

Chapter 4 - In Which Murphy Earns His Degree In Law

I've always found it kind of strange how I can get a plan together in a time of crisis, execute it to perfection, even improvise a bit on the fly when I need to, and then be completely clueless once the part I planned out is finished. It's like I'm a little toy soldier that always needs winding: once the key in the back of my head stops turning, I'm as good as dead on my hooves. My mother always said it was because I didn't have any initiative, because I always needed someone to tell me what to do and I never listened when they did. And that's only half-true: I didn't really ever listen to her during all of the various times she tried to steer me towards a "reputable" career—by which she meant one that involved physical labor and not being "too good for the family business"—but I could do anything I wanted to as long as I had some idea of how to get to the end of it. And then that idea ran its course and gave over to either blind impulse or nothing at all. Everything that happened today should give you a pretty good idea of how the former plan usually turns out.

This time, though, I was going for the latter option, which basically meant I spent the next hour or so after leaving the bank wandering in a general circle around it, sort of trying to look like I had somewhere important to be but mostly just avoiding accepting the fact that I was lost. I'd had some vague notion of finding a bar or someplace with similar standards for alcohol consumption, but I was used to the kind of drinking establishments that the ponies in these parts wouldn't be caught dead even looking at, let alone actually doing any drinking at. Around here, all I could see on every street was block after block of cute little clubs and lounges where business executives went to have cocktails and appetinis and fruity blue drinks with tiny red umbrellas sticking out of the top. Trying to get drunk in one of those places would probably be akin to striding into the Everfree Forest with a saddle soaked in manticore pheromones. I preferred my bars to be of the variety that couldn't be any seedier if you sowed and planted them at harvest time, so I kept walking, my throat drying out and my head fogging up more and more with every step.

Eventually, I looked up from the pavement and saw an enormous steel-girdered beast of a building casting its shadow over me. I was in front of Equestria First National again. I sighed and squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, though I didn't really have any reason to be surprised. This was the fourth time I'd passed it in the last hour. My stomach growled as I squinted up at the glinting stone columns outside, as if I needed another reminder that I was getting nowhere in a big damn hurry. The fact that my being a coward was the only thing standing between me and a three-course lunch at The Rainbow Room was just icing on the cake by this point.

My gut rumbled again a moment later, and this time it was enough to shake off the last few strands of pride still floating around inside my chest. *Mom was definitely wrong*, I told myself. *I've got enough ambition for ten ponies. What I lack is willpower.*

Well, so long as I had identified the problem, I could afford to indulge in it for one more

day. After pairing that thought with a shrug and something akin to a grimace, I sat down on the curb and nosed open the envelope sticking out of my saddlebag so I could fish out the wad of bills nearest to the top. I was in the middle of peeling off a few notes to tuck inside the front pocket of my bag when a breathy, bemused voice spoke up behind me.

“Well, that’s something I don’t see every day,” it said.

I turned around with five thousand bits still balanced between my forehooves, and somehow wasn’t surprised at all by the pony I found myself looking at. “You mean me sitting in the gutter?” I replied.

“I mean you sitting in the gutter with money,” the pony shot right back with an impish grin. “You forget to tip the getaway driver, or what?”

For a second, I tried to glare back, but my concentration broke in a heartbeat, and all I could do after that was shake my head and laugh. “Nice to see you too, Loose Leaf,” I chuckled as I got my hooves under me and tossed the cash roll back into my bag.

Loose Leaf’s grin grew wider, and the snort that followed was a lot louder than mine had been. “You know me,” he said as he stuck out a forehoof and helped me up. “I aim to please.”

“Sure,” I mouthed back, even though I was still laughing too. At least one thing about this day was tilted in my favor. Loose Leaf was a skinny little runt of a unicorn with faded gray fur, a wavy mane and tail colored a solid forest green, and a nearly eternal gleam of mischief in his baby blue eyes. He was one of those ponies with a face you forgot in an instant and a personality you remembered for the rest of your life, and he was also one of those ponies who had about as many crazy ideas per day as he had hairs on his body. Once, he had spent three months building a giant scale model of a pirate ship entirely out of old notecards just to see if he could make it float. Another time, he had covered his whole apartment in carbon paper and wasted the weekend spraying paint all over it with soup ladles and a tire pump. Apparently, that was supposed to foster his newfound talent for modern art. His stunts were almost always about something like that: finding a special talent or gift he thought he might have. I guess I can’t blame him for experimenting. When all you’ve got on your flank is a blank sheet of college-ruled paper, I can understand hoping it doesn’t just mean you’re good at collating tax returns.

