

Chapter 2 - In Which My Life Gets Switched and Turned Upside-Down

After sprinting back home to stick my head back under the shower again—and leaving the water on because technically I was stealing it from the supers now and I figured I might as well go full throttle on the bastards—the first stop I made was at Pony Steve’s. I’ve known him for years, first as a customer and now as the only guy who remembers who he spent the night with after Starlight’s Halloween party last year. He’s the oldest of six, with a younger brother who works a donut shop in Canterlot, and four sisters whose chosen occupations are a little less savory. His occupation, meanwhile, is baker and pastry artist extraordinaire, and right now that pretty much made him the good Princess Celestia Herself as far as I was concerned.

Steve’s shop has giant plate glass windows on either side of the door, so the scowl on his face meant he’d seen me coming. We have an interesting relationship, Steve and I, sort of a “you scratch my back and I won’t break all the bones in yours” kind of relationship. I don’t come to him unless I need a favor, and he doesn’t speak to me unless I remind him that his mother *doesn’t* remember who he spent the night with after Starlight’s Halloween party last year.

“Well, look what the cat dragged in,” he announced to the thankfully empty shop before curling his nose and narrowing his eyes into a squint. “The hay’d you roll in this morning?”

“Don’t ask,” I muttered back. “What’s fresh today?”

“Besides you?”

“Okay, what’s stale today?”

Now Steve’s scowl looked more like a glare. “Buzz off, Brick,” he growled. “I’m done giving handouts to you. You pay your own way, just like everypony else.”

Every once in a while, Steve got this funny idea in his head that he was going to start standing up for himself, and stop taking orders from some lousy private investigator who was five years his junior and didn’t have two bits to rub together. Apparently, it had been long enough of a while already. “Stevie, c’mon...” I started out with a tacky grin. “You can’t even sell the stale stuff.”

“No, Brick.”

“Not even for an old friend?”

“I said no. And we’re not friends.”

“Old enemy, then. I’m flexible.”

“Get out, Brick. Or I’m callin’ the cops.”

“They’d be on my side, y’know.”

“*Out.*”

I let out an exaggerated sigh and shrugged. “All right,” I said airily. “Suit yourself.”

I turned around, waiting for Pony Steve to speak up again. He didn’t disappoint. “And you know what?” he yelled out as I reached the door. “I don’t even care what you tell my mother! I’m sick of all that too!”

Without turning around, I shrugged again. “No, hey, I get it,” I replied. “I mean, that mare at the party probably just *looked* a lot like your cousin.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a vein in Steve’s neck twitch. Bluff, consider yourself called. “Y’know, I’ve always wondered, though,” I added before looking back one last time. “Why’d she have to look like the ugly one?”

I hit the door in a full sprint, chased out by a barrage of stale bread and a string of curses that’d make a sailor blush. After poking around to find the loaf that had landed the farthest from the gutter, I winked back at Steve through the window and trotted off to the office, my breakfast already getting soggy between my teeth.

I wasn’t too worried about retribution. He’d forgive me eventually, like he always did. And if he didn’t, whatever I was going to do about it wasn’t going to come to mind anytime soon. I can’t think when I’m hungry, and I especially can’t think when I’ve got a headache that won’t decide whether it wants to grow up into a migraine or not. I’d thought it was getting better before, but the longer I stayed out in the sunshine, the wider the crack running down the center of my skull got. As I rounded the corner and the Brick Breaker, Inc. Manehattan office came into view, I made a silent promise to myself that I would never touch another drop of alcohol as long as I lived, so help me Celestia and Luna and all their various nephews and cousins. It’s always good to laugh at yourself, I say.

I was almost to the door when it occurred to me: I needed my key to get into my office. My key was in my bag, and my mouth was full of breakfast. This was a problem. I stared at the door for a good minute or so with an eyebrow cocked, half my brain judging whether I could balance the key between my forelegs without losing my bread loaf, and the other half trying to keep myself from falling over. My headache wasn’t making either task very easy. Eventually, I got sick of thinking and started doing, which here involved reaching over my shoulder with a forehoof to try to knock my bag off my shoulder and onto the ground. Unfortunately, that also involved me forgetting that the damn thing was strapped to my *other* shoulder, which thus involved me falling on my ass and cracking my head on the door I was intending to unlock.

