

Out of the City – Chapter 1

by Kolik

“All animals, except man, know that the principal
business of life is to enjoy it.”

–Samuel Butler, *The Way of All Flesh*

“If carrots got you drunk, rabbits would be messed up.”

–Mitch Hedberg

Day 1, morning

“Think you can handle it, Nick?” asked Judy smugly.

“I can give you anything you need from me, Carrots,” the fox shot back even more smugly.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Judy said as she turned for a better angle and wiggled her tail in anticipation.

Nick appraised the task before him. “I don’t see what the big deal—oh.”

“Mmm-*hmm*,” Judy hummed. “How’s your stick handling, tough guy? Pretty narrow margins.”

Nick recovered with aplomb. “Please, Carrots. Take notes.” He wrapped one hand around his shaft and jammed it forward.

“Nick! What are you doing!?”

“Only what a man ought to, Officer Hopps. Now let me work, alright?”

Judy kicked and shuddered as Nick wrenched his shaft back and forth wantonly. “No, you’re being too rough! *Nick!*” She tried to wrest his hands away but his pride was on the line and he wasn’t backing down.

“Carrots, I know what I’m doing. Just sit back and think happy thoughts – we’ll be done before you know it.” Nick mostly succeeded in keeping the concern out of his voice. He gritted his teeth, straining to control both Judy and himself. “Almost there . . .”

Judy was beginning to panic and she could feel her heart racing in her small chest. Her words tumbled out like water from a spigot. “Nick, look, okay, it’s not a big deal, you’re still a *big, manly* man, and I still respect you, and would you *please*—” she grabbed at him again “—just *ease up!*?”

“Sorry, Carrots, no can do,” said Nick from the corner of a toothy grin that was slowly and surely becoming more deranged. His hand slid to the round part at the shaft’s end. “*Oh* yeah, I’ve got you now.” He pushed forward harder than he ever had before.

“*Niiiiick!*”

“How the heck was *I* supposed to know a clutch gear is less than an inch thick?”

Nick and Judy lay in a grassy ditch underneath a weathered pickup truck that had once been red. Nick had traded his usual Popsicle stick for a lackadaisical blade of grass and crossed his arms behind his head. The gently drooping sprout in his mouth did not give the impression he had nearly totaled one of the Hopps family’s vehicles. The truck stood propped up on a jack that was old and rusty but still strong. A thin trail of smoke curled out of the engine and into the wild blue yonder above them, bringing the smell of fatigued metal to the sleepy skies of Bunnyburrow.

“You are so lucky my dad’s truck had spare parts and a toolbox in the back,” muttered Judy. She was wearing her usual vacation clothes – a white and plaid flannel shirt that was just a bit too big for her, and some comfortable jeans that hugged her figure well. She hadn’t expected to be on her side in the grass, but nothing ever quite seemed to go according to plan when Nick was around.

Nick had sworn up and down he’d get different clothes for their little trip, and he had. Judy just wished he’d gotten the hint to dress up a little instead of sporting a hideous, vividly red (and yellow, and purple, and teal) tropical shirt and khaki shorts. Her family was casual, but they had *standards*.

“It’s one of the most important parts of the whole operation. Why do they make ‘em so flimsy? That’s what we in the business call ‘poor planning.’” Nick chewed his sprig of grass thoughtfully. “Unless you’re in the clutch gear business, of course.”

Judy pointed a wrench at him and furrowed her brow. “I told you to wait in the road.”

Nick’s face morphed into an expression of pure, groveling sorrow. “Carrots, you might find this hard to believe, but I really do feel bad. I was just trying to prove that I’m the take-charge, can-do man you need me to be. A stick shift should be a mere triviality for a man of my upbringing and intuition.” He practically melted into the ground, one hand dramatically resting on his chest. “So if I can’t be trusted to call the shots, then I can at least be assistant manager.”

“Just don’t touch the truck.” Judy turned away from him and onto her side. The summer was in full bloom and it was hot even where they lay beneath the truck. The soft grass ground into her clothes and reminded her of the scores of similar stains she’d gotten playing as a kid. There were always a lot of kids in Bunnyburrow and sometimes it seemed like they never really grew up into themselves, rather becoming copies of their parents just as their parents had done before them.

