip. They were all too afraid of what he’d do, though.

Which is when I stepped in and went to talk to the different crime bosses. Told them about how it was clear to everyone that Flip was losing everyone money, but that if someone took care of him then I could take over and make it business as usual. They liked the sound of that, and within a couple of days Flip was on the run.

Judy listened quietly as Nick talked, deciding it was best not to ask questions until he was finished. As he got closer to the end he suddenly got up and started pacing, the fur on his tail standing on end while he walked from one end of the room to the other.

Then he abruptly stopped and shivered lightly. “I was so sure that someone would put an end to him, but he must have had some cash stashed away that I didn’t know about because he managed to pay off enough mammals to save his skin. Luckily for me he wasn’t exactly in a position to retaliate, so we just kept out of each other’s way.”

At first she didn’t know what to say. She tried to imagine what it would be like if her father had been taken away while she was a kit. Or if he had died. Tried to imagine how it would feel knowing she was to blame. It was impossible; she simply didn’t have any point of reference to even begin to know what that would be like.

“You should have just gone to the police about him,” Judy tried at last, unable to think of anything else.

Nick looked her way, eyes glistening. “I wasn’t exactly big on trusting cops after what happened to dad.”

“Oh,” she said, feeling immensely foolish for having even made the suggestion. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what I was—”

“No, you’re right. It’s just a little late to think about what I should have done,” he said, walking over
to sit back down. He sighed and looked up at the ceiling. “Honestly I don’t think I would have gone to the police even if I had trusted them. I was so caught up in my anger that merely seeing him put away for a few years wouldn’t have satisfied me.”

“And doing this did?”

“At first, yeah.” Nick shrugged, then looked over with a tight smile. “When it all started to come together I felt simply amazing. I’d been working toward it for years by then. Finally getting my revenge just felt…wonderful. There just isn’t another word.

“But that wore off quick. A week or so, and after it was gone I was just empty. Ash in my mouth. Getting back at Flip had been all I really cared about. After I didn’t have anything to replace it. Dad was still dead. Mom had watched me go back to doing the same stuff that caused everything in the first place. I’d passed up on any chance of college for the chance at revenge, so there wasn’t any clear path in front of me anymore.”

“Well you weren’t in a gang when I met you, so you must have been headed in the right direction,” Judy said and leaned against his side, giving him a hug.

Nick’s arm wrapped around her. “Once I had the gang I found out I didn’t really want it. My dad had died for that nasty little outfit. Being in charge of it made me feel dirty, so I just washed my hands of it. It’s probably the one thing I did right back then. Even helped to mend things with mom a little bit.”

“Only after you went back to being a criminal.”

He gave a dry laugh. “That was all I knew. Believe me when I say that I was a saint compared to what I was doing before.” His ears folded back and he looked down at her. “It worked out okay in the end.”

“If you call running those pathetic hustles of yours okay,” she said, smiling lightly.

Nick huffed with mock outrage. “I’ll have you know my hustles were brilliant. Especially my last one.”

“Sure you want to be staking your reputation on selling pawpsicles?”

A finger lightly tapped her nose. “You’re misremembering,” he said, tail swishing slowly. “My last hustle involved a carrot pen and a bunny’s suitcase.” Judy felt her ears go scarlet as Nick started to lean closer, then paused unexpectedly to yawn.

“Tired?” she asked, still blushing.

“Mmm. So it would appear,” he smiled again. “Off to bed with you, I’m not letting you take the couch.”

“Nick, you’re not chasing me off that easily,” she said, then tried and failed to stifle a yawn of her own. “Not that eager to go to sleep tonight either. Is it okay if we keep talking?”

“Sure thing Carrots. Anything you need.”
Protection

Judy awoke to find herself in Nick’s bed. At first she simply remained where she lay, basking in the annoyance that was bubbling up inside of her. Somehow this was Nick’s doing, she just couldn’t figure out how he’d managed it. The last thing she could remember was drowsily talking with him in an effort to hold sleep at bay for just a little longer, but the specifics were blurry. Then Nick’s response had been something amusing, and after laughing she’d closed her eyes for just a moment…

She shook her head and groaned, surprised to find she still felt exhausted. Without thinking she grabbed one of the pillows and hugged it against her body, tempted to go back to sleep despite the noise drifting in through the window. There wasn’t anything wrong with sleeping in from time to time, and clearly yesterday had taken a lot out of her. Just another fifteen minutes where she didn’t have to face the world and deal with all the problems it had decided to throw her way. That proved to be more difficult than she anticipated.

Despite her best efforts her thoughts kept turning back to everything she needed to accomplish. Most immediately she had to stop by the precinct and attempt to arrange for temporary housing in a safe location, but it came with a whole list of chores she needed to address. Having her mail re-routed to the precinct. Figuring out what to tell her parents. She’d need to stock wherever she landed with enough food to last for a while since going out to eat probably defeated the purpose of living in a secure space.

Important as all of that was it wasn’t even at the front of her mind. With a sigh she got her phone off of the nightstand and started to read the Lifeline forums once again. She was surprised by just how many new posts had gone up since she last looked, and as she browsed them her thoughts drifted back to her talk with Nick just last night. Or rather, the way Nick had talked.

His anxious pacing, the agitated way his tail lashed at the air, the way he never once raised his voice. She’d seen Nick frightened before, that was nothing new. Like his healthy fear of Mr. Big. But usually Nick’s fear was heavily tempered with respect, the way one might deal with something dangerous but well understood. Yes, Mr. Big might be able to have someone iced with little more than a word and a wave of his hand, but he wouldn’t do so without a reason.

Nick’s fear of Flip more closely resembled worries over some implacable, unpredictable force. Like lightening. Or a volcanic eruption. Something both uncontrollable and deadly, with only a distant rumble to warn of the disaster it might unleash. The mere fact that Nick seemed to have trouble understanding what went on in Flip’s mind had certainly given her pause.

Her ears tilted to one side at the sound of the bathroom door closing followed promptly by water beginning to move through the room’s pipes. Nick was up then. For a moment she found herself wondering how he’d managed to make it to the shower without her noticing that he was moving around, then remembered how he’d accidentally snuck up on her during her last stay. Or how he’d nearly given her the slip the first time she’d confronted him about his scamming, for that matter. That he could do it so effortlessly was actually quite eerie, though as Nick had said that was simply part of being a fox. There hadn’t been any need for him to mention why.

Was the fact she felt uneasy knowing that he could do it a warning sign, or just something else that they needed to talk about? Was it even something she should bring up? If one of the other officers at the precinct happened to tell her that they weren’t comfortable working with her because her small size made them doubt that she could handle herself in a fight she would certainly feel offended. It wasn’t like Nick could do anything about it, short of wearing a necklace with a bell or something equally absurd. This was clearly a problem with her, and she needed to figure out how to deal with
She looked back at her phone and bit her lip, then opened the *Lifeline* forums again and went to the relationship advice board. Her thumb hovered over the “new topic” button and she took a moment to steady her nerves. At the time she’d gotten the account she’d only intended to lurk and read. Actually making a post seemed like a big step. Like she was committing to something she couldn’t walk back.

Her ears folded back and she gave herself a light shake to throw off that silly notion, then set to writing her question. Just a simple inquiry wondering if it was unusual to feel a little anxiety about how easily Nick could sneak up on her (although she was careful to avoid using any names). She also asked if there was a way to get over feeling that way, then if bringing it up in a conversation would be taboo, and how to best broach the subject without causing offense, and then... and then... and then...

Before she even knew it a torrent of questions had flooded out of her, covering everything from her discomfort about keeping the relationship a secret from her family to her confusion over if she really was attracted to predators since she’d never even looked at one before Nick had confessed his love to her. The end result was a mess that meandered from topic to topic with little warning. She stared at the end result, shocked by how much there was, and wondered if perhaps she should attempt to make it more organized. Her phone was hardly the best tool for something like that however, and the mere thought of re-writing the whole post on the tiny touch screen seemed like too much effort.

She simply posted it instead.

With that done she pushed herself to the edge of the bed and hopped down, then quickly picked an outfit for the day. Normally she preferred to go with something relaxed during the days she didn’t have to work, but since she needed to head in anyway she wanted something presentable that also made it clear she wasn’t on-duty. After some thought she decided on a plain green blouse matched with dark gray pants.

Once dressed her stomach began to complain, so she headed to the kitchen and was pleasantly surprised to find Nick still had her favorite cereal. By the time Nick finally got out, she was nearly done eating. His fur looked like it had just been brushed, a fresh shirt and slacks outfit brought together with his customary tie. He paused in the door, eyes wide as he saw her sitting on the couch, mouth working silently for just a moment before his ears folded back.

“I didn’t realize you were up. Were you waiting on me?”

“You’re fine,” she said. “I’ve been busy thinking since I woke up. Decided I should get my housing situation sorted first thing, so I’ll be getting my things and heading out before long. Just wanted to thank you for letting me stay again.”

“Do you mind if I tag along?”

“That really isn’t necessary Nick,” she assured him. “I’ll be perfectly safe on my own.”

“Oh come on Carrots. You aren’t even going to let me be all male and protective?” He covered his heart dramatically, then grinned. “Then how about I tag along so you can protect me? There’s this psycho fox with a gun out there who wouldn’t have any qualms about shooting me in the back.”

A light chuckle escaped from Judy’s mouth. “Oh fine. Maybe we can get something to eat after.”

“That sounds nice. And since you are being all empowered and progressive I’ll do the chivalrous thing by letting you pay,” Nick said happily.
Once they reached the station Nick let Judy head into Mammal Resources alone. She certainly didn’t need his help filling out the forms and he didn’t want to annoy her by hovering over her shoulder while she was busy with the paperwork. Besides, although he loathed being productive on his day off he’d managed to think of a few things to keep himself occupied while he waited.

First he checked his work email on the off-chance that he’d received the information he’d requested regarding the drug dealer’s phone number for the new Nighthowler investigation. That proved to be a mixed bag. Apparently the information had been collected, however the company’s lawyers were doing a final liability check before they released any of it. So nothing yet, but in 36-48 hours they’d finally have some answers on that front.

While he was poking at his email he also checked to see if there was any word on the IA investigation, although he wasn’t terribly surprised to learn that there wasn’t. They had conducted the first interviews yesterday after all. There was an email from Chief Bogo informing him that Agent Forester had filed an official complaint against him for his attitude, however.

That was also as Nick expected. With any luck Judy hadn’t let anything substantive slip, so his behavior would have the brunt of the IA investigation land on him. Sooner or later they would look at his reports, which would fuel their suspicions. How things proceeded from there was much less clear. If he’d done enough to convince Bogo that he’d learned the error of his ways it would probably end there, otherwise all those addendum’s might come back to haunt him. In that case he wasn’t sure how much trouble he would land in. If things really came to that he fully intended to lawyer up.

The fact that he hadn’t actually broken any laws would certainly help him. Yes, he bent them on occasion. Okay, yes. He had been bending them at every chance he got. And sometimes he bent them quite a bit, but he had been very careful about keeping everything on the up and up. Even in the few instances that he’d picked a lock he’d always stopped to make sure that he had probable cause. That said, he fully expected IA to hammer him as hard as they could if given the chance. He could live with that if it kept Judy in the clear.

But until the investigation moved along he was stuck waiting to see where everything would fall.

His final task for the morning came last, although he thought it was probably the most important. He would’ve taken care of it first, but the mammal in charge of the armory during the weekend hadn’t come in yet. Once he ran out of things to do he headed into the back to wait outside the door until an older horse with a sergeant’s insignia finally showed up. Nick was practically on the equine’s heels when she unlocked the arsenal and headed inside, hooves clacking against the hard stone floor. The look she gave him, one eyebrow arched and an ear folded back, threw him for a moment until he remembered that he wasn’t in uniform.

“Can I help you Mr…?”

“Officer, actually,” Nick said, glad that he’d remembered to grab his badge before heading to the station. He quickly pulled it out. “Nick Wilde, I’m not usually here on the weekend. Would it be possible for me to get my hands on a pair of those ceramic trauma plate inserts for my vest?”
The horse squinted at his badge for a moment, then wrote down the number before heading to the computer. “I’ll need to check if we have anything small enough for you. Why do you need it? Most officers are perfectly happy with just the duty vest when on duty.”

Something about the way the horse asked made Nick realize she was testing him. Answer wrong and she’d simply say that there wasn’t anything available. Lying didn’t strike him as particularly wise either. Anything he said was likely to be put on the requisition form.

“I had a gun pulled on me a couple of days ago while undercover,” he admitted, then gave a measured sigh. “Gave me a good scare since I didn’t have my vest on, and I decided I should probably play it safe until we’re finally allowed to arrest the guy that did it.”

“I see,” the horse said, already typing on the computer. “Pistol I presume? What caliber?”

“Didn’t think to ask. It looked big enough, though,” Nick said dryly.

“Yeah, most do when you’re looking down the barrel.” More typing, followed by a pause. “Huh.”

“Problem?”

She shook her head. “No, just didn’t realize how pathetic your duty vest is. Only rated at two-a. Plenty of things’ll blow right through that.”

Nick began to chuckle, then trailed off when the horse didn’t join him. “All the more reason for me to get those plates then, right?”

This time the horse nodded. “They’ll bump you up to level three-a. Maybe a little more, but three-a is good for pretty much any pistol round,” she said as she went back to typing. “Just don’t act like you’re invulnerable. If you take enough hits the plates will stop working, and they won’t do you any good if the bullet doesn’t hit your vest.”

“Believe me, getting shot isn’t my idea of a good time,” Nick said. “I’d just like to have as much as possible between me and the bullet if it ends up happening.”

“When do you need them by?”

“How about now? Is now possible?” Nick asked hopefully. “There’s a good chance I’ll be dealing with that guy again tomorrow.”

Apparently it was. He needed to fill out a couple of forms to make it happen, but miraculously the department had enough foresight to keep a stock of equipment for every officer at the precinct, even ones as small as he and Judy. Fifteen minutes later he was headed to his gear locker with a pair of trauma plates. They were heavier than he expected, and if his hunch was right using them wasn’t likely to make the vest breathe any easier. Still, when forced to pick between feeling a bit hotter and ending up in the hospital or worse, the choice was easy. He dropped the plates off in his locker then headed back out, glad to see that Judy had finally slipped free of Mammal Resource’s clutches.

“Where did you go? I’ve been looking for you for five minutes,” she said, the very tip of her ear twitching. “I was just about to call you.”

“I was just keeping myself busy while I waited. Took a little longer than I expected, sorry. You got a new place to stay now?”

“Sort of,” Judy said. “Come on, we can talk about it over lunch.”
Judy poked at her salad, glad that Nick didn’t seem to mind that she was venting all of her frustration while they ate. At least the weather was nice. Yesterday’s storm had left enough clouds behind that the temperature had remained quite comfortable, so they’d chosen to get their food to go and eat in the plaza outside the station. It was a shame that the time she’d wasted dealing with Mammal Resources had soured her mood to the point that she couldn’t properly enjoy herself.

“Anyway, after filling out the thousands of forms they gave me they finally decided that I was justified in wanting to be temporarily relocated. As if anyone would want to deal with all their nonsense for fun,” she continued while jabbing her plastic fork into a cherry tomato. “So then I got to fill out even more forms, of course. I guess it is nice that I can do everything in one place, but I didn’t realize just how much work a temporary move would be. Almost feels like it isn’t worth the effort.”

Nick took a bite of his veggie burger and chewed thoughtfully for a few seconds. “I’m sure you’d feel differently if Flip shows up at your apartment again,” he said, then swallowed. “You can’t be alert all the time, Carrots. Sooner or later he’d find a way to get the drop on you.”

“That’s why I said almost,” she huffed. “And don’t talk with your mouth full. It's gross.”

“Sorry,” Nick said, then took a quick drink of water. “At least after all the trouble you’ve got a fancy safe house to stay in.”

“Hotel.”

“Very funny,” Nick started, only to see the look on Judy’s face. “Wait... you aren’t joking? They’re putting you in a regular hotel?”

“It’s one of several near the station. I guess they have a deal with the ZPD, and a couple officers keep an eye on the area at all times.” She sighed, jabbing her salad again. “Safe houses are, quote, only for serious threats, unquote.”

“An effigy of you was hung outside your apartment window. How much more serious does it need to be?” Nick asked, feeling the fur along his spine standing on end.

“There needs to be an actual attack, apparently.”

Nick’s ears pinned as he looked down at his half eaten burger, then set it in his lap. “After an attack? The whole point of this is to make sure that doesn’t happen in the first place.”

“I was told that they go to great lengths to make sure nobody knows where I’m staying. They sent me a computer generated email that apparently randomly assigns me to one of the hotels, so nobody should know which one I’m staying in, or which room is mine,” she explained, though truthfully she didn’t place much confidence in the system. “So as long as I don’t tell anyone where I’ve gone I should be fine.”

“Unless someone follows you there,” Nick said. “I don’t like this, Judy.”

“Well, it’s what I’ve got for now so I just need to make it work,” she said and gave Nick a tight smile. “I’m willing to give it a try, and if anything else happens then I’ll talk to Bogo to see if he can do anything.”
“You sure? There’s no harm in asking him now.”

“I’m sure. This isn’t perfect, but I feel like I should give it a chance. Maybe it’s good enough, and Flip won’t be able to track me down before we arrest him,” she said, pushing her salad around again. “It’ll probably take him a while to realize I’m not at my apartment, so this gives me some breathing room at least, and if I suspect he’s found me I can ask to be moved to another hotel pretty easily.”

“Still don’t like it,” Nick said. “You’d think they would do more.”

“Maybe it isn’t so bad. I mean, most hotels use those key cards now, so at least Flip won’t be able to pick the lock,” Judy said hopefully. “So even if he does figure out where I am he won’t be able to get at me without causing a ruckus.”

Nick didn’t seem terribly convinced, but he picked up his burger again. “I suppose,” he said, then took another small bite.

Judy shared his skepticism, but despite her initial reluctance found that she did feel some relief despite the half-measures she’d been forced to accept. Nick had been right when he said she couldn’t keep alert all the time, and some safety was better than none at all. Plus there was a chance that Flip would either decide it wasn’t worth the trouble to track her down or lose interest.

“Check-in happens in an hour,” she mused, then looked up at her partner. “Would you like to come with and get a look at the room?”

“I thought nobody was supposed to know where you were staying.”

“Well, technically…” she paused to chew on a lettuce leaf, wishing her ears didn’t feel quite so warm. “But if anyone does know I’d like it to be you. Plus maybe we can put our heads together and think of ways to make it harder for Flip to get into my room if he does find it.”

“It really depends on the room,” Nick said, then hmmed softly. “Although I do know a lot of his tricks. Yeah. I’m sure we can come up with something.”
Case of Monday

*How do I look?*

Nick attached a selfie to the text before sending it off to Judy, his tail slowly swishing behind him while he waited for her reply. His idea to get a rental suit had mostly been driven by his wish to ensure his bullet proof vest wouldn’t be visible. The trauma plates he’d picked up didn’t add nearly as much bulk as he feared, but if he was going to be in a building with a bunch of thugs he didn’t want to risk anyone noticing he had it on. The sports jacket would be a big help on that front. He just wished it fit a little better.

After a couple of minutes his phone vibrated with a text from Judy: *Please tell me you’re joking.*

*Not Joking, Carrots.*

The reply came more quickly this time. *Is the Lt really letting you go like that?*

Nick glanced at Lieutenant Uncia and smiled. *She says I look like I belong in a bad Jack Savage movie, but yes. I convinced her that if Flip thinks I’m working for Mr. Big then I should look the part.*

*They didn’t care about that before.*

*They think I was trying to hide who I work for until now,* he messaged back. *And you still haven’t answered my original question, Fluff.*

Another long pause, then: *You look fine.*

*Just fine?*

*Alright. You look good. Satisfied?*

He could almost imagine her irritated expression. *Immensely. You already at the warehouse?*

*Around there.* Another quick reply, followed almost immediately by another. *Eating at the cafe. Once I’m done I’ll get into place.*

*Just be careful. Don’t let Flip see you.*

“Officer Wilde, what are you doing?”

Nick looked up to find the Lieutenant staring at him. “Just messaging Officer Hopps. She’s nearly in position.”

“Any problems?”

“She didn’t mention any,” he said, putting his phone away.

“Then stop distracting her,” Uncia said. “And start worrying about your part in this. You need to get them talking as much as possible. Think you can handle that?”

“That is one thing you don’t need to be concerned about. I’m sure Flip will have all sorts of things he wants to tell me about,” Nick said. “Still think you’re making a mistake by not arresting him, though.”
“You’ve made your feelings on this well known, Officer Wilde. Chief Bogo tells me that you were the one to come up with the idea for this little operation in the first place, so you should know we’re after bigger fish than a few smugglers.”

“I also know that sometimes clinging to the plan doesn’t make any sense,” Nick said, keeping his eyes on the feline. “Flip is bad news. He always has been, even back when I was a kid, but back then he was just doing the usual thing. He’s different now. I don’t know how, but I can tell. The things he said to me sent shivers down my spine.”

“We will not be making an arrest because your gut says we should,” Lieutenant Uncia told him, then tilted her head to one side. “If you really think he is that much of a problem then get him to say something incriminating. Then we can talk about arresting him.”

That was fair, he supposed. Also easier said than done. Flip might have a cruel streak, but he wasn’t reckless. Considering their history, Nick was confident that Flip was going to be extra careful. Still, it was worth a try.

The area around the warehouse looked quite different during the day. Not quite like a good neighborhood, but close. Judy was well aware there was a minor crime problem in this part of the city, only with the light she actually felt quite safe. She certainly wouldn’t have guessed there was a major smuggling operation not three buildings over.

But the sun was already on its way down, and she needed to get into position while she could still clear the area to make sure nobody had noticed her. Sighing, she folded her ears down and pulled her hoodie up over her head then picked up her modest satchel before starting down the street. She double checked her phone to make sure it was completely silenced on the way, and noticed she’d gotten another message from Nick.

Smiling, she opened it, then couldn’t help laughing as she saw that he’d sent her a few more selfies, this time holding his fingers out like a gun while striking suitably dramatic poses. In the background Lieutenant Uncia, Fangmeyer, and Snarlof could all be seen. The two other officers seemed to appreciate the fox’s antics, judging by their amused expressions. Surprisingly, even the Lieutenant seemed willing to tolerate Nick’s behavior.

Got that all out of your system? Her thumbs flew across the touchscreen as she sent off the message.

Almost, came the reply. Something is missing though.

And what would that be?

Another quick answer: In the movies the hero always has a pretty lady hanging on his arm. Interested?

Judy was thankful that the hoodie covered up her ears as she could actually feel them turning a deep shade of red. Even so, she self-consciously checked if anyone was watching before she answered. Not really dressed for the part. I’d need a gown.

Darn. Maybe next time.

Her face continued to burn as she put her phone away again, then once more checked that nobody
was paying attention to her before entering the alley beside the warehouse. Nick had assured her that nobody would care what she did so long as she acted like she belonged, but a little extra caution couldn’t hurt. So far he’d been right, though. Everyone was too busy doing their own thing to bother watching what some bunny was up to.

Once she was off the main street she felt a little safer. A final glance over her shoulder to make sure nobody was watching, then got a running start before jumping at the wall. A firm kick rebounded her off the brick surface, aimed right for the fire escape. She got just high enough to catch the handrail. Pulling herself up the rest of the way was easy enough, and then she was climbing the stairs to the roof.

Near the top she opened her satchel and pulled out the radio she’d brought. There was a burst of static when she turned it on. She hurriedly turned the volume knob all the way down, then made sure she was on the correct frequency before keying it.

“Officer Hopps checking in. I’ve reached my position, about to secure the area.”

Lieutenant Uncia responded almost immediately. “Copy, Hopps. Be careful, but try to finish quickly so I can kick this twit out the door.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Judy clipped the radio to her belt and pulled out her tranquilizer pistol, then peered over the lip of the roof to make sure nobody was already up there before she hopped up. Even though it looked clear she still took the effort to check the entire roof just in case Flip had thought to hire mice or some other small mammals to keep an eye on things. She was well aware of how often others underestimated her due to her small stature and didn’t intend to make the same mistake, not when all it took was a couple of minutes worth of extra effort.

After she’d satisfied herself that it was safe, she made sure the access door to the roof was locked so nobody could simply burst through and catch her by surprise. Then she carefully peeked through the skylights while there was still enough light for her to get a clear picture of the situation down below. There were already several mammals busy organizing crates, and although there was no trace of Flip yet she did get a good look at Conrad. She took the opportunity to snap a few pictures of the workers with the hope that the ZPD might be able to identify them later, then found a good vantage point and settled in.

“Site secure,” she said, after keying her radio again. “They’ve already got a half-dozen mammals moving crates around down there. No sign of Flip, but his number two looks like he is keeping an eye on everything. I’m sending the photos now.”

“Good work, Hopps. Try to get a picture of any mammal that shows up.”

She acknowledged the instructions as she tried to find a comfortable position to wait, her ears perked up alertly so she could listen to what was happening inside. After a few minutes her phone vibrated again. Since there wasn’t anything else going on she checked it.

*Keep on your toes, Carrots. Be safe.*

There was a certain art to walking out at night in a suit without drawing trouble that Nick had never
mastered. Being part of a larger group obviously helped, especially when certain members were well
known for working with Mr. Big. There was also a certain dangerous confidence that he couldn’t
really pull off. He was better at alternating between sincere and smarmy as the situation dictated, but
for as much as many mammals disliked foxes they weren’t exactly considered dangerous. Just
untrustworthy. Wolves, bears, and wolverines—those were the ones you didn’t want to tangle with.
Around a fox mammals simply kept an eye on their wallet.

But he could fake it well enough to make it to the warehouse, and since Flip already believed he was
working with Mr. Big once again he would be safe once he got inside. Safer anyway. It was with
that in mind that he got a taxi to drop him off right out front and only paused to give his appearance a
final once over. Not too cleanly pressed. Just rough enough around the edges that nobody would
mistake him for a respectable mammal.

As with the last meeting, Conrad was the first one to meet him. Work was already underway, with
most of the workers busy moving crates out of one of the storage rooms and onto the main floor. The
crates themselves were fairly large, they came all the way up to Nick’s chest, however they couldn’t
have been very heavy as it only took two mammals to move them. Moreover, there wasn’t the telltale
clink of glass on glass that would give away bottles of alcohol. While nobody was paying attention
to him he snapped a few pictures of the boxes with his phone for later, when he could examine them
more closely without drawing attention to himself.

Only after the wildcat made a call did Flip finally make an appearance. Judging by how quickly the
other fox arrived he must have been watching from somewhere nearby, a detail that Nick tucked
away in case it would prove useful later.

“What is this?” Flip asked, gesturing to Nick with both hands and giving a laugh. “Who do you think
you’re impressing, Nicky?”

“Just a little reminder of who I’m working for, and how lucky you are that I chose not to inform Mr.
Big of who he’s helping,” Nick answered, letting the implied threat hang in the air. “If I was trying to
impress you I would have asked Koslov to join me. I’m sure he’d love to meet you again.”

The remark was enough to shut Flip’s mouth, if only for a moment while he eyed Nick suspiciously.
“I am not here to play games, Nicky.”

“No, you just aren’t used to dealing with someone that can play back,” Nick said evenly, slowly
swishing his tail behind him. “I’m the one doing you a huge favor, Flip. Now are we going to get
down to business, or should I just call the whole thing off and let the ZPD start crawling up your tail
again?”

Judy lightly chewed on the end of her pen as she focused on Nick’s conversation with Flip, sifting
through what they were saying in an attempt to take note of the relevant details. She paid special
attention to every name that Flip mentioned, jotting them down onto the notepad she’d laid out
beside her. Many were aliases, but if they managed to track down any of the accomplices there was a
chance they could be squeezed for information later.

She wished they’d move on to the actual work, but apparently Flip wanted to make sure the ZPD
really had cleared out of the neighborhood first. Nick used the time to make small talk and got Flip to
admit to several crimes in the process. Breaking and entering. Theft. Selling drugs. Smuggling.
Nothing they didn’t already know, and no specific details, but she relayed it all to Lieutenant Uncia just the same.

At last a kid came in from outside to tell Flip that he and his friends hadn’t been able to find any trace of the cops. It was difficult to tell from where she was, but she thought the boy was a badger. Perhaps fourteen or fifteen years old. Despite the poor lighting she snapped a picture of the kid as Flip paid him before sending him off once again.

“Satisfied?” she heard Nick ask.

“Yeah, yeah, you did your part,” Flip answered. “Alright everyone, lets finish this.”

There was a sudden burst of activity as the gathered mammals inside began to move once more. Just as quickly Nick raised his voice to speak over the noise.

“Just one moment. I believe you’re forgetting something. Part of the deal is that you let Mr. Big know what you’re bringing in,” he said.

“What’s he care?” came a gruff voice that she’d come to recognize as belonging to the wildcat Nick called Conrad.

“I’m hearing a lot of complaining from mammals that are getting something for free,” Nick commented, his voice carrying a sharp note of reprimand. “Mr. Big wants to know, and I’m not in the habit of asking him to explain himself. If you want to know you’re perfectly free to call him up yourself to demand answers, just don’t expect me to stand close to you afterward. I’m fond of living.”

Judy waited with baited breath until Flip finally spoke again. “Let him do what he wants, Conrad. It doesn’t matter.”

Ears perked up, she dared to peek down into the building in time to see Nick moving to one of the boxes. Flip gestured to a skunk, who grabbed a crowbar and began to pry the lid open. Sensing an opportunity, she quietly moved for a better view and brought up her camera to wait. One corner came loose, then another. She checked to make sure the flash was off and that it was in low-light mode, then zoomed in all the way. As the lid was finally pulled free she took a series of pictures, then quickly ducked back down.

Down below she heard Nick speak up again, confusion in his tone. “Flowers? You’re smuggling flowers?”

Nick quietly watched Flip’s men load the final few crates onto a truck as he wondered what the other fox was doing. He’d insisted on being shown the contents of several other crates that he selected at random, just to be sure that Flip wasn’t trying to pull one over on him, but they all contained the same thing. Little, white clover blossoms. Nothing else. Not even a hint of contraband. He pocketed a few for evidence just in case, though it seemed like a waste of time.

When questioned, Flip merely shrugged and reminded him that today was only supposed to be a test. That still didn’t add up to Nick. Even a test like this would have operating costs. Clover flowers were perfectly legal, even with the current shortage it would be impossible to make enough to cover all the expenses. Tonight was going to cost Flip a few thousand at least. That sort of behavior was going to
make keeping the whole operation running impossible, unless…

“What the heck are you planning to bring in?” he asked Flip, his tail slowly flicking about behind him.

Flip gave him a sideways look. “Just the usual stuff, Nicky.”

“Stop being obtuse.” Nick said, “and stop lying. This dry run of yours is costing you a small fortune, isn’t it? So whatever you plan to bring in has to be big enough of a deal to cover the expense.”

“There you go worrying about money again. Don’t worry, Mr. Big will get a fair cut with what I’m planning to move next.”

“It better not be more flowers,” Nick warned. “I swear, Flip, you better not be trying to make problems for me or I’ll make sure they come back on you. You should know by now, it all runs downhill.”

“If you’re that eager to find out just come by Wednesday. Same time. That’s when we’ll be bringing out the real stuff.” Flip gave him a toothy grin. “Heck, feel free to bring as many of Mr. Big’s toughs as you like. We’ll have fun, just like old times.”

He sure remembers things differently than I do, Nick thought. “Two days doesn’t give me much time to set everything up.”

“Really? Worried that Internal Affairs investigation that’s started sniffing at you will catch wind of something if you aren’t careful?”

The off-hand question caught Nick so completely by surprise that he couldn’t keep his face straight as his mind raced. Normally he would assume that Flip was making a threat, but he doubted the other fox had any ability to influence IA’s investigation. That left him with the problem of how to address the situation. His knee-jerk reaction was simple denial. It was definitely the easiest route, but then he couldn’t learn anything.

Better to play along. “Surprised you heard about that. You aren’t exactly the type with the resources to bribe city officials, Flip.”

“Bribes. That’s a good one,” Flip laughed. “Maybe that’s how things went in the past, but after Bellwether it’s gotten much easier. I’ll give her one thing, she may have been a bitch in sheep’s clothing, but she turned out to be very good for business.”

“You expect me to believe she partnered with a fox? Really?”

Flip laughed again. “Nothing like that, though I’m surprised I have to spell it out for you Nicky. You really do focus too much on money. Surely you noticed how many preds lost their jobs while Bellwether was running the show, especially in the government.”

Although Flip didn’t elaborate, Nick didn’t need him to. It was obvious enough. So many mammals finding themselves without a job, and the few that managed to keep their place often got moved to a worse position while taking a hefty pay cut. A lot of desperate preds. A lot of angry preds, too. Just the sort Flip loved to manipulate.
Judy awoke a full half-hour before her alarm went off, and found herself staring at the ceiling trying to figure out what had disturbed her. Her first thought was that someone must be trying to get into the room, so she remained perfectly still and strained her ears until she was satisfied that wasn’t the case. Just the sound of water in pipes, the harsh buzz of the room’s AC, and the faint sounds of hotel staff getting ready for the day. All strange and unfamiliar sounds.

She sighed and rubbed her face, then got up and checked the preparations she and Nick had made anyway. Door was still bolted with the chair braced under the handle. Pencils still jammed into the widow tracks. A simple dowel cut to size laid in the sliding door to the hotel’s courtyard and pool ensured the door wouldn’t open even if it was left unlocked, and a wedge at the top prevented it from being lifted out of the tracks. Everything remained, thankfully, in place.

Just skittishness then. Judy hated feeling skittish. With a sigh she pulled the curtains closed once more and sat on her bed, then grabbed her phone.

To her surprise she found herself back on *Lifeline*. She’d just navigated her way there automatically, like it was second nature. Her ears folded back as she considered that, wondering if maybe it meant she was using the community as a crutch instead of dealing with her uncertainties herself, then shook off the silly notion and took a deep breath before she checked the topic she’d started.

The response her questions about Nick’s ability to sneak up on her had gotten was much stronger than she’d ever anticipated. It’d only been up for a couple of days, but there were already well over a hundred replies. She stared at the number, her tail flicking lightly behind her as she felt momentarily overwhelmed, then got to reading.

Apparently her situation wasn’t at all unique, which was a relief. Many posters that identified themselves as prey mentioned having similar worries initially, while the preds admitted that some of their partners had brought up similar concerns. In every case the responses assured her that what she was feeling was caused by lack of familiarity, and would fade with time.

The question of if she should talk it over with Nick was…decidedly more mixed. A few replies were concerned that raising her worries so early on might signal that she was having second thoughts about the relationship, while others applauded her desire to get the relationship off on the right foot by building it on a solid foundation of communication. The majority, however, were more cautious and believed that talking was a good idea in principle, but depended on who she would be talking with and how she chose to broach the topic.

She was able to glean a few tips. The most important was that she obviously shouldn’t suggest that it was something wrong with him, or anything that needed to be fixed. And of course she should pick the time carefully, not trying to force the conversation or interrupting anything else. A time when they could both focus, and safely end the talk if either of them started to feel uncomfortable.

As she reached the end of the thread she found all the advice that had been thrown her way mostly just left her with new questions, however she felt a little better about everything just the same. She made a quick post to thank everyone who had given advice, then bit her lip as she checked the time.

5:45AM. Even Nick would be awake by now. Still, she hesitated a moment before dialing him up.

Only two rings before he answered. “Hello, Judy? Is something wrong?”
“No, just getting used to spending the night in a strange place,” she admitted, lightly bouncing the heel of her left foot against the bed. “Been awake for a little while and wanted to hear a friendly voice. Hope I’m not being a bother.”

“Well, I’ve got a few minutes before I need to get ready for the day,” Nick said. “What’s on your mind Carrots?”

Things I’m not sure how to say, she thought and shook her head. “Do you think we can do something this weekend?”

“Of course. What did you have in mind?”

Judy nearly suggested that they have a movie night before she remembered that he didn’t have a TV anymore. Her voice caught in her throat as her mind searched for something they could enjoy together.

“Um…maybe we could grab a pizza and head back to your place?”

Because Wednesday’s operation would functionally be a repeat of Monday, Nick had dared to hope that Lieutenant Uncia would be content to use the same plan as they had yesterday. Second verse, same as the first. Everything had worked out just fine last time, after all. No need to reinvent the wheel.

The feline seemed determined to find work for everyone, however. That morning they’d been forced to sit through a debriefing where everyone shared what they did over the course of the op and suggested ways it could be improved tomorrow—and because everyone found themselves on the spot unexpectedly they all were practically forced to mention desired changes just to keep up appearances. A bunch of little changes shuffling a perfectly good plan around in ways that, in Nick’s opinion, made no difference. About half way through he suddenly realize the horrible truth.

This was what his job had become. Against all odds the lieutenant’s meetings seemed to be multiplying. Nobody could dare make any changes on the fly anymore; all the briefings and meetings and debriefings would have beaten it into their heads that this operation was too important to let any single mammal make a decision on their own. Before long they’d probably start to hold meetings over the radio while still in the field.

Actually, that is a little too far even for Uncia, Nick thought, then pursed his lips. Probably.

Still, it was beginning to wear on Nick so badly that it had actually driven him to make the decision to work through his lunch just so he could put his mind to something different for an hour. Besides, he was still trying to prove to Bogo that he could be a good boy, and putting in a little extra work to close another case couldn’t possibly hurt.

The carrier had finally gotten back to him about who had purchased that burner phone. Or, more accurately, they confirmed what he already knew: that it had been purchased with cash. They were also able to give him two other useful pieces of information, however. First, that it had been bought from a Super Wallaby-Mart. By itself that was unremarkable, however the second tidbit was much more useful.

Whoever had bought the phone had bought nine others in the same transaction. Sloppy. It was much
safer to buy burner phones one at a time, and from different stores. No normal mammal walked into a place to buy ten phones. It was the type of weird detail that made a mammal stick out.

Either someone had been in a tremendous hurry, or he’d gotten overconfident. Either way, it didn’t matter. He had a location, and from the transaction he had a time. And Wallaby-Marts were heavily trafficked enough to warrant a number of camera’s watching them. The dozen cameras still made for a lot of footage to go through, but as usual Judy was more than happy to help. More importantly, she was giving him advice on how to use the cumbersome system.

“You don’t have to use the seek to fast-forward to the time you want,” she told him, then moved her mouse over to one of her video feeds. “You can just click on the feed you are interested in and then enter the command ‘goto’ and a time to make it jump there.”

Nick tried it and blinked as he immediately ended up where he wanted. “Is there a way to do that for all the cameras I’m watching?”

“Um…” Judy paused for a moment then typed on her computer. “Ah. Yeah, looks like if you just use the goto command without selecting a feed then it jumps all the ones you’re currently watching to that time.”

“This would be easy if we had Wallaby-Mart’s security tapes,” Nick said as he jumped the footage forward to when the phones had been bought. “You know they’ve got cameras watching the registers.”

“Did you ask them for it? They’ll probably be happy to help,” Judy suggested.

“Already did. They said it’ll take them a day or two to pull the footage.”

“Well, if we don’t find anything we can always look again after they provide it,” Judy said brightly. “A day or two isn’t that long to wait.”

As usual, Nick found Judy’s optimism contagious. A smile touched his muzzle even as he slowly shook his head in disbelief. Of course she was right. In the grand scheme of things a few more days wasn’t likely to make much of a difference. Watching a half dozen security recordings each was still tedious work, but the dose of brightness did a lot to make it seem less insipid.

At first Nick simply watched for anyone walking out with a bag full of phone boxes, but after running the footage ahead a full hour nothing stuck out. Frustrating, but perhaps he should have guessed that the still-unknown perp would be bright enough to take some precautions. He had gone to the trouble of getting burner phones in the first place, after all.

So he reviewed the footage again, this time simply keeping an eye out for anyone that seemed suspicious. Out of place. He was well aware how much of a reach that could be; plenty of mammals could seem suspicious just because they felt nervous for completely innocent, unrelated reasons. Upcoming health tests. About to propose. Baby on the way. It wasn’t the sort of thing he liked to put too much stock in, however in this instance he happened to notice a fox walking out of the supermarket section with a cart full of groceries.

That in itself wasn’t particularly remarkable except for one detail: it was Flip, and cooking was the sort of mundane activity that Flip simply hated. He liked to style himself as a crime boss in his own right, not the sort of poor schlub that had to prepare his own meals.

Nick watched as the footage rolled on and Flip approached a station wagon being driven by a familiar wolf. Sensing a chance, he enlarged the area around Flip until the image began to blur, and
watched carefully as they loaded the vehicle. A toothy grin broke out on his mouth.

“We got him,” he announced, almost unable to believe that it would prove to be something so mundane that tripped up the other fox.

“You found something?” Judy asked and leaned over to peek at his screen. “Is that Flip?”

“It’s him,” Nick said confidently. “I’m sure that Wallaby-Mart’s footage will confirm it.”

“This is great,” Judy said, her ears perked up. “If it was really him then he’s involved in Nighthowlers somehow. The lieutenant will have to let us arrest him.”

Nick blinked, his ears slowly standing up, then jumped out of his chair and started feeling his pockets. “Oh, this is perfect. I’ve been waiting for this moment to come ever since I enrolled in the academy.”

Judy gave him a quizzical look. “You were hoping you’d get the chance to bust him?”

“No, this is way more important,” Nick assured her, finally finding his sunglasses in his breast pocket.

“Nick what are you—” Judy started, then cut off the moment she saw his aviators. “No. Absolutely not.”

He pointedly ignored her. “You know, we really should have realized it was him,” he said as he flicked the sunglasses open dramatically.

“Nick, no—”

But Judy was already too late; at last his moment had come. He slipped the aviators on and grinned at her.

“After all, it was a flip phone.”
The most difficult part of the new plan, in Judy’s opinion, was figuring out a way to sneak Fangmeyer and Snarlof into the area without drawing attention. A single bunny could slip into someplace fairly easily, most mammals paid bunnies only slightly more mind than a mouse or squirrel. Of course Judy had known they’d figure something out. At the very least Nick would have some trick up his sleeve for them to use, but Lieutenant Uncia surprised her by coming up with a solution first.

A nearby building had a room for rent, and the lieutenant was able to secure it by paying cash up front. Snarlof would be posing as the new tenant and Fangmeyer would be the friend helping him to move in. Judy just needed to show up on her own later, and they would be able to keep an eye on the warehouse until it was time for Nick to arrive. Clean and simple.

And, since they were out to make an arrest, this time they would actually be armed with more than just cameras. When the time came Snarlof would be on the roof with a tranq rifle while Fangmeyer watched the first floor of the building with a tranq pistol. Frustratingly, that left Judy to keep an eye on the general area from the safety of the room they’d rented, but if necessary she had her taser and could jump in to lend a hand until reinforcements could be called.

With everyone in place all they needed to do was wait for Nick to go inside and confirm Flip was present before they called all of precinct one in to bust everyone, Nick included. Since Flip already knew about the IA investigation they had a ready-made excuse for what had “gone wrong,” so there was a chance the same trick could be done a second time provided a different plant was used. In theory at least. Nick remained skeptical about that last bit.

“Alright everyone, on your toes,” Lieutenant Uncia said, her voice crackling over the radio. “Officer Wilde just got the call that they’re ready for him, so keep your eyes peeled.”

Fangmeyer was the first to answer. “Everything down here looks clear. What about you Hopps?”

“I haven’t seen anything either,” she agreed, then hesitated a moment before continuing. “Lieutenant, are you sure they said they’re ready? Nobody’s gone into that warehouse since I started watching.”

“Understood, Officer Hopps. Just keep watching for now, but don’t be surprised if you don’t see anyone. A lot of these places have hidden entrances,” Uncia responded.

Which Judy already knew was true for this particular warehouse. Nick had already told her they could use some maintenance tunnels to get in and out, though he didn’t know specifically where they led, however something still felt off. She glanced at the sun outside, then checked the time on her phone. Sunset was nearly two hours away. Unless Nick walked he would arrive long before it got dark out.

She decided to text Nick. Nobody’s gone in. The lt says they’re probably using a hidden entrance. That make sense to you?

Nobody’s gone in? At all?

Not that I’ve seen, she messaged. Been watching for a while too.

There was a brief pause before his response came back. It’s possible she’s right.

Judy frowned at the message. Usually when Nick hedged that way he didn’t feel particularly
confident in the statement. Seconds later her impression was proved correct when another text appeared.

I’ll be careful. Thanks for the warning, Carrots.

Nick lightly drummed his claws against his knee, looking out the window as he thought about the warning Judy had just given him. Technically the lieutenant was right, there was a hidden way inside the warehouse and Flip might just be playing extra safe. That even made a certain level of sense if he was trying to move something as big as Nick suspected. Who wanted to lose a big score at the last moment after investing so much into the scheme?

But if that was the case why make the move while it was still light out? Perhaps the argument could be made that working in the open to give the impression that nothing shady was going on, only if that was the goal then sneaking the workers inside worked cross-purposes to the goal. Flip wasn’t the sort to make that kind of mistake, so there had to be some other reason.