Which then resulted in said door swinging wide open because I’d forgotten to lock it the night before. The bread in my mouth muffled most of what I had to say about that.

Getting back up onto my hooves seemed like too much to bother with by then, so I got a

good grip on what remained of my bread loaf and belly crawled the rest of the way into my office, kicking the door closed mostly on purpose on the way in. Thankfully, there wasn't too much furniture to dodge around; beside the ancient pinewood desk in the center of the room, the only other objects in my office were a couple of filing cabinets set up against the back wall and a faded brown steamer trunk sitting to the right of my desk. I'd remembered to lock that, at least. Then again, the ghostly white sheen of dust garnishing the top was kind of a dead giveaway that I hadn't *unlocked* it in months.

Mental note: reconsider plan to train sewer rats as janitors.

I made it over to my desk in a decent amount of time, spitting out the bread loaf on its mostly bare top as I used it to pull myself back onto my hooves. The well-worn wood gave an emphatic creak and threatened to fall apart into tiny little melodramatic pieces if I leaned on it just one more time, but as usual it didn't go through with it. I gave it a smack for good measure, then leaned back and sat down hard on the skinny brown cushion behind it. Brick Breaker was in the building. Time to go to work.

Thirty seconds passed, and the inspiration to work didn't show up. Another half a minute and a few more bites of bread didn't help much either. Being a P.I. was like that a lot. Sometimes, the drive just wasn't there. Of course, it usually helped to actually have interesting cases to do work on. All I had right now was a lonely and shockingly deranged housewife who wanted me to figure out where her husband ran off to--for his sake, I hoped it was far away from her--and a high-stakes missive to hunt down a rogue skateboard, bequeathed upon me by a green-furred little unicorn colt who wouldn't give me back my satchel until I agreed to take his case. There's a certain glamour that goes with this job, and I'm pretty sure I was in the little colt's room when they were handing out free samples.

I'm not really sure why I still do it to begin with. The work is sparse, I'm lucky if the money even exists, and there are a thousand other things I could probably be doing better. So far, the only good reasons I can come up with are that I make my own hours and I don't necessarily have to wear clothes to work. And having a big brass nameplate sitting right up front on my desk that reads "Brick Breaker, P.I." is pretty awesome too. It'd be more awesome if anypony besides me ever saw it, but that's what I got for skimping on the office. A word to the wise: if they say in the advertisement that the property is "secluded", run like the wind.

A lot of ponies who think they're funny ask me how a pony with a magnifying glass stamped on his flank gets a name like Brick Breaker. Sometimes I make up a story to spice things up, but mostly I just tell them the truth. My father wanted a strapping young son who would follow in his hoofsteps into the construction business, and my mother wanted a daughter. Between my career choice and the fact that you couldn't pay me to go shopping for anything more complicated than ketchup, I managed to disappoint both of them. My three older brothers all worked at Dad's lumber plant, and I went to college. Kind of galling to think that they all make more than I do now.

I tried to get my mind on more pleasant things by eating the last of my bread loaf, but

even that went down sour. Last night had been catching up with me all morning, and now it had officially passed me by. My head was throbbing, my stomach was still rumbling despite the peace offering from Pony Steve, and all I had to show for my life was a twelve-by-fifteen foot office sandwiched between a duplex and a dry cleaners, and a manila folder on the desk in front of me dedicated to a stallion on the lam who'd known better than to take orders from his psychotic wife. Guess that made me the sap who hadn't, then. Story of my freaking life.