But Judy had grown up, become a police officer, and been thrust front and center into the heart of a plot that threatened all of Zootopia. A real, live, genuine conspiracy that had nearly killed her several times over and had made her realize that life wasn’t as simple as she’d thought.

At least I met Nick. A soft, reluctant blush worked its way up onto her face. *He was worth all the risks, all the danger. He . . .* She stopped turning the wrench. The “he” in question was a lot closer than he had been half a minute ago. “Nick?”

“Yeah, Carrots?”

“Why are you groping my butt?”

“I think ‘groping’ is such an undignified word, don’t you? I think ‘lavishing,’ or perhaps ‘massaging’ would do justice to the treatment I’m giving you. I’ll have you know that I moonlighted as a masseuse once or twice when the paw-psicle business didn’t cut it.”

“Why.”

“Money was tight.”

“*Nick.*”

“Right there in the job description, Carrots,” he said. “Completely out of my hands— or, well . . .”

Judy turned to glower over her shoulder and found the fox’s smug muzzle pressed nose-to-nose with her. “Job description?” she said in a withering tone of voice.

Nick didn’t even flinch. “Assistant manager: ass. man. for short.” He pressed his hands together to mime the words being shortened. “Adjective, noun. A man who is into—”

“Out!”

Day 1, afternoon

With Judy at the wheel, the rest of the drive was as smooth as a dirt road could be. Nick looked out the open window as the countryside rolled by: endless fields of green and warm earthy colors that ended starkly at the horizon. The road was a border between two farms: corn on the left side reached up higher than the truck's cabin, but the right side was a knee-deep ocean of green carrot leaves that swayed in the breeze.

The sky above Nick was so blue and clear he thought it looked almost solid, like a giant fresco ceiling was hovering far above his reach and every cloud was a splotchy brushstroke made by someone without a care in the world. Opaque blue glass with white scratch marks. It kind of reminded him of the city now that he thought about it.

"Penny for your thoughts, Officer Wilde?" Judy asked. She was in a much better mood now that the truck was rolling again.

Nick had never been very artistic. "It's like . . . like there's a big piece of glass covering everything in the sky." He paused, leaning out the window with one arm on the windowframe. "Kinda reminds me of skyscrapers."

Judy took her eyes off the long, straight road just enough to give Nick a mildly suspicious look. "Nick, you *do* know why they're called *skyscrapers*, right?"

"Yeah, because of the giant razor blades on the tops."

The truck rattled along. Judy rolled her eyes back to the road, sighing. "I'm doing you a real service bringing you out to the country for some fresh air."

The fox was suddenly at her ear, whispering and nuzzling. "What *else* can you service, Carrots?"

She swatted him away. The two had finally arrived at the Hopps family farm, one of the largest in Bunnyburrow. The farmhouse was large to match, although calling it a single house would be dishonest: Nick counted at least a dozen separate farmhouses that had been built up against each other,

connected by covered walkways and additions. The architectural styles clashed garishly, and no wall was without a hastily added doorframe that led straight into one house, or to a tunnel, or to a walkway, or to a ladder in some places where the ground hadn't co-operated. The total foundation must have been at least half a square mile.

There was a fluffy, white-and-gray crowd gathered in the main lot between the houses and the road, and it would have been a dang tight fit to squeeze all of them into the houses he saw. "Where's all the room?"

"The basement," said Judy. She refused to provide more detail. Not that any detail would have been heard over the dull, adorable roar of a thousand bunnies swarming around the truck. Nick barely managed to roll up the window before being surrounded with cute, inquiring faces that were all staring at him with wide eyes through warped plate glass.

He got some very mixed signals as his brain tried to decide if he should flee or sell them something. "Uh, Carrots?" he asked out the side of his mouth.

"Yeah?" Judy was beginning to open her door.

"You *did* tell your family I was going to be with you, right?"

"Naturally."