Necessity? Things in the criminal world had a tendency to happen when they happened. Many of the opportunities that came along were one-time affairs. There was plenty of regular work too, of course, but normally that was just enough to pay the bills. If anyone wanted to turn a profit it meant recognizing and grabbing hold of chances as they came. A buyer comes along and wants something at a very specific time, or there is a one-time opportunity to lay hands on some choice contraband. Those sorts of things happened, and anyone with the nerve and skill could do very well for themselves. If they didn’t mind the risk.

It was possible Flip had happened on exactly that sort of deal. Clearly he had access to Nighthowler toxin, or at least drugs tainted with it. Maybe he was finally able to get his hands on enough to make it worth the risk of smuggling into the city, but he had no control on when the “product” would arrive.

Only a light tingle in the back of Nick’s mind told him it was something else. Flip didn’t trust him. Hardly a surprise, he didn’t trust Flip either, but if that was the driving factor behind what was happening then Flip might be prepared for things to go south. The arrest might be more dangerous than they first guessed. He could hardly expect Lieutenant Uncia to amend the plan based on some vague worries however.

When he got out of the cab he spent a moment getting his bearings while pretending to straighten out his suit. The street was empty as far as he could tell, but several buildings down he spotted Fangmeyer through a window. Judy would be on the second floor where she’d have a better view, but if she was watching right then she was being careful enough that he couldn’t see her. And of course there was Snarlof, pretending to do maintenance on the building’s water tank.

Nick headed straight into the alley behind the warehouse, listening carefully for any sound of movement inside. If there was any work going on inside he couldn’t hear it, but then Judy’s ears were much better than his. If they were trying to be quiet he wouldn’t be able to hear them through the cinder block. He pulled his phone out and dialed Judy.

“Nick, is there something wrong?”

“I can’t hear anyone in there,” he said, letting his frustration show through. “They might just be
keeping quiet, but I won’t know for sure until I step inside.”

“Well, that’s what you’re supposed to do anyway so what’s the problem?” Judy asked.

“Only that there might be a gang of mammals lying in wait until I step through the door,” Nick said.

“I don’t know what to tell you Nick. I can’t exactly come down there to hold your hand while you do this,” Judy said, chuckling lightly.

A smile broke out on his muzzle. “That’s probably for the best, Flip was never big on meeting new mammals, but I would like to have someone close by while I sneak in.”

This time Judy wasn’t as quick to answer. “You know the lieutenant isn’t going to like that,” she warned.

“She’ll like it much less if I walk in blind and get fox-napped again.”

“One moment,” Judy said, followed by the sound of her talking to a radio. He waited anxiously until she got back on the phone. “I’ll be right down.”

She met Nick in the alley after a quick check to make sure the street was still clear. Fortunately there wasn’t a soul to be seen even though it was still a half hour until sunset, so she was free to dash across the street to find him with an ear pressed against the warehouse’s wall.

“You owe me big time,” she told him. “Lieutenant Uncia is pissed.”

Nick gave her a lazy smile, pointedly ignoring what she’d just said. “Do you hear anyone inside?”

A sigh slipped from her and she tilted her ears toward the building, holding still. After a moment she shook her head. “No.”

“Think you’d be able to if there was someone in there?”

“Only if they were moving around,” she admitted. “And then only if they were making a lot of noise or close to where we are. Thick walls like this are pretty good at muffling sounds.”

“I was afraid of that. Let me give you a boost so you can drop the fire escape ladder for me,” Nick said, already moving into position.

“Nick, if you just sneak inside like you said and you’ll find out if it is empty or not,” she pointed out.

“Yes, but I’m not going to use the front door. Not if there might be mammals hiding inside trying to go unnoticed.”

She tapped her foot a few times, then gave another sigh before getting a running start and allowing Nick to give her a boost up to the first floor of the fire escape. The catch for the ladder was rusted, so she was forced to brace herself and give it a solid kick to make it budge. It came down with a clang that seemed to echo through the alley, the sharpness of it hurting her ears. Her heart was in her throat as she waited for someone to come investigate the noise, sure that it must’ve been heard across the entire block. But Nick was already scrambling up the ladder, apparently unconcerned about getting rust on his suit as he dragged himself up over the edge then immediately started up the stairs.
The radio at her hip crackled to life with Fangmeyer’s voice. “What was that God-awful noise?”

Judy wished she didn’t have to answer as she brought the receiver up to her mouth. “Officer Wilde and I are going to peek in from the roof to see if anyone is here,” she said, mentally adding a single word. “Has anyone come out to check on the sound?”

There was a brief pause. “I got you. They’re on the fire escape.” It was Snarlof. “No, it doesn’t look like anyone’s come out.”

“Looks clear from down here too,” Fangmeyer added. “Whole street is empty. Mammals out here must really keep to their own.”

Her ears came up at that comment and she keyed the radio again. “You’re sure about that?”

“Positive,” Fangmeyer said. “Completely empty, same as it’s been all day.”

Her concern must have shown because when Nick offered her a hand to help her up onto the roof he gave her a tight smile. “Yeah, that’s not normal. The mammals that live in the area must know that something bad is going to happen, so they’re keeping their heads down.”

“Maybe we should have Fangmeyer ask the residents what has them so worried then,” Judy suggested.

“They probably don’t know anything useful,” Nick said, his ears tilted back. “At most they just have a sense that something isn’t right.”

Once she was on the roof, Judy hurried over to the nearest skylight and peered inside. The angle of the sun wasn’t right to shine in through the glass, but just enough light filtered through that she could see. Inside was a tangle of shadows cast by the various shelves and internal supports. Not a hint of movement, however.

“See anything?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Nick said, moving to another skylight for a different angle. “Doesn’t look like they’re here.”

Judy’s ears practically fell flat behind her. Lieutenant Uncia was going to be furious. Clearly someone had warned Flip, or they’d been noticed while setting up the operation, or he’d simply gotten skittish and bailed. It didn’t really matter. In the end it all amounted to the same thing: wasted effort.

Reluctantly, she called it in. “This is Officer Hopps, the place looks deserted. I don’t think anyone’s here.”

During the pause that followed she braced herself, half expecting Uncia to demand to know what had gone wrong. Instead, when the snow leopard replied her tone was tightly controlled. She didn’t sound pleased by any means, but at least she wasn’t yelling.

“Are you sure the warehouse is empty?” she asked. “Where are you right now?”

“We—Officer Wilde and I—are looking in through the skylights. There are certainly places we can’t see inside, so maybe someone is hiding where we can’t see. Can’t imagine why they would bother though.”

Uncia sighed over the radio. “Understood, Hopps. See if you two can’t get inside just to make sure.
Have Wilde go by himself first just in case.”

Upon overhearing the order Nick walked over to the door in the roof and gave the knob an experimental twist. “Hey Carrots? Can you let the lieutenant know the door is locked?”

While Judy was distracted by talking with Uncia, Nick quickly picked the lock. Getting all the pins set properly wasn’t that difficult, most mammals would be appalled by how easily off-the-shelf locks could be defeated, but the mechanism must have rusted because actually getting it to turn was difficult. He only just managed to get it open by the time Judy was no longer distracted, and quickly retrieved his picks before she saw them.

“Lieutenant says we’re clear to force an entry. This building is part of an ongoing investigation,” Judy said.

“Thanks Carrots,” he said as he pushed the door open, flashing her a cocky smile. “I’ll just be a moment to make sure things look clear, then I’ll call you down.”

“Be careful, Nick.”

Normally he would have come back with some sort of smug assurance, but the concern etched onto her face stopped him. Instead he dipped his ears back and quietly nodded, then promptly slipped inside and headed down the stairs.

The low light inside played tricks on his eyes at first, making him see shapes that weren’t actually there until he began to acclimate. That, coupled with the way every step he took on the steel stairway echoed faintly through the empty space set him on edge. He’d never liked empty buildings, the idea of an entire structure being completely devoid of other mammals just felt eerie and reminded him of the various ghost stories he’d heard as a child. Plus, if a place had been abandoned there tended to be a good reason for it.

He was glad that he could see Judy keeping an eye on him from above.

“Hello?” he called out, figuring that anyone with ears already knew he was there. “Was I the only one who bothered to show up to this party?”

Silence.

His feet finally found the bottom floor, so he took the opportunity to walk the length of the building, peering into the side rooms while his ears strained to catch any hint of noise. There had been mammals here fairly recently, their scent still lingered in the air although there was some sort of foul odor was doing its best to distract his nose. That didn’t bode well. Why would they bother to sneak their way in only to bail at the last moment? Perhaps someone had tipped Flip off.

One more quick pass, just to make sure he hadn’t overlooked anything, then he cupped his hands to his mouth and called up to Judy. “The place is completely empty. Someone was here though, so we should see if any evidence got left behind.”

“I’ll be right down to help you look,” she shouted back. “Just give me a moment to call this in.”

“Sure about that? Something smells really ripe down here,” he warned.
Judy was undeterred, of course, and moments later came bounding down the stairs with her phone out to provide light. She took in her surroundings once she reached the ground, ears swiveling this way and that. Nick watched in anticipation of when the stench would hit her, but when the time came her nose only wrinkled slightly before she shook her head and closed the distance between them.

“I guess it does smell a little,” she said as her eyes searched the ground for clues. “Any idea what it is?”

“No clue. At first I was worried someone didn’t quite make it to the restroom.”

She laughed. “It isn’t quite that bad.”

Nick eyed the smaller bunny suspiciously, certain that she was just putting up a front, but her smile appeared genuine and she continued to move with that eager bounce of hers. “This really isn’t bothering you?” he asked. “I wasn’t joking before. I half expected to find something horrible in one of the side rooms.”

“It certainly isn’t pleasant, but it sort of reminds me of the farm,” she said, then knelt down and pulled out an evidence bag. “I think I’ve got some fur. Doesn’t look like it’s been here for very long.”

He leaned over to see what she was talking about, and saw a tuft of fur that had been caught in the joint of a steel shelf. Dark gray with individual white hairs mixed in. Some mammal had probably accidental brushed against shelving unit while walking past.

“Farms really smell that bad?”

“They can,” Judy said as she snapped a picture, then collected the evidence. “Modern farms use a surprising number of chemicals.Honestly, when I got down here my first thought was that it sort of smelled like our fields after spreading fresh…fertilizer…”

“Huh. Maybe they have some sort of growing operation hidden in here somewhere,” Nick said, continuing to sweep the area.

Judy didn’t answer. At first he thought she’d spotted another clue, but when he turned back she was shining her light into the darker corners of the warehouse with a worried expression.

“Carrots?”

“We need to get out of here,” she said, hurrying for the front door.

The abrupt change caught him off guard, but he followed her lead instinctively. “What? Why?”

“Fertilizer, Nick,” she explained. “A mammal can make bombs out of that stuff.”

He stumbled, feeling like his life was flashing before his eyes for a moment. Flip was transporting explosives? No, that was wrong. Whatever was giving off the scent was still here somewhere. Possibly in one of the steel drums, or in a crate, or in any of the thousand of other hiding places in the building. If Flip was really trying to move something like that he wouldn’t have simply abandoned it unless there was no choice. That left only one other explanation: it was intended for him.

“Wait,” he said, grabbing Judy’s hand. “Not the front door.”

“Nick, the thing could be on a timer. If we don’t hurry—”
“It could also be wired to the door,” Nick said, already pulling her toward a window instead. “If Flip left a bomb here then he was expecting to get me with it. Without your warning earlier I would have just entered normally.”

Understanding lit up in Judy’s eyes and she bit her lip, looking around with worry again. Fortunately the building’s windows weren’t barred. They were rusted shut however, so they struggled with them for a few seconds until Judy spotted a pry bar they could use to force them to budge. Then they practically tumbled into the street in their rush to get out, and sprinted across the road into the building they’d set up for observation. Both Fangmeyer and Snarlof were there to meet them, and once they were safe Judy reported to the lieutenant that they thought there was a bomb inside the warehouse.

The whole while Nick’s mind was racing, trying to figure out what Flip was up to. He knew the other fox would be glad to see him killed, but a bomb? Certainly that was overkill. Perhaps he ought to be flattered.

There was more to it though, Nick was sure of that much. So Flip plants a bomb in his smuggling operation, what then? Nick was well aware that a simple bullet to the face would be more than enough to kill him, so there had to be a reason for the spectacle. Bomb goes off, and perhaps Nick is unlucky enough to get caught in the blast. He dies…and then…

Well, the ZPD responds to the explosion of course. It does that either way, in fact, so that has to be the real goal. Officers tied up investigating the scene, looking for bomb parts, keeping civilians back until the area is confirmed clear of other devices. Something like that would tie down a lot of officers, making it easier to move things around everywhere else in the city.

“The lieutenant says she’s got the bomb squad headed over right now,” Fangmeyer said, pulling Nick out of his thoughts.

He simply smiled at the tiger. “Can you tell her this is a diversion?”

“You think he’s using a bomb as a diversion?” Judy asked, incredulous.

Before Nick could answer the air seemed to compress as the building shivered under the shockwave, the sound of the explosion loud enough that all Nick could hear was a dull ringing. Judy dropped to the ground with a cry and covered her ears, face contorted. Only Snarlof seemed unfazed by the concussion as he strode over to the doorway and looked out into the street.

Half dazed, Nick went to see what the large polar bear was looking at. The whole front face of the warehouse had been blown out, exposing the interior. Across the street a second building tilted precariously, having had the misfortune of being in the direct path of the explosion.

Flip was about to get his wish; they’d been decoyed. The ZPD would be off his back for at least a few days, making it safe for him to move anything he wanted into the city.
“Welcome back, viewers. This is Fabienne Growley with Good Morning Zootopia—your first and only stop for news in the morning.

“First up, an update on the warehouse explosion that rocked Savanna Central yesterday evening just before sunset. Although the structure was empty at the time, surrounding buildings were pelted with debris resulting in over 30 injured mammals, three of which remain in critical condition. Fortunately, several ZPD officers were nearby at the time and were able to render first aid and evacuate the damaged buildings until emergency vehicles could arrive.

“The reason behind the explosion has still not been announced, with Chief Bogo of ZPD Precinct One refusing to comment at this time, but in a late night press release the city government commented that—although they have yet to rule anything out—they believe it may have been the result of a gas leak. Several inside sources have contradicted this story, claiming that the incident was in fact caused by a bomb. If true, this act would mark the first confirmed incident of domestic terrorism since ex-mayor Bellwether attempted to incite a panic by targeting predators with Nighthowler toxin.

“On a more lighthearted note, the city continues to look forward to what may be the most highly anticipated Founders Day celebration in over a decade. Despite initial skepticism over scope of the event, and several recent setbacks, everything appears to have gotten back on track. The disputes over which route the parade would take have at last been resolved. As initially proposed, the event would begin in the downtown area. That has since been amended due to traffic concerns, and the starting point has been shifted to the Zootenial Stadium. In addition to the main parade, each of Zootopia’s districts have their own special events planned for this coming Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. For a full list of events, as well as their times and locations, viewers can visit the ZNN website for up-to-date information on the festivities.

“Beyond disputes over event locations, recent supply concerns seem to have been resolved as well. Shortages of kale and seaweed were already in the process of being addressed by the city, however recent flooding in nearby Bunny Burrow coupled with a string of fires had resulted in a critical shortage of Clover Blossoms. The situation was so bad that businesses were beginning to speculate that several popular Founders Day dishes would be impossible to prepare properly.

“As of this morning, however, business owners are reporting that many minor suppliers have come forward in an attempt to fill the gap. Although shortages are still anticipated in the near future, planners now believe there will be a sufficient supply to last until the end of the Founders Day celebrations.”

“Now, for your morning commute, here is Melissa Hirsch with traffic.”

Sleep hadn’t been easy for Nick that night, and when it finally did come it had been fitful. The scent of explosives mingling with fresh blood still burned his nose. In the immediate aftermath he had felt adrift, uncertain of what he should do. His head had told him he should keep inside and out of sight since there was a chance the operation could move forward if they played things correctly, but the scent coupled with the shrieks and whimpers of pain had pushed him out to help.
Under Snarlof’s direction both he and Judy had been sent inside to help evacuate the most heavily damaged building. The inside was a mess, the entire front facing wall was filled with holes from the size of a pea to large enough he could fit his entire body through. It was nothing short of miraculous that most of the mammals in there had only suffered relatively minor injuries—moderate cuts from the flying debris or bumps and scrapes from being knocked down. Only those who had been close to windows at the time were in dire need of aid, but…

His stomach churned as he briefly remembered the unfortunate squirrel that had been sprayed with glass shards when the window had been blown inward. The paramedics seemed confident that the poor little guy would be fine once they reached the hospital, but Nick couldn’t fathom how. He simply couldn’t believe something so small could bleed so much and continue to breathe.

That had been the image that haunted him through his dreams. Red everywhere, and the revulsion over how the metallic scent seemed to hook into something in his mind and pull his focus. And then there was his father’s voice, nearly dripping with disappointment.

“I told you to stay away from that fox, didn’t I?”

He shook his head, fending off the myriad voices that echoed “that fox” at him, then looked down into his half full coffee cup. According to the clock on the meeting room’s wall there was still a good half-hour before his shift officially began, which meant Judy would arrive soon. He couldn’t wait. Right then he could really use her sunny optimism to lift his spirits. As it was, he couldn’t even bring himself to wait for her in the foyer like he usually did; he simply didn’t have the energy to deal with other mammals.

When the door opened his ears came up as he dared to hope that maybe she’d come in early as well, but it was Lieutenant Uncia who walked in instead. Smartly pressed uniform and primly groomed fur, a folder tucked under one arm, as if yesterday’s disaster hadn’t the slightest impact on her at all. Of course, she wouldn’t be fazed. A thousand quips jumped into his mind, but he held his tongue as she gave him a silent nod before heading to the front table.

He let it simmer quietly and simply watched her prepare for the day. Different sheets of paper laid out just so, a pen laid horizontally above them, and a stack of what he assumed was paperwork for the incident report. Organized as always. One of the details about her he admired—for some reason he’d always felt a leader should be organized—however today it simply annoyed him that she could continue as if nothing had happened yesterday.

“How do you do that?” he asked, glad that he was able to force his usual easygoing tone.

“What?”

“Act like yesterday didn’t happen,” he said, then lifted his coffee cup to take a sip. “You don’t strike me as some sort of cold sociopath, but you’re behaving like we didn’t royally screw up.”

Lieutenant Uncia stopped what she was doing, standing in place for several seconds before she walked over and pulled a chair up across the table from him. He was about to ask what she was doing, but she held up a finger to silence him as she looked at her watch. After another few seconds she looked up at him. “You’ve got two minutes to gloat.”

His ears flicked back. “Excuse me?”

“I’m giving you two minutes to tell me that you were right that we should have arrested Flip,” she said simply and folded her hands, laying her chin across them. “Go on.”
“Are you really sure that’s—”

“Do I need to make it an order, Officer Wilde?”

His ears flicked back and he looked into his coffee cup again, then finished the last few swallows in one go. “Fine. You’re stubborn and inflexible to the point that it actually frightens me. We waste all our time in your stupid meetings, ignoring the perfectly good plans we already have in search of better ones when we could be doing something useful instead. Then, when anything new develops you dig in and demand we continue as we were because you are so focused on a goal that might not even be obtainable.

“You put me in front of this operation, then proceeded to ignore any advice or impressions I had that you didn’t want to hear. You completely ignored my assessment that Flip was dangerous and needed to be dealt with despite the fact that he kidnapped me, has a gun, and is spouting rhetoric I could imagine coming from Bellwether if what he was saying was about predators.

“So now, because of you, Flip is gone—his entire operation is gone—and despite all our hard work and your careful planning we are left with nothing but a condemned warehouse and a pile of shattered bodies.”

Uncia remained silent, her ears splayed slightly, until he was finished. “Satisfied?”

“No.” Nick sighed heavily. “Flip’s still out there somewhere.”

“We’ll get him. CSI’s are already combing over the scene. Once we know what the bomb was made from we’ll be able to start tracking him down,” the snow leopard promised him, then got back up and returned to the front of the room. “Rest assured that the little red bastard has my undivided attention now.”

Nick tried to come up with some response to that, but all the words he found sounded petty. He sighed again and looked down at his empty cup, silently debating a refill was worth the trouble of climbing out of his seat. A handful of minutes crawled by as Nick wrestled with the question, and what he should make of Uncia’s clear shift in attitude.

He was just about to commit to jumping down when someone else walked in. His eyes went to the door expectantly, ears perking as he realized it was Judy, then blinked as he noticed there wasn’t a hint of her usual smile. There was just a hint of red to her eyes and she moved with an uncharacteristic heaviness behind each step she took. Clearly the night hadn’t been kind to her either. The corners of her mouth turned up slightly when their eyes met, but he could tell there wasn’t any real emotion behind it.

“Hey Carrots,” he said, returning her tired smile with one of his own. “You have no idea how glad I am to see you. And right on time too. I was just about to get another cup of coffee; you want some?”

Her expression warmed slightly. “Nick, you know I don’t like to rely on that stuff.”

“Only because you can’t reach the coffee maker,” Nick teased. “Come on, I promise it will make you feel better.”

“Fine, one small cup,” Judy said, tilted her head. “Actually, I’ll come with you. You never put in enough cream.”
As it turned out, Nick had been right about the coffee. Although Judy limited herself to one cup so that the caffeine wouldn’t give her the jitters, and despite the way Nick teased her for adding cream until her drink turned light tan, the heat of it was comforting and settled nicely into her stomach before spreading to the rest of her body in a way that lingered long after her cup was empty. Perhaps it wasn’t much, but it helped to carry her through the day.

The lieutenant seemed to recognize that everyone needed some downtime after everything they’d seen yesterday. Granted there wasn’t much for them to do beyond work on their incident reports. The scene had been locked down by the bomb team so they could sweep the area for any other devices, which made it impossible for anyone to gather evidence. All they really had at this point was the fur sample she’d been lucky enough to spot (the lab was already busy extracting DNA to run against the database, which could take weeks), so there still weren’t any leads they could chase down. No doubt that would change quickly in the coming days, but she had to admit that the breather was nice, even if it did leave them with very little to do except for dwell on what had happened.

Lieutenant Uncia seemed to be taking the setback mostly in stride, although her general attitude was more reserved and less demanding. Snarlof seemed unshaken as well, but then the large polar bear generally kept his emotions to himself for the most part anyway. On the other end of the spectrum was Fangmeyer, who somehow managed to maintain a level of professionalism despite looking like he hadn’t slept at all last night. The large tiger managed to drag his way through most of the morning, and spent his lunch hour sleeping. And of course Nick was Nick, although she could tell from the way he constantly seemed to look off at nothing that he was taking things much harder than he was letting on. And as for her…

Well…she was doing far better than she expected all things considered, and wasn’t really sure how to feel about that. What had happened was terrible, and that it had happened on her watch felt like a massive, personal failure even though rationally she understood that there wasn’t anything she could have done differently. Yet although sorrow had burrowed its way into her, it wasn’t nearly as strong as she thought it should be. It was tempered with anger that Flip had managed to play them so easily. That he had been completely willing to put the lives of completely innocent mammals at risk just so he would be free to carry out whatever scheme he’d managed to cook up. Simply committing crimes was bad enough, but he’d crossed over from petty offenses into pure brutality and sadism. The moment Flip found his way back into her sights she fully intended to see that he answered for every crime he’d ever committed, and if even a fraction of it managed to stick he was going to find himself locked away for a very long time.

But until then she simply had to sit and stew in her own impotence. Still, she did her best to make the most out of the situation. That was merely a nice way of saying she plowed her way through all of her remaining paperwork. It wasn’t much, but it gave her something to do, and on the off-chance that they got another shot at Flip soon she wouldn’t have any distractions.

Nick ended up joining her, bringing along his own backlog of reports and forms that needed filling out. His company didn’t come with anything resembling a casual conversation, when they did talk it was always to help the other remember some detail of a case or make sure that nothing had been left out, but just having him nearby was calming. A reminder that, in spite of how bad yesterday had been, they’d still been lucky enough to escape unharmed. And although neither of them said anything, she could feel that he was in complete agreement with her that something needed to be done about Flip.

The end of the shift managed to sneak up on both of them. She was in the process of proofreading
one of Nick’s reports while he did the same for her’s, and then Wolford and Lowell were there. Judy was so focused on the words in front of her that she didn’t even notice the pair of wolves until Lowell politely coughed to get her attention.

“Sorry,” she said as she looked up from the page. “Did you two need something?”

“We’re just wondering if you two are working late tonight,” Wolford said.

A quick glance at her phone told her that her shift had technically ended fifteen minutes ago. She didn’t feel particularly tired yet however, and now that Wolford had raised the question she found herself seriously considering the possibility. What else was she going to do? Go back to the hotel and worry that Flip was about intrude in her private life again?

“We just got a little caught up in work and lost track of time,” Nick said, stretching in his chair. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, we just noticed that you didn’t show up to Thirsty Thursday last week, Nick, and after what happened this week…” Lowell shrugged, his ears dipped back. “Figured we’d find out if something was up.”

For once Nick seemed unsure of what to say, his mouth working silently for a second as he tried to find his voice. “Oh…I…sorry, didn’t think I was invited since nobody said anything.”

Wolford snorted. “If you’ve been invited once you’re always welcome to join in again.”

“Why don’t you go this week then?” Judy suggested, smiling brightly. “I’ll bet you could use the break after yesterday.”

“Me? You were almost blown up too,” Nick reminded her. “Can Carrots join us?”

Judy wrinkled her nose slightly. “I don’t really enjoy drinking.”

“No coffee, no alcohol. I’ll bet next you’re going to say you hate chocolate too,” Nick teased.

She rolled her eyes. “Please. I love chocolate.”

Wolford and Lowell glanced at each other before the white wolf spoke up. “They have other things to drink than just alcohol if you want it, Hopps. Besides, after yesterday I’m sure everyone’s eager to hear what you’ve been doing.”

“Can’t you just ask Fangmeyer? Or Snarlof?” she asked, her head canted to one side. “They’ve been there for everything.”

“We could,” Wolford admitted, only to be interrupted by Lowell.

“IA isn’t sniffing around asking about either of them though,” the white wolf said. “Everyone’s curious about it.”

“What? What do they think Nick did?” she asked, resisting the urge to look at her partner.

Nick chimed in, holding his hands up to his forehead with his fingers spread out. “Was it Branches?”

Both of the wolves blinked, turning to each other. “Um, I only spoke to an ocelot. Did you see a deer?” Lowell asked.

“No, just an ocelot. Agent Gat,” Wolford said. “He wanted to know about your background, and
about your after-work activities. Actually he was asking about you too, Judy.”

Her mouth went dry. “Oh. What did you tell him?”

“That you’re about as straight edge as they come. He may have asked the other officers different questions though,” Wolford said.

“What about me?” Nick asked.

“We told him that you’re always mouthing off to the chief during briefings,” Lowell answered brightly. “Though you’re pretty harmless otherwise. From what I’ve seen, you pull your weight.”

“All, what? Fifteen pounds of it?” Wolford added with a smirk.

Nick blinked, one ear flicking back, then matched Wolford’s expression. “Oh woooooooowww—”

As he drew the word out he tilted his head back slightly and raised his voice, causing both of the wolves to flinch. Lowell very nearly joined in only to be elbowed sharply by Wolford.

“Suppose we deserved that,” Wolford said and scratched the back of his neck. “Anyway, you two coming or not?”

Judy could feel Nick’s eyes on her, waiting for her to make a decision. She bit her lower lip and looked down at what she’d been doing, then at the time again, before sighing. “Sure, just let me organize my desk first.”
Hornton’s was just as busy as it had been the first time Nick went with the two wolves—perhaps even a little busier. As before, the cops confined themselves to just a couple of tables, leaving the majority of the bar to the public. If he’d hoped that his second appearance would draw less attention than the first, he was sorely mistaken. If anything, Judy’s presence ensured that their arrival raised even more eyebrows. At least with her there the attention was split between them, although he felt a touch of envy that she seemed more comfortable with it than him.

Clawhauser noticed their small group almost the moment they stepped inside and waved eagerly. “You managed to get Nick back? And Judy too!” he said brightly, the tip of his tail flicking pleasantly behind him. “Was starting to worry I’d be by myself. Fangmeyer and Snarlof just called to say they’ll be a little late.”

“Sorry about that,” Lowell said as he pulled up a chair. “These two had buried their noses in work and we needed to dig them out first.”

“Well, explosions tend to cause a lot of questions so I’m sure they had a lot to keep them busy,” Clawhauser said, then took a moment to flag down a server.

“Actually, the Lieutenant was taking it easy on us today,” Judy informed the cheetah.

“We were really just trying to distract ourselves,” Nick added as he took a place next to Judy. “This is probably a better place for that.”

Like before, he ended up ordering a simple beer and a small unsalted pretzel. Nothing fancy, and more than enough to tide him over until he could get something more substantial to eat at home. Both of the wolves ordered beer as well, while Clawhauser got himself several pretzels along with dipping sauce and a cocktail. Judy ordered last, after going over the entire menu, before she decided on a margarita to the surprise of everyone present.

“Sure you wouldn’t rather a nice carrot juice?” Wolford asked when the server had left.

Judy’s ears tilted forward several notches. “And what is that supposed to mean?”

“You were trying to get out of coming by saying that you don’t drink,” Nick reminded her. “Tequila is a strange choice for a teetotaler.”

Lowell barked out laughing. “Says the fox that tried to turn down his first invitation by saying he’s a coffee drinker.”

His ears dipped down and he shot Lowell a look which only made the white wolf laugh harder.

“Yes, well…just not what anyone was expecting you to get, Carrots.”

“I’ll be fine for one drink,” she said, smiling, then gestured to the room. “We’re at a bar, after all. Just because I don’t enjoy drinking doesn’t mean I never do it.”

That was fair, he supposed.

While they waited on their orders conversation drifted to what everyone had been up to. Unfortunately both he and Judy needed to keep things light on details since their operation was still technically undercover even if the bomb had put it in the spotlight. Thankfully the others understood, and once again Nick found it nice to hear what was going on elsewhere in the precinct.
For the most part the rest of the force was still knocking out smuggling operations, a fact that Nick found surprised him for some reason. True, that was the plan from the start, but with everything that had happened so far he’d become so focused on his own little part.

Both Snarlof and Fangmeyer arrived after roughly fifteen minutes, and both looked even more rundown than they had earlier that morning. Their moods didn’t seem to perk up even after they’d settled in and given their orders. Nick debated if he should ask them if something was wrong, but Clawhauser was the first to speak up.

“So what was keeping you two? Usually you give me more warning when you need to work late.”

“That blasted IA investigation,” Snarlof growled. Nick felt his ears perk up. “Apparently yesterday’s mess has them all twisted in knots and they couldn’t wait to shove their noses in our business again.”

Fangmeyer exhaled sharply and slumped over the table. “They came to chat with us this afternoon. Honestly, I was surprised they even let me call to say we were running late.”

A sideways glance told him that Judy’s attention had been captured as well. “What did IA want to know?”

“Oh, you know how it is with these investigations—” Fangmeyer began.

“We aren’t supposed to talk about it,” Snarlof said quickly, cutting the tiger off. “Agent Forester was very insistent about that.”

Judy bit her lip and looked down at her drink. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“But you can talk about things they didn’t want to know, right?” Nick reasoned. “I mean, this has to be about yesterday. They didn’t want to know about Mr. Big calling me, did they?”

Snarlof waved his hand. “No, nothing like that.”

“So this was all about yesterday then?”

“I told you, we can’t talk about it,” Snarlof said, then rubbed his face.

“They honestly weren’t interested in things they’d already talked to us about,” Fangmeyer offered, smiling a little.

Nick drummed his fingers on the table a little bit. “Bet they’re asking about what I was doing then. Branches seemed really gung-ho about the prospect of charging me with having mob connections.”

“Wilde, they couldn’t give a mouse’s fart about you,” Snarlof said, then sighed heavily as he traced the rim of his drink.

“That’s…good?” Nick said, unable to hide his surprise as his mind raced. He’d really expected that after everything he’d done to humiliate Agent Forester that he’d have become the center of IA’s attention. Had he played his role too hard? Not hard enough?

“Honestly, I’m sort of offended they think I’m harmless.”

“What about me?” Judy asked anxiously.

The table got quiet for a moment as Snarlof and Fangmeyer looked at each other. After a tense second Fangmeyer cleared his throat.
“We’re not really supposed to talk about that,” he said quietly, staring down at his hands.

Judy settled back in her seat, wide eyed and trying to find her voice. Nick could almost read the progress of her thoughts and had to stop himself from reaching out to give her hand a comforting squeeze. Instead he let his tail bump against her leg under the table to draw her attention, then gave a smile.

“Don’t worry about that too much, Carrots. If IA was really asking about you then all they’re going to hear is that you were the one who realized there was a bomb, and that you were the first out the door to help the injured despite the fact that you were mostly deaf at the time. I’d hardly call that a black mark.”

“Thanks,” she said, managing a halfhearted smile. “Just the same, I’d much rather they weren’t interested in me at all.”

The table quieted down once more, the dull roar of the surrounding bar serving to emphasize the lack of conversation. Several times they tried to get something going, but both times it was such a painfully obvious attempt to avoid awkwardness that the discussion always trailed off and died. If things kept going as they were he could just tell it was only a matter of time before someone decided to head home, and when that happened others would surely follow suit.

“So why were you two so keen to get me back here anyway?” Nick asked, turning his attention to Wolford. “I’m not complaining, but it was a bit of a surprise.”

Wolford turned his palms up slightly and shrugged. “Honestly I figured it would probably help you out if IA saw you were spending your free time around other cops.”

“Really?”

“We were talking about it yesterday, actually. They had a lot of questions about you, but when all anyone can say is ‘He mostly keeps to himself’ it starts to seem a little suspicious,” Lowell said, then took a sip of his drink. “Not that there’s anything wrong with liking your privacy, but as far as anyone can tell you always head home at the first chance you get.”

“He does not,” Judy protested. “We get dinner after work often enough. He keeps in touch with his mother and—”

Wolford laughed. “No offense, Hopps, but the word of someone else that’s under investigation isn’t gonna carry too far. Same goes for mommy.”

“Maybe, but on the other hand Wilde is right that after yesterday she’s got to be looking good. There aren’t many mammals willing to run into a building that looks ready to topple over,” Snarlof commented.

“I wasn’t the only one. Nick was right behind me,” Judy said, even as she shrank down in her seat far enough that only her ears were visible above the edge of the table.

Nick grinned down at her. “Only because it would look bad if all us predators kept milling about outside while a lone bunny ran into danger.”

“Besides, it had to be you two,” Fangmeyer reasoned. “You’re the lightest ones; Snarlof’s big enough the building might have collapsed with him bumbling around inside, and I’m not much smaller.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Judy said as she pulled her drink under the table with her and took a light sip,
then cradled it close to her chest. “Though maybe I should start coming to these things too, just to be
safe. I’m not much better than Nick when it comes to my time off-duty.”

“What about all those dates you went on recently?” Clawhauser asked. “Dating seems normal to
me.”

Judy froze in place, staring at her cup, then pushed her head back over the table to stare at
Clawhauser. “Why would they know about that?”

The cheetah seemed at a loss for a moment, then blushed and lowered his ears apologetically. “I…
may have mentioned it when they were asking about you.”

“Great, now every one of my ex’s is going to know I’m being investigated,” Judy sighed, then took
another drink. “And then IA will find out that one of them is a raging bigot. That’s going to look
really good for me.”

“Well, you did break up with him,” Nick reminded her. “That has to count for something.”

Though she was about a quarter of the way through her second margarita, Judy wasn’t sure if she
was having a good time or not. The atmosphere was friendly and energetic. The company was
wonderful as well. It was nice to see everyone with their guards lowered. Stories and jokes and
teasing being passed around in such a way that even she couldn’t resist joining in.

But through it all her mind kept drifting back to IA’s investigation. If they were really prying into her
life that closely surely they’d turn up something. Nick’s lack of concern over the affair annoyed her,
and if she was being completely honest she was beginning to feel less and less comfortable about the
way he’d convinced her to keep her mouth shut. Not that she could blame him, that was just the way
he was and she’d allowed herself to be swayed against her better judgment. Still, it was a sore spot
she didn’t know how to address.

Because even if everything Nick had said made sense—even if he was right that this whole situation
was unfair and wrong—she couldn’t get past the fact that he’d wanted her to keep quiet because of
what it might get her and not because it was the right thing to do. She didn’t feel even a drop of
remorse over getting Mr. Big to save Nick’s life…but that she was hiding it for mere personal gain
felt was somehow twisting what she’d done. Retroactively making it something to be ashamed of
and hidden away for the rest of her life.

She took a deep breath, followed by another small sip of her drink, and wondered if Nick would
understand the way she felt. He had her best interests in mind, she didn’t doubt that for a second, but
the more she considered the situation the more she wondered if what Nick thought was best was
really what she needed.

The idea that she could be a chief was undeniably flattering, but she hadn’t even paused to consider
if she actually wanted to be one. It was a lot of responsibility to place on a single mammal’s
shoulders, and while she wasn’t the type to shy away from such things the job would also make it so
she couldn’t serve the community directly any longer. Her childhood ideas of what being a police
officer meant had been filled with silly notions like most childish dreams, but the key to them all was
that she would be among other mammals, helping those who needed it. She could do that right where
she was, but with enough promotions…
“Doing okay there, Carrots? You’re starting to look a little tipsy,” Nick commented, his voice breaking through her thoughts.

She smiled up at him, then waggled her hand vaguely in front of her. “Getting close I think, but I’m still fine. Just have a lot of thoughts running through my mind.”

“How about we head out then? I’m at my limit too,” he said, graciously offering her a hand.

“I’m not that far gone,” she laughed, although the offer warmed her to her core. “Besides, I think I need the company. If I head back then I’ll end up sitting in a hotel room by myself, wondering if Flip’s about to make another pass at me.”

“You’re probably fine. There’s an officer keeping an eye on your apartment and nothing has happened since you left,” Clawhauser assured her.

“That could just mean the guy knows she isn’t there,” Lowell pointed out.

Judy shot the white wolf a dirty look. “Gee, thanks. Now I’ll sleep real good.”

“Jeez, do you even think before opening that mouth of yours?” Wolford asked, then lightly smacked the back of Lowell’s head.

“Gah! Sorry,” Lowell yelped, ducking dramatically. “Really, I am! The beers have just been going to my head is all.”

Despite grumbling lightly to herself for a moment longer, she forgave him while accepting the assurances of the others that even if Flip knew she had left her apartment behind that it was unlikely he had been able to track her down. That thought did comfort her, especially since she knew the hotel staff had specific instructions to inform her if anyone matching Flip’s description dropped by for a “visit.”
Founder's Day

Despite how uncharacteristically late Judy had stayed out last night, when her alarm went off she awoke feeling refreshed and immediately set to getting herself prepared for her Founders’ Day assignment. Although she hadn’t been able to keep herself from fretting over the IA investigation or the problems Flip could cause for her since he was still on the loose, spending time with others had kept her from dwelling on such negative things for too long. And then, after everyone decided it was past time to leave, Nick walked her back to the hotel before calling a taxi for himself.

That last bit was a bit fuzzy in her memory. By then she had finished two margaritas, and at Snarlof’s suggestion had ordered some sort of fruity cocktail against her better judgment. Whatever it was had gone down far too easily, and had pushed her just far enough that walking had made her mildly dizzy. Nick had been in similar condition, with the alcohol loosening his tongue enough that during their walk he began to regale her with tales of his exploits during previous Founders’ Day celebrations. Although she couldn’t remember the specifics, each story had her laughing so hard that at times she could barely breathe. No doubt her drinking had as much to do with that as Nick’s stories, but that short trip had made all her concerns melt away for a time. She remembered that much clearly enough.

As well as the warmth of his hand as it clasped hers. A constant light pressure that simply invited her to lean against him for a bit of extra support while she listened and laughed, all while thinking that it probably wasn’t wise for Nick to brag about his past escapades when he was still being watched by IA. She told him as much, only for him to brush off her concerns with a cocky smile and a comment that “Branches” would have a problem finding a clue even if it was hanging from one of his antlers.

The private moment came to an end all too soon. They parted ways in the hotel parking lot. That moment was especially fuzzy in her mind, less memory than a jumble of sensations she could vaguely recall. Light breeze carrying the scent of fresh cut grass, insects chirping with the night, warm hands, green eyes, and the desire to just lean in and forget the rest of the world for a heartbeat. Only she didn’t, overwhelmed by self-consciousness at the last moment.

It didn’t matter, she told herself. Nick was being just as cautious as she was about whatever their relationship was becoming. He wouldn’t have let her kiss him; not out in public at least. So it was fine that she’d pulled back because they were both on the same page, even if it did make her feel like she’d wimped out at the last moment.

Only…what if Nick hadn’t wanted her to stop herself?

That question seemed to nag at her as she carefully brushed out her fur and pulled on her dress uniform. Or rather her replacement dress uniform, still as freshly pressed as when Bogo had given it to her. Tie, gleaming tie bar, polished buttons. She contemplated taking the hat, then ultimately decided it just wouldn’t work with her ears. Then a quick look in the mirror to make last minute adjustments before she headed out the door.

What if he’d been hoping she was ready to take that step?

Fortunately her current accommodations were close enough to the station that walking was an option. Just one look at the transit stations was enough to tell her that they were handling an unusually high volume of traffic for this early in the morning. The roads weren’t much better, as if every mammal in Zootopia with a car had decided to head out at the same moment. Still, she had to carefully navigate through the crowds that had turned out, and only walked in the door with a few minutes to spare.
What if he’d wanted it as well, but was just as afraid as she was?

Inside the precinct, Chief Bogo was already busy organizing the officers. Most were being herded by Clawhauser and McHorn toward the lot behind the building where a bus waited to bring officers to the Zootenial Stadium for the parade. Those that remained were being handed their finalized patrol routes before being sent on their way. Regardless of where they were ultimately headed, every officer received a quick, personal inspection from the chief to ensure their uniform was in order.

She barely had enough time to take in the organized chaos before Clawhauser pressed a folder into her hand. “You and Wilde are still going to be keeping an eye on Little Rodentia,” he said as he looked her over closely. “Hope you’re ready for a busy day.”

“I feel great, thank you,” she said and stood up a little taller. “Didn’t expect things to be quite this crazy though.”

“It’s always like this when a really big celebration is planned,” Clawhauser said, smiling as he watched mammals scramble to reach their assignments. After a few seconds he leaned closer and lowered his voice. “Personally I don’t think it’s really necessary, but the chief insists. He has this little saying too: There’s always some joker that doesn’t get the word.”

“Then I better hope that my joker saw the memo, huh?” she whispered back.

“Well he isn’t late yet,” Clawhauser said happily, then perked up suddenly as Francine walked in. “There you are! I was starting to worry you were running late, the bus is—”

Judy watched as Clawhauser tried his best to hurry the massive elephant through the station, but was soon distracted as Nick arrived only moments later. His fur looked slightly ruffled. He needed a moment to straighten out his tie, but apparently that was enough to satisfy the Chief because immediately after he was directed to join her. His face seemed to light up when he spotted her, though it was soon replaced by his usual self-assured smirk. His sunglasses came out as he closed the distance between them, tail lazily swishing behind him.

“And here I was worried that I’d be waiting for you after how much you drank last night,” he commented.

Judy put her hands on her hips and gave the fox a measured look. “Please. I’m not the one that’s stumbling in at the last minute while trying to hide bloodshot eyes behind a pair of shades.”

“I’ll have you know that I left early this morning. The only reason I’m late is because I had to claw my way onto the train to make it on time.”

“And we’re all very proud of you,” she said, smiling as she turned toward the parking lot. “Come on, we need to get moving before traffic gets any worse.”

Nick mmm-ed softly as he followed her out, taking the extra moment to finish smoothing out his uniform now that he was officially on-duty. “Hey, Judy?”

“Yes?”

“That dress uniform looks great on you.” He coughed lightly. “Blue really is your color.”

The compliment nearly made her miss a step. “Oh…thanks,” she managed, then peeked back at him. “It doesn’t look half bad on you either.”
Some small part of Judy had been disappointed that their assignment for Founders’ Day had placed her just outside of Little Rodentia, far removed from the route the parade was planned to take. It wasn’t so much that she was disappointed by her inability to partake in the festivities, that already wasn’t an option by virtue of her being on-duty, but she had hoped for the chance to at least see the floats.

Nick had been the one to point out that with so many mammals packed into the streets she would’ve had trouble seeing anything anyway, then informed her that most of the residents of Little Rodentia had to contend with similar problems and would likely have their own events planned. Shortly after they arrived he was proven correct. Nick brought them to one of the lower sections of the wall that sectioned off Little Rodentia, then after peeking over the top he invited her to stand on his shoulders. From that vantage point she could clearly see a miniature parade winding its way through Little Rodentia’s tiny streets.