Self-pity can be a great time-waster in a pinch, so I heaved out a heavy sigh and flipped the folder open. I'd pretty much memorized what little there was inside: a couple pages on old fillyfriends, half a sheet of notes on what a slimeball he was, one doodle of myself saving a beautiful mare from a band of muscle-bound minotaurs, and a single glossy photo of a square-jawed, sour-looking stallion with a short brown mane and what looked like an even shorter temper. I'd penciled in a single word in the white margin at the bottom: "Dino". And that was it. A name, a face, and a two-hundred-bit bonus riding on whether I could find him before his wife did. But the eternal gift of being a private investigator is that you can always imagine there's something you missed the first hundred go-arounds, some little inkling of a detail that completes the metaphorical puzzle and blows away all the metaphorical fog with a metaphorical industrial fan. It'd happened to me once or twice before, and that was enough to keep me believing a third stroke of genius was just around the corner. Somepony once told me that doing the same things over and over again and expecting different results was the definition of insanity. I'm pretty sure that pony has never done detective work.

I stared at my notes until my eyes glazed over, but nothing new stuck out. Depending on who you believed, the guy was either an average pony with a thing for lemon drops, or a coldhearted fillyfiddler who left his dear, devoted old wife for some bimbo in the boondocks and oughta be strung up from the center of the Coltlyn Bridge, bless his heart. Somehow, "yikes" just didn't quite cover that particular option. But the sign on my desk didn't say "Brick Breaker, Marriage Counselor"; if this mare wanted me to find this sap, then I was going to find him. She was paying my rent, after...

Oh, damn it to the moon.

My forehead hit the folder with a heavy thunk, and stayed there. I think I groaned for a bit, but by then I could barely even work up the strength to listen long enough to tell. Mostly, all I could do was watch the word "eviction" float back and forth in the darkness behind my eyelids, and wonder distantly why this particular sucker buck to the gonads stung so much worse than all the others. I guess I just thought I'd finally found a place I could settle down for a while. I'd been living in that little box for almost two years now. I'd filled in a few of the holes in the walls, brought some new furniture, almost gotten used to the neighbors...it was a manurehole, sure, but it was *my* manurehole. And now, in a few days' time, it would be someone else's manurehole. I was definitely groaning now.

Different ponies have different ways of coping with stress. The practical ones just swallow hard and deal with it, and I suppose the more creative ones draw or write or make macaroni art

or something to get it out of their system. As for myself, I talk to Leo. He's a snow-white pegasus with a golden-orange mane, and he's not really a voice inside my head, per se. Everything he says is just what I tell him to say. But it makes me feel a little more mentally balanced if I pretend it's not just me sitting in a dark room talking to myself for hours on end. Hence, I have Leo.

"What am I supposed to do?" I moaned out to the dark room that I hoped I wouldn't be occupying for hours on end. In my head, Leo just shrugged. "Oh, you're a big freaking help."

"Well, what am I supposed to say?" Leo replied in his scratchy and slightly high-pitched voice. "It's gonna be better in the morning?"

"That'd be nice of you."

This time, Leo just laughed. "Not a chance, partner," he said. "I'm just as screwed as you are."

That's the trouble with Leo not being just a voice inside my head. Usually, his outlook on the world isn't much different from mine. "Okay, think positively," he continued a second later. "I mean, you still got this place, right? You could sleep here."

I shook my head, and the contents of the folder trapped beneath my brow scattered all over the desk. "Kinda unprofessional to do that, I think," I argued back.

"Brick, you're drooling all over your single source of income. Let's be realistic here."

And that's another thing: sometimes, he just goes and pisses me off. "I'm sorry, how the hell are you helping?" I grunted, lifting my head halfway off the desk before remembering there wasn't anypony in front of me to glare at. Despite that fact, I imagined Leo putting on a confused face.

"Am I supposed to be helping?" he asked.

"No, just stand there and look cute. That'll fix everything."

"I'm a figment of your imagination. I can't *stand* anywhere."

"I know that!"

"Boy, you are seriously messed up today, aren't you?"

"Stars above, just shut up alre..."

I paused in mid-shout, then finally looked up to stare bleakly at the single bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. "You're arguing with yourself, Brick," I muttered as my head descended back down onto the desk again. "You're arguing with yourself again."

“And you’re losing,” Leo added matter-of-factly.

I let out my deepest sigh of the morning, and Dino’s picture fluttered to the floor. I was in the middle of shifting myself over to pick it up when a gentle rapping reached my ears. Good. Now I was actually hearing Leo run into things. Maybe I was crazy after all. I was still wondering whether room and board came free at insane asylums when the rapping rang out again. Only this time, it sounded more like knocking.

