

Chapter 3

*And high up above or down below,
When you're too in love to let it go,
But if you never try you'll never know,
Just what you're worth,*

The lights were bright.

She tried to open her eyes but only made it about halfway before the sudden influx of blinding light forced her to shut her eyelids again. Gradually, her other senses began to come back to her. She no longer felt as if she was floating, but lying down – lying down on something soft. The surface was soft yet not as fluffy and springy as the clouds she normally lay on. She got the sensation that there was something on top of her as well, something scratchy, like linen. As she became more self-aware, she began to notice a dull throbbing in her head. The pain grew and was then augmented by pain from more areas of her body. Her head hurt, her wings hurt, and her legs hurt. Her left fore-leg especially hurt, it felt as if it had somehow been broken, while her right fore-leg was marked with a pain that resembled a continuous pinprick. In fact, her entire body hurt all over. The throbbing pain in her head continued to grow until she could hardly stand it anymore. Desperate to relieve some of the headache and the lesser aches from around her body, she began to open her mouth to groan or call out to somepony – anypony.

Or, she tried to, at least. The instant she opened her mouth, she found it so dry and parched that she could barely get air in. Suddenly conscious that she needed to breathe and that her throat was somehow useless, her nose twitched and she sharply sucked in air through it. The scent that she picked up was fresh, but it had the tang of various chemicals and disinfectants on it. Regardless, the fresh air helped with the pain and she began to think enough to wonder where she was. With her curiosity piqued and headache down to more manageable levels, the pegasus tried to open her eyes again to get a look at her situation. Again, her eyelids, black against her vision, only made it about halfway up before the light forced them down again. Undaunted, she tried again, and was able to keep them open for a little longer the next time. She continued this cycle of blinking until the most annoying rays of light had dimmed as her eyes got adjusted to the brightness. Gradually, colors appeared as blurry shapes swam in and took form amongst the white light.

“Hey! She’s waking up!” She heard a voice call as her vision focused enough to reveal the blurry shape of a white pony leaning out a black passageway. The pony turned away from the doorway and advanced on her, a kind smile was visible on a white face framed with a red-pink mane. The rest of the room swam into focus as the pony stopped and looked right at her, speaking now to address her. “Hello, Rainbow Dash. It’s good to see you awake. I’m Nurse Redheart and I’m here to take care of you. Do you need anything?” Redheart spoke slowly to make sure Rainbow could articulate what she was saying.

Rainbow Dash tried to respond, but found that she could only cough. She coughed several times as she tried to speak, her parched throat unwilling to let recognizable sound come out. Her message seemed to get across, though.

“Oh. You must want some water, don’t you?” Nurse Redheart reached across the bed to a side table and gingerly balance a glass of water in her hooves, bringing it to the needy lips of the cyan pegasus lying below her. Rainbow Dash drank ravenously, the cool liquid spilling down her throat taking much of the bite out of the dryness that had covered her mouth.

Finally, when she had swallowed enough water to moisturize her throat, she found she could talk. “W... w-where am I?” She asked in a wheezy voice that was even raspier than usual.

“You’re in Ponyville Hospital, recovering from a very serious fall. In fact...”

“DAAASHIIIEE!” A new voice cried, completely cutting off Nurse Redheart as a faded pink earth pony mare with a darker pink mane and tail hanging limply at her sides bounded from the doorway and crossed the room in less time than it took Rainbow Dash to even register her presence.

“Oooof” She gasped out as a solid pink mass collided with her body in the bed and wrapped its fore hooves around her in a death-grip.

“I... I was s-so w-w-worried about y-you!” The hysterical pony sobbed as she cried into her friend’s rainbow-colored mane.

“Miss Pie, please restrain yourself. You run the risk of injuring her further!” came the stern tone of Nurse Redheart.

“S-sorry nurse. I was j-just... I’m s-sorry.” Pinkie Pie choked out as she released Rainbow Dash from her embrace and moved to stand next to her bed.

“It... it’s great to see you too, Pinkie.” Dash rasped out, before turning back to Nurse Redheart.