“How the hell are ya?” I asked him once we started walking.

Loose Leaf shrugged, but his cheeky grin never faded. “Not too bad,” he said. “Not too bad. You still stalking old housewives?”

“You still working for a living?” I shot back. Loose fell back a step and put his hoof over his chest.

“Straight to the heart, Brick,” he moaned. “It’s always straight to the heart with you, isn’t

it?"

"It's a gift," I answered. Loose Leaf just raised his eyebrows and smirked again.

"So you gonna tell me where you got all that?" he asked next.

I almost told him everything, but at the last second I remembered what Valencia had looked like when she had started talking about her daughter. I could trust Loose Leaf to do a lot of things, but keeping his mouth shut usually wasn't one of them. "Got lucky," I ended up saying.

"How intriguing," Loose deadpanned. "Please, go on."

"No can do, buddy."

"Come *ooooon*...you always told me about 'em before!"

"This one's..." I paused for a second to search for the right word. Once again, I just went with the first thing that came to mind. "It's different. But it's big, though."

Loose Leaf's eyes slid back towards my saddlebag. "How big?"

"Thirty thousand bits big."

Leaf's brow shot up, and he cocked his head to the side. "I'm sorry, Brick, I must not've slept well last night. Sounded like you said thirty *thousand* bits?"

"And another seventy once I'm done."

"Ho-lee..." Loose Leaf trailed off with his forehoof behind his head, then burst out laughing. "...*damnit*, Brick! Are you serious?"

"Yep."

Leaf's eyebrows dropped again, but the corners of his mouth didn't move. "And you're still not gonna tell me, are you?"

"Nope."

"Because you've always been a stickler about the whole client confidentiality thing."

"I said this one was different."

"All right, all right..." Leaf said, though now his expression looked more like a smirk than anything else. I smacked him on the shoulder just on the off chance it was.

"So what're you doing around here?" I asked as we reached the corner and turned left. "How's the filing going?"

“Great,” Loose Leaf replied quickly with yet another giddy smile. “I quit last week.”

It took Loose Leaf a couple steps to notice that I had stopped. “You...you just quit?” I repeated a bit slowly, though I had every right to be confused. Loose Leaf had been a file clerk at Rein & Company for almost three years now, and hadn’t complained about it even once in front of me. Leaf was impulsive, sure, but he wasn’t *that* impulsive. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened,” Loose Leaf said from a few paces away. “You mean, was I gonna get fired or something? No, they loved me. Boss said they all really hated to see me go.” He turned around and started walking again. “But it’s just...I just felt like *doing* something for a change. Y’know?”

“Not really,” I admitted, speeding up into a trot to catch up to Loose Leaf, who chewed on his tongue for a bit before he started to explain himself.

“Look, you know how sometimes you think back to when you were a little foal and you wanted to be a cowcolt or a firepony or a doctor or whatever, and then you realize that you’re never gonna be that pony you thought you’d be no matter how hard you try?” he said.

“Yeah,” I replied. “And that’s why Poseidon invented rum drinks.”

Leaf laughed, but it was a brief one this time. “See, that’s how everypony thinks nowadays, isn’t it? It’s how I thought too. I mean, when I was growing up, I wanted to be a magician. No, seriously. I got all the books, went to all the shows...there was actually this ‘My Little Magician’ club I joined when I was eight. I got a big robe and a hat with stars on it and everything. Looked like a dumbass too, but it was what I loved.

“And then I get detention one day and stay after class sorting papers with Miss Starlight, and the next morning *this* shows up”—he jerked his head towards his flank—“and all of a sudden everyone tells me I’m gonna be doing that for the rest of my life. And I went with it, Brick. For so long, I just went with it, because I thought I didn’t have any other choice. You know how many years of my life I spent trying to figure out whether I was good at origami or novel writing or some other stupid thing that had anything to do with paper? Way too damn many, Brick.

“So last week, I got to thinking about all that, and all of a sudden I just couldn’t stand it anymore. I quit my job, I emptied my bank account, and now...hell, I don’t even know what I’m doing now. But I think that’s kinda what I wanted from this to begin with. I think I wanted to do just one thing that I *wanted* to do, and not waste every day of every week wondering what I was *supposed* to want to do. Because that’s not what a cutie mark is, Brick. ‘Cause my special talent might be, I don’t know, sorting finance reports faster than a speeding intern, but that doesn’t define who I am. I can be anything I want to be, and all I need to get it is the guts to go for it.”