Knocking. Knocking on wood. Someone was knocking on the door to the office. The door to *my* office.

Celestia banish me to Neptune. I had a customer.

I swept all my notes on Dino haphazardly back into their folder and stuffed the whole thing into one of the filing cabinets, trying to shake off what was left of my hangover in the process and mostly just giving myself whiplash. Once that was done, I tossed a dog-eared notepad and a pencil out onto the desk where the folder had been, licked a forehoof and swept it back over my mane, wished briefly that I had some kind of detective hat to wear in situations like this, and faced the door.

“It’s open!” I called out, my heart pounding almost as much as my temple.

A second or two later, the door swung inwards about a foot, and a peach-furred mare with forest green eyes peered around the side. “I-I’m sorry,” she stammered. “Is this a bad time? I heard shouting...”

I bit my lip hard and tried to make it look like a smile. “No, you’re...you’re fine,” I answered. “Uh...please, come in.”

The mare nodded, then nudged the door the rest of the way open. The instant she walked in, my whole chest went numb. The trim, tight-braided green mane that matched her eyes to a T, the impeccably trimmed fetlocks, the glimmering white pearls strung around her neck...this wasn’t just a customer, this was a *rich* one. Probably part of the Orange clan that ran things uptown, if her coat was any indication. As subtly as I could, I tried to crane my neck around to check the mark on her flank, but her ruffled gray dress went all the way back to her tail.

“You’re a...an investigator, aren’t you?” the mare asked as I snapped back to attention.

“Well, that’s what it says on the door,” I chuckled back. The mare wasn’t laughing. “Yes, I’m a private investigator. I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name...”

“Oh, I’m terribly...please, call me Valencia.”

Orange family member confirmed. Initiating heart attack sequence. “And I see you’re...Brick Breaker?” she asked a moment later. I pushed my jaw back up with a forehoof and nodded.

“So, um...” I said with only a bit of stammering. “What can I help you with?”

“It’s...”

For the first time, I noticed how patently not rich Valencia looked at the moment. Her mane weave had stray hairs poking out all over the place, and her eyes were rimmed red and underscored by dark circles the size of teabags. Not to mention, that dress hardly looked like the kind an upper class pony like herself would want to show off around town. And of course, there was the nagging thought in my back of my mind that something majorly weird had to be going on if she was desperate enough to risk a trip through this neighborhood just to see me.

“I just don’t know where else to go,” she eventually croaked. For a long moment, she just stood there and sniffled a bit, while I sat there and wondered whether I was supposed to be doing anything. Comforting obscenely rich mares having emotional breakdowns in the middle of my office wasn’t really in my repertoire of skills.

“Ma’am?” I said tentatively as Valencia blew her nose with a lacy orange handkerchief.

“Oh, excuse me,” she rushed to say back, stuffing the handkerchief deftly back in her saddlebag in the same instant. “I...gracious, I’m a mess. I suppose you’re wondering why I’m here?”

“Just a bit, yeah,” I replied before I could stop myself. Valencia had a lot of self-control, though, or else she was just beyond caring by now. To be honest, I was kind of hoping it was the former.

“Well, to put it simply,” she sighed. “I need your help. I need you...to find somepony. Isn’t that what you do?”

I tried to keep my sigh of relief as quiet as possible. *That*, at least, I could probably handle. “That’s what I do,” I asserted as I leaned forward and pulled my notepad into mouth’s reach. Usually, the procedure from here was to first make sure the client had the bits to make the job worthwhile, but I figured the company I was keeping now made that kind of a no-brainer. Still, it couldn’t hurt to ask. “Well, first off, we’re going to have to talk about fees,” I began. My intention was to play things slow and see how much I could work this mare up to--because hey, I had to make a living somehow--but as it turned out I hardly had to say anything at all.

“That won’t be a problem,” she interrupted in mid-buildup.

To my credit, I got myself back on track fast. “Well, actually, it kind of is...”

“What I mean is, there’s no need to negotiate a fee,” she added a moment later, cutting me off again. “I’ve already taken care of that.”

