

The Party Never Ended

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Table of Contents:

Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	12
Chapter 3	22
Chapter 4	29
Chapter 5	37
Chapter 6	50
Chapter 7	59
Chapter 8	66
Chapter 9	78
Chapter 10	94
Chapter 11	116
Chapter 12	132
Chapter 13	148
Epilogue	167

Chapter 1

*It's late in the night, dancing is done
The music has died, you're ready to run*

*But you don't have a clue
This party hasn't ended yet not for me and you
Now you're just pretending*

*You're hiding from yourself
Yes you are, yes you are
Like golden rays of sun in the cloud*

*We're meant to be one, I know we are
If I am the sky then you are my star*

(Royksopp)

Pinkie Pie stood in the middle of Sugar Cube Corner and surveyed her handiwork.

"Pinkie Pie," she said to herself. "I know I say this to you... Or do I mean 'me'?... every month, but you've gone and outdone yourself..." She cocked her head in thought. "Or do I mean 'myself'? Oh, I can never work that out!"

The bakery was a riot of streamers and ribbons and crepe-paper and confetti, and brightly-coloured balloons floated up to the ceiling in bunches. The tables were covered with white cloths and party snacks –cookies and muffins and sugar cubes and potato chips and soda and punch and sarsaparilla and vanilla lemon drops and hot dogs and cream cakes and hot sauce. And there were party poppers and sparklers and party horns and party hats – everything that a successful Pinkie Pie-party demanded, and not a single element forgotten!

Every month, Mr and Mrs Cake would leave Pinkie in charge of Sugar Cube Corner while they went on a short trip to Fillydelphia to buy ingredients for the bakery, and Pinkie would put up a sign outside the

window saying "Sorry! Closed for Cleaning! (But open again super-soon – and that's a Pinkie-promise!)"

But the truth was she wasn't really cleaning. She'd busy herself all morning baking and cooking and stirring and pouring and kneading, until she turned into a ghost of flour and confectioner's sugar, and knobs of butter and chocolate spotted her curly pink hair.

And then she'd get to work on the decorations, painting the banner and blowing up all the balloons, until her pink face went red with puffing. She'd put out all the punch and the sarsaparilla and the cakes and the other baked goods, and of course her very own super-favourite hot sauce. And then she would go and clean the kitchen and take a bath and pretty herself up, curling her hair – Gummy the alligator never seemed to mind helping her do this, and he was so much better at it than a silly-old curling iron! – and she'd put on her super-most-favouritest party dress. And then she'd come out and look over all the preparations, making sure that everything was absolutely perfect for her super-special guest. And last of all she'd stand in the middle of Sugar Cube Corner, like a queen surveying her empire, and her eyes would settle on the banner, and as she read the pink words painted there on a field of all the colours of the rainbow, she'd smile and say it to herself so she could hear what was written there as well:

"Welcome to Your Surprise Party, Rainbow Dash!"

It happened the same way every month, and today was no exception.

Pinkie looked at the locked door and the shuttered windows, checking that there was no way that any pony could be spying on her. Then she cantered up to the locked door and putting on her brightest, most brilliant and beamingest, most powerful and perky Pinkie Pie smile, she suddenly shouted "SURPRISE!!!"

Taking the imaginary hoof of an imaginary Rainbow Dash in her own, she said "I'm so pleased that you decided to come!" and she lead her into the centre of the room and showed her all of the party's preparations with a sweep of a hoof.

"I hope you like it!" she asked. "It was SUPER difficult to try and remember all the colours of the rainbow – and the order they come in! I mean, there's

JUST SO MANY – red, orange, yellow, blue, yellow, red, yellow... and I'm SURE there's an indigo or violet or something in there as well!"

She nodded in response to an imaginary question. "It WAS a lot of work, but it was SO totally worth it to see the smile on your face, Rainbow Dash!"

"Other guests? Oh no! This is a special private party. Only Pinkie and Dash! And what's the occasion? Well, it's.... um, well... a surprise!"

"And what's the surprise?" she asked, repeating the question that imaginary Rainbow Dash would inevitably ask. "Well, the surprise is that there's something I..." Pinkie's heart was beating fast, and she felt as though she was going to explode. Maybe even twice! "Well, there's something I want to tell you...."

Pinkie always hesitated at this point. Even though Rainbow Dash wasn't really there, in Pinkie's heart she felt as though she truly was. And the embarrassment and nervousness that Pinkie felt was almost too much for the little pink pony to bear!

"The truth is... you see, what I'm trying to say is... the thing about it is... well, actually, I.... aaaaaaaaahhhh!" Pinkie leapt forward and hugged the air, and even though Dash wasn't there, tears were rolling down her cheeks as she cried out:

"I LOVE YOU RAINBOW DASH!"

And every month it would happen the same way. She'd fall onto the floor, covering her sopping eyes with her hooves, and she'd sob her heart out, until it seemed as though she couldn't remember what laughter was, and her whole universe was a broken dream of her broken heart.

Twilight Sparkle was on her way home to the library with Spike and Rainbow Dash. As they passed by Sugar Cube Corner, the Pegasus pony was swooping about them in little dives, showing off her latest trick.

"And so then I pull in my wings to reduce wind resistance, and I just TOTALLY go for it..."

Suddenly, there was an eruption of noise from inside Sugar Cube Corner. There was the sound of ripping material, of balloons popping, glass breaking, and pots and pans clashing and clanging together.

"What in Equestria is going on in there?" asked Twilight, as great white clouds of flour and confectioner's sugar billowed out of the chimney and covered the roof like snow.

Spike frowned. "It sounds like somepony's getting the beat down!"

Rainbow Dash laughed. "Oh, don't mind THAT. It's just Pinkie Pie cleaning! She does it every month..." She flew up to them and hovered close by as she whispered, "But don't bother offering to help her. She'll just say "Oh, Rainbow Dash! Thanks for being such a SUPER KIND friend! But this is something I have to do ALL by my Pinkie-self!"

Spike laughed. "That Pinkie Pie – she's so random!" But as they walked away, Rainbow Dash turned back, a frown on her face. An eerie silence had suddenly settled over Sugar Cube Corner, and she thought she could hear the soft sounds of somepony... crying?

"Nah. Couldn't be," she thought to herself. "I mean, Pinkie's the only one in there. And Pinkie Pie... crying?" She burst out laughing at the thought, then she turned and flew after Twilight and Spike, and the laughter of the three of them after she told them what she'd imagined rang throughout the whole Town Square.

A week later, Pinkie Pie was on her delivery run for the Cakes. They'd just come back from Fillydelphia with all sorts of new flavours of frosting and sprinkles and sugar-decorations, and Pinkie had spent the previous evening taste-testing them all.

"Oh Pinkie Pie!" Mrs Cake had chuckled tolerantly as the little pink pony devoured a bag of star-shaped sugar-decorations. She and Mr Cake were always careful to bring back twice as much as they needed, knowing full well that Pinkie's "testing" would make a sizeable hole in their stock. "You always seem so hungry when we come back from our little trip!"

Mr Cake was stirring a pot of batter, and he dropped the wooden spoon from his mouth to say "Now, Pinkie – don't eat too quickly, or else you'll give yourself a stomach ache!"

Pinkie looked up from the bag, her cheeks puffed out and full of treats. She looked chagrined, and she nodded.

"Ih bwon't..." she'd said in a voice muffled with candy.

But she had eaten too quickly, and the next morning she had woken up with a tummy-ache just as Mr Cake had warned her. As she trotted along the cobbled streets of Ponyville with the delivery basket in her mouth, her stomach grumbled in annoyance.

"I'm reeeeeeally sorry, tummy!" she thought, "But with YOU aching, I can't feel that other part ache as much!"

The morning's deliveries went by quickly. First she had a chocolate roulade to deliver to Bon-Bon, and some blueberry tarts for Lyra, and she found the two of them lounging around in the park as usual.

"Say – the two of you haven't seen Fluttershy today, have you?" asked Pinkie as she handed over the baked goods. "She usually orders a carrot cake for Angel Bunny, but it's not on my list today...."

Lyra shook her head. "I haven't seen her," She turned to her earth pony friend. "Have you seen her Bon-Bon?"

"Of course I haven't, Lyra!" Bon-Bon replied in exasperation. "And you know I haven't! You've been here with me the whole morning! Just like every other morning..." she muttered under her breath.

"Thanks anyway!" said Pinkie, but as she turned to leave, she said "You know- you two make SUCH an ADORABLE couple!" and chuckled.

Lyra and Bon Bon looked at each other in surprise as Pinkie trotted away, whistling to herself.

"Did she say... 'couple'?" asked Bon Bon, eyes wide.

Lyra nodded, "I think so," she replied. Her eyes sparkled. Had...had the moment finally come? After so many years of waiting?

Bon-Bon laughed loudly. "Oh that Pinkie Pie! What a ridiculous thing to say!"

Lyra nodded, but then her bottom lip started to quiver and she turned away so that Bon-Bon couldn't see the tears welling in her eyes.

Next on Pinkie's list was:

"A vanilla lemon meringue for Cloud Kicker!"

Cloud Kicker was with the rest of the Weather Control Squad in the middle of their training regime, flying circuits around Froggy Bottom Bog. But where was Rainbow Dash? As the commander of the squad she was usually in the lead shouting and egging them all on. But today she was nowhere to be seen! Pinkie sighed. Where WERE all her friends this morning?

The rest of the morning went by quickly. Pinkie delivered liqueur-filled chocolate éclairs for Berry Bright the overprotective parent pony, and of course a teeny-tiny cupcake for her super-cute little foal who was always hiding behind her flank!

And for Ponyville's mail pony -

"Muffins!" said Derpy in delight as she took them from Pinkie and put them in her saddlebag.

"Say, Derpy," asked Pinkie, "Have you seen Twilight Sparkle today? You usually have some packages for her from Canterlot..."

Derpy shook her head.

"Oh well... enjoy the muffins Derpy!" said Pinkie as she trotted away.

"Muffins!" Derpy nodded enthusiastically, then flew away.

Finally, Pinkie reached the end of her list: a special delivery for Caramel out in the fields at Sweet Apple Acres.

The brown-maned pony was helping the Apple family with the sowing, and he looked left and right to make sure Big Macintosh was nowhere in sight as he took his favourite caramel tarts from Pinkie.

"Thanks Pinkie Pie!" he said. "I'm sorry to do this all so secretively, but Big Macintosh wouldn't be happy if he knew my secret..."

"Secret?" asked Pinkie Pie.

Caramel whispered in her ear. "I HATE apples. And that's all they ever give us for lunch here on the farm. Apple strudel, apple pie, apple... bumpkin," He stuck out his tongue in disgust. "I don't even like caramel apples!"

Pinkie laughed. "Your secret is totally safe with me, Caramel. I won't tell anypony!" She looked suddenly serious. "I mean, secrets are no laughing matter, are they?" She looked around at the ponies in the distance working in the fields, ploughing and sowing. "Hey Caramel, have you seen Applejack around?"

Caramel shook his head. "Nope, sorry. I think she went out this morning – she said she had to do something important."

"Oh, ok. Thanks anyway!" replied Pinkie, as she waved goodbye.

Oh, how she wished she'd been able to run into one of her friends on her deliveries this morning! Even her tummy ache couldn't distract her from those silly black thoughts that were buzzing around her like horse-flies! She sighed again.

"Oh no! That's FIVE sighs already today!" she exclaimed. "That's a new Pinkie Pie record!" She hadn't sighed that many times since... well, since she'd been a little Twinkie Pie, frightened by those ghosties outside her window at night! Something was definitely wrong with her. Usually, the secret party she prepared for Rainbow Dash every month made her feel a bit better, once she'd cried out all those bad feelings... but this time things were different.

"Maybe..." She shook her head. No, it couldn't be! "Maybe the party inside me has... ended?" But her twitches hadn't predicted a doozy, and those twitches were never, EVER wrong!

As she was standing in the middle of the street that led back into the centre of Ponyville, thinking over everything that had happened, Spike came running up. The little purple dragon was out of breath when he reached her, and he leaned up against a street light to catch it.

Pinkie was overjoyed to see him. "Spike! I'm so pleased to see you!"

Spike started to reply, but nothing came out except for panting and puffing.

"What's the matter?"

"Puh.. Puh... Puh..." gasped Spike.

"Ooooooh! A guessing game!" Pinkie stamped her hooves in joy. "So you're thinking of a word... and it starts with a `P'?"

"Puh...Puh..." Spike repeated, pressing a claw against his chest.

"Puh...puh...pains?" guessed Pinkie. "Chest pains? You're suffering from chest pains?"

Spike nodded, but then shook his head. "Nuh....nuh...."

Pinkie looked at him quizzically. "Oh? It starts with an 'N'?NOT chest pains?"

Sweat poured down Spike's face, and he put a claw up to tell Pinkie to stop.

"Oh," the pink pony replied in disappointment. "I only get two guesses? Doesn't everypony get three guesses in a guessing game?"

"It's not a guessing game, Pinkie Pie!" shouted Spike at last. He wiped the sweat from his face and took hold of one of Pinkie's forelegs. "You've got to come with me! Something big is happening!"

Pinkie's eyes grew wide. "A doozy?!" she cried.

Spike nodded. "The dooziest of ALL doozies!"

Chapter 2

As they approached Sugar Cube Corner, things were strangely quiet in the bakery. It seemed to be closed. Had something happened to Mr and Mrs Cake? Pinkie had felt a little twitchy – but it was a kind of twitch she had never felt before. It had started in her tail and travelled up her spine, detoured down her right foreleg then back across her shoulders and down her LEFT foreleg, until finally coming back up to her neck and finishing in her ears, which had gone all floppy. It wasn't a doozy – but it WAS something big!

Spike had stubbornly refused to tell her anything as they hurried back.

"No time for explanations, Pinkie Pie!" he had replied to her excited, incessant questions as he bounced up and down on her back. "Besides, it something you've got to see for yourself!"