“Now,” Redheart began again, “as I was saying before I was interrupted... You were completely unconscious when you were brought here. You had suffered a concussion and your body was bruised significantly. You also lost a lot of blood due to both internal and external bleeding. Your wings were bruised but not fractured, thankfully. Your left foreleg was dislocated, but we managed to place it back into position, although I imagine you are experiencing significantly more pain in that joint now.”

“Yeah, my head too. My head probably hurts the most.” Rainbow said, bringing a hoof up to rub her temple as if to stress this point.

“Well I should think so. Out of all your injuries, your head trauma was certainly the worst. We actually had a Unicorn Doctor come in and perform a magic scan to test for brain damage. Luckily, there doesn’t appear to be any. You only managed to knock yourself unconscious and open a pretty severe gash on the back of your head.” She paused for a moment

before continuing again, “You should actually count yourself very lucky. In most cases of a fall from this height, we’d see far more widespread injuries. You should be glad your friends were there for you, and that they’ve been here this whole time, waiting.”

“Well where are they?” Rainbow said, confused.

“There’re still coming.” Pinkie Pie answered solemnly. “I was so excited to see you that I ran from the waiting room ahead of them at top speed to get here.”

“Oh...” Rainbow settled down to wait for the rest of her friends to show up, but at this moment became aware again of the strange pin-prick like-feeling she had in her right foreleg. She craned her neck from Pinkie on her left over to her right to get a view of the limb. She saw that there seemed to be a needle stuck into her foreleg, the point of acute sensation where it contacted her skin was hidden under a bandage, but she could see it there all the same. The needle was attached to a clear tube that seemed to have liquid running through it. She followed the tube upwards with her eyes until it reached a hanging pouch with a clear liquid suspended in it. This pouch hung on a metal rack next to her bed right beside a similar pouch that was filled with a red liquid. ‘Blood?’ Rainbow thought as she turned back to address the nurse again. “Ummm... What is this thing inside me?” she asked with trepidation.

“What? That? Oh. That’s just an IV. We used it to give you doses of nutrients while you were unconscious.”

“Why would I need that? I could sleep just fine before. I don’t need some needle stuck in me!” She attempted to pull it out with her other forehoof, but the pain of her previously dislocated left limb forced her to set it back down before she could reach the offending needle.

“Well, I suppose it is no longer necessary, seeing as how you’ve awoken. If you would prefer it, I see no harm in removing it now.” Nurse Redheart explained, just to calm Rainbow Dash’s nerves, “but I assure you, you couldn’t very well eat or drink while you were unconscious.”

“Wait, eat or drink? But that means I must have... I’ve been asleep for...” Rainbow Dash started stammering, the cold reality of her situation finally hitting her. She had no idea what time it was, or what day, even. She was in a hospital room with extensive injuries and strange fluids hooked up to her. Most of all, she didn’t even know how she had survived. “How long have I been...”

“Ya’ve been out for two whole days, Sugarcube.” Rainbow Dash looked up at the sound of the voice that had interrupted her. From across the room, her eyes locked with the green ones of the mare who was now trotting in through the doorway. It was not how she had wanted to see Applejack again. Instead of the bright, smiling, happy face that had been haunting both her happiest dreams and her most despairing moments for the past few months, Rainbow saw a dejected looking face. The green eyes that had seemed to shimmer like the depths of an emerald pool before now seemed dull, as if their usual mirth was clouded by pain. Behind Applejack,

both Rarity and Twilight Sparkle entered the room. The corner of Rarity's mouth was twitching, as if she was biting back something she desperately wanted to say. Twilight hung her head.

All four mares gathered around the hospital bed of their friend. Nurse Redheart retreated to the other side of the room, content to just watch now that she had taken the IV out. Rainbow's gaze flitted from face to face as she looked up at her four friends gathered around her. The mournful looks sported by both Pinkie and Twilight, the incredulous, confused blank stare of Applejack, and Rarity's fiery glare all met her gaze.

Pinkie was the first one to find words. "Why, Dashie... why?" she asked, tears beginning to well up in the bottom of her eyes as she looked at her friend.