“You took care of...run that by me again?”

Instead of answering me directly, Valencia craned her neck back to reach into a smaller

saddlebag tucked away inside her dress. When she straightened up again, she was holding an unsealed white envelope delicately in her teeth, which she then dropped onto my desk for me to examine. After tossing a slightly confused glance in the mare's direction, I slid the flap back on the envelope and unfolded the tri-folded sheet of paper inside. It wasn't cash or a check; it was a bank statement. I read one line, then the next, and then all the air went out of the room only to reappear a second later inside my stomach.

"That's..." I tried to swallow, and got stuck fast halfway through the motion. "That's..."

"Thirty thousand initially, and another seventy thousand once you've done what I ask," Valencia nodded. I would've said something back, except my brain was still on lockdown and my tongue had swollen up to about the size of the Goodsteel blimp. "I do hope that's enough," Valencia finished a bit unsurely.

"That's...yeah, that's fine," I mumbled. Yeah, it was fine. It was more than *fine*. For that kind of money, I'd kidnap the Princess using nothing but a pair of nose hair trimmers. I glanced up long enough to notice Valencia's uncomfortable gaze, and with a good bit of internal resistance tore my eyes away from the envelope and yanked myself back into business mode.

"So who am I trying to find?" I asked after clearing my throat and wiping the sweat off my brow.

Valencia swallowed hard, and for a second or two I had the strangest feeling that she was trying to decide whether to even answer me. "Clementine," she finally said in something close to a whisper.

I grabbed my pencil in my teeth and wrote the name "Clementine" at the top of my notepad. "And was this your husband, boyfriend..."

"Daughter. She's my daughter."

Huh. Didn't expect that. Didn't expect that at all. "Your...daughter?" I said through the pencil.

Valencia nodded, her eyes shut tight. "She has dandelion yellow fur, a bright orange mane...she has her father's nose. And my eyes, just as green, just as..." She paused, and something between a sigh and a cough escaped her lips. "She turned nine three weeks ago."

My chest was numb again. Same feeling, completely different reason. The next question I asked was automatic, already on my lips almost before it reached my brain. "Her cutie mark..."

Valencia shook her head again. She was crying again. "Too young," she whispered. "She didn't...*doesn't*. She doesn't have...oh, my little..."

It's not the same. It's something else. There's some other reason. There's gotta be

some other reason...

“Did she run away?” I asked quietly.

Valencia sucked in a shuddering breath, and looked at me with desolate eyes. And shook her head. “She was foalnapped,” she said. “She’s been gone for two days.”

Of all the days to be hung over. Of all the days to finally get this case. Of all the days I had to start thinking about why I became a P.I. in the first place. It had to be today. It had to be right freaking now. The pencil dropped from my mouth, bounced off the notepad, and rolled all the way to the edge of the desk, where it fell to the floor with a gentle clatter that nearly knocked me off my seat.

“Ma’am...” I murmured. “I...I’m sorry. But I don’t think...” Another sigh, and this one came with barbs that tore at the back of my throat. “I can’t help you.”

“No, *please!*” Valencia shouted. Pleaded, was more like it. And there was no pain or sorrow corrupting those peaceful green eyes now. Just desperation. As if I really was her last hope to get her daughter back.

Funny. I remember when I *wanted* to be somepony’s hero like that.

“Look, this doesn’t have anything to do with you...” I started to say before Valencia cut me off.

“No, you don’t understand,” she gushed, her throat bobbing up and down with every word. “You’re the only...I don’t know where else to turn. The pony who took her, he’s not like other foalnappers. He’s intelligent. The police won’t be able to find him. They won’t look in the right places.”

Oh, brilliant. Not only was I for some reason her first and only choice for the job, but she wouldn’t even tell me the real reason she wanted me to do it. I’d be a fool to walk into this, for so many reasons.

“I need somepony outside the normal circles. Somepony who’s more...unorthodox, if you will. Somepony who I know will do whatever it takes to find my daughter and bring her back to me.”

“And what makes you think I’m that pony?” I shot back without looking at her. “Cause I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but this...” I gestured irreverently at my workspace. “This isn’t really what the best in the biz get to work with.”