"I know, I know, I know!" Pinkie Pie had chirped, "Butwhatisitwhatisitwhatisitwhatisit?" She took a deep breath and kept on going. "Whatisitwhatisitwhatisit?"

"You'll see soon enough!" Spike had replied, a bright smile that Pinkie couldn't see breaking onto his face.

Now they stood before the door to Sugar Cube Corner. Spike hopped down and indicated the door with a sweep of a claw.

"Go ahead and open the door, Pinkie Pie!" he said.

Pinkie approached the door with trepidation. Her heart was bounding around in her chest like a rubber ball. Sweat poured off her face as she brought a hoof closer, and yet closer to the door knob. Finally she cried out "I can't stand it anymore!!!" and flung the door open.

Silence.

But inside Sugar Cube Corner something amazing had happened. When Pinkie had left it in the morning, everything had been set up for the day's

business. All the muffins and cakes and cookies had been sitting on their shelves ready to be sold. But now!

There were streamers and confetti and ribbons and balloons and all kinds of decorations, and all of them different shades of pink! It was as if a cotton candy machine had exploded and left the room looking like the inside of a bubble of pink bubble-gum.

Pinkie stared in astonishment, and then she almost fell backwards – but luckily Spike had his wits about him and managed to push Pinkie back up onto her feet before she sat right on top of him.

Pinkie took a step forward into the room, and there was a sudden ear-splitting shout of

"SURPRISE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

All her friends suddenly leapt out from their hiding places around the room – Applejack from behind the punch-bowl table, Twilight struggling out from inside a mass of pink balloons, and Fluttershy from hovering behind the banner that hung overhead. And last of all Rainbow Dash jumped down from the corner of the ceiling where she had been hanging like a ninja, ready to spring.

"Woooooooooah! What is this?" Pinkie was still in a daze.

"Oh, Pinkie Pie!" laughed Rainbow Dash, taking one of Pinkie's forefeet in the crook of her own and leading her into the centre of the room where her other friends were waiting for her. She pointed up at the banner Fluttershy had been hovering behind.

It read: "Welcome to your surpris party, Pinkie Pie!"

"But doesn't 'surprise' have an 'E' on the end?" asked Pinkie.

At that moment Rarity stepped into the room, dressed in a shimmering silver saddle with matching sequined bridle. She kissed Pinkie, who blushed, then turned and arched her eyebrows at Rainbow Dash. "I TOLD you she would notice the 'E', darling."

Dash smiled in embarrassment. "Look, I'm more of an ACTION pony than a SPELLING pony, OK?"

"I love it even more without the 'E'!" Pinkie giggled. "But where were you hiding, Rarity?"

Rarity sniffed. "I wasn't 'hiding' anywhere, darling. 'Hiding' goes against every FIBER in this gorgeous body!" She tossed her mane. "Besides, the most important part of ANY party is one's entrance – and I was SCARCELY going to leap out like some jack-in-the-box from some UNSEEMLY position, was I?"

Applejack snorted in annoyance. "Now if that ain't the snootiest thing I've heard outa ya all season! Ya couldn't even make an exception fer Pinkie's party, could ya?!"

Fluttershy, sensing an argument was brewing, asked "Were you really surprised, Pinkie?"

Pinkie nodded. "I'm STILL surprised! My heart is going thumpa thumpa thumpa and I'm kinda worried it's going to spring up my throat and jump out of my mouth!"

"Let's hope THAT doesn't happen," muttered Twilight. The unicorn pony looked at Applejack. "I still say I should have been hiding behind the punch bowl. I mean really," She pointed to her horn. "Balloons and unicorn ponies? It's a disaster waiting to happen! I almost ruined the surprise."

"Aw Twi," replied Applejack, "We already discussed this. Pinkie woulda seen yer horn stickin' up over the punch bowl."

Twilight frowned. "That doesn't even make any sense. I could have just kept my head down –"

"You should have accompanied me in my GRAND entrance, darling," said Rarity.

Rainbow Dash groaned. "C'mon everypony! This is Pinkie's party! Less arguing and more partying!" She threw a hoof in the air and shouted "Whooohooo!" and the other ponies shouted out as well.

"Rainbow Dash is right," agreed Fluttershy. She brought up a tray of drinks in her mouth. "Here Pinkie – please take one."

"Sarsaparilla?!" cried Pinkie in joy. She almost swallowed the whole bottle in her haste and drank it down in one gulp. "How did you know I love sarsaparilla?"

Applejack chuckled. "Er Pinkie – we ARE yer friends, ya know!"

"We know everything about you!" added Twilight, nodding, and then under her breath she added: "Except how your twitching works. Or how you can just hang in the air sometimes with no visible means of support. Or how you can be in two places at once..."

"Oh, this is the best party EVER!" Pinkie cried. "Everything is soooooo super pink. And everything is soooooo super-perfect!"

"Everything except my spelling," Rainbow Dash said, looking off to one side.

Pinkie hugged her, and the Pegasus pony's face suddenly went bright red. "But that's my favouritest thing of all!"

"Well, comin' from Ponyville's prem-ee-iere party pony, that's high praise indeed!" Applejack laughed.

"Actually," added Twilight, "This whole party was Rainbow Dash's idea."

Pinkie was still hugging Dash, and when she heard this she squealed and squeezed the Pegasus pony even tighter, and the red on Dash's face changed from being that of a blush to that of a pony unable to breathe.

"Pinkie....Pie....you're....choking....me!"

"Ooooh, sorry!" Pinkie dropped her forefeet. "It's just that I'm soooooo happy!" She flashed a beaming smile at Dash. "All of this was really your idea?"

"Hehehe yeah," Dash's turned her face away to hide a deepening

blush. When she turned back, her face was serious. "It's just you've looked so.... Out of sorts recently," she explained.

"You've been simply PITIABLE, darling," said Rarity.

"You HAVE looked lonely," agreed Fluttershy.

"Sorta unhappy, too..." added Applejack.

"Definitely preoccupied," nodded Twilight.

"Walking rather than bouncing," said Spike, who had started to help himself to some of the muffins.

"Totally un-Pinkie Pie!" said Dash, and the other ponies nodded their agreement.

"So Dash suggested this here party to put the perkiness back in everypony's favourite lil' pink pony!" said Applejack.

Pinkie looked at all the smiling faces of her friends and all of the hard work they had gone to and she felt a flush of happiness that flowed from her heart to the base of her hooves and to the tip of her ears and tail, stronger than she had felt for a long, long time.

"It's already started working!" said Pinkie, and then she burst into tears. For she realised that inside her heart the party hadn't come to an end after all.

Pinkie was worried about Mr and Mrs Cakes losing business because of the party, but Twilight put her concerns at rest by telling her that she'd let them use the library for the day.

"Spike thought that maybe a kind of café-bookshop might be a good change of pace for them," she explained, "And they were happy to oblige. They've been worried about you as well. And it took no time at all to transport all the cakes to my place. All it took was a little help from everypony...well, almost everypony," She glared at Dash, who was about to toss a vanilla lemon drop into her mouth, and the Pegasus pony lowered

her eyes in shame.

"I was taking a nap," she explained.

Spike suddenly came up and offered a tray to the guest of honour. "Hey Pinkie, tell me what you think of these!" The tray was covered with muffins... strange, misshapen muffins. Pinkie wondered where she had seen them before – and when she remembered, she leapt backwards, terrified, and backed away into a corner.

"B-b-b-b-baked B-b-b-b-b-b-bads!" she shrieked.

Applejack looked hurt. "Great flyin' apple-fritters. I ain't never gonna live down THOSE things," She took a bite out of one of the muffins. "These are a NEW recipe Spike n' Ah've been workin' on. We kinda cut out the cup o' sour, added some flour, and swapped out th' real worms with gummi worms..."

"They're actually very good!" Fluttershy said.

"I kinda liked the baked bads better," said Spike. "The gummi worms just don't have the same texture as the real worms..."

"Oh Spike!" muttered Twilight, shaking her head.

"Yer such a boy!" Applejack laughed.

The party continued into the evening. All the sarsaparilla was drunk; Applejack and Rarity were arguing in the kitchen over whether tomatoes were a fruit or a vegetable; Twilight was trying to explain the mechanics of flying to Fluttershy while the Pegasus pony was secretly petting Spike, who was had fallen asleep under the snacks table, a half-eaten baked-bad in his claw; and Rainbow Dash had dunked her face in the punch bowl after challenging Pinkie to a hot-sauce drinking competition – and losing.

All in all, it had been a super successful party! At last it was time to say goodbye.

"Are you sure we can't help you with the cleaning?" asked Twilight. Spike was lying flat out on her back, fast asleep and snoring.

"No, no, no, no!" Pinkie shook her head until her candy-floss hair flung about. "I just couldn't stand having you tidy up after the trouble you all went to!"

"But Pinkie," began Applejack, but Dash interrupted her.

"AJ, you DON'T want to argue with Pinkie about helping with cleaning up!" she warned. "Trust me on this."

Pinkie nodded. "It's all part of the party-pony's responsibility!"

"That's totally right," agreed Dash. "Which is why I'M also going to help with the cleaning up, since I was the pony who organised THIS party!" She thumped a hoof onto her chest.

"But... but..." Pinkie protested, but Dash just opened her eyes wide and stared at her until Pinkie dropped her gaze and nodded. Then she perked right up again. "This is going to be so much fun!" she gushed.

After the other ponies left, Pinkie and Dash walked back into Sugar Cube Corner.

"Oh man," Dash's shoulders slumped and her wings sagged. "This is going to be a huge job!"

Pinkie just laughed and grabbed hold of one of Dash's forefeet and pulled her into the centre of the room. Suddenly, music started up from somewhere.

"Uh Pinkie," said Dash in puzzlement, "Where's the music coming from?"

Pinkie was starting to bounce up and down. "I don't know! It just always starts playing when it's time for a Pinkie Pie song!" she exclaimed.

"A song?" groaned Dash. "Pinkie, we don't have time for...."

Pinkie started to dance around the confused Pegasus pony. "Oh, Dash, with a song the cleaning will go soooooo much quicker! In a couple of shakes of a pony's tail it'll be all done!"

*Oh,
Whenever there's housework to be done
Resist that urge to cut and run!
Oh, never mind! You're sure to find
Some helpful pony to aid you!*

Pinkie leapt into the kitchen and cleaning equipment started flying out – brushes and pans and mops and sponges and dishrags. They landed in a pile on top of Rainbow Dash, who popped her head out and cried:

"PINKIE!"

"Oh Dash!" the pink pony laughed. "There's no time to mess around!"

*Oh,
Whenever you see there's stuff to clean,
Get off that rump! Don't sit and dream!
Just look around and there is bound
To be somepony to help you!*

Pinkie spun about the room, a whirlwind of cleaning and polishing. Dust flew off her in a cloud, and whatever she touched sparkled and shone. Dash, a feather-duster in her mouth and a mop in her fore-hooves, struggled to keep up.

"Hey, wait up, Pinkie!"

Pinkie looked back at Dash, who had sweat pouring off her. She started to giggle. "Oh Dash. I thought you were supposed to be fastest pony in Ponyville!"

Dash pouted. "That's FLYING, not CLEANING!"

Pinkie laughed and jumped up onto a table and started to grab dishes, flinging them like Frisbees onto spinning piles without breaking a single one, and as she did she sang:

*Oh,
Whether you're flying or tidying stuff,*

*Give it your all – it'll be enough!
Don't be down! Reverse that frown!
You have somepony beside you!*

Pinkie looked around as she spun to a halt. The decorations were all bagged, the dishes piled up, and the floor and walls sparkling. And there was Dash, sitting in the middle of the newly-cleaned floor with a look of disappointment on her face. She glared at Pinkie.

"Pinkie Pie," she began.

"Yes, Rainbow Dash?" Pinkie fluttered her eye-lashes at the Pegasus pony, clueless.

"You just went and finished everything yourself! I didn't even get a chance to help you," she sighed.

Pinkie frowned. "Oh, I'm sorry Dash. I guess I just got carried away!" But then she perked back up, and grabbing Dash off the floor, she twirled the annoyed Pegasus pony around as she finished her song:

*Oh Rainbow Dash, please don't be mad!
I never want to see you sad!
For don't you see that you've got me
A little pony who loves you?*

The smile that had been growing on Dash's face as they danced suddenly disappeared, and she dropped Pinkie's hoof in shock. "You... you love me?" said Dash, frowning.

Pinkie's beaming smile froze on her face. "I... ah... of course I do, Rainbow Dash!" Her pupils skipped left and right. "Like a friend! I love you as a friend. I mean, we're all each other's very best frrrriiieeeeends, right?"

Dash looked at her sideways. "Are you sure that's what you meant, Pinkie Pie?"

The pink pony nodded rapidly up and down. "Uh huh!"

Dash's face was serious and thoughtful. "Well... OK then." She looked

around. The room was full of trash bags, the tables and chairs still needed to be put away and there were piles of dirty dishes everywhere. "We'd better get on with the cleaning, I guess. There's still a mountain of it to do."

Pinkie nodded. And although she didn't stop smiling, her eyes started to get misty, and she turned away and closed her eyes so that Rainbow Dash couldn't see. And as tightly as she squeezed her eyes shut, she couldn't hold back the single tear that fell down her cheek.

"Hey, Pinkie?" she heard Dash ask suddenly. She quickly wiped the tear away with a hoof and turned around to face her.

"Uh... yes, Rainbow Dash?"

The Pegasus pony was carrying a teetering pile of plates. "Is it OK if I put these in the kitchen?"

Pinkie nodded. "Thank you so much for your help," she said, and then she added, in a voice little more than a whisper: "I can't do anything without you."

Chapter 3

Pinkie was busy with the dishes in the kitchen as Dash lugged the heavy bags of trash out to the back alley behind the bakery. But there was already a pile of garbage there, and it was difficult to find any space for the bags she was carrying.