Loose Leaf paused for a second, and then he snorted. “You know what the funniest part

about all this is?" he wheezed. "They totally told us all that bullshit in grade school, and we never listened. I mean, it's like Teach actually knew what she was talking about or something. Kinda galling, almost."

I chuckled along with him, but for some reason my heart wasn't really in it. "So what are you gonna do now?" I couldn't help but ask.

"Un momento, por favor," Leaf announced in an absolutely stars-awful accent before lighting up his horn and floating what looked like a boat ticket out of his bag and waving it in front of me.

"Tahayti?" I asked once my eyes zeroed in on the jittery slip of paper long enough to read the glossy letters embossed in gold on its front.

"That's right," Loose Leaf confirmed proudly. "Two weeks on island time without a care in the world. I didn't even plan it, Brick. Just got out of bed today and said, 'You know what, screw it. I'm gonna go on a cruise.' And as for what I'm gonna do when I get back, who the hell knows? That's the best part. For the first time in my life, I'm doing something that just makes me happy, something I should've done a long time ago. I've...you know what it feels like? It feels like I'm free again. Like I had these big ol' ropes around my legs for my whole life and now all of a sudden I found a pair of pruning shears and cut my way out. And I'm happy. I'm...look at me, I'm about to freakin' pop over here!"

Even though my chest still felt like it was filling with lead and I didn't have a clue why, I did my best to fight past it for my friend's sake. "You know what?" I said with a faint smile. "That's awesome, Loose."

Loose Leaf stopped in mid-babble and looked at me with about as much warmth as his widened eyes could manage. "You really think so?" he asked, the question paired with a grin that sent my stomach into a tailspin.

"Yeah, I do," I replied. "I think it's awesome that you're finally moving on from all that. I don't think I've ever even seen you this happy before."

"You haven't," Loose shot back with a friendly nudge in the shoulder. "'Cause I ain't never been this happy before. And oh, hey, you'll like this: I've got you to thank for it."

All right, then. Color me baffled. "What?"

"Oh, yeah. You're the only reason I've even got this ticket right now. 'Cause when I was doing the whole epiphany thing the other day, guess who I was thinking about?"

"This conversation's taking an interesting turn."

"Keep your mane on, you're not *that* good-looking. No, I just started thinking about the kind of pony I wanted to be, and I swear on the stars the first thing that came to mind was, 'I

want to be like Brick Breaker'. I mean, you're, like, the definition of a free spirit. You said it yourself: I work for a living, and you're out here hunting down criminals and doing whatever the hell you feel like doing. And I thought about that and I told myself, 'That's what I want to be: a pony who does what he wants, who couldn't care less whether the mark on his flank is a sheet of paper or a magnifying glass or a frickin' garbage can.'

Loose smiled, and this time it was completely genuine. "And now that's what I am."

Fancy that. I was Loose Leaf's role model. I was the most important pony he'd ever met. I was the one who had inspired him so much that he changed his entire view of the world and started living his own life for the first time in years. So of course, it made perfect sense that hearing Loose say all that made me feel like the dirt between a hound dog's toes. What happened to the good old days when milk was a half-bit a gallon and my brain didn't suddenly go manic-depressive on me every other freaking day?

"Hey, you all right, Brick?" Loose asked before I could bend my brow back out of the scowl it had fallen into. He really did sound concerned, I'll grant him that. And he had no reason not to be, if he really admired me that much. If he really thought he wanted to be just like me. If he really thought I was just peachy keen with the way my life had turned out.

"Oh...yeah, I'm fine," I assured him. The grin I put on was all teeth. "Hung over, if anything."

That got his spirits up again. "That's what I'm talkin' about!" he nearly shouted. "You're living life on the *edge*! Damnit, I don't think I've ever even gotten drunk once in my life. That's just...is that sad? That seems pretty sad. I mean, to a guy like you, that probably seems just pathetic. If I were you, I'd think it was pathetic. But then you'd be me and you wouldn't be...I don't even remember what I was talking about. What the hell was I talking about?"

I gave a noncommittal shrug, partially because it wasn't like I had anything better to say and partially because it'd be a cold day in Appleloosa before anypony knew what the hell Loose Leaf was ever talking about. I was still trying to think of something to change the subject to when I noticed something odd out of the corner of my eye. Namely, that Equestrian First National Bank was six blocks behind us and wasn't doing a whole lot to catch back up.

"Hey, Loose?" I mumbled with my head still twisted towards the distant skyscraper.

"Sup?"

"Where are we going?"

