

A Mountain I'm Willing to Die On

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A Mountain I'm Willing to Die On

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Summary

In which they solve a murder, join a movement, and finish falling in love.

Notes

Now with a partial translation into Chinese here: <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/4406574798>

Translation in Korean here: http://www.joara.com/literature/view/book_intro.html?book_code=1090290

Chapter 1

“This is....nice,” Nick said with an ill-concealed wrinkle of the nose.

“It’s awful,” Judy looked around the closet of a room, trying to see her apartment through his eyes. “But it’s my awful.”

“Uh huh,” Nick was already at the window, trying to pry it upwards. He gave a grunt and gave up, stepping backwards. “The view is okay.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, gesturing him into her chair as she turned on her small wardrobe. “Just concentrate on the pretty lights and I’ll get myself together.”

“Nothing plaid,” he warned. “There is nothing intimidating about pink plaid.”

“Right,” she stared into her off duty shirts disparagingly. “What are you feelings on paisley?”

“We’re going to a dive bar, Carrots. Paisley isn’t going to cut it either.”

“Remind me why we’re going to this bar again?”

“Because our source is a sad sack, who likes to pretend he’s in a bad film noir setting twenty-four setting,” she could hear him rifling through the few things she kept out. “Do I want to know why you don’t have a computer?”

“The internet is out more than it’s on here, so I just use my phone for everything anyway,” at the bottom of a drawer she unearthed a black t-shirt. It had once had a bright neon green logo on it from someone’s sweet sixteen, but she had washed it so many times the logo was long gone. Usually she slept in it. “Don’t turn around.”

“Uh huh,” he said distractedly. From the corner of her eye, she saw him pick up the picture of her parents. She switched shirts and traded her uniform pants for jeans.

“What do I do with my badge?”

“Huh,” he put the photo down and gave her his full attention. “Aw, Carrots, you still look like a cop.”

“How?” She demanded.

“It’s the posture,” he shook his head. “Ah well, we’re not exactly undercover material either of us. Faces plastered on half the recruitment posters in the city.”

“Yeah, I know you’re really upset about that,” she rolled her eyes. “Badge, Nick. What do I do with my badge?”

“Still got those busted headphones.”

“Don’t remind me. I still haven’t picked up a new pair,” she fished the broken ones from the pile of stuff by the door. “Why?”

“C’mere.”

She stood patiently while he messed around behind her, handing over her badge when his hand appeared in her line of vision. It would always make her nervous to have someone standing behind her, breathing in her ear, but she had become good at smoothing down that feeling. She could stand still while he laid a white cord around her neck, badge affixed in the middle.

“There,” he pat the back of her neck where she could feel the lump of a knot, “tuck in your shirt and you’re good to go.”

“What about you?” She asked, closing her eyes for a brief breath. Her heartbeat was, by nature, fast. Faster than his. Faster than most. But just now, she thought it might finally jitter loose from its moorings and escape.

“I’ll keep it in my pocket. Mine are deeper than yours. Ready?”

“Ready.”

She locked the door behind her for all the good it would do. Her badge shifted between cloth and fur. Nick was already halfway down the hall, eager for the next thing. She loved that about him. No one had ever matched her enthusiasm before, even if he did hide it better.

They walked to the bar, neither of them equipped with a personal vehicle of any reliability. It was a nice night, clear and warm.

“The first greens are coming up at home,” she told him. “Little slivers of life pushing up through the dirt.”

“Yeah?”

“Mm. Weeding season. It’s always weeding season, but it’s the hardest right around now. You have to be careful not pull the crop up with the weeds. I used to spend hours with my sibs, just pulling up clover.”

“Sounds....boring.”

“It was,” she laughed. “I hated it. But I miss it too. Is that weird?”

“My mother was a terrible cook,” he shoved his hands into his pockets and Judy could imagine he was running his fingers over the edges of his badge. He did it all the time when they did long stints in the squad car as if his fingers were magnetized to it, “She stopped even trying by the time I was old enough to figure out that dinner wasn’t supposed to taste like charcoal. But sometimes I get a burnt fry or something in a meal and it makes me think about her. So maybe it’s like that?”

“Yeah,” she bumped her shoulder into his arm companionably. “I think it’s exactly like that.”

Their informant was a moist-eyed koala, who wore a battered fedora. He didn't have much information to give them, but he was clearly excited to be of any use at all. They let him talk himself out. Judy could pinpoint the second when Nick stopped listening and started eyeing up a game of darts in the corner.

"Thank you for time, Mr. Olan," Judy said solemnly. "Stay safe."

"I will, I will," he attempted to fade from view and knocked over a chair at a neighboring table. When he was finally gone, she dropped her face to the table.

"I wouldn't do that," Nick advised. "Unless you want it to stick there."

"Gross," she whipped back up. "Darts?"

"Do you know how?" He asked, but he was already licking his lips and picking up his drink.

"I think I can figure it out."

They waited for a rough looking group of hyenas to finish out their game, then took up the marks. The weight on the darts was a little off and took some getting used to, but soon they were in close competition. Which of course, meant Nick had to start playing dirty.

"She holds it aloft, contemplating her next move," he said in the same exact voice as a golf tournament announcer, "should she keep drawing out the anticipation? Will the target suddenly sprout legs and move if she doesn't?"

"You can try to distract me all you want," she huffed. "I'm still going to beat you."

"Oh?" He sniffed. "Want to make that a bet?"

"Depends, what are the stakes?"

"What do you want?" and he meant it to be flip, but Judy couldn't help take stock. She wanted a lot of things. Dreams were funny like that. You pinned one down and another five sprang up in it's wake.

"An entire day where I pick the music," she decided because some dreams were smaller and more attainable than others.

"Hm, fine. Then if I win, we get coffee at Beanz instead of the Donut Palace. For two days."

"Not sure how that's fair," she walked to the board and retrieved the darts.

"I think the suffering will be about even," he muttered darkly.

"It's sad how you lie to yourself," she pat his chest casually and held up a dart to him. "You know all the words to every top 40 song we hear on the radio."

"Knowing isn't enjoying," he plucked the dart from her and let it fly. It sank into the bullseye. "Sweet, sweet lattes here I come."

They jostled each other, timed sneezes and spilled drinks. Judy was particularly proud when she got him to miss the board entirely by burping the first half of the alphabet.

“Brothers,” she explained when he whirled on her.

“That,” he pointed at her with an oddly proud smile, “was disgusting.”

He won by a point and gloated over their food with gusto.

“You realize that means I have to pick you up ten minutes earlier, right?” She nibbled at a piece of cauliflower that was so sad and old, she wondered if she could sue for mistreatment of produce. “Beanz always has a line.”

“Good things come to those wait,” he sing-songed and pushed his extra ranch dressing in her direction.

“Thanks,” she dipped the cauliflower into it. “Always thought that was a terrible saying though.”

“Of course, you did,” his smile softened. “You hate waiting. Bet you’ve never done it a minute more than you were made too.”

“Yeah,” she agreed and shoved another piece of cauliflower into her mouth before she could betray herself. “Not a single second. Remember that the next time you want to sleep in. Like tomorrow. When I pick you up ten minutes early.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he waved her off. “You break the alarm clock one time...”

They split up outside the bar. He waved and she waved back and then began the walk back on her own. The city was never quiet, but it was late on a weeknight and most people had better things to do than loiter on the sidewalk. She felt weirdly alone in the bustling city, surrounded by people.

By the time she reached her apartment, she was seriously considering calling her parents, despite the late hour. They would talk to her. It would drive her crazy, but they would. She got as far as slumping into her chair and taking out the phone before she noticed the note on her desk. She remembered Nick messing around and picking things up, but she didn’t think he had time to write anything. But it was his handwriting.

Pick me up early tomorrow. There’s a place for rent on my side of town that’ll be in your budget. This place is too sad for a happy dumb bunny. -N

“You jerk,” she pressed her hand over the words and smiled.

She took off her badge slowly, glancing over the knotted cord. It was surprisingly complicated and when she tugged at it, it only got tighter. He’d taken real care to do it the right way. The badge she removed and clipped it onto her fresh uniform shirt for the morning. The chord she considered, before laying it next to the note. It had been useful after all. No point in throwing out something useful.

The next morning, she had the squad car to their meeting spot fifteen minutes early. He was already waiting on the bridge, sunglasses squarely in place against the early morning light. When they'd first partnered up, she'd asked him if he'd want to do the night shift once and awhile.

"Been working days long as I can remember," he'd shrugged. "Why mess it all up now?"

She hadn't pressed, but she did wonder if he was really comfortable in the harsh noon sun. If he would prefer the cool nights when his vision was sharper or least required less protection. Then again, he did look good with the reflective lenses, projecting an easy cool that she envied as much as coveted.

"No wonder you wanted two days," she said as he climbed into the passenger seat. "Equal pain my tail."

"Want to see the place or not?" He strapped himself in.

"My apartment is fine."

"If you like dirty closets."

"No fair. I've never seen your place, so I've got no ammo."

"It's....not ideal," he pointed outward. "Straight on now. Coffee. Then the joint."

"We'll be late," she sighed.

"Even the Chief doesn't get in as early as us, Carrots. Stuff the compulsive behavior for one morning. Promise it'll be worth it."

Beanz had the promised long line, but Judy could agree that her cappuccino was far tastier than usual.

"See? Do it my way and quality goes up."

"Less talking more drinking."

He gave her directions from the shop and the road led them away from taller buildings, but not quite into the quasi-industrial area he hung out in. There was a wide green patch, grass left unattended for a little too long. A mailbox stuck out proudly from the road. Nick hopped out and opened the box. He pulled out an envelope and from the envelope, he fished out a key.

"I know the realtor," he explained.

"Of course you do," she frowned. "So where is this place?"

"We're standing on it," he took a few steps and pushed a wide sheaf of grass out of the way. A pretty white door was behind it, apparently leading into the knoll itself. "Some local

hippies built the place a while back. Something about a return to the earth or what have you. They foreclosed and moved off. Maude's been using it as a rental property ever since."

The door gave into this fumbling with the key. A light switch revealed a neat staircase.

"Underground?" She looked back the bright summer day, then into the darkness. "Really?"

"Just come and look, huh?"

So she followed him down into what should've been a basement. Instead, it led into a very nice living room. It was already furnished, simple and plain colors that could be punched up with a few touches. There wasn't any sunlight, no view, but it was almost cozier without all that. The kitchen existed, already an improvement on her current location. It was large enough to cook for two or three people and the countertops gleamed with care. There were two bedrooms, each a decent size. A bathroom with a bathtub and shower.

Everything was at a decent height for her. Not perfect, but nothing much in the city was. Despite herself, she was already planning little modifications that would make life easier in the place.

"So how much is the rent?" she finally dared to ask.

"It's fifteen hundred a month," he said hesitantly.

"Ah," she tried not to feel let down. The place was really nice. Why had he even showed it to her if he knew it was out of her price range.

"If you were to live alone."

"Who else would I live with?"

"Me?" he gave her a sheepish smile. "I've always kind of liked the place and my lease is up and..."

"That's a lot of together time," she managed to say. "I mean...a lot. We already spend all day together, eat dinner together most nights. Won't we get on each other's nerves?"

"If we haven't by now, not sure how tacking on a few more hours would make a difference."

He was right. And if she refused, she'd either have to explain which would make things...awful. Or she could refuse and make something up that would hurt his feelings and make her feel terrible for lying.

"Let's do it," she summoned up a smile.

How bad could it be?

The answer was very bad.

Terrible.

Awful.

She would have stopped immediately if hadn't also been so great. Judy had never minded sharing her space, forced into it by the dozens of siblings she still had at home. If anything, she'd missed having someone else cluttering up the place and Nick was good at clutter without tipping into heinous mess.

They would come home together and figure out dinner over takeout menus or the freezer unless her parents had sent a care package. Then they just ate whatever was fresh over the sink, sticky fingered and guilty as children.

After dinner, Judy would pretend to read a book while Nick watched one of the terrible dramas that always sucked her in despite herself. They even got into Bake It, a mellow cooking competition that escalated into whirlpools of angst among the contestants as the season went on.

Once the last of the bakers had melted down in the confessional booth, Judy would say goodnight and go to bed. In the perfect dark of her cozy room, she could hear Nick lowering the volume of the television as he watched a late night show. If she stayed up long enough, he'd head to bed. She could predict each step to the bathroom, how long the water would run so he could brush his teeth and then his careful walk to his own room, trying to avoid the squawking plank in the hall.

Their bedrooms shared a wall. She could hear the springs of his mattress creak as he settled in.

Judy tried not to stay awake for it. It was too hard to listen to all the things happening ten feet away that she wanted to happen beside her.

"You really are the dumbest bunny," she told herself, curling around the second fat pillow she'd added to her bed for that purpose.

Chapter 2

They'd been working together for a year, living together for four months, when they got their first homicide case. The victim was only nineteen, a college student named Miranda Wine. An arctic wolf, Miranda had been found far from home in the Rainforest District. She'd been abducted and missing for four days, the crime crossing district lines which put in firmly into Precinct 1's territory.

"Never a good time for your first murder," the Chief had looked them over, before handing over the case file. "Don't make any promises to the parents. Let the liaison officer handle them as much as possible."

"Yes, sir," Judy took the file and opened it slowly.

The crime scene photos were horrifying. Nick leaned over her to get a look and she could feel the rumble of discontent in his chest. The paperwork trailed them to their desk. They had been assigned two abutting desks, but no one had attempted to make accommodations naturally, so one was more than large enough. If they sat in their opposing chairs, she couldn't even see Nick over the paperwork.

She hopped up onto the piecemeal booster seat and booted up her computer. Nick slid in beside her, flipping through file with his teeth gritted together. They opened the record with her typing and him dictating. The dry facts were minimal, evidence collection and autopsy reports still pending.

"We should look at the scene," she said tentatively.

"Yeah," Nick closed the file and pushed it away with the tip of his finger. "I guess we should."

Neither of them had the usual zip in their step and Judy didn't exactly speed. In the end, they got there whether they wanted to or not. It was a forlorn clearing, all the way at the root of giant trees. The constant flux of water had washed away most of the evidence before the team had gotten there and now, four hours after the find, they had to use the photos to find the spot at all.

"I don't think she was killed here," Judy leaned, trying to recount everything she'd learned. "No signs of struggle. A dump?"

Nick didn't respond. She turned and found him craning his neck upward. There was a line of sky cars that dipped fairly low right above them.

"That would account for the post-mortem trauma," he said faintly.

"Oh," she imagined the trajectory and nodded. "Yeah. You're right. Let's get up there and check the cars."

They called it in and a CSI team showed up before they got too far into the investigation. Then it was just waiting, eating lunch while other people did the close detail work. Usually they talked over their food, but today it was only the sound of chewing. Judy didn't know what Nick was thinking, but all she could see was Miranda's open eyes staring eternally at nothing.

"Officer Hops?" One of the techs held out an evidence bag. "We found this."

It was a business card, the glossy stock protecting the ink from being entirely drowned out.

"I know that joint," Nick reached over her to take the bag. "They sell secondhand electronics."

"On the up and up?"

"Far as I know," handing the bag back to the tech, one of his buttons snagged against her fur. She caught a whiff of his shampoo and mousse, a heady vanilla and cedar mix. "Sorry."

"No problem," she pushed him gently away.

They drove into a rundown neighborhood. Clusters of kids were playing on the sidewalks and talking on the steps of the buildings. The windows were open on most of the buildings, a flood of warring radio stations, conversation, and television rumbles poured out onto the street. The shop that matched the business card was on the corner. The posters in the window declared half off sales that had yellowed with age. When they pushed inside, dust kicked up to glitter in the slanted sunlight.

The shop was full of odds and ends, mostly mechanical. Sitting at the counter was a well dressed rat, leafing through a magazine and generally looking utterly bored.

"Hi, Franco," Nick smiled broad. "What are you still doing hanging around this junkyard?"

"I own this junkyard, Nicky my man."

They high-fived over that and hunkered down to exchange the small talk that Nick excelled at. It was much easier letting him take the lead on questioning while Judy discretely scribbled notes.

"Oh, yeah, Miranda!" Franco leaned over the photo that Nick slid to him. It was her high school yearbook shot and she looked so full of hope. "She started working here a few months ago. No good behind the counter, but she's a whizz at fixing things. Not due in for another few hours though."

"When did she last work?"

"Two days ago. She comes in the afternoons, around four."

"Do you know any of her friends? Any shysty characters?"

“Nah,” Franco slid the picture back to him. “She’s a good kid. Not much of a life, actually. Goes to school, goes to work, then goes back to the dorm as far as I know. Never mentioned any kind of parties or anything.”

“Anyone special in her life?”

“Not that she mentioned to me, but I wasn’t asking. Type of thing is not exactly appropriate employer-employee chatter,” frowning Franco glanced at Judy as if just now taking in the uniform. “She okay?”

“I’m sorry, Franco,” Nick said heavily and put the picture back into the file. “They found her this morning.”

“Found her? But she wasn’t-” Franco stopped. “Oh. That’s...that’s a real shame. She really was a good kid, Nicky.”

“Yeah. I bet she was.”

They took a more formal statement after that which Franco gave willingly, along with her employment record. Apparently, her parents didn’t know she’d taken on the job because she didn’t want to worry them about her finances. There was a scholarship that was keeping her afloat,

“But she needed a little extra for everything else. You know. Clothes, going to the movies, that kind of thing,” Franco had shook his head. “I really don’t believe it.”

Back on the street, the squad car had been colonized by a trope of ferret kids, jumping on the roof and sliding down over the glass.

“Hey!” Judy shouted and they ran off giggling, except for two of the girls. They hadn’t been on the car just lingering next to it.

“Are you really a cop?” One of them asked, eyes wide.

“Yeah, yeah I am,” Judy softened immediately.

“See, I told you!” She snapped at her companion, who shrugged. “I’m Izzy and this is my sister Penny.”

“Nice to meet you, Izzy.”

“I want to be a firefighter one day,” she said confidently.

“You know there’s a junior program at the middle school,” Nick leaned into the conversation.

“NICK WILDE! As I live and breath!”

“Mrs. Petunia?”

Judy caught a blur of silver and then Nick was swamped by a frail, white muzzled ferret, who apparently had tenacious grip.

“You stupid boy,” she said through tears, “do you know how hard I looked for you after your Mama died?”

“I-” Nick looked frantically to Judy. “I didn’t-”

“M’am, I appreciate your excitement, but I think he needs to breath,” Judy said quietly.

“And who is this?” Releasing Nick from her grasp, Mrs. Petunia turned her attention on Judy. “I recognize you. You’re the bunny cop.”

“That’s me,” Judy smiled weakly. “So you know Nick?”

“I was his history teacher,” she shook her head. “One of my brightest students. Wrote an essay on Zootopia’s founding fathers that I kept hanging in my room for years.”

“Is that so?” Judy said.

“One hundred percent,” Mrs. Petunia snapped as if Judy had been contradicting her. “My brightest student and then one day he just drops right off the radar. And I couldn’t get anyone to care. Poor boy loses his mother and not even social services could get themselves together enough to do right by him.”

“To be fair,” Nick cleared his throat, “I didn’t make it easy for anyone to find me.”

“I would’ve taken you in,” Mrs. Petunia took Nick’s hand. “I wanted to.”

“I was just your student, m’am. All due respect-”

“Damn right, with all due respect,” Mrs. Petunia sniffed. “You near broke my heart, boy.”

“I’m sorry,” his ears drooped as much as they were capable of doing.

“None of that,” Mrs. Petunia straightened her shoulders. “I don’t blame you. I blame the systemic failure of social systems at work in this city. Now. You’ll come in for a cup of coffee and tell me how you wound up in that uniform?”

“We’re on a case-”

“We’d love to,” Judy cut in. “If you don’t mind me tagging along, m’am.”

“Of course not. And you might as well call me Izzy.”

It was a revelatory lunch. Nick sat meekly at the table, hands wrapped around his mug, filling Izzy in on the particulars of his involvement with the Savage Conspiracy as it was now widely known. He deferred to Izzy at every turn and somehow wound up gathering the dishes, taking them to the kitchen to wash. When the sound of the water running started, Izzy turned on Judy.

“You convinced him to become a police officer?”

“He convinced himself. I just cheerlead.”

“Uh huh,” Izzy sat back in her armchair, surveying her. “You like working with Nick?”

“Yes,” she knit her hands together in her lap. “I do. Very much.”

“Good,” Izzy tilted her head slightly. “That’s good. He has a solid heart, that boy. Always did. Lot of ideals too.”

“I know,” Judy glanced through the doorway, saw Nick drying mug with tender care. “I’m glad we ran into you today.”

“So am I, girl, so am I. You two should come by for dinner sometime.”

They spent the rest of the day down at the college, interviewing students and professors in a general canvassing. Everyone agreed with Franco that Miranda was a studious, no nonsense type.

“What about the roommate?” Nick ticked through the list of names they’d gathered. “Ursala?”

“She dropped out a month ago, citing stress. Think she’d know something?”

“Gotta ask, right?”

A few phone calls and they had her current address. Judy stopped at a fast food joint on the way, ordering by rote. Nick held her sandwich out for her, so she could nibble through it without taking her hands off the wheel.

Ursula was waiting for them outside, wrapped up in a thick coat. Her antlers mantled out from under the hood. She had her phone in her hands, but barely seemed to be looking at it.