Her first impression was akin to a child finding that her toys had suddenly sprung to life to act on their own, but she quickly pushed that notion away upon noticing just how much effort Zootopia’s smallest citizens had put into preparing for today. The floats were as extravagant as anything she could imagine, just so small that she would have been able to lift them without any difficulty, and along every street were smaller versions of the same banners that currently adorned the rest of the city.

She watched, enraptured, as the Little Rodentia parade moved past while mice and rats and voles and lemmings and shrews crowded around on the sidewalks, talking to each other and taking pictures. It wasn’t until she noticed several sets of eyes watching her with concern that she was reminded of her first time in Little Rodentia and the panic her presence had caused. With a friendly wave she took one last look at the festivities, then she hopped off of Nick’s shoulders.

“Bored already, Carrots?”

“No, I just suddenly realized that we’re probably here to stop mammals from doing exactly that,” she said. “Thank you, though. I don’t think I’ve ever gotten to see something like that before.”

“I know. It’s sort of like being one of those giant monsters from the movies,” Nick said, then puffed himself up slightly. “Just towering over everything, watching the mammals scurry about below you.”

“Really? That’s the first thing to jump into your head?”

Nick smiled. “Yeah, why? How did it make you feel?”

“Like I was really high in the sky looking down on everything,” she said, her cotton tail wiggling a little behind her. “I bet that’s what the whole city looks like from the traffic copter.”

“Well I suppose if you want to be boring—”

“Boring?” Judy hopped in front of Nick and tilted her ears forward. “What, exactly, is boring about flying?”

“What would you do in a helicopter? Just sit on your tail and stare out the window?” Nick said, leaning forward just a little bit. “I do that every day when you’re driving the cruiser or when I’m taking the train. Sometimes the view is pretty, but I wouldn’t call it thrilling.”

“But you’d be so high up you could see everything at once,” Judy pointed out.
“If you wanted to be up high you could just ride the elevator to the top of any of the skyscrapers downtown.”

“I seriously doubt they let just any mammal go up there,” Judy said, beginning to roll her eyes only to stop when Nick stared at her. “What?”

“Carrots, most of those buildings have an observation floor near the top,” Nick said. “Some even have tables, and you can buy an overpriced meal to eat while you watch the city.”

“Really?” She turned to look at the large buildings that climbed up into the sky, clearly visible even from where they were.

“It depends. Some of them make you buy a ticket first, but it isn’t that bad,” Nick said, then hmmed. “You really have a thing for high places, you know that Carrots?”

A shy smile touched Judy’s lips. “I wouldn’t call it a thing exactly. It’s just that I spend all my time walking around on the ground, you know? And when I’m up high I can just see things that are so far away. Kinda reminds me that the world is so much bigger than the things I normally see around me.”

“Mmmhmm.”

She blinked. “Just what is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, I was just thinking,” Nick said, then abruptly straightened up and continued down their patrol route. “Personally I always preferred to focus my attention on where I am, but I can see where you’re coming from.”

“You realize I don’t believe that for a second, right?”

Nick put a hand to his chest and sniffed dramatically. “You wound me, Carrots. I’d thought we were past the point where you’d assume I was lying just because I’m a fox.”

She rolled her eyes. “No, I just know when you’re up to something.”

“Do you now?”

“Come off it, Nick,” she said. “You always get the same look when you’re up to something.”

“Well, since you’re the expert I suppose you must be right,” he said happily. “You win this round.”

She looked up at him expectantly, waiting for him to go on, then nudged him firmly in the side. “So are you going to tell me what you’re up to or not?”

Green eyes looked down at her. “Sure you want to know?”

“Yes!”

“Well, if you insist.” Nick took a deep breath, then grinned teasingly. “I’m plotting something.”

Judy pressed her lips firmly together and shot her partner a fake glare. “I don’t know why I even bother.”

Nick only laughed in response, but before the conversation could continue their job butted back in as just down the street two vehicles collided in the intersection. Judy sprinted over to make sure nobody was hurt with Nick following just behind. The larger vehicle, a food truck, had skidded up onto the sidewalk in an attempt to avoid the collision, and for a moment she feared that a pedestrian may have
been hit—or worse, that a smaller rodent’s vehicle might have been run over. Only once she was
close enough to take stock of the scene did she begin to relax. With so many mammals off attending
the festivities there simply wasn’t as much foot (or hoof) traffic as there usually was.

Once she’d taken a deep breath she reached for her radio. “Precinct one, this is Officers Hopps and
Wilde. We’ve got an accident just outside of Little Rodentia at the intersection of Elm and Pride.”

She only had to wait a moment before Clawhauser’s voice came back over the radio. “Ouch. Should
I send an ambulance?”

“One moment,” she answered, then quickly checked with both the drivers. Both were pretty shaken-
up, but they seemed fine. “Just a few minor cuts and bruises. I think we just need someone to get
these vehicles out of the way.”

“No problem, Hopps. I’ll send a clean-up crew your way in just a minute.”

Nick waited patiently until she’d returned the radio to her belt before speaking up. “Fun, fun, fun.
Who gets to deal with the drivers and figure out which one is at fault?” he asked, then quickly raised
his hand. “Not it.”

“Sometimes you act like a child,” Judy told him.

“Thank you.”

Nick looked so satisfied with himself she couldn’t help chuckling. “Fine, I’ll take care of the drivers,
so how about you make yourself useful and direct traffic.”

He gave her a quick salute with two fingers as he headed into the street, leaving her to return to
the two drivers. She quickly took stock of the scene again, and the way the food truck appeared to have
swerved at the last moment in a futile attempt to avoid the collision. From the looks of it someone
had run a red light.

“Who wants to tell me what happened here?” she asked.

The two drivers, a rhino and a grizzly, looked at each other before the grizzly sheepishly spoke up.
“I’m afraid it’s my fault, ma’am. Been running behind all day and was in a rush to deliver these
cakes over by the parade route. Thought I could make the light and…well, I just wasn’t paying
enough attention I guess.”

Judy quickly wrote down everything the bear had said before glancing to the rhino. “Do you have
anything to add?”

The rhino shook her head. “No, ma’am. I’m just annoyed that my car got banged up, but I suppose
I’d rather that then someone got hurt from all this.”

“Alright, well I’m going to need both of your drivers licenses, vehicle registration, and a written
statement from each of you,” she started, then noticed the rhino seemed to tense up. “Is something
wrong, miss?”

The rhino cleared her throat. “I…ah…I was just on my way to the Department of Mammal Vehicles
to get a new license since mine was suspended.”

Judy stared at the rhino, trying to find her voice as she glanced over at Nick. The fox only mouthed
“I told you so” back.
“You were driving on a suspended license?”

“I was on my way to get a new one,” the rhino said.

“Then you should have had someone else drive you, miss,” Judy pointed out. “I’m going to have to give you a ticket.”

“But I didn’t cause the accident!”

“The accident is another matter entirely,” Judy explained. “You won’t be found at fault for it, but you were driving on a suspended license. A ticket is the most lenient I’m allowed to be. As I said before, you should have had someone else drive you.”

The rhino’s ears flicked back. “I tried, but nobody was willing to take me.”

“Then you should have waited until another day.”

“And go when there’s a line? Have you seen how slow sloths can be?”

At the rhino’s question Judy had a brief flash of her first experience in Zootopia’s DMV, and how what should have been a simple request had taken an entire day. She quickly shook her head to push the image away once more and took a deep breath, then gave the large rhino a sympathetic smile. “Believe me, miss, I understand completely, but that isn’t really an excuse. You could have taken the train instead.”

To Judy’s amazement the rhino kept trying to come up with excuses in an attempt to get out of the ticket before she finally gave in with an annoyed snort. Off to the side Nick continued to direct traffic around the wreck, looking entirely too pleased. She had half a mind to march over there and make him switch with her, confident that he would do so if she begged. Unfortunately that was out of the question; she wasn’t about to give him the satisfaction. On the other hand, maybe there was another way.

“Alright. If you two will just wait right here I’ll go get my squad car and I can get you the forms you’ll need to fill out,” she said happily. “If you need anything before I get back feel free to talk to Officer Wilde there, I’m sure he’ll be very happy to answer any questions either of you have.”

Nick was nearly at his wit’s end by the time Judy finally got back with the cruiser, exhausted from directing traffic while the two drivers kept coming to him with questions—mostly wondering how long it would be before they were free to go. He probably should have been angry that Judy had left him to handle everything, but all he really felt was a warm sense of pride that she had found a way to take advantage of the situation. A reminder that he needed to keep on his toes around her, or else she would inevitably find a way to turn the tables on him.

He would need to get her back somehow, of course.

But today he merely settled for pushing the drivers back onto Judy the moment she got back, allowing him to return his focus to directing traffic once more to prevent another accident. A tow truck arrived only a few moments after his partner, and after a brief discussion the decision was made to pull the food truck into a nearby lot so it would be out of the way, then tow the rhino’s sedan (though Nick privately thought the word “tank” was more appropriate) to a repair shop. That meant
taking the road down to a single lane so the tow crew would have room to work, so Nick was glad that there weren’t many cars on the street. He could easily imagine just how many angry drivers he would have to deal with if most of the city wasn’t off watching the parade.

With the roads as clear as they were it was a fairly painless process, however. Most of the delay was caused by the food truck, which needed to be carefully pulled from the sidewalk without smashing it into anything else before it was painstakingly dragged out of the way. The sedan, by contrast, just needed to be hitched up and carried away. In all it took a little more than forty-five minutes, so Nick’s fears that the accident would force him to put off lunch didn’t come to pass. All that remained was for Judy to verify the information she’d been given was correct, then they would be free to find someplace to grab a bite.

“Everything appears to be in order,” Judy said while she wrestled to control forms intended for mammals many times her size. “You are both free to go now. A copy of the report will be mailed to the addresses you provided. If you have any questions, or wish to dispute the report’s findings, you will be able to do so by calling the ZPD’s non-emergency number.”

“Thank heavens!” the rhino said. “No offense, but this whole process takes far too long. I was starting to get hungry.”

“Perhaps I can help with that,” the grizzly said. “I was carrying a bunch of personal sized cakes. If you like, I can get you one.”

The rhino’s eyes lit up for a moment, but then she promptly shook her head. “No, I really shouldn’t. I wouldn’t want to get you in trouble.”

“It’s no problem at all,” the bear assured her. “These things don’t really last that long. At this rate they’ll probably go bad and need to be thrown out anyway, so someone may as well enjoy them. Besides, it is the least I can do after hitting your car.”

“In that case could you maybe get me two?” the Rhino asked. “I was going to bring my husband something to eat when I got back, but with everything that’s happened I really just want to go home now.”

“Sure thing. What about you officers? These cakes were made specifically for Founders Day. No reason you can’t enjoy yourselves a little while you’re on duty.”

Nick grinned at Judy. “I like the way this bear thinks, Carrots.”

For a moment Judy seemed to actually consider the grizzly’s offer, but then she shook her head as he expected she would. “I appreciate the offer, sir, but we really can’t accept anything.”

“No tricks?” she asked at last. “Please? I’m famished.”
Nick held up his hand. “No tricks.”

Her ears slowly came back up and she smiled. “Alright. Well if you’re paying I want to get something good. Let me check to see if there are any good salad spots nearby.”

“Alright, Carrots. Just please have some mercy on my wallet.”

While she searched for a nearby spot on her phone Nick kept an eye on what was going on around them—they weren’t technically on lunch yet after all. Not that there was much for them to do out there anyway. There were only a few mammals out on the main streets, and while just over the dividing wall for Little Rodentia there was a veritable horde of rodents and other tiny mammals the private security force that served the city’s smallest residents was more than capable of handling the day-to-day problems that came their way.

“You aren’t going to embarrass me if I pick someplace a little nicer than usual, are you?” Judy asked as she considered the list of restaurants her iCarrot had found.

“Amusing as that would be, I wouldn’t want to make you angry with me for the rest of the day,” Nick said, then grabbed Judy’s collar to keep her from walking into the street. “Somehow I doubt Bogo will be understanding if he finds out we took an hour lunch to have a nice dining experience though.”

Judy laughed. “You only wish I was the type of mammal that would pick a spot like that. There’s a Savanna Salad Bar just down the street, we can get some take-out from there.”

“When you said you were going to pick someplace nice I was expecting better than the prey equivalent of Bug Burger.”

“Just because it’s fast food doesn’t mean it isn’t nice,” Judy protested. “They make really good salads.”

“Ritzy fast food is still fast food, sweetheart,” Nick said, just to needle her a little more. “But I did say it was your choice, so as long as they have fruit I’m game.”

They were just about to cross the road to where Judy had parked the cruiser when Clawhauser’s voice came across the radio calling for any officer free to check on the Grasslands Mall to deal with a violent mammal. Before Nick could stop her, Judy responded to ask for more details.

“Come on, Carrots, that is half-way across the district from us,” Nick said. “Someone else has to be closer.”

It was already too late though, so Nick leaned against a nearby building and went back to watching the street while he waited to find out if they were missing lunch. Judging from what Clawhauser was saying the report was pretty vague, apparently whoever had called in the crime had been too excited to give much useful information. No word on who the attacker was, if he was armed, or even if there were any injuries. Just a simple “he’s gone mad and is trying to kill everyone”.

While Judy was still busy trying to get information another officer abruptly cut in to report a stampede near the parade, followed shortly by another call by Wolford reporting a “berserk” elk. And more began to flow in until Judy was left staring at her radio in shock, then went back trying to find out if anyone needed assistance.

“Miss, are you alright?”

Nick recognized the grizzly’s voice and glanced over to see him standing over the female rhino, who
had doubled over with a groan. She stumbled a few steps until she found a hand railing to lean against, giving a distressed snort as she shook her head.

“Oh no, you aren’t allergic to nuts are you?” the grizzly asked with growing alarm. “I should have asked before giving you that cake. Do you have an epipen?”

The only answer the bear got was a groan, followed by a snort as the rhino staggered again, and this time fell to her hands and knees as she panted. Nick watched, eyes wide and ears folded back.

“Hey Carrots,” he said, feeling his fur standing on end as the rhino snorted again.

“I’m busy.”

The rhino’s legs spasmed a few times before she began to crawl, shaking her head again. “Judy, it’s important.”

“What?”

Nick pointed at the rhino just as she charged the grizzly, throwing him to the ground before she collided with a parked car. The clash was enough to slow her down slightly, but she continued to stagger on all fours until she hit the wall between Little Rodentia and the rest of the city. Then she shook her whole body and slammed into the wall again, and again, drawing high pitched shrieks of terror from the other side.

For a moment both he and Judy were frozen in place, then she grabbed his hand and began pulling him toward the cruiser. “Come on, we have to stop her!”
Rampage

Judy squeezed Nick’s hand, dragging him along for several steps until he began to move on his own. They reached the cruiser in moments and she immediately dove into the driver’s seat, beginning to fumble with her keys as she watched the rhino.

The wall that protected Little Rodentia managed to hold when the rhino’s bulk slammed against it, but that was hardly a surprise. It was designed to withstand a collision from a vehicle without being knocked down after all. What it wasn’t designed for, however, was to take multiple blows in quick succession, and the tiny citizens that populated Little Rodentia shrieked in terror as the enraged rhino began to throw her body against the barrier time and time again.

“What are you doing?” Nick asked just as she finally got the key in and started the cruiser’s engine. “You can’t just ram her!”

“We’re not going to,” Judy assured him as she popped the trunk. “Get the towing chain. Maybe we can drag her away.”

Nick stared at her for a moment. “Or just get her angry at us.”

“You’d rather have her stomping around in Little Rodentia?”

Nick’s ears folded back and he looked at the rhino again, wincing as she smashed herself into the barrier once more causing a crack to run from the top edge down a third of the way to the ground. Then he was moving behind the vehicle and she heard him scramble up into the trunk. Judy bit her lip and watched as the rhino continued to charge the wall, grimacing each time, expecting it to give in at any second. Then she heard the distinct clinking of metal chain accompanied by Nick’s triumphant cry of “got it” before he came running around the front.

“So what do you want me to do with this thing?”

Judy hopped out and hooked the tail end of the chain to the front of the cruiser. “You’re going to get in the cruiser and wait for my signal, then shift into reverse and floor it.”

His ears stood upright, his going eyes wide. “What? No way, Carrots. You’re so small that rhino won’t even notice if she stomps—”

“I’m faster and more experienced than you,” she reminded him. “Plus, I doubt a savage rhino is going to react well to a predator approaching her.”

Once again Nick’s eyes flicked over to the rhino. His ears folded back and he looked away, then jumped up into the driver’s seat. “Alright. I trust you. Please be careful.”

“I will,” she promised, then grabbed the other end of the train and ran forward dragging the chain behind her.

Dragging the heavy steel forced her legs to pump much harder than she was used to, kicking off the ground with enough strength that normally she would have been propelled into the air. Instead it only carried her along at a respectable trot, however she’d expected that and timed her run to arrive just as the female rhino hit the wall again.

She ignored the sharp crack of stone splitting and darted between the rhino’s legs, taking advantage of the seconds following the impact when the larger mammal would be stunned. With six rapid
jumps she wrapped the chain around one of the rhino’s thick legs before hooking the chain back onto itself.

Not a moment too soon. As she scrambled clear again the female rhino snorted and turned to see what was running around by her feet. Judy didn’t give her a chance to find out.

“Nick, hit it!” she shouted, and crossed her fingers.

He watched in disbelief as Judy nimbly darted about between the massive rhino’s legs, feeling an odd moment of mixed pride and envy until the small rabbit called out to him. Without hesitation he shifted into reverse and stomped the gas pedal to the floorboards, the sudden squeal of tires stinging his ears as the cruiser rapidly accelerated for a second until it pulled all the slack out of the chain with a clang followed shortly by an enraged bellow.

The sudden jolt felt almost like he’d run into a wall, but the cruiser continued to move more slowly as the rhino suddenly fell to the pavement and began to slide backwards over the ground. Nick’s heart thumped away inside his chest, a thrill running up his spine despite how slowly he was making progress. They didn’t need to be able to stop the rhino themselves, just keep it subdued long enough for help to show up.

He glanced down for a moment, then picked up the mic for the cruiser’s radio and waited for a pause between the reports that were rolling in from all over the city before he keyed it. “Dispatch? This is Officer Wilde. Carrots and I are trying to subdue a savage rhino. In need of immediate assistance.”

“You guys too?” came Clawhauser’s harried reply. “You’re going to have to wait, there’s a line right now.”

“Savage rhino,” Nick said again, speaking slowly to emphasize his words. “Near Little Rodentia.”

The radio went dead silent for a second, then: “Okay, Wilde, you and Hopps got priority. You’re still going to have to wait, though. The chief is trying to get everyone back from the parade, but everything is a mess right now. Where are you?”

“We’re still near Elm and—” he started, only to be interrupted by the sound of tearing metal just before the cruiser lurched backwards.

Nick quickly slammed to a halt before he hit something and looked up to see the cruiser’s push bumper lying in the middle of the street. And just beyond it, the rhino was dragging herself back up onto all fours. She shook her head violently once, then gave an angry snort and turned to face him.

Upon seeing the rhino fall to the ground Judy jumped into the air and let out a whoop. She’d been a little worried the plan she’d thrown together wouldn’t work because their cruiser wasn’t actually intended to move a mammal as large as a rhino. While there were rhinos, hippos, and elephants on the force, the vehicles necessary to move them were quite expensive and so most of the cruisers used by the ZPD were intended to serve mammals no smaller than a wolf and no larger than a tiger. Their
cruiser was just such a version, specially modified to handle even smaller mammals.

But it was working. Maybe progress was slow, but the rhino was being dragged away from the wall a foot at a time and the further they got her away from Little Rodentia the less likely she was to attempt to force her way inside again. Of course the rhino was hardly coming quietly, flailing for purchase even as she slid across the ground, but cement and asphalt didn’t exactly provide her with much leverage.

The only warning that all wasn’t well was a faint creak followed by a loud snap. She watched in disbelief as the cruiser suddenly shot backwards, its push bumper clattering to against the ground. Without even a moment’s hesitation the female rhino pushed herself back up, giving her massive body a single shake before she turned and charged the machine that had dared to inconvenience her.

Judy immediately gave chase, not sure how she intended to help, but was caught off-guard by just how quickly the rhino built up speed. She watched as Nick tried to maneuver the car out of the way, but he was too slow. At the last moment the rhino tossed her head to the side and caught the back end with her horn, sending the vehicle spinning like a top and leaving a frighteningly large dent in the frame. Two of the tires blew out when the cruiser jumped onto the sidewalk, then finally came to rest.

“Oh no no no no no,” she whispered, pushing herself harder to reach the cruiser before the rhino could come back to finish the job.

As it turned out her fears were entirely unfounded. The rhino came to a rolling stop, then trotted in a wide 180 that swung the chain wide behind her before surveying the destruction her passage had caused. She gave the cruiser a long look followed by a derisive snort, apparently satisfied that she had “killed” it. A moment later her attention refocused on the other little annoyance that had plagued her recently.

Everything seemed to stop for a moment when Judy realized the rhino’s eyes had locked onto her. She could feel how hard her heart was working, felt the ground under her feet as she tried to change direction, somehow managed to search everywhere around her for someplace to leap to safety. Then with an odd rubber banding sensation time sped back up and things began to happen entirely too quickly.

The rhino closed the distance between them faster than Judy thought possible. She managed to dive clear, though those heavy feet still came much too close for comfort. Once she was sure the rhino wouldn’t trample her, she threw herself to the ground just in time to avoid the chain that was whipping through the air behind the massive mammal. There was no dodging the cruiser’s ruined push bar however.

It clipped her shoulder, sending a painful tingle down her arm just before the whole limb went numb. Her mind reeled under the blow, eyes squeezed shut and teeth clenched, even as her training took over and she allowed herself to roll with the hit. She felt herself slide across the ground a short distance before coming to a stop, her entire body refusing to move for just a second while her senses tried to find something to focus on.

Somehow Nick had managed to get his seat belt on just seconds before the rhino hit him, and considering the ride he’d just been given he was convinced it had saved him from being tossed
around the cruiser’s cabin like a rag doll. Even after he came to a stop the entire world seemed to tilt
precariously around him, but nausea was much better than death. All he needed to do was bail-out
and find someplace to hide before the freight train that had just hit him came back.

Unfortunately for him, the seat belt had jammed. He struggled with it for just a moment before he
gave up on forcing the mechanism and instead resigned himself to clawing his way through the
nylon shoulder-strap. Far from the ideal course of action, his claws weren’t nearly as sharp as a
feline’s and the woven pattern was specifically designed not to fail easily.

When he heard the rhino charging again he looked up, wanting to gauge if there was enough time for
him to cut loose or if he should wait until after she hit the cruiser again, only to see that the large
mammal wasn’t coming for him. His eyes quickly scanned along the path, his heart jumping into his
throat when he saw his partner scrambling in the middle of the road.

“JUDY!”

His claws dug into the nylon, frantically tearing into those strong fibers as he kicked and squirmed to
get himself free. Every time his claws raked over the strap he felt the seat belt loosen just a little
more, giving him that much extra space to free himself, already so close after just a few seconds.

It didn’t matter.

He watched, helpless, as Judy dove out of the rhino’s path and then ducked under that deadly chain
only to be hit by the cruiser’s push bar. From where he sat he couldn’t see how bad the strike had
been, but the way the small bunny tumbled across the ground didn’t look good at all. All at once he
threw his body against the seat belt, snarling as he kicked and clawed as hard as he could, until at last
he was able to slip free.

And then he was back outside and running across the street to where her body had come to a rest,
leaning over her and looking into her eyes. “Judy!”

She winced and batted his muzzle away. “I’m okay,” she said through gritted teeth, carefully flexing
the fingers on her other hand. “Mostly. Can’t feel my arm.”

“That’s probably for the best,” he told her, sparing an anxious glance at the rhino. “Can you walk?”

“My legs are fine,” she assured him, gingerly pushing herself back up.

“In that case, I want to formally say your plan was terrible,” he said, making sure she was back on
her feet before he stepped away. “With that chain dangling behind her she’s even more dangerous.”

“At least she isn’t trying to get into Little Rodentia anymore.”


Thundering footsteps cut their exchange short. Judy didn’t waste any time darting behind a parked
van, keeping her arm tucked in close against her body. Getting behind cover seemed like a
wonderful idea to Nick, but he realized at the last moment that if they simply followed the bunny they
would make a single target. He cut back across to the cruiser instead, keeping one eye on the rhino’s
progress. It didn’t take long for him to confirm that this time its attention had settled squarely on him.

He dove under the ruined cruiser and scrambled across the ground on all fours to the other side to
keep a healthy amount of steel between himself and the savage rhino. Once again she hit the cruiser.
The blow landed squarely this time, caving in the passenger’s side and sliding the whole vehicle
several feet across the ground. Moments later she rammed it a second time and Nick was forced to
move before he was crushed against the wall.

“Oh come on. This can’t be good for you,” he said, knowing full well how useless it was to reason with her. “I promise nobody wants to mess with you. Just calm down.”

“We need to get her somewhere else,” Judy shouted from across the road. “Someplace safe, before she kills someone.”

Nick barely had time to grunt his agreement as he dove behind another car just in time to avoid another charge, actually able to feel the air rushing past him in her wake. Moments later came the clang of metal on metal, the towing chain battering the side of the car as it dragged along behind the large mammal. A shiver ran down his spine as he imagined how bad it would be if anyone got tangled up in that. The push bar that was attached to it was just as deadly; he was amazed that Judy was doing as well as she was after being struck by it. Unless they took care of the situation quickly there was no doubt the chief would have some choice words for them.

But as the push bar clattered down the street something drew Nick’s attention. It didn’t slide or bounce cleanly, but rather jumped into the air, skipping from end to end as it was pulled along. As he watched, it caught on a storm drain for just a moment. When the chain was pulled taut again it immediately wrenched free, but in that instant the massive rhino stumbled slightly.

“I’ve got an idea, but you aren’t going to like it,” he said, voice raised to carry across the street.

“What is it?”

“We gotta lead her to Pride and Seventeenth. There’s a construction site there.”

As Judy ran down the street she tried not to think about how completely insane Nick’s plan was, or how insane she was for going along with it. True, she didn’t have any better ideas, and from the reports that were coming in on the radio they probably weren’t going to be getting help any time soon, but now that they were actually trying to lure the savage rhino through public streets she was beginning to have second thoughts.

Thankfully most mammals took one look at the several tons of unfettered rage that was tearing its way through the city and quickly found somewhere else to be, but keeping the large mammal’s attention focused squarely on themselves wasn’t as easy as they’d expected. Every so often her frustration seemed to get the best of her and she would try to find something easier to pulverize, forcing them to get her attention once more. Usually that involved shouting and taunting the rhino, but in several cases they’d actually been forced to find things to throw. That point in particular made Judy feel uncomfortable, despite how dangerous she was the rhino was very much a victim in this. It didn’t seem right to pelt her with small sticks and pebbles even if the mammal’s thick hide made it impossible for either Judy or Nick to hurt her.

At least it was working. Keeping the rhino from trampling them was actually the easy part. She was faster than Judy would have thought, but once she was moving she wasn’t able to turn very well so jumping out of the way wasn’t very difficult. The chain that was dragging behind was significantly more dangerous as Judy had already learned, jumping across the ground unpredictably as it was pulled along. She still couldn’t feel her right arm, leaving her hand feeling like it was larger than it was and robbing her fingers of any ability to manipulate small things like the knobs on her radio.
“Okay, we’re here. What now?” Judy asked.

Nick held up a hand, then doubled over with his hands on his knees as he panted for air. “Now we just get that chain tangled up in the steel beams the construction crew drove into the ground.”

“Well that *sounds* easy,” she commented, then jumped as the rhino came crashing through the fence and began to look for them.

“Most things do until it’s time to actually try it,” Nick said and took one more deep breath, then pushed himself upright again. “Since it’s my idea I suppose I get to be the bait, huh?”

“You sure? What should I do?”

“Be ready to drag my tail to safety if I need it?” he shrugged. “I’m going to be honest, Carrots, I’m just making this up as I go.”

Her ears folded back and she bit her lip, pulling out her taser. She fumbled with the settings, silently cursing her numb fingers, until she turned the dial to maximum. A pause, then a pronounced electronic whine as it stored the charge. With any luck she wouldn’t need it, the tiny units they had given her and Nick really weren’t expected to bring down anything larger than a cougar. It might be just enough to provide an opening, though.

*Be careful, foxy.*

One of the few things Nick had going for him was that most rhinos didn’t have very good eyesight and this one was no exception, so he was able to creep surprisingly close before she noticed. With each step he took he expected her to hear him, but with all the noise she was making it wasn’t until a change in the breeze carried his scent to her that she turned with nostrils flared.

“Miss, I know you’re having a very bad day. Mine hasn’t been that great either—” he started, not at all sure why he bothered. The female rhino didn’t even give him a chance to finish speaking before she hurled her impressive bulk straight at him.

He dodged behind one of the steel beams, then ran to the next one over, looking over his shoulder to track her progress. She actually skidded to a stop in the bare dirt, leaving deep furrows in the ground before she changed direction for him. He did a full 360 around that post before heading to the next, repeating the process there before crisscrossing his way back. The whole while the ground trembled under his feet. He could almost feel her breath on his back and only his desire to not end up flattened kept him moving fast enough to keep his lead.

It wasn’t until a minute in that he realized that his plan had a single, critical flaw. While the chain was indeed getting caught up in the various tools and debris around the construction site the rhino was easily strong enough to tug it free each time. Doing so slowed her down some, and was probably tiring her out, but he’d been counting on the chain getting snagged solidly enough to bring her to a dead stop. The way things were going he was going to tire out long before she did.
“If you need a breather just let me know,” he muttered between gasps. “I’d be happy to let you call a
time out.”

The rhino, predictably, only snorted in response and charged again. This time he decided to try
something different and jumped over a length of the chain that was currently working its way around
one of the posts, thinking that perhaps the rhino would trip herself. He misjudged the height
however, or perhaps it had simply pulled taut at the wrong moment. Regardless, his foot caught on
the metal and sent him sprawling. With barely a moment to lose, he rolled along the ground until he
bumped into something, eyes wide as a heavy foot landed scant inches from the tip of his nose.

Then the rhino let out a bellow that Nick at first mistook as anger for missing until he saw her legs
buckle and noticed the taser prongs stuck in the mammal’s flank. Shortly after came the rapid
CRACK-CRACK-CRACK of voltage shooting down the wires, followed by a wimpy pop.

“Do something quick, that blew the circuits,” Judy cried.

Her words sent him back in motion, casting about for anything he could use to restrain the rhino.
Everything looked either too flimsy or too far away. Already he could hear the grunts of the rhino
trying to get back up. Then his eyes settled on the push bar.

Without thinking he lunged for it and quickly unhooked the chain, then ran to one of the steel posts.
Judy met him there, and together they quickly wrapped the chain around the post several times
before she hooked the chain back on itself. They jumped back not a moment too soon, just seconds
before the rhino finally managed to heave herself upright and tried to charge again. She barely made
it five steps before all the slack came out of the chain and the metal links snapped tight however,
giving her a firm pull on her ankle and sending her sprawling once more. The heavy chain creaked
lightly, and the metal beam shifted under the sudden load, but after a second it became clear both
were going to hold.

Nick nearly collapsed from relief, but let Judy lead him back out to the street. She struggled to work
her radio on the way there, then sighed and handed it to him instead.

Once he’d caught his breath he called it in for her.

The moment they reached the road Nick sank to the ground, and after a second of thought Judy
decided to join him. She still couldn’t feel her fingers, but that painful tingling had returned and
seemed to run up and down her arm in waves. So long as she didn’t move her arm it wasn’t so bad,
but something told her that the chief was going to want her on desk duty for a few weeks after this.

On any other day that would have bothered her, but right then it barely even registered in the back of
her thoughts. She was still seeing Nick stumble, the rhino bearing down on him mercilessly, those
heavy feet attacking the ground right where he’d landed. A burst of terror so intense that it seemed to
strip her of all other emotions. Even after, once she’d saw him unharmed on the ground, the fear
refused to let go of her.

Her eyes closed when she heard Clawhauser report that help was finally on the way, then slumped
against Nick’s side and pressed against him. He leaned back against her, his warm presence helping
to calm her even as she felt like her whole body might begin to tremble at any moment. With a little
shift she pushed under his arm and hugged against his side, practically curling in as she reassured
herself that it hadn’t happened. Just a close call.

“You okay there, Carrots?” he asked, just a hint of worry touching his voice.

She nodded and squeezed him a little tighter with her good arm. “I’ll need to see a doctor, but I’ll be fine. I just thought for a moment that…”

Her ears went limp behind her and she swallowed, unable to finish the thought. Then she felt Nick’s arm wrap around her side, holding her close. A tense laugh slipped from her and she shook her head, then buried her face against his chest, taking a deep breath to calm herself as she fought back tears.

“You dumb fox.”

“That’s me, sly bunny.” His fingers brushing down her side, sending shivers through her body.

They sat quietly, just catching their breath. In the distance she could hear sirens everywhere in the city. At least one of those was coming for them. And back in the construction site the rhino struggled to free herself, her impotent cries of rage accompanied by the clatter of the steel chain.

Then Nick seemed to straighten up a little, his body tensing up ever so slightly. “Ah, Carrots?”

She didn’t bother to look up. “Mmm?”

“A crowd is gathering,” he said.

“So long as they don’t try to get into the construction site they’re fine.”

“Well there is that,” Nick said, sounding just a bit nervous, “but we’re getting a lot of looks.”

For just a moment she considered sitting upright again, but she just couldn’t bring herself to do it. She gave her head a little shake. “I don’t care.”

“Some of them have their phones—”

She dug her fingers into his uniform and tugged lightly, pressing more firmly against him. “I don’t care.”

At first he didn’t say anything, then she felt his tail curl around her side as he slumped back down. “Oh. Okay then.”
"Alright Miss Hopps, can you squeeze my index finger please?" the weasel physician asked calmly, his hand held out for her.

Judy did as she was told and grasped the finger tightly, squeezing cautiously until she felt a dull throb in her arm. "Is this good?"

"Perfect," the weasel said. "Are you feeling any discomfort?"

"A little bit. There's a dull pain."

The weasel pulled his hand back and hmmmed, taking a moment to write a few notes on the medical chart before he picked up a small weight and offered it to her. "Okay, now if you could hold this and do a few curls."

She carefully picked up the little weight, surprised to find that it was heavier than she would have guessed. It took her a few moments to get used to the heft, but again she did as the doctor asked and carefully performed a curl, only to wince as her whole arm began to ache terribly. Her eyes closed and she quickly dropped her arm back down, panting hard for a moment.

"That…hurts bad," she informed the doctor, though judging by the weasel's face he had figured that out on his own already.

Several more notes went onto the chart. "Well, the good news is that you are lucky, Miss Hopps. This could have gone a lot worse for you. Mostly you got a bunch of bumps and bruises, but those will heal on their own in a week or so."

"Mostly?"

"That would be the bad news," the weasel said. "I'm going to send you for x-rays to be sure, but it looks to me like you've got a badly bruised scapula and hairline fracture in your humerus. That's going to have you laid up for longer."

She rubbed her arm lightly, working her fingers again as she listened to the weasel, then sighed and folded her ears down. "How long? Will I still be able to work?"

"As long as it isn't anything physically strenuous, sure. Just remember that if it starts to hurt that your body is telling you to stop," the doctor said, looking over her chart again. "As for recovery time, that is a little harder. You're young and healthy, so you've got that going for you. You'll need to be in a coaptation splint, but there's a pretty good chance we can move you to a functional arm brace in a week or two."

Judy bit her lip, not really sure what difference there was between a splint and a brace although she supposed that she would learn soon enough. A sigh slipped from her and she rubbed at her arm again, closing her eyes as she tried to imagine how the next weeks were going to go. There was no way the chief would allow her on the beat with a broken arm. She'd be lucky if he even gave her parking duty. That meant she was staring down a month of desk work at the very least. With how bad things seemed to have gotten she probably couldn't count on him being able to spare Nick to keep her company either, even if she was liable to go insane by herself.

For now she didn't have too much time to worry about it however. The weasel sent her to radiology to get some x-rays of her arm and upper-chest, confirming that she had a small fracture. She
supposed the one time she didn't wear her duty vest would be the day she got hurt, although if she was being honest she wasn't actually sure her padded vest would have done much to stop this injury. From the start she'd understood how dangerous the job could be, but somehow in her mind it was only dangerous to the others. "They" were all going to get hurt sooner or later, but her? She was quick and agile, able to get out of the way of anything before it hit her. Clearly not though.

The hospital staff then introduced her to the splint that she would be wearing until her bone had healed enough to change over to a brace. At first she was hopeful as the splint didn't look that large, but once it was in place they brought out a larger plastic covering that fit over her entire upper arm from the shoulder to the elbow. Once that was secured she could still move her shoulder a little, but her elbow was held at a ninety degree angle. According to the nurses she was allowed to take it off to bathe, and could get away with wearing just the smaller part if she was careful while sleeping, but otherwise they wanted it on at all times. In a week she could come back in to see if the bone had healed enough to go with something less restrictive.

She still had no idea how to explain the injury to her parents. They worried about her safety enough when she was merely dealing with routine police work. Her father would twist himself into knots fretting about her now, and her mother was liable to pitch a fit. No doubt she was going to be urged to return to Bunny Burrow to rest until her arm was healed.

The worst of it was that she was lucky to have a family who were able to take care of her like that, and she knew it. If she asked, Bogo would almost certainly grant her medical leave. Then she could head back to Bunny Burrow to be pampered and relax until the local physicians declared her fit to return to work. Only one problem: that wasn't where she wanted to be.

Nick rubbed his head as he paced in the hospital's waiting room, listening to Bogo's voice over the phone as he gave a seemingly endless stream of orders to whoever was back at the station. The ZPD was gradually regaining control of the city, not that the news made it seem that way. Every talk show was breathlessly recounting the day's events, giving the picture that things were spiraling even further into chaos with colorful tag lines like "Founders' Day Crisis" and "Savage City." The government was apoplectic, demanding that the crisis be resolved now despite how unrealistic that was given the magnitude of the problem, and as expected the pressure was rapidly running down the chain of command.

"Alright, Wilde, you've got thirty seconds. What is so important?" Bogo said at last, barely able to keep his grouchy tone in check.

"You need to check the food, sir," Nick said quickly.

"Excuse me?"

"Our rhino, she went savage after eating a cake she was given," he explained. "That can't be a coincidence, I think someone's poisoned the food, or maybe poisoned is the wrong word, but—"

Bogo cut him off. "You are sure about this?"

"No sir, but it can't hurt," he said. "I'm telling you, it happened right after she took a few bites—"
"We cannot check the entire city's food supply, Wilde."

Nick shook his head, then realized Bogo couldn't see him. "Not everything. These were cakes intended for today's celebrations. I'll bet if you check on the other savage mammals you'll find they had just eaten something similar."

"So you think whoever has been handing this stuff out is responsible?" Bogo asked.

He almost answered, then stopped himself. The bear had seemed genuinely concerned when the female rhino had begun to show signs of distress. In fact, the bear had been trying to help and seemed completely surprised when he'd been attacked. Hardly the behavior of someone who knew they'd just made a mammal go savage.

"Wilde?" Bogo asked impatiently.

"I don't know, sir. I doubt it," he said. "There's something else going on, maybe someone tainted the food supply somehow. That's all we really know until we find something else."

"Alright, I'll put Anderson on it," the cape buffalo said, then hung up.

Nick stared at his phone for a second, though he supposed he couldn't blame the chief for being curt. He still didn't know Bogo very well, not beyond the usual boss/subordinate relationship at least, but he'd noticed the chief's mood always seemed to sour during particularly high profile incidents. Considering the city's current state today was probably among the worst ones the cape buffalo had ever had.

He closed his eyes, then shivered as he saw that rhino's heavy foot land right in front of his muzzle once more. At the time he'd felt like he'd handled the close call pretty well, but now that he was finally able to process everything he found himself revisiting that moment more often than he would've liked. That, and the moment he'd been trapped in the cruiser as Judy was sent sprawling in the middle of the street. The two memories had dug their way into his mind like ticks, refusing to let go.

His phone was almost back in his pocket before he realized there was another call he needed to make. As he dialed, he took a deep breath and tried to brace himself.

One ring-ee-ding-ee…two ring-ee-ding-ees…

"Nicholas, is that you? Where are you?"

The rapid-fire questions made his ears fold back even as he smiled a little. "Hello, mom. I'm safe. Just standing around at the hospi—"

"You're in the hospital?" The sharpness of her voice made him wince, forcing him to pull the phone from his ear. "What happened? Are you hurt badly?"

"I'm fine mom," he stressed, then took a deep breath. "Really. I got a few scrapes from tripping, but nothing bad. I'm just waiting for Judy to get back out—"

His mother interrupted again. "Officer Hopps got hurt?"

"Just her arm," he said quickly, heading her off before she could get going again. "Otherwise she's fine. I was just calling to let you know I'm okay and make sure that you are too."

"I'm not an idiot, Nicholas. I know to stay inside when things get bad."
"I know mom, just the ZPD has its hands full right now. You can't blame me for trying to look out for you."

"You're right," she said, and he could almost imagine the frustrated look on her face. "Just don't do anything stupid, okay?"

"I'll try mom, but no promises," he said just as Judy emerged from the elevator clutching a white prescription baggy. "I should really get going now. Love you, stay safe."

He hurried over to Judy's side, though his initial relief at seeing her quickly gave way as he realized she was wearing a splint that had her whole right arm immobilized from shoulder to elbow. She looked at his face, then down at her arm as if to say "I know" before forcing a smile.

"Your dress uniform is a mess," he informed her in an attempt to lighten the mood. "The chief is going to lose his mind if he sees you like this."

The comment made her stop in surprise, then she looked down at herself. Her eyes darted to the scuffs and dirt that covered the once pristine uniform. A soft chuckle slipped from her lips and her smile widened a little as she came over to give him a hug with her good arm.

"Yours isn't any better," she said.

"We best get cleaned back up before he sees us then," Nick said, already leading the way outside.

He got the doors for her despite her protests that she still had one good arm, then called a Zoober to pick them up. The whole time he kept catching himself looking at her injured arm, fighting back the obvious questions. Did it hurt? Was she going to be able to work? How long until she was better? Did she blame him?

It was an absurd question, Judy wasn't like that, but he couldn't deny how guilty he felt. If he had reacted faster the rhino wouldn't have hit the cruiser. If he had gotten out sooner he could have done something to keep Judy from getting hit. If he had insisted that she take the wheel and let him put the chain on the rhino instead. If…if…if… That she had probably saved him by tasering the rhino when she did just made him feel even worse.

The drive to the hotel passed mostly in silence. Occasionally she asked him about what was going on elsewhere in the city, and he'd tell her what little he'd heard while she was being looked at, but otherwise neither of them spoke. She simply slid up next to him in the seat and leaned in while he draped his tail across her shoulders like a shawl.

Several times he caught her looking up at him, a question in her eyes. He could almost forget about their driver with her body settled against him like this, and he felt himself relive all the same sensations he had sitting on that curb with the crowd gathered around. Exhaustion and relief and worry all twisted together in a knot, the weight of her against his side somehow making him know everything was going to be okay. And those three words: I don't care.

When the driver finally dropped them off he looked around the hotel parking lot, then rubbed his neck and chuckled. "I suppose you can make it from here on your own, huh?"

"Yeah. My legs work fine," she said, lingering a moment longer before she spoke up again. "Hey… um…can I ask you for a favor?"

"Of course. What do you need?"
Judy cautiously peeked up at him. "Would you mind sticking around for a few days? Just the weekend. There's a spare bed and I'm going to need some time to get used to living with this thing on my arm. I know it's a lot to ask, but I just don't feel confident being alone right now and—"

"Hey, no need to beg," he said, fighting down the warmth he felt in his stomach. "I'm happy to help. You know I'd do anything for you, Carrots."

"Really?"

"Well, maybe not eat one of your salads, but pretty close." He smiled, then glanced down at himself and chuckled. "I'll need to swing back by my place to get a few things and clean up first though. You going to be fine for an hour or so?"

She beamed back at him. "I think I'll survive that long."

Once she'd got back to her room, Judy began the slow process of getting her dress blues off so they could go into the wash and so she could take a shower herself. She ran into problems almost immediately. As with most clothing designed to look nice, the ZPD's dress uniform was more concerned with appearances than with being easy to put on. The tie came off easily enough, but the buttons proved to be a much greater challenge—especially the ones higher up on her chest and near her neck. The holes were just barely big enough for the metal buttons to fit through, and with her right arm effectively immobilized she was forced to make due with only her left hand.

Back at the hospital one of the orderlies had helped her get back into her uniform before the splint had been put on her, but she hadn't realized just how much she'd relied on him until now. By the time she finally got out of the buttons she was huffing with frustration, and resolved to take the splint off right then. That too proved to be a challenge, but in this case someone had at least given some thought to making sure a mammal could remove it one handed.