"So why . . ." Nick twirled his finger in a circle.

"I told every one of my three hundred and twenty-nine brothers and sisters I was going to be coming home for a vacation. *And* that I'd be bringing you."

Nick narrowed his eyes as he unbuckled his seatbelt. "I thought you said you only had two hundred and seventy-six."

Judy shrugged. "At the time, I did." Now it was her turn to be smug. "Oh, I'm sure they all told *their* friends, and *cousins*, and *neighbors*. Most of them have probably never seen a real city slicker fox before. I hadn't until I joined the academy."

She finally opened her door and was instantly smothered in hugs, kisses and cheers from four or five generations of the Hopps clan. Nick's reception was considerably cooler, which he was thankful for as he squeezed out of the door with barely enough room to open it.

Alright, Nick, same old same old. Fake it 'till you make it.

"So, how are you all doing?" Nick said in the warm and friendly tone of a used car salesman. "I tell ya, this truck's a fine piece a' machinery to get us here so smoothly – and *completely intact*, no less. Now, in the big city, something like this woulda broken down at least three—no, four times just going down the street for groceries . . ."

The crowd of rabbits, the oldest of whom Nick now realized was half Judy's age, stared at him in silence as he spoke. After a minute of wringing the subject of Zootopia's transit woes for every drop it was worth, Nick decided his opening role in the sacred rites of small talk was finished.

". . . But I never did like taking the train. How about all you?" He glanced around. "You got carriages or something around here?"

More silent eyes trained on him, unblinking. A voice piped up from near his feet. "Are you a criminal?"

"Alright, good talk."

Nick picked his way around the front of the truck to find Judy still swamped in hugs and loving questions. How was she? How was life being a *famous superstar cop*? Had the president sent her on a secret mission? Was she getting enough to eat? Had she spoken to cousin Herb in rabbittown? "Good, great, no, yes, and not yet but I promise I'll give him a call the next time I have a day off."

Judy caught sight of Nick through her bunny bunker. She pushed her way out and hugged his ribs fondly. "And *speaking* of days off, here's my partner, Nick!" She glanced back to her family to see them keeping a polite distance.

Aunt Rosie was the first to say something, a rotund woman with dimples worn into her face from years of smiling. "Partner?" she asked distantly.

Judy nodded, oblivious. “Yep! Tell ‘em, Nick.”

Nick decided to have a little fun. “It’s all true,” he said with a shrug. “Officer Hopps and I are together for life.” The crowd collectively gasped, sucking in enough air to derail the flight of a nearby bumblebee. “We’re tied together tight as two strings. It’s all official.”

“And we have our own patrol car and everything! Chief Bogo has given us a *ton* of freedom on duty, and it’s helped a lot.”

The crowd sighed with relief and perhaps a bit of disappointment – gossip was gossip, after all – producing another wave of air and getting the bumblebee more or less back on course. “Oh-like-*police-partners-thank-goodness*,” Aunt Rosie said through a strained smile.

Judy squinted. “Wait, did you say ‘thank goo—’”

“That’s-lovely-would-you-like-to-eat-something-it-must-have-been-a-long-drive!” Aunt Rosie swept up to Judy and Nick, bustling towards the house with them. Nick craned his neck to peer down at Rosie, who looked almost spherical from this angle. He knew not to trust skinny cooks, but the fox had never been fond of rabbit cuisine. He muttered something noncommittal.

“Yes, absolutely!” said Judy. “Trust me, Nick, I’m sure you’ll find something good to eat,” she said in response to his sour look.

Nick did at least appreciate going inside and away from the prying eyes of the Hopps clan. “So, where do the rest of you all live, anyway?”

“Why, the basement, of course,” said Rosie as though it were an eminently silly question.

Nick raised an eyebrow at Judy. She smirked. “Where else?” The fox was just about to spit something back when they reached the front door, and he tumbled it into a completely different world.

The houses’ interior was the polar opposite of the outside. Someone had gone to great lengths to ensure the paneling, style, and overall look was consistent throughout the entire place. As Nick was herded from a grand (if short) foyer through hallways, sitting rooms, and covered walkways, the houses began to look strangely cozy.