"Why what?" Rainbow answered cautiously, knowing full well what she meant but not wanting to admit it.

"You know exactly what she's talking about, Rainbow Dash." Rarity looked like she was ready to explode, and seemed to be doing all she could to keep her voice down to acceptable levels. "Why did you do this? How... how could you do this to us, your best friends? How... how could you... how could you try to... try to... how could you even think about..."

"...killing yourself." Twilight finished in a small voice, so quietly that it was as if she didn't want anyone to hear her, as if the mere mention of such a thought was too horrible to speak out loud.

Rainbow cringed. This was not the conversation she wanted to be having right now. Quickly, she tried to think of a lie to cover her tracks, or at least buy her some time. "But I wasn't... I didn't... I wasn't going to..."

"Don't you try to lie to us, Rainbow Dash." Rarity nearly shrieked, almost beside herself with anger. "Pinkie Pie told us that she saw you lock your wings up during flight when she saw you fall. You did this on purpose. You were perfectly content to just fall to your death without a care to what we felt, weren't you?"

"Rarity... Rarity, please." Twilight almost whispered, barely able to stand the rising emotion.

"I... I failed the Wonderbolts tryout." Rainbow said lamely.

"Oh sure, we had to hear that from Pinkie too, while we all waited in the lobby for the doctors to tell us if you were even going to make it!" Rarity seethed, "Tell me, Rainbow Dash, does that seem like a good reason now to throw yourself off a cloud? You would be dead now if your fall hadn't been broken. I hope you realize that."

It was in this moment, looking from face to face of her four friends while she tried to think of a suitable response, that Rainbow realized something was wrong – very wrong. "Wait a

minute... Where's Fluttershy?"

"Rainbow," Applejack quickly said in order to cut off Rarity's next outburst, "She broke yer fall Rainbow. Fluttershy did everything she could to save yer life, and it worked."

At that moment, Rainbow Dash wanted nothing more than to break through a hole in the ceiling and escape this new nightmare. But she couldn't. This was the real world now. "Fl-Fluttershy saved me? I landed on her? Is she... is she..." Rainbow couldn't even bring herself to ask the question that now burned at her mind. Fluttershy – sweet, innocent, kind, caring Fluttershy, had come between her and the hard ground?

"She's in the next room over." Nurse Redheart called from her chair over by the wall, "We managed to get her breathing and her heart rate stabilized, but she is still comatose and she is still in critical condition."

"I hope you realize what that means." Rarity snapped before Rainbow Dash could inquire further, "Fluttershy is in even worse shape than you are right now. She could have died trying to save you, Rainbow Dash."

"Well she didn't." Rainbow shot back, "She's still alive, and she's OK, right?"

"Weren't you listening to the nurse?" Rarity's voice was continuing to rise, even against her own better judgment and sensibilities, "She's in critical condition. We've all been waiting here for two days for you both to wake up, and Fluttershy still hasn't shown any signs of improvement besides a weak pulse and ragged breathing. She might not make it!" Rarity was close to crying now, but still managed to push on, "She might still die, Rainbow Dash! And if she does, it will be entirely your fault."

"You don't need to remind me of what I did!" Rainbow shot back, starting to get angry with Rarity, "It's not like I was trying to hurt her!"

"But it was your stupid decision that put all of us in this situation!" Rarity shouted, any semblance of previous etiquette slipping away.

"I didn't ask Fluttershy to try and save me!" Rainbow retorted, her own volume rising, "I didn't want anypony to save me!"

"And just what was she to do? Leave you to fall to your death of your own accord?" Rarity cried, "Would letting you kill yourself solve anything?"

"Shut up, Rarity! You don't know my life, OK? You don't understand anything about me. You have your fashion world and your dreams of being a designer; you have everything you could ever want! You don't know what my life is like! You know I've always wanted to be a Wonderbolt, but now all that is gone. I've got nothing left to look forward to. You'll never understand. You still have your dreams! You still have your family!"