“Thanks for meeting with us,” Judy started.

“I know who did it,” Ursula said sharply.

“Oh?” Judy blinked. “Who’s that?”

“She was one of them,” the word curdled out of her mouth. “Dated out of species. Made my skin crawl.”

“Was she seeing anyone in particular?” Judy gritted out. She couldn’t bring herself to look at Nick, couldn’t even think about how he might be reacting.

“Yeah, a copybara. Ernst. She kept trying to introduce me, but I didn’t want anything to do with their perversion,” she sniffed. “You can find him at one of their club meetings. They call themselves ‘Equality Now’.”

Judy asked her more questions, more on autopilot than really engaged though her pen diligently moved across the page. She'd have to actually read the notes later. Nick, for once, said nothing at all.

"This has been a really long day," she sighed when they finally got back to the car.

"The longest," he agreed and they both stared out the windshield into the darkness.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" She finally asked.

"Hate crime? Yeah. Seems likely. I mean, it's possibly that the boyfriend axed her, but..."

"Yeah," she turned the key, let the engine rumble to life. "Let's run him down. If it was him, we can't afford to give him the time to clean up more than he already has."

"And if it wasn't..." Nick tapped his fingers against the dash.

"He could be in trouble too," she agreed.

It wasn't hard to find Ernst Maximilian. He was right where he should be, in his dorm room studying. He had a narrow single that reminded Judy of her former apartment. For a split second, she was overwhelmed with gratitude once more that Nick had found their new place.

"Good evening," Nick said somberly.

"It's Miranda, isn't it?" Ernst had a nice face and Judy felt for him as it crumpled. "I've been texting her all day and it's not like her not to respond. But I've been cramming for this big test, so I didn't- I should've known. I should've- What happened? Is she going to be alright?"

"I'm sorry to inform you," Judy began. Nick had already taken the bullet once today, "that Miranda Wine was found dead last night."

"No," he looked frantically between them. "No- she was planning a protest. I told her she had to have permits. I thought maybe you'd taken her and she needed bail or something. She's not dead."

"Her body has been positively identified."

"No," he sat down hard on his desk chair, sending a flurry of papers into the air. "I just talked to her yesterday afternoon. She's running for president of Equality Now next year and she's gonna win. People like her. She's a natural leader."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Maximilian. But we do have to ask you a few questions."

"Yeah, anything, whatever you need to know."

"You said you spoke to her yesterday afternoon?" Nick cut in. He walked Ernst through his day after that, jotting down names and numbers that made up a solid sounding alibi. Ernst had a night class and then he'd gone out see a movie with friends, even produced a ticket stub.

“Miranda doesn’t like action flicks,” he was starting to sound a bit numb. “I should’ve just stayed home. Gone to see her.”

“Her old roommate implied that you were in a romantic relationship,” Judy said as neutrally as she could manage.

“Yeah,” Ernst lifted his chin in challenge. “She was my girlfriend. We met in comp sci class semester and hit it off. There’s nothing wrong with it.”

“No, there’s not,” Judy said staunchly. “Is that why you joined Equality Now?”

“We were both already sort of members. Before me, Miranda only dated other wolves, but a few of them were girls, you know? Equality Now is all about marriage being about commitment instead of procreation,” some passion rose back into him, “we aren’t asking for anything that shouldn’t already be happening. The law says anyone can get married, but the clerks at all the municipal offices have the right to refuse and almost all of them do.”

“And Miranda was going to change that?” Nick asked clinically.

“Well, we all wanted to try. She was planning a big protest in a few weeks. First of its’ kind. We’ve all been living underground for a long time.”

Judy clicked her pen, open, closed, open. Underground indeed.

“Has anyone made threats?”

“Yeah,” Ernst sank back down in his chair. “There’s a group that calls itself Mates for Mates that claims it’s a social club, but basically they fund all the anti-interspecies bills that come up for debate and help elect people that’ll support them. There’s a campus branch. They protested outside our meetings for the last few months. A few times they’ve thrown garbage at us when we were leaving.”

“And the police weren’t called?” Nick frowned.

“No. The college isn’t exactly in favor of us either. Someone broke a member’s window a few weeks ago and no one’s even been by to fix it yet. There’s always the slurs, whispered around, you know?”

“Yes,” Nick nodded. “I do. So slurs, a broken window, and garbage tossing. What about threatening letters, emails or texts?”

“No, nothing like that,” he denied. “I can reach out to the rest of the group though. Ask them.”

“Please do,” Judy hesitated. “And if any of them would agree to speak to us that would be helpful.”

They said their goodbyes and ‘so sorry for your loss’ one more time before heading out.

“We could’ve just asked him to produce the names,” Nick pointed out. “If it’s a group where she’s close to everyone, we could have a suspect among them.”

“We could,” she looked down at her feet, noticed the layer of dust that held built up during the day. “But...”

“Yeah,” he put his hand on her shoulder. “Yeah, I hear you. Those kids are gonna have a bad enough tomorrow when the news hits.”

It was late. Too late to keep going. Their house was quiet, the single living room light they left on barely denting the darkness. Judy’s feet hurt and her eyes were strangely sore as if she’d been crying. The refrigerator hummed into the silence.

She looked in the direction of her bedroom, but couldn’t imagine falling asleep.

“There’s a marathon of Sell it or Fix it on,” Nick kicked his shoes off, sloughing away his uniform to reveal the plain white undershirt and black boxers he always wore underneath. He usually put on pajama pants when he sat around the house, but apparently he was out of juice and willing to slump on the couch without bothering.

“Perfect. I’ll make popcorn.”

“Fantastic,” Nick drooped his head against the back of the couch.

She changed out of her uniform, hanging it with a little less crispness than usual. Her nightgown and worn fluffy bathrobe encased her like a protective skin. The kitchen yielded up what she wanted. She took her spot on the other side of the couch, the bowl of popcorn slightly closer to her than him after long experience that he would mindlessly destroy the bowl before she got more than a handful otherwise.

The home improvement predictability washed over them both, flickering bright lights doing their best to shove all serious thoughts away. Judy watched hardwood floors cover over dank basements and marble countertops polished to gleaming perfection, but her mind wouldn’t stop churning.

“You’re quiet,” he observed.

“So are you.”

“Long day.”

“The longest,” she agreed.

The silence, previously comfortable, took on the uneasy thickness of an unasked question. They both looked at each across the gap of cushion and emptied bowl. She dredged up the remains of her courage and put words to the thought,

“So. Marriage equality.”

“Yeah,” he blinked long and slow at her. “Complex issue. Guessing it didn’t come up much on the carrot farm?”

“There were a few gay couples and no one gave them any trouble, but they never tried to get married as far as I know. Interspecies was definitely out though. One of my sisters dated a pygmy rabbit and it was anyone talked about in my family for months,” she shrugged. “She dumped him for a second cousin.”

“Uh huh,” he didn’t take the straight line she’d offered up which worried her.

“It doesn’t bother me,” she decided to chance. “I mean, not her marrying our cousin that was...unsettling, but the interspecies thing. Seems to me like it’s more of that drawing lines that don’t need to be drawn.”

“Oh?” he was still painfully non-committal and she wanted to shake him, but her big mouth was already running away with her.

“Sure. I mean if two people care about each other and they aren’t hurting anyone, why is it any of our business? Why should a government official have the right to decline them based on their personal prejudices?”

“Good question,” he crossed his legs, feet up on the coffee table. Her mother would’ve murdered them both if she knew how often they used the low table as an ottoman. “Refusal of service is a right.”

“It’s a stupid right. I thought so the day we met and I think so now,” she fumed. “It’s just another layer of red tape that fear can hide behind.”

“Okay, okay,” he held out his hands. “Carrots, I’m not disagreeing with you.”

“I know,” she took a calming breath one after another. “I just...if this girl died over this...you saw how rocked that poor boy was. He loved her and he lost her because someone didn’t like her opinion.”

“We don’t know that,” he finally moved, reaching over popcorn to tug gently at one of her ears. “You’re gonna make yourself crazy over this, aren’t you?”

“Too late,” she grumbled.

“I figured,” he tossed the empty bowl neatly onto the table and moved in closer, rubbing his hand between her ears. “But you got to figure out a way to start compartmentalizing this stuff.”

“Like you do?” She asked, eyes closing a little. He had good hands, a soothing touch on his forehead.

“Okay, maybe not,” he allowed. “Only one of me is allowed in this partnership. It’s good that you care.”

"I'll have to keep quiet at the office about it though," she realized. "If the Chief thinks I'm too emotionally invested, he'll yank us off."

"Probably. If he'd realized the angle, he would never have given it to us in the first place."

"Why not?" she tilted her head back to study him, confused.

"Right," he scrubbed his free hand over his eyes. "Because...because look at us, Carrots. We're an interspecies partnership that lives in each other's pockets. People would start pointing fingers pretty damn quick if they knew. Say we had an agenda."

"But we-" she stopped, really looked at how he was hiding his expression away. How he'd stopped to think. To make up a reason. To cover up what he meant to say. They did live in each other's pockets and she knew him well now.

She looked around their home, the den/burrow he had found for them. The little touches that had sprung up of their lives intertwining. Shared space, shared job, shared lives. She'd imagined herself alone in her longing to close what little gap remained between them. It had been easier to think it wasn't possible. That they would never have to have talks like this because there was no reason to do it.

It had been so much easier and so very much harder. To see him, be near him, to talk to him for hours everyday and pretend that none of it touched her. There was so many other things to deal with. They didn't need the complication.

"If you think any harder, a gear is going to come loose," he gave her a wry half-smile.

"Shut up," she grumbled.

"I'm serious, Jude. Just watch the nice people tear up their house and each other. Don't think too hard."

She tried to follow his directions. He hadn't moved from beside her, the steady rise and fall of his chest lulling in it's own way. Slowly she let herself collapse against him. His hand slid from her hand to her shoulder, but his attention never wavered from the man ranting about chrome fixtures.

Complications. She let her eyes fall shut. They could wait for tomorrow.

Vaguely, she was aware of a blanket descending around her some time later. It chased away the threatening chill, but then her pillow started to move and she made an annoyed noise.

"Fine," Nick huffed. Her resting place stopped quaking, "You win. Stubborn is what you are, Hopps. Pure stubborn through and through."

"Mhm, quiet sleeping time now."

There would be time for shame in the morning.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains descriptions of physical wounds.

Morning snuck up on her and she woke to find her head on Nick's lap and his tail in her face. Her mouth was dry, but her head was clear. She turned onto her back and found herself staring at the underside of his jaw, the tip of his tongue lolling out a little. It wasn't his most flattering angle, but it was weirdly endearing.

She sat up slowly, trying not to jar him awake and reached for her phone. It flashed her the time. Not late, but getting close if they actually wanted to get a reasonable start to the day. Stretching, her shoulder popped. Then she turned and gingerly poked at him.

"Up and at 'em, Officer Wilde."

"No," he grunted, rubbing a hand over his eyes. "I refuse."

"You don't have to shine, but rising is mandatory," she got to her feet and picked up the popcorn bowl and loaded it into the dishwasher, then started the coffee machine. She watched as he stood and then gave himself a hard shake, fur sticking out in every which direction.

"My back is mad at you," he informed her, stalking over to stand at her side staring at the pot as if he could force it to brew with his mind.

"Sorry?" she offered. "You make a good pillow."

"My dreams have all been realized."

The pot produced a fine dark roast and he poured them both tall cups topping her off with milk and filling his own with sugar. They leaned against the counter like it was any morning, Each with their drink and their early waking thoughts. She waited through her entire mug. Waited for him to take the last sip which he always ended with a soft sound of satisfaction. Waited for him to give up the prop, setting the mug into the dishwasher and turning to take hers.

She gave it to him, watched him upend her favorite 'Dig It' mug with care and practice, so that it wouldn't collide with the others in the washer.

Waited for him to turn, empty handed.

"Nick," she said gently.

“Yeah?”

She pushed herself up so she could sit on the counter, bringing her eye to eye with him. Very slowly, so her intentions could not be misread, she reached for the sleeves of his undershirt. It folded soft in her hands and she tugged him forward. He moved, slow and careful into the vee of her legs.

They studied each other across this new closed gap. She had never noticed the flecks of amber in his eyes before, unable to get close enough to tell. They scattered themselves among the deep brown, adding warmth.

“Thank you,” she started because gratitude was a good place to begin all things.

“What for?” He sounded a bit dazed.

“You found us a home. You lined it with things and memories. You sent me a lot of messages that I wasn’t ready to receive,” she exhaled slowly, “Sorry about that. I was purposely looking away.”

“Judy,” his breath was soft of her face. “What are you talking about?”

“You’d think I’d be over being ashamed or embarrassed,” she went on, “not of you. Never of you. Just...myself. Working against all these things that I’ve been taught to carry. About what we should and shouldn’t do, who we should and shouldn’t be.”

“I’m really really not following you,” he was frowning. “I thought we had to get ready for work.”

She kissed him gently, just the once, then pulled back to watch his expressive face conjugate it’s way through a few different states. Confusion, pleasure, disbelief, annoyance and circling back to confusion again.

“Is this about the case?” He asked as wary as the day they met.

“It’s about you and me,” she said firmly. “If you don’t want me, I can live with that. We can be what we already are for the rest of forever as far as I’m concerned. It’s a pretty good life and I’m happy with it. But if you do...I think maybe it could be better.”

“What if it doesn’t work?” he didn’t back away, but he did reach up to untangle her hands from his shirt. “What if we ruin what we’ve got?”

“You’re the gambler,” she smiled weakly. “Gotta roll the dice, right?”

“Not with you, Carrots,” he stepped back. “Never with you.”

“See, that’s the kind of attitude that sort of puts the odds in our favor,” she tried not to betray the anguish even that slight separation caused. The potential for rejection prickled over her, nasty and raw. “We’re good for each other. To each other. Because of each other.”

“The house always wins,” he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Then let’s be the house.”

“That’s not-” he leaned back against the fridge, studying her. “You know that’s not how it works.”

“If you don’t want to risk it, then we won’t,” she swallowed down the thick glut of emotion that rose in her throat.

“I need to think about it,” he looked away. “I know how much you hate to wait.”

“I’ll manage,” she slid off the counter. “Let’s get ready for work.”

“Just like that?”

“I like to keep busy while I wait. And we’ve got a murder to solve, remember?”

“Trust me, I haven’t forgotten for a second,” his voice went soft and strained and she nodded without turning back around.

In her room, she leaned against the closed door and stared at her made bed. There was one thing Nick had never really understood about her. She might be all go go go when it came to work and play, but in larger matters, Judy had the fortitude of camel. For the first twenty years of her life, she had waited for the chance to prove herself. For twenty years, she’s listened to a thousand people tell her to defer, to put aside, to reconsider. For twenty years, she had had to listen and wait. Always waiting for her chance to prove them wrong.

If she could wait through a thousand voices saying no, she could wait for one beloved voice to say yes. She could wait for him. Because he had not once denied that he wanted to be with her. That was hope enough to sustain a person like her for a very long time.

Determined to ease any awkwardness she might have introduced, she set the radio to his favorite station and wordlessly handed him his second cup of coffee when they got into the car.

“Thanks,” he slumped down in his seat, sunglasses firmly in place.

“I contacted the liaison officer,” she pulled out onto the street. “I figure it’s time we talk to Mr. and Mrs. Wine.”

Tundratown frosted over their windows. Nick reached over and ratcheted up the heat before she could start to shiver.

“They’re close to the border,” he flipped through paperwork. “He’s a security guard in midtown on an office building, night shift. He was clocked there there night of the murder all night. She does local patrols. She’s an admin for a local ice exporter. Day shifts. She was watching her sister’s kids that night. They have one other kid, older boy. David...wife and kids of his own and he lives out in the burbs. His alibi check out too.”

“Okay, good,” she rolled the facts around. “We’re going to have to ask them about Ernst.”

“Think they knew?”

“Only one way to find out.”

The liaison officer was waiting for them at the door. As Judy could’ve predicted, she was an arctic wolf herself.

“Officer James,” she introduced, hand shaking all around. “Their waiting for you inside.”

“Thank you, Officer. We’ll brief you on the details of the case afterwards, if you like.”

“No,” she gave them a faded, tired smile. “It’s better when I don’t know. Then I don’t have to work so hard to keep the information from the family. Just let me know what they know.”

“We can do that,” Nick agreed and then there was nothing to do, but go in.

The parents were on the couch in the living room. The house looked like one that was well-lived in, pictures hung by the dozens on the walls and dozens of throw pillows on every piece of furniture. The Wines were dry eyed, but otherwise weighted down by grief. They bent towards each other, hands interlocked.

“I’m sorry to meet you in such circumstances,” Judy took a seat across from them, perching on the very edge to demphasize how her feet didn’t touch the floor. “We do have to ask a few questions.”

“Of course,” Mr. Wine dragged his gaze up to hers. “Anything we can do to help.”

They took turns rattling off the standard questions. Alibis were repeated, Miranda’s character praised and round denials that anyone could ever want to hurt a single precious strand of fur on her beloved head.

“Were you aware that Miranda had a job at an electronics store?” Nick ventured.

“Yes, she only told us a few days ago,” Mrs. Wine shook her head. “We were upset. We really wanted her to concentrate on school, but she was a smart girl. Had a spreadsheet breaking down her expenses and everything. She was right. She needed the money and couldn’t afford to help her more than we already were. I thought it was good that she told us in the end. That she was so honest-”

She had to stop, taking a moment to regain her composure.

“We tried to raise our kids to know they could tell us anything,” Mr. Wine picked up.

“So you knew about her affiliation with Equality Now?”

“Yes, she was very proud of her activist work,” Mr. Wine looked past Nick to some memory beyond. “We knew she was going to meetings and that she’d met someone, but I wasn’t sure if it was a female wolf or...well. You know. Someone else. She’d had a girlfriend in high school. Nice pup. Good manners.”

“I liked her,” Mrs. Wine added. “But they ended things before college started.”

“I was worried for her,” Mr. Wine frowned, “but the more she talked about it, the more it seemed like a social club. There’s only a handful of them and they hadn’t done much more than meet up and talk. Harmless. She would’ve grown out of it.”

“Yes,” Nick’s pen made a deep divot in the page. “I can see why you might think that.”

“Is there anything else you think we should know?” Judy could feel her face freezing in it’s ‘neutral compassion’ face. They shook their heads. “All right, please let Officer James if you think of anything.”

Officer James herself was still poised at the front door, scanning the frozen landscape.

“Nice folk,” she commented as they came out.

“Yeah, it’s a shame,” Judy took off her cap and rubbed at the fur underneath. “They seem up to date on her life for the most part.”

“Didn’t meet the boyfriend yet,” Nick pointed out.

“Sure, but it hadn’t been that long. Nothing that unusual there.”

“Anything I should know?” Officer James lifted her brows, clearly eager to return inside.

Judy and Nick exchanged a look.

“Nothing that would change how you work with the family,” Judy determined.

“Good. Then you guys have a swell day.”

The car had been left running, a terrible waste of gas, but Judy was painfully glad for it when the wave of heat enveloped her. The radio crackled to life before she could more than hold her hands in front of the heaters.

“Hopps and Wilde? Come in Hopps and Wilde,” Clawhauser crackled over the line.

“Hey there, House of Claws,” Nick picked up the line, “What can we do for you?”

“Nick! Hey! Did you catch Bake It! the other night? I couldn’t believe how badly someone could mess up a quiche.”

“Right?” Nick relaxed into the seat, “Who puts mint in a savory dish?”

“Travesty,” Clawhauser clucked his tongue. “Annnnnnyways, we’ve got your reports from the morgue and the labs here. Autopsy is complete and some of the testing. Guess even a rush won’t get you too far around here.”

“Thanks, my man. We’re on our way in. Want us to pick you up something for lunch?”

“Would I! You guys always know the best stops. Whatever you’re getting is fine with me.”

“You got it,” Nick ended the transmission and turned to her.

“Tacos?”

“You’re a mind reader, Carrots.”

They debated the merits of various taco stands on the drive towards the precinct and of course, just stopped at the most convenient one like they always did. It put a dent in Nick’s wallet to pick up extra for Clawhauser, but Judy didn’t say a word about it. Clawhauser always came through for them and it was worth it to get the guy a couple of munchies to try to pay it back.

The files were already piled on their desk when they were done plowing through their lunch. Judy took a last sip of her soda, girding her mental loins for the autopsy report. Nick considered the chair.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she reached down tugged on his collar. “We sat next to each yesterday, day before and we will tomorrow.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he scrambled upwards, jamming himself resolutely beside her. She wasn’t any more or less aware of him than any other day. Tuning out her longing was already habit. “Bossy.”

“I am the senior officer,” she reminded him, in her haughtiest tone.

“And that means ever so much,” he flicked the folder open.

Mercifully, there were no photos. In silence they read through it, Judy waiting at the bottom of the page for Nick. Once, she had thought he was a slower reader, but time had revealed he was simply more thorough. Sometimes it drove her crazy, but he always found something she’d missed.

“The fall killed her,” he tapped the pertinent line. “Broken neck...maybe it was an accident? Defensive wounds though...”

“What if she was attacked and tried to get out of the skycar? If she was afraid for her life, she might’ve thought it was worth the risk.”