Dash shook her head in annoyance. "Smoggy and Patchy – you guys! What a time to be taking an extended vacation!" She flew up and placed one of her trash bags gingerly on the top of the already teetering pile. "You'd think the Mayor would have organised somepony other than Derpy Hooves to be in charge of the trash collection while they're away." Flying back down, she collected another bag and flew it to the top of the pile. "When will– " she grabbed another bag, "–everypony learn–" and another, "–that Derpy just isn't the most–" and another. "–dependable of ponies?"

The last bag was on top now, and the tower began to sway.

"Uh oh." Dash flew over to the side that was threatening to collapse and she gave it a gentle push, but it went too far the other way, and she flew back and forth, pushing and pulling, until it seemed stable enough. She landed and wiped the sweat from her forehead.

"There!" she said, dusting off her fore-hooves. "If you want something done properly, you just gotta call on the ..."

Crash! An avalanche of trash bags swamped the Pegasus pony as the tower collapsed on top of her. She'd just managed to poke her head out of the pile of bags when Pinkie came rushing out, her hooves and hair a mass of soap-suds that made her resemble a pink poodle. "Rainbow Dash! Are you alright?"

Dash shook her head to dislodge the banana peel that was stuck in her hair. "Yeah, I'm OK I think." She looked at the endless expanse of black trash bags and slapped her head with a hoof. "D'Ohhhh!"

Pinkie smiled. "I'll be out to help you in just a jiff!" she said. "I've only a few

more dishes to do!" She disappeared back into the bakery.

Dash pulled herself out with difficulty, and started piling the bags up in much smaller and less precarious stacks. She was lugging the final bag – the largest and heaviest one of all that had landed on top of her – when the bottom suddenly split open and the contents inside spilled out.

"Oh perfect! Just... perfect." She had just started collecting up all the popped balloons and streamers, shovelling them back into the bag, when she noticed that they weren't the pink ones from the evening's party.

"Huh," she thought. "I didn't know Pinkie organised a party recently. I wonder who it was for?" She looked at the rainbow-coloured streamers in her hooves. "These are really pretty."

The last item was a rolled-up banner, and it was extra heavy, so Dash lugged it onto her back. She was about to toss it on top when it slipped off and fell onto the ground, unrolling itself as it went. With a sigh, she turned to roll it back up – but she stopped in her tracks when she saw what was written on it.

Welcome to your surprise party, Rainbow Dash!

"Ohhhhh Dash!" All of a sudden Pinkie's voice came from inside Sugar Cube Corner. "Sorry I took so long – those hot-sauce stains are just the worst!"

Dash froze mid-air for a single heartbeat, eyes wide, but then she recovered and scrambled to collect the banner, crumpling it up into a clumsy ball. "Uh... no problem, Pinkie Pie! I'm just finishing up now..." She quickly shoved it under the largest heap of trash bags and had just managed to do so when Pinkie came out.

"Wow!" said the pink pony, looking at the neatly piled bags. "You did a super-awesome job!"

Dash blushed. "Uh... thanks, Pinkie Pie." She ruffled her hair and confetti fell out of it. "D'you think maybe I could take over from Smoggy as the garbage pony?"

Pinkie nodded, then giggled. "But then we'd have to call you Rainbow TRASH – and 'Dash' is soooooo much cuter than that!" But when she noticed how dusty and dirty the Pegasus pony was, she leapt into the air with a gasp. "Oh, Rainbow Dash! There's dust and grime and dirty yucky stuff all over you!"

Dash rubbed her face with a hoof and it came back black. "Uh, yeah. It's OK though – I'll just find a nice, big raincloud and fly through it. That's what I usually do."

Pinkie Pie frowned. "Oh, no no no no no no! You need a nice, hot, soapy bath with piles and PILES of poufy bubbles!"

"Listen, Pinkie. It's fine. I'm just going to go and..." But Pinkie had already swept Dash up in a whirlwind, and before she knew it the Pegasus pony found herself lying in the big, white porcelain bathtub on the second floor of the bakery.

Pinkie hummed as she turned the taps. "Now, just tell me if it gets too hot, OK?"

Dash nodded. She knew better than to argue with Pinkie once her mind was made up about something. "Uh, Pinkie. Gummy's not anywhere nearby, is he?" She looked about the bathroom nervously.

Pinkie chuckled. "Oh no! Twilight said that she'd look after him tonight at the library so he wouldn't get under our feet while we tidied up. I'll be back in one second!"

Dash felt her body start to warm up from the hot water. This is actually really nice! she thought. It sure beats flying through a raincloud – although that is pretty fun. Maybe I should do this more often. Dash lay back and let the water rise up and cover her. She had a lot of things to think about. Why would Pinkie Pie have held a surprise party for her, and then not invited her? Had she thrown that banner out in the trash accidentally? That was a pretty Pinkie Pie thing to do, she admitted. But something strange was definitely going on, and she needed to get to the bottom of it.

Suddenly Pinkie trotted back in the bathroom holding a big bottle of pink liquid in her mouth. She came over to the bath and squeezed it tightly,

squirting a huge stream of liquid into the running water and making the bath suddenly explode in a riot of bright pink bubbles.

Dash struggled to pull herself up so she could breathe, and as her head popped up out of the mountain of bubbles she saw herself in the mirror wearing a huge afro of pink foam.

Pinkie laughed. "Oh, Rainbow Dash! You look just like my Uncle Fizzy!"

Dash shook her head and bubbles flew off in every direction, some of them splashing onto Pinkie's face and head and giving her a goatee and beret. She looked in the mirror and said "Now I look like my Uncle Ginzie!"

"Oh Pinkie Pie," said Dash, shaking her head and smiling. "You're such a... such a... Pinkie Pie!"

Pinkie blew the goatee away and shook off the beret. "Who else would I be?"

Dash nodded. "Y'know Pinkie, I'm so jealous of you sometimes. How can you always be so... you know, ON all the time?" She frowned. "Don't you ever get tired?"

Pinkie shook her head. "Nope – never! Never ever!"

Dash was thoughtful, and she splashed at the bubbles. "I guess it must be all those sugary treats you eat."

Pinkie nodded. "Well, that's part of the reason," she said. Her heart skipped a beat when she realised what she was going to say.

"Hmmm?" Dash blew at the heap of foam in front of her and watched as little pink bubbles split off and floated away.

Pinkie knew the moment had come. Her tail started to twitch, her hooves began to sweat, and she felt suddenly cold all over. She closed her eyes – if she saw Rainbow Dash's face right now, with all the feelings exploding inside her like fireworks, she was afraid the words might get all tangled up inside her and come out all wrong.

"Well...." Pinkie began. She felt as if she was on a rollercoaster which had just reached the top of the highest peak on the track, and was looking down at the dizzying bottom far below her. "The cakes and cookies and muffins are what give me my perky Pinkie-Pie energy," she explained, "But what really keeps me going is the party inside of me."

Dash chuckled. "Wait – you've got a *party* inside you?" she asked. What a totally cute and random and... well, Pinkie-Pie thing to say!

Pinkie opened her eyes and nodded, and walked over to the bath so she was face to face with Dash. The Pegasus pony looked at her quizzically, but Pinkie had already started to speak. "Ever since I was a little Twinkie Pie I knew I wanted to make everypony happy," she explained. "Then one day I got my cutie mark –" She wiggled her rump in the air, showing off the three colourful balloons. "– and I knew straight away that I was supposed to be Ponyville's party-pony... and that's when the party inside me started!"

Dash looked at the open, cheerful face in front of her with its huge, sparkling eyes and couldn't help but smile. Pinkie's face always did that to you. Pinkie was right – she DID make everypony happy, Dash realised, even if the little pink pony DID get out of control sometimes. But Pinkie was just so bubbly and crazy all the time that it was easy to forget that she was a pony just like any other. I mean, she must get sad and tired sometimes? There's got to be more to her than just jokes and pranks and partying and her voracious appetite for baked goods, right? But what did she want? Dash wanted to become a Wonderbolt. But Pinkie? She already had everything she ever wanted, right?

Pinkie hadn't finished. "But there's somepony very special to me," she said, dropping her gaze, and Dash noticed a... a tremble in her voice? "She's the one who keeps the party inside me going." She lifted her face again, and her eyes were glistening as she spoke. She was so close to her now that Dash could feel Pinkie's breath on her face – and it smelled of hot-sauce and cupcakes, the spicy, sugary scent that always made her think of Pinkie Pie. "Without this super-special pony, the party inside me would just slow down and end, and I don't know if I could ever party again if that happened!"

Dash's eyes went wide. Pinkie sounded so serious! "So who's the pony?" Was Pinkie going to tell her about a... secret crush she had?

But Pinkie said nothing and just leaned forward and kissed her on the mouth. Dash's eyes went even wider still, and if she hadn't scrambled against the slippery sides of the bath she probably would have slid under the bubbles in shock.

Pinkie broke the kiss. "That pony is you, Rainbow Dash." Her eyes grew misty and she closed them. "I love you," she whispered.

With her eyes closed, Pinkie's sense of hearing became ultra-sensitive. But there was no sound, no movement in the bathroom for what seemed like forever. She squeezed her eyes tighter, feeling the start of real tears. But she knew she had to open them – she couldn't stand there forever.

When she did, she saw Dash still lying in the bath. She was staring up at the ceiling, an unreadable expression on her face.

"Dash?" began Pinkie, her voice soft and pleading.

"Hmmm?" Dash turned her head and looked at Pinkie. "What is it, Pinkie?"

Pinkie's heart rose up into her throat. "Did you... did you hear what I...I said?"

Dash nodded. "I heard it alright."

"So... what do...what do you think?" Pinkie felt her knees trembling and a sound like the rushing in of water filled her ears.

Dash climbed out of the bathtub and shook herself off. Her face was serious. "I think... I'm going to go home." She stepped towards the window of the bathroom and opened it, letting the night breeze in which set the bath curtain fluttering. She turned to Pinkie. "I've... I've got a lot of things I have to do, Pinkie," Her eyes were sad. "Thanks for the bath. And I'm glad you enjoyed the party! You really... really, totally deserve it." She spread her wings and, climbing over the windowsill, she turned back a final time. "Goodbye, Pinkie Pie," she said, and then she jumped.

"Dash! Dash! Please ... please wait!" Pinkie galloped up to the window and peered out of it. The night air was cold on her face, but not cold enough to

cool the hot tears that ran down her cheeks. There was no sign of Rainbow Dash – it was as if the darkness had swallowed her up. "Please... don't go." Pinkie fell back inside and slumped onto the floor. "Don't go," she said, again and again, her voice echoing in the emptiness of the bathroom and in the emptiness of her heart. "Don't leave me here all alone." She started to sing, slowly and softly, as her tears fell onto the tiles, "*don't you see... that you've got me... a little pony who... loves you?*"

Chapter 4

"Rainbow Dash!"

When Dash woke up, she realised the voice calling her had been doing so for some time. It had slipped into her dreams – she'd been back in Flight School in Cloudsdale, and she'd obviously done something to annoy her fellow students: everypony's eyes followed her wherever she went, and everywhere there was a conspiratorial whisper of "Rainbow Dash... Rainbow Dash..."

As the Pegasus pony shrugged off sleep and stretched her wings, she looked down from her cloud home to see Twilight calling up to her.

"You're finally awake! Thank Celestia," the unicorn pony muttered. "You're a deep sleeper – I've been down here calling you for about five minutes now!"

Dash chuckled. "That's me – work hard, party harder, sleep hardest!" But at the word 'party', the events of the previous night came flooding back to her. The relief she'd felt that the bad dream had been exactly that had dissolved away and the memory of the kiss and Pinkie's horrified face made her stomach ache like there was a chunk of ice in it.

Oh Pinkie Pie, why did you have to go and kiss me? What am I going to do now?

With a sigh, Dash ruffled her mane and flew down to Twilight. "So what's the matter, Twilight?" she asked. "Manticore attack? Another bunny stampede? A storm blow in from the Everfree Forest?" The Pegasus pony hopped up onto her hind legs and jabbed the air with her fore-hooves, shadow boxing. "'Cause I'm up for anything this morning!"

"It's nothing like that, Dash," Twilight replied. The unicorn pony's expression was usually serious – kind of like she was mildly annoyed at everything, Dash thought – but this morning it was more serious still. She looked genuinely upset. "Did... something happen between you and Pinkie

last night after the party?" she asked.

There was that icy feeling again! Dash's face fell, but she quickly recovered. "What? The party? Nothing happened," She shook her head so violently her mane flew out like a whip. "We cleared everything up, and then Pinkie ran me a bath..." ...and then she kissed me and told me she loved me... "...and then I went home." The Pegasus pony couldn't look Twilight in the eye, so she stared off over Ponyville towards the Swayback Mountains instead. She knew that Twilight could tell she wasn't telling her the whole story, but the unicorn pony said nothing and instead handed her a sheet of parchment.

"What this?" asked Dash.

"We were moving Mr and Mrs Cake back into Sugar Cube Corner this morning," explained Twilight, "and Pinkie was nowhere to be found. That piece of parchment was sitting on the desk in her bedroom. It's a note."

Dash looked at the parchment as if it had turned into a tarantula. "Did you... did you read it?"

Twilight nodded. "It's addressed to all of us."

Dash swallowed and started to read:

"To Mr and Mrs Cake, Twilight, Fluttershy... oh, I'll run out of space if I write down everypony's name!" Dash put a hoof to her forehead. "She actually wrote that!"

Twilight nodded, but she didn't smile. "At least we know for sure that Pinkie Pie actually wrote it."

Dash continued: "'I'm just going to write 'Dear everypony who's ever been my friend'...."