Even with the painkillers they'd given her she felt a dull ache in her arm when she moved it, but at least this way she wouldn't be reduced to an invalid. With care, she stripped the uniform off—occasionally wincing when she bent her arm in the wrong way—then hurried into the shower to get clean before Nick returned.

The shower, at least, went more smoothly since she temporarily had full use of both arms. There were certain spots on her body that hurt to reach, and that dull ache never quite left her, but the hot water was soothing and getting all the dirt washed out of her fur felt simply amazing. Had she not been in a rush to finish before Nick returned she would have taken the time to brush her fur as well. Instead she settled for getting as dry as she could with a towel and combing everything back into place, then pulled on some loose fitting clothes. Just when she was working herself toward putting the splint back on there was a knock at the door.

"Judy? Can I come in?"

"Just a second," she called back, leaving the splint where it was for now. A few seconds of fussing, and the latch came open, letting Nick inside. "Sorry for the wait, I just got out of the shower and—"

"No reason to fret, Fluff. Standing in the hall for a couple of minutes isn't going to hurt my feelings," he said as he slipped past, carefully maneuvering so the gym bag he'd brought wouldn't bump into her. "Feeling any better now?"
She pushed the door closed and re-did the lock, then flexed her fingers a couple of times in an attempt to ward off the unpleasant twinge that ran through her arm. "Mostly, though getting anything done with this arm is just..." She sighed. "Could you help me get the splint back on?"

Nick tossed the duffel bag into the corner then went to sit on the edge of the bed. "Anything you need, Carrots. Bring it here."

Her tail wiggled lightly as she retrieved the splint, then jumped up next to Nick. She shifted in place to get comfortable, only for him to grab her around the waist and hoist her up across his lap, ignoring her halfhearted protest.

He took a moment to examine the splint before helping her lift her arm up so he could get it back on. Even that little bit of movement sent stinging pins and needles shooting up her arm from her elbow into her shoulder, but she bore with it as each strap was redone until at last the plastic splint was hugging around her arm securely. A sigh of relief slipped from her and she carefully rolled her shoulder, making sure the splint was on properly, then smiled up at Nick.

"Thanks."

Nick's ears dipped back, his fingers trailing over the splint, then down to her exposed arm. "Hurts pretty bad, huh?"

"It isn't so bad if I don't move it around too much," she said, then nodded toward the prescription bag she'd brought back from the hospital. "Plus they gave me some pain killers, in case I need it. Don't think I'll be taking the splint off very often though. Not for a few days at least."

"Really scared me when I saw that bar hit you." His fingers kept rubbing over her forearm, his claws tracing though her fur. Then his hand found hers, closing around it loosely. "All I could see was you lying in the road, and you weren't moving."

Judy swallowed past a lump in her throat, then looked up to find Nick's eyes were closed. "I was just stunned, that's all," she whispered, reaching up with her good arm to rub over his muzzle. "Besides, you gave me a pretty bad scare too."

His eyes reopened, looking down into hers. "Mmm. Saved me again. You keep doing that," he said, finally managing a smile. "I'll need to return the favor sooner or later."

All at once her ears began to heat up as she realized just how close their lips were. She swallowed again, looking at his mouth where she could just barely see the tips of his teeth, then back up into his eyes. All she needed to do was lean in just a little more and...

Their noses bumped first and she drew back, blinking in surprise, then quickly looked away in embarrassment. "S-sorry, I don't—"

A finger slipped under her chin, coaxing her to look back up. Nick's ears were tilted back, just the slightest tremor in his voice as he leaned closer. "Let's try that again."

This time Nick tilted his head slightly to one side, his lips hovering so close she could feel his breath on her fur. Her heart fluttered, she closed her eyes, leaned in that last little bit...

...and melted.
The rustle of cotton sheets washed with too much starch, someone talking loudly in the hall, steady breathing, and the heat of the smaller body he’d curled around. Each sensation registered one after the other in Nick’s mind as sleep fell from him, his eyes cracking open just enough to check the time as he stifled a yawn. The red digital display blurred slightly in his vision before 7:12am snapped into focus. Still much too early to wake up on a weekend, although considering what he was waking up to he couldn’t complain.

He took a deep breath, basking in the warm memories from last night. That bubbly, giddy sensation still lingered, making him tingle in a way he could actually feel in his fur—a sensation he hadn’t experienced since he’d been a teen with a crush. Even though they’d restricted themselves to making out he couldn’t remember a better night or a more pleasant morning, and couldn’t help wondering how much better it could be when they didn’t have to worry about Judy’s arm.

His nose lightly pressed into her fur and he sighed, then followed one of her ears to the very tip and nibbled tenderly. She squealed almost immediately, ducking her head down before lightly batting at his side with her good hand.

“H-hey, careful! Those are sensitive.”

Nick drew back just a little and smiled. “Sorry, didn’t mean to wake you.”

Judy promptly pressed back against him with a teasing smile, peeking out of one eye. “Been awake. Just haven’t felt like getting up yet.”

“Why is that?” he asked, tucking his muzzle between her ears as he settled back in. “Wait, don’t tell me. You were hoping I’d try to wake you with a kiss.”

“Something like that.” She let out a contented sigh, lightly shifting in place.

Unable to resist, Nick trailed a finger from the very tip of her ear down over her side as he simply enjoyed the moment. It was so easy to just let everything else go, to forget the whole reason he was there in the first place, but as his body began to relax again he noticed just a subtle shift in Judy’s scent. Just the slightest twinge of distress.

“Your arm doing okay?”

She nodded. “Yeah, mostly. The painkillers are starting to wear off a little though.”

“Want me to get your pills?”

“No.” She stretched out against him. “I’ll take one when I get my shower. Right now I want you just where you are.”

A happy rumble slipped from him and he relaxed back against the bed, letting his mind drift in the fuzzy space that existed between the waking world and sleep. For a few blissful minutes he was able to forget everything outside of the bed as he listened to Judy’s soft breathing. He wished it was possible to stay right where he was all day, warm and safe and comfortable. Wisps of dreams began to lightly tug at him, drawing him back into their embrace when the sound of his phone going off dragged him back.

Judy groaned lightly as he reached blindly toward the nightstand until his fingers brushed over the
case. With his first attempt to grab hold of it he very nearly knocked it onto the floor. His next try met with success, and he immediately brought it up to his face to see who was calling so early.

“It’s the precinct,” he muttered, then pushed himself upright and gave Judy an apologetic look before answering. “Officer Wilde. What do you want?”

“Wilde? We need you to come in to help cover patrols,” said a business-like voice on the other end. “Be here no later than eight-fifteen.”

He glanced at the clock again and did some quick mental math. “Yeah, that isn’t happening.”

Judy arched her back as she pushed herself up, a tiny yawn escaping from her. After, she quietly nestled against his side, listening to the conversation.

“Excuse me? Officer Wilde, you are required—”

“I’m not at my place and don’t have my uniform with me,” he said firmly, interrupting the lecture he was about to receive. “I’ll need time to head home so I can get changed.”

A pause, followed by a sigh. “That is fine. When do you think you’ll make it in?”

“Eight-thirty if I leave now.”

“Alright, Officer Wilde. See you then.”

Judy leaned up to kiss his cheek. “You better get going.”

“Yeah, I guess I should have expected this. The city’s a mess right now,” he said, then willed himself to his feet. “Mind if we pick up from right here tonight?”

“Of course not! Now shoo, or you’re going to be late.”

With Nick gone there wasn’t much reason to continue lazing about in bed, so Judy reluctantly resolved to get up. The slowly growing ache in her arm was the biggest concern on her mind, so she went to read the instructions to the pills she’d been given. One tablet every eight hours plus an additional one if needed, no more than six per day. No operating vehicles or heavy machinery. Possible drowsiness, mild nausea, or loss of appetite. Do not mix with other drugs or alcohol.

She frowned at the bottle and silently debated if she actually needed this, but that ache was steadily getting worse and she wasn’t sure if the drugs she’d already been given had completely worn off yet. A little bit of pain she could manage just fine, but she most certainly didn’t want to end up writhing in agony either. If she was going to take one, now was the time so the drugs would have a chance to take effect.

After a bit of thought she decided to keep herself to half a tablet, fully aware that she was still acting like the precinct was going to call her in as well. A happy little fantasy, since they’d surely put her on the injured roster. She knew all the relevant regulations, that she would be taken off active duty the moment her injury was reported. What’s more, she fully understood and agreed with the rules. None of that mattered though. For some reason she still resented not being able to help.

Just as she was beginning to wonder what to do, her phone began to ring. For a wonderful instant
she thought that maybe they had found something for her and practically leapt to answer. When she looked at the screen reality dragged her back down. Not from the precinct, but a MuzzleTime from her parents. Just the thing she’d been dreading.

Eyes closed, she took a deep breath to ready herself, then put on her best fake smile and answered. Her mother’s face filled the screen.

“Mom! What a surprise!”

Her mother took a step back and turned to speak off-screen. “Stu, I’ve got her,” she said. “Judy, we heard about what’s happening. Why didn’t you call us, we’ve been worried sick!”

“Sorry, I was a little…occupied yesterday.”

Her father came running into the frame and shoved a newspaper forward. For a moment the image went out of focus as the camera tried to compensate, eventually showing a headline: Savage Celebrations in a Savage City. It came complete with the image of an elephant overturning a parade float.

“I’ll bet you were occupied,” her father said anxiously, pulling the paper away again. “It’s all the news is talking about. Is it true the whole city just went insane?”

“The city’s always a little insane, dad,” she assured him. “Yes things got bad yesterday, but it wasn’t anything—”

“Judy, what’s that on your arm? Are you okay?”

She froze when her mother interrupted her, realizing that she’d moved back just enough for them to see her arm. Ears down she shrugged a little, still trying to maintain her smile. “I got knocked around a tiny bit, it’s nothing—”

“Is that a cast?” her father demanded.

“It is not a cast.”

“Well it sure looks like a cast,” her mother said, nose beginning to twitch. “What happened? Did you break your arm?”

“Okay, look,” she said, letting out an exasperated breath. “There was this savage rhino that Nick and I had to deal with, and while we were doing that I might’ve gotten just a little bit hurt. It’s not that bad, really. Just a hairline fracture.”

“So you did break your arm? When were you planning on telling us about this?” Her mother gave her a stern look.

“Mom, I just got out of bed,” Judy said. A nervous laugh slipped out of her. “Plus I didn’t want to worry you. I know how you two get.”

“And just how do we get?”

“You’re doing it right now, mom!” she said, then realized her father was on the verge of tears. “Listen, I’m sorry. Really really sorry, I just didn’t have a chance to call yet, I promise. Yesterday I was busy, then I was trying to figure out how to deal with this thing on my arm, and now I’ve just gotten out of bed. I wasn’t trying to keep you two in the dark, I swear.”
“Does that mean you’re going to be coming home?” her father asked.

When she didn’t immediately answer her mother’s head tilted forward slightly, the stern look returning. “Judy? You are coming home, right?”

“It’s just that things are really hectic here still, and the city really needs all the help it can get right now—” she started.

“You’ve got a broken arm, just what do you think you’re going to do?”

“Not all police work is running around and arresting mammals, mom,” she said, her ears lying flat. “There are witness interviews, and investigations, and paperwork, and…”

“You mean safe things,” her father said, looking immediately relieved.

Judy rolled her eyes. “Yes, dad. Safe things.”

“Well thank the heavens for that!”

“Well I still don’t like the idea that you’re out there by yourself,” her mother said. “Stu? Where are my bags? I’m heading down there.”


“Nonsense, I can’t have you staying by yourself if you’re hurt.”

“I’m not by myself,” she blurted, then covered her mouth, ears beginning to burn.

Both of her parents stared at her as the insides of her ears slowly went from pink to bright crimson. Oh God, please not like this, she thought as she fought to find her voice.

“Pardon?” her father asked.

“I—I’m not by myself,” she stammered, not at all sure why she was repeating herself. “I…um… I kinda got a friend staying with me?”

An uncomfortable silence lingered between them as she squirmed under her mother’s skeptical gaze. She’d expected to have more time, to figure out a way to broach the subject delicately on her own terms. Now there was no escaping giving them at least some information.

“A friend, Judith?” her mother asked skeptically. “I don’t know any young ladies who blush that much over a friend.”

“He’s a very good friend, okay?” she groaned, wishing she could just vanish.

“Does that mean you’ve found another boyfriend?” her father asked, brightening up a little. “See, Bonnie? I told you that if you stopped nagging things would work out on their own. What’s he like?”

“And when were you planning on telling your parents about him?” her mother asked. “You aren’t shacking up with some dude you just met I hope.”

“Oh for the love of—” she started, then let out a groan. “We haven’t even really done anything yet! And no, I didn’t just meet him, okay? I’ve known him for a while.”
“Then why haven’t we heard anything about him yet?” her mother asked.

“Maybe you have,” Judy shot back. “And maybe I wanted a chance to figure things out before involving my parents in my life again.”

“Whoa there Jude, no need to get your ears in a twist,” her father said. “Can’t blame us for being interested, what with how you were so insistent that you weren’t looking for a relationship right now.”

She rubbed her face, forcing herself to calm back down. “I promise to tell you all about him another time—tonight even—but for now I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“Alright hun,” her mother said. “We’ll talk to you again tonight. You make sure to take care of yourself. Love you.”

“Love you too, mom,” Judy said and held her breath until the call ended. “Somebody shoot me. What am I going to do?”

One thing she knew she wasn’t on her to-do list was sitting alone in the hotel all day. She glanced at the clock and considered her options, then felt a smile slowly break out. Maybe she hadn’t been called in, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t show up anyway. The doctor had said she was cleared to work provided it wasn’t physically strenuous, after all. If she got moving there was even a chance she could beat Nick, assuming the splint didn’t slow her down too much.

Thanks to his carelessness last night, Nick made it to the station with only a few minutes to spare. He hadn’t paid nearly enough attention to where he’d been putting his gear, so he ended up having to hunt through his entire apartment at the last moment to find everything. At the time he’d been tempted to just leave without it and hope for the best, but he hadn’t actually been told what he would be doing once he arrived so he decided it was best to just play it safe.

It was a shame though. He’d been looking forward to having a couple days away from the bulletproof vest and the undershirt he wore to keep it from matting down his fur too much.

He did end up having plenty of time to reflect on yesterday’s fiasco however, and ended up with a disturbing itch in the back of his mind that just wouldn’t let go. What had happened was too huge, too widespread, and too sudden. Something like that took a lot of planning, and the idea that it could have been done without anything being noticed was just impossible.

There wasn’t such a thing as a perfect crime; he’d pulled enough jobs to learn that lesson. Someone always talked, or messed up, or just got plain unlucky. Even when he was running a hustle the mark would realize they’d been had sooner or later. That was a large part of why he’d come to know the city so well. It paid to keep moving from area to area, giving mammals plenty of time to forget his face before he returned. Even then there were plenty of close calls, so the idea that the ZPD hadn’t gotten wind of what was coming just didn’t fit.

Which could only mean they had, but misinterpreted what they were smelling.

And that he was immensely stupid.

Soon as he walked into the station he was practically accosted by Lowell. The white wolf gave a
bark, then began to drag him toward the station’s parking lot, tail fanning the air behind him. “Finally. Come on, the chief has been staring daggers at me since I got in. We need to get moving.”

With some effort, Nick managed to pull himself free and gave his hand a shake. “He’s put me with you again?” he asked, realizing a moment later just how that must have sounded. “What about Wolford? Is he in the car already?”

“Naw, just you and me today. McHorn got a concussion while dealing with a savage elephant, so Wolford got paired with Francine today,” Lowell said. “Everything’s a mess and I’ve never seen Ol’ Bogo so angry, so we best get moving before he comes back out of his office.”

“I was hoping to have a moment to do something before getting thrown back into the city,” Nick said, then pointed back toward the labs. “Just need to make sure the CSI’s got all the evidence from a case. You don’t mind if I take care of that, do you?”

“Yeah, sure. Just make it quick. I’ll meet you at the cruiser.”

Nick didn’t waste any time getting to the evidence lockers. A few minutes to fill out a chain of custody, and then he was down in the labs. The moment he stepped in he could tell they’d been overwhelmed by the sudden flood of work. Just by looking he could tell the labs had called everyone in to help handle the additional load, and even then it didn’t look like anybody had time to help him out.

Fortunately Judy still had him double check her reports for errors, so he just so happened to know exactly where his baggie of evidence needed to go. He made his way to the chemistry lab and cautiously poked his head inside. Half a dozen mammals were busy preparing samples or running tests, but his attention fixated on the only red panda in the room. Without a word he walked over to her and waited until she looked his way.

“Can I help you?”

“Are you Miss Zhu?” he asked cautiously.

“I am,” she said as she rubbed her eyes, then sighed and repeated herself. “Can I help you?”

Nick nodded earnestly. “I hope so. According to Officer Hopps, you were the one to run the sample on that wildebeest kid several weeks back. Is that correct?”

“If you’re wondering what I found then I already told the bunny cop everything I know. It isn’t Nighthowler, but it is very similar,” Miss Zhu said. “Now if you would excuse me—”

“No, I already know that. Believe me when I say that I wouldn’t be here if I would be wasting your time,” he said quickly, then held up his evidence bag. “I’ve got a sample here I’d like you to run to compare against that kid’s. And against anything you find on this case.”

Miss Zhu turned back to him, one ear cocked back skeptically. “In case you haven’t noticed we’ve already got our hands full. What makes you think now is the time to add this to our work pile?”

“Because I’ve got a hunch there is a link,” Nick explained. “This is a sample from a crime scene, and the guy we’re trying to catch might have been the one who sold the drugs to that wildebeest.”

Miss Zhu sighed again, then held out her hand. “Let’s see it.” When he gave her the bag she immediately opened it and peered inside. “I hate to break it to you, officer, but these are clover blossoms. Nighthowler flowers aren’t white.”
“Yes, but I think the flowers may have been coated in something,” he said. “Please, if you can do this one thing for me I promise that I’ll make it up to you. I know just about everyone worth knowing in the city, so I’m sure I’ll be able to help you out with something sooner or later.”

“Fine, I’ll run it,” she said, then added it to the pile of samples that was already in front of her. “But you better not ride me about it. We’re too busy for me to rush this, so it’ll be done when it’s done.”

“Thank you, Miss Zhu. I promise you won’t regret this,” he said, already backing out of the room. “Just call me if you need a favor!”

With that he hurried back out into the main lobby and turned to the parking lot. On the way he swung by his desk just to make sure that nothing important was waiting for him there. Several memos, a few letters, and a pile of busy work. He picked the lot of it up and dumped it into a file with the intention of sorting through it later, then turned around just in time to see Judy walking up.

“Carrots?” he said, his ears perked up. “You’re here?”

“Yeah, I decided to help out a little,” she said, a sheepish smile. “Wanted to surprise you at the door, but Bogo caught me first and called me up to his office. Only just managed to convince him to let me stick around to help out processing paperwork and such.”

He pressed his lips together, then glanced at her arm. “Are you sure?”

“It isn’t anything I can’t handle,” she said, though she did reach over to touch the splint. “You better get moving, though. I doubt they called you in so you could stand around worrying about me. See you later tonight?”

“Tonight,” he promised, reaching out to lightly tweak the tip of her ear. “See you then, sweetheart.”

Hours paperwork had gradually managed to tarnish Judy’s initial cheerful mood. The problem wasn’t the work itself, she was actually glad to help in whatever way she could, but her splint made even this routine task frustrating. She simply hadn’t realized just how difficult it would be to write or type when she couldn’t move her arm as she wished.

Then there was the nature of the work she was doing: reviewing initial reports for the recent epidemic of savage cases. Each one detailed who the victim was in addition to the number of injuries they had caused. Too often she also found a death toll, and she simply couldn’t help keeping a running tally in her head. With each new page the sheer magnitude of what had happened became more and more clear to her.


She stopped, feeling a moment of nausea as the picture continued getting clearer. Bogo wanted her to look for patterns, but she kept getting distracted by how bad things had been. The savage mammal incidents were supposed to have ended after Bellwether’s arrest, but now she felt like they were
facing something far worse.

Still, she was finding patterns. Most of the mammals who had gone savage did so in areas near the Founders Day events. There were a few exceptions, but she was sure they would find some way to connect those mammals to the festivities in some other way.

Initially she’d thought the cases were completely random, however she was beginning question that. So far she had looked at over two hundred incidents, and all but three of those were prey mammals. The exceptions were a bear, a badger, and a skunk. Had the incidents been random she would have expected there to be several times that many predators—a dozen at least—which told her that something else was going on. It was almost like someone was targeting prey species.

She kept that to herself though. The time she had told the press that mammals were going savage because they were predators was still fresh in her mind. Right now the city most definitely didn’t need someone to be making those sorts of accusations until there was proof. She could mention her worries to Nick later, he would understand. If they could figure out how it was being done then maybe they could decide how to proceed from there.

But for now she was in desperate need of a break. She pushed away from her desk and hopped to the ground, then groaned as she stretched her back and legs. The ache in her arm had returned, so she stopped by the water cooler to get some water and take the other half of the pill she had that morning. She lingered there, telling herself that she was just waiting for the painkillers to kick in but knowing that really she just didn’t feel up to reading more of those reports.

For a moment she wondered if the reaction she was having meant that she wasn’t cut out to be an officer. Yesterday had shaken up everyone on the force pretty badly, but near as she could tell everybody else was holding it together. When she read those reports though…it was almost like she could see the body bags piling up.

Only after the tumult in her mind had begun to settle did she return to her desk, holding out hope that the worst was already behind her. It was nearly the end of the day, so Nick would be returning from his patrol soon. Then they could go back to the hotel and she could try to forget about everything she’d read about. Just before she got back she noticed Clawhauser standing by her desk and felt her heart sink, certain that she’d just been given more reports to go through.

“There you are,” the cheetah said when he spotted her, his tail lashing the air behind him. “I was worried that you’d decided to leave.”

“Not yet. Wanted to finish everything first,” she said. “Please tell me you didn’t just give me more to read.”

Clawhauser blinked, then glanced at her desk. “Oh, no nothing like that. I just wanted to show you something I found in the newspaper.” Before she could say anything he held it up in front of her. “See? Page A5.”

“I really don’t…have…” she started, then realized she was looking at a photo of her pressed against Nick’s side at the construction site.

She grabbed the paper and stared, shaking her head as she skimmed the page. Thankfully there were other photos as well; the article was a collection of images taken from all across the Zootopia yesterday titled “Scenes from the City”. Under the photo there was a simple caption: Officers Nick Wilde and Judy Hopps recover after subduing a savage rhino. Her ears began to heat up.

“Thank you,” she managed, her mind still racing. “I…um…that is—”
“It’s a really nice picture,” he said happily, then reached down to point out a paragraph from the article. “It talks about how you had to go to the hospital after because you were injured, and that Nick wouldn’t leave your side until the paramedics arrived at the scene.”

Her mouth felt dry and she read the paragraph, then let out a little sigh of relief. It was mostly about how Nick had given her basic first aid after her arm really began to hurt. That wasn’t so bad. More importantly, it meant she could still tell her parents before they found out from someone else.

“Thank God,” she murmured under her breath.

Clawhauser gave her a cheshire smile. “Not that it’s any of my business, but you might want to be just a little more mindful from now on. It’s a touching picture, but some mammals might take it the wrong way.”

He knew. Or at least suspected. Judy couldn’t explain why she felt so sure, but she did. Her ears went flat against her back as she looked up at the cheetah, trying to find her voice to beg him not to tell anyone else.

“I just wanted to make sure you knew,” he said, then lightly tapped her nose with a finger before he walked past. “It is really adorable though, so maybe you ought to hang onto it.”

Judy watched him go, then took one more look at the picture before quickly folding it back up and stuffing it in a drawer where nobody would see it. Disjointed thoughts raced through her mind. She wasn’t ashamed. She wasn’t. Angry was closer to the mark. How could anyone even think of taking a picture of that moment just so they could sell to the paper? For that matter, how dare the paper publish it without contacting her and Nick first? They’d just started to really move ahead with things, if a bit cautiously. They hadn’t even really figured out how things would work, and already she felt like their privacy had been trampled.

Had anyone else in the ZPD seen the photo? If not she was sure they would sooner or later. The caption and associated paragraph had thankfully avoided rumormongering, so maybe it wasn’t that bad.

Only Clawhauser had figured it out, and if he had then others at the station would as well. Comments already floated about the precinct about how much time they spent together. Mammals that didn’t know her personally might withhold judgment, but the other officers saw her every day. How many of them knew? What if Bogo got wind of it?

She darted into the ladies room and went into the furthest stall, then pulled out her phone and did a web search. It wasn’t difficult to find the website version of the article. A quick scroll down to the comments and she began to read. Her ears fell flat.

Mind still reeling she visited the Lifeline forum next. Surely her situation wasn’t completely unique. The mammals there would probably have advice on how to handle this sort of thing. At the very least they could offer her comforting words and support so she could calm down enough to actually think.

One problem though. The moment she visited she noticed that the most active topic that day was her picture, and the thread was filled with speculation about if she and Nick were an item. The actual comments were much nicer in tone than what she’d found in the newspaper’s comment section, but that hardly mattered. If she came asking for advice now she might as well just tell the whole forum who she was. That was definitely a step she wasn’t ready to take just yet.

With a defeated sigh she put her phone back in her pocket, feeling guilt well up inside of her for her
response. She didn’t care anymore. She’d told Nick she didn’t care.

So why did she?

Nick was completely exhausted by the time they got back to the hotel, but that wasn’t enough to keep him from being concerned for Judy. She seemed unusually tense since he got back to the station, barely even engaging him in conversation. At first he’d worried that her arm was bothering her, but when he asked she assured him that she felt fine before returning to her brooding. At a loss for what he could do, he decided the best course was to simply give her some space until she felt up to talking. That moment finally came when he stepped out of the shower to find her sitting on the edge “his” bed.

“How was your day?” she asked.

“A massive pain,” he admitted. “Apparently there were a bunch of mice and rats that went savage. They’re causing a bunch of problems by chewing up wires and stuff.”

“How’d that go?” Judy asked.

He shrugged a little and settled down on the bed next to her. “Okay I guess. Think we caught them all at least,” he said, then held up his finger for her to see. “Little buggers have a nastier bite than you would think though. They did this to me through the work gloves I was wearing.”

Judy took one look at the gnaw marks before chuckling. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be laughing.”

“It’s okay. Lowell was trying to coach me from the sidelines, as if a wolf knows more about mousing than a fox. What about you?”

Instead of answering immediately, Judy pulled her phone out and brought up a webpage then scrolled about half-way down before tilting the screen so he could see. “Clawhauser brought this to my attention.”

He examined the picture quietly. “Not bad. I especially like how I look all heroic with you pressing your face into my chest that way.”

“It isn’t funny,” Judy said, shooting him a look. “Just take a look at the comment section!”

“If it’s all the same, I’d rather not,” he said, dipping his ears back. “Can’t say I’m happy having our relationship plastered across the newspaper.”

“Me either,” she said. “I feel so angry and violated. I’m worried that everyone knows now and is going to see us differently. And I’m just so ashamed…just when I finally decided that I’m really okay with us…”

Unable to think of anything else, Nick hugged her lightly and rested his muzzle between her ears. “Scared?” he asked, then squeezed a little when she nodded. “So am I. Wish I had an answer, Judy. This is all new and frightening for me too.”

She just nodded again, shifting in his arms so she could return the hug. He wasn’t sure how long they stayed like that, feeling her tremble just the slightest amount while he fought to keep his eyes
from watering. The whole while he tried to find something to say that would take away the fear and
hurt, making everything better. For perhaps the fourth time in his life, his tongue failed him
completely.

Judy recovered her composure first and reluctantly pulled away, so he did his best to blink the
moisture from his eyes before giving her a tight smile. Her ears continued to droop behind her, but
she leaned in and placed a soft kiss on his lips before settling next to him again.

“There’s something else too,” she admitted. “My parents called this morning and I might have let slip
that I have a boyfriend. So now they want to know all about this mysterious guy they know nothing
about.”

A cold tingle ran up Nick’s spine. “I don’t suppose you could put off telling them anything too
specific?”

“Not with that picture out there. Sooner or later someone’s going to show it to them and they’ll put
two and two together,” Judy said, looking down at her phone. She took a deep breath. “I’m sure
they’ll be fine with it. If anything, trying to hide it will make things way worse.”

“So should I leave for a bit while you call them or—”

She grabbed his hand and squeezed it. “No. I want you here. Please?”

He nodded and settled back in, trying to ignore his heart’s palpitations. That cold tingle had spread
out gradually over his body, making his fur puff out involuntarily so that he had to fight to make it lie
down properly once again. He gave Judy a sideways look to check if she had noticed, but found her
staring at her phone still. A minute later and she still hadn’t made a move.

“So are you going to call them, or do you bunnies have telepathic powers I’m unaware of?” he
asked.

Her ears perked up and she snorted a laugh, elbowing him firmly in the side. “I was just thinking
about what to say.”

Nick lifted his hand to his head, thumb and pinkie extended to mime talking into a phone. “Hello!
Mom? Dad? You were curious about my boyfriend, so I thought it was time I tell you. I met this
intelligent, handsome, romantic fox at work and I just let him ravish me—”

Judy elbowed him harder, forcing him to recoil in self-defense. “I’m serious,” she laughed, blushing
deeply. “Can’t you just let me think a moment?”

“I promise to quit once you actually call them.”

“Alright, I’ll do it,” she said, lightly biting on her lip as she opened MuzzleTime.

While Nick waited for the call to connect he stretched, then flopped back onto the bed with a soft
yawn. The phone’s screen was still visible, so he watched it come to life with the image of Judy’s
mother as she waved someone else over from off-screen. Moments later Mr. Hopps walked into
frame as well.

“Hey mom and dad,” Judy said, her cheery tone not quite able to handle the slight tremor in her
voice. “How was your day?”

“Oh it was fine,” her father said. “Just another day in the carrot patch.”
Judy’s mother nodded her agreement before skipping past any further pleasantries. “So, do we get to hear about this buck you’re staying with now?”

Nick’s ears flicked back briefly and he reached out to give Judy’s hand a light squeeze as she gave a tense chuckle. “See, that’s kinda the thing,” she said cautiously. “He…kinda isn’t a bunny.”

“Oh?,” her mother said, then blinked and looked at her husband as the words sank in. “O-oh. Um… well that’s nice.”

“So is he a hare?” Stu asked.

“You said we already knew about him,” her mother said. “Has this been going on very long? Who is he?”

“Ah, well we’ve been talking about it for a week or two because it is pretty unusual,” Judy hedged with a tense chuckle. “And yeah, you know him. You’ve met him already actually, though we were really just good friends then.”

“Really?” Bonnie asked, then perked up some. “Oh, during that police graduation you gave the commencement speech for! Is he on the force with you?”

Judy brightened slightly. “Actually yes—”

Stu interrupted. “Aren’t your coworkers all a little…you know…large for you sweetie?”

Nick clamped his muzzle shut in a futile attempt to stifle his laughter as that question made him imagine Judy trying to go on a date with McHorn. On the phone both of Judy’s parents perked their ears, immediately noticing the snickers. Judy shot him a death glare.

“Is he there right now?” Bonnie asked.

“Actually, yes,” Judy said as she motioned for him to get up. “Mom, dad? You remember Nick right?”

Nick folded his ears down bashfully as he pushed himself upright to sit beside Judy again, doing his best to keep his fur from standing on end when she tilted the phone to point the camera more directly at him. “Hello Mr. and Mrs. Hopps. It’s a pleasure to see you both again.”

All at once the conversation died as both of Judy’s parents stared at him. For a moment he wondered if maybe he had shown off his teeth by smiling too widely. Or maybe they were waiting for him to say something else. Or perhaps—

Stu fainted.

There was a loud crash.

“Oh my God,” Bonnie cried as she looked down at her husband. “Stu? Honey? Are you okay?”

“Dad?” Judy called out, moving the phone as if that would let her see what was going on.

“Oh dear,” Bonnie muttered, then shouted. “Jerry? JERRY! Your father just hit his head. Get the pickup started, we’re taking him to the hospital.” She then glanced back over, her eyes lingering on Nick. “Sorry about this, bun bun. We’ll discuss everything later, okay?”

“Okay mom,” Judy started, but Bonnie was already calling for Jerry again and hung up.
With the call ended they sat in silence for a time, Judy staring at her phone as she squeezed his hand. With his ears back, he gave her cheek a soft nuzzle, then whispered to her.

“Don’t know about you, but I think they took the news pretty well.”
Time To Talk

The days that followed were filled with so many highs and lows that Judy had trouble keeping track. Nick had stayed with her for the weekend while she got used to the splint, followed by another day, and another, until now they had both accepted that he would be spending his nights at the hotel with her until the splint came off. Their time together was both wonderful and fraught with tension as they tried to figure out how to make everything work. Some generic questions to the *Lifeline* forum and the fact that they were roughly the same size made things a little easier—anything designed for one of them could generally be used by the other with minimal difficulty—but although neither of them had broached the topic directly the problem of physical compatibility lingered.

Thus far they remained content to take things very slowly, occasionally sneaking kisses or nuzzles during private moments. They’d only made out one other time after that first night, but even so they spent much of their private time comfortably cuddled together. It was a chance to test their boundaries, and to learn how each other’s bodies responded to even the most basic stimulation. There were a few mistakes, such as when Nick discovered that she couldn’t stand to have her ears licked even if careful nibbles were fine in moderation. Tiny steps that felt like they weren’t actually going anywhere even though she treasured every moment.

Then there were the looks they both began to receive. Although nobody actually said anything Judy was sure the rumor mill had already spread the news to every officer on the force. Sometimes she caught one or two of them watching her, but they always quickly looked away upon realizing that she’d noticed their interest. Some part of her wished that they would actually come up to say something so she would at least know what they were thinking, but at the same time the possibility terrified her. The ZPD had become a second family to her in a way, and the thought that she might lose it was almost too much.

At least she knew everyone at the precinct. The looks she got while in uniform headed to and from the station made her more uncomfortable still. Even if she hadn’t been the only bunny on the force the splint clearly marked who she was, as did the fact that Nick was always with her during those times. Again, nobody said anything while she was in earshot. That didn’t stop her from feeling their judgment, and to her surprise she found that she was actually glad to be restricted to desk work so she didn’t have to deal with that all day.

Nick did. He tried to convince her that he didn’t really mind, that it wasn’t too different from how mammals normally treated him for being a fox, but even so she could tell from the way he came back from patrol exhausted every day that it was slowly getting to him.

And there were her parents. Apparently her father had hit his head on the coffee table, earning himself a split scalp and a concussion, but the doctors were confident he would be fine if he took it easy for a week or two. All of this was communicated to Judy through texts; her parents hadn’t yet called her back. That was good in a way, she wasn’t sure she was prepared to face that minefield again, but it did make her worry about what her parents actually thought. They rarely let her go three days without checking up on her, and now that it was Thursday they were already pushing past five.

All of that had been mitigated by several breaks that had happened, giving her an opportunity to jump out of doing simple paperwork and begin reviewing the stinger operation with Lieutenant Uncia. Miss Zhu had unexpectedly found her one afternoon and explained that Nick had apparently brought her some sample he wanted compared against the drugs the wildebeest had taken and all the food samples the ZPD had collected following the crisis. Results were still preliminary, but according to Miss Zhu all three appeared to be a perfect match. They were being sent to a facility with better
instruments for verification, but it implied that Flip was deeply involved in the rash of savage mammals if not the actual mastermind behind it.

A disaster. If the results were correct then it meant the antidote wouldn’t work on the afflicted mammals. Judy hadn’t heard if the doctors had tried the antidote yet—in the face of the sudden influx of savage mammal cases the city had announced that it would take time to produce enough to treat every case—but she didn’t need Nick around to know what he thought was going on. They were covering it up to prevent further panic.

So for the past several days she’d been busy the entire case history along with any police report that seemed to involve the mammals they had seen associating with Flip thus far. That was proving to be quite the challenge since, to all appearances, those mammals had completely vanished. Initially they’d thought they had all gone into hiding following the attack, but the officers they’d sent asking came back with reports of worried family members who were wondering why their loved ones were missing.

Even more confusing to Judy, Flip had a large number of prey mammals working for him. Normally that wouldn’t be a surprise as Zootopia was 90% prey and she knew criminal demographics were roughly similar, but in this case they were involved in a plot that seemed specifically designed to target prey mammals. Why would they agree to something like that? There were only two possibilities she could see: either Flip was offering them something they couldn’t refuse, or they hadn’t actually been in on the plot themselves. In either case, she found it hard to believe that they hadn’t been able to locate a single one of Flip’s helpers. There was always someone who was willing to talk, so why couldn’t they find anyone here?

That was exactly the problem she was gnawing on when her focus blurred for a moment, signaling that it was time to take a break. She slinked out of the room that she’d claimed to help shut out distractions and made the decision to go for a quick jog on one of the treadmills in the precinct’s gym. With her arm still injured she didn’t push herself nearly as hard as she normally would, jostling her splint seemed like a good way to hurt herself, but stretching her legs felt simply wonderful. Afterward she got a quick drink of water and was just about to get back to work when a familiar voice caught her ear.

“Listen, I’m not saying that we should round up all mammals of a certain type and cram them into some sort of camp. That would be absurd. I’m just saying there is a lot of tension in the city right now, especially when this recent terrorist attack was obviously targeting prey mammals. The natural way to ease those tensions is to institute a limited system of segregation to keep predator and prey mammals from coming into contact as often as they do now. This would deescalate the current situation by making mammals feel safe while ensuring that misunderstandings don’t happen until we know more.”

The fur on Judy’s neck tingled and she turned to find herself looking at Norman on one of the department’s TV’s. Somehow he’d made it onto the midday talk show circuit. According to the helpful banner along the bottom of the screen he’d also recently founded a prey activist group, the Safety Coalition of Prey Mammals, which believed the recent attacks had been carried out by disgruntled predators. From the sound of it their “solution” was to restrict predators to certain parts of the city, as if that sort of thing was likely to just calm everyone back down.

She stared at the screen as Norman argued that in light of the two Nighthowler crises this was simply the most logical thing to do in order to protect everyone. Across from him, a hyena in semi-formal dress (apparently a representative of the city) tried to explain every reason that such a plan was doomed to fail only to have Norman dismiss each as a trivial concern that could be tackled when the time came.
From the looks of things, Norman had done some homework to prepare for the show. He had a number of lines and facts at the ready, and came off as your typical concerned citizen pushing for reforms to improve the city. At times he even seemed outright charming. If Judy hadn’t known better, hadn’t already seen how well he was able to cover up his fear of predators, she probably wouldn’t have even noticed the way he did his best to avoid looking at the other guest. Nor how there was a shadow of discomfort just behind his eyes when he did face the hyena.

At least the audience didn’t seem to be entirely convinced, though he did get more applause and cheers of support than she would’ve liked at some points. Seeing him again, even on a TV screen, made her almost immediately uncomfortable. It was hard to believe that she hadn’t realized what he was like more quickly.

Just when she was about to retreat and try to forget that she’d ever met him the host decided to allow the different speakers to field questions from the audience at home. She had nearly made it back to the room she was working from when another voice she’d recognized came over the speakers.

“Good afternoon. This is my first time calling, but I couldn’t resist asking mister hippity-hop there a couple of questions. First thing’s first though: I’ve planted a bomb in the studio and if the broadcast ends I intend to detonate it.”

A shiver ran down Judy’s spine as she heard Flip’s voice. Without a thought she ran upstairs to get Bogo.

There was a pregnant pause as the mammals in the studio processed what had just been said until Peter Moosebridge spoke up. “Do you think that’s some sort of—”

“—joke?” the caller finished. “Not at all, but if I am reading your company policy correctly it requires that all ZNN employees take any threat seriously. If you doubt what I’m capable of just call up the cops. Tell them Flip is threatening to blow you up and just see how they take it after that warehouse I demolished.”

Another pause, this time while Peter walked off-screen. When he came back a minute later he appeared visibly shaken and sat in the large comfy chair he’d been mediating the discussion from. He folded his hands and took a deep breath before looking back at the camera.

“Alright, tell me your demands.”

“Demands? We’re just having a friendly conversation here,” the caller said. “You wouldn’t believe how hard I’ve worked to get everyone’s attention. Lining up supporters, starting up a nice smuggling ring, dousing the city with Nighthowlers—”

“What do you want?” Mr. Moosebridge said, raising his voice slightly.

“What I want is to talk to Mr. Bunny-bottom there,” the caller said with a laugh. “See, I’ve been listening to him since the start of your program and I must say he has some very interesting ideas. I rather agree with him.”

Norman blinked as he was brought up, remaining very still in his seat. “You do?”

“Indeed. I think you’re right, keeping prey and predators in such close proximity is a bad idea.” A
low growl registered over the line. “So get out of my fucking city.”

“Excuse me?” Norman asked, shaking his head in disbelief. “Your city? Who the heck do you think
you are? Do you have any idea how insane that is? Prey make up nine-tenths of the population!
Without us Zootopia would collapse. If anything it belongs to—”

He was cut-off by a shout. “Zootopia was founded by a bear. Predators may only make up ten
percent of the population, but we do all the important jobs. Police? Forty percent predator. Fire
department? Thirty percent. Military? Sixty.”

“It’s well known that certain species seem to prefer certain occupations,” Peter Moosebridge said,
trying to get the exchange back under control.

“Yeah, because I’m sure no tiger grew up hearing that with how big and strong they were going to
be that they should join the military.” The growling on the other end of the line continued unabated.
“Predators disproportionately put themselves at risk to make this city work. Predators tolerate laws
that target them specifically so that you prey can stay safe, as if my teeth are less dangerous than
your horns. Predators even gave up on eating any type of meat other than fish and poultry for your
benefit alone. Tell me, what have you sacrificed?”

Another uncomfortable pause loomed. Norman looked at Mr. Moosebridge silently, while off to the
side the city’s representative was talking on the phone in a hushed tone. At last, Norman gathered
enough courage to speak.

“We clearly don’t have anything to talk about. Everyone can tell you’re some sort of insane racist,
not to mention a criminal if even a fraction of what you said is true,” the bunny said. “Nobody’s
going to listen to someone like you.”

“You’re covered in fur too, bunny-boy,” the caller said, sounding momentarily amused. “Yes, I’m a
lowlife. I’ll bet I’m near the bottom of the barrel that this city has. Even the mob won’t deal with me
anymore, but as you can see I’m still alive. Would you like to know why? It’s because I like to notice
things. I’ve gotten very good at it. Would you like to know a few of the things I’ve noticed?

“I noticed that while Bellwether was mayor, the approval for the policies she wanted to enact
hovered around eighty-seven percent. Not once did I hear any prey mammal question what was
happening when predators started being reassigned to worse jobs, assuming they weren’t simply
fired due to ‘safety concerns.’ Of course, once everyone realized what a psycho that little sheep was
you couldn’t find anyone who would admit to supporting her. I wonder where all those mammals
went when her plot was revealed. You know, the ones that blindly believed the first explanation the
media rubbed in their noses? Pretty sure none of them were preds.”

Norman’s eyes bulged. “It was the only explanation we were given, and with what we knew it
seemed like the only way to keep safe!”

“Because you looked so very hard for alternative solutions, didn’t you? Did you know that
Nighthowlers are commonly used in agriculture, and their effects are not entirely unknown? You
would have me believe that nobody thought to point out the similarities?” the voice continued
mercilessly. “Never mind that when predators started going savage the first reaction by all you
scampering little prey was to throw us in cages. Maybe you’d think there would be a different
response when the prey are the ones going savage, but if you honestly believe that you aren’t paying
attention. Still want us in cages, don’t you hippity-hop?”

“We aren’t the ones doing anything wrong!” Norman shouted.
“Ah, but the predators that went savage were?”

The bunny began to sputter. “I never said that.”

“Of course not, but it was implied,” the caller continued. “Oh, and please continue to forget that your innocent, savage prey killed far more mammals in one day than the savage predators did over three months.”

“You can hardly compare having to handle one savage mammal every couple of days to a few hundred all at once,” Peter Moosebridge said. “You are trying to start a fight where there doesn’t have to be one.”

The caller snorted. “Maybe you’re right. Let’s compare one of mine to Bellwether’s best then. I had a rhino trying to batter her way into Little Rodentia. The ZPD stopped her, but her attempts knocked enough rubble loose to kill four mice and injure about a dozen others. Imagine how many mice she would’ve flattened if the wall had given way. I believe the worst savage predator killed two, injured five others?”

“They were just mice, you bastard!”

The caller stopped for a moment, letting Norman’s comment hang in the air. “Well they are quite small, yes. Tell me, long ears, how many mouse lives are worth one bunny’s?”

Norman sputtered. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Of course not. Not when everyone is listening,” the caller laughed viciously. “You know something else I just noticed? You little bouncing bozos seem awful quick to get in front of the cameras and call for inter-species conflict. You don’t like predators, mice aren’t worth worrying about, and I’ll just bet you think elephants and rhinos eat more than their fair share.”