“Maybe,” he slumped back in his seat. “No drugs or alcohol in her system. Last meal was probably lunch and last sure sighting was at three. Sometime between three and nine, she goes to the Rainforest District. Time of death is estimated at nine fifteen....still plenty of people awake around then. How come no one saw anything?”

“Security footage is still being analyzed from the college and the skycars,” she was a fast typist, the words sprinting across the page. “We might get lucky and get a spotting there. It was dark, dark enough that most of us with diurnal vision wouldn’t have seen a thing. Anyone on night shift would’ve been at work already for the most part. Probably a near perfect time for it.”

“Still. Someone had to be out,” he shook his head. “I don’t buy this no witnesses thing. Her fur alone would’ve been visible. Not much in the Rainforest is that bright a white. It had to have triggered someone’s interest.”

“You want to do a door to door?”

“I’d say send some junior officers to do it...”

But they were still the most junior officers going. The Chief wasn’t going to lend them anyone else’s time when the cases were piling up as thick as they had been.

“Let me finish up my notes and we’ll get on it.”

“Thanks, Carrots,” he gave her a half-smile. “I know it’s nuts.”

“Nah, it’s a hunch. A good one.”

They spent the afternoon and a good part of the early evening knocking on doors. Working in concentric circles, they hit up everyone within a half mile of the skycar. Most people just shook their heads at the photo.

Except one lone okapi, who studied the picture for a beat longer.

“You know, I thought it was odd. I ran out to get some milk for the kids. Later than I usually would. My husband forgot to get some on the way home,” she tapped the photo. “This girl was getting into a skycar, but she didn’t have anything with her. No bag, no jacket, nothing.”

“Was she with anyone?” Nick leaned in and the okapi looked up, startled.

“No, she was alone.”

“M’am,” Judy tried hard to keep her voice even and calm, “was there anyone else getting into the cars?”

“Oh, maybe?” She frowned, staring down at Miranda’s face. “Yes! Yes, there was someone with antlers. I remember because they were broad and I thought that was unusual for the area. Most antlered folk don’t do well out here. Too many branches.”

“And when was this?” Nick prodded.

“About nine thirty? I’m sorry, I was in a rush. That’s really all I remember.”

“Thank you so much for your help,” Judy offered up her card. “Please call us if you think of anything else.”

They kept their cool until they were out of hearing range.

“A break!” Judy skipped, bouncing upwards for a fist bump that Nick obligingly gave her.

“You’re a genius, Officer Wilde.”

“Thanks, Officer Hopps. So I’m guessing we go back to Ursula.”

“Damn right, we do. What we really need is a warrant and one vague eyewitness isn’t going to cut it.”

Judy’s phone rang, flashing an unknown number. She put it on speaker.

“Hello?”

“Officer Hopps? This is Ernst Maximilian. There’s a few of us from the group meeting tonight and everyone’s agreed to talk if you want to come by.”

“Thank you, Ernst,” she checked in with Nick, who nodded, “where and when?”

The meeting was in cramped sub-basement of the engineering department. The room smelled like stale sweat and the overboiled coffee sitting in the corner next a picked clean box of donuts. A dozen or so college kids were slumped around a table, passing around pictures of Miranda. There were a few couples that Judy could figure right off the bat. Two female lions were sitting so close together that it was difficult to tell who’s hand belonged to who, a water buffalo had his chin tucked over the shoulder of a kangaroo of indeterminate gender, and lemur had her tail locked around a horse’s broad neck.

They all looked up when she and Nick came in. And started applauding.

“Um, hi?” She looked to Nick, but he was equally bewildered.

“Sorry,” Ernst approached from the left, ushering them into seats. “You guys are sort of-”

“Our heros,” the lioness’ chimed in unison.

“One big strike for the little guy,” the lemur put in. “Fox and bunny working together in a previously segregated workforce? We talk about you all the time.”

“Thank you for taking Miranda’s case,” the horse said quietly. “She was the best of us.”

“You’re welcome,” Nick smiled benevolently upon them and Judy could practically taste their interest as the turned to him. “We’d like you all to tell us about Miranda.”

It started with stories, like the parents, mostly flattering and kind. Being peers, some of them were a little more ribald, but nothing terribly shocking. As they warmed up, they started offering speculation about various members of Mates for Mates, who had harassed or bullied them at one point or another.

“Who got the rock through the window?” Judy asked and the lemur, Betty, raised her hand.

“I had to put duct tape over it. Every time I call maintenance they say it’s on their list,” she snorted. “As if.”

“Did you see anything?”

“No. I wasn’t home, thankfully. There was a note though.”

“Do you still have it?” Judy’s chest tightened. They were closing in somehow, she could feel it.

“Back at my room? I could go get it?”

“It’s dark, babe,” the horse tapped on her tail. “I don’t know if you should go out alone.”

“So she won’t,” Nick lifted his chin. “I’ll take you. The rest of you, keep doing your best to answer Officer Hopps questions. Anything you can remember has the potential to be useful.”

It was a struggle not to watch Nick leave. She kept her focus where it was needed.

“What do you know about Miranda’s old roommate?”

“That bitch,” one of the lionesses...Chloe, Judy decided after checking her notes. “She was the worst. Full of spite and vinegar. I think she was jealous of her anyway.”

“Jealous how?”

“She’d had her eye on Miranda,” Chloe sucked on her fangs in remember annoyance. “Used to try to steal all her attention. Dragged her to sorority meetings like Miranda gave a crap about herd shit...sorry, Jonesy.”

The horse, Jonsey apparently, waved the comment away.

“You think she wanted her romantically?”

“Definitely,” Chloe’s girlfriend cut in. “I could tell. She even came to a few of the meetings, but she wasn’t serious enough about the cause to stick with it. We talk about a lot of heavy stuff. Then Miranda and Ernst started getting friendly and she really disappeared.”

“She dropped out?”

“Flunked out,” Chole corrected. “She was in my sociology class and she never showed after the first day.”

“Same with our anthro class,” Jonsey put in. “It was like she got in and then thought she could just cost. Even tried to get my notes off me a week before the midterm like that was going to help her.”

“But she wasn’t a Mates for Mates member?”

“Nah, but she was boning one of them,” Chloe’s girlfriend said.

“No way,” Chloe turned to her, “you never mentioned it.”

“Wasn’t any of my business. I saw him walking her home. Big ole moose fella. Thought it was weird considering their whole species purest thing, but I guess reindeer and moose are

kissing cousins.”

“No,” Ernst said quietly, too quietly for anyone, but Judy to hear. “Not near close enough.”

“When did you see them?” Judy asked.

“Week before Ursula dropped out.”

“Did you recognize him beyond species?”

“He had a chemistry book with him, I think. It looked familiar.”

There wasn’t much meat on the bone after that, but they were all so eager to help that she let them keep at it. They started showing her their handouts, drafts for their supposed big rally. Though looking at their numbers, Judy couldn’t tell how Miranda had planned to have more than a sad looking picket line.

It was only when the hour mark went by that she started to get worried.

“How far is Betty’s dorm?”

“Fifteen minute walk,” Jonsey glanced at the clock. “Not this far.”

“Okay, can you give me some directions?” Judy gave them all a bright smile, sketching a quick map as Jonsey described the route. “Officer Wilde does get to talking. I’ll be back in three shakes once I track him down. Keep thinking.”

She walked calmly out the door and waited until she was out of sight to start running. Halfway to the dorm, she spotted Nick limping towards her. He was favoring his right leg and Betty was letting him use her as a living cane.

“Nick!” Judy was on him in an instant, hands wavering over the bloody tear in his leg.

“I’m okay, Hopps,” he said shakily.

“Who? How?”

“They must’ve seen us go into the building,” Betty started babbling. “They were waiting in the stairwell, in the dark. Big guys, three of them, and one of them had a knife, but Officer Wilde kicked their asses!”

“It was two,” Nick corrected. “They were wearing hoods, but one of them definitely had antlers. As soon as I took out my gun, they ran off. I don’t think they were counting on an armed officer. Suppose in the dark, they might’ve thought I was a security guard.”

“Why didn’t you radio me?”

“Wasn’t sure if they’d left or not. Figured we’d get out in the open where they’d be too afraid to try again with witnesses.”

It was rational, but she still wanted to shake him.

“Okay,” she took a second to take stock. “I’m going to call for an ambulance. Betty, are you hurt?”

“No, m’am.”

“Good, that’s good. Call someone from the group, let them know they should all leave together tonight and no one should be alone in their rooms. Sleep on floors if necessary.”

“I don’t need an ambulance, Carrots,” Nick transferred his weight to her shoulder, letting Betty free to make her phone calls.

“If I stitch you up, it’s going to scar. I’m not that good at first aid,” she got him over to a bench, easing him down onto it. The blood was still weeping, a slow shower of droplets. “And they need to get a bucket of disinfectant on to you.”

“I hate hospitals,” he grouched.

“Yeah, well. Suck it up, Wilde,” she got on the horn. “Officer injured, send a bus to Clover Quad on the southeast campus of Brook College.”

“Bus is on it’s way,” dispatch chirped, “seriousness of injury?”

“Jagged stab wound,” she considered the blood. “Send a CSI team as well. Attack is linked to a homicide.”

“Good thinking,” he laughed weakly. “Damn idiots probably stabbed me with the same knife they used on her.”

The thought of Miranda’s blood mixing with his on a sharpened blade brought bile to her throat.

They waited there under the bleak streetlights, listening to the sirens growing closer, to Betty’s voice frantic and scratching. They waited in the still of the night for all the motion yet to come.

Chapter 4

“You can’t go in there, m’am,” the nurse said patiently. “Family only.”

“But he doesn’t have family!” Judy stood up on her tiptoes, trying to at least see into Nick’s room. The cut had apparently been deep enough to warrant overnight observation and the last she’d seen of him he’d been wheeled away from the E.R. to get admitted. “Just me.”

“I can’t let you in,” the nurse repeated.

“I’m his partner.”

“You can come by tomorrow morning to pick him up for discharge.”

“But-”

“Go home, Carrots,” his voice floated down the hall, ten feet or a hundred away, it barely matter.

“Shut up, Wilde! You got stabbed, no more decisions for you tonight!”

“M’am,” the nurse grunted. “Other patients are trying to sleep. Please.”

“Sorry,” Judy had lost her cool and any advantage she might’ve had. She could practically see the nurse slotting her into the ‘hysterical rabbit’ niche in her head. Reluctantly, Judy trudged away, picking up her hat from one of the crappy plastic chairs. She could linger here all night, being a pest, but she was too tired to fight.

The ride home was blurry and strange without Nick at her elbow. The music played without commentary. Their house was too quiet, robbed of his light steps and heavy presence. Only her utter fatigue warded off a sleepless night. As it was, she woke too early. To her choking fear, she found blood on her hands as she stepped into the shower. It took her a long terrifying minute to remember reaching for him. His blood.

It washed rusty off her and swirled down the drain along with grit and dust. She washed twice to be sure it all got scraped away, trying to force the memories along with it. Their job was a dangerous one, she reminded herself. They had chosen it. They embraced it.

She stayed in the shower until the water ran cold.

In the kitchen, she dug out the last of the fresh carrots from the fridge and mindlessly chewed through it as she watched the coffee brew. Fishing out a disposable travel cups, she filled them and grabbed one of Nick’s protein bars to put in the glove compartment. He liked to have one on hand.

Considering where the cut had been, she realized that his pants were probably in tatters. He wouldn’t want to pull on his blood spattered shirt either. With hesitance, she went to his room and stood on the threshold. She had never actually stepped inside though she was fairly sure

he'd poked around through her things. Though she'd never say it out loud, she understood that there were some instincts that neither of them knew how to repress. For Nick, it was a territorial thing, knowing the lay of the land without much regard for boundaries.

She knew how it looked, of course. He usually left the door open. It was decorated far more sparsely than the rest of the house, just a single photo of his mother on the bedside table next to an unusual green glass lamp. There was a single armchair that mostly served to hold up clothes that been worn, but weren't deemed dirty enough for the wash yet. His laptop sat on the foot of his rumpled bed, sleeping with a casually blinking light.

There was a painting on the wall where a window might otherwise be. She had never gotten a chance to really examine it. Curiosity finally drew her inward. The room smelled like him, his shampoo and general faint musk that intensified toward the end of the day. From the doorway, she could tell the painting was a watercolor, a smeary scenery, but not of what.

Up close, she was able to piece together a meadow, dotted with flowers and a broad blue sky. A white door stood upright in the grass, crisper and cleaner than the other lines. It stood firm against a breeze that bent the grass.

It was their front door. Their house. Had he painted it? She'd never seen him create anything other than popsicles. If not, had he found someone and commissioned it? Boggled, she left the painting behind and turned her attention to the more practical matter of getting him wearable clothing.

His closet was a jumble, but she managed to find a soft pair of pajama pants, a t-shirt, and a sweater. She hesitated at his underwear drawer, then gave herself a stern shake. It was all clean clothes. Without looking too closely, she plucked out the pair on top and speedily folded them into the pants and shirt.

Armed to the teeth, caffeinated and prepared, she set out. The sun was just creasing the horizon, only morning on the slightest of technicalities. On her way, she radioed in for updates and passed most of the ride listening to Clawhauser's breathless news and concern for Nick.

"We passed the hat and we're sending a care package to the house," he told her. "Tell him we're all doing our best."

"He knows," she assured him, warmed by the enthusiasm.

When she got to the hospital, Judy very carefully avoided garnering attention. A few judicious flashes of her badge and ducking behind tall desks got her into the previous off limits hallway. After that, it was a piece of cake to find Nick's room and slip inside. It did hold a second bed, thankfully empty.

The room was dark, but light poured in from the hallway and peeked between the curtains. She could make out the rise and fall of his chest under the thin blanket. The injured leg was exposed, a stripe of fur shaved away to make way for a parade of black x's. The skin beneath his fur was a trembling pink, too vulnerable to belong to him.

“There’s my girl,” he slurred, eyes so barely open she could only make out a thin line between eyelids.

“They got you on the good stuff, huh?” She took his hand between hers.

“Uh huh,” he closed his eyes again. “I had some very weeeeird dreams. Leg doesn’t hurt though.”

“That’s good. I brought you coffee.”

“Awwwww,” he smiled upwards at nothing. “You’re the best.”

“Damn right,” she didn’t dare give him the cup in this condition. It would keep.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he opened his eyes again, this time too wide in overblown concern. “You gotta get that Ursula to start talking.”

“She’s being picked up as we speak,” she assured him. “Apparently an officer getting injured in the line of duty makes the warrants run hot and cold. They’re gonna save her for me, let her sweat it out a little first. So I have time to get you settled at home.”

“Can’t go home,” he frowned, eyebrows knitting in confusion. “We gotta close this case.”

“We will, but you need a day to recoup at least. Someone can come out with me to follow up on anything Ursula gives me.”

“Someone isn’t me,” he said staunchly. “No one else has your back like I do.”

“I know, but they aren’t gonna throw me into the fire either.”

“I’m never getting stabbed again,” he vowed with a toddler like surety. The drugs must’ve been very good indeed. “Stupid thing to do.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

He drifted off again and she spent a dull half hour watching him breath while repressing a very urgent need to beat someone until they bled. Preferably someone responsible for all of this, but if not, any felon would do.

A doctor wandered in eventually, clipboard in hand and a yawn on her lips.

“Let’s see then,” she paid no mind to Judy, inspecting Nick’s wound and nodding to herself. “Good...good...mm.”

“Is he going to have any long term effects?” Judy asked.

“Hm? Oh. No,” the doctor smiled vaguely. “It’s a good place to get stabbed if you must. Missed anything vital and only nicked a tendon instead of severing it. He’ll have to be careful with it for awhile. I’ll prescribe painkillers. Watch for skin getting redder or any seepage. That could mean infection and he’ll need to see someone right away. Hmmm...yes. There are

some oils that can ease the tightness appearance of the scar. He might not be able to grow fur back at the spot, but I don't think it will be too visible."

"Visible is good," Nick was awake again, slightly more clear eyed again. "How else will people know I'm a badass."

"I don't like badasses," the doctor said primly, "they make my job harder. I'll let the nurse know you're ready to be discharged into your friend's care. Stop by the pharmacy here to get your scripts filled."

Discharge wasn't quite that simple. The merry-go-round of last minute tests, paperwork and long pauses lasted forever. Nick ducked into the bathroom and changed into street clothes a full hour before they were finally released back into the wild.

"That was the worst," he got out of the wheelchair to limp the few feet to the car. In the light of day, he looked bad. Haggard and every one of his thirty-two years, plus a few extra for good measure. "Ugh. Sun."

She handed over his sunglasses and the protein bar. As he gleefully bit into his breakfast, she turned the car towards home.

"Woah, woah, no way," he protested. "We've got a suspect to question."

"You look like you just went ten rounds in a boxing ring," she pressed on the gas. "And you're out of uniform. You're going home."

"Aw, c'moooooon."

"That pain killer is going to quit working in about ten minutes and you're not going to thank me if it's in front of the Chief. Or worse, the suspect."

"So what? I just gotta stay at home and wait for you to call like a teenage girl the week before prom?"

"...yes. Hopefully with slightly less whining, though I'm starting to lose hope."

"Mean is what you are. Plain old mean."

By the time they reached the house, he was obviously in pain. He leaned heavily on her as they negotiated the stairs and all, but collapsed onto the couch.

"Here," she gave him two white pills, "that'll help. I'll get something together for you to eat and drink. You better only get up to pee. Got it?"

"Got it," he mumbled miserably, dry swallowing the pain killers.

She got everything she could think of, piled a blanket over him and turned on the television, putting the remote into his hand. All she wanted was to stay right where she was to make sure he took it easy.

“You gotta go,” he commanded, waving her away with the remote. “Miranda needs you.”

“Yeah,” she straightened her spine, “okay. Text me if you need anything. Try to sleep.”

“Kay,” he yawned, jaw cracking. “I think I’ll manage somehow.”

The precinct was buzzing when she walked in the door and she could sense questions waiting behind closed lips as they watched her go by. It would have to wait. Nick was right. Miranda needed her and she had to see that through before she gave into the dubious joys of her colleagues’ curiosity.

“They’ve got her in room 5b,” Clawhuaser directed. “You want this?”

He offered her a donut and she looked at it for a long second before taking it.

“Yeah, I really do,” she smiled at him and took it. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he beamed back, pleased to be of use and she could have kissed him for being so utterly familiar in a suddenly unfamiliar world.

She devoured the donut on her way to interrogation. Rob was standing guard, the rhino who had given into her fist bump on her first day. He said nothing, but offered her a crisp head nod and opened the door for her.

Ursula was sitting at the table, a paper cup sitting in front of her. She looked up as Judy entered, taking her measure and then abruptly started to cry.

“I thought no one was ever coming,” she blubbered. “They said they were going to leave me in here.”

“Did they?” Judy asked mildly, taking the other seat. Someone had even brought in an accessible chair for her, multi-rung and high, so that she didn’t need a booster seat to look Ursula in the eye.

“They did!” Ursula wailed and Judy waited her out. She couldn’t tell if the tears were real and by that time, she barely cared.

“I need to ask you some questions, Ursula. You’re not under arrest, but anything you say in this room will be recorded and could be used against you in the court of law. Do you understand?”

“I didn’t do anything!” She protested.

“Do you understand?” Judy asked again.

“Of course I do! But there’s nothing to ask. I don’t know why I’m here.”

“Can you recount your activities and movements for the last four days?”

“Why?” Ursula sniffed.

“It’s best if you just answer for now. Do your best for me and I’ll try my best for you, okay?” Judy smiled lightly. It was Nick’s trick. To promise nothing and make it sound like everything.

“Okay,” Ursula’s hands twisted together.

“The last four days. Start with the morning of the 3rd.”

“I went to work. I got a job at The Chasm after I dropped out. My cousin works there. I mostly work the register or the dressing room. I got in at ten and worked until six. When I got off, I went straight home and had dinner with my parents.”

The recital of facts lined up with her previous statements. Her parents were her only alibis for the night of the murder and they didn’t actually see her after seven. She claimed she closed the door to her room so she could watch a movie without disturbing them. The next few days sounded like mirror repeats. Very pat. Very simple. And through it all, Ursula played with a silver ring on her right middle finger. Twisted it around and around and around.

“Thank you,” Judy gave her a warm smile. “That sounds like a very lonely life, Ursula. No nights out with friends?”

“What friends?” The girl snorted, a little bitter now. “Everyone I knew from high school has moved on and everyone at the at stuck up college forgot about me as soon as I left.”

“Every one?” Judy pressed. The ring went around and around.

“Yeah. Everyone.”

“Now, we both know that isn’t true,” she said carefully. “Who gave you that ring?”

“My mom,” Ursula put her hands quickly into her lap.

“You think if I ask her to describe it she’d be able to?”

Ursula stared sullenly into middlespace.

“Listen,” Judy leaned forward, “I know what it is to be alone. I know that you might’ve been told that if you give them up then they’ll leave you. But Ursula, you don’t know how lonely it can get. Without another suspect, you’re going to get prosecuted for this and even if you don’t get found guilty, the press is going to make it sound like you are.

“I don’t want you to go down for someone else’s crime,” Judy put as much sincerity into it as she could, “I really don’t. No person on this earth is worth the sacrifice of the rest of your life. And if they were, they would be a good enough person not to need you to do it.”

“I-” Ursula started and stopped.

“I didn’t want to show you this,” Judy sighed and opened the file. “But I think you need to see it.”