After a quick glance up the street we were walking down, Loose Leaf stuck his bottom lip between his teeth and let out a thoughtful little hum. A moment later, he shrugged.

"No clue," he said. "I was following you."

“And I was following you,” I sighed.

“Well...wait a minute.”

“Brilliant...” I muttered under my breath.

“Dude, that’s...kind of hilarious, actually.”

“I’m laughing on the inside.”

“No, it’s like we’re on the same wavelength. Like an old, married couple.”

“So what, we’re gonna start-”

“Finishing each other’s sentences?”

“Oh, you’re adorable.”

“Love you too, honey.”

“Loose, where the hell are we?”

“We are...” Loose Leaf said, dragging out the second word as he turned around in a full circle where he stood. “Right where we need to be,” he finished a half-turn later, his slow spin jerking to a stop as an incredibly self-satisfied look washed over his face. “Check it out.”

I checked it out. “Ye Olde Salt Shoppe,” I read off the pink and blue neon sign hanging over the door of the squat brick building Loose Leaf was pointing towards. “How original.”

“That’s where we’re going,” Loose declared. “Right into...right here. Into this bar right here. I love this place.”

Mm-hmm. And I’m a pretty princess with fairy wings and a God complex. “You come here a lot?” I asked nonchalantly.

“Oh, totally. What, you think I’m making this up? Nah, dude, this is the place to be Friday nights around here. I come here all the time with my, uh...when my...”

“Pants are on fire?”

“When my pants are...” Loose Leaf blinked, and blew out a heavy breath. “Yeah, I have no idea where we are,” he said. “But hey, when life gives you lemons, right? Let’s get a drink. I gotta get in shape for the boat anyway. Don’t wanna board tomorrow and be the only pony there who can’t handle a mogeeto on the rocks.”

“Mojito.”

“Whatever. You in?”

I can't be the only one who hates it when you can't figure out what the hell your thoughts mean. I'd kind of had it in my mind that I wanted to get drunk alone today, but there was definitely a reason I felt like running for the hills right now, and that definitely wasn't it. I felt depressed, almost, but it was the kind of depressed that just came right out of nowhere and stuck around for hours like peanut butter to the roof of your mouth. And I wasn't going to figure out what caused it anytime soon.

So instead of listening to my gut and bluffing my way into a quick exit, I just nodded and said, "Sure, I'm in," because Loose was standing right there in front of me, and when your best and possibly only friend asks if you want to get a drink, you say yes. That's what friends do.

Loose Leaf grinned, and my stomach dove into my hooves. "All right, then," he said, throwing a forehoof around my shoulders. "Let's go get wasted, Brick."

And there wasn't any big revelation after that. I don't know what I was expecting, but I never had any blinding moment of clarity where I realized what exactly the hell it was that was wrong with me. Not when I walked into the bar behind Loose, not when I took a stool at the counter and got a glass of bad whiskey I hardly even touched, not when I spent two hours pushing my drink back and forth in front of me while Loose learned through experience that chugging four ounces of straight scotch in a single gulp would be the number one cause of suicide in adult stallions if anypony else were stupid enough to do it. The whole time, I just stared at the puddle of condensation forming underneath my glass and waited for Loose to get wrecked enough for the bartender to kick us out. The whole time, my mind was clogged like my kitchen sink on leftover night.

And the whole time, all I could think was that, despite the fact Loose Leaf was sitting right next to me and talking to me and occasionally spilling his drink all over me, I had never felt so alone in my entire life. Anypony who wants to psychoanalyze *that*, good freaking luck.

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You know, I'll never say that Loose Leaf's not a nice guy, but I will say that he's *really* bad at a lot of things. And as I was discovering now, item number one on that list of anti-skills was being graceful and composed when he was drunk off his ass.

"Yu'oh what...y'know what your problem is, Brick?" Loose shouted in my ear as we hung a left on Fetlock and passed by the green painted sign welcoming us to Sugarcube Hill. "You gotta *smile* more. Y'know?"

I nodded absentmindedly and kept my eyes focused on the ground. We'd been at the bar so long that the sun had already sunk down behind the office complexes we were trotting by now, and if I hadn't known better I might've thought that the city's designers *meant* for the sunset to shine right down the center of Fetlock Boulevard and directly into my eyes. "You don't say," I muttered back as I squinted down at the sidewalk to keep from going blind.

“Nah, ‘m serious, bro. I see you walkin’ around all the time, and you’re all, like...just a downer, right? Ever’pony loves a guy who smiles, ‘s how you get friends. ‘Cause...’cause ever’pony loves a guy who smiles. I mean, look at me, I smile, an’ I got fr-friends all *over* the place.” A sloppy grin slid over Loose’s lips, and a second later it oozed up into his eyes. “I’m the *liiiiiife*’a th’ par-*HIC*.”