“That is quite enough,” Peter Moosebridge said, shouting the caller to silence before turning to Norman. “Shut your mouth if you know what is good for you!”

Norman glared at Mr. Moosebridge. “You expect me to just listen to this monster?”

The growling returned, rumbling low and steady. “Please don’t compare me to that pathetic ball of fluff. I’m not like her at all. At least I admit what I am instead of hiding between a squeaky-clean public image, and I don’t need the city’s resources backing me up. I’m nothing like Bellwether at all. I’m much better.”

“Stop egging him on,” Peter Moosebridge said, glaring at Norman. “In fact, get off the stage before you make things worse. I’ll be the one doing the talking now.”

“Come on, it isn’t any fun if you don’t let him learn for himself,” the caller complained. “Oh well, I guess I’ve had my fun, but one more thing before I go:

“The government’s story about there not being enough antidote to go around? All lies. Don’t expect your precious cure to work this time around. Leave or stay, do whatever you want. I’m perfectly willing to use force to kick you prey out even if I have to turn every mammal living here savage to make it happen. My city or no city. Take your pick.”
“He’s bluffing,” Uncia said as she watched the havoc that ensued once Flip had hung up the phone. “He has to be bluffing. There is no way he has enough Nighthowler toxin to bring down the city.”

Bogo scowled at her. “Are you sure? Because given what he pulled off last Friday I would be reluctant to make that bet. What do you think Hopps? You’ve seen this maniac before, do you think he’s capable of pulling this off?”

Judy swallowed hard, fighting a nervous tremble. Why did Norman have to go make an ass of himself in front of the whole city? Why did he have to make all bunnies look bad while he was doing it? For a moment she wondered if what she was feeling was anything like what Nick had gone through while watching her press conference, but no. That was impossible. For him it had to have been worse. She could barely stand to look at Norman, but Nick had trusted her.

*Please don’t let anyone find out that I dated him, she prayed. I don’t need that in my life. Not now.*

“Hopps? Are you paying attention?”

“Y-yes sir,” she said, shocked from her thoughts by Bogo’s gruff snort. “That’s really a question you should ask Nick, sir.”

“Well Nick isn’t here, Hopps, so I’m asking you.”

She hesitated. “I don’t think he can do what he claims, sir…but I think he’ll try anyway. Nick mentioned to me that Flip was spouting some sort of anti-prey rhetoric. I just brushed it off as nonsense at the time, but considering everything that’s happened since then…”

The Chief sighed, then turned to Uncia. “I read in your reports that Nick recommended an arrest, but you refused.”

“That is right sir,” Uncia said, her white-spotted tail flicking anxiously behind her. “At the time we were still trying to make a bust, it seemed a waste to arrest what looked like some middle tier thug without justification. Once we linked him to Nighthowlers I gave the okay, but by then…”

“By then my city was bleeding,” Bogo finished for her, heaving another sigh. “Learning experiences all around I suppose. Uncia? I want that fox. I want him now. I don’t care how you get him, but I want him in a cell downstairs pronto.”

“Yes sir.”

“Judy, I’m going to call Nick back to the station,” Bogo said. “I want you to go over everything we know about Flip right now, see if that shakes anything loose from Nick’s memory. Make that your number one priority, understand?”

She nodded. “Yes sir, I’ll get everything together now so it’s ready to go when he gets back.”

“Good. Now get out. After that little show I need to call a press conference.”
Nick slumped over the table he and the other officers had claimed, lost in his thoughts as he listened to the other officers talk over the bar’s background noise. He hadn’t been especially eager to come to Hornton’s this week. With how tired he felt the only place he wanted to be was back in the hotel room with Judy. He didn’t care that she would be busy reviewing the case file, his time working with Lowell had left him aching for her company. It wasn’t that he and the white wolf didn’t get along in spite of the usual hiccups that came from working with someone new. Just that it was unfamiliar, so much so that both he and Lowell constantly had to remind themselves to make sure the things their usual partners handled still got done.

But as far as Nick knew the IA investigation was still on, so he needed to make a show of being just another one of the boys in blue. Clawhauser was there, of course, as were Snarlof and Delgato. Even Wolford showed up, though he arrived half an hour late.

Two wolves, a tiger, a cheetah, a polar bear, and a fox, Nick thought, feeling his mind working its way toward some sort of joke. Instead swerved on the way there, taking him down a different path. Six predators.

He considered that for a moment and took a sip of his drink. Judy had only been there last time because he’d asked if she could come. True, there were plenty of predators on the force, but between the larger prey mammals like rhinos, horses, cape buffalo, and elephants the prey still made up the majority. One would think a few would take part in Thirsty Thursday. For some reason that just wasn’t the case.

The whole ZPD was like that, Nick realized. Wolford and Lowell, two wolves. Fangmeyer and Snarlof, tiger and polar bear. Francine and McHorn, elephant and rhino. Pred-pred, pred-pred, pred-pred, prey-prey. Even the operation to bust Flip fit the pattern. Lieutenant Uncia, Fangmeyer, Snarlof, and himself. Four predators, with only one prey joining after Judy managed to worm her way in. Now that he’d noticed it lurking right in front of him it was impossible to unsee.

“Hey, Ben?” he asked without bothering to sit up, simply rolling his head until one eye pointed at the cheetah. “Are Judy and I unusual at all?”

Clawhauser was halfway to taking a bite of a pretzel and stopped to look at the other officers at the table. “Um, do you mean about that thing I pointed out to Judy?”

Nick blinked, then folded his ears back. Of course, that would be the first thing to come to the cheetah’s mind. “No, I mean a predator being partnered up with a prey. I haven’t seen it that often.”

“Oh, let me think.” The cheetah took a bite of his pretzel, then dipped the end into the cheese sauce and stirred it around slowly. “There’s Delgato and Higgins, and right now Wolford is working with Francine until McHorn recovers. I don’t know about the other shifts, but they probably have one or two each as well. So no, I guess it isn’t that unusual. Why?”

“I just noticed that most of the times prey and predators don’t seem to be assigned to each other.” Nick stretched a little, then pushed himself up so he could take another sip of his beer. “Was wondering if there was a reason for that.”

“Oh, the chief likes to let mammals pick who they’re working with as long as it doesn’t cause
problems,” Clawhauser said before taking another bite.

“There are a few precincts that do things differently. I started out in Precinct Four,” Wolford said. “Back there they assign a partner. You can request to be reassigned if you don’t like who you end up with, but you won’t get to pick the replacement and might make some other officers upset by breaking them up.”

“So you had more predators paired with prey there, right?” Nick asked.

Wolford swirled his glass. “Actually I think we had less. Mammal Resources was always worrying about making sure mammals were comfortable with who they’d been assigned and did everything they could to avoid problems before they happened.”

Nick drummed his fingers on the table, his ears folded back as he thought about that. He didn’t get very far before Fangmeyer gave a light cough.

“Since we’re on the topic. You and Judy?”

He flinched lightly, but forced himself to look up at the tiger. “Excuse me?”

“Come off it, Wilde. With that picture in the paper you know everyone is wondering,” Wolford said.

Lowell chuckled. “Never mind the way they both smell.”

For a moment all Nick could do was stare at the three, doing his best to keep his expression neutral. Not an easy task once he realized that even Snarlof was listening intently. “You wolves just can’t keep your noses to yourselves, can you?”

“Just ignore those jokers, they probably have money in the office pool.” Snarlof said. He shot Fangmeyer a look. “Though I thought some mammals had enough sense to not get mixed up in that kind of thing.”

Fangmeyer held his hands up. “Hey, it’s just good fun. Besides, it’s been forever since we had something this juicy to wonder about.”

“Pretty much everyone in the precinct wants to know if you two are an item,” Clawhauser added helpfully. “Honestly I’m kind of curious too, since you’d make an odd couple. Not that I’m one to judge.”

Wolford laughed. “Not with that crush you have on Gazelle. Are you still trying to convince the chief to let you work security for one of her shows?”

“He says I can’t do it until I’m fit enough to do patrol duty,” Clawhauser said sullenly, ears dipping.

For a wonderful moment Nick was able to hope that the conversation had moved away from his relationship with Judy, but attention promptly shifted back to him. His mind raced, unsure of what he should say. A flat denial wasn’t about to work, not if Lowell really had been catching Judy’s scent on him every morning, and simply admitting to the relationship wasn’t the sort of thing he wanted to do until he knew what Judy thought first. That left him with two options: deflect or stall.

“Are you guys seriously asking if we’re sleeping together? And you actually expect me to answer?” Nick asked, letting his tone tilt toward annoyance. “As if you’d even believe me if I said we weren’t.”

“I would,” Lowell volunteered. “I mean, you’ve never walked into work smelling like that.”
Wolford promptly tried to cuff Lowell over the head, but the white wolf ducked too quickly. “Would you just listen to yourself? You know it’s rude to use your nose to sniff out something so private.”

“It isn’t like I can help it,” Lowell protested. “Besides, I said he wasn’t doing it.”

“Still rude to talk about it that way,” Wolford said, then sighed. “Though unfortunately pretty much every wolf on the force has noticed the same thing. Why do you smell like each other?”

Nick tsked. “Well, Judy’s living with that absurd splint, right? I’m sure my senior officers can put their keen deductive skills to work to solve that mystery.”

That seemed to satisfy both Snarlof and Clawhauser, but as Nick expected both of the wolves kept giving him curious looks. No doubt they could tell he was doing more than simply sharing a room with Judy while her arm healed. Thankfully neither of them pressed the issue. Still, he made a mental note that he definitely needed to look into some scent neutralizing shampoo during his next shopping trip.

Judy’s phone began to ring with a MuzzleTime request when she was nearly finished reviewing the case file, sending her scrambling to the night stand to answer before the call was ignored. Her heart felt like it was in her throat when she pushed to answer, a little shiver running through her body as her mother appeared on screen.

“Hello?”

“Hey bun bun,” her mother said. “Your dad is asleep right now. I swear, those painkillers just knock him right out.”

Judy’s nose twitched lightly. “Oh,” she said, then realized just how pitiful that made her sound. “Is he doing alright? I got your texts a few days ago, but you haven’t really kept me up to date.”

“Sorry, I know I should have called sooner,” her mother said. “Are you alone right now? Because if this is a bad time to talk I can call back—”

“Now is good,” Judy said quickly. “Nick’s out with some of the other officers. I…um… I would have called, but I was worried you were upset with me.”

“Why in the world would you think I was mad?”

She swallowed. “Well, I mean…you kind of took your time calling back. And what with Nick not being a bunny…”

Her mother’s expression softened. “Sweetheart, I could never,” she said, then shook her head and took a deep breath. “Though I’ll admit I’ve had to spend a lot of time thinking about all this. I’m sure your father would too, if the drugs weren’t making that so difficult for him. You have to understand this is… Well, it’s not anything like what we expected.”

“I’m sorry mom—”

“No.” Her mother’s ears tilted back slightly as her voice suddenly turned firm. “No, Judy, don’t you do that. This is very difficult for your father and I, but don’t you dare apologize when you haven’t
done anything wrong. I’ll admit that I’m just a little scared out of my mind because never in my wildest dreams or worst nightmares did I imagine one of my daughters would take fancy to a fox, but that’s my problem isn’t it?”

Judy blinked as her mind unpacked that. “Nick really isn’t bad, mom. He’s actually very sweet when you get to know him.”

“I’m sure he is, bun bun. You’ve said nothing but good things about him,” her mother said, then let out a soft sigh. “And I trust your judgment, even if I don’t understand it and I’m a bit nervous about what is going on over there. I didn’t raise a fool, so if you say this can work then I’ll believe you. Just…please be a little patient with your father and I, it’ll take some time for us to come to grips with all of this.”

At first Judy couldn’t think of anything to say, but when her vision began to blur a tiny laugh bubbled its way out of her. “Do you think dad feels the same way?”

“There’s no question in my mind, Judy. You’re father loves you just as much as I do,” her mother said before glancing off to one side. “Can’t speak for the rest of the family. You know how Pop Pop is.”

“Maybe he won’t be so bad after he gets to know a fox.”

“Maybe,” her mother said, though she didn’t sound terribly convinced. “Let me worry about Pop Pop. You probably have enough problems, no reason to add a senile old bunny to the list.

“And speaking of problems, how is your arm?”

“Still hurts,” Judy said, resisting the urge to touch the splint. “Not as much as it used to though. After work tomorrow I’m going in for a check-up. If the doctors like what they see I might get some sort of arm brace instead of this bulky splint.”

“Well I expect you to keep taking it easy if they do. Bones don’t heal in just one week,” her mother said.

“Trust me, mom, Chief Bogo isn’t going to let me out from behind my desk until he’s sure I’m ready for it,” Judy started, then blinked as she heard Nick outside her door. “I need to go, mom. Love you.”

“Love you too, bun bun.”

She quickly hung up and slid off the bed, hurrying to meet Nick with a hug the moment he got through the door to squeeze him as tightly as she dared. After he recovered from his initial surprise, Nick wrapped his arms around her as well and leaned back against the wall.

“Woah, hey. I missed you too Carrots,” he started and gave her a light squeeze in return. “Are you crying? Everything okay?”

A laugh slipped out as she realized that she had started tearing up. Blinking a few times cleared her eyes for just long enough to smile up at him, and she went up onto her toes to plant a kiss right on the tip of Nick’s nose.

“Fine. Everything is fine.”

Nick’s body relaxed slightly. “Oh, well as long as everything is fine.”
“I just got off the phone with my mother,” she said, finally releasing him. Nick remained silent as she practically bounced in place. “She says she’s okay with us. She thinks dad will be too once he gets off the painkillers.”

“She is? Really?” Nick asked, then blushed when Judy narrowed her eyes at him. “I mean that’s great. I just…wow.”

“Told you.” Judy’s face lit up with a smile while she let go of the hug.

“Shame on me for ever doubting your word.” Nick’s ears dipped back slightly as he carefully escorted her away from the door. “How’d the case review go? Sorry I wasn’t able to give you anything better than a list of Flip’s old haunts. Really doubt you’ll find him at any of them.”

“Can’t hurt anything to check, though I wasn’t really expecting too much,” she admitted. “To tell the truth I’m pinning my hopes on getting back the final lab reports. Might give us an idea of how Flip’s making this stuff, which will probably give us an idea of where to look for him.”

“You think?”

“Well, he’s getting his stuff from someplace,” Judy said, beginning to fuss with her splint as she nestled against Nick on the bed. After a few light huffs she managed to pull it off her arm before gingerly leaning against his side. “How about you? How’s the city been?”

Rather than answer, Nick wrapped Judy in his arms and pressed his nose lightly against her neck. A light sigh slipped from him.

“That bad?”

“Not at first.” His words sounded raspy. “Everyone was on edge, but that was to be expected. As time’s gone on though…well… And especially today. Lowell and I ended up being called out to so many public disturbances where mammals were just looking for an excuse to start a fight.”

“Sounds like you really needed the break tonight,” Judy said.

“I guess, though it wasn’t the same without you there,” he said. “They asked about us by the way.”

His words hit her harder than she expected. “Seriously? What did you say?”

“Didn’t say anything. Just stalled,” he answered, moving so he could look at her. “Seemed wrong to tell them anything until I knew what you thought about it first.”

Green eyes. Her thoughts scattered.

“Carrots? Judy? You okay?”

“Sorry, I’m okay. Just…is everything going to keep coming back to that?” Her hand found his and squeezed tightly. “I still don’t think I’m ready to take that step. Not yet at least. Thank you.”

Nick’s tail curled around her. “Thank goodness,” he whispered. “On the way here I started to worry you’d think I was ashamed or something.”

“Mmm, maybe if you were someone else. You’ve been pretty shameless from the moment I met you though,” Judy said, smiling a little. “Everyone will figure it out sooner or later; I just want a chance for us to figure it out first.”

“Does that mean I don’t have to tell my mom yet?” Nick asked, then let out a light yelp when Judy
pinched him.
Too Close

From the start Nick found Friday to be remarkably awkward, with Judy’s afternoon appointment looming over the morning routine they had built together. Neither of them said anything about it, but the same thoughts played through their minds. On the one hand, if the doctors did decide to move Judy over to a functional arm brace it was a good sign that she was well on the road to recovery. On the other, the regained mobility that brought would also end the convenient excuse they’d both been using to explain why Nick was staying with her.

And the questions their coworkers had asked last night made it quite clear that they were already beginning to draw attention. Even if they didn’t admit it there was a chance that their time together was about to come to an end. Nick didn’t regret his decision to stay, but going back to live alone in his apartment after having nearly a week together seemed unbearable.

Meeting Lowell that morning only drove the feeling home that much harder. He found himself wondering just how much the wolf’s nose was giving away. How much the rest of the precinct knew and how much was just suspicions. Would the chief care? There was no way he could come out and ask how Bogo felt about relationships in the precinct without confirming everything.

It probably came down to how the chief felt about those involved, he guessed. In that respect they might be lucky. The chief had clearly grown to like Judy, so surely that would encourage him to give them a little more latitude than he otherwise would. What was less clear was how Bogo felt about Nick. The fox was never able to get a good read, mostly because the chief rarely interacted with him. Given the way he generally let the daily comments during briefings slide, Nick supposed Bogo was willing to tolerate him at the very least. Perhaps not a glowing endorsement, but as an “untrustworthy, conniving fox” it was about the best he’d come to expect.

Or maybe things were even better than that, because just before he and Lowell left for their patrol they were informed that there had been a change of plans. They would be providing security for the press conference the Chief had called. Hardly exciting work, but surely it showed some confidence right? So instead of patrol they headed to the courthouse.

They found themselves posted at near periphery with instructions to ensure that nobody dangerous slipped in unseen. An easy enough task. Growing up in the rougher parts of Zootopia had taught Nick how to spot a mammal that was carrying a weapon. Hardly a common occurrence—teeth, claws, and horns were enough for most mammals to feel secure—but not entirely unknown either. Slight, unexplained bulges in clothing. Hands that lingered near pockets. Jackets with a noticeable weight on one side. Long, loose clothing that didn’t seem to match the season. Each was a tell that, while not completely reliable, indicated who to watch. Or in this case, who to check more closely. Lowell, on the other hand, relied on his nose. No doubt he was sniffing for any dangerous substances or checking to see who smelled nervous.

In both cases it was mostly just theater, Nick knew. The only ones showing up at the courthouse were the reporters coming to hear what Chief Bogo had to say. As usual the regular citizens were busy with their lives, even if they’d just seen their world shaken to the foundation. A reporter carried cameras, pads of paper, recording devices. The chief wasn’t actually worried about someone attacking the press conference, Nick decided. He was trying to repair the aura of control that had been so sorely battered in the past week.

But even easy jobs had a few bumps associated with them, and Nick soon discovered these ones: there was no shortage of reporters who recognized him on their way in to the press conference and asked him for a statement on the picture that had ended up in the city paper. The first time a camera
had been shoved in his face he nearly spoke without thinking and was only saved when a tiny alarm went off in the back of his mind. He recognized the tactic, ambushing and pressuring for an immediate response.

Trying to get a mammal to make a commitment before they had a chance to think. It was the same sort of trick he used all the time when hustling.

So rather than committing to anything he informed them that it was an answer for the ZPD’s media relations mammals and refused to make any further comment. The reporters didn’t like that answer very much and kept trying to reword their questions, or leveled outright accusations in an attempt to get a rise out of him. Perhaps the most clever attempt had been a request that he comment on why he didn’t appear to be partnered up with Officer Hopps any longer, but he simply repeated the simple statement that he was not the one to ask before sending them on their way.

Lowell kept giving him sympathetic looks through the whole ordeal.

“Looking a bit jealous there, wolfie,” Nick joked once they were finally alone. “If you’d like some of this attention just feel free to cuddle up to me and we can get a few shots in the paper.”

“No thanks,” Lowell said. “I’d rather not have cameras pointed at my face everywhere I go. Besides, I doubt it’ll generate as much buzz. Foxes and wolves aren’t all that different as far as most mammals are concerned.”

“Aww, don’t sell yourself short, big guy.” Nick elbowed the larger mammal lightly. “Although I guess nobody’s would believe that you’re dating me.”

“Of course not,” the wolf agreed.

Nick smirked. “I mean, I’m way out of your league.”

“That’s ri— Wait, what?”

“Just look at this luscious, plush fur,” Nick said, curling his tail around his side so he could stroke his fingers through it. “You wolves are just too rough and tumble to handle something like this.”

Lowell sighed and shook his head, laughing. “How does Hopps put up with you?”

He shrugged. “Well, if I’m really good sometimes she buys me lunch.”

“I’ve been buying you lunch all week,” Lowell accused.

“That’s because you’re easy,” Nick teased. “Though seriously, I don’t know why she gets along with me so well. First time we met I had her pegged as exactly the sort I couldn’t stand.”

“Bright eyed and cheerful?” Lowell asked.

Nick hesitated, then shook his head. “More like she was just being nice to me to prove what a good mammal she was,” he admitted. “Granted I didn’t give her much of a chance, but I’m sure you know what it’s like.”

“Sure. I grew up in a mostly prey neighborhood. When I was a teen most of the other kids were afraid of me. For a while the only friends I had only seemed mostly interested in just proving they were brave by hanging out with a wolf,” Lowell said. “Ended up noticing the kids didn’t act that way around the campus officer. Was this older lion. Figured it was the uniform, and decided that if that was enough to make mammals trust me then that was what I wanted to do with my life.”
“How’s that working out?”


“Oh, just noticed a similar thing myself,” Nick admitted. “Mostly, anyway. Some mammals still just see a fox waiting for his chance to cheat them outta something.”

“Like lunch?” Lowell asked.

Nick couldn’t help smiling, but before he could answer the entire crowd of reporters hushed as Chief Bogo strode out to give his statement. Amazing how that worked. Tell a mammal that someone was important and they’d automatically assume the guy had all the answers.

Everyone present was looking for someone to assure them that the situation was under control, and that the ones who had caused the current crisis would be found and punished. That was tricky considering this was an active investigation. Any details that the Chief released tipped the ZPD’s hand to anyone who was listening. Say too much and the public might realize just how far they were from having resolved the situation. Worse still, it would let Flip know how close they were, and either embolden him or convince him to cover his tracks more carefully. What the Chief needed to do was be just open enough to gain the trust of anyone listening without actually giving them information that wasn’t already common knowledge.

Although Nick hadn’t seen the speech he could imagine how it would go. First Bogo would thank everyone for coming and acknowledge the terrible events that had happened before promising to see justice done. Mammals would like that. It gave the impression of a strong leader taking charge in the wake of a crisis without dismissing the failures that had happened. Then he would share details about the case, careful to only release the ones that the media had already discovered for themselves. There would be one or two trivial points thrown in that nobody already knew. Just enough to give the reporters something to latch onto and give the general impression that progress was being made. After he would restate his commitment to bring in every mammal responsible for the recent terrorist attack before allowing several reporters to ask questions.

All boring, standard stuff, so Nick chose to keep an eye on the surroundings instead. He could just imagine Flip using a pellet gun to douse some of the reporters with Nighthowler toxin during the press conference. A sure way to spread panic, assuming Flip could arrange such an attack on such short notice. Then again, would he think it was worth the risk now that the ZPD was actively hunting for him?

Nick didn’t trust himself to guess the answer to that. He had thought he understood what made Flip tick, but clearly something fundamental had changed about the other fox. He was just as sadistic as ever, but rather than just lashing out at random he’d found a purpose to channel his activities toward, and that was a frightening realization.

He scanned the windows of the nearby buildings, but didn’t see anyone suspicious watching the speech. That honestly made sense, the ZPD probably had sharpshooters hidden about the area and frankly Nick found it difficult to think of Flip as a sharpshooter. On the other hand who was to say Flip would do it personally?

Several minutes passed before he was satisfied that nobody was going to open fire on the press conference from a hidden location and started to relax. The chief was still talking to the media, laying out what steps the ZPD would be taking to prevent another attack. Everything he said seemed fairly generic to Nick: increased patrols, aggressively pursuing the case, public outreach to report suspicious activities, and consulting with experts.
“Sir? Sir! You can’t park there.”

Nick blinked and looked over to see Lowell approaching a semi that had pulled up to the curb. The driver, a particularly sturdy looking badger, climbed from the driver’s seat and gave the white wolf an annoyed look. “What are you talking about?”

“The street is closed to parking,” Lowell said. “You can’t park here right now.”

While the wolf dealt with the driver Nick started over as well, idly checking to ensure the area was clear. There was a distinct tingling sensation down his spine that set him on edge. Leaving his post felt wrong, there was a chance that this was all some sort of diversion, but letting his temporary partner handle the situation alone didn’t seem like a very good solution either.

“Look, I got a timetable to keep here and I’m already behind. Just let me make my delivery and I’ll be gone,” the badger said.

That uncomfortable tingle again. Nick could feel his fur beginning to stand on end.

“Just go to the next stop on your list and come back later,” Lowell said. “You can tell your customer to call the ZPD if he wants to complain.”

“Yeah, well I’mma need to let him know he’s gonna get his stuff later than usual then,” the badger said, his ears twitching.

Courthouse, city records, office buildings, bail bondsmen, post office… Nick’s fingers drummed on his upper thigh as he examined the buildings, then checked on the badger. Really up tight for a mammal that’s just running late. Why doesn’t he have a lock on his load?

Before the badger could head off Nick called out. “Out of curiosity, is this that shipment of fish steaks the grill house has been waiting on?”

“Huh? Oh yeah. That’s why I wanna deliver ‘em now. If they go bad it’s my tail.”

Nick continued to drum his fingers on his thigh and sniffed the air. “This doesn’t look like a refrigerated trailer to me. Lowell, your nose is better than mine. Smell any fish?”

“Actually no, I—”

“They’re packed in ice and vacuum sealed,” the badger said, speaking up before Lowell could finish.

“Well the city is pretty on edge right now, and we’ve been instructed to keep this area secure. You know, no weapons, drugs, bombs, dead bodies, tanks. You aren’t carrying anything like that, are you?” Nick asked.

The badger shook his head. “No, no officer. Nothing like that.”

Not even a chuckle, Nick noticed. He’s really tense.

“Mind if we take a look?” he asked.

Before the words even left his lips the badger turned and bolted. Nick drew his taser and fired, dropping the badger before he could make it five steps. He didn’t waste any time getting the handcuffs on while Lowell gawked for a moment. By the time the wolf had picked his chin up off the ground Nick was already beginning to rifle through the badger’s pockets.

“What do you think you’re doing?” the wolf demanded.
“Look around, do you see any grill house nearby?” Nick asked, mentally cataloging what he was finding. Change, knife, wallet, keys. He moved to another pocket. “It’s all legal stuff, there isn’t a grill house for three blocks.”

The badger groaned and shook his head. “T-this is police brutality! R-release me at once before I—”

Nick growled at the badger, silencing him. “Quiet before I’m tempted to give you another zap. What are you really doing here? Who sent you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about! You can’t do this, I know my rights!”

As the badger spoke Nick continued his search, finally pulling out a small electronic device with a single orange button. Without a word he tossed the device to Lowell. The badger went silent.

“What the heck is this?” the wolf asked, looking it over. “Something tells me this is one of those buttons you aren’t supposed to press.”

“Donno, and I’m betting our friend here isn’t going to give us any answers,” Nick said. He carefully got up, making sure the badger didn’t try to move. “You got this? I’m going to check the truck.”

Once he was sure Lowell had things under control he worked his way to the back of the truck, noticing that several reporters had taken notice of what was going on. Thankfully the chief was still taking questions, so none of them had come over to see what was happening. Still, that didn’t leave much time.

He cautiously unbolted the back door and cracked it open just enough to peek inside, then pulled his head back and shut it once more just as quickly. The sound of bleating and snorting followed him before he got the door closed. With a glance toward the reporters he bolted it shut once more before hurrying back to Lowell.

“Arrest him,” he said, then picked up the badger’s keys from the ground. “We need to move this right now. Do you know where they’re quarantining all those savage mammals?”

Judy moved her injured arm experimentally, checking just how much range her new brace permitted. She’d been worried that it wouldn’t be that different from wearing the splint, but found herself pleasantly surprised. There was still some restriction, she couldn’t reach behind herself or anything above shoulder level, and it wasn’t particularly comfortable either. Compared to near total immobility of a splint it was a huge improvement though.

That probably should have made her feel better than it did, but her mind was preoccupied. Just that afternoon she’d been informed that Nick and Lowell had apparently prevented some badger from releasing a number of savage mammals upon the chief’s press conference. Flip again, there was no doubt about it. Such a blatant attempt to spread more fear fit what he was trying to accomplish perfectly.

At least he’d been foiled this time, but that fell far short of what she actually wanted. He needed to be stopped, to be arrested and dragged in front of a court to answer for everything he’d done. The fact that he was still loose, and still plotting against the city, was simply unacceptable. The one silver lining she could see was that the remotely operated switch the badger had hoped to use to release all the savage mammals from their cages might be possible to trace.
“How does that feel, Miss Hopps? Does it pinch or rub anywhere?” asked the nurse that was helping adjust the brace to fit.

“I think it’s okay,” Judy said, then smiled at the serval. “I don’t suppose I’ll be able to take this off very often.”

“Taking it off to bathe is fine, and you really shouldn’t sleep with it on either,” the feline said. “Otherwise you should leave it in place while your bone finishes knitting. Try not to worry about it. You bunnies have a fast metabolism so you’ll be good to go in a week or two.”

She thanked the nurse for his help before heading out, still trying to get used to the brace. The extra weight was going to take some getting used to, and she could already tell that she was going to be bumping it into things almost constantly unless she was extra careful. Compared to everything else that was going on that seemed a petty complaint, but she was already sick of being stuck with desk duty.

As he’d promised, Nick was waiting for her when she stepped into the lobby. She hurried over, surprised to see him grab a plain plastic bag when he stood to greet her.

His eyes went immediately to the brace on her arm. “Huh, that is way bulkier than I expected.”

“I know. They said I can wear the splint if I prefer, but I figured I would give this a try,” she said, flexing her arm slowly for him. “I mean, this way I can at least bend my arm, right?”

“Plus now you can pretend to be a cyborg.”

She rolled her eyes at that one. “Yeah right. Thing looks like cheap plastic.”

“We can rebuild her,” Nick continued, ignoring her comment. “We have the technology. We have the capability to—”

Judy couldn’t take it anymore and gave him a light shove as she laughed. “Would you stop that? I feel silly enough as it is.”

He chuckled and shut his mouth, but she could hear him humming the theme under his breath just the same. Once again she rolled her eyes, but found herself reaching for his hand as they walked out and headed for the nearest train station.

“What’s in the bag?” she asked, leaning over to look around him.

“Your dinner,” Nick said, handing it over to her. “Plus a surprise for you. Something came for you from Bunny Burrow. I’m afraid the rest of the precinct got into it, but I guess Clawhauser made sure to save you some.”

Her ears came up and she huffed, eyes narrowing. “They opened something that was for me? What is it?”

“Clawhauser said it was cookies. And trust me, Carrots, the chief was yelling up a storm after I told him.” He smiled down at her. “I’m pretty sure you’re going to be getting a few apologies.”

“You said cookies? Did it come with anything else?”

“There’s a card too,” Nick said, pulling out an envelope from the bag.

Judy quickly grabbed it and turned it over, looking for any identifying marks, then carefully tore it
open when she failed to find any. Inside she found a generic get well card with a note inside:

_Hey Judy, sorry to hear about your arm. Thought I’d send you a little something to brighten your day. Hope you get well soon._

-GG

“Anyway, I felt bad that everyone else ate your cookies so I swung by that Savanna Salad place you mentioned,” Nick said while she read. “Got you one of their fancy spinach salads with extra carrots.”

She peered into the bag, blinking a little as she found that Nick had actually gotten her a large salad—or rather large for someone her size. “Nick, I can’t eat all this. There’s enough here for two or three meals.”

“I know, but I didn’t really understand the sizes on their menu,” Nick admitted, his ears dipping back.

A smile broke out on her face. “You should have asked first, I would have explained it to you.”

“Perhaps, but that would defeat the purpose of making it a surprise.”

She grinned and looked into the bag once more, then perked her ears. “I don’t see anything in here for you.”

“Ah, yeah.” He shrugged. “Place was packed and I didn’t want to be late so I just got something for you. It isn’t a big deal.”

“You can’t just go around skipping meals,” she said.

“Wasn’t planning to. Just figured I would pick something up on the way back to my apartment,” he said, reaching down to muss her ears.

Judy stopped and stared up at him, ears falling flat. “You’re going back to your place?”

“Yes, why?” Nick asked, then blinked when he looked at her. “I mean, now that you don’t have that splint I just assumed—”

She blushed, realizing all at once that had been what they’d said all week. Somehow it had never sunk in though. Suddenly shy, she rubbed her arm and gave Nick a smile, her tail quivering just a little. “Oh, that’s right. I just thought maybe…you know…”

“If you want I can stay for another day or two,” he offered.

“Just a day or two? I really don’t mind your company.”

“Trust me, Judy, there is nothing I would like more than to stay with you,” he said. His ears tilted down and he rubbed over her left ear affectionately. “Just thought maybe we could use a little time to think about what we both want when we aren’t busy distracting each other.”

He had a point, she realized. A good one. Ever since that first kiss, when they were alone together things inevitably went in that direction. Never intentionally, it usually started as innocently as a kiss or a compliment, but before long thoughts of doing anything but spending time together would fly out the window. They were simply too deep in that first, giddy phase of the relationship.

“Just one more night?” she asked hopefully, looking up into his eyes.
By the time they got back to the hotel room Judy was practically beside herself. Nick was right. Wonderful as their time together was she was a little worried that maybe they were going too fast. They needed time to process everything that was happening, she could feel that, but every moment they were together felt too precious to waste. Some part of her was worried that taking a break would make them both take a step back from the relationship, but at the same time she was concerned they were setting themselves up for failure.

Everything so far was amazing. Kissing, petting, touching, cuddling. Every bit of progress made her feel fluttery inside, and there was no doubt in her mind that sooner or later they would figure out how to take even those final steps. Despite it all there was one concern that she couldn’t silence: was this really something meaningful, or was their relationship just based on the physical side?

It seemed a silly concern; she and Nick got along famously. He had become her best friend and closest confidant in every sense. The one she turned to for support when she had doubts or worries. She trusted him more than any other mammal she’d ever met. Surely that was love, she knew of no other word to describe it.

But was it the right kind of love? Was it “in love” love? She’d had plenty of girlfriends who’d dated male friends while growing up, guys they’d gotten along with well. She’d also seen many of those relationships crash dramatically, destroying the friendship in the process. The possibility that the same thing could happen to her and Nick was truly frightening, but at the same time she didn’t want to miss out on something that felt so remarkable because she was too timid to pursue it. How much of what she felt was mere hormones running rampant, and how much was from some deeper connection?

No matter how she looked at it, she had to agree that they needed some time to think. And ultimately that meant spending some time apart. She hated it.

She wrestled with her reluctance to let go for even a moment as they ate, watching as Nick devoured the tofu wrap he’d grabbed on the way. He ate slower than normal, sharing details about his day—especially the press conference. The whole time she did her best to listen, but her mind kept drifting to other things. The soft nibble of teeth, plush fur, claws combing through her fur, embrace and heat…

This is exactly the problem, she thought and speared a carrot slice with her fork.

“Nick?”

“Yes sweetheart?”

She swallowed, nose twitching. “I’m afraid,” she admitted, looking down at her salad. “I’m worried that once we aren’t together something will happen. That…that you’ll realize you don’t actually like me. Or that I’ll have second thoughts. I really don’t want to let go.”

An anxious shiver ran through her as she waited for his response, expecting him to reassure her. To laugh and say that she was being silly for worrying about something like that. Instead he got on his knees right in front of her so he was at eye level, his ears folded down as his mouth worked silently for a moment.

“Me too,” he managed. “I keep worrying that any moment you’re going to come to your senses. Or
that maybe I’m just caught up in how new and exciting this all feels and…I’m really afraid I’m going to hurt you, Judy. I mean really hurt you, by accident. That I’ll slip and my claws or my teeth—”

Another shiver ran through her, accompanied by a strong urge to kiss him. Somehow she managed to contain herself. A strained laugh escaped at the mere idea that Nick could hurt her. She reached out and touched his lips, silencing him, then traced a finger along one of his canines until her finger found the tip.

“They aren’t as sharp as I imagined,” she admitted, then slid out of her seat to hug him.

He tried to pull back. “I’m serious, Judy. You know what my teeth were made for. I’m really afraid that if I’m not paying attention…”

“Not going to happen, and even if it did I’d know it was an accident,” she said confidently, blinking a few times to keep her eyes from misting up.

“I’d still hate myself if it happened,” he murmured, letting himself settle back into her embrace. One of his hands trailed up her back.

“Didn’t you hear me?” Judy asked, taking on a mockingly stern tone. “It isn’t going to happen.”

A few seconds passed before he took a deep breath, nuzzling into her neck. “That makes me feel a little better.”

“Aw, just a little?”

“Mmmhmm,” he whispered, slowly pulling back. “Though I can think of something else that will help.”

Judy’s ears started to perk back up. “A kiss?”

“…I can think of two things that will help,” Nick amended.

She gave him a light peck on the lips, letting the contact linger before she pulled back. “Well, what is this other thing?”

“Could I maybe have some of your cookies?” he asked, making eyes at her.

A snort slipped out as she tried not to laugh. “You are terrible,” she muttered, then grinned at him. “Fine. You can have one cookie.”
Keeping to the promise of “just one more night” proved much more difficult than Nick expected. He’d spent that entire evening and the following morning practically curled around Judy, as if he could make time stop if he held onto her tightly enough. When it finally came time to leave he lingered until he’d exhausted every excuse imaginable. Then he was out in the morning sun by himself, then the bus, then walking up to his room alone. A perfectly average commute that left him feeling utterly miserable.

So miserable, in fact, that he found himself doing chores. Despite how rarely he’d stopped by his apartment it had gotten impressively dirty. A noticeable layer of dust covered nearly every surface and a slight musty scent hung in the air, clearly advertising just how vacant the place had been. The leftovers he’d left in the fridge had started on their first steps toward reanimation as some sort of horrifying sci-fi monster as well, necessitating a trip to the grocery store. Then there was laundry and bills and the mail he’d allowed to pile up over the past week.

Enough to keep him preoccupied, although the distinct feeling of aloneness dogged him throughout the day. The closest he came to actually feeling anything else was when he’d swung through the grocery store and made a deliberate decision to buy an extra-strength scent neutralizing shampoo, mostly because of how uncomfortable that made him. When he’d first picked it up he’d assumed everyone would recognize who he was and then realize why he wanted it. It wasn’t until he was in the checkout line that he realized that the primary consumers of that sort of product happened to be skunks, a point that was driven home by the embarrassed looks he’d received from the porcupine that was working the till. He suffered through it willingly. It was a small price to pay to ensure that every canine in the city wasn’t clued in on the status of his budding relationship with Judy.

He was already back home before he realized that Judy probably needed to pick up something similar. That had been an awkward conversation to hold, even though it happened mostly over texts. In an odd way that ended up reassuring him somewhat. A sign that they were willing to share more than just the happy moments of their life. His mother had always said that she’d known she had found “the one” when she realized that she wasn’t worried about looking foolish in front of his father.

From there the day turned completely boring. He checked in with his mother. He called Finnick. He grabbed something to eat, despite not being particularly hungry. Then, at the first sign of sunset, he’d crawled into bed.

It was there that he nearly caved in. The loneliness that had followed him all day was amplified by the empty bed. He did the best he could, but pillows weren’t nearly as satisfying to hug as Judy had been. Hours slid by while he tossed and turned, trying to find some position that would ease his heartache.

What finally worked was when he pulled up the pictures Judy had sent him of her trip to Bunny Burrow. He flipped slowly through them and imagined what she would have said if he’d been there. He imagined himself teasing her for sending such an odd collection of photos. But deep down he was glad she’d decided to share that bit of her life, even if he still didn’t understand what he was looking at. He could just ask her of course, but where was the fun in that? He was sure to figure it out sooner or later.
Judy spent her weekend brooding over her relationship with Nick, but not because of any doubts that had popped into her mind. There were a few of those too of course, questions about what other mammals would think or how she could have a “normal” relationship when what she had was anything but typical, but those paled in comparison to what she was really worried about. No, her thoughts had been bent specifically toward figuring out what she wanted.

It was at once an immense and nebulous question. All she really had to go on was her dating history, and in her opinion that was hardly an ideal measure. At most it let her make a few vague statements about things she didn’t want, and while that wasn’t entirely useless it didn’t bring her much closer to an answer.

Looking back on the past week did provide some answers though. Every moment had been wonderful, more than she’d ever imagined, but in retrospect there was one detail that bothered her. They’d both been fairly circumspect about the whole affair, mostly making use of the hotel’s side entrances and saving all but the tamest displays of affection for when they were alone. Both of them were nervous, carefully navigating the uncharted waters they’d found themselves in, but eventually she wanted to move past that. To stop stealing kisses when nobody was looking as if they were doing something wrong.

By extension that meant eventually moving in together as well. There they were lucky at least. They were near enough in size that they could make things work without too much difficulty. At worst she might need to accept that she would need to stash step stools in convenient locations, but all things considered that was a modest concession. She was actually more worried about finding a place that would rent to them.

Perhaps she was being paranoid, but she kept imagining all sorts of hurdles. Would places rent to a predator-prey couple? If necessary Nick wouldn’t have any problem coming up with some scheme to get them in, but sooner or later the owner would realize they were an item. If the owner wasn’t about to rent to them if they were honest, what would happen if he found out they’d lied to get a space?

Then there were Nick’s concerns about accidentally hurting her. She still stood by what she’d told him, but at the same time she had to admit that his worries weren’t completely unfounded. He was a fox, and while society had evolved biology was still trying to catch up. His body was made to… well…that only mattered because of his worries that she might get hurt by accident.

At least that was one area where she could turn to the Lifeline forums for some help. A simple post and several hours later she had more advice than she knew what to do with. The other members agreed that reassuring Nick that he wouldn’t just hurt her by accident had been the right course to take, but most also had other suggestions they said might help put his worries to rest. The suggestions ranged from careful, constant communication any time they were being intimate to the actual use of safety gear to having Nick carefully file his claws to ensure they weren’t sharp enough to harm anyone. She wasn’t actually sure how she felt about any of the suggestions, some of them seemed to imply that there was something wrong with Nick that needed to be addressed, but she supposed it was worth at least mentioning the advice just to see what Nick thought.

Her main concern was when and how. It didn’t seem like the sort of thing to do over the phone or through texts. Talking about it at work was obviously out too. For one it wouldn’t be at all appropriate, and if the status of her relationship with Nick really was the current hot topic to gossip about she didn’t want to add any fuel to the flames. Similar concerns meant they couldn’t simply discuss it over lunch or dinner. That meant the closest opportunity would be the coming weekend, assuming they could arrange for some privacy.
At least Lieutenant Uncia seemed ready to keep her busy until then. The moment she’d stepped into
the precinct the snow leopard had her share everything she’d been able to learn by reviewing the
case file. Then, once she was finished, she’d been sent to the university to speak with a Dr. Fetlock,
the expert that had helped the ZPD analyze the substance that Flip was using to drive mammals
savage.

A far cry from being placed back on the street, but at least it was better than sitting in the precinct all
day doing paperwork. It also gave her a chance to try driving with the arm brace, and to her surprise
it wasn’t all that difficult. Steering felt a little awkward since she couldn’t rotate her forearm as much
as she would have liked, but once she adjusted for that she didn’t have any other problems.

Dr. Fetlock met her in the university’s administration building along with several printouts. At first
Judy had worried that she was going to need him to explain everything in order for her to
understand, but to her surprise the language was remarkably casual. There were a few terms she
didn’t know the significance of, but other than that everything was explained using everyday words.

She looked up at the horse, smiling in relief. “M-Nighthowler?”

“Ah? Oh, that isn’t an M, it’s a mu,” Dr. Fetlock said. “It’s the name I’ve given this particular
compound, since we discovered that it is very definitely a modification on the standard Nighthowler
toxin.”

“But it is Nighthowler though,” she said, continuing to read the report. “Our lab decided it wasn’t,
because the substance was larger than Nighthowler toxin and because the cure is completely
ineffective.”

“That’s because it has been modified. Stabilizing agents were added after the conformation of the
protein was altered. Your lab wouldn’t have been able to determine that. As it is, we only realized
after running it through NMR spectroscopy in the chemistry lab.”

Judy nodded absently, having just gotten to that part of the page, then pointed out one of the words.
“Denatured?”

“That just means it is no longer folded properly,” Dr. Fetlock explained. “When a cell makes a
protein it needs to make sure that it is folded up correctly so it will work. It is a process that can be
very sensitive to temperature, pH, and a few other factors that you don’t need to worry about. The
important thing to know is that it appears the Nighthowler toxin was exposed to very carefully
targeted stabilizing agents, preserving its neurological effects despite its altered shape.”