She laid the crime scene photo in front of Ursula, the brutal sprawl of Miranda's body laid out in technicolor.

"Oh!" Ursula put her hands to her mouth.

"You may not have liked her or what she did, but she was just nineteen like you. She had her whole life ahead of her. Maybe she could've become something else. Maybe she would've changed her mind. You'll never know now because someone stole that from her. Stole all of her choices," Judy looked away, "Someone you think is worth protecting snuffed out the life of a girl just like you. They looked into her eyes, saw her afraid and helpless and pushed her to her death."

"No!" Ursula blurted. "He said it didn't happen like that. They were struggling and she fell!"

"That's possible," Judy allowed. "If that's the case then things may go differently for him, but Ursula, you need to tell me right now who he is. I can't help him if I don't know him."

"She helped me unpack my stuff," Ursula looked at the phone, eyes wide and wet now. Real tears. "I forgot about that. The first day. I was so freaked out, being paired up with a wolf, but she...she just started asking me where I wanted to put stuff."

"Who did this to her?" Judy tried hard to keep her voice level. She wanted to beg Ursula, to shake or pummel the name out of her. "Who did this to the girl that unpacked your things?"

"His name is Drew," Ursula shoved the photo away. "Drew Vine."

"Your boyfriend?"

"Yeah. Sort of," Ursula stared at the floor, at the ceiling, anywhere, but at the photo. "We met in a class. I thought...I thought at first he was interested in Miranda which I thought was gross. He kept asking me questions about her. But he asked me out instead after a few days. He was nice."

"Was?"

"When I dropped out, he stopped talking to me for a long time," she pressed her lips together. "I thought he was like the rest of them. But two weeks ago he showed back up out of the blue. At The Chasm. Took me out to a nice dinner and told me he was sorry. Gave me the ring. Told me it was a promise."

"A promise for what?"

"An engagement ring," Ursula took a shuddering breath. "He said that he loved me. He does. He loves me."

"When did he tell you about what he was planning?"

"There wasn't a plan! He made a mistake. He called me after, he was practically in tears...he was just going to talk to her. Take her to a Mates for Mates meeting in the Rainforest District,

so she could understand their perspective. But she changed her mind about going on the way there. She went crazy, started fighting him off. He was just protecting himself.”

“What did he ask you to do?” Her heart thudded off kilter, off beat. She hoped Rob had already made the call.

“Just to tell them about Ernst. I didn’t lie,” Ursula said firmly. “I told the truth.”

“And that might save you,” Judy took the photo off the table and tucked it back away. “Does Drew own any weapons?”

“He collects knives,” Ursula slumped forward.

“What about a gun?”

“Maybe? I don’t know.”

“Has he ever accidentally or intentionally hurt anyone else?”

“No!”

“Does he have any friends who might have?”

“Um. Well, there’s Rudy. He’s also a Mates for Mates guy. I think he got Drew into it. They hang out a lot. I never liked him though. He’s big for a boar and he likes to kind of stand behind people and make them uncomfortable.”

A knock echoed through the room.

“Excuse me,” Judy jumped off her chair and opened the door. Rob stepped back, closing the door.

“We’ve got his current address and likely location,” Rob rumbled. “Chief is waiting for you in his office. Double speed, Officer Hopps.”

She took off, file a ragged wing under her arm. The Chief was talking to an antelope in a suit outside of his office.

“Sir,” Judy skidded to stop.

“I’ve assigned Joey and Elaine to you,” he pointed toward the front of the building. “They’re waiting for you outside. Go get him, Officer Hopps.”

Someone had moved her squad car to the ‘No Parking’ zone in front of the building. Jenkins and Elaine were idling right behind her and gave the ‘ready’ signal as soon as appeared. The radio crackled alive with Elaine’s voice:

“Address is 5-2-2 Winnebago Lane. Standalone house. Three other residents known.”

“Roger,” she hung up the radio and put her foot on the gas.

It was a ten minute drive even with sirens blaring and a lead foot. Halfway through, she fumbled with her phone and put in on speaker.

“S’up?” He answered after too many rings.

“Sorry, did I wake you?”

“Are those our sirens?” He sounded instantly more alert. “Where are you?”

“I’m getting our guy. Thought you might want to know.”

“Yes!” His yell splintered the air, breaking apart some of the tension lodged between her shoulders. “Was it Ursula’s boyfriend?”

“How’d you know?”

“Had some time to think this morning while the talk shows were on. She wasn’t really the right size for the one who stabbed me. And she was so eager to misdirect us onto Ernst.”

“Right again, Officer Wilde.”

“Always,” he huffed in satisfaction. “Hey, do me a favor and be careful, okay?”

“Yeah,” she kept her eyes on the road and not on his picture on her phone. It was a good one, taken in blurry profile their first day on patrol. He’d been smiling broadly, the wind ruffling through his fur. “I can do that.”

“Good. Can’t have both of us laid up at the same time. Bad for the image. Remember, gotta do it twice as well-”

“For half the credit,” she finished. Their mantra. Not the most uplifting, but the theory was sound. “I’ll be careful.”

“Call me the second you can afterwards. Take a picture of him in handcuffs.”

“You got it. Go back to sleep.”

“As if I could,” he huffed.

The line stayed open. The turn for Winnebago Lane approached.

“Nick-”

“Yeah,” he sounded infinitely tired all of a sudden. “I know, Carrots. I know.”

“Talk to you soon.”

She forced herself to hang up.

The house was plain enough. White paint, blue shutters. She killed the sirens and crawled the last half mile, parking silently in front of it. The backyard was narrow and on the other side,

she could see the other squad car. Elaine came around the back of the house, the bulk of her elephant flesh belying a graceful stealth, and gave her a nod. Judy got out and together they approached the front door.

“Joey has the back exit. There’s definitely someone home, first floor. Only one shadow, but could be more.”

“Could be armed,” Judy stared at the front door.

“Could be,” Elaine gave her a toothy smile. “That’s the job, ain’t it? Let me do the knocking.”

Elaine’s enormous fist collided with the wood door. It splintered a little with the force.

“Police!” Judy shouted. “Open up.”

They waited, listening to someone rummaging and then the door opened a crack.

“Can I help you?”

“Are you Drew Vine?” Judy asked.

“I don’t have to answer your questions.”

“You don’t,” Elaine agreed, then held up a piece of paper for him to look at. “But you do have to let us in. We’ve got a warrant to search this house.”

The door opened another foot, revealing Drew. He looked very young, this reindeer boy in his college sweatshirt and jeans. He reminded Judy of one of her younger brothers, still all too long limbs and big eyes. Not the picture of a murderer.

“Drew Vine, you are under arrest for suspicion of homicide,” Judy recited as Elaine took out her handcuffs. “Anything you say after this point may be used at any point in the legal process. If you proceed in a calm and cooperative manner-”

“Fuck you, pervert lovers!” Someone shouted off their left.

A loud bang cracked through the air.

“Gun!” Elaine shouted and drew her own, aiming it up the stairs. Drew slipped by her and ran into the kitchen. “Get him, Hopps! I’m after the shooter.”

Judy ran. She saw Drew reach for the kitchen knives, all gleaming their block. In the curious sharpened state of alert, she noticed the glaring empty slot.

“We’re doing this for your own good!” Drew shouted, hand closing around the hilt of the blade.

Judy pulled out her taser and triggered it. She watched dispassionately as Drew went down hard.

“Nicely done,” Jacobs busted through the back door and plucked Drew off the floor.

“Where’s Elaine?”

“The shooter!” Judy turned and was off again, leaving Jacobs to cuff Drew.

The upstairs was a maze of doors and dirty laundry. Elaine was standing at the end of the hall, pressed to the wall. She lifted her chin in the direction of the door beside her. For a brief, sour second, Judy wished with everything she was that it was Nick there instead of Elaine. Nick would know their language, could communicate a plan in winks and fingers.

But Judy had survived without Nick for many years. She pointed to Elaine and the ceiling, then herself and the floor.

You go high, I’ll go low.

Elaine nodded once, sharply.

Count of three? Judy mouthed.

Another nod.

Then it was one. Two. And three.

The door fell to pieces as Elaine kicked it in. She turned gun raised and Judy skidded in low, hugging the floor. Unnoticed by Rudy, who had an enormous rifle aimed at Elaine’s head. Her tasar was downstairs and drawing her gun would only add to the danger in the room. Judy had microseconds and only what she had readily available. She bit his ankle as hard as she could, sinking in her teeth and not letting go even as he lashed a hard kick into her chest.

It was enough time for Elaine to shoot, hitting him in the meat of the right shoulder. He dropped the gun and that was the only window Elaine needed to have him up against the wall. Judy released and fell a foot or so to the floor. A foul copper taste spread over her tongue.

“Remind me not to wrestle you at the next training day,” Elaine said mildly as she pinned Rudy into handcuffs. “You okay?”

“I think he broke a rib,” she didn’t really feel the pain yet, but there was a faint warning tingling through her. Pain was coming when the adrenaline wore off.

There was no hospital for her luckily. Just a lot of questions and an EMT looking her over while they were asked. Ribs got bandaged and blood wiped away from her face and mouth. Warnings were given to get a blood draw in a few days to make sure she hadn’t picked up anything. Elaine and Joey took both boys down for booking. The Chief called her as the EMTs were packing up.

“We need you back here tomorrow morning,” he grumbled. “And that partner of yours if he can make it. There’s a lot of paperwork at the end of a homicide and the two of you can laze around doing it until you’re ready for field work again.”

“You got it, boss.”

She groaned as she got behind the steering wheel, the sharp ache in her ribs starting to make itself known

There were calls she had to make. Ernst. The parents. Someone needed to tell them that an arrest had been made. She picked up the phone and sent a single text.

on my way home

Someone else could make the phone calls. Probably would since she was supposed to be off duty. It wasn't as if they were anywhere near done. The running was over, but helping the D.A. build a case would take weeks more. She could rest for a little now. Just for a night.

The house was quiet when she came down the stairs. The television was off, the dishwasher on. Lights were mostly off, only a faint glow from the hallway illuminating the living room. Nick was stretched out on the couch, face tipped toward the door and his phone still resting in his hand though he was sound asleep.

Judy surveyed the scene. Quietly, she took off her vest and hat, slithered her belt out from it's loops and left it all on the side table. Then carefully so as not to jar his leg, she climbed over him and rested her head on his chest. He went on sleeping, brought low from his usual alertness by the betraying pain killers. She could hear his heartbeat, steady and so much slower than her own.

Surrendering to the inevitable, she tugged a little at the blanket, drawing it over them both. Plucking his phone out of his hand, she set it on coffee table, then closed her eyes and fell asleep between the rise and fall of his breath.

Chapter 5

“C’mon, Carrots, get off. Food’s here.”

“Food?” She felt blurry from the tip of her ears to the fuzz in her mouth.

“Ordered by app, so you could finish your little nap,” he wagged his phone at her. “Farmer’s Express delivery waiting at the top of the stairs.”

“I’ll get it,” she managed to get to the floor without jarring him or putting her hands somewhere awkward. “You’re not supposed to move.”

“Not a problem. You’re a good paperweight.”

The delivery girl was still waiting patiently with the heavy bags. It looked like he’d ordered most of the store and then some. Judy tipped heavily and carried everything back downstairs. Nick had righted himself, his good leg tucked beneath him and the bad stretched out to prop on the coffee table.

“This is more than even we can demolish,” she commented lightly as she pulled container after container from the bags.

“Keep us for a few days. Got a few emails while you were snoozing and it sounds like we’re gonna be snowed in with paper for awhile,” he found the plasticware and handed her a fork, “They just started questioning Drew and Rudy. CSI is going over the house with a fine comb and their computers are in the labs.”

“Did they say when they’d have a preliminary report?” she speared a few roasted zucchini slices.

“Tomorrow afternoon. We’re up the line on priority on this one since it looks like it’s definitely a hate crime now. And then there’s this,” he handed her his phone, the Daily Chew pulled up on the browser.

Fight Fire with Signs: Protest Announced by Equality Now in Memorial of Miranda Wine

Below that was a good picture of Miranda looking young and unharmed. The article quoted Ernst, but also some members of the broader Equality Now group. None of them produced any solid sound bites.

“They’re framing it wrong,” Nick chewed through a bit of tofu, then stole one of her zucchini slices, “this whole fight.”

“What do you mean?” She stuffed more of her food in her mouth before he could infringe further.

“They keep coming back to the marriage thing, but that’s such a small piece of it. You know why the right to refuse exists?”

“No.”

“It was for bars mostly. So they could turn away customers who were already drunk or belligerent. That’s it. Some stupidly clever person realized they could turn it against people they just didn’t want in their businesses.”

The first day they’d met, she’d watched the ice cream store manager turn that sign on him and she could remember the icicle of empathy that had struck through her. And that, despite everything she discovered later, had been real. It had happened again since though in light of the badge, the signs were more subtle.

She had watched him absorb that rejection, no ripples on the smooth surface he presented. Usually he found a way to turn it to his advantage, the knife of bigotry slicing both ways. But how could you live taking a thousand tiny cuts without eventually bleeding to death?

“So what do you want to do about it?” She asked.

“Me?”

“Us.”

He considered her across the gulf of cushions and cartons. She could still smell the hospital on him, acridly clean. It had nestled into his fur, clinging to wound.

“I want to fight,” he stuck another piece of tofu in his mouth.

“Good. It’ll take a few days for us to put the case to sleep. Once we do, we find the right people to talk to at Equality Now and figure out how we can help.”

“What about the force?”

“We’re allowed to participate in political activities as long as we don’t wear the uniform and make it clear we’re acting as private citizens.”

“You looked that up?”

“Please,” she sniffed, “I memorized the handbook.”

“Of course you did,” he said affectionately.

They ate the rest of the meal, catching up on Bake It! When she noticed his face going tight, she chased down the bottle of painkillers (it had mysteriously rolled under the couch) and supervised him getting into bed, before going back to tidy up. Her ribs were fire and ice, but she pushed through it with only a few headache tablets.

Her late nap left her unbalanced and wakeful. She tried to pick through her latest true crime book, but it had lost a lot of it’s appeal. The television yielded up nothing that grabbed her.

Eventually, she pulled up her email and started responding to the rain of correspondence cascading in from various departments.

A string tugged at the back of her mind. It teased over her memory and she tried to tug at it. When nothing came, she got out her reliable notepad and started going back through it. All the way to the beginning.

“Huh,” she found a quick scribble and turned it over and over in her head. Then she went into Nick’s room and poked his shoulder.

“Ow,” he grumbled, “What? Is it morning? Did I sleep through the alarm?”

“Why would Miranda be carrying a business card from the place she worked?”

“Huh?” He sat up slowly, trying to beat back the effect of the drugs.

“We got to Franco because they found his business card in the skycab, right?”

“Right,” he yawned. “So?”

“So, why did Miranda have it on her if she was working there for months? She would’ve known all the information or at least had it in her phone.”

“Maybe to give to someone else?”

“Maybe. Or maybe it wasn’t hers at all. What if Drew had it on him?”

“Why would Drew have it?”

“Ursula said that he was asking a lot of questions about Miranda as far back as six months ago. So what if he went to her job and started asking around about there? Someone gave him the card there.”

“Not sure why it matters,” he yawned and shook himself a little. “What’s getting to you?”

“It doesn’t...look we’ve said from the start that it’s possible that killing her wasn’t intentional. Ursula claims that Drew was just taking her to a meeting of Mates for Mates.”

“And Drew is a liar.”

“Maybe,” she allowed. “But what if he was telling the truth about that? It’s easy enough to find out and we’d have to run it down anyway. Because the real question is, why would she agree to go with him?”

“Get another perspective? Maybe try to get them to see her side of things?”

“But she knew they were dangerous. Slurs, a brick through the window, garbage getting thrown at them.”

“He had her at knife point.”

“But he got in a few paces behind her according to our witness. Not close enough to keep a present threat. And Miranda wasn’t exactly defenseless even unarmed. She could have run or screamed.”

“Maybe she did and that’s when she got the stab wound instead of later.”

“Maybe,” she frowned. “Something isn’t right here. We’re missing something.”

“Well...” he scrubbed at his face, “I can’t think. Everything is all clogged up.”

“Don’t think. You’re better at hunches than me. What’s your gut say?”

“My gut says I had too much tofu.”

“Nick.”

“Fine, fine,” he fell back down against the pillow. “My gut says that Drew killed her. Not intentionally. I think he’s probably too gutless for premeditated murder and it doesn’t really serve their agenda. Maybe he was a courier and got rough with the package. Or...”

“Or what,” she prodded.

“Or Miranda was going somewhere of her own accord and he was following her...for some reason. Maybe even to persuade her to go to the meeting.”

“So why would she be going somewhere in the Rainforest District?” Judy rocked her heels. “All her friends, college, and work are in midtown, her family is in Tundratown. There’s no one for her to be going to see there. Nothing that she might have to do.”

“Where did that skycar line go?” He frowned up at the ceiling.

“One second,” she went and grabbed her laptop, bringing it back in and sitting on the edge of her bed. A few clicks and she brought up the map. “We know she got on a little after midtown, probably took a bus or a taxi that far. It stops at Irving, Swoop’s Swallow, Tomlin Bridge and Faint Hearts Grotto. There’s only connecting lines at the Bridge, but that line heads back to midtown or into a mostly suburban area.”

“It’s an industry line then. Mostly water powered factories around the Swallow and the bridge. What would she need there?”

“Not what she needed,” Judy flashed through the map, grinding in closer. “Awful lot of places with an awful lot of electronics around there.”

“Jude,” he propped himself up on his elbows. “I’ve known Franco for years.”

“How well?” She ran a rapid fire search while he watched her in silence. Unfortunately, she found what she was looking for and turned the computer to him.

The Mates for Mates website didn’t list general membership names, but they did have the heavy hitters up.

Midtown Board Members
President - Andy Cane-Vine
Vice-President- Felicity Concordia
Treasurer- Franco Marks

“Son of a fangless spineless waste of air,” Nick growled. “I’ve known him since we were both kids.”

“I’m sorry,” she looked at the damning evidence.

“He led her to them,” Nick shook his head. “It doesn’t matter why. We pick him up tomorrow. Smug ass probably thinks he’s gotten away with it.”

“We’re not picking up anyone,” she reminded him. “We’re confined to desk work.”

“Fine. Then we interrogate him after someone else brings him in. I want a piece of him.”

“Something else is bothering me,” she frowned at the computer, tapping restlessly against it.

“Ugh,” he threw an arm over his eyes. “I’m supposed to be resting you know.”

“Uh huh, but why did Miranda tell her parents about her job?”

“I don’t know, Carrots. Could be a million things.”

“Sure, but Franco went out of his way to tell us that they didn’t know about.”

“So?”

“You don’t think that’s weird? That she keeps it a secret for months and then just a handful of days before she dies, she tells them out of nowhere?”

“It’s...you’re right. It doesn’t fit,” he drummed his fingers over his stomach. “This case is so...there’s all these jigsaw pieces, but they don’t square up.”

“I should let you rest,” she closed her laptop, residual warmth soaking through her fur.

“Sure, now that you put a cement mixer to the my brain, I’m sure I’ll be out like a light.”

Despite his protests, their conversation couldn’t keep the opiates at bay and after a few more minutes of speculatoin, sleep overtook him again. Judy retired to her room and gave her bed a shot. It took at last and she got in a few precious hours before her alarm screeched her awake.

It took them both substantially longer to get out the door. The day after proved much worse for her ribs and he took sharp notice as he limped between the kitchen and bathroom.

“What happened to being careful?”

She said nothing and let her ears droop down pathetically until he rolled his eyes and went into the shower. It was nice to have him smelling mostly like himself again. Even better to

have him in the passenger seat despite the pressure of the seatbelt against her ribs and the way he dozed with his head against the window.

At the station, Clawhauser actually came out from behind his desk to shake Nick's hand and give him a hearty pat on the back.

"Can't believe you're here already. When Brady got stabbed, he took three weeks off."

"Well you know," Nick smiled at him. "Things to do, forms to fill out. And it's really only a graze."

"Hey, Anklebiter!" Elaine called out from across the floor. "We got your perps settled in cells. You want us to get 'em again."

"Not yet! Got transcripts to look over," she considered, "You free to go pick up another suspect?"

"This one armed?" Elaine ambled over.

"Maybe, but he's not expecting anyone, so probably less trouble. If you get him at his store, he probably will go quietly," Nick said.

"I know what I'm about," Elaine tapped her trunk on the top of Nick's head once, "I've nearly got my twenty in, newbie."

"Okay, okay," he batted at her with a laugh.

"Here," Judy scribbled out the name and the address, handing it over.

"You got the evidence to hold him?"

"We'll have it by the end of the day. We need to question him first. Set him up against the others."

"Fair enough," Elaine tucked the paper away. "We'll bring him in on our way back from speed patrol. It's on the way."

"Thanks."

Nick waited until they were at the desk to ask,

"Anklebiter?"

"Well. To her," Judy dodged.

"Uh huh," he narrowed his eyes at her, so she concentrated on getting the digital file up and running.

They read through transcripts of interviews. Drew had only confirmed that he knew Miranda to recognize her on the street and that he had been dating Ursula, but had otherwise

maintained a frosty silence. Rudy wouldn't let Elaine get a word in edgewise, blasting through rhetoric that deteriorated into messy rants over time. A note had been added that a counselor was coming in to evaluate him that morning and further questioning was contingent on their findings.