Loose Leaf stopped dead for a moment, his eyes unfocused and his Abba’s apple bobbing up and down like a fishing lure with a twenty-pound trout on it. “...life’a the party,” he finished in a mumble once his throat stopped twitching long enough to speak.

Normally, I would’ve at least tried to keep my eyes from drifting skyward, but Loose Leaf would be lucky if he remembered his own name after today, let alone whether I’d been less than supportive about it. And besides all that, my headache was kicking in again. “Is that all?” I asked in a monotone before my better judgment caught up with my steadily worsening mood.

“No, y’know what else? Y’know what you need? You need a fi-fil...fillyfre...shit.”

“Fillyfriend?”

“Yes. You need a fillyfriend, Brick. I mean, ‘cause you’re...an’ I’m sayin’ this as a friend, dude, but you ser’sly got it goin’ *on*, y’know?” By now, Loose Leaf was spraying spit all over the road every time he ran into a hard consonant. “Like, you got the whole rugged, badass, bounty hunter thing goin’ up here, and you...I-I don’t know what you got goin’ down there, I never...”

Loose Leaf coughed, then nearly collapsed onto my shoulder in a fit of surprisingly unmasculine giggles. I found a wispy gray cloud of factory smoke to stare at until he got himself composed enough to continue enlightening me with the wisdom Mr. Tack Daniels had imparted upon him.

“Dude, I...” Loose eventually started to say in between wheezes. “I’m so *wasted*, man.”

“You? *Nooo*,” I assured him. “You’re the pinnacle of health.” All right, so sometimes I ignore my better judgment on purpose. Sue me.

“No bullshit?” Loose Leaf asked.

“Aw, course not. Friggin’ Ponympic champion over here, that’s what you are.”

Loose Leaf nodded vigorously and somehow kept himself up right while doing so. “Damn straight,” he said with his tongue poking out of the corner of his mouth. “Barnacle of help, that’s...that’s really nice of you, Brick.”

We took a right turn this time, onto Driver Street. The smoke column was even bigger now, but I couldn’t for the life of me remember what the factory it belonged to was. And you know what else I couldn’t remember? That time last night where I must’ve been smashing coconuts with my forehead or something, because there was no other logical reason it needed

to be pounding like somepony was bouncing a soccer ball off of it.

“No, jus’ listen for a...li-listen for a second,” Loose begged me. I guess he’d forgotten that I hadn’t actually said anything yet. “You...you are always so *nice* to me, and I...I’m tearin’ up. Brick, my eyes’re...yeah, I’m cryin’. I’m cryin’ now.”

Of course I couldn’t remember which factory was over here: there weren’t *any* factories over here. So that was a house fire I was watching, then. Awesome. If there was one thing my humble abode was missing, it was the smell of slow-roasting drywall seeping out of everything inside it. And yes, that was a rogue beam of sunlight that had just gleamed off a storefront window and stabbed me in the frontal lobe. Just what I needed to top off the day.

“I...I love you, Brick,” Loose Leaf slurred. “Y’know, not like, uh...it’s like a brotherly thing. You and me are like...like brothers, dude. From another...um...” Loose Leaf sucked in a breath and made a very interesting face, one that involved tucking his upper lip behind his bottom teeth and gaining the distinct appearance of a pony trying to crap out a bowling ball. “‘S it hot out here?”

I closed my eyes as gently as I could and made a blind turn onto my street. This was starting to get downright unfair by now. Shouldn’t I have had to be drunk too to have a headache this awful? Wasn’t that how things worked in a fair and just world? And now even my nose was raw from all the smoke scratching around inside it. I’d probably smell like an ashtray for a week. All because some idiot put a squirrel in their microwave or something and lit up their house like the Summer Sun Celebration. All because somepony upstairs had decided long ago that today would be International Screw With Brick Day. All because I had decided to get up and go to work today.

And that was it. I’d had it. The world had been poking and prodding at me ever since I’d woken up that morning, and I was officially done with being civil about it. I was going to walk down this street, turn into my building, lock my door, and go to bed, and if Princess Celestia herself needed to wake me up between now and next month, then Equestria was just going to have to soldier on without me. I. Was Freaking. Done.