“But if it is basically just Nighthowler toxin why doesn’t the cure work anymore?”

Dr. Fetlock held up a hoof. “Ah-ha. That is likely because the protein is denatured. The cure binds to
a very specific site on the protein. If you change the shape, the site might not exist anymore, or if it
does the cure may be unable to bind properly. Or maybe it does bind properly, but because of the
altered shape it no longer causes the compound to release as it previously had. Determining which is
the case will take more work, but the important part is that this is Nighthowler.”

“I would think the important detail would be that the cure doesn’t work anymore,” Judy said dryly,
skimming ahead in the paper.

“A fair point, but I was mostly referring to your attempts to catch the culprits,” Dr. Fetlock said. “The
fact that it is standard Nighthowler that has been denatured and not some other compound or process
is important.”
“Why?”

“Because denaturing a protein generally destroys all of its activity, or at least severely alters it,” the horse explained, then pointed to a graph near the bottom of the page. “See here? It is a very sensitive process. Biology is fairly messy at best, but when proteins denature the outcome is difficult to predict. Small differences in the initial conditions can lead to massive changes in the outcome. Whatever process is being used, I cannot imagine it has a very large yield. That means whatever operation they are running is going to need to be pretty big if it supplied enough product for this attack.”

Judy lightly bit her lip. “How big? What would he need?”

“That is difficult to tell. On the one hoof his yields are very low, but on the other he is delivering the toxin by having mammals ingest it. That makes it much easier for the body to take in than if it was placed on the skin, so the dosage required to cause a mammal to go savage is significantly lower,” Dr. Fetlock explained, pressing his hooves together in front of him. “My guess is that they haven’t tried shooting mammals with this yet because they can’t produce enough to make that worth the effort.

“However we didn’t see any non-active toxin, so they must have a way of purifying that out along with any other contaminants. That’s going to take some chemistry equipment and enough space to set up a permanent processing line. Something that can just be left running with minimal oversight; I doubt that whoever you are going up against has a large staff of qualified individuals to babysit chemistry gear.

“They would also need access to some sort of acid in large quantities or a way to denature things with heat. Personally I would lean toward heat because it is easier to manage and will raise fewer eyebrows than trying to buy huge vats of acid. Might only require some sort of industrial-sized boiler.”

“So they need a chemistry lab,” she said quietly.

Dr. Fetlock nodded. “And the boiler. In fact, that is probably the more difficult part; those tend to be very large. Not the sort of thing you can have delivered without attracting attention. Most likely they just found one that they can use.”

Which meant they’d either had access one that wasn’t being used any longer, or someone was letting them “borrow” one. Then they move in, set up a growing operation, and get to work on building whatever chemistry contraption they needed to purify the result.

A light thrill ran down Judy’s spine as she realized that it would be easy to get the records for any industrial boiler deliveries in the city from the companies that had sold them. With the current emergency a court order compelling the companies to surrender the information would be easy to secure, and from there they could just work their way through the list.

“Thank you very much, doctor. You’ve been very helpful,” she said, already beaming. “If you learn anything else don’t hesitate to call us.”

Nick had barely been on patrol for two hours when Lowell received a call over the radio asking them to come back. That had been his first sign that the day wasn’t going to end well. Chief Bogo was a
A mammal that valued order, and a part of that was not disrupting the ZPD’s standard operations unless absolutely necessary. If they were being called back that could only mean that something had happened, or that someone was in trouble. As it turned out this was the second. Agent Gat met them at the door, and the ocelot had promptly taken charge by ordering Nick into one of the interview rooms. He told himself that everything was fine, that he hadn’t actually done anything wrong so there was nothing to be afraid of. In fact, it was a good thing they had decided to focus on him. That meant Judy was in the clear. If only his heart would stop racing in his chest he might actually have believed himself.

Agent Gat looked fairly confident as he sat down. That was a bad sign. He also didn’t try playing any games and immediately launched into telling Nick his rights. Another bad sign. Still, the ocelot had come to talk to him. That meant IA didn’t think they had a solid case yet. That, or they were fishing to see what else their investigation could turn up.

“So, should I worry?” he asked, pleased to find his voice sounded calm. Thank you, years of hustling.

“That depends on if you are involved with the mob, Officer Wilde.”

“Because Mr. Big made a call to save my hide,” Nick guessed.

Keeping himself from chuckling at the idea that Mr. Big would help him out was difficult. If not for his friendship with Judy the crime boss would probably be pleased to see him offed.

“Not precisely,” Agent Gat said and opened up a folder. “You and Officer Hopps are remarkably close it seems. Would it be a stretch to say that you know her well?”

That caught him off-guard. Was that an oblique reference to rumors about their relationship? Or was it something more innocent? Once his initial shock wore off his mind then jumped to the more important detail: why did he want to know about Judy?

“I suppose you could say that,” Nick said reluctantly. “She’s been my partner from my first day on the force, and she was the one to suggest I join the ZPD. Chief Bogo said we work well together.”

“Yes, yes, and according to the other officers you two spend a remarkable amount of your off-duty time together,”Agent Gat said, waving his hand. “So it would be safe to assume that if Officer Hopps was on the mob payroll you would be the first to know, correct?”

“Excuse me?”

Agent Gat gave him an even look. “I am just trying to confirm that you would be aware if Officer Hopps was taking orders from the mob.”

“That is the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard. Judy is a lot of things, but I can assure you that if anyone tried to buy her they’d find themselves in cuffs so fast it would make their heads spin,” Nick said. “I have no clue where you got the idea that she’s working for the mob, but it is ridiculous.”

“Really?” Agent Gat asked, then pulled out a page and slid it across to Nick. “Do you know what this is?”

He looked at the paper, ears tilted back. A list of times and phone numbers. Several were highlighted. Suddenly the room felt just a little colder.

“Call records,” he said quietly.
“From Officer Hopps’ cell phone,” Agent Gat said. “And those highlighted calls? To Mr. Big’s daughter. For a while there they were talking every three or four days. Bit unusual for a cop to be close friends with a crime lord’s child, wouldn’t you say?”

“This really doesn’t prove anything,” Nick said.

“Maybe not, but then on the day you were abducted she made a call, then almost immediately after was contacted by a burner phone,” the ocelot said, still speaking slow and confidently. “That is just a bit suspicious. As is the fact that Officer Hopps’ phone mysteriously lost Fru Fru Big’s contact information. She claims she had phone problems, but that seems a little too convenient.”

Nick bit his tongue, holding very still, well aware that the investigator would be looking for a reaction. How had IA known to check Judy’s call records? That sort of thing would take a warrant, which they wouldn’t have been able to get unless they had enough of a reason to convince a judge that they needed access to that information. There was no way they’d managed to find anything like that unless…

Judy had told them she’d made a call. That was the obvious answer, she’d told them she’d made a call, but of course he’d cleared her call history so they needed to find some other way to determine who she’d contacted. It was such an obvious mistake that he was shocked Judy had made it. She’d covered for him often enough that he’d assumed she would know better and simply omit that detail, but rather than being confrontational with her Agent Gat had been friendly and tricked her into lowering her guard.

And of course now, because of his trying to cover her tracks, she just looked even guiltier.

_Oh God, this is all my fault._

The ocelot was talking again. “Officer Wilde, listen. If you know anything about this it would be in your best interests to let us know. I understand you want to protect a friend, but if Officer Hopps is really helping the mob then eventually you’re going to regret covering for her.”

He wanted to tell the smug feline just how far off base they were. He wanted to shout that Judy was the best, most incorruptibly pure officer on the force. He wanted to take that blasted call record and shove it so far up under Agent Gat’s tail that the ocelot would be tasting wood pulp for weeks. Any one of those would make him feel so much better, but at the same time none would do what he really wanted: help Judy.

There was just one problem. Judy really had been friends with Fru Fru, and she really had asked Mr. Big for help. Normally he was of the opinion that it was possible for a mammal to worm free of any situation provided they knew the right things to say, but things became decidedly trickier when someone had you dead to rights and knew it. About the only thing that really worked was to toss something else out as a distraction. Something that was impossible to ignore.

“Mom is going to kill me when she hears about this.”

Agent Gat chuckled. “Officer Wilde, I assure you—”

He didn’t give the feline a chance to finish. “Did you know that Carrots saved Fru Fru Big from being flattened during her second day on the force?”

“Really.” The ocelot crossed his arms, making no attempt to hide his skepticism.

Nick pressed on. “It’s true. I’m sure if you check the cameras you will be able to find a record of it. Didn’t even know who she was saving, but why would she? You can’t really expect some innocent
country girl to recognize the daughter of the city’s most notorious crime lord. Unsurprisingly they became friends pretty much instantly. I mean on the one side, someone has just saved your life. On the other, you’re in a new place and desperately alone. What could be the harm?”

Uncertainty ghosted across Agent Gat’s features. That was exactly what Nick had been waiting for. It was time for the next step.

“And can you imagine the spot that put Mr. Big in? Someone just saved his daughter’s life. That’s the sort of thing you want to encourage, but it was a cop. You can’t just give her a reward because then twits like you are bound to come sniffing around, but you still owe her a debt even if she doesn’t know it. Things like that mean a lot to crime bosses. There isn’t a law there to protect the mammals they deal with, so it ends up coming down to reputation. Not repaying a debt could tarnish his image.”

“That is all very nice, Officer Wilde, but it hardly excuses an officer from having mob connections,” the ocelot said.

“Oh, so Fru Fru is taking an active hand in the family business now?” Nick asked, smiling a little. It was well known that Mr. Big did everything he could to keep his precious daughter away from that life. “It would seem to me that Officer Hopps had a perfectly legal friendship with an innocent citizen who just happens to be related to a criminal. Is IA so desperate to find corruption that they’re going to go after officers based on something that tenuous?”

“Officer Hopps still received that—

“—call, yes I know,” Nick said, cutting the agent off. “I’m sure Judy told you she called Fru Fru, yes? Of course she was worried for me and wanted to hear a friendly voice. And maybe Fru Fru hears that her good friend, the friend that saved her life, has a problem and realizes that her daddy can help. You are really surprised by all this?”

For the second time Agent Gat seemed unable to come up with a response. Nick let him think for a moment, then reached out and dragged his claws slowly over the wooden tabletop, leaving behind a fresh set of scratch marks. Time to go all or nothing.

“You see, I’m thinking that if I were Mr. Big—hypothetically of course—I know I can’t just give Officer Hopps a reward because that’ll land her tail in hot water. Not exactly the message you want to send to mammals you want keeping an eye out for your daughter,” he said slowly. “Now—hypothetically again—I think I’d want to do something more subtle. See about ways to nudge her career along. Nothing obvious though, and nothing that can come back on her. The ZPD frowns on corruption, as I’m sure you know.

“I’d probably see if I could get someone close to her instead. Somebody so good at what they do that they have a clean criminal record. Don’t want anyone to realize what is going on, right?” He chuckled, glad to see he had the ocelot’s full attention. “Then I would hypothetically tell this clever little helper that he’s going to make sure Officer Judy Hopps solves cases. Tell him to bend the rules if necessary, and then feed him information from time to time when my contacts know something about a crime that Hopps is working on. And if I find out that my little helper accidentally ends up in trouble, well that just won’t do. Finding someone else is going to be a pain, so it’s best to do what I can to bail him out.” Nick smiled wider. “Hypothetically. Of course.”

Come on, swallow it. You know you want to, Nick thought, fighting to keep his tail from fidgeting behind him.

Agent Gat abruptly stood. “Stay there, I’ll be right back.”
“Whatever you want,” Nick said, then kicked his feet up onto the table and leaned back.

The ocelot walked out, leaving him alone for just a moment. Soon after Chief Bogo stormed in, practically slamming the door behind him. Nick looked up at the large cape buffalo, honestly surprised to see him there. Then again, perhaps he should have expected it. Obviously the chief would want to watch while his officers were being questioned.

“Officer Wilde, what are you doing?” Bogo demanded.

Nick glanced at the two-way mirror, his lips pursed, then back at the chief. Best not to say anything, there was certainly at least one IA stooge listening in. A slip of the tongue would ruin everything, so he merely gave Bogo a pointed look instead.

*This is what you wanted, right? To make sure IA only lands on me?*

Before Bogo could say anything the door opened again. This time Branches strode in.

“Ah, do you need to have another conversation with my father?” Nick asked the deer.

“I suggest you watch your tongue, fox, because Agent Gat and I have a whole bunch of questions for you now.”

“That sounds lovely,” Nick said, then stretched and glanced at the clock. “But I’m afraid it’s past time that I asked for a lawyer.”

Judy was on her way to report back to Lieutenant Uncia when her ears caught the sound of raised voices.

“—it is highly irregular to place an officer on administrative leave when there is no evidence that he did anything wrong.” She didn’t recognize the speaker, but he sounded upset.

“No evidence? He just gave us a confession!” That was Agent Gat. Judy felt something inside her tighten. IA was sniffing around again?

“I’ve reviewed the tapes, and I believe a court would dispute that point. Officer Wilde was clearly talking about possibilities and nothing more.”

“Regardless, IA is well within its rights to place any officer on—”

She rounded the corner to find a beaver in a business suit facing down with Agent Gat. Upon seeing her they both went silent until Agent Gat turned and approached her. His expression was grave, a sharp contrast to his friendly demeanor when they had first met.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize I was walking into anything,” Judy said, looking between the two other mammals. “Is there a problem? I heard you mention Officer Wilde.”

“Do not worry about that,” Agent Gat said. “While you are here though, I would like you to confirm something. It was brought to my attention that when you first joined the force you saved the life of Mr. Big’s daughter. Is that information correct?”

Before she could answer the beaver spoke up. “Officer, I may not be representing you, but I would
advise against answering that. Internal Affairs is very obviously on a witch hunt.”

Her mouth quickly snapped shut as Agent Gat gave the beaver an annoyed look. A witch hunt? Did that mean they’d been unable to find anything that would stick, so now they were after Nick on some trumped up charges? Her tail began to quiver with outrage and she very nearly demanded to know what was happening.

Agent Gat spoke up first however. “You are being a real pain. Thank you so much,” he said, then sighed. “Never mind. I will simply verify it from surveillance tapes. Thank you Officer Hopps.”

She watched the ocelot depart, but found that her anger didn’t leave with him. Her foot started to tap as she tilted her ears back. Only after Agent Gat had left did the beaver speak again.

“Thank you for listening to me,” the beaver said. “I would also suggest you insist on having a lawyer present when talking with IA from now on before they drum up some excuse to place you on administrative leave too.”

“You brought up administrative leave before,” she said. She was surprised by how tiny her voice sounded. “What is going on?”

“It would appear that IA is desperate to justify the time they’ve spent on this investigation by convicting someone with working for the mafia,” the beaver said, then sighed. “Please excuse me. I need to write a court brief protesting Officer Wilde’s treatment.”
Judy tried to focus on the task at hand, but her thoughts kept drifting back to Nick. Every few minutes she would feel her phone vibrate, but when she scrambled to check she was inevitably disappointed. It was always her imagination. Nick still hadn’t responded. Even knowing that she was tempted to unlock her phone and read the log just to be completely sure. Only the knowledge of what she would find kept her from doing so.

Nick, are you there?
If you’re busy we can talk later.
Come on, Nick. I know you’re upset, but please don’t ignore me.
Are you mad?
...going to bed now. Love you.
Good morning, are you feeling better today?
Nick?
Are you screening my calls?
Nick, please! Say something!

By the time she’d gone in to work she’d been so angry and worried and hurt that it was close to making her ill. She’d promised herself that the next time she spoke with Nick that he was going to be getting a sizable piece of her mind. With how things were turning out it was perfectly understandable that he would be upset, and maybe he was trying to spare her from dealing with his sour mood, but that was no excuse to shut her out completely. At the very least he could have simply told her that he needed some time alone. That would have stung, but she could’ve accepted it. This total communication blackout set her to worrying however, even though she knew perfectly well how silly her fears were.

She’d been so caught up in her displeasure that she’d snapped at Clawhauser when he greeted her, and brooded all through the morning meeting while Bogo handed out the week’s assignments. He’d asked to speak with her after, then informed her in no uncertain terms that she was to stop trying to contact Nick. That any record of her holding a conversation with him would look extremely bad now that he was on Administrative Leave. That if she cared about him then she would step back and trust the lawyer to do whatever was necessary to have him returned to duty.

The sort of kick to the rear that turned righteous, indignant rage into shame. Once Bogo had finished dressing her down she’d scurried meekly out of his office and promptly rejoined Lieutenant Uncia’s team, which had doubled in size now that there were actual leads. The Lieutenant had assigned her to assist both Snarlof and Wolford in sifting through the sales records of every industrial-scale boiler that had been sold in the last two decades.

At first she’d hoped it would prove to be an easy task since what they were looking for was a piece of heavy industrial equipment. How many could there be? The answer, she quickly learned, was a lot.

Industrial Boilers were used in far more applications than Judy would have ever imagined. Large buildings used them to provide a constant supply of hot water. In Tundra Town they were often part of central heating plans. Almost every power plant in the city made use of them to turn a turbine. Some large food processing operations used them in the cooking process. A number of other industries employed them for sanitation. Even some of the older trains in operation used boilers to provide power for locomotion. In short, this one piece of technology was used in applications ranging from providing the constant spray of vapor that maintained the Rainforest District’s humidity...
to more mundane realms like purifying water for wine breweries.

How many boilers could there be? Literally thousands.

But a lead was a lead, so they did the best they could. Some of the boilers could be ruled out easily enough. Ones that were actively being used to provide city services, for example. Places where irregularities were sure to raise questions, or where a large staff and regular inspections would make running clandestine criminal operations impossible. They also ruled out the oldest ones that were likely to have fallen into disrepair.

While Wolford and Snarlof focused on ruling out possibilities Judy spent her time trying to prioritize others. Boilers that had been abandoned, either because the business that had purchased them had gone under or because a unit had been replaced with something newer. Ones that were owned by private citizens—often wealthy members of the city’s elite for their mansions—that could be re-purposed without drawing attention. She even ended up combing through social media, looking for posts by industry leaders that seemed sympathetic to Flip after asking herself what things Nick would suggest.

Between the three of them they were able to classify every industrial boiler in the city as low, medium, or high priority. A good start, but it just scraped the surface. Lieutenant Uncia had been the one to point that out. Flip had been trying to smuggle things into the city. That implied his base lay somewhere outside, and that posed a problem.

Just how far outside the city? If he was set up in the same county there wouldn’t be that much of a problem. Zootopia was large enough the city and county government had been merged at one point. The ZPD and the County Police remained separated, and they didn’t share jurisdiction, but beyond some friendly inter-service rivalry they were on remarkably good terms. Sharing resources wasn’t at all unheard of and the ZPD often offered to lend a few officers in the rare cases that the County Police needed an extra leg up.

What if Flip went one county over though? State police would take over since their jurisdiction ended at the county line. In another state? Federal, and all the red tape that came with. In either case that left the ZPD with little option but to hand over information and do its best to head-off any other incidents. Judy didn’t want to believe that Flip had the sort of backing that would make such a far reaching operation possible, but then she hadn’t thought anyone would be able to pull off the Founders’ Day attack either.

It was a bit premature to worry about something like that though. Even if the operation itself wasn’t in the city it was possible that Flip himself was, so once they were finished Judy had immediately dove back into the records room in the hope that she would find something about one of Flip’s accomplices that could lead them to him.

Nick took his time with lunch, glad that he’d managed to get permission to go out. Not even one full day into being placed on Administrative Leave and he was about ready to claw his way up the walls out of boredom. He was actually dreading the moment he would have to go back home.

The humor of the situation wasn’t lost on him. Back before he’d become a cop there had been the odd news story about officers who slipped up and got placed on leave. At the time he’d railed against it, wondering why someone who’d done something wrong got rewarded with a paid vacation.
Rarely would they be convicted of anything, another point he’d resented. Cops didn’t go to jail. At most they would get fired.

But now he was getting an unexpectedly intimate appreciation for the situation. Not so much paid vacation as house arrest. He needed to get permission to even leave his apartment. Plus he was about to be dragged through a court not once, but twice. A criminal trial, where he would be given the full protections afforded to any citizen accused of a crime, and an administrative one…where he would not.

That was where the administrative leave came in. Obviously the city didn’t want a potentially crooked cop on the street, but neither could they simply fire him without justification. Instead they sent him home with orders not to leave, and there he was forced to stay until the investigation concluded and they decided his fate.

So there he was, way out on the limb he’d crawled onto for Judy, unable to do anything but listen to it creak as IA leaned their weight upon it. Worse, there was no way to avoid hearing what was being said about him once the news that the first fox officer was under investigation for mob ties had broken. His mother had called just that morning after seeing the papers, frantically demanding to know if it was true. He’d assured her that it was just a misunderstanding and everything would be cleared up, but even over the phone he could tell she didn’t believe him. Hardly a surprise, but it hurt just the same.

And then there was Judy. She’d been sending him texts almost every fifteen minutes since yesterday. Then she’d tried calling a few times. Not answering any of it had hurt even worse. He could tell from her messages and the lone voice mail that his silence was upsetting her. It was like she didn’t realize that associating with him right now might cause IA to take another look at her. He’d called the Chief to tell him what she was doing, and today the unending stream of messages had finally stopped, but he was still worried.

Would she understand that he wanted nothing more than to talk to her? To hear her voice? That he was doing this for her?

Would she even care?

He should probably feel silly for wondering about such things, but Judy wasn’t likely to look favorably on his doing this without asking for her permission first. She would think that he should have simply come clean about what had happened. That IA had caught her, and that the right thing to do would be to stop wasting their time and accept the consequences of her actions. There was no question that the very thing that made Judy the mammal he loved would make her throw her entire future away.

And the worst of it was that the whole situation wasn’t fair. She’d saved his life, but the IA agents didn’t seem to care about that at all. How was killing her career going to help solve anything? The city desperately needed someone like Judy. Someone willing to see the best of it, to see what it could be, and then be willing to step up and fight to make it happen. If IA had their way it wouldn’t just be a loss for her. All of Zootopia would be poorer for it.

He turned those thoughts over in his head over and over again on his way home after lunch, trying to rehearse what he would say when Judy finally confronted him. The image of her mouth scrunched up as she glared at him refused to leave him. He’d seen it before during the few times they’d disagreed in the past, but if he knew anything it was that this was likely to be their first serious fight. Perhaps it was an inevitability since they’d decided to take a shot at spending their lives together, growing closer inevitably meant learning to cope with someone when they rubbed your fur against the grain, but he would never have guessed it would come so soon.
There was one small, silver lining: since he’d been put on administrative leave he was free to go without wearing that bulletproof vest. Not that he found it particularly uncomfortable, but the constant weight of it worked to wear him down while at work. It was the sort of problem that he only noticed when he took the blasted thing off and realized how much better he felt. The trauma plates he’d acquired only made it that much worse.

At least those were his thoughts on the matter until he walked into his room to find someone sprawled across his couch. Without thinking Nick reached for his hip, but of course his taser wasn’t there. Officers weren’t just permitted to carry that sort of equipment around when they weren’t on duty, and his had been confiscated when they’d placed him on leave anyway.

“Nicky, Nicky, Nicky,” Flip said as he pushed himself up, lightly waving his right hand to call attention to the pistol he was holding. “I was wondering when you’d get back. Come on in and close the door. We have a lot to talk about.”

Nick’s ears splayed back as he stared at that gun, then sniffed the air. Not a trace of any other strange mammals in the room. Had Flip really come alone? Did he have some henchmen hanging around outside that he’d missed? For that matter, why hadn’t Flip simply shot him?

“What are you doing here?” he asked, then froze when Flip pointed the gun right at him.

“Close the door.”

“Flip, we both know that if you came here just to shoot me I would already be dead,” he said, doing his best to ignore how anxious he sounded. “If you pull that trigger you aren’t going to get whatever it is you want, and then you’ll have to worry about having the ZPD chasing you on your way back out.”

Flip flashed his teeth. “Is that really something you want to test while standing on that side of the barrel? The ZPD hasn’t been having a lot of luck tracking me down, you know.”

Nick hesitated, then decided that was a remarkably good point. Moving slowly, he shut the door—without locking it—and tried to think of some way to get a call out to the ZPD without Flip noticing. Simply pulling out his cell phone was clearly out of the question. Attempting to make a call without pulling out his phone would be tricky to say the least, assuming that Flip actually allowed him to reach into his pockets.

“There, now tell me why you’re sitting on my couch.”

“What? I can’t visit an old friend when he finally gets home?” Flip asked. “Really started to wonder where you’d run off to when you stopped coming back here, Nicky. Especially after I saw the news this morning, though I can’t really say I was surprised. How long did you think they were going to let someone like you hang around in the ZPD anyway?”

Nick couldn’t help laughing. “That’s your angle? Come down here to pretend that you care about my problems?”

“I’m not pretending,” Flip said, lifting the barrel of the gun. He still held it at the ready, but Nick was willing to settle for not having it trained on him. “This is exactly the sort of behavior that I’m fighting against. We can’t be friends, but that doesn’t mean I’m not willing to set aside our disagreements so that we can work together against a common enemy.”

The earnestness of the statement caught Nick by surprise. He swallowed, finding his mouth was unusually dry, as he tried to process that.
“Really? You expect me to believe that you’re going to trust me?” he asked.

“Of course I’m not going to trust you. I’m not a fool,” Flip said calmly. “We both know that I’m better at this then you are though. I’ll be watching you closely and at the first sign of disloyalty I intend to put a bullet through that head of yours, but I am willing to give you the chance provided you pass a little test.”

“And what makes you think I’m even interested in this?”

“Because I can read a goddamn newspaper,” Flip said and jumped up from the couch. “I’m sure you’ve seen the headlines, but have you bothered to read the statements? They’ve got mammals from the government trying to score political points by saying they were against having you join the ZPD from the start. There are officers going on the record saying they always thought there was something off about a fox joining the force. The stories are practically crowing about how this just proves that some species are not fit for respectable society. I’m half surprised there isn’t a crowd gathered outside your place with pitchforks and rope.”

“You know perfectly well this is just because I’m the first fox on the force, and the news loves a sensational story,” Nick said uncomfortably. “It’s just click bait.”

“Oh, so if Officer Bunny was to do the same thing she would be treated exactly the same way? Not even given the benefit of the doubt before dragging her through the mud?” Flip asked harshly, starting to walk closer. “You forget how well I know you, Nicky. Getting caught like this isn’t your style. How long did it take for her to throw you under the bus?”

“I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about,” Nick said, then mentally kicked himself as he realized he’d responded just a little too quickly.

“Please, did you really expect me to believe you had mended things with Mr. Big? I may not have been here to watch it happen, but I heard all about what you did. We both know the one thing that little psycho cares about most is his family,” Flip said, his tail flicking slowly as he came closer. “That bunny cop friend of yours, though? I don’t think there is a crook in the city that doesn’t know that she rescued little Fru Fru. Far as most of us criminals are concerned, she’s sacrosanct. Nobody wants to risk upsetting a mob boss by hurting his pet bunny. So go ahead and guess who I think got Mr. Big to vouch for you.”

“Why do you even care? Sounds to me like you’re risking getting the mob after you again with the way you’ve been targeting Judy,” Nick said. He tried to walk past Flip, hoping that with his back turned he’d be able to get a call out, but the other fox stopped him.

“I care because she needs to pay for all the harm she’s caused. She’s the reason things went terrible, her and that blasted sheep. Now the city wants us to forget her sins? I think not.”

“You really have no clue what you’re talking about,” Nick said quietly, shaking his head.

Flip made a show of examining his pistol. “Really? Because I could have sworn I saw her telling the whole city that it needed to be afraid of predators.”

“She knows better now,” Nick said uncomfortably.

“Oh, is that what she told you?” Flip asked, showing just a flash of teeth as he spoke. “That why you’ve spent the last week with her? Don’t look so surprised Nicky. I told you I read the papers. It wasn’t that hard to figure out, with the way she leads you around like she has you on a leash. I’m curious, she actually giving you some? Because I have no idea how that’s gonna—”
“Shut your damn mouth!” Nick barked, his ears folded back. He didn’t even realize he was growling until he saw Flip’s triumphant grin.

“Does she make you wear a muzzle so you won’t bite her?” the other fox asked, then leveled the gun once more when Nick started to take a step forward. “She’s just using you, Nicky. That’s why you’re under IA’s thumb instead of her.”

For a terrible moment Nick actually did find himself wondering if that was what was going on. Judy was constantly surprising him with how clever she could be, and she had only really come around on their relationship after that first interview with IA. Then he remembered how worried she’d looked when he got off the train after he’d been kidnapped. The way she’d pressed into their first kiss. The sly looks they exchanged when there were other mammals in the room to keep them from sharing affection more openly.

“Listen, you and me? Water under the bridge, down a duck’s back, wherever you want it,” Flip said, speaking calmly. “All you need to do is tell me where the bunny cop is.”

Nick looked away and tsked. “I’m not telling you that.”

All at once the facade of calm left Flip’s expression. Nick watched the gun anxiously, trying to brace himself to be shot. The pistol whipped out and slammed into the side of his muzzle instead, the impact driving him against the wall as he doubled over with a yelp.

“Why? Why are you so disappointing?” Flip demanded as he struck Nick again, this time over the top of the head. “You’re supposed to be smarter than this Nicky! You’re smart enough to bring me down, so why the hell are you playing pet to something that by all rights should be your dinner?”

Somehow Nick managed to stagger clear. He pulled his hand from his face to find blood wetting the fur on his fingertips. He could feel more running from a gash in his muzzle.

“She’s a friend. You really expect me to just sell her out like that?” Nick tried, slowly backing away although the fact that Flip had trained the pistol on him once more meant the extra distance really didn’t matter.

“It’s just a lie,” Flip shouted back. “Just like this whole damn city. There was a time you knew that. All these blasted prey running around scared to death of mammals like us, trying to pretend they aren’t. Oh, but they’re just looking for an excuse to be able to say what they’re thinking, aren’t they? Fox becomes a goddamn cop and they all pat themselves on their backs about how enlightened they are, then turn around and tell each other that they always knew those vulpines were no good when he’s put on administrative leave.”

Enough blood soaked into Nick’s fur that it began to drip onto his shirt, but he did his best to ignore the sharp, metallic scent as he kept a wary eye on Flip. “Well you’re doing a fine job of justifying their fears. Do you honestly think this is helping anybody?”

“Please, you know me so much better than that. I’ve never just gone out and done anything on my own. I’m too lazy; something always needs to push me first. All this? It’s just a defensive reaction.” Flip cocked his head to one side. “They fired the first shots, and you would have me sit aside while they reap the benefits of their phony crisis?”

“Who the heck is this ‘they’ you’re talking about? The only one looking to gain from the Nighthowler crisis was Bellwether,” Nick said as he pressed his hand against the gash in his muzzle, trying to stop the bleeding.
“Every single prey in this rotten city.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “You’re insane.”

“Don’t believe me? I’m sure you noticed how many preds lost their jobs. Who do you think filled those vacancies,” Flip said.

“They didn’t do anything wrong. They’re innocent.”

“Mighty convenient considering how well the lies worked out for them, mmm? If they’re really so innocent why haven’t they given those jobs back to the original employees,” Flip asked. “Every single one of them is guilty. Just by existing they support a system that only ever attacks us. A pathetic attempt to drag down their betters.”

“That was just Bellwether, and she only became a problem because she was able to make herself mayor. It isn’t the sort of thing that’s about to happen again,” Nick said, although he already knew his words weren’t going to have an effect. He just hoped that if he could keep Flip talking for long enough there would be a chance to get a call out.

To his surprise his comment made Flip draw back a step, blinking as he looked at Nick as if really seeing him for the first time. “You really believe that, don’t you? You really believe you can be their friend.”

Nick held his tongue, worried that if he said the wrong thing he would provoke Flip again. Every muscle in his body went taut when he saw the other fox reach into a pocket, although he wasn’t sure why. There was already a gun pointed right at him. That anxiety quickly turned to confusion when flip pulled out a crumpled paper and gave it an underhand toss. Nick caught it without even thinking.

“Go ahead and read that and tell me if you still believe what you’re saying,” Flip said, his ears tilted back.

With one eye watching Flip, he carefully flattened the page back out. In the process some of his blood got smeared across the page, but he could still tell what it was. Notes from city hall’s last meeting. Closed doors to discuss policy in light of the recent Nighthowler attacks. Proposals to deal with the radicalization of the predator popu—

“How did you get this?” he asked.

“Thought I explained this to you before, Nicky. Bellwether’s reign hurt a lot of predators. Some more than others, and some that found themselves in places where everyone ignores them but they still have access to sensitive information. Like, say, a secretary serving a member of the government,” Flip said. “It’s real. The city is just trying to keep hush about it right now. Waiting for...how did they put it? Waiting for a cohesive plan to deal with any unrest the announcement may cause.”

“This isn’t going to go through. The mammals living here won’t stand for it. There’s a note here that not even the whole city council supports this,” Nick said, though he could tell he was only grasping at straws.

“Most of the city is prey, Nicky, and those prey have set up all sorts of new little groups that are writing their representatives about how they demand to be kept safe. They want to lock us all away. Funny how they didn’t demand the same thing for Bellwether.”

“If you know that then you know that only a minority of the population has joined them. Less than one percent,” he said, still staring at the page. “Most prey don’t think those things. If this is ever
announced they’ll protest—”

“Then why aren’t they doing anything? Why is the news keeping cameras on these mammals and giving them a chance to talk to the whole city about how predators should be caged or worse?” Flip demanded, beginning to raise his voice again. “Where were the protests when Bellwether was doing the exact same thing? They might not be saying these things, but their silence speaks volumes. Whether they admit it or not, they all think the same way. It’s always been there, buried under their false civility.”

“Only because of what you did.”

“Yes, what I did. Me. But they don’t actually care that it was just me, do they? They’re just looking for an excuse. That’s why the first thing they’re going to do is go after every predator in the city. Meanwhile Bellwether sits in a cell alone even though her whole conspiracy was run by sheep.” Flip paused to give Nick a pointed look. “I’ve got predators of all sorts working for me. Compared to her? I’m progressive.”

Nick touched his muzzle again, glad to find his fingers didn’t come away with fresh blood this time. He sighed, trying to think of some way to make Flip see reason. Easier said than done. The other fox wasn’t saying anything that was blatantly wrong, just twisted beyond reason. He was outright ignoring the protests Gazelle had led throughout Bellwether’s time in office. Ignored the outrage that had followed when the sheep’s plot had been revealed. Ignored that the very Founders’ Day celebrations he had disrupted were supposed to be a step toward mending the rift Bellwether had caused.

No doubt Flip had been thinking about this for a while, and Nick found himself completely unprepared. He’d been so busy trying to graduate from the academy. Then getting used to being an officer. Then came this case and the IA investigation. In effect, trying to put everything that had happened behind him rather than agonizing over it the way Flip apparently had.

“You really want my help?” he asked.

“Of course. There’s a war coming and I need the smartest mammals on my side,” Flip said, striking a tone of faux camaraderie. “You’re a cop now, so you know exactly what they’re going to expect. It isn’t even like you owe them anything with the way they’ve tossed you aside, and when it hits the fan you’re going to be on my side anyway. Might as well skip everything in the middle, right?”

“Fine. Maybe you’re right, but I’m not going to tell you where Judy is. That’s my condition. You get me, but she is left out of this,” Nick said. He could already see the anger rushing back into Flip’s eyes so he quickly continued. “You’re too focused on her anyway. While you’re trying to get your petty revenge the ZPD is closing in on you. They’ve already got at least one solid lead on where you’re staying. If you keep wasting time like this they’re going to stop you.”

That was enough to make Flip check his temper. “You’ll tell me what they already know?”

“The bits that they’ve shared with me.”

Flip glanced to one side, then snarled. “I suppose I can settle things with the bunny later then,” he said, then waved Nick over. “Come on, I’ll have someone pick us up and you can spill everything in the car.”

“Can I get cleaned up first?” Nick asked. “Or did you want me walking out in public covered in my own blood?”
“Go ahead,” Flip said, holding out his free hand, “but first you’re going to give me that phone of yours. I still don’t trust you.”

So much for that, Nick thought as he surrendered his cell. Guess it's time for plan B.

He took a moment to wash the blood from his face and hands before heading back into his room. Before he changed his shirt he checked to make sure that Flip was occupied. Only after seeing that Flip was on the phone did Nick open his closet and reach for the hanger right next to his uniform, followed by one with a spare shirt.
To say that Flip was displeased with the information Nick shared during the drive would be putting it mildly, and that was exactly as Nick intended. He’d gotten plenty of practice doing exactly the same thing back when he’d managed to ruin the other fox. No matter how much better Flip thought he was the same tricks were still working. All he needed to do was play on Flip’s paranoia, something which had only grown since they’d last worked together.

The start had been key. Initially Nick only shared trivial details that were common knowledge to set the stage, giving the appearance that he was willing to be as forthcoming as he’d promised. As expected those scraps didn’t satisfy Flip at all, so when the other fox had demanded something more substantial Nick braced himself and took a gamble.

“Do you know there’s someone working for you that has been feeding us information?” he’d asked and relished the way Flip’s eyes had bulged.

As he’d hoped, that was something that Flip had been fretting over constantly. It was an easy guess to make. Flip had always been slow to trust other mammals, and his sudden interest in driving all of the prey from the city only served to reinforce his distrust of others. Of course the other fox had demanded proof, but that was easy as well. All Nick had to do was point out that they had managed to find Flip’s smuggling operation and easily thwarted the attempted attack on Chief Bogo’s press conference. Coincidences really, but in Nick’s experience mammals were always eager to have some way to explain away such strokes of bad luck. The idea that someone had become a snitch provided just such an explanation.

The ploy set Flip to brooding for the rest of the drive, occasionally checking his pistol to make sure it was loaded or mumbling oaths to himself. The driver, the very same wolf Nick had seen last time he’d been kidnapped, pointedly kept his eyes on the road as they headed north, but that wasn’t enough to hide how anxious Flip’s behavior was making him. Any time Flip started to speak the wolf’s ears would twitch, then slowly pivot toward the agitated fox. Judging by the reaction this sort of thing wasn’t an uncommon occurrence. Nick couldn’t bring himself to feel sorry for the wolf however. Anyone who hitched their wagon to the crazy train deserved to get taken for a ride.

With nothing else to do, Nick tracked their progress as best he could. At first they’d headed out of Savanah Central and into the Rainforest District. The numerous bridges slowed their progress there, but they continued north through the Meadowlands until they began to near the far northern border of the city and finally turned west. Then they were in the outskirts of the city, driving through places that were increasingly unfamiliar to him. Then into the rural areas beyond. He couldn’t help looking back the way they’d come, a sinking feeling in his stomach as he realized that this was the farthest he’d ever been from home.

Just as he was beginning to really worry about how far they intended to take him the car made a turn onto a dirt road. Several minutes later they were pulling up to a building. Nick stared at the structure, and the surrounding fields growing some sort of grain, and began to wonder just where he was and what he’d gotten himself into. This was Flip’s home base? A farm?

No, he decided. That wasn’t quite right. Yes there was farmland, but the buildings had an almost industrial look to them. The lack of other structures, or even a significant number of mammals, immediately made him exposed. There weren’t even many roads that far out, and the ones he’d seen didn’t even have signs. It was all just farmland and undeveloped wilderness.

“Where the heck are we?” he asked under his breath, looking for a sign or something else that would
Flip gave him a toothy smile. “Just someplace run by another predator that has reason to take issue with what Bellwether did.”

“I may be mistaken, but this seems just a little bit outside of the city limits,” he said, still taking in the area. “Why would they care about anything going on in the city?”

“Really that clueless, Nicky? Suppose I can’t blame you. You never did care about anything that wasn’t right in front of you,” Flip said, beginning to walk toward one of the back buildings.

Nick’s ears folded down. “Here I thought it was because I’m a city fox.”

“Same difference,” Flip said, then gestured around him. “Bellwether might have only been interested in Zootopia, but sooner or later her policies would have spread to the surrounding county. The city government rules over all of it. Made a lot of preds out here mighty nervous.

“But this group saw it hit him pretty hard almost immediately. The city almost stopped buying goods produced by predators. Heard that this wolf family was on the verge of losing the family business because of it. Fortunately for them, I knew how to smuggle things into the city.”

Well, that explains the wolf chauffeur, Nick thought. Though it really doesn’t tell me where I am.

Rather than ask, he followed Flip into the building, keeping an eye out for identifying features. He still needed to figure out some way to get word back to the ZPD, but sooner or later something would present itself. All he needed was a little patience.

As they walked into the back room Nick found himself looking at a massive indoor growing operation with row upon row of indoor growing beds completely filled with Nighthowlers. A number of predators—mostly wolves although there were several other species mixed in—were busy tending to the plants, carefully pruning them to collect the fully mature flowers. Moments later he found himself being confronted by Conrad.

“What are you doing here?” the wildcat demanded, puffing himself up as his claws curled out. “Flip, you said you was going to take care of him.”

“And I have. Little Nicky here is going to be working for us now,” Flip said with a light chuckle.

“Working? You can’t expect us to trust a damn cop!”

“I can, provided he proves his usefulness to us,” Flip said and folded one ear back. “Which I’ll be checking on in a moment. Until then you can toss him into the backroom with our little woolen friend.”

Nick was hardly surprised when he found that the small room he was shoved into already had a familiar occupant sitting on the lone cot pressed against the far wall. From the looks of it the past year had been hard on Doug, and not just because his captors had apparently decided to keep the sheep’s fur sheered and hobbled him by chaining his ankles together. There were clear bags under his eyes and the way he held himself reminded Nick of mammals he’d seen on the street that were nearing the end of their ropes. No words passed between them even after the door closed behind Nick.
A thousand lines raced through Nick’s mind, most falling on the scale somewhere between gloating and vindictive. In the past he would have picked one, most likely something he felt would carry the most bite. Perhaps he would even pick several just to feel the rush that came with letting someone else know just how terrible they were. Today though? He simply couldn’t see the point.

“So,” he said, moving to lean next to the door, “quite the change in scenery from the subway. I can’t say I find the decor any better, but you probably get more fresh air.”

Doug gave him a flat look, but refrained from speaking. All he gave was a dismissive snort.

Nick tried a different track and gestured to the bare walls and general lack of furniture. “Not much to do in here. Surprising. Would have thought they would be keeping someone like you busy.”

This did get a response.

“Got the lab set up in the boiler room,” the sheep said. “It mostly runs itself now, though I still need to check on it twice a day or it stops working.”

There was a glimmer of pride in Doug’s expression as he spoke, although it quickly melted away. Even so, Nick couldn’t help being impressed. Not that Doug had managed to set up the lab to run itself—in his opinion something like that would be easy for someone with the sheep’s talents—but because he’d been clever enough to realize that if it hadn’t needed anyone to oversee it then Flip wouldn’t have any need to keep him around.

“Sounds like it’s better than the one you had working for—” he started, but Doug interrupted him.

“Listen, I don’t know what you want from me, but I’m not about to make small talk with anyone that works for that psycho.”

Nick splayed his ears for a moment and considered trying to press for more. It wasn’t like he had anything better to do while he waited. He certainly didn’t have anything to lose, but before he could think of how best to proceed Doug stretched out on the cot and rolled over so he was facing away. It would be difficult for the sheep to advertise his intent to ignore any attempt at conversation more clearly than that.

Still, the brief exchange hadn’t been entirely useless. In addition to confirming that Flip had managed to get ahold of Doug he had an idea of how Flip was processing the Nighthowlers. He’d need to get a look at that lab at some point to see if there was a way to break it. Fortunately breaking things was pretty easy even when he didn’t have a clue what he was doing. In fact it was probably even easier to break something while clueless, provided he didn’t need it to work again at some later time.

That could wait however. For now the best thing he could do was come up with a plan. Breaking the lab was a fine idea in theory, but it was also a great way to start raising suspicions. Best to hold off doing something like that until he was sure it was necessary.

His first priority needed to be getting word back to the ZPD so they would know where Flip’s home base was. There wasn’t a doubt in his mind that they would raid the place at the first opportunity. He just needed to point the way…and figure out how to do so when he didn’t know where he was.

But a raid wasn’t a sure thing. At worst they would shut this operation down and make a bunch of arrests, but there was a chance that Flip would slip away. How many problems that might cause depended on just who escaped with him. Someone like Conrad was made a decent stooge, but really wasn’t useful beyond acting as muscle. If Flip managed to escape with Doug however…well that would surely be bad. That would be priority number two: make sure Flip didn’t get away with Doug
no matter what.

How difficult it would be to make that happen was the real question. There was no doubt that the sheep disliked Flip. In many ways his current situation was probably worse than having landed in jail, but that said Doug would certainly prefer to avoid arrest if possible. The ideal situation would be to find someplace secure to keep the sheep away from Flip, but that wouldn’t be an easy task. If it came down to it his best option might actually be to let Doug go free, something that almost certainly wouldn’t make IA back off of him, but if there was no other choice…

“Those cuffs look uncomfortable,” Nick commented, nodding toward the sheep’s bindings. “They ever let you out of them?”