This is just a teeny little note saying "Thankyouthankyouthankyou!" for all the super happy fun times we've had together! I always thought that my life in Ponyville was exacta-tota-completely like a party that would never end – but now I need to go and think about some super-important things. I bet you're all thinking 'That Pinkie Pie! She's soooo random! Why can't she just

think about things in Ponyville? Why does she need to go somewhere else to do it?" Well, the thing she's got to think about is like a present that's wrapped up in a million layers of cellophane and coloured paper and tied up with a tangle of like a TRILLION ribbons and an ENTIRE BALL of string – so it might take a little while for her to work out how to open it! But while she's doing it, she just wants you to know that she loves you..." Dash almost dropped the letter, but somehow she kept hold of it. "...and that she'll be back as soon as she possibly can – and that's a Pinkie promise! P.S. Dear Twilight, can you look after Gummy for me? Just think of him as Spike's little brother! His favourite food is gummi bears and gummi worms and ... oh, you get the idea! There's a jar FULL of them on my desk..."

Twilight interrupted at this point. "The jar was empty – I think Pinkie ate them all."

Dash looked over the rest of the parchment "It just goes on and on about Gummy," She turned it over. "...on the back as well."

"So, Dash?" Twilight had been watching the Pegasus pony's face the whole time she'd been reading.

"So... what?" replied Dash, her face blank. She handed the parchment back to Twilight.

"The letter?" Twilight arched her eyebrows. "What do you think happened? Why has Pinkie left all of a sudden – without even coming to collect Gummy?"

Sudden anger flooded over Dash's face. "It's just Pinkie Pie being random – as usual!" She stepped back and unfurled her wings. "It's nothing serious. I wouldn't worry about it."

She was about to take flight when she felt Twilight's hoof on her shoulder. The expression on the unicorn pony's face was sympathetic. "Look, Dash – no pony will blame you if you had an argument with Pinkie about..."

Dash pulled away from her and spread her wings out fully. "Nothing happened!" she snapped. "Don't you get it? Do I have to say it a bunch more times until you believe me?" Her lips were quivering, but Twilight couldn't tell if she was going to burst into tears or fly into a rage. Suddenly,

her face softened and she looked down at the ground. "I...I'm sorry, Twilight. I just think we should respect Pinkie's wishes. Give her some space, you know? She said she was coming back soon, right?"

"Dash, wait! I..."

But Dash had already turned and, with a few off-centre flaps of her wings, she rose up into the air and soared back towards her home in the clouds – just in time for the tears in the corners of her eyes to appear without Twilight seeing them. She angrily scraped them away with her hooves as she flew. "Stop crying!" she muttered to herself. "You're Rainbow Dash, Celestia damn it! The Dash doesn't cry. Stop being such a dweeb!" But the tears wouldn't stop, even after she'd landed back at her house and had thrown herself into her cloud hammock.

"Oh Pinkie, Pinkie!" Dash sobbed. "I...You've ruined everything! You stupid little pony! Why did you have to tell me you loved me!? You stupid, stupid, stupid little pony!"

Down below in Ponyville, Lyra was trotting along the road towards the park where her beloved Bon-Bon would be waiting. It was the same every morning. Lyra would apologise for being late, Bon-Bon would click her tongue and glare at her, and then the two of them would sit down on the bench they had shared for as long as either of them could remember, just sitting and watching the inhabitants of Ponyville walk past. It was the favourite part of Lyra's day, and she whistled as she trotted.

Suddenly, a rumble of thunder came from somewhere behind her and she turned around, eyes wide in fright. Clouds, dark and angry, had begun to form over the Everfree Forest. Yellow flashes of lightning scored their black undersides, followed soon after by the soft growling of far-off thunder.

"Strange!" said Lyra. "I didn't know there was any rain planned for today! So we won't be sitting in the park all day then..." But there was no trace of disappointment on her gentle face. "I guess we'll just have to spend it curled up indoors instead!" She smiled brightly at the thought of the curly-haired earth pony snuggled up beside her on the couch while they listening to the rain clatter on the roof together. "Thank Celestia I baked some

cookies last night. Oh, I do so hope Bon-Bon likes them!"

After Twilight had left, Dash had tried to nap but she'd been unable to find a comfortable position. She'd lain there, staring up at the blue sky above, and sighed. A few of the Weather Patrol had flown overhead, but she'd just ignored them. She just wasn't in the mood to work today, and they knew better than to try and talk her into something she didn't want to do. Let somepony else do it for once! Cloudkicker would totally jump at the opportunity to show off her skills to the Mayor. Yeah, that was a great idea! Let Cloudkicker do all that boring weather junk... Dash would just catch some 'Z's then jet off and do some sneaky aerobatic practice over the Swayback Mountains where no preachy unicorn ponies could disturb her!

"Well, better get out there and do some laps!" Dash yawned and stood up, but when she tried to unfurl her wings she knew something was wrong right away. They felt heavy and unbalanced somehow, like they weren't even part of her body.

"Must've been all that sarsaparilla at Pinkie's party!" she thought. Or maybe the hot sauce she'd drunk in response to Pinkie's double-pony dare. Just how DID that little pink pony put away so much spicy stuff? Dash smiled as she remembered how she'd even tried to drink unrefined rainbow on their visit to Cloudsdale and how that had been the only thing to have put a kink in that curly hair of hers.

But then Dash's smile suddenly dissolved away. The thought of Pinkie brought back that icy feeling again.

"I wonder where she went?" she thought. There was no way she could be away from Ponyville for long – was there? All her friends were here and Mr and Mrs Cake needed her help in the bakery as well. And what about Gummy the alligator? Surely he must be missing her terribly by now! Was Pinkie going to abandon her little pet so easily? Maybe she just didn't care about him anymore.

Dash looked out across Ponyville. The dark clouds she had started to see earlier had advanced to the edge of the town, and as they'd come closer they'd grown and darkened – just like her mood, she thought. More strays

from the Everfree Forest! Just great – exactly the sort of thing that Dash and the Weather Patrol was supposed to keep under control. The Pegasus pony frowned in irritation. There was always something! Every day it was the same old thing: everypony expected her to drop everything and fly out to keep the skies clear. She could hear the Mayor now: Dash do this, Dash do that! It was really starting to cramp her style! She had no time to really practise her flying. Maybe Pinkie had had the right idea, leaving Ponyville. This place WAS getting pretty old. Maybe Trottingham would be a cooler place to live? Or Canterlot... or even good old Cloudsdale! She'd easily make lots of friends there after totally acing the Best Young Flier competition! And maybe she'd find out where Pinkie had gone to...

But then hot anger sprang up again from the dark place deep inside her. Why did SHE have to leave Ponyville as well? Dash knew everypony would blame her for making Pinkie run away, no matter what Twilight said – she was sure of it – but it was really all Pinkie's fault. The unfairness of it all made Dash furious. How could she leave so suddenly – a note wasn't even a real goodbye! Lots of ponies were depending on her back in Ponyville. Where did she get off making such a dramatic gesture like that? It was probably all just a big joke to her, a massive prank. Yeah, that was it! Maybe it WAS just all a huge Pinkie Pie prank – the kiss, the confession, the running away, that silly note – and after she got bored of hiding, she'd come bouncing along the road back into Ponyville. And Dash would be waiting for her – but when Pinkie came up to hug her, she'd push her away and TOTALLY let her have it for all the trouble she'd caused everypony. Dash knew now that underneath that innocent pink bubble-gum exterior Pinkie Pie was really a troublemaker. Oh, why did she keep attracting that type? First Gilda, now Pinkie. She'd had her heart played with so many times, and she was sick of it all. All that sissy love junk had ever done was complicate her life and distract her from her dreams of glory.

And yet... that kiss hadn't felt like a prank. It had felt... And so what if Pinkie loved her? Dash didn't need to love her back, right? She could just play along until Pinkie got it all out of her system, and then she could let her down easy. It had worked with Gilda... hadn't it? And who could blame them for loving her? She WAS the fastest, the bravest, the most risk-takingest Pegasus pony in all of Equestria! Who wouldn't love her?

Dash kicked at a tiny passing cloud in frustration. "I guess the best way to get it all out of my system is to just get out there and start kicking those

clouds old-school. I can't give those other Pegasus ponies a chance at the top job, after all!" She trotted up to the edge of her cloud with a new sense of purpose. But when she looked down she was filled with a sudden attack of stomach-twisting nausea. The ground seemed to come rushing up towards her and she scrambled back in fright.

"That was... weird!" she muttered. For the first time in her life, the distance to the ground had looked like a huge yawning mouth threatening to swallow her up. She gulped, then stepped forward again in determination. There was no way she was going to let some nerves keep her back. She **WAS** the Dash after all, the best young flier in Equestria and destined to be the greatest in all of history!

"C'mon Dash –just like they told you at Junior Speedsters! Best way to get over your nerves is to just jump in the deep end..." She stepped up to the edge of the cloud but didn't look down. She focussed on the horizon... but it was almost invisible behind the banks of grey-black clouds. Lightning flashed suddenly, and Dash's heart leapt up into her throat.

"Just a little glide, Dash," she thought. "Start off small and work your way back up. Soon you'll be back to sonic-rainbooming like crazy!"

She closed her eyes and stepped off the cloud, spreading her wings as she did. But they felt stiff and unwieldy, and her pinions felt as if their feathers were all stuck together. She opened her eyes when she realised something was wrong, and she found herself plummeting towards the ground. Try as she might, the leading edge of her wings seemed incapable of cutting through the air as they always had, as if the air which had always held her up and lifted her aloft had turned against her, becoming a giant hand pushing up against her and forcing her down towards the ground. Dash panicked and began to pump her wings in desperation, trying to get enough lift to pull her out of her death-spiral. And as sweat poured off her and her face turned bright red from the exertion, she arrested her descent and a series of furious and muscle-straining flaps brought her back just high enough to grab hold onto the edge of her cloud.

She pulled herself onto it in a heart-bursting scramble then lay flat out, slick with sweat, her chest heaving and her wings furling and unfurling against her body. What in Equestria had just happened? It had felt a bit like those terrible stitches she had got in Junior Speedsters. But she'd been young and inexperienced back then, still plump with filly-fat rather than the taught,

terrific bullet of pure toned muscle she was now!

Maybe... she was getting old?

Dash laughed, but the laugh went on too long and started to echo eerily around her.

Maybe she'd just slept too long. Or maybe not long enough?

That was it!

"I'm just tired," she decided. "That's totally the reason. Nothing magical!" Hadn't Twilight said there was no such thing as curses and hexes and all that junk? She'd know – she was, after all, the brainiest pony she knew.

It was settled then. The rest of the Weather Patrol could deal with all those rainclouds today. Dash found the softest corner of her cloud-home and curled up. Around her, the black clouds continued to roll in – and the thunder that rumbled louder and louder at last lulled her into a dark sleep free from the pain that was plaguing her heart.

Chapter 5

Twilight looked out the window of her study at the swirling black clouds and she frowned. "That is by far the strangest storm I have ever seen."

She had spent the afternoon trying to find information about the history of unnatural storms hitting Ponyville – and by unnatural, she of course meant storms that had originated over the Everfree Forest rather than in the Storm Factory in Cloudsdale. But try as she may to concentrate, the whole business between Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie was preoccupying her.

She slammed the tome in front of her closed in frustration. "I've read that same sentence TEN TIMES now!" she muttered. "Confound these ponies! They drive me to distraction..."

She stared out the window. The whole town had been plunged into an eerie darkness. The winds that had come up around an hour ago were growing in intensity. The leaves of the tree the library had been built into shivered and rustled and its boughs rubbed together with an alarming creaking sound that played bass to the shrill voice of the wind itself.

Suddenly Spike came running down the stairs. Gummy the alligator was in hot pursuit, his harmless jaws open wide and his pink eyes swivelling with mad intensity.

"Twiiiiiiiiiiiiight!" cried Spike. "Get this little monster off of me!" The little dragon leapt onto the back of the sofa and scrambled to the far end as Gummy leapt up at him from the floor, snapping his gum-filled maw.

Twilight scowled at the little dragon. "Oh Spike – not you too! Why is everypony and everything trying to keep me from finding out the source of this unusual weather?"

"Twiiiiiiiiight!"

Twilight opened the front door of the Library. Wind suddenly filled the room, and dust and loose parchment fluttered about. "Go and play with Gummy

outside for a while, Spike, before it starts to rain – he needs a walk anyway. And some exercise will do you good – those baked bads are making you pudgy!"

Gummy had cornered Spike on the back of the sofa now and the little dragon closed his eyes and jumped for his life, running as he hit the floor. "Anymore exercise like this and you'll be needing a new assistant!" he shouted as he raced out the door and into the stormy darkness with the tiny alligator snapping at his heels.

"Kids – they're like this every rainy day," smiled Twilight. As soon as the door was closed she trotted upstairs. She'd had a sudden idea. Maybe the answers she was seeking weren't to be found in any book, but in observing the storm directly. She opened the window and pushed her telescope flush to it. The wind was thankfully not so bad on this side of the library. She tilted her telescope as steeply as she could and after floating over a notepad and pencil she sat down to make some observations.

Straight away the storm proved to be even stranger than she had initially thought. The thunderheads that made up the storm were not moving overhead, but were keeping a regular course circling Ponyville. And deep within the grey layers of vapour, something dark seemed to be moving around. At first she thought she'd imagined it – maybe a darker layer of cloud higher up that became occasionally visible through breaks in the lower clouds. But there was definitely something there, moving within the storm – a black, sinuous form that kept out of sight, almost as if it didn't want to be seen.

"That CANNOT be good," said Twilight. Suddenly a squall hit the library, and rain flew in through the window into her face. She quickly dropped the notes she had been making and closed the window telekinetically. "Is all of Ponyville starting to fall apart?"

She raced around the house shutting all the windows. "That Spike!" she muttered. "Trust him to be out having fun when there's work for him to do!"

She trotted into the kitchen and was in the middle of shutting the window over the sink when Spike somersaulted through it bodily, landing with a catastrophic clattering among the pots and pans stacked in front of the washing machine.