And usually, I try not to think what I thought right then. I try not to consciously look at a situation and say to myself, “This cannot *possibly* get any worse than it is now.” It’s not because of some sage, philosophical nonsense, and it’s definitely not because I’m one of those ponies who’s never seen a snafu that they didn’t think would be all hunky-dory by morning. It’s a much stupider reason than that: when it comes down to it, I’m just paranoid. Superstitious, if you want to get a little more specific about it. Because, see, I’m the type of guy who believes that somewhere off in the great blue yonder, there really are a bunch of all-powerful ponies lounging around and watching over us all, bigger and more powerful than any princess could ever be. And I also believe that those ponies, for lack of a better way to say it, have minds just like ours. They think, they reason, they fall in love overnight and regret it in the morning; just like all of us mortals, only with earth-shattering superpowers and better hair.

“Aw, sh...*Brick!*” Loose yelled suddenly, even his voice sounding a little unsteady at this point. “Dude, check out th’ fire, man!”

That’s not all, either. I believe that they like the same kind of things we do. Y’know, like good food, good friends, great wine and better mares. All the little pleasures of life here on good ol’ Terra Hippos.

“No, ser’sly, *look* at it. Th’ big building right over there. It’s just...friggin’...”

Most of the time, I think they even like making us happy.

“Wait a se...hey, dude?”

But you know what the thing I believe most of all about those ponies is?

“Isn’t that *your* building?”

Every so often, they just like being complete and total assholes.

My eyes shot open just as I nearly ran into the backside of a giant pegasus with a thick black firesuit on over his cyan fur, but the half-second look I got at what Loose Leaf was pointing at was all I needed to see. The street was packed with carriages and ponies, half of the latter dressed like the pony standing in front of me and the other half made up of curious bystanders and the errant reporter or two. Overhead, a soot-blackened swarm of pegasi ferried clouds back and forth across the sky, wringing each one dry ovetop a five-story building off to my right, the top floor of which was currently engulfed in convulsing orange flames. My building. My floor.

My apartment.

The firepony turned around and looked at me, his canary-yellow hardhat glistening at me in the flickering light of the growing blaze. He shouted something, I think, but he probably wasn’t talking to me. I would’ve heard him if he were talking to me, and I couldn’t hear anything right now except for splintering wood and a cacophony of calls for more water over here and more clouds over there, and a faltering, almost incomprehensible voice that sounded almost, but not quite, like mine.

“That’s my...that’s my...”

I was dreaming. That was it. I was at the bar, passed out in a pile of drool after downing one too many Clyde Lights while Loose Leaf tried to fan the flies away from my thoroughly soused hindquarters. That *had* to be it. I couldn’t really be standing here on *my* street looking up at *my* window watching *my* home go up in smoke. My luck couldn’t possibly be that bad. The universe couldn’t possibly hate me that much. There had be some kind of rules about these things, didn’t there? Some line drawn somewhere where you could only have so many awful things happen to you in a single day before someone checked in and said, “All right, back

it off, he's good for today." Bad things happened to bad ponies, and good things happened to ponies like me who just did their best with what they had. That was right. That made sense. That-

Somepony's hoof touched me on the shoulder, and I jerked back with every hair on my back standing on end. By the time my knees unlocked and my heart rate was no longer stuck on "hummingbird", my ears were working again as well.

"Stay back!" the owner of the hoof shouted behind my ears. It was the big blue pegasus again, his thick brown eyebrows hung low over his equally dark eyes. "We've got it under control!"

"That's my..." I tried to say again, only to be ambushed from the side by a gasping mound of faded green fur that had moved a lot faster than what I would've considered to be logically possible.

"Oh, thank *heavens* you're all right!" Mrs. Willow sobbed in my left ear, the only part of my head that wasn't being crushed against her chest like an empty soda can. For a nine-hundred-year-old mare on a fixed income, she sure had one hell of a kung-fu grip. "I've been looking for you *everywhere*! They told me everypony got out safe, but there was smoke everywhere and I never saw you leave and..." Mrs. Willow gave me another squeeze, and a thousand little suns burst in front of my eyes. "Oh my stars, I'm just so happy you're safe!"

Fire. Old pony. Mothballs. Can't breathe. "I love you too," I wheezed. "Please let go of me."

Thankfully, Mrs. Willow's hearing was better than I'd expected as well. As she released me from her grasp and I stared at my hooves until they grew back to their normal size, Loose Leaf decided to join us as well.

"Dude..." he said for what must've been the millionth time that day. "*Rough.*"

"And who's this?" Mrs. Willow asked, still characteristically oblivious to the fact that I was more or less in full-blown shock by now, and also the fact that Loose Leaf was still off prancing about in La La Land. "Another one of your little friends?"