"They think he's having some kind of break with reality," Nick surmised.

"I'm not sure he had anything to do with this, except maybe egging Drew on. None of the evidence puts him near Miranda or the scene."

"Agreed."

Lab reports trickled in as they filled in form after form. A knife had been found in a garbage can a block from the Drew's house, wiped clean of prints and blood, but the right size and shape for the murder weapon. It matched the set in the kitchen. Trace had gotten DNA results back from Miranda's body. A few stray hairs were confirmed as reindeer and they were being run against a sample compelled from Drew the night before.

If hadn't been for their discussion the night before, the whole case would seem open and shut now.

"No matter what, the kid is going to prison. Just a matter of how long," Nick ticked off a few boxes then scrawled his signature at the bottom of the page.

Lunchtime gave them both a chance to stretch a little, airing out their twinges after eating through some of the leftovers they'd brought from home. Judy went to the bathroom when she was finished and when she came out, found Nick in deep discussion with Rob. When he saw her, a storm cloud of anger passed over his face.

"You bit an armed suspect?" He demanded.

"You know, I think I forgot my keys in the bath-"

"I will follow you in there, you know I will."

"It seemed like the right thing to do in the moment," she crossed her arms over her chest, suppressing a wince as she knocked into her bandages. "We had a suspect with a gun and-"

"So you bit him!"

"Elaine was covering me."

"He had a gun!"

"This is our job, Nick!" She threw her hands. "We're going to take risks! We're going to get hurt! You were stabbed literally a day ago!"

"I didn't attack a suspect! You had two other officers there, you could've waited for a SWAT team! You don't have to be the hero every time!"

“I wasn’t trying to be a hero!”

Judy became aware of a lot of eyes on her. The whole office had come to a screeching halt. Someone’s copies overflowed the receiving bed on the printer and they drifted towards the floor.

“You’re a menace, Carrots,” he had noticed too, subsiding into his usual light tone.

“That’s the whole show folks,” she gave a jaunty wave. “We’ll be here all week, try the tiramisu.”

Everyone went back to whatever they were doing with unnecessary commitment.

“Sorry,” Nick huffed.

“Yeah. Me too,” she gave him a half-smile.

They were nearly done demolishing the paperwork when Clawhauser called up.

“They’ve got your suspect in 513b again. Guess it’s your lucky number.”

“You okay with this?” Judy glanced at him. “I know you were friends.”

“Friendly,” Nick corrected. “There’s a difference.”

It dawned on Judy that while Nick was friendly with nearly everyone, aside from herself and the occasionally appearing Finnick, she wasn’t sure he had friends. She wondered if it was a trust issue or something deeper. It was a question for another day. Maybe the sixth Wednesday in the month of Never.

Franco was sitting on a rat-sized chair on top of the usual interrogation table. He was dressed neatly and had apparently refused a drink. Usually Nick didn’t sit down when they were questioning someone, preferring to lean against the wall while Judy sat across from their suspect. Today, he limped into the second chair and nearly collapsed into it.

“You two look rough,” Franco said jovially enough.

“It’s been a rough few days,” Nick smiled thinly. “So Franco, let’s talk about Drew Vine.”

“Andy’s kid?” Franco shrugged. “Not much to say. Only met him once or twice.”

“So you know Andy Cane-Vine?”

“We belong to the same club. It’s hardly a secret.”

“That club being Mates for Mates?” Judy asked.

“Yes. We meet at the Elk Club on Fifth and Oak every third Tuesday. You’re invited if you’d like. Both of you.”

“Thank you,” Nick said flatly. “Did Drew attend these meetings?”

“Once or twice. He was starting a campus chapter, I think. Got a few tips from us,” Franco shrugged, “seems like an okay kid.”

“Any reason why he would’ve had your business card on him?”

“My card?” Franco’s eyebrows came together. “Oh! Sure sure. He had a busted radio. Wanted to know if I could repair it for him.”

“So if we ask him, he’s going to repeat that story?” Nick asked.

“Why not?” Franco ran a hand over the crease in his pants, adjusting the line. “What’s this about Nicky? You guys running out of suspects so you’re pulling in hard working folk and shaking them down?”

“When did you meet Mr. and Mrs. Wine?” Judy put in before Nick could reply.

“Excuse me?” Franco coughed.

“When did you meet them?” She asked again, sharply as if it were a known fact that he had. To her immense relief and no little surprise, it worked.

“Daryl Wine came to a meeting a few months ago. He didn’t come back for awhile, but then he brought Connie with him to the meet last week,” Franco licked his lips. “No big deal. We get people who seem interested then disappear all the time.”

“So there was no connection between them coming to the meeting and you being Miranda’s boss?”

“I don’t know,” Franco shifted in his seat. “Maybe they asked her and she told them where to find us.”

“Miranda knew you were on board of Mates for Mates?” Nick glanced at Judy.

“Sure. We argued about it all the time. Good-natured sort of thing, you know?” Franco smiled stiffly. “She was a good kid. Idealistic. She didn’t really get the big picture.”

“And you knew she was a part of Equality Now?”

The silence was deafening. Franco corrected the creased in his pants again.

“You knew,” Nick leaned in a fraction. “You knew and that must’ve eaten you up. You were paying this girl and she stood for everything you hate. Must’ve really burned you up,”

“No!” Franco protested. “I like Miranda! She’s good at what she does. One of the best employees I ever had. She was just a little misguided. We all had some strange ideas when we were that age, right?”

“But no one killed us for our ideas, Franco. No one set us up to be attacked by a brainwashed kid with a kitchen knife. No one pushed us out of a moving vehicle and watched our bones shatter against the ground, then left us for dead.”

“I didn’t kill her!” Franco stood, his chair falling backward behind her.

“But you had something to do with it,” Judy said softly. “You set her up.”

“It was her fucking parents!” Franco spat. “They wanted their little girl to have a shot at a normal life. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“What do you mean?” Nick asked.

“I’m not saying another word,” Franco reached for the chair and righted it. “And you can go fuck yourself, Nicky. Trying to pretend like you’re some high and mighty ethical cop now. Like you weren’t the son of a whore and a-”

Only her training and already rising adrenaline gave Judy the reflexes to hold Nick back before he could complete his lunge across the table. Franco barked a dark laugh,

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Still a no good thug at heart, aye Nicky? We all knew how your mama kept you fed. Working her way down the factory line on her kne-”

“Enough!” Judy barked with every atom of authority she could sum up. Nick yanked away from her grasp, but he didn’t go for Franco.

“I’m gonna take a walk,” he said instead. “You finish up with him. I’m going to go get a subpoena for the Wine’s finances and phone records.”

“Yeah, tuck that worthless tail in and run,” Franco sneered.

“Aw, that’s cute,” Nick snorted. “I’m not running, Franco. I’m just leaving you to the real predator in the room, Franco. He’s all yours, Hopps.”

“See you in fifteen,” she cocked her head to one side, giving Franco a thorough look over. “Nah. Strike that. Ten.”

“Ten it is,” Nick slipped through the door and it closed with a final ‘click’ behind him.

“So what, you gonna rough me up?”

“That would be illegal,” Judy tore a blank page out of her notepad. “I’m not interested in hurting you. Pain isn’t much of a motivator, really. People in pain give bad information to make the pain stop. I need good information.”

“There’s no information to give,” Franco said staunchly.

“It’s already coming unglued around you,” she folded her hands together. “When he’s done securing the subpoenas, Nick is going to go talk to Drew again. He’s going to find out that your broken radio story is a lie because Drew will make up a different lie to protect you and his daddy. Then he’ll pull security footage from your store, I saw that nice camera you had up in one corner, and I’m sure if we review this past week something interesting will come up. Then he’ll get a warrant for your store and your apartment. Maybe the Mates for Mates records too for good measure.

“Maybe we’ll get something from the subpoenas, the footage, or maybe one of the boys will talk. Or maybe Ursula will remember something else helpful. Or maybe the helpline will give us the tip. The only certainty is that we’re less than a handful of hours before finding something that puts the final nail in your coffin. You may have liked Miranda Vine and you may have only been doing what you thought was best, but if you don’t tell me what that is then I am going to build a case that makes a prosecutor salivate. The kind of case that the media eats with a spoon.

“Maybe a jury will even let you off, but your name will forever be associated with the murder of a pretty co-ed. Your business will die. Your neighbors will shun you. Mates for Mates will likely disavow you and your actions or risk losing sympathy from the public. You might walk free, but in the eyes of the world, you will most certainly be a murderer.

“Or,” she slid the blank paper to him and drew a small pen from her pocket and set it on top. “You can write out what really happened. I know you didn’t kill her, Franco. If you help us out, I’ll make sure the rest of the world knows it too.”

He stared down at the pen, then up at her. She smiled brightly. He shuddered.

Then he picked up the pen and started to write.

Chapter 6

She emerged from 513b with a little less of herself. A little less charitable, a little less hopeful and so very tired. The Chief was waiting. He gestured for the thin sheet of paper.

“Good work, Hopps.”

“Thank you, sir,” she gave him the confession. “I didn’t know you were taking such a close interest on this case.”

“I take close interest in you and that partner of yours,” he slid the paper into a thick folder that had previously been sitting on her desk. “When Wilde done shaking down Vine, I’ll be securing a team to raid the Second Chances facility. There’s a judge working late just for us tonight. Good work on this, Hopps.”

“Sir, Nick and I have fought hard on this case. We should-”

“Might I remind you that you’re both injured and shouldn’t even be here today?” He raised an eyebrow.

“We need to be on that raid, sir. We just- it’s important,” her gut twisted. She needed to see it. Needed to know it was coming to an end.

He studied her for an excruciatingly long time.

“You’re on second string, not to enter the building until the all clear and even then only if requested. It’ll take at least two hours to get the paperwork. So for right now, you’re headed to P.R. to give a summation of the facts for the press releases that we’ll need.”

“We have a public relations department?”

“Not everyone gets the mayor’s office involved in their cases,” he sounded almost amused. “The department is mostly Cindy and whatever overworked intern she’s abusing this year. She needs to get a written statement out to the press. You and Wilde do not talk to them directly, understood?”

“Understood,” she said with tremendous relief. After the first disastrous experience, she’d grown to dread the idea of speaking in public again.

Cindy’s office proved to be shoved into the corner between Booking and Processing. There was a large window behind her desk and the rest of the walls were covered in neatly framed articles set in precise rows. Cindy herself was an elegantly besuited pig.

“Ah, Officer Hopps,” Cindy looked up from her computer. “You and I are long overdue for a talk, I think.”

“Sorry?” Judy got up on the guest seat.

“Did you like your poster? I thought you and Officer Wilde looked well together.”

“You do the recruitment posters?”

“I do everything,” Cindy said lightly. “For some reason, the Chief has been reluctant to get you down to me. A shame. You do well in front of a camera.”

“I caused a near riot,” Judy pointed out.

“Because you were compelling, if....let’s go with naive, shall we?”

“That’s charitable.”

“I understand where you came from, I suppose. I grew up in Sty Village.”

“I know the Sty!” Despite all the bile of the afternoon, Judy dug up a smile for a near neighbor and Cindy smiled back at her. “That’s only down the road from where I grew up. We used to play football against your high school.”

“And lose spectacularly,” Cindy’s grin widened. “Now. Let’s talk about your case.”

Cindy was an excellent interviewer and it was a little cathartic to relay all their findings to fresh ears. Gradually, Cindy’s fingers drifted over her keyboard and she asked more precise questions.

“This will come out in tonight’s news and be recycled and rehashed through the internet over the next twenty-four hours,” a few more precise clicks and Cindy sat back in her chair.

“Legally, the only name we can release is Drew’s since he’s going to be formally charged before five today. The raid will be late enough that it won’t get air until too late for most people to bother with. In the morning, I’ll hold a press conference with the Chief for that.”

“What else do you need from me?” Judy asked.

“Eventually, a photo. The ones that I have on file of you and Officer Wilde are a little too glossy for this kind of story. If journalists ask for one, I’d rather give them a staged candid. Talking over a pile of folders, something like that.

“I know the Chief has already told you, but say nothing directly to the press. If someone pushes a microphone in your face, tell them that you can’t give details of ongoing investigations.”

“Which is true,” Judy mused.

“The truth is very useful.”

“Can I ask you something unrelated?” Judy reached for her pen as Cindy nodded, a little surprised. “Officer Wilde and I have been discussing joining a political group as citizens. I know what the handbook says, but....”

“Yes,” Cindy sighed. “The handbook is not the court of public opinion, is it? If you two are going to join up with Equality Now-”

“How’d you know?” Judy interrupted.

“What else would it be?” Cindy shook her head, “I’d ask you to wait until after the trial, if there is one. Anything prior to that will muddy the waters irrevocably.”

“We can do that. Why if?”

“I’ve seen high profile cases like these disappear into plea bargains before. Drew Vine is young and his parents are influential. Most likely he’ll cut a deal. The deal will probably include indicating the other suspects, who in turn will be advised by their attorneys to avoid trial. Trials kill reputations, but given your....special interrogation techniques, I’d say you already know some of this.”

“We can all afford to lose a lot of things, but reputations are the hardest to gain back,” Judy clicked her pen closed, then open again. “You know an awful lot about me.”

“I’ve been watching,” Cindy said and it very nearly didn’t sound creepy. “Did you know that you and Officer Wilde have the highest clearance rate for the department?”

“Work twice as hard for half the credit,” Judy mumbled.

“Yes, I suppose it would start to feel that way. This is only the first case like this for the two of you. You’ll probably both make detective in record time because they will be unable to prevent you. Even Officer Wilde’s...colorful past helps your image. He’s the dashing reformed criminal, you’re the earnest do gooder. I can sell that story, Officer Hopps. And I’m going to sell it hard.”

“Why?”

“Reputation,” Cindy tented her fingers together, “cuts both ways. Do you know how many crimes against foxes go unreported because they don’t trust us? Or by prey species too intimidated to talk to the more...toothy officers? Sometimes rightly so, I’m afraid to say. The ZPD does it’s best, but we’re an old institution with all the issues that come with old attitudes. But I don’t have to tell you that, do I?”

“No,” Judy thought about her little meter maid truck. She still had nightmares about it. Some mysterious figure stuffing her behind the wheel and taping her hands to the ticket printer.

“Image is critical, Officer Hopps. It saves lives in our case. And I’m only a little sorry to tell you that I intend to use your image shamelessly to help ours.”

“I think,” Judy leaned back in her chair, “that you better call me, Judy.”

They spoke for another half hour and Judy left, head spinning, ribs aching, and heart pounding. She was glad that no one had ever told her younger self that making the world a better place would hurt so much.

Their desk sat lonely and quiet in a sea of other empty desks. She went down to the interrogation rooms and after a few erroneous knocks, she discovered Nick in 511a. He was sitting with his feet propped up on a table, no suspect in sight. There was nothing in his hands, his head tipped upwards in contemplation.

“Hey,” she said softly.

“Hey.”

“I got us on the raid-”

“Second string. Yeah, I went to the briefing. I’ll give you the thumbnail version on the way. We should probably go get suited up,” but he didn’t move.

“If you don’t want to-”

“No. You were right. We earned it. Or something like that. Need it, maybe,” he shook his head, “I guess I’ll just never be done being surprised with what people can do to each other. Especially in the name of love.”

“Yeah,” she leaned on the doorjamb. “I know.”

“Do you know what Maid Marion’s Day is?” He glanced over at her.

“No, should I?”

“Probably not. It’s a fox holiday. Sort of a...tribute to an ancestor. Maid Marion joined Robin Hood in his crusade to steal from the rich and give to the poor. But she got less glory. We’ve got a Robin Day too, but that’s a festival with fireworks and carnivals. Marion’s Day is quieter. They say she became a sort of protective spirit after she died and she comes back to look over all fox children.

“She gives gifts while they sleep. Leaves them on the foot of their bed. One for a full belly, one for a warm den, and one for a clever mind. It’s really your parents, of course, but it was...nice. A little bit of magic in the middle of the grit.

“My mom always made those three things show up. Sometimes they weren’t very big, but I never ever went without,” his feet slid to the floor, “I was old enough towards the end to know how she got the extra money for things like that. I used to think she was less for it. That she was tarnished somehow. But as I had a moment...well. It doesn’t matter. I realized that it was probably the bravest, most selfless thing she could’ve done. It doesn’t bother me that Franco knew. It was that he made it sound dirty and wrong. She wasn’t a fallen woman. She was what circumstances gave her and her own will to do more than just survive led her to.”

“She sounds like an amazing woman,” Judy swallowed a lump of emotion, shoving it down. He wouldn’t welcome it.

“She was,” he agreed. “And the fact that she died and these worthless sacks of fur get to parade around crying like they’ve earned their grief.....it’s the worst thing I can think of.”

She crossed the distance between them and threw her arms around him, prepared for him to go stiff and push her away. Instead, he drew her straight off the floor and held her, his chin resting on top of her head and his arms gentle around her broken torso.

“I wish I could’ve met her,” Judy said after discarding a dozen other sentiments.

“She would’ve hated you,” he snorted. “But you wouldn’t have let her for long.”

They stayed there for as long as Judy dared. Only when shouts started to echo through the hall, warning signs of the oncoming stampede of officers, did she reluctantly pull away. He let her go and rose with his head held high.

“Ready, Hopps?”

“Let’s roll, Wilde.”

Their tactical gear was unwieldy and hot, but Judy was happy to draw on the protective layers and then spot check Nick’s while he looked over hers. Around them, all the other officers were stomping and shouting around the black vans that would draw them. They wove deftly through thick legs and careless tails.

“Hey, Hopps!” Elaine was sitting in the back of truck. “You’re with us.”

“Aren’t you first on scene?” Nick asked, tugging at one last buckle on Judy’s vest.

“Hm?” Elaine feigned a slow blink. “You say something? Awfully loud in here.”

“Ah,” Nick put a finger to his ear, mimed clearing it out. “Thought I heard you say you were bringing up the rear.”

“Near?” Elaine leaned forward, holding out a hand to Judy. “Fear? Can’t hear a damn thing. Step on in, Anklebiter.”

Nick and Judy squeezed in beside her on the bench. The ride was a matter of fifteen minutes, Nick rumbling in her ear under the louder banter among the others.

They went in quiet, black vans slipping in between factories and corporate parks, coming to a gliding stop at a squat building with no windows and a brightly painted sign that read ‘Second Chances: Bringing You Back Home’. It was in walking distance from the Swoop’s Swallow sky car stop.

“Ok, we’re going in hot and heavy,” Elaine cocked her gun, “front door, full speed. Anklebiter, Wilde, not sure how we miscommunicated, but since you’re supposed to be in the rear, so we need you watching tails. T, Rotter, I want you at my ten and two. Joey, we’re point. Questions?”

Everyone stayed silent. Elaine picked up the radio,

“Team One in position,” she barked.

Three other teams at the other entrances clocked in. The Chief came on the line.

“Go!”

Judy hugged the van wall, watching the heavy hitters pass them by. Before the van doors could swing shut, she and Nick were out and on tails as requested. Nick was still limping and Judy was sucking in air with extreme care, but they weren’t going to be too slow. They kept on tails.

The front door blew open and they were taking the hallways. The facility was mostly quiet, not at peak staff for the time of day. They cleared out the administrative offices, taking away a handful of bemused line workers. The radio crackled with reports of the receiving dock and the cafeteria.

“We need back up here! Got a few guards out, but there’s a lot of infrared spots behind this door. ” Team three shouted. Judy and Nick looked to Elaine, who gave them a brisk nod. Team One was already seizing computers and hauling files.

The hall had four open doors, classrooms that had already been blitzed by Team Three. Besides their dishevelment, they looked too normal. Like a high school if one didn’t look too closely at the materials. Judy didn’t look.

Team Three was at the end of the hall. They acknowledged Judy and Nick with vague expression of disbelief, but the scanner monitor was tilted towards them. Even distribution of heat. People lying down. And two standing up, walking up and down the rows.

“Mark,” the lead said, face mask down. “Remember, disable, do not injure. We don’t know victim from perp.”

They went in, keeping their bodies low. Judy saw nothing over taller heads for a brief moment, but then the smoke cleared.

Sixteen beds, she counted them without quite meaning to.

Only one was empty.

“What are the cops doing here?” A small voice asked and Judy turned on her heel. A rabbit boy about her age, got out of his bed.

“We came to get you out,” she mustered as much authority as she could. “I’m Judy Hopps, what’s your name?”

“Austin Thumper. You people are really really late. Some of these fur for brains here are starting to believe this shit.”

“Sorry about that. We came as soon as we could, ” Nick reached out a hand, “Officer Wilde. Nice to meet you, Austin. How long have you been here?”

“Six months. They say I’m near incurable,” Austin pointed at one of the other beds. “You should get Janice out first. They gave her a dunking treatment last week and I think it got into her lungs.”

“Right,” Judy cleared her throat. “We’ll get her to a doctor. Anyone else need medical help?”

Austin proved a fount of knowledge, the other ‘students’ started to group around him and eventually, Judy was feeding him questions to give out to the others. All of them were above the age of consent, most of them had come willingly, but of those all of them had tried to leave after a few weeks and found themselves detained. They were told that due to their voluntary commitment to a psychiatric facility, they would be discharged when doctors found them cured. Four, Austin included, had been tricked into it.