"Spike!" yelled Twilight. But then Gummy came careening through the window – and the little dragon was ready for him. He'd hurriedly put a pot on his head for a helmet, and in one hand he held an egg-beater and in the other a fry-pan that he used as an impromptu shield to fend off the alligator's playful lunges and bites.

"Twilight! This alligator is crazy!" But Twilight didn't respond – she was deep in thought about the thing she had seen in the storm. She remembered its shape from something she had read once – but where in Equestria had she seen it?

"Spike! Stop making so much noise!" Gummy had got the better of the little dragon, who was desperately wrestling him among the wreckage of the kitchen. It sounded as if the crockery and the cutlery were at war, crashing and shattering and clattering all at once.

Twilight's annoyance finally boiled over. "I CAN'T STAND IT ANYMORE!" she yelled. "I just can't concentrate with all this racket! Spike, clean this up once you're done playing with Gummy. I'm going out!" She stormed into the living room.

"Out? Into that hurricane?" said Spike, incredulous. Gummy had been distracted by Twilight's angry shout and was watching her get ready with inquisitive pink eyes. "But Twilight – don't leave me here with this... this monster!"

"Oh Spike," replied Twilight as she slipped into her raincoat and levitated an umbrella in front of her. "Gummy's not a monster! Just think of him as your little brother."

Spike stumbled out of the kitchen and slammed the door shut before Gummy had a chance to react. But soon there was a crash on the other side of the door as the alligator threw himself it, and Spike had to push with all his might to stop him from busting it down. The little dragon turned to beg Twilight for help one last time – but she had already left.

"But I never wanted a little brother!" cried Spike as the door buckled and started to split under the onslaught. "And besides – dragons and alligators aren't even related!"

When Cloudkicker had finally beaten her way through howling winds and driving sheets of rain that had flown into her face like frozen needles, she found Dash's little cloud-house. It sat in a strange area of calm, like the eye of a hurricane; but there was very little light here in the centre of the storm – there were no blue skies like in the eye of a hurricane, just a dark expanse overhead. And something seemed to writhe around inside it – or maybe it had just been her imagination.

The blonde-maned Pegasus pony wiped her flying goggles clear of rain-spots with a hoof as she drove the leading edge of her wings lower to bring her down into a short landing – it was a daring manoeuvre, but a necessary one, since getting lost in the banks of blackness had meant she'd appeared over Dash's home much higher than she'd expected. And as she dived she looked for any sign of her commanding officer – she was sure to be found asleep in her hammock as she often was when goofing off work.

As Cloudkicker had flown through the storm, anger had welled up in her and overcome her usually ever-sunny demeanour. Maybe she had just lost patience at last with Dash's prima-donna antics. This was no ordinary storm – it was something far worse. It had settled above Ponyville and was showing no sign of moving off like a storm normally would. This was no time for Dash to be lazing around and dreaming of future fame and glory!

Rainbow Dash lay curled up in a corner of her cloud-home. As the clouds had rolled in and the thunder started to roar and Ponyville had been lit by lightning strike after lightning strike, she had wanted to get out there and help the rest of her squad. But again that dizzying terror had taken hold over her, and again her wings had frozen and threatened to drag her down to a terrible fate far below. And so she had remained there, helpless, curled up in the corner of her cloud-home, watching the storm-clouds circle Ponyville like monstrous black vultures.

Cloudkicker landed with a bounce and in moments, after tearing off her goggles, she was shaking Dash with her fore-hoofs.

"Dash, wake up! How on earth can you sleep with all of this going on around you?!" Cloudkicker lifted the other Pegasus pony's head up,

expecting to see a blissfully unaware and dreaming face. But what she saw shocked her.

Dash's coat was pale and sickly, and her mane was listless and hung down from her shoulders and back like a flag where there was no wind. But worst of all were her eyes: they were red and swollen, and her cheeks and face were wet – but from tears or rain, Cloudkicker couldn't tell.

She stepped back in alarm at the sight, and straight away she felt all of her angry resentment subside to be replaced with a desperate concern. She'd never seen Dash in such a state – not even when she'd caught the flu after trying to beat the Equestrian record for the highest flight and had returned to base with icicles in her feathers and frost riming her coat.

"Are... are you ok, Dash?" Cloudkicker asked, and immediately the question seemed such a stupid one to be asking. "You... you look terrible!"

"Cloudkicker?" Dash's voice was barely a whisper. "I... I think I must be sick. I... I can't seem to fly anymore."

"You? You can't fly?" Cloudkicker looked over Dash's body, checking her wings and her coat for any injuries. "Where are you hurt?"

Dash chuckled – but it was a humourless and hollow sound that chilled Cloudkicker's blood. "I'm not injured – at least, not anywhere on the outside."

"We've got to get you to the hospital..." Cloudkicker said as she tried to lift the rainbow-maned Pegasus pony, but Dash felt so heavy – as if some force was pressing down on her.

"This... this must be magic of some sort," Cloudkicker decided. She brought her face close to Dash's and said: "Just hang in there, Dash. I'm going to go and get help. Don't try and move, OK?"

Dash raised her head with difficulty, her eyes glittering with dark humour. "No problem," she said. And then, after hesitating for a moment, she asked: "Cloudkicker – do you think I'm a good pony?"

Cloudkicker was taken aback by the question. It was simply one of the last things she could ever have imagined Dash asking her. "Of course you're a

good pony, Dash," she replied. "Now, just wait for a..."

"Do you know what I did to my friend?" Dash continued. Her voice was soft and laden with pain. "I... I betrayed her."

"Your friend? Who, Pinkie?" Cloudkicker had had an inkling that this was all somehow connected to Pinkie Pie's disappearance. The story had already got around Ponyville. So was that what this was all about? "I'm sure Pinkie'll be back soon, Dash. I can't imagine her leaving for good, can you?"

Dash shook her head. "I didn't mean Pinkie Pie..." she said.

Cloudkicker realised that Dash must be delirious. There was no time to lose with talking. She quickly slipped on her flight goggles again. "I'll be back soon, Dash. Don't worry!" she said. "You'll be feeling like your old self again in no time!"

She turned and galloped straight off the side of the cloud and a few strong beats of her wings later she had returned to the swirling maelstrom and vanished from Dash's sight.

Dash exhaled and looked up at the sky. Behind the clouds that dark shape she'd seen earlier was boiling and writhing again. So it hadn't been her feverish imagination after all. Dash knew it was somehow connected to everything that was happening. And as she watched, it slowly started to emerge. It had been waiting for Cloudkicker to leave, she realised. And now it had her alone.

"C'mon y'all!" shouted Applejack, struggling to be heard over the screaming winds. "These here apple trees all need ta be staked down well or else th' entire orchard'll be blown away in this gale!"

Applejack had marshalled the troops at Sweet Apple Acres. The ploughing had been abandoned and now all the earth pony workers were hard at work staking and roping down the young trees whose roots weren't strong enough yet to survive the strong winds. It was a difficult and dangerous job – as the winds howled, apples were knocked loose and they joined other

debris in zipping through the air like bullets, while every few moments a weaker branch would sheer off from a tree and coming crashing along the ground. There'd already been more than a few injuries, but everypony had doggedly struggled on. If they lost all the new apple trees, Sweet Apple Acres might never recover.

"Ya gotta pull it tighter, Caramel!" With his back against a tree, Big Mac was acting as the anchor for the guy-rope that the smaller earth pony had dragged around it to shore it up. "Else that rope's gonna snap quicker than Granny Smith's knee-bones on a winter's day!"

"I'm pulling it as hard as I can!" replied Caramel. His voice was hardly audible over the shrieking gale. "The wind... it's just too strong! We're finished!" He buckled at his knees at one particularly violent gust, and the rope went suddenly slack.

"C'mon now!" shouted Big Mac. "Y'gotta have more faith in yerself! Ah can't do it on my own. Ah need ya, Caramel!"

The words pierced deep into Caramel's chest. His face straight away grew steely with determination and he struggled back onto his feet. Pulling the rope until it went taut and the tree had stopped its precarious bending, he hammered in the peg and then galloped back to where Big Mac was.

"Ah knew ya could do it, Caramel!" laughed the bigger stallion around the rope in his mouth. He let it slip out, and the tree bent but did not fall against the onslaught of the furious winds. "Nah c'mon! These other ponies're slackin' off and they need us ta show 'em how it's done!" But as Big Mac turned to go there was an ear-splitting snap as a rope that had been wound around a nearby tree suddenly broke, one end cracking out like a whip at the red-coated stallion.

"Mac!" Caramel leapt between them, receiving the full force of the rope in his side. He crumbled lifeless to the ground.

"Caramel! Caramel!" Big Mac was at his side in moments and knelt down beside the wounded pony. "Are ya OK buddy? Speak ta me, Caramel!"

The younger stallion groaned and slowly opened his eyes. "Uhhhhh.... Mac? Big Mac? You're OK? Oh, thank Celestia!"

"What're ya babbling about?" Big Mac's face was a confusion of anger and concern. "Why'dya hafta go an' do such a foal-hardy thing?"

"Be..because..." *Because I love you Macintosh!* "Because you're the strongest stallion here, Big Mac. AJ needs you. Anypony can replace me – but nopony can replace you."

Big Mac shook his head, but when he looked at Caramel again he was smiling. "That's near the bravest thing Ah've ever seen a pony do," He started to nuzzle at Caramel's injury. "Nah where does it hurt?"

Caramel closed his eyes as he felt Big Mac's breath against his coat. There was no pain now – just a sudden bliss that filled him from the tip of his tail to his ears.

"No... pain," he said, a dopey smile plastered on his face.

"AaaaaaJaaayy!" shouted Big Mac in a panic. "Caramel's hurt real bad! He's slippin' into a coma or somethin'! We gotta get him ta th' hospital!" He looked down at the injured pony. "Hang in there, buddy!"

Caramel's smile deepened as the screaming of the wind, the splatter of the rain against his face and the rumbling hoof-falls of the ponies rushing to help him one by one vanished until he knew no more.

"Um... Cloudkicker? Can you check if I'm... wearing these right?"

Fluttershy had been fumbling with her flight goggles as she flew alongside Cloudkicker and the rest of the Weather Patrol. It had proven so hard to put them on with the wind whipping her pink mane everywhere! Her mane seemed to have a life of its own and kept getting tangled up in the strap.

Cloudkicker soared down beside her and helped her untangle the strap, and adjusted it so that it wasn't so loose. "There... that should do it!" the lavender-coated Pegasus pony said. She looked at Fluttershy. Here, flying through the centre of the clouds that were encircling Ponyville, she looked so different from the shy and gentle pony everypony knew. Her face was

set with determination, and to Cloudkicker's eyes she looked even more beautiful than before.

"Thank you for volunteering to help us," said Cloudkicker, blushing at the thoughts she'd suddenly had. "We really did need every pony we could get!"

Fluttershy nodded. "It's my pleasure," she replied. "I mean, we've got to protect Ponyville and everypony we love," Rainbow Dash! Were you alright? Cloudkicker's account of her friend's condition had horrified Fluttershy when she had heard it. Oh, she did hope Ditzzy Doo and Nurse Cross would reach her in time!

The clouds that had surrounded them suddenly cleared, and they were suddenly dazzled by the bright sun and blue sky overhead. Beneath them, the black clouds rumbled and flashed still. But Fluttersy's eyes were held upwards. She felt the soft, warm rays of the sun against her wind-burnt face and she prayed with all her heart.

"Oh Princess Celestia! Please give me strength! I'm so very, very afraid – but I need to do this. Everypony I love is depending upon me."

The pink-maned Pegasus pony looked across at the mountainous thunderhead they were going to try to disperse. It was like a black tower, broiling with darkness and lit by vicious streaks of sheet lightning. Fluttershy gulped. She had to do this! No pony else among her friends could fly – and with her animal friends' homes being flooded and blown away far below, she had no other choice. She had to protect them.

Fluttershy adjusted her flight-goggles and flew on.

It was the same shape as a rainbow – that thin arch brought to life by the rays of Celestia's holy light refracted through the million lenses of raindrops, the living embodiment of the powerful Rainbow Magic that lay underneath all of creation.

But this rainbow was not one of light. It was black, and colourless – and yet it was more than merely dark. Darkness was the absence of light – but this

was rather the negation of light, a total absence of anything, a limitless void of emptiness that hurt Dash's eyes to look at. And it slid out of the cloud's underbelly like a snake and coiled about the Pegasus pony before she realised what was happening. But as she struggled to her feet and stumbled back, it suddenly jetted out in a parabola and, like ink being poured into a jar, it filled the invisible shape of a mighty equine form no farther than five feet away from her. It was a figure, tall and lank of leg, with a sharp and elongated muzzle behind which glowed two points of sickly purple light – its eyes, shimmering like willow-wisps. It turned its head and considered the bedraggled Pegasus pony that lay not far away – so frighteningly small against its towering form.

"Who... who are you?" Dash's sudden fear drove a desperate energy into her body, and she found she could move again. She scrambled backwards against the nearest of the pillars of cloud that held up the top story of her cloud-home and stood, her head raised high, ready for an attack. But the shadow made no move – and began to speak.

"You'll find me where there's no laughter to be heard, and wherever despair has taken hold of a heart," said the black figure, and its voice seemed to echo in Dash's ears without physically travelling the distance between the two of them – a thin and shimmering voice, like the rustling of tree-leaves before the advent of a storm. It was as if the air around her had been forced to take on the job of vocal chords where none existed. "I choose to call myself Nightmare."

"Nightmare... as in Nightmare Moon?" Dash knew she had heard something like this voice before – in that battle with Nightmare Moon in the Temple of the Two Sisters deep within the Everfree Forest.