“This certainly is *different* from the Zootopia apartments I grew up in,” he said as they passed yet another reading room. Each one had a subtly different furniture arrangement but he hadn’t gotten a clear look at any of them, and had lost track somewhere around ten. Nick had no idea where they were in relation to the front door. Did a building like this even have a front door?

Rosie hadn’t said a word about their final destination but she was moving through the hallways and corridors like a ball bearing towards a magnet. “Oh yes, the Hopps family household goes back generations!”

“Doesn’t *everything* in Bunnyburrow go back generations?”

“What she means, Nick,” said Judy, “is that the Hopps family line is long and historic—and yes, *every* family line in Bunnyburrow is long and historic. There’s a reason why bunnies choose to stay here more often than not.”

“Really? I just figured there was something in the water.”

Judy’s retort was silenced as she and Nick were pushed through a grandiose looking set of double doors, into a vast dining room. There must have been a hundred tables, all covered with pristine linen tablecloths and seating two dozen rabbits apiece, minimum. There were young and old, fat and skinny, parents and children, brothers and sisters, short and tall (by rabbit standards, anyway; Nick still had a head on the tallest of the men).

A nearby table was clearly claimed by a group of workmen returning from their shift, just sitting down. They were caked with dirt and muck, runnels of sweat beading through their fur as they took off their safety equipment and ran hands between their ears. They were all wearing baseball caps, all with the same team. *Go Burrowers!*

Nick figured it must have been a little league team, but he didn’t have time to mull over what a bunny-sized little league would look like. There were more tables, more rabbits, more crushes of country life all around him: a table of youngsters ate a late breakfast, some of them reading books and trying not to drip oatmeal on the pages. A womens choir snacked on fruit slices and whipped cream,

humming along to a ditty playing through an ancient-looking tape recorder. An elderly couple stared lovingly at each other and held hands, their waffles and syrup completely forgotten.

And speaking of food, there was a heck of a lot of it. As Rosie walked through the center of the room trying to find a few open seats, Nick tried not to gape at the sheer volumes of food being prepared, brought out and consumed around him. The serving tables near the center of the room were fully six feet wide and thirty feet long, stacked high with oat bread, carrot muffins, pancakes, and slices of fruit and steamed vegetables in well-used chrome steamers. Next to them were the hardier foods: potatoes oiled, seasoned, fried or mashed or baked and ready to be loaded with butter. The fox took all of it in silently, finally fixing his eyes on the pies at the end of the table. Vibrant cherry and blueberry cream sat glistening, dusted with nutmeg and icing sugar.

A voice called Rosie's name from the far side of the room. It came from kitchen doors that were never allowed to settle shut, being bustled through by youngsters carrying plates of food and dirty dishes. "Oh, drat," Rosie said. "Pardon me, dears, but you can take care of yourselves, can't you? I'm needed behind the scenes – goodness knows how my sisters have managed to bungle their baking. Honestly, sometimes . . ." she walked away, voice lost to the din of at least three hundred rabbits eating and talking. It was a modest crowd for lunch.

"No problem, Aunt Rosie. You've been a great host!" Judy grabbed a plate with practiced ease and started to fill it up with string beans and sliced yams. She turned to Nick, who was paralyzed with naked gluttony and looking to her like a drowning man eyeing a life preserver. She relished the feeling. "Help yourself, Nick. We didn't eat much for breakfast, after all."

Nick's mouth worked for a moment before any sound came out. "You . . . *all* eat like this?" Judy nodded. "All the time?"

Now Judy smirked. "Four meals a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, since I was— well, actually, as long as I can remember."

Nick took a deep breath and grabbed a plate. “Carrots, I’ve said some disparaging things about your family before. I’m sorry.”

“For implying that all the bunnies in my family are crazy?”

“Oh, no, they’re *definitely* crazy. But they’re the good kind.”

Day 1, evening

“I swear it’s gotta count as some kind of child abuse,” said Nick as he walked through the door to his and Judy’s room.