“My sister told me we were going grocery shopping. I was so...I was thrilled. I thought she’d made peace was things,” Austin smiled faintly. “It was the first time she’d really talked to me since my mother walked in on me making out with my boyfriend.”

Eventually, the ambulances and regular squad cars rolled up and hot on their heels, reporters. Judy and Nick flanked Austin and led him out to a waiting ambulance. He wasn’t technically injured, but malnourished and worn thin from holding up the other victims through the statements.

“They’ll get you a nice IV and something to help sleep,” Judy murmured. “We’ll be back in the morning with more questions, I’m afraid. The cameras we can’t stop, but you can pull the blanket over your face if you want.”

“That’s alright,” Austin lifted his chin and squared his shoulders. “I want them to see.”

“Officer Wilde! Officer Hopps!” A bright eyed slim cheetah was thrusting her microphone at them. “What’s happening here? Who’s this? Why have you raided a private facility.”

“We’re not at liberty to share the det-” Judy started.

“My name is Austin Thumper and I was taken into this facility against my will by my sister and mother,” Austin stared into the camera with a ferocity that Judy recognized. Rabbits. So emotional. “I was starved, beaten, and tortured in the name of ‘conversion therapy’. But guess what? All it did was make me hungry and pissed off. Trent, you better have waited for me! You and me are getting married, you hear?”

“Austin here needs medical attention, so I’m going to ask you nicely to move out the way,” Nick started pushing through with Judy and Austin following in his wake.

They handed Austin into the ambulance, turned and found the Chief looming over them.

“You two,” he groaned. “I don’t even know where to start. Go home. Go to bed. Tomorrow, my office at eight-thirty sharp. Cindy wants you standing behind us looking heroic and injured at the press conference, so play it up. After that, you’re both on medical leave for at least three days.”

“Sir,” Nick gave a sloppy salute.

“We don’t actually have a ride, do we?” Judy looked around at the various cars, but everyone was engaged in work or warding off the press.

“Sky cars are still running,” Nick tilted his head upwards. “We can catch a cab from there.”

They stripped off the tactical gear and laid it neatly on their seats in the van. The reporters were so busy running between victims and annoyed cops, that they didn’t see two small people disappear into the night.

Leaning all over each other, they managed to make it up the car line. They got on and watched the ground disappear. They swung over the spot where Miranda’s body was found and Judy kept her eyes trained upward. Her death had been tragic, but she wasn’t tied to it. Miranda’s name was a part of the cause now. Her spirit was hopefully somewhere peaceful now. It was the living that would have to deal with the fallout.

“She was so trusting,” Nick elbowed in beside her. “She thought her parents really had her back. Probably never said much against her their whole lives. Even support childhood flings with girls. She trusted Franco too, happily goes to meet a seller for him in the dead of night, miles away from anywhere she’s familiar with. Maybe even trusted Drew until he made the mistake of drawing the knife on her. Trusted everyone right to her death.”

“What should she have done instead?” Judy sighed. “She was only nineteen.”

“I was grifting at nineteen. No trust required.”

“Yeah? What kind of life was it?”

He didn’t answer. The trees petered out slowly, but surely. The world around them shifted from green to the grey of asphalt. A bus stop met the descending car and they waited another few minutes for a shambling bus to take them the rest of the way towards home. There was no energy left for conversation, just the zombie walk to bed and the black swallow of sleep.

Judy dreamed of dark spaces, the tick of a clock, and the voices of the dead. Even those nightmares weren’t enough to jar her from sleep.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A headache throbbed behind Judy's neutral expression at the press conference. The Chief and Cindy answered the volley of questions with far more grace than she would've managed on her own. Still, there was a difficulty all on its own in staying silent and opinion-less. The questions ranged from factual to outlandish and on more than one occasion, outright bigoted.

Nick stood as still as a gargoyle beside her. He'd poured on the act of injury as he limped out in front of the crowd, but no one would be able to tell he was in any pain now. Judy could smell the faintest whiff of copper that suggested one of his stitches had ripped. Given how much had happened since he'd gotten them, it was amazing it had taken this long.

"Chief Bogo! Is it true that ZPD violated private property to follow its own political agenda?"

"Our only agenda at the ZPD is to keep our citizens safe. The facility we raided last night was keeping people against their will. There is significant evidence that they were intentionally deprived of food, beaten, and mistreated at every turn," the Chief put both hands on the podium, looking solemnly out on the crowd. "We would not allow any private facility, regardless of their mission statement, harm people. No cause is worth the amount of pain inflicted on the victims of Second Chances."

"We know there are more of them out there," Cindy swept her gaze over the crowd, making eye contact with each camera, "And we implore you to step forward. We know how frightening it must be and how brave you were to survive it. We want to find justice for you, for everyone who suffered alongside of you."

"Was Officer Wilde injured in the raid?" Someone else called out.

"Officer Wilde sustained a wound during the investigation that led us to Second Chances," Chief Bogo gestured at Wilde. "A suspect attempted to impede him."

"Which suspect?"

"All of that will come out at the trial."

The questions turned to the lurid, looking for further details, but they were all readily deflected and before Judy quite realized it, it was all over. Cindy gathered her papers and led the way off the platform back into the secured officers. Nick hissed in pain on the last step. Judy held out her hand to steady him.

The click of a photo. They both looked up startled to find one reporter closer than they should've been. A security guard appeared and led them off.

“That’ll be in someone’s headline,” Cindy smiled faintly at them as they hobbled in through the door. The Chief was already gone, back to work presumably. “Should play well though. Officer Wilde, would you like the name of a good drycleaner?”

“I know one,” he looked at his shirt, “do I have mustard on me?”

“Blood on your pants,” Cindy dug a flask out of her jacket and downed a large sip, before handing it to him. He took it bleakly, his focus on the slow growing spot of red on his dress uniform.

“Guess who gets to go back to the hospital!” Judy clapped her hands in feigned cheer.

“Guess who goes with him and gets her chest re-x-ray’d!” Nick smiled with too many teeth.

“Could I come with you?”

All three of them turned to find a rabbit with white fur covered in brown splotches. He was wearing clothes that reminded Judy powerfully of her brothers’ when they went courting. The best pair of jeans, the ones with only a little wear, and a hand-me-down button down shirt with mismatched buttons. One of his ears drooped, but the other stood at stiff attention.

“How did you get back here?” Nick asked, capping the flask and handing it back to Cindy.

“They were taking my statement. My name is Trent, Trent Cottontail? Anyway, they said they would take me to the hospital so I could see-”

“Austin!” Judy supplied. “Of course.”

“Yeah!” His smile was wide and a little bashful. “Gosh, I guess everyone knows what with him announcing it on television and all. I was so happy to see him alive. His mama told me he’d moved and didn’t want to talk to anyone from home, but I knew that wasn’t right. He wouldn’t just leave me. I filed a missing person’s report with the local guys, but they said his mama and sister had seen him that day. Never met such filthy liars in all my life, m’am.”

No one had ever really m’amed her before. It felt strange.

“I’ll drive all three of you,” Cindy announced. “Since the idea of one of you two injured idiots behind the wheel makes my skin crawl.”

Cindy had a very sensible car painted a muted silver. She drove like she had a badge in her pocket and for all Judy knew, she did. Judy quickly regretted taking the passenger seat and wondered if it was impolite to close her eyes. Meanwhile, in the back, Nick and Austin chatted nonchalantly.

“So where are you from?”

“Cottontail Barrier, originally,” Trent said with a friendly smile. “It’s a little nothing of a place. We grow beets mostly.”

“And then you came to the big city?”

“Sort of.” Even his laugh was familiar and Judy felt a little homesick. Or that could be nausea from hurtling to her death while Cindy honked at a driver who dared to get close to her car. “Organic is trendy now, so I bought a little plot in the Sun Flat District. I still grow beets, but I’ve also got a nice size orchard going. I met Austin back when I was still delivering things myself. He was working for this fancy grocery store in Tundratown. We flirted over deliveries, you know? Took me weeks to get up the gumption to ask him out.”

“Seems like it worked out,” Nick wasn’t quite looking at Trent, his gaze fixed on some nebulous point in space. Judy wondered if he was getting faint. It didn’t look like that much blood.

“I was gonna ask him to move in with me,” Austin knotted his hands together in his lap. “Had a nice dinner all planned and a key made, but he up and disappeared right about then. Wish I hadn’t waited. Might’ve avoided everything.”

“Can’t live your life on what if’s kid,” Cindy said sharply, startling Trent and Nick. Judy had figured she was listening. She had that kind of attuned energy. “It rots you from the inside out otherwise.”

“Oh,” Trent blinked. “I’ll keep that in mind. But I’m nearly thirty, m’am. Please don’t call me kid.”

Older than her, Judy realized and was a little ashamed. She’d been thinking of him as young because he was polite and seemed a little backwards with his back home accent. But he’d moved here, started a business, and overcome some serious hurdles to love who he wanted to love.

He was probably more of a grown up than she was.

The hospital finally appeared and Cindy dropped them off at the front entrance.

“Have fun!” She gave a cheery wave and pulled out to leave skidmarks on the road.

“Let’s get you to Austin first,” Nick strode in with purpose. Or tried.

“Or we can drop you off in the E.R. and then I’ll take him,” Judy said sweetly.

“C’mon, Carrots, it’s two more minutes. I won’t die.”

“Carrots?” Trent raised his eyebrows. “You let him call you that?”

“He means it well,” she shrugged and approached the receptionist with an authoritative wave of her badge.

They were keeping Austin and the others in a secured ward on the fifth floor. Two uniforms were stationed by the front of the hall. They recognized Judy and Nick and only nodded as they walked in. Judy made a mental note to buy them coffee before she left the hospital. It was a dull duty, guard patrol.

“Here,” Judy checked the door number and then knocked on the partially open door.

“C’mon in!” Austin yelled out. “But if you’ve come for another blood sample, I honestly think I’m tapped out.”

“Brought you something better than a needle,” Judy said as she came in.

“Hey, Officer Hopps!” He was propped up by a lot of pillows on a very not rabbit sized bed. He looked a little smaller and thinner than the night before, but his color was better. “What are you doing here? Thought I was done giving statements for the day.”

“Not quite official business,” she said, but it was lost in Trent’s entrance. He didn’t run, but came in with wet eyes and his hands held out before him.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Trent spoke quietly as if his voice might shatter Austin to pieces.

“Trent!” Austin sat straight up, reaching for him. With a quick hop, Trent was on the bed, careful of the various IV lines and peppering Austin’s face with kisses. “Hi, baby.”

“I was so damn worried,” Trent pulled back far enough to hold Austin’s face in his hands. “You scared the life out of me.”

“I figured you thought I just broke it off or something,” Austin swallowed hard. “I missed you.”

“You idiot, I knew something wasn’t right. Just couldn’t find nobody to take me seriously,” Trent kissed him again. “I missed you something awful.”

“We should go,” Nick determined from the doorway. Judy nodded and back slowly out the door, then closed it firmly behind her. They’d earned a little privacy.

“Seems like they’re going to be all right,” Judy sighed and headed back out toward the elevators. Her ribs jostled terribly. Maybe she did need a fresh x-ray.

“It’s funny,” Nick pressed the button that would whisk them back down to the E.R. , “you never seem to have an accent, but after listening to Trent, I can hear it a little.”

“Bunny Burrow is a little less...country than Cottontail Barrier. And I worked hard to get rid of whatever was left while I was at school,” she could hear it now though, creeping back in. The sweet twang of home. “I couldn’t afford to sound different from everybody else.”

“It’s not so bad,” Nick winked at her. “Makes you sound softer than you are.”

“And that’s why I try to avoid it,” she groaned.

“Nothing wrong with a little softness sometime.”

They had come at the right time of day, apparently and they whisked Nick off right away to get his stitches seen to while a nurse scolded him.

“And you, m’am,” the doctor pulled away from Judy’s chest, “do indeed have two broken ribs. Not much we can do beyond pain management until they’re healed, but you need to be

careful. If you feel any increase in pain or difficulty breathing you come right back here. Pneumonia is a real risk.”

Battered, broken, and freshly bandaged, they emerged blinking into the bright light of day. Nick’s sunglasses deployed immediately shielding him from the worst of it. Judy’s phone buzzed. The number was marked ‘unknown’.

“Hello?”

“Cindy here,” her voice was clipped, annoyed, “some ass divulged your address to the press. The Chief is working on finding out who so we can have a nice long chat, but for now, I need you two not to go home.”

“But-” Judy began.

“In an apology for the incident, the precinct will cough up a two night stay somewhere cheap.”

She considered, looking at Nick from the corner of her eye.

“Think we could swing something near the ocean?”

Chapter End Notes

Since a few people have asked, I believe this story will have at least one more very meaty chapter, possibly two and then an epilogue.

BTW, if for some reason you're looking for me on tumblr, you can find me at dragonmuse.tumblr.com

Chapter 8

A fox and a rabbit went down to the shore for three days and two nights.. It sounded like a terrible joke or a fairytale dimly remembered. The reality was much more shabby and smelled faintly of old cigarette smoke. The motel was called ‘The Clam Digger’ and boasted a gloomy clapboard face, it’s white paint peeling in the late afternoon sun.

“Nice,” Nick’s sunglasses were firmly in place.

“Yeah, well, what did you expect?”

The front desk was manned by a pudgy wolverine, who squinted myopically at them over the desk.

“Good afternoon,” Nick said with forced cheer. “We have a reservation under Sharp.”

“Good for you, buddy.”

“Uh...could we get the key?”

The wolverine heaved a sigh, typed something into the computer then reached behind him and took a key off the hook and let it clatter onto the desk in front of Nick.

“Room five. Last on the left. Beach is that way,” the wolverine pointed vaguely behind him, “no room service, but there’s a few places to eat down the road. Check out is at ten. Don’t get loud or I’ll call the cops.”

“That would be...ironic,” Nick picked up the key between two fingers with his nose wrinkled.

Room five turned out to have two double beds with concave centers. Everything seemed clean enough, if scented with the aforementioned smoke. The carpet was worn down and the television archaic. Fishing her phone out of her pocket, Judy confirmed that there was no Wi-Fi, just a sad empty ethernet jack for their imaginary laptops.

They didn’t have luggage, just two plastic bags filled with whatever they’d had stashed in their lockers at work. That amounted to about a change of clothes, their wallets, badges, and a box of granola bars that had expired two weeks ago.

“Awesome,” she sat down on the edge the bed, fatigued to the extreme. “I’m going to take a nap.”

“Yeah,” he unbuttoned his uniform shirt and tossed it in the direction of the desk chair.

“Sounds good.”

They spent the first twelve hours of their vacation asleep without having so much of a glimpse of the ocean. Within the first twenty minutes of sleep, Judy had rolled to the dipped center, cocooned in the fresh laundered sheets. When she awoke with the dawn, she had to

claw her way out of her cloth prison and sit up in bewildered grogginess. She hadn't woken with the sun in her eyes in months.

She didn't have time to consider this situation as her bladder reminded her of a few things that needed tending. After, she washed her face and hands, feeling a little fresher for it. Nick brushed by her as she exited and she listened to him perform the same minimal ablutions.

"I'm starving," he moved back into the room, gingerly stretching the re-banded leg.

There wasn't much in the way of delivery that early in the day or cabs, apparently, but they did manage to use their reluctant cell reception to find out that there was a convenience store only a few doors down.

They moved like two old people, stiff with their sleep frozen pain. The air had a new smell to it: salty, a tang of fish caught between fresh and rot, and a sharp freshness that stole into Judy's abused lungs.

It was a shame to have to walk into the rigidly air conditioned convenience store. The clerk greeted them with a yawn and took their money for coffees, two tourist bait t-shirts with cartoons of waves on them, and packaged pastries.

"Hey, man," Nick swept their things into a paper bag. "How long a walk to the beach?"

"You're on it," the clerk smiled lethargically at them. High, maybe? Judy decided she didn't care. "Walk around the store and you'll be all up in it."

The sun had risen far enough to cast away disguising shadows. There was sand in the parking lot, she realized. In fact, there was sand nearly everywhere, creeping towards the small strip of buildings as if threatening to return all of to the water.

"You want to go now or later?" Nick balanced a pastry on top of his cop.

"Did you really just ask me that?" She laughed and it hurt, but it also felt very very good.

"Well, sometimes I like to hear you say 'now' like the word can't get out of your mouth fast enough," he grinned and they walked around the building.

The world dropped away. The sand was gritty underfoot, but she barely noticed as she took in the vastness of the water. Waves rose and fell like an erratic heartbeat, sweeping great gusts of water in and out. She came to a halt at the spot where dry sand met wet.

"Can you swim?" He asked, not far behind her.

"Barely. There was a pond on our farm, but it was shallow," she watched the tendrils of water grow closer, than depart. "You?"

"I learned at the community pool. I don't know how I'd do against waves though."

They drank their coffee and ate through a mound of plastic-y sugar. She gathered their garbage in the bag, folding the top over. Spotting a can, she decided to pitch it all. As she

walked back, she kept her eyes on Nick. He moved a few critical inches forward, letting the ocean rise up over his feet. He looked right there, standing at the edge of the world as a little red splotch on the beige sand with his sunglasses pushed up to the top of his head.

Other people had started appearing, bringing folding chairs and towels. A few young children clustered in small groups to begin construction on the first sandcastles of the day while their parents established their base camps.

And Nick stood at the center of this burgeoning joyful chaos with the ease of a sailor just stepped from a ship. Even in his wrinkled uniform pants and a worn t-shirt, mismatched and favoring his non-dominant leg, even utterly out of his element and left exposed in the bright sun.

Somehow, she kept moving towards him. When she came to a stop at his side, she held her hand out to him.

“If you’re done thinking it over,” she said.

He looked out her outstretched reach and with an annoyed sigh, took her hand.

“You’re a pain in my ass, Carrots....or should I not be calling you that? I thought Trent looked a little pissed.”

“It’s a little like me calling you, Protein Bar,” she shrugged. “But I like it now. You mean it in a way that feels good.”

“You never really call me anything, but my name,” he pointed out.

“I like your name.”

“I’m not a romantic,” he warned. “I’m not candlelit dinners or heartfelt cards or-”

“Walks on the beach at sunrise while holding hands?” She suggested.

“...shut up,” he grumbled while she laughed at him. “We’re not actually walking at the moment. Doesn’t count.”

“I know exactly what you are,” she squeezed his hand. “I’ve seen you at your worst and your best. Unless you’ve got literal skeletons in your closet, I think I’m going in with my eyes wide open.”

“What about you?” He frowned. “How do I know you’re not coming with some sordid past?”

“C’mon now,” she turned to him. “I really hope you’re jok- AH!”

She had been standing just far enough behind him to miss the water until that moment. It was startling cold.

“You okay?” He asked in earnest and then with a snort when he realized her issue. “Did the bad water get you?”

“That is frigid! People willingly swim in that?”

“When it’s hot out,” he shepherded her further from the shore. A gathering of sheep were eyeing them rather closely, veiled hostility evident in the set of their faces.

“Let’s come back when it’s warmer then. You can teach me how to keep my head above water.”

“Sweetheart, that’s all I’ve been trying to teach you since the day we met.”

The hotel room door closed with a final click. They stood together unmoored in this strange new predicament. There was no easy distraction, no other agenda.

“Have you done any of this before?” He asked, sitting down heavily on the edge of his bed. She debated and wound up sitting on hers, facing him. While it was tempting to sit beside him, she needed to see him clearly.

“I dated some in high school. There was a guy off campus when I was in training.”

“Really?” He frowned. “I thought you were all work, work, work.”

“Sure, but I wasn’t dead. We weren’t serious. He was the only other rabbit for about fifteen miles around. We broke it off when he started pressuring me to get off birth control. Typical macho rabbit shit,” she shrugged. “No one since then. You?”

“Oh, you know. Typical fox macho shit. We’re love ‘em and leave ‘em types, you know.”

“Yeah?” She repressed a smile. “You fall in love often then?”

“Love euphemistically,” he crossed his arms over his chest. “I don’t have a lot of faith in love as a concept.”

“Someone broke your heart,” she guessed.

“A little. Maybe. I was a dumb kid. It doesn’t matter. You in love with any of your high school heartthrobs?”

“Please. We were just weirdos being weird together so we didn’t have to go to dances alone or whatever,” she waved the collection of boys that she mostly remembered in smears of adolescent lust, “not exactly the stuff long term relationships are made of.”

“Great, so neither of us know what we’re doing.”

“That’s never stopped us before,” she fell backwards on the bed, slowly to avoid any unfortunate jostling. “Look, we can argue about this forever if you want. But I told you before, if you don’t want to do this then we don’t. I’m not going to box you into something you don’t want.”

“I want it,” he stood and crossed the small space between their beds. Standing over her, his shadow blanketed her body. “I want it too much.”

“Dramatic doesn’t suit you,” she decided and hooked one leg around his uninjured one, forcing it to buckle and topple him gently over her. He caught himself on his elbows, their faces a hint of a breath away.

“What if we just don’t...work? I know we’ve been seeing all these crazy couples, but we’re not even on the same side of the great divide, Carrots.”

“You want me. I want you. We’ll figure something out,” the smile couldn’t be stopped now. She beamed up at him. “How about you just kiss me and we’ll work out the rest later?”

Even kissing didn’t come naturally, so to speak, but they figured themselves out eventually. The broken mattress kept their bodies entwined. Their wounds forced them to be slow and careful. The time they had spent working towards this made them reverent.