The shadow laughed. "That was my name once – but just one among many. No, that was my name when I resided in the heart of that upstart Princess of the Moon. Oh how delicious the pain in HER heart was! But always, always that snivelling love for her sister held her – and me – back." The black form approached Dash, and as it walked it seemed that parts of it dissolved away into the dark clouds behind it, like dye soaking into cloth. "No, stripped of her personality I am again Nightmare – the one who was here before the sun and the moon, the one who created this world. For you see, long before those two interlopers came, this world was shrouded in eternal darkness. Only the stars glared down upon the earth –

and even those tiny points of light from far off were scarcely visible on the surface of my world, for everywhere there grew the Forest – MY forest, where I was free to roam as I wished. But today only a small part of it remains," said Nightmare. "And it is my prison – or at least, it was until recently."

"Let me guess – the Everfree Forest?" Dash said with a chuckle. "You don't need to be a braniac like Twilight to work THAT one out!" Somehow, now that the threat had taken a real form she felt her old feistiness returning. Shadow ponies from the beginning of time? Piece of cake! At least you could actually SEE these things. "So, do you want to go back to prison yourself, or am I going to have to send you back there myself? 'Cause I'm not gonna sit here and listen to your life story all day – I've got laps to fly!"

Nightmare laughed, and the sound was a sudden storm of knives that hurt Dash's ears. "Your arrogance is by far your most endearing trait, Rainbow Dash!" The shadow's face seemed to smile. "I shall enjoy bending you to my will. Luna was so needy, so frightened and alone. But you! YOU are a far better choice to be my vessel. I will take a most singular delight in being Nightmare Dash!"

Dash refused to cower before the black figure's piercing eyes. "No dice, Nightmare. There's no way I'LL ever allow you to take control of me," She thumped a hoof against her chest. "There's room in here for one only, and that's the Dash."

"Truer words were never spoken!" And Nightmare laughed again – but this time Dash felt a chill pass throughout her entire body, and she stepped back. "My little pony, YOU are the one who brought me here, who opened the way for me. The despair YOU created in the heart of one who loved you was like a beacon to me, and your guilt will be a gate for my spirit!"

"Pinkie? What have you done to Pinkie!?" Dash felt a desperate hot anger rising in her, and as she did she felt a tingling sensation along her wings. The thought of Pinkie, the sudden image of her face with its explosion of pink curls, those beautiful blue eyes and her beaming jackpot-smile had brought warmth and life back to them. Dash flapped them once, then twice, as she advanced on Nightmare – and a third flap lifted her up from the ground and brought her furious face level to the shadow pony's own. She stared into the dull green points of smoky light that were its eyes – and she

thought she saw them blink. But the shadow held its ground.

At last Nightmare replied, with a chuckle like the crackling of dry leaves. "I find it darling that you're so concerned about one particular pony, while down below us hundreds of them are struggling to survive in a desperate situation they have YOU to thanks for."

"Wait, are you saying I did all this?" Dash looked about at the expanse of dark cloud that covered the town. The howling winds and the lightning that battered the town – had she done that?

Nightmare cocked its head in amusement. "Let's just say you ALLOWED it to happen. But then, Rainbow Dash, you've always been most interested in looking out for yourself," Nightmare's black mane swirled and wherever it passed, the dark grey of the stormy night was plunged into utter nothingness as if it had been erased. "After all, what space is there left in your heart for anypony else? It was all used up long ago, wouldn't you agree? You... abandoned that part of you, did you not?"

Dash closed her eyes. The ice in the centre of her body turned her stomach, and she could no longer look Nightmare in those glowing pits it called its eyes. "How... how could you know that?" she managed to whisper at last.

"You mortal beings and your incomprehensible arrogance!" Nightmare's voice was tinged with indignant anger now. "Your primitive existences are like an open book to one who has existed from since the time the stars themselves were young. All your past is visible to me! Everything that has ever happened to you is still happening, although your sadly limited senses can only see it vaguely, as if staring through a smoking mirror. " Nightmare jerked its head towards Dash as if in accusation. "Oh no, Rainbow Dash. You will beg me – BEG me! – to take control of you after you see the places I'll take you! No pony can face despair eternal and remain unmoved!"

"Where... where are you going to take me?" Dash whispered. Her brashness had sloughed off her now, and she felt frightened and suddenly, horribly alone.

"Why, just the most terrible place to be found anywhere in the universe..." Nightmare touched its head to the Pegasus pony's chest.

"No," whispered Dash. "Not there!"

"Yes," said Nightmare, and its eyes grew suddenly brighter with glee as it swirled and coiled once again into a rainbow of darkness that penetrated into Dash's chest and vanished. "There!"

Chapter 6

"I do hope Rarity and the fillies are OK..." thought Twilight as she battled her way through the driving rain. "I don't want to imagine what damage Applebloom and her friends have done to the boutique by now, stuck inside out of this storm!"

Her hooves splashed up muddy water as she trotted, soaking her legs, while about her the storm continued to ravage the little town. Trees bent in the growling winds and the rain was now almost a vertical wall that she had to struggle through. The umbrella she had brought from the library had long since been blown out of her telekinetic grip, and had spiralled off into the deepening darkness.

Twilight was almost at Rarity's boutique when a pony came rushing up to her out of the gloom. It was Nurse Mercy, the head of the Ponyville hospital, and she was in such a hurry that she almost ran straight into the unicorn pony.

"Oh, Twilight Sparkle!" Mercy shouted over the wind. "Thank Celestia I found you! We need your help in the infirmary! Rainbow Dash was just brought in by Ditzzy Doo and..."

"What happened to her?" Twilight demanded. The look on Mercy's face made her stomach lurch. "She's not...?"

Mercy shook her head. "No... Rainbow Dash is breathing and all her vital signs are good. But something has happened to her – something magical! You've got to hurry!"

Twilight asked no more questions but followed her as she galloped off into the darkness.

The infirmary was full of injured ponies – Twilight hadn't seen so many since the infamous "baked bads" incident. Luckily, there were no serious injuries – but with the storm showing no indication of slackening, it was only a matter of time.

Big McIntosh was there, standing beside the cot that housed Caramel. The young stallion, layers of bandage wrapped around his torso, was lying with his eyes closed and a huge smile on his face.

"He'll be fine," explained McIntosh as Twilight and Mercy hurried by. "Fact, he almost looks like he's enjoyin' himself!" The stallion shook his head, an affectionate smile on his face. But then he turned to Twilight and said "Ah hope ya can do somethin' for Rainbow – she's... well, ya'll see soon enough..."

Rainbow Dash lay on her own cot, her usually brash mane lying slack upon the hay, her eyes closed. Twilight was shocked by how small and fragile she looked, but she steeled herself and started her examination without delay.

"There's no sign of trauma anywhere," Mercy explained. "And she's clearly not truly comatose – look at her eyes!"

Twilight looked closer and saw that Rainbow Dash's eyes were moving behind their closed lids. It looked like she was... dreaming? The unicorn pony closed her own eyes and concentrated. Her horn burst into a rippling purple light, and using her magic she scanned the whole of Dash's body. After she was finished, the light faded out and she shook her head. "I know I've always said that there's no such thing as curses or hexes – but whatever's affecting Dash is clearly magical in origin."

Mercy looked at the unicorn pony expectantly – but Twilight sighed. "I'm afraid I have no idea what to do." She gazed down at the tattered body. "I'm just glad she's alive." Twilight turned towards the door. "We should move her to the library – I may be able to find a cure in my books somewhere."

Mercy nodded, and Big McIntosh came up. "Ah'll help ya take her, Twilight. Caramel's clearly on th' mend, an' with all tha trees shored up back on the farm Ah got nowhere else ta be useful in this storm..."

Twilight smiled up at the stallion. "Thank you Big McIntosh." But she quickly turned away so that he couldn't see the blush that had risen to her cheeks.

Soon Rainbow Dash, lovingly wrapped in a blanket and carefully lifted onto

Big McIntosh's back, was being taken back to the library. As they trudged through the storm the stallion looked down at the little unicorn pony and asked "D'ye really think ya can do somethin' to help her, Twilight? It breaks mah heart to see her like this..."

"I hope so, Big Mac," Twilight replied. "And if there's an answer to be found, it'll be in my books somewhere."

As soon as Big Mac had returned to Sweet Apple Acres, Applejack had come as quickly as possible to help Twilight and had picked up Rarity on the way. The unicorn pony had been overjoyed to be able to escape from the hijinks of the Cutie Mark Crusaders, and she had thrown her hooves around the neck of Apple Bumpkin, tearfully thanking her for taking over for her.

And now both Applejack and Rarity were sitting on the floor of the library while Twilight read through a huge pile of books that Spike was continually added new ones to. Rarity was cradling Rainbow Dash's head in her lap and stroking her mane. The Pegasus pony had shown no sign of improvement, and Twilight was becoming more and more desperate.

She muttered as she flipped rapidly through the heavy tome before her. The title read: *Preternatural Beings of Equestria*.

"Ya found anythin' useful in there, sugarcube?" asked Applejack.

"Oh, do say you HAVE, darling!" added Rarity. "I simply cannot bear to see Rainbow Dash in such an APPALLING condition for a single moment longer!" The unicorn pony was doggedly trying to brush the knots out of Dash's mane. "Oh, my dear – this... this is such a TRAVESTY!"

"Manticores, dragons, basilisks... none of them can cause this kind of condition!" Twilight slammed the book shut in frustration. "I guess I should admit defeat..." I'm sorry Princess Celestia, she thought to herself. But I just can't handle all of this on my own. The sight of the usually brash Pegasus pony lying on the floor in the centre of the library without moving made her swallow her pride at last. There was only one thing left for her to do. She turned to where Spike was sitting at his writing desk and watching the rain

fall through the window.

"Spike, take a letter..." she said.

The little dragon sighed. He tried to take his quill from its usual spot behind his ear, but all he could feel was the scales of the little alligator whose jaws were lodged around the back of his head, so he rifled through the top draw of the desk until he finally found one. Twilight continued to dictate:

Dear Princess Celestia,

I regret to inform you that we are in dire straits. Despite all our best efforts to solve the problem ourselves, Ponyville teeters on the brink of disaster. The tiefoon...

What? Oh. T....Y....P....

Yes, storm is also fine! No, don't write that! What do you mean you've already written it?

...storm that has formed over the town threatens us all. Rainbow Dash is unable to help us, as she lies stricken by an unknown enchantment and despite my best efforts I have been unable to find a cure. Our friend Pinkie Pie also remains missing, presumed waterlogged and scared.

In this hour of our greatest need, we turn to you and your great power and wisdom to aid us.

Your faithful student,

Twilight Sparkle

Spike rolled the parchment and breathed on it, whereupon it vanished into green smoke. A heartbeat later, he hiccupped, then burped and grabbed the scroll that appeared in front of him.

"That sure was quick!" said Applejack.

"What does it say, Spike?" asked Twilight.

The little dragon coughed twice then started to read:

"Dear Princess Celestia, I regret to inform you yada yada yada wait a

second!" Spike turned the parchment this way and that in confusion. "Isn't this the letter I just sent? How the hay did that happen?"

"The letter must have never reached Canterlot – it bounced." Twilight exhaled. "I was worried that something like this might happen..."

Rarity frowned. "But... whatever does it mean, darling?"

"It means we're on our own," Twilight replied. "The typhoon has cut us off from the rest of Equestria." She slumped on the couch, her gaze glued to Dash's body on the floor. Oh Celestia, what am I going to do?!

Spike had dislodged Gummy from the back of his head, and the little alligator was now curled up on the floor, fast asleep. But all of a sudden he opened his eyes, lifted up his head and began to squeak.

"Oh, how simply ADORABLE!" said Rarity, getting up and petting the little alligator's head as his eyes swivelled backwards and forwards madly.

"Ah never realised Gummy's voice was so darn cute!" said Applejack. "He's peepin' just like a chickadee!"

But Spike had leapt onto the backing of the sofa again, and was hiding behind Twilight. "Cute, nothing! He's a vicious predator!"

"Oh Spike, darling!" protested Rarity, stroking the alligator's scaly back. "Gummy is NO such thing!"

Spike glared at Gummy. "Huh!" he snorted. "Rarity's never stroked my scales before. Lucky little..."

But then Gummy squirmed away from Rarity and hopped towards the front door to the library. He sat down and looked up at the door intently, then started to squeak even louder, wagging his spiky tail in excitement.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door.

Twilight almost fell off the couch in surprise. Rarity and Applejack both leapt behind the sofa in terror and hid there, holding each other shivering. But Spike was already walking towards the door.

"I know, I know! I'll get it...!" he muttered. "One day I'm going to open this door and it's going to be some terrible monster, and it'll swallow me whole... and then you'll all be sorr..."

Violent wind and freezing rain flew in as soon as Spike opened the door. The little dragon stumbled backwards, temporarily blinded... but after he wiped his eyes he could see again. A sudden flash of lightning illuminated the hooded figure that was waiting on the doorstep and he leapt back, crying "Twiiiight!"

Twilight was beside him in a moment... and when she saw what had alarmed him, she smiled. "Oh Spike! Don't you remember our friend Zecora?"

The figure pulled off its hood, revealing that it was indeed the zebra of the Everfree Forest. She looked at them with a wide smile on her face. "Greetings, oh friends of Ponyville, If only circumstances were not so ill!"

"Zecora!" Rarity and Applejack both came out from behind the sofa and trotted up to their old friend. It was then that they all noticed that she was carrying something on her back, and that Gummy was leaping up at it, squeaking.

"Oh Zecora..." whispered Twilight. "Is that...?"

Zecora knelt down and the three ponies and Spike all helped take the load from her back, and as they did the blanket it had been wrapped in fell open and a shock of pink curly hair flopped out.

"Pinkie Pie?" Spike looked down at the comatose pony, and was immediately bowled over by an excited Gummy who started nuzzling and licking his mistress's face.

Zecora nodded. "I found her near Everfree ravine – the saddest sight I have ever seen." She helped Spike and the three ponies to unwrap the rest of Pinkie Pie, and they lay her carefully on the floor next to Rainbow Dash. Her face was smudged with dirt, her hair a bird's-nest of twigs and leaves, and her eyes were closed – but she was wearing a blissful smile despite it all.