Judy clung to Nick’s chest with her legs wrapped around his ribs and her head nuzzled into the crook of his neck. Her eyes were closed and she smiled without really thinking about it. “I never thought I’d hear you complain about free valet service.”

“Valets are one thing, but employing your children as a servant caste—for *free*? Practically diabolical, Ms. Hopps.” The room was part of the Hopps basement (more like a labyrinth, Nick thought). A few small dugout windows near the top of one wall let silvery moonlight glow across the floral rug covering most of the floor. A door to a small bathroom stood at the far end next to a dresser.

“You wanna . . . *ahh* . . . do it all yerself . . .?” Judy’s retort was punctuated by a yawn.

“Perish the thought.” The bed was halfway between the hallway door and the bathroom. Nick stepped over to it gingerly before rolling onto it, careful not to disturb Judy. The fox had overeaten at lunch – and dinner, and supper – but Judy had inhaled at least twice as much food as he. It had caught up with her three quarters of the way to their room, and she had nearly fallen asleep on her paws. Nick glanced around. “They put our stuff away in the dresser—and I didn’t even have to tip.” When Judy didn’t reply, Nick looked down at her, resting his head on one hand. The bunny was melting into the mattress, rustling this way and that to get comfortable enough. “Man, you really *are* tired, huh?”

Judy blinked, eyes unfocused. “I think I overdid it on the good old fashioned home cooking.”

“I don’t blame ya—but we can’t have the *little biddle bunny* going to bed in her *little biddle button-up*, can we?” Judy’s eyes narrowed but she didn’t protest as Nick’s free hand dexterously ran down her collarbone to the flannel shirt she wore. There were still grass stains on it. Judy tried to mutter something but her leaden limbs were too tired to push Nick’s hand away. He undid the top two buttons before leaning in for a peck on her forehead.

That was enough to get a rise out of her, and she lifted her head up for a more involved kiss. The fox's hand slowed as the two of them pressed their lips together and shut their eyes, drinking in love and the warmth of each other's bodies. The simple, physical joys of love could be lost in the crush of the big city, but in the countryside they could bloom like a patch of violets. The two pressed forward, humming softly as they began to wrap their hands around each other, running claws through fur and gripping into soft skin.

Then the dresser coughed.

They froze. "Did you hear that?" Nick whispered.

"Yeah," breathed Judy.

Their eyes scanned the room. Nick disentangled himself and stood up very carefully. He padded to the middle of the carpet where the moonlight was brightest. The room was dead quiet, but that didn't mean anything. "Oh, *Judy*," the fox said, facing the cluttered bookshelf with a smirk, "you're so *pretty* and *lovely* and *nice*." He glanced back over his shoulder at her and winked.

She sat up and gathered the bedsheets around herself, winking back. "Oh, *Nick*," she breathed loudly, "you're so *tall* and *handsome*."

Nick flicked his ears around, training them carefully on where he thought the noise had come from. "And you're so *short* and *cute* and I *love* you." His voice did not betray the shit-eating grin plastered across his face as he practically fondled the C-word with his tone. Judy winced.

"And you're so *sly* and . . .um . . ." Nick deflated ever so slightly as the pause went from funny to irksome. "And, and fluffy . . . and *orange*." Nick peered at her, no longer smirking. He raised one eyebrow. Judy shrugged back angrily.

The fox was first to break off. "Whatever." He walked over to the dresser. There was a susurrous from one of the bottom drawers that would be just a little too far out of comfortable reach for someone his height. He crouched down and slid the drawer open. Bunny kids had crammed

themselves into the drawer like kernels of corn. A dozen pairs of timid yet excited eyes looked back at him. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s not polite to eavesdrop?”

“Uh . . . no?” said the closest kid.

“Too bad.”

After all the furniture, crawlspaces, shelves, and other tiny nooks had been cleared out, Nick herded the offenders into the hallway. “Okay, thanks for coming, great to see you, honestly I’m flattered—but the show’s over.” A small field of sad bunnies looked up at him from knee level like droopy sugarcane wrapped in pajamas.