Loose Leaf guffawed, then put on a bashful, bleary-eyed look. "You're pretty," he said back. "She's pretty, Brick."

Mrs. Willow went pink under her fur, and my mind went numb with what I later determined was abject horror. "Oh...my," she chuckled. "Aren't you a charmer?"

"I'll be anythin' you—*hic*—want me to be..."

Oh, sweet Celestia, change the subject. Change the subject now. "What happened?" I managed to ask the pegasus without my bone-dry tongue getting in the way too much.

“H-how’d this start?”

The firepony shrugged. “Not too sure yet, to be honest. Best we can figure, it all flared up on the top floor, on the far side over there. Might’ve been a candle tipped over, oven left on...no witnesses, far as we know, so I can’t tell ya much ya don’t see for yourself just now...”

“Well, now, that’s not true!” Mrs. Willow piped up suddenly. “Dogwood here knows all about it!”

“Hey, yeah, totally!” Loose agreed. “You tell ‘em, Bri...w-wait, what?”

“What are you talking about?” I said to Mrs. Willow.

“Why, that’s where your apartment is, isn’t it? On the far side, two doors down from me.”

Of course. Leave it to Mrs. Willow to forget I’d spoken to her right before I left for work. “Well, yeah, but...I’ve been gone all day,” I explained as gently as I could manage. “How could I have seen anything if I wasn’t even th-”

Another thing about today I didn’t see coming: Mrs. Willow cutting me off by way of a smack on the head and sending me spinning off into a whirlwind of stars and sunbursts. “Shame on you,” she said firmly before I could even so much as whimper in agony. “You know better than to tell lies like that! Especially when this nice pony just wants to help!”

“What am I lying ab-” She smacked me again. “Ow! I’m an adult, damnit! Just talk to me!”

“You stop that this instant,” Mrs. Willow ordered. “Not twenty minutes ago, I was going out to the store to get some wheat germ, and I saw you walk into your room and lock your door. Now you tell me why you have to make such a big to-do about a secret like *that!*”

“What I’m *telling* you is that I never...” My train of thought left the station just as a new one came screeching in. “Wait, wait, wait a second...what’d you say?”

“I said that I saw you walk into your room and lock the door,” Mrs. Willow replied indignantly. “I suppose that was somepony else with the key to your apartment?”

The key to my apartment. Somepony had been in my apartment twenty minutes ago, and they had a key. But the lock on my door only had one key, and it was in the satchel still slung over my back. She must have been seeing things, then, because there was no way that somepony could’ve just broken into my apartment without anyone hearing it, and have gotten out without anypony seeing him after the whole place went up in...

...*son of a bitch.*

“When did you see me?” I asked Mrs. Willow. “Exactly when did you see me last?”

“About twenty minutes ago, I said,” she answered testily, though now there was a bit of concern sneaking into her voice.

I turned to the firepony. “When did the fire start?”

The stocky pegasus cocked an eyebrow, but didn’t stay silent for long. “We got the call ‘bout fifteen minutes ago,” he said. “So...well, I reckon it’d be about twenty minutes ago that it all started too.” Soon after that, his other eyebrow sunk down to join its partner. “Hold on...”

“Are you all right, little pup?” Mrs. Willow asked. And strangely enough, I was. As a matter of fact, I was better than all right. My shock was gone, and so was my confusion and my fear and the headache that had haunted me every hour of the whole damn day. For the first time in what felt like years, things was finally starting to click together for me. Somepony breaks into my apartment right through the front door, and a few minutes later the entire floor is burning and nopony knows why. I didn’t need to put the puzzle pieces together anymore; I had the picture on the box sitting right in front of me. The printing was blurry and I couldn’t make heads or tails of what it was supposed to be, but at least I had a shape to work with. And considering how my day had gone thus far, I was more than happy to take that and run with it.

But if I hadn’t been in my apartment all day in the first place, then what was the point of setting it on fire? I didn’t know any secrets dirty enough to justify this, and all my case files were at my office...stars above, what if they’d already burned everything there too? No, that wouldn’t have made any sense either; if they’d wanted to kill me or make sure something I knew never saw the light of day, they would’ve just swung by that afternoon and plunked a Molotov down right in the middle of my desk. Torching my apartment as well would’ve just made it more obvious that it was a deliberate attack. So that only left two possibilities I could think of right now. Either this whole debacle really was random and I’d just been the victim of an incredibly coincidental botched robbery, or somepony was trying to send me a message. And if somepony was trying to send me a message, then they’d want to make sure I got it.