“And risk letting me run away? Yeah right.” Doug laughed bitterly and turned his head just enough to look back at Nick. “Pretty sure they got rid of the key, so you can drop the—”

The abrupt stop caught Nick by surprise. “Something wrong?”

“I know you.”

“I sold you Nighthowler bulbs once,” Nick lied.

Doug clearly wasn’t buying it. He was already pushing himself up and leaning in to get a better look. “No. You’re that fox that helped the bunny cop bust my operation. I saw your face on the news, back before Flip realized who I was.” He paused, expression darkening. “You’re the reason I’m stuck here!”

For a moment Nick considered denying the charge only to decide there probably wasn’t any point. If enough time passed then Doug was sure to find out anyway, just from overhearing things the other mammals working for Flip said.

“Yeah, that’s me,” he said, making a point of maintaining his relaxed posture. “Although to be fair I think the reason you are here has more to do with your trusting your safety to a psychopath like Flip. What were you thinking letting a predator handle your escape plan? After everything you did to hurt them you really expected him to just let you go?”

“Like I could have planned for Bellwether to mess everything up by running her mouth,” Doug said, then heaved a sigh and settled back onto his cot. He rubbed a hand through the wool on his head, then frowned and looked down at his closely shaved arms. “The whole world is just upside down.”

For a moment Nick was almost able to forget what Doug had done; what he was still doing in a way. It passed quickly, but in its wake it was difficult not to see the sheep as the miserable creature he was. To Nick’s surprise he actually came close to pitying the other mammal, and began to wonder what would cause someone to do the things Doug had. He wondered if he might find the reason uncomfortably familiar.

Seeing as Doug had apparently turned back in on himself Nick was left alone to probe that question in his mind. With everything the former yarn-ball had managed to accomplish it was actually rather surprising that he wasn’t doing anything more productive with his life. It was difficult not to wonder what had happened to lead him down this route instead. That sort of hate wasn’t the type of thing a mammal was born with, Nick knew. It was either learned, or it was taught. He himself hadn’t disliked prey before his encounter with the junior ranger scouts, and the little he knew about Flip’s history told him the other fox had experienced something similar.

A chill ran through him as a question struck him. Why hadn’t he been pushed over the edge like
these two? It was all too easy to imagine himself attempting to do the same thing Flip was. Was it because his parents had simply done a better job? That seemed like a bit of a stretch, considering he’d lived his life as a petty hustler for so long.

He didn’t manage to make it much further than that. Without any warning the door to the room reopened and a large wolf hauled him out by his scruff before marching him without ceremony back to one of the side rooms to see Flip once more. When they arrived the other fox was clearly preoccupied with his thoughts, sitting silently at a table and looking down at his gun. When Nick was shoved in front of him he seemed to snap out of it and stood up, his chair scraping noisily across the floor.

“So Nicky, I’ve looked into everything you’ve told me and lucky for you most of it checks out,” he said, his head tilting to one side. “Everything but that story about the informant. You wouldn’t lie to me, would you?”

Absolutely. “I don’t make a habit of lying to anyone when they’ve got a gun pointed at me.”

“Prove it,” Flip said. “Tell me who this informant is. I can’t have anyone squealing to the cops, not now. You give him to me and I’ll consider us square.”

Nick felt his mind begin to race and bit his tongue lightly, then decided it was time to take a gamble. “I can’t.”

Before the words had even left his mouth Flip had the pistol pointed directly at Nick’s nose. He shrunk back, staring at the gun’s muzzle, half expecting to be shot as he frantically continued talking.

“It isn’t that I don’t want to! I swear if I knew who it was I would’ve already told you. You scare me to death,” he said, feeling as if his skin was about to leap from his body. “I’m just a beat cop. They don’t let us handle that sort of stuff. I just know he exists, that’s all.”

“Well that’s really a shame, because I’ve had a bit of time to think and just happened to remember that part of the way you managed to get rid of me last time was by making me think everyone was working against me,” Flip said calmly. “I want to believe you, Nicky. I really do, but we both know I just can’t trust you. Unless you can prove that you’re telling the truth…”

Before, when he’d been younger, the implied threat might have made him wet himself. As it was Nick merely had trouble stopping himself from running his mouth without thinking first. He didn’t even bother trying to hide his fear. Mammals like Flip enjoyed knowing others were afraid. They made the mistake of equating it to respect.

“I don’t know who he is,” Nick repeated, holding up his hands to keep the other fox calm. “But I bet I can find out. Just let me call my partner. She still has computer access and the chief likes her. She’ll be able to look it up.”

“Why would she help you after tossing you over to IA?” Flip asked, just a touch of a growl in his voice.

“Why are you so sure she did? I’m willing to bet that she cares for me enough to do a favor without asking why,” Nick said, then leaned in closer. “It isn’t like you have anything to lose. If she isn’t it means that you were right about her, and you’ll have the perfect excuse to shoot me. From the way you’re holding that gun I know you’re itching to do it. What does it matter if you have to wait a little longer?”
To those on the outside the ZPD’s first precinct seemed to be dealing with business as normal, but as the day wore on Judy and the other officers that worked there became aware that changes were underway. There hadn’t been any grand announcement, and any mammals who actually knew what was going on were keeping quiet about it, so there wasn’t any gossip or water cooler talk. The change was more subtle. Something in the air that set the wolves on edge. The way Clawhauser’s usual cheeriness seemed to have diminished. Officers began to give the mammals from IA glares when they thought it wouldn’t be noticed. And storm clouds may have well been following Chief Bogo everywhere he went as he was clearly angry about something his superiors were trying to push.

That last one was what had really gotten Judy’s attention. The hostility to IA could easily be explained by the way Nick was being treated. As Fangmeyer had put it, Nick might not have been the most popular officer, but nobody had a definite reason to dislike him and he was still one of the pack. And as for Clawhauser…well, every mammal had off days. But the chief was rarely ever angry. He was frequently stressed, annoyed, disappointed, and even out of patience, but true anger was rare to behold.

And that was before Judy had learned about Lieutenant (now captain) Uncia’s promotion. Judy would have thought the snow leopard would be pleased by the development, but instead the feline had been complaining from the moment she found out. Apparently the Chief had insisted upon it, given the expanded resources at her disposal and the looming importance of her case. From the sound of it Uncia had protested until Bogo had explained that she had two choices: accept the promotion, or hand the case over to someone with more seniority and head back to Tundra Town. Apparently Uncia wasn’t willing to let go of Flip after what he’d done on her watch, so she’d grudgingly accepted the promotion, thereby effectively locking herself into Precinct One’s command structure as a result.

Despite all of that Judy found herself continuing to work on locating Flip’s hideout. By some measures they were making an impressive amount of progress. The ZPD had been sending officers to investigate locations on their short list all day and were quickly eating their way through it. At the current rate they would be through it all by tomorrow, and able to start looking at other locations. The problem was there was only one measure of progress that actually mattered in any real sense: arresting Flip. That had, obviously, yet to happen.

Meanwhile Judy, along with Snarlof, and Wolford were busy trying to expand their search to cover the entire county. At some point Francine, Lowell, and McHorn got added to the team shortly after Uncia’s promotion as well. The added bodies made it easier to cover more ground, but there was still an unexpected problem they found themselves contending with: when Zootopia’s city government had absorbed the county it had created a mess on the record keeping side of things, one which had been left to languish as nobody had seen any pressing need to update the information.

Gaining legal access wasn’t an issue, Captain Uncia was now able to give all her requests a level of priority that previously would have needed Chief Bogo’s approval so things progressed remarkably smoothly on that front. Instead it was a matter of confusion as some of the manufacturers would then turn over records for the city rather than the county. Other times they would issue a refusal, mistakenly believing that the city government had no right to records regarding the county without first going through a higher court. Worst of all were the times that they got a response that the records no longer existed. That they had been purged following disbandment of the county government.

Judy still threw herself at what they did manage to find, using work to bury her worries until the day ended. There were large gaps in the records they had managed to secure thus far, but thankfully the
picture was looking less overwhelming than the city proper. The county police would easily be able to handle things on their own, and would in fact probably clear everything long before the ZPD had finished sweeping the city. She tried not to think about what it would mean if nothing was—

Her concentration was broken by the sharp vibration of her phone, followed shortly by musical chimes. She immediately pulled it out, fearing that perhaps her parents had seen the newspapers and that she would find herself in an extremely uncomfortable situation, but when she looked at the screen she was met with the image of Nick’s teasing grin. All at once she felt as if something had squeezed her heart, a brief flare of annoyance that he was calling while she was at work after having ignored her all through yesterday and into this morning. Relief swept that away almost immediately and she quickly answered the phone.

“Hey there Judy, how are you doing?” Nick said the moment they were connected, the words rolling over her before she could even say hello. “I was wondering if you could do me a couple favors, if it isn’t too much to ask. When are you headed back to Podunk to see your folks? I was wondering if you could bring back some cherries for me.”

The request, along with the tone of Nick’s voice, caught her unprepared. “Cherries?”

“Mmmhmm, like you brought back last time,” Nick continued. “They’re much better than the stuff I can buy in the store.”

Judy’s mind reeled and she stared at the phone, her ears tilted back slightly. Her first thought was that her family didn’t grow cherries, but quick on its heels was the realization that even if it did Nick wouldn’t eat them. They had red juice and he didn’t want something like that staining his fur. He wanted blueberries.

In fact, everything coming out of Nick’s mouth just sounded wrong. She recognized that tone of voice, the one he used when he was trying to manipulate someone, although usually he wasn’t so blatant about it. And he knew she grew up in Bunny Burrow, not Podunk. He hadn’t called her Carrots or Fluff or any of the usual nicknames he favored. He hadn’t even apologized for blowing her off.

Something is wrong.

“You still there?”

“Oh, yeah, I was just surprised you called to ask for cherries,” she said, feeling her face burn as everyone else in the room began to take note of the conversation. “I don’t know when I’m going to be visiting again. Sorry.”

“Shame. I’d head out there myself, but we both know your parents want to skin me alive.”

Wrong, wrong, wrong, Judy thought, pressing her lips together. It was like he was trying—

“Well they are the reason I was carrying that fox taser when we met,” she ventured, feeling a tingle at the base of her skull when Nick laughed.

“In any case, the second favor is a bit more of a stretch, but I was wondering if you could maybe look something up for me,” Nick said.

That drew quite a few shocked looks from the room. Even Uncia seemed to be paying attention now. Judy cringed a little bit, bending over her phone slightly.

“Like what? You know I’m not supposed to do that,” she said, lowering her voice. “You’ve been
“Yeah, but with all that’s been going on with Flip I had an idea. You remember that informant that’s been giving us all our information?” There was a poignant pause. “You know the one. After Flip nabbed me the first time I managed to convince Lieutenant Uncia that he’d been the one to get Mr. Big to call my phone. If you could find out anything about him I’ll bet we can trace him back to Flip.”

Judy stammered, shocked by the sheer number of regulations Nick was just casually asking her to violate even though he was asking for information that simply didn’t exist. Uncia’s expression had darkened noticeably and the other officers were looking away now.

“Look, if you can’t manage it I’ll understand, but just give it a try okay? We should really move on this now before Flip realizes he has a leak and shoots the guy,” Nick said casually. “But I should get going. Call me tomorrow and tell me what you find, okay?”

Before Judy could say anything Nick hung up. She stared at the phone, her mind racing as she tried to put the odd conversation together.

“Captain? Nick might be in trouble.”

“Thank you Officer Hopps, but I figured that out for myself when he started asking for case details that don’t exist,” the snow leopard said. There was just a hint of a growl to her voice. “Wolford, please swing by Nick’s place to make sure he hasn’t just lost his mind.”

“He won’t be there,” Judy said. She looked up at Uncia, feeling strangely disconnected from her body. “Everything he said during that call, every single thing, was wrong except—” Her ears came up. “Ma’am, Nick said ‘the first time’ Flip got him. I-I think Nick’s been kidnapped again.”
Tracing the location of Nick’s phone was simple enough in theory. Captain Uncia easily compelled the cell provider to provide the records, in part thanks to her ability to expedite requests to the court as a result of her promotion. Barely an hour later and they had a list of every tower Nick’s phone had pinged in the past day.

By then Wolford had already confirmed that Nick wasn’t in his apartment. More worryingly, he had discovered some mild blood spatter on the wall along with the scent of a second fox. Frustratingly none of the other residents could corroborate the findings. Yes a number reported seeing a fox, but none of them had thought that was unusual as Nick lived there. They’d simply assumed it was him or someone he knew (which, Judy supposed, was technically correct). And as far as any struggle, nobody could recall hearing anything like that at all.

They didn’t have to however. At roughly 1PM Nick’s phone started moving north before heading west out of the city. Two hours later, roughly half an hour before Nick had called her, the movement stopped out in the middle of nowhere.

And therein lay the problem. Cell phones connected to the closest tower possible, both to maintain a strong signal and conserve battery life by reducing the power required by the internal antenna. In cities, filled with electronic interference and buildings, that made it easy to pinpoint an individual’s location fairly accurately. No more than a few blocks, thanks to the numerous towers and repeaters the companies used to ensure total coverage.

The country was a different scenario altogether. Out there it was simply more economical to just build a single tower that would cover everything for miles. In this case, 13 miles in any direction. That didn’t seem like very much until you did the math and realized it covered over 500 square miles of territory. Far too much to search without tipping off Flip that they were on to him.

Naturally they attempted to narrow it down by cross-referencing the area with their list of industrial boilers out in the country. That failed almost immediately, though there was no way to be sure if that was because there was a gap in their records or because there wasn’t anyone out that way with an industrial boiler.

But Nick was out there somewhere waiting for help, so Judy had pulled out a map and drawn a circle around the area covered by the cell tower, then began to comb over every inch of it in the hopes that she’d find something that clicked.

It was slow going, mostly because everything she came across needed to be looked up just so she could know what she’d found. Then, because of the gaps in their records, she needed to look up what was done at the site—if anything—and check if the process used an industrial boiler at any point.


One by one she ruled them all out, her ears beginning to wilt as the hours dragged on and the sun began to set. She stared at her latest find, willing her eyes to maintain focus as she looked up the business name: Silver Moon LLC. A quick Zoogle search later and she had her answer. A microbrewery.

With a groan, she pushed the map away and rubbed her face as frustration began to set in once more.
How much time had passed? Two hours? Three? Her stomach protested as she realized that she’d missed her usual dinner time and contemplated grabbing something quick before continuing.

But just as she was about to get up something tickled in the back of her mind. Alcohol. Beer. Liquor. Booze. Why did that seem relevant?

She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, thinking back on the case. What did Nighthowlers have to do with alcohol? Flip hadn’t spiked beverages, only deserts. Ones favored almost exclusively by prey. There wasn’t anything connecting him to—

Then she remembered. The very first stakeout where Nick had gone into the warehouse himself. That was what they were smuggling. Alcohol. He’d said it was the sort of thing a new operation tended to deal in to prove the route was secure. Even after they’d realized the whole operation was being run by Flip they’d simply assumed he was smuggling alcohol in for a 3rd party. But what if that wasn’t the case? What if there was a supplier connected to Flip?

She went back to the company’s website, but beyond the main landing there was only an “About Us” page that contained contact information. Back to Zoogle, this time checking other links. A stub page on a community wiki. A forum thread containing a list of every microbrewery in the greater Zootopia municipal area. An article with a review of different brews from the company as well as a behind the scenes look on their process.

That one caught her eye. She clicked it, then did a quick page search. The word boiler didn’t turn up. Her hopes fell, but then she found herself wondering if an article intended for beer and wine enthusiasts would even bother mentioning such a detail. What could a brewery use a boiler for anyway? She thought back to her research into them, then searched the page for another term: sterilize.

*Key to Silver Moon’s quality is their commitment to producing a clean product. Every drop of water the brewery uses is treated to remove impurities, then superheated to sterilize—*

Superheated. That required keeping the water under pressure, and that required a boiler. This was it. It had to be.

“Captain?” she said, surprised by how small her voice sounded. She swallowed, then spoke up again. “Captain, I think I found it.”

One key to survival Nick had learned early in life was to never let others set a deadline for him if it was possible to do so himself. When he’d called Judy there was little doubt that Flip expected to have things decided by the time he hung up. He could’ve stretched the conversation out a bit, perhaps even a full half hour if he was willing to make the other fox upset, but by simply asking Judy to call him back with the information tomorrow he’d bought far more time for himself with much less effort. He’d also put Flip on the spot. Now he couldn’t say Nick wasn’t holding up his end of the bargain. It was just going to take a little longer than expected, and what difference did twelve hours make anyway?

Which left Flip with a very real problem: what to do with Nick. That led almost immediately to Nick’s second survival lesson. He’d immediately suggested that they simply lock him up with Doug until tomorrow. It was the perfect solution. They would know where he was and he wouldn’t be able
to cause any problems. Only a funny thing tended to happen when a captive made suggestions. For some reason the jailers always assumed there were ulterior motives, even when the advice seemed perfectly sound.

*Especially* when the advice seemed perfectly sound. In this case Flip apparently worried that he would convince Doug to make a mess of the lab the next time he was let out to tweak the equipment, so while locking him away with Doug would keep him from escaping or causing problems Flip very quickly decided that was the last place he wanted Nick. Instead Conrad was ordered to keep an eye on him.

That was perfectly fine by Nick. The wildcat was smart enough to keep him from getting away with any shenanigans, but Nick wasn’t about to cause problems. Not until he knew what sort of problems he could cause anyway. So he meandered his way through the building Flip had apparently claimed for his operation, keeping an eye out for ways he could sow chaos.

The first thing to come to mind was the growing beds. Destroying those, or rather the plants in them, would be a great way to set Flip back by weeks at least. He quickly discarded that notion though. There were simply too many of them. Even if he wasn’t being watched he would only be able to deal with three or four before someone noticed and stopped him. Not nearly enough to make any difference.

There were tools out among the growing boxes however. Mostly trowels and pruning shears. He contemplated grabbing one for use as an improvised weapon, then discarded the notion and set his sights on something more important.

“Hey, is he supposed to be doing that?” Nick pointed to a wolf on the far side of the room.

“Doing what?” Conrad asked, his ears folded back as he looked.

Nick quickly palmed a small screwdriver while the wildcat was distracted. “Ah, never mind. Thought he was on the phone, but he was just scratching his ear.”

Conrad glared at him, his ears folded back. “Don’t mess with me fox. I know all about your kind. I don’t know what you’re up to, but if I see anything funny I’m not gonna hesitate to sheathe my claws in your flesh.”

“My mistake, sorry,” he said and made a show of stuffing his hands in his pockets. He dropped the screwdriver there. “I’m just looking around. I won’t even touch anything.”

The wildcat gave him a skeptical look and pointedly curled his claws out before he finally eased off again. Nick kept his hands in his pockets as he considered what to do next. Pushing Conrad too much clearly wasn’t going to be a winning proposition so he needed to tread more carefully for now.

He let another fifteen minutes pass before he began to wander through the building again. This time he let his path take him out of what he’d decided was the “growing area” and headed down the hall as if he just felt the urge to walk. A half-dozen doors met him. Most were shut, but he made sure his path brought him past the ones that were left open so he could peek inside. Nothing fancy. Just storage.

Just as he was about to turn back someone walked out of one of the rooms and he got a glimpse of lab equipment. His ears went up and he started toward the door, his tail swishing. “Hey, what’s in here? Looks interesting.”

Conrad was on him in an instant, pulling him away. “You aren’t allowed back there!”
Claws dug into his arm to drive that point home and Nick let himself be pulled away, wincing dramatically in order to play to Conrad’s ego. He’d already seen everything he needed anyway. A dizzying array of beakers and tubing and hot plates that looked like they’d been cobbled together out of high school chemistry supplies, all hooked into a system that fed into some sort of massive hot water boiler. Clearly this was the lab that Doug had set up. He’d only gotten a glimpse really, not nearly enough to understand how it worked, but it had been enough for him to start having ideas on how to shut the thing down.

Luck. More than brains, more than brawn, more than money. The best boon a mammal can have is to be born lucky.

That was his father’s favorite saying, and Nick had never before appreciated it quite as much as he did right then after he’d noticed the faint beat of a helicopter’s blades. Not because of the helicopter itself, that was purely coincidental, but because when he turned to look out the window at the night sky he’d moved just before an earsplitting crack reverberated through the growing room.

A bullet slammed into the cinder-block wall, passing through the space his head had occupied just a second before. The shock of the moment seemed to shove him out of his own body. He felt his training take over as he dove to the ground and scampered a dozen paces, passing between a pair of growing boxes before he dared to push himself back up. Flip was already lining up another shot.

“What the heck is wrong with you?” he shouted, throwing himself back to the floor just in time to avoid another bullet.

“Why the hell did an entire convoy of black vans just turn onto the road leading to my hideout Nicky?”

Nick was crawling again, moving to keep as many planter boxes between himself and Flip as possible. He checked his path to make sure nobody was moving to intercept him, but the few other mammals in the room had been just as surprised by the gunshot as he had and found cover as well. Conrad had actually jumped in the opposite direction. That didn’t leave much time.

“There’s a perfectly reasonable explanation, I assure you,” he called out, still scrambling across the floor. His eyes were fixated on the door to Doug’s room.

Two more gunshots rang out. Nick could practically feel them buzzing over him. One struck something hard and ricocheted, buzzing away like the angriest bee he’d ever heard until it struck the far wall and went silent.

“You seriously expect me to believe anything you say now?” Flip asked.

He reached the door, then checked the handle. Locked. But then he’d expected that. Flip couldn’t just risk letting Doug walk out, now could he? With his other hand he retrieved the screwdriver from his pocket.

“Maybe?”

Flip fired again, but thankfully the shot was rushed and the bullet struck the wall just beside the door frame. Still much too close for comfort.
Before the other fox could correct his aim Nick slammed the screwdriver’s steel tip against the lock, driving it into the keyhole and deforming the softer brass. He then threw his weight against the handle and snapped the tool, leaving the tip wedged in place. Goal number one down, keep Flip from escaping with Doug. It wasn’t a permanent solution, but getting that door open again was going to take time.

He took off running again. Two more bullets chased him; thankfully both flew wide as he made for the side hallway. A wolf moved to block his path, then abruptly reconsidered the wisdom of getting too close as Flip fired yet again. With not a moment to spare Nick threw himself into the hall and slammed the door shut behind him just as another three shots rang out.

How many times had Flip fired? From the way his ears hurt it had to be at least half a dozen. Eight? Nine? Ten? The rush of panic fueled energy muddled his memory so the individual gunshots seemed to blur together.

More importantly, how many could there be left? He tried to remember his training as he tried to catch his breath. His academy instructor had said it depended on the make of the firearm and the round it carried, and had then thrown out different numbers. Five, Six, Eight. All those seemed far too low, given how liberally Flip was pulling the trigger. There were some handguns that carried more though. Twelve. Even eighteen.

He really hoped the answer wasn’t eighteen. That seemed like far, far too many.

But there wasn’t anything he could do about that right now. He took a deep breath and ran for the lab, reaching it just as someone worked up the nerve to come after him. No lock on this door, he noted darkly. Probably didn’t want to risk giving Doug a chance to lock himself in with all the chemicals unsupervised. There was a chair however, and Nick used that to barricade the door.

His first thought was to simply sweep all of the lab equipment onto the floor, but he quickly realized that doing so would result in him being covered in whatever chemicals were cooked here. Accidentally making himself go savage didn’t sound like a very good plan.

The whole mess was connected in to that massive boiler however. The boiler fed into an enclosed reservoir which then branched off into a series of tubes carrying hot water to different points in the apparatus. Nick didn’t have the slightest clue what any of it did, but if the lab needed that much hot water then the easiest way to shut the whole thing down would be to simply make sure it couldn’t get any. So much the better that he could do that without exposing himself to anything dangerous.

Someone tried to open the door, and he heard Conrad growling orders on the other side. He needed to act quickly before they got through. That chair wasn’t going to hold out for long.

A firm yank pulled all the tubes free of the reservoir, which then began to spray scalding water and steam into the room. He only just avoided getting burned, sheepishly realizing that he probably should have shut off the water flow before doing that. On the outflow pipe he found a small lever with a green rubber handle. Twisting that ninety degrees corrected his mistake, although the room was already practically filled with vapor.

“What are you doing in there, fox?” Conrad demanded. “If you’re touching anything I swear we’re going to break every bone in your body before Flip puts a bullet through you.”

Nick sincerely hoped that was an exaggeration, and wondered if perhaps he should start looking for some way to escape, but somehow he doubted that turning the water off was going to inconvenience Flip enough to ruin this batch of Nighthowler toxin. He needed to figure out some way to keep them from just setting the thing back up. Out of desperation he began to search for some easy way to break
the boiler itself. What he found instead was a bunch of text topped by the word “WARNING” in bold, red letters:

Safety Pressure Valve. Stay clear, may emit superheated steam. Do not seal or the boiler may suffer a catastrophic failure—

That sounded perfect. Plug that and the thing was likely to burst a seam, and good luck getting it fixed or replaced on short notice. All he had was the now ruined screwdriver though. He stared at the stubby metal shaft that poked out of the handle and the jagged end on its tip, then shrugged. It had been good enough to jam a lock, so why not this as well? He lined it up carefully and then threw his weight behind the handle, snarling as heard the sound of metal grinding against metal. Twice more he pushed against it, each time burying the tool a little deeper until at last it refused to go any deeper.

No sooner had he finished than the door practically exploded open, followed by a pair of wolves and Conrad. Nick immediately ran to the far side of the room, thinking that perhaps he could run around them. Conrad was quicker though and quickly headed him off, trapping him in the corner as the two wolves began to close in.

Nick looked from one mammal to the next, his ears beginning to fold back. “Hey, come on guys, you got me alright? Why don’t we all just calm down and—”

Conrad punched him in the face, knocking him to the ground. Nick shook his head, only dimly aware that the yelp he’d heard was his. Why? Why did they always want to hit him in the face? That was twice in less than a day. And now he was on the ground. That was never a good sign. He pushed himself up, doing his best to ignore the pain in his temple.

“The ZPD is going to be here any moment,” he growled, looking directly at the two wolves. “You should be running away before they show up and arrest everyone.”

The pair of canids stopped in place, but Conrad wasn’t about to have any of it. He swung again, this time with his claws extended. Only now Nick was expecting it and caught the wildcat’s arm. He then shifted his grip, taking hold of Conrad’s thumb and bent it back, drawing out a hiss. His freehand knocked the inside of the elbow, collapsing the joint so he could twist the hand behind Conrad.

“Go on, puppies. Do the smart thing and go while the getting’s good,” he said, trying to stay out of range of the wildcat’s other hand.

“Try to walk out and I guarantee Flip will have both of you killed or worse,” Conrad warned them.

Nick growled. “Quiet you. Flip is going to prison for a very long time.”

Before Conrad could say anything else a low groan sounded out, drawing everyone’s attention to the boiler. Then came a pop, and a bulge appeared on the side. Nick had just enough time to wonder if maybe he’d miscalculated when a concussion picked him up and threw him through the air, slamming his body against the wall.

Judy sat quietly in the back of the ZPD response van—affectionately referred to as a party wagon by officers on the force—and tried not to feel dwarfed by the mega-fauna surrounding her. Nearly every rhino, bear, hippo, and elephant on the force had been called up for the raid after the county police
had confirmed they couldn’t gather enough mammals quickly enough to respond to the threat. Captain Uncia and Chief Bogo had thrown the op together in less than an hour and were probably still trying to plan things out during the drive over.

She hadn’t been invited, but had somehow managed to slip onto the last van out anyway by claiming she was going as an observer and to help advise on how Flip was likely to react. Nobody had thought to ask why she wasn’t in the first vehicle with Uncia, so apparently her excuse had passed muster. That or everyone was willing to look the other way. It didn’t stop McHorn from giving her a critical look from time to time, no doubt noting that she was the only one present not in full riot kit and that she was still wearing her arm brace.

Technically she wasn’t disobeying orders. Neither Chief Bogo nor Captain Uncia had told her she couldn’t come. Of course she hadn’t asked either, but then it was always easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. Nick had taught her that one.

When the van made a turn onto a dirt road she knew they must be getting close. The other mammals in the van began nervously checking their equipment, making sure their body armor was secure and their tranq guns were loaded. Judy followed their lead, although she only had the taser on her belt, a few extra cartridges, and her regular duty vest.

*Not like it will matter,* she thought. *With this much muscle anything we run into is just going to be flattened.*

Her tail quivered as she thought about that, surprised that being forced to watch frustrated her even though she was only there to see Nick once they rescued him. She couldn’t allow herself to get involved in the assault itself. The ZPD’s regulations were clear on that. He was her partner, her friend, and even more. By definition she was too involved to participate in the rescue.

So when the van finally pulled to a stop she lingered inside, waiting to let the larger mammals off first while she struggled with an unexpected rush of embarrassment. Why was she even there? Did she really expect to have a chance to run to Nick’s rescue? No answers came to her.

She heaved a sigh and jumped out of the back. Too late to have second thoughts now. All she could do was watch and wait, and hope that the Chief wasn’t too upset when she got back to the precinct.

An explosion made her dive behind one of the van’s tires for cover. Every muscle in her body went ridged when she saw an entire section of the building’s roof had been blown clear off. Seconds later debris rained down as Uncia began to shout orders over the cries of the surprised officers.

But Judy could only stare at the building, trying to understand what she was seeing. All her thoughts focused on one thing: where was Nick? Was he okay? Surely he wasn’t dumb enough to stand next to an explosion. Without thinking she scrambled to her feet and ran for the building. From behind she heard several of the other officers shouting for her to wait. Seconds later Uncia called out for her to stop.

“Officer Hopps is running for the building,” someone reported over the radio.

There was a moment’s pause, followed by Bogo’s deep voice. “Officer Hopps, I know you can hear this. I order you to stand down until a bomb team arrives.”

The command almost made her miss a step. Mind racing, she reached for the radio at her belt. She considered refusing the order. Then she considered simply turning the thing off so she could pretend she’d never gotten it. Instead she keyed it and rubbed her fur over the mic as she spoke.
“Sir? What was that? There’s too much static.”

Bogo’s reply came back almost immediately. “For the love of—Captain Uncia, stop Officer Hopps before she gets herself killed! Tranq her if you have to!”

That got Judy’s attention. She very nearly stopped, looking over her shoulder at the other officers as she considered turning back. Then she heard two gunshots from inside. Ears back, she ran harder. With every step she expected to feel a dart take her in the back. Instead her radio came to life again, crackling with the sound of someone rubbing their fur against the mic.
White and heat. Ringing that refused to cease. Every breath choked with vapor so thick it hurt. For a
time Nick wondered if he’d been blown into some sort of hellish cloud. That was impossible though.
Clouds didn’t smell of blood (at least, he was pretty sure they didn’t), and his back was resting
against something hard.

The white cleared and he found himself looking up at the night sky. The sheer number of stars
amazed him. He couldn’t remember having seen so many before; the city lights always drowned
them out. When the boiler exploded he’d hit the wall, he remembered. Had he been blown through it
and landed outside?

Then he noticed the tattered remains of the roof. By what was left, it looked like the whole thing had
simply been ripped off by an angry giant. As his mind finally began to get a handle on the situation
he looked to his sides and saw that the walls were cracked in several places. Even the concrete floor
had a large fissure running through it. He tried not to think about how much worse the damage
would have been if the roof hadn’t been blown off.

Every joint in his body ached just at the thought of moving, and he could feel a massive tender spot
between his shoulder blades where he’d hit the wall. Given that he’d just been blown up he felt
remarkably good, beyond the pain in his ears and that continued ringing. If he hated to think about
just how much worse it would have been if he hadn’t been behind Conrad at that moment.

With that thought he finally checked the area around him, then froze when he found the wildcat
crumpled a short distance away. His body was a spider web of cuts, some of them quite deep, and
the sheer amount of blood soaked into the mammal’s fur made him think the feline was dead.
 Gingerly, Nick moved closer to check for a pulse, then felt an immediate wave of relief. Just to be
safe he checked on the wolves as well, then staggered to his feet.

The entire lab was gone, though that probably shouldn’t have surprised him. Shards of glass covered
the floor near the walls where the beakers and flasks had been shattered, having coated the walls
with whatever chemical cocktails they’d contained. As Nick surveyed the destruction he couldn’t
help feeling an odd measure of pride. He would’ve never believed he had it in him.

Goal two: shut down the lab. Check.

He started to the door, or more correctly toward where the door had been as there was now only a
hole where it had once stood. He took care to watch where he placed his feet. How stupid would it
be to survive an explosion just to go savage after stepping on a piece of glass coated in Nighthowler
toxin? Besides, taking his time had its benefits. His body was beginning to sort itself out. With each
step the ache in his joints became just a little more tolerable, and the ringing in his ears had subsided
enough that some of his hearing was starting return.

Just as he was about to make it to the hallway Flip stepped in front of him, one eye twitching as he
took in what remained of his lab. Nick’s body froze, his eyes following the pistol as it swung to point
at him. He knew he ought to jump behind cover, or dodge, or anything really, but when he tried to
gather himself to do so his body simply refused.

“It’s over, Flip. I’m sure the ZPD has the place surrounded by now. The best thing you can do is—”

BANG!
The bullet caught him square in the sternum, the shock of it driving all the air from his lungs as he was distinctly aware of a violent shatter. He didn’t even have time to fully process that he’d been shot before Flip pulled the trigger again. The second round hit higher and a bit to the right near the top of his chest. Pain erupted across his entire torso as he fell to the ground. His thoughts swam as he struggled to breathe again. Through it all Flip didn’t say a word. He sneered briefly, then turned away.

As the other fox left Nick got one last glimpse at the pistol. Its slide was locked back. Empty. His ears folded at how unfair it was that he had gotten so close. Just two more. Then he noticed the other fox reach into his pocket and heard the sound of something metal hitting the concrete floor.

Judy ran past a surprising number of mammals (mostly wolves, although she also noted a badger, a weasel, and a cougar) on her way to the building, every one of which was headed in the opposite direction in an effort to escape the building which had just exploded. Her first instinct was to reach for her taser in case any of them attempted to stop her, but they all gave her a wide berth so she let them go. The other officers could handle them easily enough and she had other worries.

She paused by the now ajar front door to peek inside rather than simply barging in and was rewarded with a perfect, panoramic view of pitch blackness. That was an exaggeration of course, light cast from the headlights of the police vans parked outside leaked in through the door. Just enough for her to see the interior had been converted into a Nighthowler growing operation, but the light quickly fell off leaving her with only the vaguest idea of the room’s size and layout. That it was dark inside wasn’t a terrible surprise—something had just exploded so it stood to reason that the electricity had been knocked out—but she wasn’t prepared for just how impenetrable it was.

An anxious shiver traveled down her spine before she took a deep breath and tilted her ears determinedly forward, reaching for her flashlight as she stepped inside. The radio crackled to life again as the other officers started to give reports, nearly making her jump out of her skin. She immediately turned the volume down to the lowest level, so quiet that even her sensitive ears could barely hear it. Right now she needed to be aware of her surroundings, not distracted by every transmission that went out.

The narrow beam of her flashlight swept across the room while she watched for any sign of movement. From what she could see nobody else was there with her though. Had everyone else bailed after what had happened?

It was actually a fairly large space, there were probably at least a hundred growing boxes arranged in neat rows on the floor. She tried counting them, but stopped after she reached two dozen and realized that she hadn’t even covered a quarter of the room yet. There would be time to worry about evidence later. Right now she needed to find Nick.

A metallic clatter came from the left, drawing her attention to a doorway. Every muscle in her body went tense and she swung her flashlight to the source, only to find a door. Had something just fallen over? No, that didn’t make any sense. After that explosion anything loose would already be on the ground. Someone must’ve knocked something over on the other side of the door.

She hurried over to check, but before she even made it eight steps the door swung open and she found herself looking at Flip. His eyes immediately found her and his expression twisted into something halfway between a snarl and a smile. Her ears went back and she jumped away, bringing
up her taser as he raised his arm and pointed his gun at her.

“Maybe today isn’t that bad after all,” he said calmly. His tongue licked out over his pointed teeth. “Look at you, Officer Bunny. You’re still pretty quick. I assumed that arm would slow you down.”

“Drop the gun. The whole building is surrounded, you aren’t getting out of here,” she told him.

He sneered at her and took a step forward. Judy tightened her grip on the taser and tilted her ears back.

“Don’t move or I’ll fire,” she said.

Flip merely chuckled. “Fine by me. Let’s trade and see who comes out worse,” he said, then tilted his head to one side. “Or you can try to escape like a proper bunny should. It won’t change anything. I’ve got twelve little friends, and they can all run faster than you.”

Judy could practically feel that threat hanging over her as she stared at the dark gun barrel, her heart beginning to pound so fast she couldn’t even count the individual beats. She considered taking her chances anyway, but the memory of that rabbit effigy and the clean holes through her old duty vest flashed before her eyes. If she gambled and missed she would need to reload, while Flip merely had to pull the trigger again. She really couldn’t afford to miss.

And if Flip actually hit her on that shot it wouldn’t matter if she got him or not. Eventually her taser would stop delivering a shock and Flip would be fine. Recovering from a bullet wound however… that took significantly longer. Her safest bet was to get behind hard cover and try to distract Flip until the other officers arrived. Even that wasn’t without its risks. Slipping up could easily end with her seriously injured or worse, but Flip only needed to get lucky once.

*He wants me to run,* she thought as she met his gaze, refusing to shy away from the predatory gleam there. *He wants to make it a game—no, an old fashion hunt—to prove he is better than me.*

“See? Now you’re beginning to understand,” Flip said, his fur beginning to bristle. “Run away little bunny.”

Judy’s ears folded back. Her nose was twitching she realized, every muscle in her body coiled tightly. She quickly considered her options, then made her move.

With a slight flick of her wrist she brought the beam of her flashlight directly over Flip’s face, then immediately jumped to the right while he snarled in surprise. Flip’s pistol let out a pair of sharp cracks, belching two bullets in her direction, but his temporary blindness ruined his aim and she heard both rounds strike something hard on the far side of the room. A second later she turned the flashlight off as she dove behind one of the planter boxes and began crawling as fast as she dared.

She wasn’t sure how powerful the bullets in Flip’s gun were. If they really were armor piercing then there was a good chance they could blow right through the wooden construction of the planter boxes. The dirt they contained was another matter however. As long as she kept at least one between herself and Flip she should be fine.

Actually managing to do so was the hard part. Without her flashlight she could barely see several feet and she didn’t dare turn it back on for fear of giving her position away. To make matters worse, her arm brace meant she couldn’t crawl too fast without making noise. Unfortunately she couldn’t stay where she was, Flip had probably been able to see well enough to notice which direction she’d been moving, and if she moved too slowly there was a real danger that Flip would simply walk up on her.

How sensitive were a Fox’s ears? She didn’t actually know. As far as she knew they were above the
average of most mammals, but definitely not as sensitive as a bunny’s. That she often heard things
Nick couldn’t testified to that fact, but she hadn’t ever tried to quantify the difference. She’d never
thought it would matter.

And to make matters worse she couldn’t hear anything. Was Flip still standing where she’d last seen
him by that door, patiently waiting for her to poke her head up high enough for him to shoot? She
shook her head at that wishful thinking. Nick could move around without making any noise, couldn’t
he? Why would she think Flip was any different?

Judy closed her eyes, they weren’t doing her much good anyway, and strained her ears as she
crawled along. The soft tap of her arm brace against the cement floor, so quiet she couldn’t hear it.
Leaves rustling outside. Distant murmur of animals talking in urgent tones. Even frantic patter of her
own heart. She scrunched her face in frustration and tried to focus harder. Straining…straining…
straining…


She jumped as hard as she could, sending herself flying to the left this time, and winced as another
gunshot pierced the silence. Because she hadn’t had time to judge her leap she landed harder than
usual and fell to all fours. A sharp ache sprang to life in her arm, telling her just how close she’d
come to breaking it again. Fortunately she’d landed in one of the growing beds and the soft soil had
cushioned her fall somewhat.

Without hesitation she rolled to the side and back down between the planter boxes as Flip fired
again. She crawled a short distance, gathering her strength. Then she pushed herself back up and
sprinted as hard as she could.

I’m up, she thought to herself, remembering her training. He sees me…and down!

Judy threw herself back to the ground just before another shot rang out. The bullet ripped through the
air just above where she’d been standing. There wasn’t time to contemplate just how close she’d cut
it though. She immediately began crawling again, putting several paces between herself and where
she’d gone down. Then back to her feet and running again.

I’m up…he sees me…and down!

Two bullets this time, accompanied by a frustrated growl. She couldn’t help grinning to herself at
that. Seven down, only five to go. Then she’d get to see how much Flip enjoyed hunting her without
a gun to hide behind.

I’m up…he sees me…and down!

Nothing. She blinked, surprised that Flip hadn’t taken a shot this time. Had he lost track of her? If so
then maybe now was a good time to swing around and try to get the drop on him.

That hope didn’t last very long.

“Impressive,” Flip laughed. “You’re a lot harder to shoot than your pet fox.”

Judy froze mid-crawl, her entire body feeling suddenly cold. He’s lying, she told herself. He has to
be lying…

“You should have seen the look on Nicky’s face when I did it. He really thought he was about to get
away,” Flip continued. “Put two in his chest right before I saw you. Just went down like a sack of
meat.”
Judy merely bit her lip to keep quiet, fighting back the stinging she felt in her eyes as she tried to focus all her attention on following the other fox’s voice. Flip was lying. He was lying. He was lying. But for some reason every word he said sucked just a little more warmth from her body.

“You know, now that I think about it he could still be saved if you got him to a hospital quickly enough,” Flip said. His voice began to move closer to that door. “Perhaps I should correct that little oversight while I still can.”

No!

Judy wasn’t stupid. She was perfectly aware that Flip was only trying to make her race him to the door so he’d have an easier shot. He wanted her to get back up, but she couldn’t risk that he was telling the truth either.

That didn’t mean she had to do what he wanted though. If he expected her to simply run for Nick the best thing to do was surprise him. Get close enough to take him down with her taser and cuff him. Then she could check on Nick.

After taking one final, deep breath, Judy jumped back to her feet. Instead of moving for the door she’d dodged to the left and brought up her taser, ready to charge Flip the moment her feet hit the floor—

Flip’s pistol was already trained on her. How? With barely any hesitation he fired. The muzzle flash dazzled her eyes for a moment as the bullet grazed her hip. It wasn’t bad. She could already tell that much, but the sudden flare of pain distracted her at the worst possible moment. Her feet weren’t positioned quite right when she landed, and in her desperate attempt to recover she ended up over-correcting. She barely managed to tuck into a roll to keep from hurting herself, but in the process she lost her grip on the taser and it went spinning off somewhere into the darkness. When she came to a stop Flip already had his gun trained on her once more.

“I knew it was true,” Flip said, a triumphant gleam in his eye.

As she stared at the gun Judy felt her mind yelling at her to get back up. To move. Jump behind something before Flip pulled the trigger.

But before she could do anything a frighteningly low rumble sounded out.

“Here, let me teach you something…”

Nick clung to consciousness, struggling to breathe as the dream was replaced by a single thought that dominated everything else: being shot hurt far more than he anticipated, not that he’d expected it to be pleasant. Maybe the fear that accompanied staring down the barrel of a gun had made him more sensitive to what came after, but even then the sheer agony he felt outstripped anything he’d experienced before.

Once he was sure Flip had left he slid his hand up his stomach, under his shirt and the vest it concealed. He felt around his sternum followed by his chest. With the intensity of the pain that radiated across his entire torso he was entirely numb to any other sensation. When he pulled his hand back and looked at it a sigh of relief escaped from his muzzle. No blood. His vest, and the added protection provided by the trauma plates, had done its job.
Which made it doubly unfair that he was in such agony. Some addled part of brain remembered a lecture at the Academy where the instructor had warned recruits that even a bullet stopped by a vest could cause a nasty injury. The projectile might not be able to punch a hole as designed, but all that energy still had to go somewhere. Trauma plates attempted to address that point, that was why they shattered by design when struck by a bullet, but a soft vest could only dissipate so much force.

But Flip had left, so it really didn’t matter anymore. Nick closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The best thing he could do was play dead. The rest of the ZPD had already arrived, and while Flip’s gun might give them a little trouble they were certainly capable of dealing with one crazed fox. Once they secured the building they would find him, and then he could get checked out by an EMT.

Thoughts drifted, twisting as if in a breeze, and he wondered if his being kidnapped would reflect poorly on his IA investigation. He could easily imagine Agent Forester would argue that he should have requested permission to be abducted prior to leaving his apartment, and clearly the fact that he’d been brought outside of the city indicated that he was a flight risk. A weak laugh escaped him which he almost immediately regretted as the pain in his torso flared.

_Can’t be that hurt if I can still laugh_, he thought.