“So you’re not gonna . . . gonna *kiss* her again?” one rabbit kid in a nightgown asked breathlessly, clutching a pillow to his chest. He failed to contain a yawn even as a shocked whisper cut through the crowd of his family members—oh, he had actually *said* the taboo word, and right to the fox’s face too! He was gonna get eaten or scratched up or something too horrifying to think of.

“What she and *I* do is none of your business,” Nick said flatly as he sneered down his nose.

“Haven’t you ever had guests here before?”

“Not foxes.”

Nick blinked. He was used to city slickers who never quite said what they meant, and the bluntness in the Hopps household continued to stymie him. He bit back a patented Wilde barb and reminded himself these were children. They were easy marks. “Well, I’m still a guest and you still have to be polite. You think that just because you’ve never seen a fox before, you can follow me around all hours of the day and stare at me? Treat me like a circus act, like someone busking for coins?” He crossed his arms confidently.

The rabbits looked at each other uncertainly, some whispering in council. *Oh, yeah. This is what it’s like to be the grown-up. Respect the boss, little guys.* After a few seconds they focused on Nick again. “Yes,” they said together.

Nick dragged a hand down his face. “Go to bed.”

Once he had shut and *firmly* locked the door, Nick turned back to the room to see Judy struggling to hide a grin behind her hand. “Hope they weren’t too much trouble.”

The fox shrugged tiredly. “I suppose I should be happy we caught them. I’d hate to scar twenty young minds on my first day.”

“First *night*,” Judy corrected him, “and it’s still young. Come here, Mister Wilde,” she said demurely, turning invitingly beneath the sheets.

Nick just stared at her. “You’re joking.”

Judy blinked. “What makes you say that?”

“I’m not exactly in the mood anymore, Carrots.”

Now she stared at him. “Why not?”

“Are you . . . we just had a *serious* violation of privacy in our most intimate moments. Doesn’t that bother you *just a little*?” Nick walked straight to the attached bathroom and began rifling through his toiletries. “I swear, they’d better not have . . .” he muttered.

“Not really, no. Nick, I wasn’t kidding when I told you it would be a lot to get used to. And what are you doing over there?”

The fox had taken out one of his combs and was wiping his fingers against it. “Covered, just *covered* in rabbit hair. Eugh.” He returned to the bed and held it out to her. “You see this?”

The flame of passion in Judy’s heart flickered in a cold breeze. “Yeah, Nick, it’s rabbit hair. There are several thousand rabbits in this house, and *one of them* is covered in hair you rather like, if memory serves.” She sat up, doing her best to look inviting.

Nick frowned. “Oh, don’t play at that. You know you’re different.”

Judy frowned back. “Different?”

“Carrots, before you came to Zootopia, when was the last time you were alone? *Actually* alone.”

She thought about it. Shrugged. “Well, I can’t remember. Maybe when I took a wrong turn down a road and spent half a day walking in the wrong direction.”

“And what happened?”

Judy’s face brightened. “Oh, Mr. and Mrs. Lapine found me wandering around their front yard and had me in for dinner. There was this *great* roast potato—I should get Mom to make it!”

“Carrots, I grew up in Zootopia – more specifically, in a poor Zootopian apartment with my dad. We didn’t always have a lot, but what we had was ours. Sometimes we had to get creative to keep our spare cash under wraps, but we always managed to have a little something for ourselves.” In a rare show of vulnerability, Nick lifted a hand to the back of his neck. “And ever since I met you, I . . . well, I’ve had to behave differently.”

Judy’s eyes were fixed on Nick. “Yeah?”

“You are the . . . *exception* to a lifetime of looking out for Number One and not letting anyone else get close. I don’t know your family the way I know you.”

Judy crossed her arms. “I’m an *exception*. Oh, I *see*.”

“Hey, come on.”

“Nick, you’re a grown man. You’ve been an active duty officer for months. You speak to a hundred people every day – not to *mention* you conned people for years.”

He waved his arm at the dresser. “There’s a *big* difference between conning or helping people and whatever *that* was.”