“Just what are you implying, Rainbow Dash?” Rarity returned fire while Twilight, Applejack, and Pinkie could only watch in fascination and horror, “That I’m the insensitive one? I’m the one with a perfect life? You’re the one who just about ended her life without a thought towards what her friends would think!”

“The Wonderbolts were all I had left! They were the only thing that kept me going for years – ever since my parents died! I had to watch my parents be burned to death when my house caught fire, Rarity. My entire childhood went up in flames and my entire family was lost right in front of my eyes! I had to go to Cloudsdale alone and raise myself for years, and that entire time the only reason that I kept me waking up each day was my dream of becoming a Wonderbolt, and now that’s gone too. I have no family, no future, nothing!”

“What about us, Rainbow Dash?” Rarity seethed, “Aren’t we, your best friends, worth living for? Don’t you think we could have helped you? Do you think you’re the only one who has lost family members?”

“You still don’t understand! I lost my entire family in one day, and I had to watch my entire world burn and crash down around me! You have Sweetie Belle; you still have your family! How could you understand?”

“Of all the insensitive notions!” Rarity nearly screamed, having noticed that Redheart had conveniently left the room, “Of course I have Sweetie Belle, she lives with me! Have you ever stopped to consider how unusual that is Rainbow Dash? That a little filly such as herself should be living with her sister instead of her parents? You’ve never even met my parents! Don’t you wonder why? Rainbow Dash, you are not the only pony who has lost her parents.”

“R... Rarity, I... I-I didn’t know...” Rainbow choked out, only now realizing the folly of her shouting match.

“Oh, save it.” Rarity snarled as she turned hoof and began to stomp towards the door. “You don’t care about me or my parents. You obviously don’t care about us if you’re willing to just throw your life away without a care towards what we would have thought. Some element of Loyalty you are, Rainbow Dash. I’m going to go sit with my best friend, who could be dying just because she wanted to save your sorry flank.”

Rainbow Dash could only stare for a few seconds after Rarity left the room. She had made her friend angry; she had yelled at one of her best friends. Rarity was right, she was no element of Loyalty. Unbeknownst to Rainbow Dash, a new tear began to form and slip from her eye, sliding down her face as she contemplated the loss of a friend.

“Come on girls,” Twilight managed to say in a very small voice, “I think Rainbow needs some privacy.”

In that moment, as she watched Twilight and Pinkie step out the door, Applejack just

behind them, Rainbow realized something. No matter what, she didn't want to lose her friends. Right now, she was close to losing two of them, she didn't want to risk the others, especially the one she cared about most. As Twilight and Pinkie slipped out of sight out the doorway, Rainbow cleared her throat to call out. "A-AJ!" she called, just loud enough so that the orange mare in the doorway heard her, stopped and turned around. If Rainbow Dash knew one thing, she knew that she didn't want to be alone.

"Yeah, Sugarcube?" Applejack responded from the doorway.

"AJ... AJ please... Could you... Could you stay here... with me? I need... I need somepony here." Rainbow said.

"Sure, Rainbow. Sure." Applejack said, walking back into the room and pulling up a chair.

"AJ... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get so mad. I didn't mean to shout at Rarity; I didn't want to get her angry. I didn't even know about her parents. I'm so sorry."

"It's OK, Rainbow. I know you weren't trying to pick a fight." Applejack replied in as soothing a tone as possible, "We've been waiting here worried sick about y'all for two whole days. Ah guess Rarity just got too stressed. You know how she can be, and this has been a hard time for all of us. We were all worried about ya."

"But she's right. I almost abandoned you guys in the worst way possible. I don't deserve to be the element of loyalty. I don't deserve friends like you."

"Don't say that, Sugarcube." Applejack said, picking up a hoof and lifting Rainbow's chin so she could stare right into her magenta eyes, "You just made a mistake, Rainbow Dash. What's done is done. You're alive now, and you should be thankful for that. Ah don't want ta see ya beating yerself up over this Rainbow. Ah don't want ya ta hurt yerself anymore."

"You're not mad at me? I thought everyone would be mad at me. I've been a terrible friend." Rainbow said glumly.