"Is she... sleepin'?" asked Applejack.

"She certainly doesn't appear to be in any pain," said Twilight. "In fact she looks positively happy!"

Rarity looked down at Pinkie. "Oh, you poor, poor dear! Your hair is SUCH a mess!" She began to pick out the leaves and twigs. "Whatever have you being DOING? There... that's a LITTLE better. I'm afraid we'll have to wait until you're well again – and then I shall give you and Dash both a COMPLETE makeover!"

"Quit yer fussin' and yer' mussin', missy," Applejack pushed the unicorn pony aside. "What Pinkie needs right now is some TLC!" She started to lick Pinkie's face. "Hang in there sug'! Soon ya'll be partyin' like never before – an' old Applejack'll bake as much apple pie as ya can fit into tha' lil' pink tummy o' yours!"

Twilight turned to the zebra. "Is this the same enchantment that Rainbow Dash is under, Zecora?"

The zebra nodded. "It is an enchantment both potent and rare, the work of the dark spirit called Nightmare."

"Nightmare...don't ya mean Nightmare Moon?" asked Applejack. She had started shivering at the name.

Zecora chuckled, and shook her head. "You have defeated Nightmare Moon, but the spirit lives on – in this typhoon!"

Twilight closed her eyes. "Nightmare. It all makes sense now."

"What makes sense? Who's a nightmare?" asked Spike.

Twilight made a particularly ancient book from high up on the shelves float down to them, and she flipped to the relevant page. "Not a nightmare – Nightmare. It's the name of the spirit that resides inside the rainbow of darkness. But I never realised that it was involved in Luna's transformation into Nightmare Moon..."

Applejack gulped. "So yer sayin' that this Nightmare fella is the one who put Dash and Pinkie under this hex?" Her face suddenly flashed with anger. "We gotta go and fry his fritters fer him!"

Twilight nodded. "But the most important thing right now is figuring out how to break this enchantment," She looked toward Zecora. "But what kind of enchantment is it exactly? All the information I have on Nightmare is just fragments of legends and they're pretty light on specific details."

Zecora's face was serious. "The curse is one of endless dreams – all part of Nightmare's evil schemes."

"Oh Ze-cora, ain't there somethin' you can do to help them?" asked Applejack.

The zebra nodded. "The only cure for this terrible spell is for one to enter their dreams as well."

"Enter? Their dreams?" repeated Twilight. Was such a thing even possible?

"Well, then the matter is settled," said Rarity. "I shall go! I AM the one most experienced with dealing with a pony's dreams and desires! It goes hoof in hoof with a fashion designer's job, after all."

"What're ya jawin' about, Rarity?" Applejack stepped forward. "AH should be the one to go. AH'M the eldest, so that means it falls ta me to rescue Dash an' Pinkie."

Twilight shook her head. "Thank you both for volunteering, but I'm going to go." She looked down at her two sleeping friends. "Nightmare is somewhere in there as well, and somepony will have to deal with him. Since I'm the most knowledgeable about magic, it should be me."

Rarity started to argue, but a look from Applejack silenced her. "Ya right, Twi', like always." She put a hoof on Twilight's shoulder. "But just promise us ya'll be careful in there!"

Rarity nodded. "Who knows what terrible dreams those poor dears are experiencing RIGHT now! Oh, do take care, Twilight, darling – and come

back to us SAFE!"

Twilight lay down next to Dash and Pinkie while Zecora slipped out of her saddlebags and nosed through them. At last she pulled out a small pouch. "Moonflower pollen, by Luna blessed – This shall lead you on your quest."

"So what's the plan, Twilight?" asked Spike, a worried look on his face.

"I'll enter Pinkie's dream first," said Twilight. "All of this started with her somehow, so the answer must lie somewhere in her little pink head."

Zecora brought the pouch over to Twilight and placed it by her head.

"Hear my advice and heed it well, lest the dream should draw you under its spell; Do not forget that all you see is shaped from the dreamer's memory."

Zecora untied the pouch and opened it, revealing the silver-blue pollen of the Moonflowers glowing within. Then, drawing in her breath, she blew the glittering pollen onto Twilight's face. It hovered in a sparkling cloud before the unicorn pony's eyes and she breathed it in deeply – then she yawned once, then twice, and on the third yawn she realised she was already dreaming.

Chapter 7

Twilight was still lying on the floor of the library, but Dash and Pinkie were no longer beside her and Zecora and the others were nowhere to be seen. She stood up and as she did she noticed that sunlight was streaming in through the windows. She opened the door to the library and looked outside. It was a beautiful sunny day. A light breeze ruffled her mane, while above her fluffy white clouds floated serenely against the blue vault of a summer sky.

"Is... is this really a dream?" she wondered. But it all seemed so real! Twilight didn't know what she'd been expecting – gloomy forests, twisted buildings, labyrinthine streets filled with grotesque illusions maybe?

She was about to go outside when she stepped on something lying on the floor. It was an envelope! She floated it up for a closer look.

To Twilight Sparkle! From your bestest friend forever, Pinkie Pie!

Twilight quickly opened the envelope with the tip of her horn and slipped the invitation out. It was written in pink crayon.

"Dear Twilight, You are hereby invited to the most super secretest and most super surprisingest of all super secret surprise parties! Where? Sugarcube Corner silly! When? Well, right now! Why? Who needs a reason for a party? Well, OK. Rainbow Dash is the reason. But don't go being a big spoily-pants by blabbing it to her, will you?"

Twilight looked at her clock on the wall. The hands were pointing directly at RIGHT NOW! "Oh no!" she cried. "I'm already late!"

She raced through the door, slamming it behind her. If she galloped she could reach Sugarcube Corner in a few minutes! Pinkie would be so disappointed if she arrived late. And Big Mac would be there as well. She couldn't leave HIM waiting...

Twilight suddenly stopped dead in the middle of the street. She shook her

head. Wait – that wasn't right at all! She had to find Pinkie to rescue her from this dream! What had she been thinking? Those thoughts – and even memories – had slipped into her mind without her noticing. The unicorn pony gulped when she at last realised how dangerous being in another pony's dream could be. Well, Zecora had tried to warn her.

"Remember Twilight – this is all a dream. Just a dream," she kept repeating. "The real Ponyville is being ravaged by a typhoon. Pinkie and Dash and everypony else is depending on you."

She resumed her gallop, and soon she heard the noise of laughter and applause rising up like a wave somewhere ahead of her. The party was obviously already well on its way.

Suddenly, a young stallion ran up alongside her. She turned and saw that it was Caramel from Sweet Apple Acres. He was puffing and panting.

"Oh... Twi-Twilight! Don't tell me you slept in as well!" His usually carefully-styled mane was dishevelled. "The party must've been going for ages already!"

Twilight looked at the earth pony as if she was seeing him for the first time. His wide blues eyes, his cream caramel coat, the triple horseshoe cutie mark. He looked exactly like the real Caramel! He even smelled the same – that soft scent of sandalwood. But the real Caramel was back in the real Ponyville, lying injured in the infirmary.

"Uh, ye...yes! I slept in too," she replied. You're asleep, Twilight. Don't forget you're asleep!

"We'd better hurry. Big McIntosh will be wondering where you are!" Caramel winked at her, and edged ahead.

"Big... Big McIntosh?" she repeated.

They were outside Sugarcube Corner now – and the noise coming from inside was incredible. Music blared, ponies laughed and chatted, glassed clinked, party poppers exploded and whistles blew – and above it all could be heard a singularly chirpy and cheerful voice. "And so I said 'Oatmeal? Are you crazy?'" There was an immediate burst of laughter.

"Aww... we missed Pinkie's oatmeal joke!" Caramel sighed. He stepped up and clopped on the front door with a hoof, and it flew open – and before they had time to react, they were both drawn into the middle of the party.

It was like being in the centre of an exploding rainbow. The streamers, tablecloths, balloons, ribbons – everything was red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet as far as the eye could see. And every pony in Ponyville seemed to be there!

Twilight quickly became separated from Caramel as she pushed her way through the endless sea of drinking, eating and laughing ponies, and it seemed that everypony she passed wanted to greet her.

"Hello Twilight!" Rose the Ponyville florist touched her shoulder with a hoof as she went by. "Glad you could make it!"

"Twi, you're here at last!" said a yellow-maned earth pony mare with a neon pink coat and a cutie mark of a pair of cherries.

"So good to see you!" said Carrot Top, through a mouthful of carrot cake.

"Well, this is certainly a surprise!" said a black-maned mare with pale green eyes.

"Hey Twilight – Pinkie's been waiting for you!" a young stallion with a chocolate-brown coat and a straw-yellow mane told her.

"Muffins!"

"Oh hi Derpy," replied Twilight, smiling at the mail-pony who was eating a muffin slathered with hot-sauce.

"Oh, there you ARE, darling!" Suddenly Rarity was there, helping her through the crush of partying ponies. "Wherever have you BEEN? Poor Pinkie has been BESIDE herself with worry that you'd forgotten about Rainbow Dash's surprise party!"

Don't forget, Twilight. She might look and sound like the real Rarity, but she's just a part of Pinkie's dream. But her hoof! It feels so soft and smooth,

exactly like the real Rarity's...

And then they squeezed through a final wall of ponies, and there were Pinkie and Dash. Twilight almost burst into tears. The last time she had seen her two friends they had been lying unconscious on her floor, wet and dirty – and now here they were, laughing and smiling and full of life just as she remembered them.

"TWILIGHT!!!" Pinkie suddenly caught sight of her and launched herself across the distance between them, bowling the unicorn pony over in a rocket-propelled hug. Twilight felt the little pink pony's forelegs around her neck and her pink hair tickling her face, and all around her there was Pinkie's unmistakeable scent – of popcorn and cotton candy and cookie dough and hot-sauce.

Twilight! Don't forget! Don't forget!

But Twilight couldn't help but hug her back, and tears filled her eyes. "Pinkie Pie!" she sobbed. "Thank Celestia I found you! You're in great...."

"A great mood?" Pinkie laughed. "Of COURSE I am!" She slipped a forefoot from around Twilight's neck, swung around and when she turned back she'd dragged Rainbow Dash into the hug, her forefoot around the Pegasus pony's waist. "Why wouldn't I be when I have my favouritest ponies in the whole wide world partying with me?"

"Aww Pinkie," Dash blushed. "C'mon! Y'know how I feel about all that lame lovey-dovey stuff! " She looked at Twilight and smiled. "Hey. We were starting to get kinda concerned that a bunch of books had collapsed on you or something."

"Uh... no. No, I was... I..." Twilight knew she was forgetting something... Oh Celestia! Any longer in this party and she was going to lose her mind! She grabbed Pinkie by the hoof and tried to pull her away. "Pinkie, you've got to come with me! You and Dash are really sick..."

Pinkie blinked at her in confusion. "What do you mean Twilight? What kind of sick?"

"Whatever ARE you talking about, darling?" Rarity interrupted. "Pinkie and

Dash are standing right in front of you, the absolute PICTURE of health!" She looked at Pinkie and cocked her head to one side. "Although, Pinkie my dear, those cream cakes DO appear to be going straight to your hips!"

"Oh Rarity!" Pinkie giggled.

Dash slipped a hoof down and patted Pinkie's bottom. "Just more Twinkie-Pie to love, Rarity!" she laughed.

Twilight dropped Pinkie's hoof. "No, wait... this is all wrong," she said. "Pinkie, you have to wake up! This is all a dream!"

"A dream?" repeated Pinkie. She looked around. "Well, it IS a dream come true!" she said, a huge smile on her face. "ALL of my super-special friends are here, there's just... just MOUNTAINS of delicious treats and awesome decorations and DJ Scratch has been laying down some TOTALLY wicked beats and... and Dash just said she'd agreed to go steady with me!" Her smile beamed even wider still.

Dash shrugged. "So there's going to be a lot of totally disappointed fillies and stallions out there – but why keep looking once you've found the best?" She hugged Pinkie closer to her.

Twilight looked about her. Everything seemed so real! She had to do something before the dream drew her in completely – and fast. So she leapt forward and bit Pinkie on the tail.

"OOooowww!!!" The little pink pony leapt out of Dash's embrace and flew into the air. When she landed she was rubbing her bottom.

Applejack's mouth was wide open in shock. "Twi! Why the hay didya go an' do THAT for?"

Dash was frowning. "If that's your idea of a joke, Twilight, you better leave the pranking to experts like me and Pinkie!"

Rarity sniffed. "What APPALLING taste! I'm SO disappointed in you, my dear!"

Twilight stepped back. Everypony had stopped talking and was looking

straight at her. "I...I'm sorry. But I had to do it!" she said, stepping back. "I thought it'd break you out of the dream..."

Everypony was looking at how Pinkie would react. But the little pink pony just burst out laughing and hugged Twilight again.

"Oh Twilight! Thank you!" she gushed. "Now I KNOW this all can't be a dream!" She wiped the sweat from her forehead with a hoof. "Phew! I was worried there for a second. I mean, everything is just so positively absolutely perfectly PERFECT that it COULD have been all a dream!"

Twilight suddenly noticed Fluttershy was at her side with a tray of drinks in her mouth. "Here, Twilight. Take one. I'm sure you'll feel so much better after a nice bottle of sarsaparilla."

"Hey Twilight!" Spike had appeared at her other side. He had a half-eaten muffin in his hand which he brought up to her face. "Want a bite? It's delicious!" A live worm suddenly squirmed out of the treat's centre and Twilight squealed and shied away.

"Keep away from me!" she cried in a panic. "All of you!"

"Whatever is it NOW, darling?" asked Rarity, coming forward with a look of concern on her face. "Do you feel sick?"

"Oh Twilight!" laughed Pinkie. She was once again hoof in hoof with Dash. "Have you been eating too many baked goods again?"