“I don’t want the best,” she replied firmly. “I want you.”

“Why?” I repeated.

Again, I got the strangest feeling that Valencia didn’t want to answer me. Unfortunately, this time it was only a few blissful seconds before I found out why. “Because my husband’s

brother is an associate editor for the Daily," she said. "Because I remember when you were on the front page. And because I remember why you were there."

Lord Poseidon in heaven.

"Please," she begged. "You of all ponies must understand."

Now it was my turn to have my eyes shut tight. "I do understand," I muttered back. *And that's exactly why I don't want anything to do with this.*

"So you'll do it?"

Well, then. Decision time, Brick. Are you going to help this frantic, hopeless mare, or are you going to save yourself while you still can? Noble sacrifice, or self-preservation? Think carefully, Brick, because whatever choice you make, you're going to hate yourself for it regardless. Stars above, don't you just *love* having options like that?

I mean, I wasn't a cop. I was a private investigator. *Private*. I could easily just say no to this, just shove that bank statement back into that envelope and hand it over and say, "No thanks, I'll pass". Every fiber of my being was screaming at me to do just that. Every fiber of my being knew that I was exactly the wrong pony for *this* case, for *this* entire damned job. That if I could barely even bring myself to think about going after a foalnapper, then I couldn't possibly expect to do anything but waste this mare's time. And yet my lips stayed closed, and my teeth stayed clamped together like I'd brushed them over with Gorgon Glue. And my mind kept picturing a cold, hungry, dandelion-yellow filly locked in a basement somewhere, orange mane coated with grime and eyes burning with salt and fear. And an outstretched hoof reaching towards her. Lifting her up. Hooking around her neck. Squeezing.

In the end, you might say it was my conscience that got the best of me. Not the money or the fame or the fact that I knew I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I didn't take this case; no, you'd think, I just knew deep down in my soul of souls that it was simply the right thing to do. I was scared, I was afraid, I was downright petrified, but I saddled up anyway. My mind said no, but my heart said yes. All that good stuff that sounds great in a radio play, and is a little harder to come by when there's no script and no director and no unspoken promise that everypony will go home happy. When all you have to go on is your own mind telling you that you can't do it, and some other part of you telling you that there's no way you can't. You call it a conscience; I call it being a coward. Whatever it was, it got Valencia the answer she wanted to hear. And I suppose in the end, that's all that really matters.

"Has the foalnapper asked for a ransom yet?" I asked, figuring Valencia was smart enough to get what that implied about my decision. She was.

"No, he hasn't," she said with visible relief. "Not yet, at least."

I wrote that down on my notepad and put a big question mark at the end of the line.

“How do you know your daughter was foalnapped, then?”

“Because she disappeared on the way home from school. Her friends...said they saw her talking to a strange pony on Halter Street just after class ended. It’s only a block away from our home.”

“And this was two days ago, you said?”

“Yes. Mid-afternoon, I suppose.”

Two days ago. Two days ago was the Autumnal Equinox, one of the biggest holidays in all of Equestria. “Interesting day to commit a felony in broad daylight,” I thought out loud.

“I hardly think that’s at all relevant,” Valencia answered with a definite edge to her voice.

“You’d be surprised,” I muttered before backing off a bit. “And did these, uh...friends of hers see what this strange pony looked like?”

“Well, he looked...strange.”

“Yeah, we kind of established that. Anything else?”

“They didn’t know. Her friends, I mean. They told me they didn’t get a good look at him.”

“Who were these friends, again?”

“I don’t think I’m at liberty to divulge that. This has been a...well, as I’m sure you can imagine, they’re very upset about this. You’d have to speak with their parents first if you want to question them. I can give you their addresses if you need them.”