"No, Sugarcube, Ah ain't mad at ya." Applejack's words were calm, soothing the cyan pegasus. "Ah'm scared for ya, and Ah'm scared for Fluttershy, but Ah ain't mad. Ah don't think you deserve that."

"Th-thanks, AJ." Rainbow said meekly, feeling reassured by the mere presence of the beautiful pony beside her. "Applejack? Could you please stay in here, with me? I don't want to be alone."

"Sure thing, Rainbow. Ah'll stay right by your side." Applejack smiled for her friend and Rainbow could swear she saw those green eyes sparkle - a sign from happier times. "Now. Ya should go back to sleep. Ah imagine yer pretty tired after all that, and ya need rest to recover."

Rainbow smiled as she gazed up into the face of the mare she cared about most. With that happy image burned into her mind's eye, she closed her eyes and soon felt the grip of sleep begin to take her, hoping against hope that it would be undisturbed.

The hospital was dark when Rainbow Dash next felt the sensation of being woken up. She opened her eyes and looked about the room, she was sure she had felt somepony shake her awake, but there was nopony in sight. Not even Applejack. 'Figures she wouldn't stay with me once I fell asleep,' Rainbow thought to herself, 'I'm not worth it.'

She glanced down at the leg that had been in such pain earlier, it didn't look so bad. She decided to test it, just to see if it was still hurting. Tentatively, she flexed the limb, expecting pain but not feeling it. Empowered by her seemingly healed injury, she thrust the scratchy linen sheet that had lain on her off her body in one motion, tossing it to the side. She spent but a few minutes taking in her body as it lay exposed before her. Bandages were in places where she had felt cuts and scratches before, but beyond such cosmetic damages and a restricted throbbing pain that persisted in her head, she looked and felt perfectly fine.

Rainbow Dash carefully pushed herself up off her back so that she was sitting up in bed, her shoulder joint only giving mild protest at her using her leg to prop herself up. She glanced around the room, confirming that there was no one else there. The IV stand still stood to her side, the half-empty bag of nutrient solution still dangling next to a bag full of red blood. For the first time, Rainbow looked down at the bedside table which had sat alongside her, just below her field of vision when laying down, and saw what rested on it. One more bag, just like the ones above, only empty. Empty that is, except for the minute traces of crimson liquid which had pooled in the creases of the plastic bag that lay expended and discarded on the table's surface. 'More blood?' Rainbow thought as she looked upon the used transfusion bag, 'Did I need blood from somepony?'

She turned away from the sight and instead fixed her gaze on the open door ahead of her. As she stared absent-mindedly out into the empty hallway, an idea struck her. An idea that grew to fill her mind and take the form of a scheme, a plan, a reason for being awake. In an instant, Rainbow knew what she wanted to do, she knew why she had been woken up.

She swung her legs out over the side of the bed and gently set them down upon the linoleum tiling of the floor, careful not to make a sound, lest she be heard and have somepony come running. She gradually lowered the rest of the body and instinctively winced as she tried to put weight on her bad leg, immediately shifting to her other hooves to avoid that joint's throbbing protest. Now fully out of the bed, she began to tentatively move across the room towards the open door, making sure not to create excess noise as she did so, getting caught would not suit her purposes.

Rainbow Dash stepped out into the hallway, favoring her right hoof, and began to almost instinctively turn to her right, some unseen force drawing her in that direction even though she

had no idea which way her destination really was. As she snuck down the dimly lit passage, the flash of a lone light source reflected off a fixture on the wall caught her attention. Approaching it, she realized that it was a mirror, inexplicably hanging on the wall of a hospital passageway. Drawn by curiosity, Rainbow stepped into its path so that she was facing the reflective surface. What she saw surprised her. Staring back at her were the magenta eyes of a cyan pegasus pony, but her forelock of shockingly bright rainbow hair was pressed and matted to her forehead by a large wrapped bandage. For a fleeting instant, Rainbow wondered if this might explain the headaches that she had been feeling, if there was a gash there large enough to warrant such a substantial bandage, might that be where she had lost all the blood that was replaced via tube?