Flip was talking to someone. Nick recognized the other fox’s cadence, although he found it difficult to grasp the words themselves. Orders? No, this didn’t carry any trace of command behind it. Hostility and…gloating? What could Flip possibly have to gloat about now? With some difficulty Nick forced his eyes to open again, turning his head toward the ruined doorway with his ears perked.

“Run away little bunny.”

His mind railed.

_What is she doing here?_ Nick thought before looking down at himself. _Oh. Right._

Nick sat up, or rather he tried to then fell back with a wince. No good. The vest was too heavy. When he moved the weight of it pressed on his already aching body hard enough that the pain flared unbearably.

A pair gunshots. With newfound urgency he reached under his shirt and ripped the velcro fasteners open. Several seconds of struggling and he tossed the heavy thing from his body, then pushed himself back to his feet. He very nearly toppled over from how moving seemed to deepen the ache somehow, but he found his balance at the last moment and staggered through the ruined doorway into the hall. He kept one hand against the wall as he headed in the direction the gunshots had come from, toward the main growing room.

After a dozen steps he saw Flip walking purposefully through the room, his gun at the ready. At first Nick couldn’t tell what the other fox was so intent upon. He watched as Flip came to a stop and aimed at something. A faint, easily missed red light hidden between a pair of planters. Then his breath caught as he saw Judy leap out just before Flip fired. She landed in one of the nearby planter boxes, then quickly rolled into the space between them in time to dodge another shot.

To Nick’s horror, through it all the faint red light moved with her. Even now it marked her progress as she crawled along the ground. Such a small thing, just the power LED to her radio, and not nearly strong enough to pinpoint her location perfectly. The sort of thing Judy would never think about. It probably didn’t look like anything to her, but to Nick’s eyes it might as well have been a neon sign. _Here I am. Here I am. Here I am._

He opened his mouth to warn her, but almost immediately his throat felt like it was on fire and he
only managed a feeble croak. The sudden pain triggered a memory of him being enveloped in that white cloud, gasping for air only to have it burn his nose and throat on the way down.

But as he watched Judy was somehow managing to make it work. She popped up and ran for a few seconds, then dove back to the ground right as Flip took another shot. Several seconds later she repeated the process and two more bullets were gone.

Then Flip learned, and on her third attempt he held his fire. He smiled. Then he laughed.

“Impressive. You’re a lot harder to shoot than your pet fox.”

*Oh no, Judy. Don’t fall for it,* Nick thought as he reached the doorway. He leaned against it and tried to talk once more. Again his voice failed him.

Flip calmly aimed directly above the red light as he spoke. “You should have seen the look of shock on Nicky’s face when I did it. He really thought he was about to get away. Put two right in his chest right before I saw you, and he just went right down like a sack of meat.”

*Stay down, Judy. Please stay down. I’m okay.*

“You know, now that I think about it he could still be saved if you got him to a hospital quickly enough.” Flip began to slowly walk backwards. “Perhaps I should correct that little oversight while I still can.”

“*Now remember, you aren’t really supposed to do this…*”

Nick shook his head, his ears back. He didn’t have time for that right now. He took a deep breath, making another attempt to warn Judy. To let her know that he was fine so she wouldn’t do anything crazy. He failed. Judy leaped up, but since Flip was already prepared she never had a chance. The gun fired and he saw Judy flinch, but he couldn’t tell where she’d been hit. Was it bad?

Her graceless landing gave him his answer even as she tucked into a roll. Her taser, probably the only thing she had to defend herself, bounced off the ground and into one of the planter boxes.

And Flip. Flip was already moving in.

“*Only when you absolutely have to…*”

With a frustrated snarl, Nick started into the room. He gave his head another shake, told his father to shut up. Not now. He didn’t have time for guilt right now. Not when Judy needed his help.

Ears tilted back, he forced himself forward as quickly as he could manage. All on its own a rumble rose into his throat, heedless of the pain that caused him as he tried to close the distance before it was too late.

“*No, not like that. From deeper. Imagine someone kicked you in the stomach.*”

As if on cue Nick felt the vibrations in his throat spread, as if they were coming from somewhere deep in his chest. His muzzle contorted, wrinkling as he lunged at Flip, his hands immediately grabbing hold of the gun as their bodies collided. The impact sent a fresh bolt of pain arcing up his spine. Everything went white as they hit the floor, and the next thing he knew was a flurry of claws, the snapping of teeth, and the pistol’s sharp report that filled the room every time the trigger was pulled.
When Flip was knocked to the ground it took Judy several seconds to realize what was happening. The moment he hit the floor everything became a confusing jumble of flailing limbs in the dim light, and other than the frantic struggles the only thing she could hear was Flip’s curses and a deep rumble that pulled on some ancient part of her brain and commanded her to flee. Then the gun fired into the air and during the burst of light provided by the muzzle flash she saw Nick on top of Flip.

At first the sight of Nick froze Judy in place as she registered the atavistic snarl on his muzzle and she realized that growl she was hearing was from him. She couldn’t help wondering if Nick had been exposed to the Nighthowlers, and if so was it the new strain or the old. Her hand went to the radio to call her discovery in when the pistol went off again, providing just enough light for her to see again.

Nick wasn’t behaving like a savage mammal. He wasn’t trying to bite Flip, but focused completely on gaining control of the gun. Both his hands were on the firearm and he’d pulled it close to his body, practically curled himself around it, giving himself all the leverage and allowing him to keep the gun pointed at the ground.

Her fears washed away the moment she had that realization, but while Nick controlled where the gun was pointed he seemed unable to break Flip’s hold. The other fox’s fingers remained wrapped tightly around the grip—and more importantly, on the trigger. Flip couldn’t pull the gun free, but he only needed one hand to hold on. That left his other hand free to strike Nick at will, and when the gun fired again Judy was able to see that Nick was not in any condition to fight. In fact, it was taking everything he had just to hold onto the gun.

Judy pushed herself back to her feet. Stumbled a step and nearly fell down again when the gun fired again. But Flip had rolled as he fired this time, and once Nick was pressed to the ground Flip put his foot on her partner’s arm, pinning it to the ground. Moments later he began to pull, still raining blows down.

She reached for her taser, only to remember she’d already drawn it. Dropped it just a moment ago. Part of her longed to search for it, but there wasn’t time. Nick’s grip was weakening. By the time she found her taser Flip might already have control of his gun again. Her hand diverted several inches to her flashlight instead, then with a push of the button she focused the beam on both of the foxes.

They both recoiled at the sudden intensity of the light. Nick lost his grip on the pistol, but Flip reared back blindly and began to stumble as his aim went wild. Sensing that this was her best chance, Judy charged Flip as quickly as she could with her slight limp and delivered a sharp kick to the back of his knee. He yelped out as his leg collapsed out from under him, and she already had another kick primed. As Flip fell she let it go, landing the second blow solidly against his stomach to drive the air from his lungs.

Flip completely folded up as the pistol dropped with a clatter, struggling to breathe after the brutal kick. She didn’t give him a chance to recover. With a slightly awkward hop she got up onto the fox’s back, then forced his wrists behind him and promptly cuffed him. Only then did she go to check on Nick.

“Oh thank God you are okay,” she said, immediately throwing her arms around him in a hug.

Squeezing Nick set her injured arm to hurting again, but she didn’t care. Not until he winced as well. Ears back, she looked up at the grimace on his muzzle, then let go of him. “Y-you are okay, right?”
Nick’s ears folded as well and he waggled his hand indecisively, then lightly tapped his neck. “I think I burned my throat,” he whispered, and judging by the way he flinched even that much hurt him.

She hugged him again, more carefully this time. “You scared me,” she whimpered. “You did something really scary. I thought you were savage.”

“Sorry,” Nick whispered back to her, resting his head lightly atop hers. “I was a little—”

Before he could finish Judy kissed him. “It’s okay.”

Off to the side Flip retched. “Don’t make me sick.”

Judy glared at him, her ears back, then pulled out her radio and turned the volume back up. “This is Officer Hopps. I’ve apprehended Flip and found Nick,” she said, looking the fox right in the eye. “I am pretty sure the building is safe.”

Captain Uncia’s response was almost immediate. “Understood Hopps. I’ll send someone to pick him up shortly.”

“Could you send a paramedic as well? Both Nick and I are a little hurt.”

“Once the building is clear,” Uncia promised.

With that Judy set her radio down and gave Flip a pointed look, then immediately leaned in and gave Nick another kiss.
Bogo watched Anderson and Uncia leave his office, fully aware that neither was happy with the outcome of the private meeting. What’s more, he fully understood their feelings. To their credit neither had protested.

Truth be told, Bogo was far from pleased either. He’d dared to hope Flip’s arrest would bring calm back to the city. Shutting down the fox’s plot had put an immediate end to the wave of savage mammal cases, and interviews with Doug had helped speed the development of a new cure.

The wounds inflicted had been much deeper than he’d expected however, and Flip had taken to using his trial as an opportunity to zealously lay out the numerous grievances he had against the prey of the city. Then came the news that Doug had received a plea deal in exchange for his assistance in developing the new cure and his willingness to testify against Flip. The sheep would only go to jail for six months, followed by a lengthy period of house arrest provided he maintained good behavior. Seeing a sheep go free while the courts leveled the full weight of the law upon Flip had been like tossing a match into a barrel of gasoline.

A rash of vandalism targeting prey-owned businesses happened in the wake of that announcement, followed shortly by one targeting predator businesses. Officers on patrol were frequently diverted to handle public clashes between predators and prey, and twice rival protest marches had converged on the same location causing the events to devolve into riots.

But for all of that Bogo still saw a sliver of hope. There were a number of voices calling for calm on both sides of the conflict, mostly older mammals with memories of past conflicts over equality doing their best to reason with those that held more extremist views.

Only most of the agitators were younger mammals with no memory of those events. Many were barely even legally adults; and they were angry. Angry in the way that could only burn so hot in the hearts of youths. Theirs was an anger born of ideals—or rather they had ideals to rationalize their anger. In a real sense it barely mattered if they had a boldness fueled by a cause, or a cause to justify the brash risk-taking that bordered on madness. The end result was the same: they refused to be reasoned with. In some cases they even labeled those attempting to calm their tempers as traitors.

And to the misfortune of all, the politicians were well aware of which side had more votes. Nothing overt was being done, not yet. But the pressure was already filtering down. Casual inquiries that were clearly attempting to sound out support.

Which led right back to his meeting with Anderson and Uncia. Anderson was to be reassigned to Tundra Town where he would be groomed to replace the current chief who was even now nearing retirement. His minor-celebrity status as a result of his visibility during the smuggling crackdown made it almost a certainty that he would be confirmed to the position. The locals would demand it. And in the process the ZPD would be able to re-affirm its commitment to protecting all mammals by giving the position to a predator.

The sticking point was that Anderson much preferred Precinct One. In fact, the polar bear hated snow. Meanwhile Uncia desperately wanted to return to Tundra Town, and had been petitioning for a transfer almost from the moment Flip had been captured so she could rejoin the fight against Mr. Big. The problem was that although Uncia was a snow leopard, and therefore also a predator, Anderson was more popular with the population of that district. Having headed up the operation that ultimately brought Flip to justice last month had made Uncia popular as well, but it was focused in Savanna Central where the majority of the recent savage mammal cases had happened.
His desk-phone’s intercom chimed, followed by Clawhauser’s voice.

“Chief? The agents from IA are here as you requested,” the cheetah informed him.

Bogo looked at the clock and sighed. He hadn’t realized how long the meeting had dragged on.

“Send them up,” Bogo said, “then go ahead and send those faxes I gave you earlier.”

“Really? Now?” Clawhauser asked. “Are you sure? I thought you’d want to tell the precinct—”

“Benjamin, I do not have time for this right now. Send the blasted faxes.”

There was an uncomfortable pause before Clawhauser answered. “Sorry. I’ll send them.”

*Well, now I’m committed*, Bogo thought. To his surprise some of the anxiety he’d felt about the decision abated now that there was no backing out.

His eyes drifted to the file on his desk. Shortly after Flip’s arrest the lawyer representing Nick had gotten a court order to take the fox off of Administrative Leave. There simply wasn’t enough evidence to justify it. Of course Nick hadn’t been able to immediately return to work thanks to his injuries. It wasn’t until last week that the fox had been fit for even light duty.

Officer Wilde’s return had also restarted the steady flow of addendum’s to his official paperwork despite the fact that Bogo had already told him that there wasn’t any need to continue the practice. The fox’s official reports still weren’t entirely kosher, but in Bogo’s opinion they were good enough. Apparently Nick wasn’t willing to take risks however. If this kept up Bogo would find himself needing another file very soon.

Meanwhile he’d been forced to reprimand Officer Hopps for her recklessness and put her on unpaid leave for a week. Officially he couldn’t prove she’d disobeyed orders, Captain Uncia had confirmed that the operation had suffered from “mysterious” communication problems. The other officers had backed her up, stating that for some reason transmissions from Zootopia had all come through garbled, although nobody could explain why the interference had apparently only been one way.

The entire situation had left Bogo furious. Yet it also reminded him of the few times he’d pulled the same trick.

IA was significantly less understanding. Judy’s insubordination had made them take another look at her, but now the other officers in the precinct had lost their patience and refused to cooperate any longer. Naturally this was sending IA into fits to the point that Bogo now had to dedicate several hours a week to smooth out all the ruffled fur.

Topping everything off, the investigators had found just enough to know that *something* questionable had occurred, but the waters had muddied to the point that it was impossible for them to conclusively say what. Normally that meant warnings, but by this point the investigators had committed enough resources and time, and leveled enough accusations, that they needed something to justify all their effort. Before they could have satisfied themselves with handing out warnings. That time had long since passed. Now they wouldn’t be satisfied unless someone lost their job.

A knock at his door. Bogo closed his eyes, then took a deep breath and sat straighter.

“Come in.”

Agents Gat and Forester entered, both already clearly annoyed despite the short walk from the front desk to his office. Bogo nearly made the mistake of asking what had happened on their way over,
but decided he really didn’t want to know. More to the point, he really didn’t care.

“If you do not mind we would like to make this quick,” Agent Forester said.

“I hope this isn’t a waste of time,” Agent Gat agreed. “You assured us that this would have a serious impact on our investigation and we are already quite busy.”

“Trust me, this will not take long,” Bogo said. He picked up a page from his desk and handed it to the deer. “I recently sent this to my superiors and the city council. Major news networks are also receiving a copy.”

Agent Forester grunted as he took the page and began to read. After a minute he stopped, blinking in surprise as he restarted from the top. Once he was finished he handed the letter over to Agent Gat.

“Resigning?” Agent Gat demanded, looking up from the paper. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Effective at the end of the month.” Chief Bogo folded his hands so he could rest his chin atop them. “If you would read to the end you’ll see that I will be holding a press conference to explain my reasons for leaving. What remains to be seen is which reasons I shall include.”

“You really think this will make us drop our investigation?” Agent Gat asked, the tip of his tail flicking about behind him. “This is a corruption investigation.”

“One which has yet to discover a smoking gun.”

“Perhaps, but we continue to make progress,” Agent Gat insisted.

Bogo sat upright and lightly tapped the top of his desk for a moment. “If that is your answer then so be it, but I believe it is only fair to make sure you are both aware of what is going to happen so that you may prepare yourselves.

“Obviously I would not share specifics about your investigation as I would not want to risk divulging any information that might make your jobs harder, however upon hearing that one reason for my departure is that I believe IA has been unfairly targeting officers under my command the media will quickly realize that I am speaking about your investigation.

“They will then begin to pry for more information, interviewing officers in my precinct. And they will begin to review previous coverage of your investigation, namely that you suspended Officer Wilde, and realize that more recent developments were overlooked as the arrest of Flip came to dominate the headlines. They will then realize that a judge ruled that Officer Wilde had been unjustly placed on Administrative Leave.”

Chief Bogo brought his hands back together, steepling them. “At which point they will begin to make information requests regarding your investigation. IA will protest, citing its ongoing nature, but ultimately some information will be released. Soon the news will be reporting that you have exclusively targeted Officers Wilde and Hopps, switching indecisively from one to the other. It will surely be remarked that both were successes of the MII programs, and the first respective members of their species to join the ZPD.

“Even cursory research will reveal that both were heavily involved in the arrests of not only the former Mayor Bellwether, but also Flip and Doug. In the case of Officer Wilde, it will surely be noted that IA has pursued him with surprising aggression—a fact that many politicians shall find uncomfortable given the current political climate. No doubt there will be certain groups that will use this information to claim that the city does not respect certain demographics, and will use this to justify further unlawful behavior.
“The District Attorney will be pressed to make a statement, and will be forced to admit that this investigation has failed to uncover anything substantial enough to justify prosecution. Other politicians, the ones able to see which way the wind is blowing, will then begin to comment on the expense of this investigation and the resources it has taken up.

“And during all of this Flip’s trial shall proceed. I fully expect it to come out that, according to Officer Wilde, Flip seemed surprisingly well informed about IA’s investigation. Obviously this will raise questions about if IA itself has been compromised in some way and was targeting Officers Hopps and Wilde in order to hobble their investigation into Flip’s activities. Such notions are nonsense of course, but IA will suddenly find itself under an unusual amount of scrutiny that I expect your superiors shall not enjoy.”

He stopped, looking each agent in the eye as he let them contemplate his words. About halfway through his statement Agent Gat began to glare, while Agent Forester had started to re-read the letter for a third time.

A slight hiss slipped from Agent Gat’s lips. “You cannot do this.”

“I cannot?” Bogo asked, arching an eyebrow. “Do you presume to chain me to this desk?”

“This is extortion!” Gat continued. “You cannot use your influence to shield your subordinates from a lawful investigation.”

“You seem to assume that my only grievances are with Internal Affairs. As I said before, it remains to be seen what my official reasons for resigning shall be. To be perfectly honest I am much more concerned with the Predator Registration debate,” Bogo said.

Agent Forester finally set the page back down. “We cannot just drop the investigation. Something is going on here.”

“Which we both know you will never manage to figure out. The best thing you can do now is give both Wilde and Hopps a warning and keep an eye on them in the future. I can assure you my replacement will be fully willing to cooperate with you on that front,” Bogo said.

The two IA agents looked to each other before the ocelot sighed. “Very well, we’ll close the investigation. For now.”

A full month of uncertainty and worry immediately followed Chief Bogo’s announcement that he was resigning. Not just resigning, but resigning in protest as the city government was pressuring him to police the predator populations more heavily in order to restore the peace. The reveal came as a shock to the city and had dominated the news completely for several days. Even the near constant protests (which occasionally erupted into violence) stalled out. Protesters seemed stunned by the announcement, and Bogo was perhaps one of the few mammals with the respect of both sides of the conflict.

When it emerged that the plans Bogo was protesting had originally been drafted by ex-mayor Bellwether the protests restarted in earnest, this time refocusing the public’s ire almost exclusively upon the city council. Simple registration or full on tracking collars, the exact details hardly mattered. Those that had privately backed the plans suddenly found themselves in full retreat, their seats in jeopardy while their insistence that they were taking measures to prevent abuse fell on deaf ears.
Their attempts to sneak the legislation in unnoticed did little to engender trust.

And Bogo had left a parting time-bomb for the city council to diffuse as well by nominating Captain Uncia as his successor. Her promotion to Captain was recent enough that she was actually disqualified from being elevated to chief for a year, and even if that were not the case she was currently the most junior captain on the force. That said, in an attempt to pacify the protests the city council had tried to pivot by commending Uncia for her role in leading the operation that had ultimately brought Flip to justice. The story that Flip had been brought down by another predator was simply too tempting to resist. Their plan couldn’t work if they denied Uncia the promotion however.

A compromise was swiftly reached. The commissioner would assume the role of “acting chief” while Uncia would be assigned as his adjunct. The arrangement nominally placed an experienced mammal in control, but made it possible for Uncia to be given command of Precinct One provided she ran it according to his instruction. Then, after a year had elapsed, Uncia could officially move into the position provided that she proved her capability.

Thus far the plan had been proceeding smoothly. Bogo immediately began to hand off responsibilities to Captain Uncia to help acclimate her to the new role, and today was her first opportunity to hand out assignments. Business as normal for the most part, however Judy had been caught completely by surprise when both her and Nick had been called aside rather than receive duties of their own.

“What did you do?” Judy asked as she and Nick walked to the room Uncia had claimed as her temporary office.

Nick scoffed. “What makes you think I did anything?”

“Because we are obviously in trouble,” she said, giving him a look. “And that always turns out to be your fault.”

“I swear Judy, I haven’t had time to do anything yet,” Nick promised, giving her a sideways look. “Ended up oversleeping after last night, so I haven’t time.”

Judy’s ears began to burn. “Hush you. It was just dinner.”

“It was a very nice dinner though. Are you trying to say I cannot savor our time together?”

Her blush deepened, but they arrived before she could think of a proper retort. Captain Uncia was already waiting for them, her tail flicking slowly as she gestured for them to sit down. The snow leopard looked completely exhausted. Clearly Bogo had been pushing her to learn as much as possible before he officially stepped down.

“The Chief tells me you were both cleared for duty again last week,” Uncia said. Her eyes settled on Judy. “City Hall wants you both assigned to downtown. Apparently there are protests planned and they hope that showing the protesters a fox working alongside a bunny will placate them.”

In light of everything that had happened that sounded remarkably shallow to Judy. “Why not just tell us that in the bullpen?”

“Cat’s Cradle,” Nick quipped.

Captain Uncia blinked. “Excuse me?”

“You aren’t a bull,” the fox pointed out with a wry smile. “Doesn’t make sense to call it a bullpen.”
Judy promptly elbowed him in the side. “Stop that.”

Captain Uncia snorted however. “Whatever you want to call it,” she said while shaking her head. “Regardless, I thought you would prefer the opportunity to do something less demeaning than serve as city mascots.”

Judy’s ears came to attention. “Really? What did you have in mind?”

“I was considering moving you from simple patrol duty over to investigations,” the snow leopard said as she smiled at Judy. “You’ve got a good eye for evidence and putting clues together. I am sure they would be happy to have you over there.”

“Really?” Judy smiled at Nick. “Then they already have a case for us to work on?”

“No, for you to work on Officer Hopps,” Uncia corrected, her ears tilting back slightly. “They have room for one more mammal, and I think that you are the best fit.”

Judy felt her thoughts slam into a wall. “What about Nick?”

“I thought he would appreciate the opportunity to transfer into undercover work,” Captain Uncia said casually, shifting her attention to the fox. “Regular police work seems to bore you, Wilde, and frankly you have the knack for getting yourself into places you shouldn’t be.”

Surprise flickered across Nick’s expression as he sat silently. Judy bit her tongue as she watched him, feeling her ears wilt. She didn’t miss the anxious look Nick gave her. After a moment Nick swallowed, then answered.

“This is really sudden,” he said, looking down. “Could I maybe think about it?”

“Me too,” Judy chimed in, her tail flicking. “Not that I don’t appreciate the offer, but if it would mean I have to work with someone else…”

“That is fine. I’ll give you the week to decide,” Uncia said, her tail continuing to flick. “There is one more thing as well.”

Judy glanced to Nick again. “Yes?”

“Frankly the nature of your relationship is none of my business, but if you decide to remain together I expect you to remain professional while at work,” Uncia said, giving each of them a significant look. “That means I better not catch you holding hands while on duty.”

Nick froze in place as Judy felt her entire face begin to burn. She stammered lightly, ears folding back as she tried to put together a coherent response. Normally this was when Nick would come to her rescue, but this time he was completely speechless as well.

“That’s all,” Captain Uncia said with a light wave of her hand. “You two better leave for your patrol. Dismissed.”
A week of patrols, and a week of trying to decide what to do. Captain Uncia’s offer was extremely tempting, but Nick suspected it was also really intended to give Judy and him a safe way to create distance at work without drawing undue attention to themselves. Even knowing that Nick had to admit that Uncia was right. Judy was wasted on mere patrol duty, and he had to admit the prospect of undercover work did excite him.

He just wasn’t sure if he was comfortable losing Judy as his partner in the deal, a fact that left him feeling at once vulnerable and unexpectedly guilty. His time with Lowell had shown him that he could work with other mammals on the force, but the experience had felt more superficial. It wasn’t that he hadn’t gotten along with Lowell, although he did still think the wolf was rather foolish. Things had worked out just fine and maybe someday they would even be friends, but when he worked with Lowell it had been just that: work.

There was something else to consider as well. If Judy got moved to investigations it could only be good for her career. Sooner or later she’d end up working her own cases, and with that came the possibility of media exposure. Being placed in charge of a high profile case could easily propel her career forward, especially now that IA had apparently decided to back off (although not without an obligatory “we’ll be watching you”).

The smart thing for Judy to do was take the offer, and he’d told her as much. And Judy had encouraged him to move into undercover operations where he could more freely apply his talents. Hearing her say those words had hurt in a way he couldn’t quite describe, but if she left then there really wasn’t anything to hold him to where he was. Maybe that was for the best. Now that Bogo was officially out a whole host of changes seemed poised to arrive.

Nick just wished he felt ready for it to happen. He still hadn’t given Uncia his answer yet, and he’d been too afraid to ask Judy what she’d decided. The clock was ticking though. This wasn’t something he could put off indefinitely. In this case not making a decision was still a decision.

And then there were his other worries. When he was alone he frequently found himself thinking about the investigation into Flip and the things the other fox had said. Things he was still saying, only now his voice was amplified by the media that was covering his trial. Nick hated to admit it, but a lot of what Flip said struck a chord in him. It was insane, he knew it was, but there was a part of him that actually agreed. What did that say about him? And if Flip was able to tempt even him how would other mammals react?

So he’d gone to visit his mother in the hope that she could give him advice, only then Judy had found out and insisted on tagging along. All at once he’d found himself facing something else. He’d struggled for the entire hour of the visit to work up his courage, then in the final minutes told his mother about his relationship with Judy. Afterward he braced himself.

She had laughed, patted the side of his muzzle, then said, “I know, dear.”

Once they were alone Judy simply hadn’t been able to help teasing him about how flustered that had made him. He tried to be good natured about it, but sometimes he still had trouble accepting that Judy had managed to worm her way so deeply into his life. For the most part it was actually rather nice, but every so often that wasn’t the case. Those moments seemed to sneak up on him every time.

They were always short-lived however. By the time he was on the train, Judy’s hand squeezing his lightly as they sat just a little closer than was proper, his embarrassment had faded enough for him to
return to the larger questions looming between them. He watched her silently for a time, searching for any hint about what she had picked, but she was still riding the emotional high she’d been caught up in from the moment his mother had accepted their relationship without reservation.

“Hey, Judy?”

She grinned up at him. “Yes?”

“Have you given much thought to Captain Uncia’s offer?” he asked.

At once much of the wind went out of Judy’s sails, her mood shifting toward thoughtful. A touch of worry and a dash of eagerness. She blew out a lungful of air and leaned back in her seat, looking out the window.

“How could I not? It’s a really generous offer, especially with how little experience I have,” she said, then glanced at him. “Feel like I’ve been thinking about it during every free moment. What about you?”

Nick hesitated. “Been thinking about it too. Looked into it a little bit and it seems kind of like what I used to do before, only with more paperwork. That’s really tempting, but—”

“I think you should do it,” Judy said, her ears tilted back. “This is an even better opportunity for you Nick. Besides, you do get bored with all this normal police work.”

*It isn’t all that bad*, Nick thought as he looked at Judy. “What about you though? Maybe I would like undercover work more, but I don’t want to do that if it means you won’t have a partner looking out for you.”

Judy released his hand and started to rub her arm. “Well, I just assumed that if you went there, then I would go to investigations. Probably get assigned to some detective, so I’ll be fine.”

“So you think we should do this then?” Nick said.

She peeked at him again, then quickly looked back out the window. “Yeah, I guess. I mean it is a wonderful opportunity for both of us, and it means we won’t risk running afoul of regulations.”

Nick’s mouth went dry. “You really think regulations are going to be a problem? Before you said it would be up to Bogo.”

“Captain Uncia’s call now,” Judy reminded him as she shifted in place, “and Bogo already gave me a warning for running into that building alone.”

He closed his eyes and resisted the urge to lean against her. Instead he swished his tail near the ground so it would lightly brush over Judy’s feet.

“Do you want to go to investigations?”

“Nick, I just told you what a wonderful opportunity this is.”

“Yes you did, but do you want it?” Nick asked, tilting his ears back. “Because I’m not exactly sure I do, but if this is something you want…”

He left the rest unsaid, sitting uncomfortably as Judy went back to looking out the window. While he waited he tried to figure out what she was looking at; the buildings outside were just a blur. Then he noticed they were approaching the high rises toward the center of the city.
Before he could reflect on that too much Judy spoke up. “I don’t,” she whispered, then turned to face him again as her ears dipped back guiltily. “I don’t want you to go…and I don’t want to leave either. At least not right now.”

Nick’s ears dipped back in a brief blush. “I don’t want to go anywhere either.”

For a moment he considered kissing Judy right there despite the train-car full of passengers, but just doing something like that without making sure she was okay with making their relationship public was out of the question. Then he got a better idea, and quickly took Judy’s hand as he started toward the exit.

“Let’s get off at this stop.”

Judy was so surprised she ended up stumbling as she tried to keep up. “What? Why?”

“Because,” Nick said as he flashed her a teasing grin, “I need to get revenge for earlier.”

When Judy stepped off the elevator Nick made sure to watch her face. The whole ride up she’d been practically bouncing in place with excitement, something he found wonderfully fitting for a bunny. She rushed to the observation deck to press her face against the glass. Pure, wide-eyed wonder.

“See? Just as good as a helicopter,” Nick said as he hug back a short way so other mammals could go look.

“If we were in a helicopter then we could go even higher,” Judy said, but when she turned around she was beaming. “Although it is amazing. I feel almost like I can see all the way back to Bunny Burrow.”

“Hang around about ten or fifteen minutes and it should get even better when the sun sets,” he said as she rejoined him. “Place will be pretty crowded right around then, but the view is worth it.”

“Lots of mammals come up to see the sunset?”

“That isn’t exactly wrong,” he said, leading her away from the mammals that were crowding toward the windows. “Some do, it is very pretty, but there are going to be a lot of couples up here too.”

Judy’s walk slowed a little as she looked around, finally taking the time to look at the others that were in the room with her. He could see the pinkness in her ears deepen by several shades as she finally noticed the numerous flirting couples.

“They’re all going to wait until the very last sliver of the sun is sinking behind the horizon and then kiss,” he explained quietly.

The pink in her ears turned to red and she looked up at him. “Nick, I don’t know…”

“That’s fine,” he assured her. “If you aren’t comfortable we can just watch, or leave, or anything you want to do. I’m happy with just seeing the look on your face when you look out the window.”

She searched his eyes for a moment, then relaxed. “Then why?”

That was the question, wasn’t it? Nick pursed his lips as he thought about it, looking out the window
for a moment and then down at Judy. His tail flicked over to one side.

“I guess it is because of Flip,” he admitted, then folded his ears when she gave him a shocked look. “I promise that sounded less insane in my head.”

“That must really be a neat trick, because pretty much everything that comes out of Flip’s mouth is insane.”

Nick’s ears went all the way down to his head. “Not exactly everything.”

Judy gave him a look that made him want to back up a few steps. “Nick, that isn’t funny.”

“I know,” he said quickly, kneeling down so he wouldn’t feel like he was standing over her. “Trust me, I know, but not everything he says is wrong.”

“He targeted prey mammals with Nighthowler toxin. That our cure didn’t work on,” Judy whispered through clenched teeth.

“Which was terrible, just like everything else he thinks should be done,” Nick said quickly, holding up his hands. “The things he is angry about though, those are really problems Judy. I’m not saying that what he did was the right way to change things because it obviously isn’t. He’s a psycho, and I think in a way he was just looking for something to give him an excuse to be as brutal as he wanted, but that doesn’t mean the problems he is talking about aren’t real. If they weren’t then the things he was saying during his trial wouldn’t stir up so much trouble. He is right that a lot of predators got treated badly under Bellwether, and that nothing has been done to make things right for them after.”

The building anger in Judy’s eyes faltered. “What does that have to do with this? We aren’t on the city council Nick; we’re just cops.”

“So was Bogo, but look what he managed to make happen. Things aren’t better, but at least mammals are listening to each other a little now. Maybe we can’t do anything that big but…” Nick paused, then reached out his hand. When Judy accepted it he felt himself begin to tremble a little. “I could have been just like Flip. The only reason I’m not is because he hurt me just as bad as any prey animal ever did when I was a kid; worse even. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened to me if I hadn’t met you, even if Bellwether’s plan got found out, and…”

Judy stepped closer and gave his hands a squeeze. “You couldn’t possibly be like him.”

“I was an angry kid, Judy. That never completely went away until I met you.” He squeezed her hands back. “When Flip talks I can remember who I was back then, and his words resonate. If I hadn’t met you I might have helped him when he asked for it. Not because it was the smart thing to do, or the best thing to do, but because it was the only way I was being shown. Because he was the only one who was talking about the pain I felt, and I couldn’t see anything else back then.

“That’s what I’m worried about Judy. Flip is getting a lot of attention after what he did, and to predators that are hurting and feel like they’ve been ignored that has to look pretty good. I’m scared that we’ll just have another Flip in a year or two.”

“If there is we’ll be there to arrest him,” Judy said confidently.

Nick couldn’t help smiling a little. “Of course we will, but maybe we can do better than that.”

“How?”

“You saw how much attention our last picture got in the newspaper, right?” he asked, then
swallowed. “We could take away a lot of the attention Flip is getting…and maybe show everyone that there isn’t any reason to be afraid at the same time.”

In Judy’s eyes he saw worry that he knew was mirrored in his own. Something like this couldn’t be taken back, nor could it be rationalized away as easily as the last picture. Back then they’d merely been leaning against each other. It was easy enough to say they’d simply been exhausted and not thinking too clearly. A deliberate kiss however?

“Only if you want to,” he promised her again.

She bit her lip, then glanced out the window. There wasn’t much longer to wait.

Nick gave her hand another squeeze, worried about what it would mean if she decided not to do this. He also worried about just how much their lives were going to change if she did. There was still time for him to retract the offer, or to suggest that they talk it over more and do it another day, or—

Judy took a small step forward and kissed him just as he saw the last trace of the sun dip below the horizon. He tensed up at first, then felt his ears burning. Without thinking his arms wrapped around her and pulled her in closer as he tilted his head, ignoring the commotion that erupted around them.
Small Things And Tire Swings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It only took the media two days to identify them from the pictures that ended up plastered all over social media, but to Judy’s surprise the first requests for comment didn’t come until after the story was covered by the evening news. She just stepped out of her apartment that Monday morning on her way to work and a dozen reporters immediately ambushed her in a dizzying flurry of questions. The experience was so disorienting she nearly had a flashback to her disastrous press conference.

She couldn’t actually remember what had happened too well. At some point she’d gotten past them by insisting she needed to get to work while refusing to answer any questions. Then she’d sprinted to the train where she had enough time to collect her thoughts. Most of the mammals there had given her curious looks, and a few were openly hostile, but they left her alone. The whispered comments she’d overheard didn’t count.

More reporters—many more—outside Precinct One. Then came the looks the other officers gave her and Nick, although there she only saw a few expressions of disapproval. The rest were simply curious. And a very pointed meeting with Captain Uncia where both she and Nick argued for the chance to prove they could remain partners, followed by a standard daily patrol where paparazzi followed them every step of the way.

In short, a flurry of new pressures neither she nor Nick were used to dealing with. She hadn’t realized just how exhausting and invasive the constant attention would be. Everywhere they went the paparazzi lurked, and when there weren’t paparazzi there were always others who took an interest. Cameras or phones seemed to be pointed at them no matter where they were. Even going out for a meal together seemed to attract attention.

There was also a new unknown any time she interacted with someone while with Nick, or when she was by herself but someone recognized her. Several times mammals had outright refused her help when she was on patrol with Nick, and once another bunny had recognized who she was and called her a… Well, nothing polite that was for sure!

The fawning curiosity some mammals had was even worse in a way. On the one hand they were never intentionally offensive, although many of the questions did tend to veer in that direction. It was more an issue of just how ever-present the attitude seemed. A jerk was a jerk, but then they went on their way. Curious mammals were completely insatiable.

No matter how many questions she or Nick answered there were always more, and there seemed to be very few boundaries that other mammals were willing to respect to satisfy their curiosity. The same questions were asked over and over again by different mammals. She’d lost track of how many times she’d had to tell someone that Nick had never bitten her even by accident. She also came to understand why the Lifeline forum had such a lengthy post explaining that predator/prey relationships were not a sexual kink. Some of the things she’d been asked made her flush just thinking about them.

And if she ever refused to answer a question because she was getting tired, or was busy with something else, or felt it was too personal, or just wasn’t in a good mood to open up? Many mammals took offense to that as if they were entitled to have access to her.

The few mammals that responded to their relationship with indifference were a boon to be treasured. Bland disinterest was a blissful reprieve from the usual hostility (whether guarded or open) and the
pestering questions. She hadn’t realized just how many of her day-to-day interactions had fallen into that category until it was gone.

At least Captain Uncia appeared to be taking a “wait and see” approach so far, maintaining that she was willing to allow them to remain partners provided they could behave professionally while on-duty. That came at the cost of finding themselves under more scrutiny than the other officers, but it was a fair trade in Judy’s opinion. Nick complained of course, but he threw himself into his job despite how boring he thought it was as if to prove to everyone that he could make things work out.

For all of that, Nick had been right about one thing: the news cycle was dominated by their relationship. Flip never completely disappeared from the news, but his coverage dwindled away. Neither of them went out of their way to push the story, the most they’d done was release a joint statement to the press in an email, but it almost seemed like that only fueled the media’s thirst for more. Even the *Lifeline* forum was blowing up, with the regulars tracking the public reaction with a mixture of interest and very open concern. A few of the posters had hinted that they were beginning to consider coming out as well, something that filled Judy with hope even as she wondered if the kiss she’d given Nick might had inadvertently started something.

Mercifully the news cycle turned again after a few weeks, bringing with it Bogo’s surprise announcement that he would be running for Mayor on a platform of reconciliation. So far he hadn’t selected a running mate, but the impact was felt almost immediately. The day after a political cartoon made the rounds depicting a bunch of miniature clown hats inside a circle moments before they were to be flattened by a massive police officer’s cap. Not all the attention had vanished, but the intensity had certainly become more bearable.

All of those were problems for the big city though, and for now Judy did her best to ignore them as she walked over the trails that crisscrossed the lands around Bunny Burrow with Nick at her side. A short vacation they’d planned to have some time alone, only to discover that news of their relationship had caused about as much uproar in her hometown as it had back in Zootopia. Her parents and most immediate family remained supportive, and many of the younger mammals tended more toward curiosity than fear or hostility, but finding herself facing the same problems where she’d grown up had been a shock. As had the realization that some of the mammals she’d gone to school with, even some who had previously called her a friend, now looked on her with disgust.

But Nick was with her, and that was all that mattered. She’d actually been surprised by how intent he was to experience as much of her hometown as possible in the short amount of time they had, and worried that the sometimes open animosity they faced would ruin the experience for him. He faced it all with his usual sarcasm despite the verbal abuse he occasionally received.

“So what is special about this trail?” Nick asked. It was the same question he always seemed to ask when she brought him somewhere.

Judy took a deep breath through her nose. “It’s just a trail. The tri-county area is full of them.”

“Then why choose to take a walk on this one instead of another one?”

“No reason,” she said, then bounded a couple steps ahead so she could turn around to face him while walking backwards. “It’s pretty out here. Isn’t that enough of a reason?”

“I guess. Just thought maybe you had some sort of history with this particular one,” Nick said as he looked around.

“Well, I did go jogging out here almost every day when I was training to enter the academy.”
“Just jogging? You made me do a whole workout routine to prepare,” Nick said, just a touch incredulous. “Three whole months of you busting my tail every day.”

Judy gave him the biggest smile she could. “And you should be glad for it too because you were as soft as a marshmallow back then. Plus when I got accepted I learned pretty quick that jogging hadn’t been enough to prepare me. Ended up needing to work twice as hard to make up the difference. How many tries did it take you to complete the obstacle course?”

Nick took a moment to think, silently counting to himself. “Um…Probably seven or eight before I finally made it through everything. Thing really isn’t designed with smaller mammals in mind.”

“See? It took me closer to two dozen,” Judy said. Her ears dipped down the slightest bit. “Twenty-one tries actually. The instructor said I was close to washing out for a little while.”

“Really? That many?”

“That many,” she confirmed.

Nick opened his mouth, then closed it again, ears tilting back thoughtfully for a moment before he finally spoke. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

They continued down the trail, idly trading ideas on how to go on a date without feeling like they were putting on some sort of show. Early on they’d learned that restaurants were off limits for that sort of thing. Going to the movies didn’t turn out any better. Apparently just being there together was enough to cause disruptions and they were asked to leave. Nick thought things might turn out differently if they arrived separately, but somehow the idea of sneaking in that way just ruined the fun. A backhanded reminder that her relationship with Nick was somehow seen as less worthy of respect than other relationships. Sometimes it seemed like the best she could hope for was that other mammals would view her relationship with Nick as something to be fetishized; at worst something to be scorned.

At some point they ended up holding hands, something they’d been doing more and more often recently when they were off-duty. It was getting to where she could instantly recognize Nick’s hand when it closed around hers. The amount of pressure he used when squeezing, the way his thumb traced over the back of her hand, even the way he made sure that his claws never found their way to her skin.

And the best part? Now the hand holding inevitably led to hugs, and those naturally progressed into kissing (once they were no longer in public, of course). Still taking things slow, they were continuing to lean on the breaks pretty heavily after that first week, but that only meant there was room to talk each new step over until they were both comfortable with moving forward.

So when Nick began to slow down she was caught completely by surprise when she tried to pull him along and he simply let her hand slip free. Confused, she turned back to him to discover he was staring at an ancient tree with a tire swing hanging from a branch. Without a word he walked over to the swing and touched it. The rubber was nearly crumbling from exposure to the elements, and the rope was beginning to fray. Nick gave the tire a light push, then looked around the surrounding area.

“Something wrong?” she asked.

That seemed to snap him out of his reverie. “This place, you sent me a selfie standing right here,” he said, then pulled out his phone and flicked through several images until he found the right one.
“See?”

Judy stared at a picture of herself grinning at the camera while she stood beside the swing. “I can’t believe you bothered to save that.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“It’s just a silly thing I took so I could send it to you,” she said, her ears tilting back. “Honestly I don’t even know why I did. It was just something I started doing when I got here.”

Nick looked back at his phone, running his claw over the image lightly. “So did your dad hang this up for you or something?”

“No. I have no clue where it came from, just stumbled across it one day,” she recalled, her ears folded back. “I think mom and I were fighting at the time, we did that a lot when I was in my late-teens because she kept trying to make me give up on the police officer dream. She’d convinced herself it was just a phase, or something I was doing for attention.”

Nick tilted his head to one side. “Really? I got the impression your parents supported you the whole way through.”

“They did, but they never really agreed with what I was doing,” she told him, looking at the tire swing again. She reached out to run her hand over its cracked surface. “Looking back on it I realize they were just worried that I would fail and be crushed, but back then it messed with me a lot. Seeing my parents do all this stuff for me so I could follow my dreams while whispering behind my back about how worried they were…

“Anyway, when I found the swing I just jumped into it and had a good cry once I was sure I was alone. Just worrying that everyone was right and that it wasn’t worth the trouble. Probably sounds weird, but it made me feel a little better to let that out from time to time. After I just always felt determined again.”

A hand brushed her cheek, then down over her neck to rest on her shoulder. “I don’t think that’s crazy at all,” he whispered. “It’s actually kind of refreshing.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

Without warning, Nick’s hands both went for her sides and began tickling without mercy. “Because it means even my invincible bunny girlfriend can’t be strong all the time!”

She squealed in surprise, gasping for air as the tickling made her laugh hard enough that it was difficult to even breathe. By the time she managed to fend him off and had jumped out of range her eyes were watering, her body quivering as small fits of giggling continued to take her.

She pointed a finger at Nick while he put on the most innocent expression he could manage. “J-just wait until I catch you.”

“Should I be worried?” he asked, a smile slowly spreading across his muzzle. “What are you going to do?”

“That depends entirely on if anyone’s around to see,” she said and matched his smile.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you to everyone who commented, gave kudos, and bookmarked on this story!

Whew, been working on this for so long it feels weird to have this story finally finished. I plan to take a break from writing in Zootopia for awhile. There are other projects of my own that desperately need my attention!

BUT! That does not mean I am completely finished with this setting! I have more ideas for stories following Nick and Judy, and will certainly start writing about them again sometime in the next year. More than likely that won't involve weekly updates (that is really hard to keep up guys!), but I'll have some sort of regular schedule for everyone to count on. I also intend to make it shorter than this story, which has topped out at over 185,995 words (excluding author notes). That is the same as a fairly long novel!

Once again, thank you to everyone. Hopefully I'll see you all again when I begin work on the sequel (which will be posted in its own series).

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!