“Sure,” I said, but without really meaning it. I hardly even glanced at the piece of paper Valencia took out of her bag and scribbled on for a moment with a dainty black pen that had a cushioned guard for her teeth built right into the grip. Mostly because the single glance I did give it was long enough for me to see that those addresses would take me straight into the heart of Tuxedo Town. There were many things I’d do to make a quick bit; waltzing through the poshest neighborhoods in Manehattan to go interrogate a couple of grade-school aged foals wasn’t on the list just yet. The last time I questioned a kid, he started bawling in the middle of a ice cream parlor and I spent twenty minutes trying to convince his parents that I just wanted to know where the bathroom was. Add a friend’s disappearance and a weekly allowance bigger than my retirement fund, and you had a perfect recipe for a whole different level of stuff I *really* didn’t want to deal with.

“I have a photograph of her,” Valencia said, sensing that the prolonged silence meant I’d run out of questions. “Of Clementine.” I nodded in reply, and watched as Valencia reached into her bag one last time and pulled out a glossy six-by-eight that looked like it had been pulled out of a picture frame. I stared down at where she had dropped it on top of my notepad, and a fiery-maned, gap-toothed earth filly stared back with piercing green eyes that didn’t glow like

stars so much as twinkled like emeralds. It was the first time I'd seen the pony I was supposed to go find. It was about the fourth time my stomach had turned over at the very thought of it.

"All right," I murmured. "I'll check around Halter today, see if there's anypony over there who saw anything. You want me to write you if I find something?"

"Don't write. If you find anything, come tell me directly. Here, I'll leave you my husband's card. It has our address on it." *Fantastic*, I thought. *More traipsing around Fancy Flanks Acres*. "And if there's anything else you need—"

"Just drop on by," I finished. "Copy that."

Valencia nodded, and pulled her lips tight over her teeth. I don't think she really knew what to do now, so after a minute or two she just nodded again and turned to leave. But not before looking back at me and saying exactly what I knew she would say at one point or another. "Please, find my daughter. Please."

I tried to put on a smile, but lying to other ponies is a hell of a lot easier than lying to yourself. "I'll do the best I can," I said back honestly, and she seemed to take that as good enough. With a polite bow and a wayward cough, my first customer of the day showed herself out. And I sat motionless behind my desk, wondering what exactly I'd just gotten myself into.

I knew one thing: this case was big. Bigger than any I'd ever had before, and probably would ever have afterwards. A hundred thousand bits was serious bank to even a pony like Valencia, and to have thirty percent of it sitting in an envelope right there on the edge of my desk was unreal. I didn't even have *dreams* this crazy. To be honest, I wasn't entirely sure I wasn't dreaming right now. My head certainly felt light enough to make it a possibility.

A few minutes after my front door swung closed again, I reached out with my forehooves and pulled the bank statement out of the envelope to read it again. According to that, the Orange Family had opened up a bank account in my name at Equestrian First National, and the first portion of my fee had already been deposited and was available for withdrawal any time I wanted it. Thirty thousand bits in my own private vault, before I'd even known about the case. And if I actually found Clementine, another seventy grand would trickle on down straight into my saddlebag. It seemed too good to be true, and in my experience that meant it probably was. There was something else going on here, and I couldn't begin to think of what it could be. But the bits were real. Valencia's tears were real. And that meant this case was real. Where the cash came from didn't matter; I was being paid to be an investigator. So, I would investigate. I would catch the foalnapper, I would save the foal, and I would take the money and run, baby. All in a day's work for Mr. Hotshot Private Investigator.

It sounded so simple when I put it like that, didn't it? Like something easy. Like something that didn't mean anything beyond a crime and a criminal and a good pony like me out to bring him to justice. Like something I knew I could do.

I shoved the envelope aside and looked at Clementine's photo again. "Can I do it, Leo?" I whispered. "Can I do it right this time?"

There's one other reason I know Leo isn't just some voice in my head, and that reason is that he always answers me when I talk to him. When I call, he comes. It's one of the few things I can count on always being true: death, taxes, and Leo's always one word away. And right now, more than ever before, I needed an answer from Leo. Not anypony else. Just him. So I asked him the question that had been digging through my head ever since I found out what those thirty thousand bits were for, and waited for Leo to reply.

And in ten minutes, he never did. For the first time since he'd first taken up residence in my brain, Leo had nothing to say.

There's something to be said for spending your whole life carting lumber. At least my brothers didn't have to deal with crap like this.

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