There wasn’t a single wasted breath or a moment that Judy wouldn’t hold carved into her memory for the rest of her life. They worked, somehow, through trial and error and laughter. They figured themselves out just fine.

Afterwards, he padded naked to the room’s only window that nearly faced the beach. He thrust it wide open to let in the breeze and the smell of the ocean mixed with their combined scent. The relaxed drape of his tail twitched lazily and the sun painted an aura of red around him.

“Stop that,” she muttered sleepily from her spot in the middle of the bed.

“Stop what?” He turned to her bemused.

“Making me fall more in love with you. It’s annoying and unnecessary.”

“I love you too, Jude,” he crawled back into bed, settling into the spot where her second pillow would normally lay.

They napped in the streak of the noon sun, warm and satisfied.

When they woke, it all felt settled somehow. Judy threw his pants at his head and demanded food, so they ventured out into the afternoon. There was a restaurant near the water, far nicer than their accommodations and they ate fat helpings of fried kelp while a band played songs that her mother would’ve known all the words to.

“Do you think anyone knows?” She asked idly when her belly was full and she could think again.

“Carrots, everyone thought we were a couple from the start,” he sipped a drink the color of the toxic waste and twice as potent. “Or they would’ve if they weren’t in deep denial.”

“You think so?”

“I know so,” he shrugged. “It’s in the sideways looks. The gossip behind hands. You never noticed?”

"I mean a few times, I guess. But not as widespread as all that," she looked out over the water, watched the pounding of the waves. "You think the Chief will split us up?"

"Who else would have us?" He shook his head. "It wouldn't benefit him. And the regulations about fraternization are all about not being supervised or harassed. I think we're all right there. Anyway, we don't have to tell them officially if we don't want to."

"I'm not ashamed," she whipped her head back to him. "I'm not going to hide."

"No one said you were," he set down the glass, the fading light glinting through it. "But sometimes discretion is the better part of valor. Time will take care of outing us, trust me."

"So you think we should just say nothing?"

"I think we do what we've always done and if someone has the raw courage to actually ask then we tell them the truth," he smiled ruefully at her. "It's not nothing. It's everything. Every day we're together is going to be a spit in the face of tradition. Just by deciding to do this, we're getting involved in an ugly fight that we'll have to combat constantly to survive."

"You make it sound like we're going to war."

"Aren't we?"

"Thought we were in love. Seems sort of the opposite."

"I don't put much faith in love," echoing himself from before, he gave her a wink, "but I put an awful lot into you, Jude. If I'm gonna go to war, you're the only person I'd want to fight beside."

"Aw, and you say you're no good at romance."

They did take a walk on the beach at sunset after that. They didn't hold hands. Judy was too busy mulling over the implications of everything he'd said and Nick's attention wandered to the passing ships, tiny glimmering dots on the horizon.

"How's the leg?" She asked as they got closer to the motel.

"Feels like burning. Your ribs?"

"Slightly less like broken glass rattling around in my chest."

They made love again with a little more surety in the privacy of the dusky evening. Rested, fed and sated, the television was finally employed. Skipping the news for once, they settled on some sitcom rerun.

Judy pillowed her head on his chest, listening more to his heartbeat than the show's shallow dialogue. His hand strayed down to her back, running his hands through her fur.

"You asked if I had a dark past," she remembered and his hands stilled for a half-beat and then started up again.

“Is this when you confess that you’ve been serial killing all along?”

“Yes, this is the Zodiac speaking,” she scoffed. “No. Nothing actually dark. Just...you know the scars on my face?”

“Sure,” he said readily as if they were the most obvious thing in the world. Those three stretched thin white lines generally covered by her fur, so fine that she didn’t even notice them in the mirror anymore. But he knew them. Knew all of her.

“I stood up to this elementary school bully.”

“I’m shocked,” he said dryly.

“Shut it,” she poked him in the stomach. “This is important.”

“I’m listening,” he made a dramatic face of intense focus.

“Look, he was nasty to me and he sliced my face open to remind me that I’d never be more than what I was, ok? It was sort of a big moment for me.”

“Okay,” he subsided. “And?”

“And he was a fox.”

“Ah,” he raised his head. “So?”

“So...I don’t know. That’s it. That’s my last big thing that you don’t know about.”

“...that’s your dark secret?”

“Nick, I grew up on a farm in the middle of nowhere and everything I did was to get into the police academy. I was hardly going to get in real trouble. Sorry, that’s all I’ve got.”

“You’re ridiculous,” he said fondly. “You think I care that you had a kid-hate thing with another fox?”

“It’s why I had a hard time in the beginning, that’s all. He was the face of everything trying to hold me back for a long time. Now he bakes pies.”

“Yeah?” Nick shifted. “Well, you can buy me one next time you see him. That’s your penance for whatever imaginary sin you think you committed.”

“Fine. You’ll like the blackberry one,” she watched the show for a little longer. A stray thought floated to the front of her mind. “Hey, I meant to ask you, where did that painting in your room come from? The one of our front door?”

“Ah,” he tapped the remote against his thigh. “My father, maybe.”

“Your father?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. Remember I told you the house was made by hippies?”

“Yeah?”

“I might have glossed over the part where one of the hippies was my mother,” he stared up at the dark ceiling, “she ran away from home when she was fifteen and joined up with this conclave of artists. She liked being around creative people. When she got pregnant, she moved out and got a factory job. All the guys she knew used to stop by when I was small, she stayed friendly with them. The painting showed up when I was three or four. No signature. But she said my father painted it. By the time I was old enough to ask questions, they’d all stopped visiting.”

“She never told you who your father was?” Judy couldn’t imagine it. Everyone knew everyone in Bunny Burrow. Sure there were kids born out of wedlock, but the father was almost never a question mark.

“No. She said it didn’t matter since he wouldn’t have been around anyway,” he said it without anger, but a hint of something...wistful. “I tried to track them down eventually, but I didn’t know any of their real names. They’d go by Weeboo or Stick or whatever.”

“That’s why you were interested in the house?”

“A little,” he admitted. “It’s how I knew it was there anyway. I’d visit sometimes when it wasn’t occupied. Try to figure out if it meant anything. After a while though, the place grew on me. I’ve never met my grandparents, Mom hated them. So I guess it’s the closest thing I have to her childhood home.”

“Were you ever going to tell me?”

“Why? It’s not exactly breaking news, Carrots.”

“It’s important because it’s important to you.”

“Ugh,” he unmuted the television.

“You really think the reporters will be gone when we get back?” She asked after a few more minutes of inane prattle.

“Sure. Something else will have come up in the news by then.”

“I hope so.”

They fell asleep with television on, before they could negotiate anything like sides of the bed or position or even get under the covers. Judy woke first, as always, shivering a little where their bodies didn’t meet.

She went down to the ocean one last time, on her own. They never did get around to a swimming lesson, but she thought they might come back now. Maybe even make a proper vacation of it at some point.

Folding herself down small, sitting on towel borrowed from the room, she watched the waves. They had their own timeless rhythm, heedless of who observed them. She matched

her breath to the in and out of it.

It seemed there had never been a time where her mind had been quiet like this, not even a time when she thought it was a desirable state. Judy lived to move, to act, to do. She liked that about herself. Yet, she managed to enjoy the temporary reprieve, this moment of isolated silence.

“There you are,” he appeared over his shoulder, handing down a cup of coffee as reliably as a clock. Then he sat down beside her on the little square of cloth. “We’ve got to get going soon if we want to beat morning rush hour.”

“Okay,” she rested her head against his arm. “I want a real breakfast when we get back. Waffles.”

They don’t get waffles.

Instead, they nearly reach their front door when a reporter appeared from nowhere, literally springing up from grass with microphone posed for a soundbite.

“Officer Wilde, Officer Hopps!” She shouted as if trying to make herself heard over dozens of other reporters. “Can I get a moment of your time?”

“I’m sorry, we’re very tired, not today,” Nick got the door open and shut it firmly in the reporter’s face as soon as Judy’s tail cleared the door.

They hid out in their living room, finally tuning back into the news. The arrest of Miranda’s parents played over and over again. They walked from their house with Officer James following behind them. She looked slapped and agitated as she guided them into the waiting squad car. Elaine was behind wheel, grim faced.

An interview with Miranda’s brother broke around lunchtime. They had cornered him coming home from work and he had a hunted look on his face.

“Look, I didn’t know anything. My parents and I didn’t get along well. I loved them and my sister, but I barely spoke to any of them the past few years. I don’t have anything to tell you.”

“Do you agree with your parents’ ideas?” The reporter pushed. “Do you think non-reproducing relationships should be outlawed?”

“How can you ask me that?” He turned away and pushed determinedly through the crowd. “My sister died and my parents are responsible, all because everyone was too invested in who someone was going to go home to at night. It’s none of my business and it’s none of yours either.”

The reporter said something non-committal to the camera and then it was back to the newsroom with pundits weighing in on all sides. They shouted over each other until Nick turned the television off.

“At least the written word as volume control,” he muttered.

The call from Cindy came around while they were eating the last of tofu slices from the fridge.

“Hi, Judy,” she said brightly. “Hope you’re feeling better. Can you put me on speaker?”

“Sure, one sec...okay, you’re on.”

“Hello, Officer Wilde.”

“Hi, Cindy. There’s a kangaroo with a microphone outside our house.”

“That would be Yasmin Applebaum. Persistent that one,” the sound of shuffling paper came briefly over the line, “Don’t worry, now that she’s seen you, she’ll go home. She likes to startle answer out of people and doesn’t have anything else in her arsenal.”

“Good to know,” Nick settled behind Judy, his head resting between her ears. “So what can we do for you?”

“Excellent question,” Cindy chirped. “There have been a few requests for interviews coming in which of course we declined. The picture of you two from the press conference had been making the rounds though and a lot of buzz has built up. The Power Hour with Annette Regal approached us with the idea of doing a profile on the two of you. It would be a more casual interview and there would be no questions about any of your current cases. Think of it as a fluff piece hiding a bit of meat.”

“Wouldn’t it be better if we just faded from view?” Judy asked for Nick’s sake. She could feel the question rising in his throat.

“No,” Cindy said speedily. “If you’re going to be the face of the new ZPD, then you need to be visible now while people care.”

“We’ll do it,” Nick sighed. “When?”

“I’ll be sending a car for you in an hour. You both have suits for court?”

They chorused an affirmative.

“Good enough. Wear those. I’ll make adjustments with wardrobe when you get here. See you in sixty.”

She hung up with no goodbye.

“Guess it’s lucky we can shower together now?” Judy offered.

“Yeah, real time saver,” he sighed. “All right. Pedal to the medal.”

They didn’t actually shower together. There wasn’t enough time to negotiate the small space or worse, get distracted. Instead they rotated through and got themselves dressed just in time to meet a low slung black car outside their front door. There was no sign of the kangaroo. The driver paid them no mind, stepping on the gas as soon as he confirmed they were settled in.

They city raced by the tinted windows.

“This feels like meeting Mr. Big all over again,” Judy remarked.

“Except then we knew the worst thing that happened was that we’d be murdered,” Nick pointed out. “Iced isn’t the worst way to go.”

“Foxes,” she mock sighed. “So dramatic.”

Cindy was waiting for them at the side entrance of a glossy jut of a building. She had a clipboard and a phone wedged under her ear.

“Yes...yes. They’re here. We’re coming up now. Yes...yes, got it,” she hung up the phone, but didn’t tuck it away. “You two look slightly less like death. Good. Let’s go.”

An elevator whisked them upwards and delivered them into a tight warren of hallways which Cindy navigated with aplomb.

“And here’s wardrobe,” she shooed them in. A harried antelope looked them over with a jaundiced eye. “Please remember that they’re officers of the law, not film stars.”

“I could do something with that, I suppose.”

Clothes rained down on them from all directions and they emerged looking much crisper than they’d come in. Both of them were in slick black suits and dark blue shirts, his cotton and hers silk. A pearl necklace had arrived around her neck at some point and he had a somber tie shot through with silver stripes.

“Hm,” Cindy looked them over and shook her head. She reached over and loosened Nick’s tie a little, then turned to Judy and unbuttoned the top button of her shirt. “Better. The show begins taping in ten. Annette tends to like a touching story with a little bit of detail on the pain and ending with a smile. So Judy, she’s going to ask you about how hard it was to be the first rabbit cop. Tell her about your rural childhood, she’ll love that. Talk about how you had a hard time fitting in, but emphasize that it’s better now, got it?”

“Don’t deny the difficulty, but make ZPD come out looking good?” She asked.

“Got it in one. Okay, now Nick, she’s going to bring up your shady past. You’re going to do remorse and talk about your tough childhood. Center on how you decided to become a cop. The Savage Controversy is fair game, so give her as much as you want on that. Judy, can he do sexy without sleazy?”

“Standing right here,” Nick pointed out.

“Men never know that about themselves,” Cindy waved her hand dismissively.

“He can,” Judy confirmed, then at Nick, “Think last night over how you tried to charm that one bartender.”

“...fair enough,” he allowed. “So I’m the bad boy with a heart of gold to Judy’s bumpkin made good?”

“If you must summarize it that way,” Cindy’s phone rang. “Follow me.”

She talked all the way to the set. It looked like an ordinary expensive living room, if someone had peeled off the roof, most of the walls and shone the world’s brightest lights onto it. Annette Regal, in a black v-neck dress pulled over her snow white leopard fur. Rising from the couch she held out both her hands to them.

“Thank you for coming,” she greeted with a smile. “I’ve been gagging to have you on the show. Come, sit. They’ll adjust the lights around us.”

The couch was surprisingly stiff, despite its plush appearance. Judy sat on the edge of it, so that her feet hit the floor. Nick sat further in, one arm along the back of the couch. It had the effect of looking casual and also keeping Judy in the safe circle of his body without touching.

Annette chatted lightly about the weather until someone in the shadows gestured at her.

“All right, remember it’s just you and me. Ignore the cameras,” Annette said softly.

“In three!” Someone boomed. “Two...”

A hand signal and Annette turned to face the camera with her perfect smile.

“Hello, Zootopia. It’s Annette Regal with the Power Hour and today we’re talking to ZPD’s finest. Officer Judy Hopps and Officer Nick Wilde. Recently linked to the tragic case of Miranda Wine, this crime fighting duo have impressed us right from the beginning. But we all have one burning question,

“Officers,” she turned to them and Judy saw a camera pan over in her peripheral vision as she tried to keep her focus on Annette, “the public wants to know: How do you feel about the Right to Refuse?”

The question landed with a dull thud in the pit of Judy’s stomach. She could feel every hair on her body stand on end. In the distance, she could just make out Cindy cursing something exceedingly foul.

“Well,” Nick coughed and sat up a little straighter, “Annette, let me tell you about the day Judy and I met.”

Judy sat up impossibly straighter and braced herself for the oncoming storm.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter contains discussion of child abuse

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“-she stepped in and convinced him to serve me. Now she had her own assumptions that I could’ve done without, but it was still a very well meant gesture,” the story had tumbled from Nick’s mouth in a wave and he didn’t shy away from the truth. Though he didn’t name Finnick or even describe him beyond ‘a friend’. “You could say that I was doing something immoral and you’d probably be right, but it certainly wasn’t illegal. And...I want this to be perfectly clear, not something I would’ve even considered if I thought other options were open to me.

“I was made very aware that because of my species I would not be welcome at traditional places of work,” he stopped, took a deep breath and then plunged on, “My mother spent years trying to find steady employment. She was a kind, decent, smart person, who tried to do the right thing, but she was turned away from anything that paid more than criminally low. Even when she took on a low paying gig, nine times out of ten, she was bullied and abused by management or forced out by her colleagues. Solely because she was a fox.”

“How can you know that?” Annette asked, she dropped her little blue card of questions awhile ago, intent on Nick’s response.

“Because I saw her come home in tears over and over. Trying to figure out what she’d done wrong. Because I’ve experienced it myself. When she...when my mother died, I was twelve. I avoided getting put into foster homes because my friend, the one who was with me in the ice cream parlor? He saved me. He’d been in the system himself.

“Annette,” Nick folded his hands into his lap, looking down at his joined hands, “I want you to think about being very small, scared and alone in the world. A child who has lost their parents. You put your faith in nice people in nice suits and they take you foster homes. Homes where the parents smile at the good little sheep and lions and put you in a cage because you’re a ‘problem fox’. My friend was six the first time that happened to him. What could a six year old possibly do to deserve that?”

“Nothing,” Judy said staunchly.

“Exactly,” Nick gave her a tight smile. “Nothing. He made sure I never got put in a cage. He was only a few years older than me, but we stuck together and figured things out. No one ever asked what I was doing out alone by myself. No one cared to know. When I turned sixteen, I got a worker’s permit. My friend told me not to bother, but I did it anyway.

“No one would take me. A few people laughed in my face for even asking. We’re not talking specialized work here, I was applying to bus tables at restaurants or for the privilege of sweeping a factory floor. I got one job at one department store that I’ll be kind and not name. My entire job was to empty the trash bins. I was fired for ‘loitering’ because I stopped to speak with one woman that worked in the cosmetics department. She had asked me my name and when I told her, she said ‘Good to know, Nick. I’ll make sure you’re gone by the end of the week. Can’t have foxes giving this place a bad name.’”

“No!” Annette looked shocked, eyes round.

“Oh, come on!” Judy huffed. “You can’t be surprised by that! How many foxes do you have on staff at this station? How many weasels? Stoats? Racoons? How about hyenas? I know I didn’t see a single person who was less than three feet tall.”

“Well I-” Annette started.

“The problem is that we want to shocked,” Judy went on. “Isn’t it so much easier to watch the night news and see brave victims taken out of a heinous facility? Because we can all sit back and say ‘well, I would never do that’, but we’re all a part of what causes it. If you’ve ever said, ‘it’s up to a business owner to decide who to serve’ or seen a young kid walk into a store and thought ‘that fox boy will probably steal something’, then you’re part of the problem. I’m part of the problem. You, Annette, you’re part of the problem. Because you have all these amazing guests and yet, I think Nick is the first fox to ever sit on your couch.”

“There’s never been-”

“If you say there’s never been another fox work interviewing, then we’re leaving,” Nick said quietly. “Because I can name six off the top of my head.”

“We all have to be better,” Judy said staunchly. “I never wanted to be the symbol of diversity. I just wanted to be a cop. What I dreamed of...what I thought was possible was to be one of a dozen rabbits and foxes and squirrels and weasels that worked at ZPD. I want it to be normal to go to a bank and see a racoon teller. Not something you write to the bank and praise them for. It should what we do because that’s the Zootopian ideal. All people with equal rights.”

“And there’s nothing equal about the ‘Right to Refuse,’” Nick started before Annette could get in a word. “It creates a safe place for bigotry to flourish. If a bartender thinks a patron is too drunk to have another that’s not the right to refuse, that’s a safety issue. If a shop owner doesn’t like skunks and wants them off his property that is hatred. We are not a city built on hate. We should not let it devour us. We’re better than that.”

Silence reigned in the wake of that statement. Annette picked her card back off the desk and glanced over it.

“So,” she cleared her throat, reached for a glass of water and took a sip. “I suspect that the two of you have a future in the movement to repeal the Right to Refuse?”

“We’re officers of the law before anything else,” Judy said firmly. “I love working for the ZPD. We were the first public institution to reach out to non-traditional species and I don’t

mean to underplay how very fortunate I was to be the first person to benefit from that.”

“Tell me more about that struggle,” Annette looked painfully relieved. “It couldn’t have been easy.”

“I’m luckier than most. I had a great family, who tried hard to...well. To understand me as best they could and support the ways they knew how. I met with a fair amount of resistance, but Nick and I have a saying,

“Twice the work for half the credit,” he intoned with her.

“Do you feel you don’t get enough credit on the job?” Annette asked.

“I do now,” Judy shrugged. “But it took closing one of the largest cases Zootopia’s ever had with extremely limited resources. The world isn’t rabbit and fox sized. We, metaphorically and once or twice literally, have to stand on each other’s shoulders to be seen and heard. I’m not angry because I’ve had more luck than most and because I’ve benefited some from the bias of the system. But I do think we can do better. And I think Nick has every right to want to tear it all down brick by brick. The fact that he decided to work for a system that has done nothing, but try to hold him down is a testament to his strength.”

“More to yours,” Nick corrected. “Judy wouldn’t let me get away with disappearing after the Savage Incident.”

“So you have a close working relationship?” Annette asked.

“It’s no secret that we do,” Nick smiled. “I don’t think either of us would be nearly as successful at this job if we had other partners.”

“This picture went viral a few days ago,” Annette gestured to a screen behind them that flashed up the image of Judy helping Nick off the podium. “And drew quite a lot of discussion about the state of your relationship.”

“Why?” Judy blinked.

“Well, you’re quite close there.”

“Nick was stabbed a few days before,” Judy dug up her most innocent expression. “I wasn’t going to let him stumble down the stairs.”

“Of course, but you’re standing fairly close to him.”

“I guess?” Judy frowned, she studied the photo. “I’m not sure where else I should’ve been standing.”

“And you were also injured?”

“Still am,” she put on a laugh and was pleased that it didn’t come out sounding forced. “Broke two ribs. I don’t recommend it.”

“And how did that happen?”

“In the line of duty,” Judy shrugged.

“The stabbing?” Annette probed.