“And a bunch of kids are too much for you, is that it?” The breeze in her heart became a shivery gust. “You’re too worried about my family to focus on *me*, right here in front of you? You’re not the only one who’s had to make adjustments, you know.”

“Now, look, that is *not* what I said.”

In the hall, Joey-Joseph “Big-Ear” Hopps listened carefully with his head pressed against the door. When he was older, girls would laugh at his freakish, lopsided ears, but for now he was a hero of the cause. “Well?” the rest of the group asked him.

J.J. “B.E.” H. frowned. “It sounds like they’re angry.” He looked at the rest of his siblings. “Do foxes get angry when they kiss?” The kids look at each other. Angry? What kind of people kissed when they were angry? . . . Well, maybe foxes did, and wasn’t that food for thought. But would it be the same if a fox kissed a rabbit? A small group of kids broke off to discuss this puzzling new discovery while the rest pressed closer, clamoring for more whispered words. This was earth-shattering news and they weren’t going to miss any of it.

The door swung open, causing J.J. “B.E.” H. to lose his balance and faceplant onto the feet of a fox fresh out of a lovers’ spat. He stared down at them grouchily.

“I *told* you to go to bed.”

Day 2, morning

Morning comes at dawn in the country, and Nick was surprised to find himself alone in bed when he awoke. The bathroom was empty and he felt reasonably sure Judy wouldn't be hiding in the dresser, so that meant she must have woken up before him and gotten dressed by herself.

Is letting me sleep in for a bit her way of apologizing for our heated conversation last night? Or maybe she just wanted to be left alone.

Nick was still leery of the medicine cabinet in the bathroom but it didn't have anything other than dental floss and a crusty tube of toothpaste in it. He showered and got dressed before heading out to breakfast. Walking through the beautifully wallpapered and seemingly endless basement hallways, Nick couldn't help but lick his lips. He enjoyed good food as much as anyone, but the Hopps clan seemed to take an empty stomach as a mortal insult.

Not that Nick was going to tell them any different. He arrived to find the dining hall just as busy as it had been the day before. He piled his plate high with waffles, hash browns, and vegetable omelettes before turning to survey the room. His canine nose told him that Judy had been here recently, but he couldn't see her anywhere.

Nick was interrupted by a stout, burly rabbit bumping into him. "Hey, whoa!" He scrambled to keep his breakfast intact as he teetered for balance.

"Gotta keep the line movin', son," the rabbit said in an easygoing and authoritative voice. "If yer lookin' for Judy, then you just missed her." He pointed with a fork towards to a table full of tough-looking rabbits in denim overalls and wool shirts. "Yer welcome t'eat with us. Name's Paul."

Nick had no better ideas, so he accepted. He sat down in the only free seat, squeezed between a dark-furred rabbit on his left and Paul on his right. The low conversation at the table stopped abruptly as soon as the other rabbits got a good look at him. The fox was at least a foot and a half higher than

everyone he'd met or seen so far and these men were no exception, but the combined effect of forty pairs of eyes focused on him was enough to make him ever so slightly unsettled.

Luckily, he knew how to work a crowd. "So, fellas—"

"That there's Saul, Raul, Dale, Kale, Bernie, Ernie, Big Ernie, Small Ernie, John, Johnny, Jack, Jacky, Jackson, James, Jamie . . ." Paul listed the names of every rabbit sitting at the table with them, pointing at each in turn before finishing the circle with himself. "An' like I said, I'm Paul Hopps." He offered his right hand to Nick. "Dunno if y'got a proper welcome wagon, yet, but it's nice t' meet ya."

Nick had taken the opportunity to cut his waffles into bite-sized chunks during Paul's speech. He lifted one to his mouth and mumbled a greeting before shaking the rabbit's hand and almost biting his fork in half as the rabbit's tiny, calloused grip threatened to grind his finger bones to dust.

After extracting his hand and finding it mercifully undamaged, Nick glanced at Paul. "Where did you say Judy was, again?"

One of the Ernies piped up from somewhere to Nick's left. "If she ain't here, she might be out in th' fields helpin' with somethin'."