Which meant that whoever that somepony was...

“He’s still here,” I said. “Whoever set that fire, he’s still here.”

“What?” the firepony and Mrs. Willow said in tandem.

“Dude...” Loose Leaf murmured under his breath, right before tipping over sideways with his legs stuck straight out and passing out on the sidewalk.

I decided to let Mrs. Willow take care of her now unconscious admirer and pushed right past the firepony, who didn’t make any motion to stop me this time. Once I got out into the empty semicircle of pavement right beneath the building’s front, I looked up at where my apartment had once been through its reflection in the puddles formed by the fireponies’ efforts. I knew everypony in the crowd had to have noticed me by now, but in my mood I was in I couldn’t have cared less. There were at least a hundred ponies out there who were completely

irrelevant right now, and exactly one who wasn't. And I was going to weed him out.

Ever since I was a little foal, I've had this weird ability to pick out the tiniest of details in even the most chaotic of scenarios. It tends to come with an annoying side effect of missing the really big things sitting right in front of me and there really aren't a lot of practical applications for it out in the real world, but there's one thing it's absolutely perfect for, and that's finding somepony who doesn't want to be found. I couldn't tell you how I do it for a million bits, and between you and me it doesn't even work a good bit of the time. But when it does, it's like the whole world around me fades to black and white, and all I can see with any clarity is the one thing I want to pop up. It might be instinct. It's probably magic. At the moment, I didn't particularly care one way or the other. Right now, all I knew was that I wanted to find the bastard who started all this, and I was gonna run my special talent into the ground before I let him sneak away into the night without me having my say about it.

And call it fate or destiny or damnfool luck, but even with my whole body aching and throbbing all over, my special talent was still firing on all cylinders. Just a few seconds after I left Loose Leaf and Mrs. Willow behind, I felt a tingly, almost painful itch on the side of my head, just to the left of my temple. I've learned over the years that when I get that itch, it's best to listen to it first and ask questions later, so I turned my head to the left and swept my eyes over the crowd. At the end of the first pass, the buzzing reached a crescendo, and suddenly I was staring at a button-nosed earth pony standing almost out of sight behind the sandwich shop on the corner. He was stoutly built and a bit on the short side, and had orange fur and a curly maroon mane I could just barely see poking out from underneath a dumpy gray jacket and hood. There was nothing at all remarkable about him: he wasn't breathing hard or sweating, his sleeves weren't charred black at the edges, he didn't have a kerosene canister hanging from his teeth. And yet that extra sense I had floating around in my head wouldn't let me look away.

The stallion was already watching me when he first caught my eye, but the same could be said for everypony with a hundred feet. For a long moment, we just stood there and stared at each other, and for a much longer moment I wondered what the hell I'd been thinking when I'd let my instincts tell me that this guy was responsible for burning down a whole city block. If Stumpy over here was an arsonist, I was a ballerina. He wasn't even wearing shoes, for moon's sake. What kind of moron would set an apartment on fire without any shoes on? It was a weak reason to give up so quickly and I knew it much too well, but my sudden shot of inspiration was wearing off a lot quicker than I'd been expecting, and to be honest I was much concerned at this point about avoiding a repeat of the last time I'd suffered through a cutie mark failure. Specifically, the time I still had the chipped tooth and the singed eyebrows from.

I gave the other pony a few more seconds to do something other than stare back at me, then called it quits and let my eyes drop to the pavement. That whole self-confident trip I'd been riding high on when I'd walked out into the middle of the street was gone now, so I had plenty on situational awareness left to notice all the ponies whispering and pointing at me from the crowd. They didn't know why I was standing out there looking like a jackass, but I'm sure they have some very good ideas of their own. And the icing on the cake? This time, it was all my own

neighbors who were staring at me and theorizing about me and wondering what on earth was rattling around in that little hollow space between my ears. I'd never been so thankful to have red fur, because it was the only thing keeping my face from glowing brighter than the apartment I'd been planning on sleeping in tonight.

And for whatever reason, I chose that moment to look up at Stumpy again one last time. There's an argument for saying that I just did it out of embarrassment, and another one in the notion that my special talent wasn't quite done just yet. Hell, you could probably even say I was just too desperate by then to throw away the one lead I'd even temporarily had. But whatever the reason really was, there was one thing no pony could ever debate: that moment I picked to look up one last time was the one moment about that day I'd remember for the rest of my life.

Because it was in that exact moment that I saw Stumpy blink his eyes, let them widen to the size of dinner plates, and then take off in a dead sprint into the alley across the street.

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