“Same,” Nick grinned. “Would’ve been pretty terrible luck if it happened on my way home, huh?”

“Yes,” Annette put on her company smile. “I suppose it would’ve been. Speaking of home, it’s been observed that you two share one.”

“True,” Judy managed a smile to match. Her mother would be proud. “I was living in a terrible apartment. You know the kind, your first job in the big city kind of place? Little bed, smells like unfamiliar cooking, and the paint peeling?”

“It rings a certain bell,” Annette laughed lightly, apparently on firmer ground.

“Right, so Nick found a place with decent rent if we split.”

“You aren’t sick of each other after working together all day?” Annette asked.

“Sometimes,” Nick nudged Judy with his elbow. “Not like either of us can cook either which makes for some sad dinners, but mostly we figured it out. Give each other space when we need it. Most of the time this one goes to bed at eight.”

“Lies,” Judy laughed. “It’s at least eight thirty on a weekday. To be fair, I get up at five. I’m a morning person, he’s a night person, we figured it out.”

“I see. I was going to ask if you found it strange that a fox and rabbit lived together, but I think we’ve already been well informed that you don’t care much for those kinds of distinctions.”

“Oh, we care,” Judy glanced at Nick, who nodded, “we’re not in denial that there are differences. We still stumble over them sometimes, but part of working well together is pushing through them rather than letting them slow us down.”

“And to not assume anything. Every time we’ve assumed something about the other person it’s come back to bite us,” Nick pointed out.

“For example?” Annette had set down her card again.

“Judy kept asking me if I wanted to work nights,” Nick nudged her again and she rolled her eyes. “Because I’m ‘nocturnal’.”

“Yeah, yeah and he kept saying no, but I figured, he has to hate it.”

“But I don’t. Not even a big reason to it. I’ve always been active during the day. Doesn’t bother me. Now being asked fifty times if it did bother me...”

“Uh huh,” Judy rolled her eyes. “Or there was the time you went grocery shopping and brought back like fifty pounds of carrots and nothing else.”

“To be fair, you ate all of them.”

“Well I wasn’t going to let it go to waste!”

“Uh huh,” Nick shook his head. “Anyway, we figure it out most of the time.”

“Well I think it’s very sweet,” Annette said gently.

“Is it?” Judy glanced at Nick who shrugged. “We can go with sweet, I guess. We’ve been called worse. Probably by your production team and our friend backstage just today.”

“On another topic, I happen to have a few questions from my audience that were sent in earlier today from our SnoutBook page and Twitter feed,” Annette located another card. “Let’s see....ah! @JeanBlueMask wants to know if the two of you have considered doing a commercial for ZPD?”

“A commercial?” Judy gave a real laugh this time. “I haven’t acted in anything since I was in second grade.”

“I’d dig it,” Nick waggled his eyebrows. “C’mon Jude, we could be stars of stage and screen.”

“Unlikely.”

“Let’s see, Kevin Georges asks ‘how do you keep your faces so still during press conferences?’”

“I try to remember the exact order of every elimination on Bake It! for the last three season,” Nick put on his serious face. “See? Eliza...Bull...Vasquez.....”

The questions continued along that lighter vein and at last, Annette turned a bright smile on and said,

“Thank you for coming, Officers Wilde and Hopps. I’m sure we’ll have you back again.”

“Are you though?” Nick muttered and then reached over to shake her hand.

As soon as the signal came and the lights on the cameras went dark, Cindy was on stage. She pointed at the two of them and then at the corridor she had come down, before stomping out.

“Well, Annette,” Nick clicked his tongue. “I think you got us in a fair bit of trouble.”

“I’m not going to apologize,” she said mildly. “As soon as that interview hits, our ratings are going to soar through the roof. I haven’t done anything that incendiary in years.”

“Glad to help,” Judy stood and went after Cindy.

They found her cradling her cellphone like an infant and staring into middle space.

“Sorry?” Judy offered lamely.

“No, you’re not,” Cindy hit the back of her head against the wall. “You have no idea...no. I’m sure you do actually.”

“I’m not sorry,” Nick smiled tightly. “Who we are is a political statement. The ZPD can’t pretend it isn’t forever.”

“I would’ve liked a little more preparation,” eventually Cindy looked directly at them. “The real trouble is, I entirely agree with you. I’m not exactly a conventional species at the ZPD either, you know.”

“I know,” Judy put a hand on her elbow. “What can we do now?”

“You’re house will be mobbed again, but I think this time it’s going to be better to face it head on. Don’t answer questions, but don’t hide either. You didn’t do anything wrong. They’ll get bored eventually,” her fingers tapped a tatu out on her phone, “I’m going to watch the final version of the interview, I recommend that you do as well. It will be trimmed and dressed up and it’s best you’re familiar with that version.”

“And work?” Judy asked, hesitantly. “Do you think we’ll get suspended?”

“No,” Cindy said firmly. “Even if you had done something wrong, it would be a massive statement on the department’s part to suspend you over this. ZPD can’t be seen as having an opinion one way or another.”

“Right,” Nick rubbed a hand over his eyes. “But we’ll be on desk work?”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” the phone rang and she silenced it with a quick tap. “People will need to see you now more than ever. Something unrelated to the equality issue though. Something that gets you out on the streets. I’m sure the Chief has something appropriate.”

“Good,” Judy exhaled. “That’s good.”

“Now, give the nice wardrobe people back there clothes and get out of here,” Cindy ordered. “The car will take you home and I’m sick of looking at you.”

“Yes, m’am,” they chorused and then they were off.

The driver unbent enough to run them through a drive through and Nick ordered massive quantities of food. Judy felt too sick to eat, but she drank her cola to the bottom before they reached the house. There was no one waiting for them outside. Yet.

Power Hour would air in four more hours.

“I’m going to call my parents,” she decided as they unloaded their bags.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I want to tell them what’s coming before the whole world knows.”

“Shit! Finnick!” Nick realized. “I’m gonna have to call him too. He’s going to kill me.”

“It’s okay, I think I can take him. And you didn’t name him or anything.”

“Yeah, if he gets out of town for awhile and lies low it should be okay. I’m gonna have to fork over some serious cash for that.”

“I’ll help,” she said quickly.

“Thanks,” he kissed her once, swiftly. “See you on the other side.”

Judy headed into her own room, changing back into soft pajamas. She looked around the little space she’d made for herself and wondered if she should give it up. It would be strange to sleep without him now, that last fragile barrier well smashed. But equally strange to move into his room. Then again, they could use a place to stick a treadmill.

“Stalling,” she muttered and pulled out her phone. The video chat lit up almost immediately, her parents faces crowding the screen.

“Hey there, Judy!” They chorused.

“Hi Mom! Hi Dad!” She felt ridiculously pleased to see their faces.

“We saw you in the news a few days ago! You’re partner is okay, isn’t he?” Her mother asked. They’d never actually met Nick and Judy was starting to wonder why she’d been worried about them meeting.

“Yes, he’s okay. It wasn’t a big deal.”

“They said he was stabbed, Judy!” Her father clucked his tongue.

“It was only a little stabbed?”

“There is no such thing as a little stabbing!” Her mother scolded. “I’m going to send that boy some blueberries. You don’t dare eat one, understood?”

“Understood,” she swallowed. “There’s something I have to tell you both.”

“Did you get stabbed?” Her father demanded.

“No, Dad. Nothing like that. Just...you know the Power Hour with Annette?”

“Oh sure! Your mother likes her.”

“I do,” her mother confirmed.

“Well-” Judy spilled the whole story of the day, leaving out her own injury though she knew that would come back to bite her. She told them about the case, about Miranda and Ernst and Austin and Cindy and Annette. She told them about the interview and Equality Now. They listened, eyes increasingly wide, but mostly silent. They must’ve known some of it if they watched the press conference, but they never hurried her along or interrupted. “So...that’s all going to come out tonight.”

“You poor little bun-bun,” her mother sniffed. “And that brave fox of yours! I’m so sorry that you’re dealing with all this.”

“It’s a lot of responsibility,” her father looked at her across the distance. “Wish we were there to give you a hug, kiddo.”

It was too much. Judy had held it all at bay for too long. She started crying. She could hear her parents making soft reassuring noises, but she couldn’t stop. The sobs shook her violently. The door cracked open and a sheen of red entered her peripheral vision. Nick plucked the phone out of her grasp.

“Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Hopps,” Nick sat down beside her, put an arm around her shoulder, “I’m Nick.”

“It’s good to meet you, Nick. Is our Judy okay there?”

“I think the dam just broke,” he told them. “She’s been a real rock the last week. Had to give eventually.”

Had it only been a week? Judy clung to him, wetting his shirt and not caring who saw it.

“Judy told us you made quite a statement today,” her father said.

“Might’ve,” Nick sighed. “Didn’t say thing you probably don’t already know though.”

“We’re not city folk, Nick,” her mother said in her careful way, “but we try hard to stay up on things since Judy moved out there. We were just devastated when we heard about that raid. No one should suffer for who they love.”

“I agree completely, Mrs. Hopps,” his hand was rubbing up and down Judy’s arm and the tears started, slowly, to recede. “And I should say, thank you for all the care packages.”

“Don’t be silly,” her father cleared his throat. “The least we can do is give our girl a taste of home and her...boyfriend a good reminder of where she came from.”

Judy’s tears stopped in their tracks. She jerked her head up to find her parents smiling gently at her. Nick looked utterly slapped.

“I...thanks. Thank you,” Judy swallowed. “Thank you, guys.”

“I didn’t like that pygmy rabbit of Alice’s because he treated her badly,” her mother said primly. “I told you we’d rethought a few things.”

“Nick here...well I’ve never seen you happier than when you’re talking about him,” her father shrugged. “And you’ve always known your own mind. But you two come visit soon, so we can see for ourselves.”

“We can do that,” Nick said seriously. “I...I can’t tell you how much I appreciate that, Mr. Hopps.”

“Eh,” her father waved a hand at the phone. “Honestly, I thought Judy would stay single forever.”

“Me too,” said her mother. “Too independent and driven to snag a man. Couldn’t get her to look up from her studies long enough to notice anyone.”

“Hey!” Judy protested.

“Shhh,” Nick pseudo-whispered, “you’re type A insanity is working in our favor.”

Her parents laughed and Judy buried her face in her hands. But the tears had turned to laughter.

Her parents hung up after extorting promises for more frequent calls and a visit. In the silence their voices left behind, Judy sagged further into Nick’s side. He pulled her a little closer.

“How did it go with Finnick?”

“Not as well as with your parents,” Nick sighed. “I mean, he’s totally right to be pissed. Got madder when I offered him get out of town money.”

“So he’s not going to go?”

“No,” and Nick sounded...proud, “he said he’s going to talk to the reporters when they start showing up. He wants to tell the story his way. Let people know exactly what it’s like for foxes in the foster care system.”

“Good for him.”

“Yeah...and then he said he’d write a tell-all book and become a millionaire. Which is totally possible. And then he said that I’m an idiot, wanna be cop with delusions of grandeur that only a mother could love, but that he’d keep putting up with me anyway. And then he said if I ever mentioned that he said anything that sappy, he’d punch me.”

“The rest of our lives are going to be exactly like this, aren’t they?”

“Probably less dramatic, but yeah, Carrots, a little like this,” he kissed her forehead, her nose, her mouth. “Complaining?”

“No,” she smiled into the fabric of his shirt. “I can’t wait for it all to get here.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone! There is an epilogue coming, hopefully before the end of the weekend, but I wanted to take a moment here near the end of our tale and thank every single one of you for reading, kudo'ing and commenting. Writing this story has been a great journey and I appreciate everyone taking it with me.

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Being the rest of their lives in a very small nutshell.

The softest of May days beamed down its approval on the gathered masses. A breeze rustled through the wheat field on either side of the mowed down lawn and the decorations swayed gently. Judy minutely adjusted the seam of her dress and looked across to Nick, who looked very dapper in his tuxedo. He winked at her, made a show of smoothing down his silver vest.

The preacher in his collar spoke about love and honor and the hard work of partnership.

“...so repeat after me,” he said, winding to a close, “I, Austin Thumper, take you Trent Briggs to be my lawfully wedded husband.”

Austin repeated the words with a trembling voice and luminous smile. Trent gave his vow and they were kissing to the raucous applause of the assembled. Judy tossed flower petals alongside two of Trent’s sisters. There were photos to take and tiny canapes to eat, then dinner set up where the ceremony had been with a makeshift dance floor and an energetic DJ playing familiar songs.

“Nice day,” Nick put his arm around the back of her chair.

“One of the best,” she agreed, putting her feet up on his lap.

“Ladies and gentleman, and all those in between,” Austin had procured a microphone, “Trent and I want to thank you all for coming.”

“Really, thank you,” Trent leaned in, the mic screeching a little. “We know it was a choice you had to consider seriously and we are thankful to have everyone of you here.”

“Absolutely,” Austin pulled Trent closer, the white of their suits muting together in the fading sunlight. “You might have noticed we have an empty table in the back. I assure you it’s not because of last minute cancellations. While we were putting together our invite list, we found there were a lot of people that we wished we could invite. There are those who were taken from us too soon, but might’ve been our sisters and brothers.”

“Miranda!” Someone called from the audience and Austin lifted his glass in acknowledgement.

“Like Miranda,” he agreed. “And there are those that are rightly afraid or in circumstances that prevent them from joining our community. To them we leave an empty table and we

hope that all of you will too at your events to come. Leave seats for those we wish were here and one day, maybe we will be lucky enough to break bread with them.”

“Raise a glass,” Trent thrust his upwards, “to the Empty Table!”

“To the table!” They shouted back, Judy and Nick throwing back their whole glass.

“And to Equality Now!” Austin held out his glass for a refill from a passing waiter and was obliged.

“Equality now!” Everyone boomed back.

Two glasses of champagne rapidly drunk made the party more festive rather quickly. Judy and Nick joined the dancing couples, safely shielded among the crowd of the like minded.

The world was soft and kind that night, a cushion to rest their aching heads on. The past year had been full of running from case to case, shaking reporters until the news cycle spun on to the next thing. If working overtime wasn’t enough, Nick had taken up the mantle of President of the Mid-city chapter of Equality Now. After some discussion, Judy stayed in the shadows of it all. She came to events and was generally supportive, but didn’t make a move to be an officer. Instead, she worked with Cindy to make the lipwork of ZPD join up with real work. She headed a support group for non-traditional officers and actively recruited at high schools in every district. Their lives were packed full and exhausting.

A week after the wedding, the **Rights for Miranda Bill** went before the legislature for the first time. It would take five times, numerous edits and compromises, for it to get approved. Nick’s influence was in every single iteration. The fifth version would pass on the fourth anniversary of Miranda’s death and finally repeal Right to Refuse for anyone working within the government and many private businesses. The day after it passed, Nick stood down as president.

Two mornings *after that*, Judy crept out of bed at dawn as she usually did, but unusually she fished inside the closet under a pile of boxes. Hiding things from Nick was nearly impossible, but she figured even he wasn’t poking around in old shoe-boxes when he wasn’t expecting anything. With care, she laid the stack on the foot of the bed, then went into her old room to get in her morning run.

“Carrots?” Nick called as she neared the end. “What the hell is this?”

She grinned, stopped the treadmill and wandered back into his rooms. He had a stack of three neatly wrapped boxes in his hands. He wagged them at her.

“Isn’t three traditional? One for a full belly, one for a warm den, and one for a clever mind.”

“It’s... you got these for Maid Marion’s Day?”

“I know it’s for children, but with everything that’s been going on, I thought celebrating a holiday was appropriate,” she waved at the gifts. “Aren’t you going to open them?”

“Of course,” he pried open the first box and grinned. “I see you got your parents involved.”

“They liked the idea and insisted. The blueberries are from their farm, of course.”

“That’s breakfast sorted out then,” he set the pie aside, the smell wafting temptingly through the room. The second box yielded up a thickly knitted blanket.

“That’s what I was doing all those nights you had late meetings the past few months,” she said sheepishly. “It’s awful, but I figured the thought counted.”

“It’s very...uniquely shaped,” he folded it and set it on the end of the bed. “But we can always use more layers.”

The third present was a puzzle box. She sat down beside him as he worked it out, taking pleasure in his sharp mind as he moved and prodded and tested. Finally, it opened and yielded up its prize.

“Ah,” he said then subsided.

“We need a vacation. I was thinking about going back to the ocean. A weekend getaway. Like the first time.”

“Yes,” Nick covered her hand with his. “That sounds...perfect.”

They stayed at a much nicer hotel and Judy did learn to swim. Barely.

When they got back, the press conference had already been set.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Cindy asked them for the umpteenth time.

“It not now, when?” Nick shrugged. “It’ll hit the news soon enough.”

“We’re tired,” Judy leaned into his side, the lines of her uniform wrinkling. “Hiding...it’s exhausting.”

“Is that what you’ve been doing?” Cindy rolled her eyes. “You’re hiding looks a lot like living out loud to me.”

“You ain’t seen nothin’ yet,” Nick drawled.

“May all of the mothers of little piglets help me,” with a shooing hand she gestured them up to the platform. She took to the podium first. “Sergeants Wilde and Hopps have called you here to make a formal announcement. There will be five minutes for questions afterwards. You can call my office for further information afterwards.”

She stepped into the background, letting Judy and Nick step up to the microphones.

“Many of you have come to know us well over the years,” Judy looked out over the crowd, “we have always been open to you about our passion for equal rights. I am unspeakably proud of the work that Sergeant Wilde has done to bring about the erasure of the Right to Refuse to our city.”

There was an uneven scattering of applause, some wildly clapping while others stared in stony silence.

“But in order to live up to the mission we claim to support,” Nick took over, “it’s time that we are fully honest about ourselves and to each other. We are not just work partners nor are we simply friends.”

“As of yesterday morning,” Judy glanced up at Nick and took solace from the grin he couldn’t quite suppress, “we are legally married in the eyes of the Zootopian government. Questions?”

Every single hand shot up and the shouts of a dozen agitated reporters overlapped each other.

“Congratulations, Sergeants!” A booming chorus rose from the back of the crowd. Dozens of officers had lined up behind the reporters, appearing out of nowhere. Elaine stood among the masses, her lieutenant stripes gleaming as she held a massive cake aloft. On her shoulder was Evangeline, the only other fox they’d managed to recruit and Nick’s hand picked protege, started throwing confetti over the assembled crowd. “You didn’t invite us to the party, so we brought the party to you!”

“For they are jolly good fellows,” Elaine started singing and then the whole force rang behind her to back them up. “For they are jolly good fellows...for they are jolly good felllllooooooows...”

And that was how their impromptu wedding reception wound up on the nightly news, complete with the Chief, serving slices of wedding cake to bemused reporters.

Their lives never became easy or simple. Coming out as a married couple gave new fever to dormant groups demanding their badges. Living more publically meant dealing with all the attendant harassment. When the worst of that burned off, another three years, an older, sadder Ernst came to their home with a bottle of wine and a request.

“We need you. Both of you,” he looked on them with eyes gone permanently watery. “I hope you’ll consider it.”

They talked about it long into the night and in the morning, Nick took a leave of absence from the ZPD and announced his candidacy for mayor. It was a physical ache for Judy to drive alone to work, to spend her entire day (more officer time than in the field now) without him. She wasted countless minutes explaining an idea to him, only to remember that she was alone.

“I hate this,” she grouched when they met again at home late into the campaign. “I miss you.”

“You’ve got the job to keep you company,” he smiled wearily at her.

“I love you more than the stupid job,” she crossed her arms over her chest, pouting. He didn’t reply and she thought maybe he’d gotten distracted, but when she looked back up, he was staring at her. “What?”

“I just always assumed the job came first,” he said slowly. “That’s all you’ve ever wanted, Jude.”

“I want you, idiot. I didn’t marry you because you’re decorative,” she rolled her eyes. “You’re more important than a job.”

“C’mon, you built up your own department, choose your cases. Your life is everything you dreamed about when you were a kid.”

“Because you’re in it,” she frowned up at him. “You’re really serious right now? Nick, it’s a job. A meaningful job. An important job even, but it’s not my life. You are.”

“Then why didn’t you want to come to work on the campaign?” He sat down heavily on the couch beside her.

“Because you don’t need me there,” she sighed. “You’re a good leader and you’ve got plenty of people with a better feel for the political scene than I do. It seems like the best thing I can do for you is to keep clearing high profile cases and standing next to you at important speeches.”

“Carrots,” he laughed, wearily and pulled her closer. “I’m an idiot.”

“Yep,” she agreed and leaned her head on his chest. “But you’re my idiot. So I’ll keep you. By the way, Mom and Dad want us to come down for Harvest Day this year. They’re okay if you bring the campaign crew down too. Get some good shots of you getting dirty.”

“Your parents just want my poor interns to help pull up the crop,” he kissed her. “Sounds like good work experience to me.”

Mayor Nick Wilde would remain one of the most controversial figures of his age for his radical changes to hiring law, slick Socratic arguments that left any trying to question him in a daze, and near hijacking of the legislature for his yearly reports. He was re-elected twice, crime having hit an all time low and prosperity soaring under his leadership. Chief of Police Judy Hopps left a less showy legacy, but her picture would remain in the training handbooks for many years to come. When she retired, she and Nick escaped from the pages of history entirely.

They lived out the rest of their days, it may be supposed, with as much happiness as any two people in love could manage.

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