Nick began gobbling down the rest of his food, eager to leave. "And how much ground would I need to cover in order to find her?"

"Well, lessee, there's about a hunnerd acres—"

"That's not so bad."

"—in the southwest fields, which are bein' rotated right about this time a' year. Then a hunnerd more in the southeast, then both th' north fields, which are even bigger . . ."

Nick speared his last potato dejectedly. "And you guys are working on . . .?"

Paul grinned. "We're clearin' trees for a new field in the northwest. It's real simple if yer looking for some honest work."

"I've never looked for honest work in my life, but it always seems to find me." Twenty minutes and one bumpy truck ride later, Nick and his newfound friends stood in an uneven field surrounded by

miles and miles of absolutely nothing. The dirt was so dry it looked like sand, and the only things growing nearby were thin, twisting weeds that sprung defiantly out of the harsh soil.

There were also the trees: a dozen strong, wide oaks that had managed to take root long enough to grow large and tall. Their roots were gnarled, reaching out through dust in wide, grasping curls. Nick had expected the Hopps's equipment to be pretty modern, but as the other trucks in the convoy pulled up, he saw that one of them was loaded up with giant lumberjack saws at least seven feet long.

"Hey, Paul?" said Nick.

"I'm Saul," said Saul.

"Right, pardon me. Are we actually gonna use those to cut down all these trees?"

Saul nodded. "Ayup, ayup."

It was true that Nick had never looked for honest work in his life, but as he and Johnny (or was it just John?) got to work sawing, he considered that he might try noticing it next time it came for him. That way he could get a head start running in the other direction.

Like everything else in Bunnyburrow, lumberjacking was a proud and historic tradition, which was a polite way of saying it hadn't changed since the advent of indoor plumbing. The saw itself was large, rusty, and very old, covered with wicked-looking serrated teeth along one side and some functional but supremely uncomfortable wooden grips at the ends. Nick had to use his whole body to set it against the trunk at the proper height and angle, which was a comfortable chest height for Johnny but awkwardly low for the fox.

Once they actually began sawing, Nick resolved to ask Judy what the hell the rabbit definition of "honesty" actually was, and if it involved pulling a huge hunk of metal towards oneself while trying not to inhale sawdust. Back and forth the saw went, slowly but surely cutting through the bark and making progress towards the heart of the tree. Back and forth Nick went, leaning back with his entire body to pull the saw towards him before Johnny ripped it back in half the time and half the effort. The rabbit was barely working up a sweat in the hot sun. Nick was almost frothing at the mouth.

The oak trees were dead, withered, and cast no shade at all. Between saw pulls, Nick stole glances at the other rabbits to see if they were as adept as Johnny. With a sinking feeling he began to realize that Johnny was probably one of the weaker ones: every single man in the work crew was built like a boulder that had sprouted arms and legs, and the dull whirring and grinding of sawblades into wood was loud enough to fill the air with ragged *zzzzzp zrrrrr zrrrrp* sounds.

The gang been working for nearly an hour now, and most were about halfway through their trees. Nick was barely a quarter. The fox wondered if he could find a way to excuse himself from this kind of work. He clearly wasn't cut out for it. They could clearly make better time without him. Really, he—

“You need a breather, Nick?” Nick looked across the saw at his partner, an honest and completely unassuming rabbit. He obviously wasn't bothered by their slow progress or by Nick's daydreaming, and the only thing he wanted to know was whether or not Nick needed to take a break. For just a moment, the fox was disgusted at his own ineptitude. The old Nick would have figured out a way to blow off this toil and have the crew *thanking* him for it, but what would that gain him?

It'd make me more comfortable.

Nick snorted. Old habits died hard. He hadn't been joking when he had told Judy that he wanted to be all the man he needed her to be – that little bunny had sparked a flame in his heart, and he was like a blind man learning to see for the first time. Sometimes the light hurt to behold, but sometimes a man had more important things on his mind than comfort.

Nick gripped the saw handle. “Thanks for asking, but I'm fine. Let's get back at it, Johnny.”

“Jamie.”

“God dammit.”