Drawn ever onward by the same unexplained compelling force that brought her from her bed, Rainbow tore herself away from the grip of the mirror and approached another door on the other side of the hallway. She didn't even bother to check the name on the plate outside before fumbling with the latch and swinging the door open silently. She crept into the room, which appeared identical to her own except for the figure resting on the bed. With one glance, a glimpse of a bright yellow patch of fur convinced Rainbow Dash that her instincts had been correct. She had found the correct room; the only problem was that Fluttershy's face was not visible. It wouldn't have mattered anyway, Rainbow decided. Even though her friend's entire head seemed to be wrapped in white bandages, it was as clear as day to Rainbow that Fluttershy was still unconscious. The only sound that permeated the room was the steady beeping of a machine that seemed to be hooked directly up to Fluttershy. A bright green line trailed across the screen in front of Rainbow and cut through the darkness of the room, a line which jumped and scattered itself up and down with every beep of the machine. Rainbow Dash knew enough about hospitals to recognize this machine for what it was doing: recording her friend's heartbeat.

"H-hey... Fluttershy." Rainbow spoke in a whisper, aware that the two of them were the only ponies in the room and that Fluttershy couldn't possibly register what she was saying, but feeling the need to communicate nonetheless. "I... I wanted to see you. I-I was worried about what the girls said about you, so I came up to meet you; to tell you I'm sorry." She paused for a moment, unsure whether or not to continue on. "I heard what you did," she continued after but a moment's hesitation, "You risked your life to save me, and it worked. You saved my life, Fluttershy, and you hurt yourself doing it." She began to feel tears tugging at the corners of her eyes as she struggled to keep up their one-sided conversation, "Fluttershy, you didn't have to do that for me. You're so innocent, you don't deserve pain like this." Rainbow's defenses had long ago crumbled, and she now felt the tears come streaming down her face again, she was unable to hold them back as she gazed at the blank, bandaged face of her friend.

"Do you... do you know what, though?" She finally said as she calmed down enough to resume speaking, "I'm glad you did. I made a mistake, and I'm glad you were there to correct it for me. You may have hurt yourself, but I'm still alive because of it. I'm alive thanks to you. You've helped me with my problems before, especially back in Cloudsdale, but this... this is the biggest of them all, and you didn't even hesitate to do all you could for me. You don't know how lovely you are, Fluttershy." Rainbow shook her head a few times before continuing on. "And I almost blew it. Everything you've ever done for me, and I almost threw it all away. Well no more," She said, looking up again, "I'm not going to make another mistake that you have to fix.

I'm going to make my life worthwhile now that you gave it back to me. I'm going to start over and make sure I don't mess up like this again." She paused, still staring at the mass of bandages that should have been Fluttershy's face. "Did you hear me, Fluttershy?" She said louder, hoping to break through the separating wall of unconsciousness, "I'm going back to the start."

Suddenly, Rainbow noticed something. The beeping of the machine in front of her, which had previously been drawn out, was growing faster. The timespan in between pulses dropped from several seconds to less than one, the noise growing in frequency, signifying that Fluttershy's heart was beating faster. Rainbow was nearly stunned into silence. Had Fluttershy heard her? Was she waking up? Rainbow could feel her own pulse quickening as she imagined at any second that Fluttershy would stir and rise from her slumber.

Then, as suddenly as the time between beeps had started dropping, it vanished altogether. Each individual blip melded into one continuous noise that drowned out all thought from Rainbow Dash's mind. The chill of absolute horror washed over her body and froze all function as she watched the jumping green line suddenly go flat and drag across the screen, never to pulse again. The prolonged whine of the machine was all that sounded to lament a sudden loss.

Immeasurable time was spent as Rainbow Dash stood frozen, rooted to her spot on the tile floor. The whine of the machine was still blaring in her ears when she regained vocal function, her eyes as yet unable to tear themselves away from the flat green line playing across the screen.

"No," She whispered.

"No." She gasped.

"No." She said.

"No." She cried.

"NNNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"