Twilight panicked and stumbled back against a wall. "Pinkie, snap out of it!" she pleaded. "This is all a dream! A false dream created by Nightmare!"

"Who...mare?" asked Pinkie.

"Nightmare! And you and Dash – the real ones, I mean – are lying on the floor of my library, seriously ill!"

Dash looked at her through narrowed eyes. "We're not sick, Twilight. Aren't YOU the one who's sick?"

"Me? Sick?" Twilight did feel dizzy and confused. The music that had

started up again and the noise of all the ponies talking and laughing was starting to overwhelm her.

But then she heard a deep, affectionate voice from right behind her. "Hey, are you OK Twi'?" She turned and saw that she had backed into Big McIntosh – what she had taken for a wall had in fact been the stallion's barrel-like chest. Twilight blushed deep red and she started to move away, but McIntosh slipped a forefoot around her neck and brought her back up against him. "Maybe ya should go an' have a nice lil' lie down for a while. Or if ya feelin' too sick Ah kin always walk ya back t' the li-brary if need be..."

"Ah, ah... no, thank you Big McIntosh," Twilight stuttered. "I... I don't feel quite so sick anymore." And she didn't. With her head pressed up against the red-coated stallion's warm chest she felt safe and... happy? No, not just happy – blissfully happy. "I feel fine now."

Big Mac chuckled. "You sure 'bout that? Why so formal alla sudden, Twi'? He nuzzled his muzzle against the back of her neck. "You ain't called me 'Big McIntosh' for a long time – why, way back before we got together!"

"We... got together?" Twilight asked. Why couldn't she remember that happening? But no... maybe, maybe she DID remember. She'd been telling herself to remember something, to keep remembering. Maybe that had been what she'd meant!

Oh, what did it matter anyway! She sighed and rubbed her face against Big Mac's coat. His scent was of perspiration and apples and it smelled so good. "No, I'm fine Mac... really," she muttered into his chest. "I... I just got confused is all."

McIntosh laughed. "Ah love it when ya start talkin' like me, Twi."

Twilight closed her eyes. She knew that she loved it too.

Chapter 8

Applejack, an affectionate smile on her face, had been watching Twilight and Big McIntosh and listening to their conversation the whole time. She turned to Rarity and said "Naw don' those two jus' make the most adorable couple?"

Rarity looked at them and beamed. "Oh, most ASSUREDLY Applejack. They're like a dream come true!"

Twilight's eyes flicked open. A dream come true. A dream? Where had she heard that before? Somepony had said something about a dream, and for her to be careful. But who had it been? Suddenly she heard Zecora's voice echo in her head.

"Hear my advice and heed it well, lest the dream should draw you under its spell; Do not forget that all you see is shaped from the dreamer's memory."

"This.... this is all wrong!" Twilight said, her voice tinged with horror. She pulled out of Big McIntosh's embrace. "Everything is perfect... too perfect!"

Big McIntosh looked at her in hurt confusion. "Twi', what's wrong with things bein' perfect?"

But... aren't you happier here, Twilight? Aren't you so much happier here, where your dreams can come true? Was that her own heart she could hear? But she shook herself out of it.

"I'm sorry Mac," Twilight said as she moved away from him. "I want to be happy... but not like this." She grabbed Pinkie by the shoulders. "We have to go now, Pinkie," she said, looking deep into the pink pony's big blue eyes.

"But where are we going to go, Twilight?" asked Pinkie, blinking. "The party hasn't ended yet!"

"Don't you see, Pinkie?" Twilight shook her until her pink hair was flopping

all over the place. "The party's never going to end. Look at the clock!"

She drew Pinkie's gaze up at the clock on the wall. Both its hands were spinning wildly, and instead of numbers, at every increment around its face the same thing was written: PARTY TIME.

"But... but what does it mean?" asked Pinkie, scratching her head with a hoof.

"This is all a dream – and you're trapped here," explained Twilight. "And the dream is going to keep going until the real 'you' dies – and the real Dash as well!"

Dash looked at Twilight through narrowed eyes. "I'm going to die? But... I feel totally fine!"

Rarity arched her eyebrows over her bottle of sarsaparilla. "Oh no, Twilight darling. Not ANOTHER of your off-colour jokes?"

Confusion had spread across Pinkie's face. "But Twilight, what do you mean 'the real Dash'?"

Twilight breathed in. This was the final gamble, and if it didn't pay off she knew she wouldn't get another chance. "Yes, Pinkie. The real Dash. The one that helped you clean up after our surprise party. The one you confessed to that you loved her – and who didn't return your love."

Pinkie's eyes went wide, and then they closed in pain as she started to remember. "I think... I think I remember." Her eyes flicked open again and she grabbed Twilight around the shoulders. "Is Dash really going to die?"

Twilight nodded. "Zecora found you at the bottom of the ravine in the Everfree Forest. You and Dash were attacked by somepony or something called Night..."

But before Twilight could finish her sentence, the black-maned pony who had greeted her earlier was suddenly standing in between her and the bewildered Pinkie. She turned to Twilight, her pale green eyes flickering, and said "I'm afraid you're going to have to leave, Twilight Sparkle. You're

simply not getting into the spirit of Pinkie's party!" She waved a hoof at the ranks of smiling ponies that surrounded them. "I mean, how could this party be any more perfect? Pinkie Pie, you've outdone yourself this time, my dear. And you'll never, ever have another chance to enjoy a party like this one!" The mare smiled at the little pink pony, who beamed back at her.

Dash came up and embraced Pinkie from behind. "Whatever-her-name-is is so totally right, Pinkie Pie. This IS the greatest party ever – and I hope it never ends!" She kissed Pinkie on the cheek, and the earth pony giggled uncontrollably and blushed.

"It IS the bestest party ever, isn't it?" agreed Pinkie. She turned to Twilight, a look of disappointment on her face. "Oh Twilight – do you have to be such a serious frowny miss grumpy-pants all the time? Can't you just relax and enjoy yourself?"

Twilight looked around her. All the party goers were looking at her in disapproval and muttering among themselves. Things were getting ugly. There was only one option left open to her. She struggled away from Pinkie and Dash, and pushed and shoved her way through the crowd of ponies that surrounded her.

At last she reached her goal: DJ Scratch's table. The stripy-maned unicorn pony was in mid-song, and when she approached her she looked up at her in alarm. "Hey Twilight. Is everything OK?"

"You better get out of the way, Scratch!" Twilight warned him. "'Cause this party is over!" She turned around and gave the table an almighty kick with both her back legs, and it tumbled over with a cataclysmic crash of smashing plastic and scratched vinyl. Scratch had leapt away at the last minute and was scrambling as fast as she could from the total devastation that Twilight had wrought.

"Man, that unicorn is totally out of control!" she shouted. "Somepony stop her!"

With the music so brutally cut short everypony's eyes were again on Twilight – but she stood her ground. She snorted, and pawing the floor she launched herself next at the snack table. Ponies jumped aside in panic as she shoulder-barged it and sent it careening over, a wave of muffins and

cakes and baked bads flying everywhere.

But Twilight was not finished yet. Her horn started to glow purple and suddenly all the bottles of sarsaparilla and hot sauce on the drinks table floated upwards as a body. A flick of her head and the bottles flew in every direction, smashing against the walls and coating unlucky nearby party-goers with black and red stickiness.

"My coat, my PRISTINE white coat!" squealed Rarity. She had received the onslaught full force and was dripping in syrupy liquid. "It's... it's been VIOLATED!!!" She galloped up to Twilight and slapped her. "You've ruined EVERYTHING, Twilight Sparkle! You should just go away and NEVER come back!"

"Gladly," said Twilight, touching a hoof to the red mark on her cheek. "And I'm taking Pinkie Pie with me."

Pinkie stood in the middle of the room. Around her, the party had fallen into ruins. As she surveyed the devastation she seemed to be seeing things for the first time. She frowned as her memories came flooding back.

Dash came up to her and took a hoof in her own. "Pinkie, are you OK? Look, I know everything's been totally smashed, but..."

Pinkie took her hoof out of Dash's. "You're not the real Rainbow Dash... are you?" she whispered, her eyes misty.

Dash looked at her in confusion. "Of course I am, Pinkie! Look at me. Awesome multicoloured mane, totally bitching wings, boyish good looks!" She smiled and went to hug her, but Pinkie stepped back and pushed her away.

The black-maned pony came forward now. She seemed somehow larger than before, her mane blacker. "But this is what you always wanted, Pinkie!" she said. "The party doesn't ever have to end for you. You can have anything you want!"

The veil had been lifted from Pinkie's eyes now. Anger shadowed her face as she turned on her unwelcome guest. "I remember you. I met you in the Everfree Forest. I was... sitting and crying looking down into that ravine, the

place where... where I first fell in love with Rainbow Dash." Tears welled in the corners of her big blue eyes.

Twilight jaw dropped in surprise. The ravine? When they'd been on their first adventure to find the Elements of Harmony? Oh, she remembered now! Rainbow Dash had saved Pinkie from falling into it when the rope bridge had collapsed. But... had that really been the start of all?

Pinkie continued. She was crying now. "And you... you told me that you could make everything right and better. And that you could make me happy again – that there was a way you could make it so that the party inside me never ended – never, ever! And I... believed you!" She hit herself on the head with a hoof. "Oh Pinkie Pie, you silly, silly, silly little pony! This is all your fault!"

Twilight grabbed Pinkie's hoof. "Pinkie, it's time to go. The real Rainbow Dash is waiting for us. We still have time to save her – but we need to find her and snap her out of her dream as well!"

Pinkie nodded. "Let's go, Twilight." But first she turned to the black-maned mare who had been watching them in silence the whole time, her green eyes unfathomable. "You told me you were the Lady Morava, exiled from Canterlot to the Everfree Forest. But I know who you really are, now." She pointed a trembling hoof. "You're... you're... Black Snooty!"

The mare blinked, and then a thin smile populated by a row of sharp pointed teeth split across her face. "I gave you happiness eternal, and this is how you repay my kindness?" Her body seemed to be melting now, dripping away from her like ink. "If bliss is not enough for you, let me show you the depths of true despair then, PINKIE PIE!"

A heartbeat later there was nothing left of the Lady Morava, and the tall, lank form of Nightmare reared up in her place. It turned its face towards Twilight, and its voice rustled and creaked as it spoke. "And you... Twilight Sparkle. You little meddler! I'll trap you here as well. And your pain and loneliness will know no respite!"

Twilight lifted her face towards the shadowy horror... and then she chuckled. "You know, Nightmare - you talk a lot like one of my teachers back in Canterlot. SHE thought she was scary as well. But you know what

we called her behind her back? We called her 'the old black nag' – and I think that name would suit you as well!" She turned away, pulling Pinkie with her. "Goodbye, old black nag!"

But Nightmare immediately melted once more into the rainbow of darkness, and arching over them in a flood of broiling shadow she again stood towering in their way.

"You're not going anywhere, Twilight Sparkle," Nightmare hissed. "You may have broken the spell over Pinkie, but there's no way I will allow you to find Rainbow Dash. She is mine now!"

"Then we'll stop you," said Twilight simply. "We've defeated you before. We can do it again."

"With two of the Elements of Harmony?" laughed Nightmare. "Where are the others? Should I expect them to suddenly appear out of nowhere as well? I hope they do. Perhaps I will offer Rarity limitless fame and glory! And how about Fluttershy? What if I promise her that dearest dream she keeps secret from everypony? And Applejack – I shall grant her her heart's DARKEST desire!"

Suddenly Pinkie pulled free of Twilight's grip and walked up to the looming shadow. Her face was red and her hooves trembled at her sides. "Oh, be quiet you... you... big meaniepants!" She took another step forwards, her chest heaving and her eyes flashing. "You keep my friends out of this!"

All this time the party-goers in Sugarcube Corner had been watching in horrified silence. But at the sight of the little pink pony walking towards the towering figure of Nightmare, the spell was suddenly broken and Rarity and Applejack, with Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash hovering above them, rushed to Pinkie's side – and Twilight galloped forward to join them.

"We heard what ya were sayin' bout us!" said Applejack, her face flushed. "Well, not about US per say, but about the REAL 'us'es! An' we ain't gonna stand fer it!"

"I must concur with Applejack here," said Rarity. She had wiped as much of the hot-sauce and sarsaparilla mixture off herself as she could, and she again walked with her characteristic haughtiness. "Such rudeness!"

Speaking about us as if we weren't important, just because we happen to be DREAMS!" Her azure eyes flashed with fury. "Why, it's simply OUTRAGEOUS!"

"Yeah, ya big ugly monster!" added Dash. "Creeping around in ponies' dreams and trying to turn them against their friends! Let's see how you like some dream-hooves in that ugly face of yours!" She moved to fly at Nightmare, but Applejack managed to leap up and grab her tail in her mouth in time and pulled her back.

Nightmare strode forward. "You foals! Without the real ponies, and the real Elements of Harmony, you can do nothing. Only the power of the rainbow is a match for the rainbow of darkness!"

"Actually, Nightmare, that's not precisely true." A wide smile broke onto Twilight's face. "The old legends say that nightmares can be dispelled by an older magic, even older than rainbow magic."

"Older than rainbow magic?" Nightmare snorted in derision. "There's no such thing!"

"Oh, but there is," Twilight turned to Pinkie. "Remember that song Grannie Pie used to sing to you when you were a little filly, Pinkie?"

Pinkie eyes grew wide. "Remember? Of course I remember!!"

Dash groaned. "How could ANY of us forget?"

Nightmare hesitated – but then it strode forwards again. "Enough of this.... this ridiculous nonsense! Come at me, little ponies – but be warned: today ALL dreams die!"

Pinkie Pie was doubled over, her hooves pressed up against her mouth – and for a moment Nightmare thought that she was crying, and its cruel smile lengthened across its face. But it wasn't tears Pinkie was holding back – it was laughter.

Pinkie snorted in between a fit of giggles. "Oh, oh! I just realised what it is you remind me of, Black Snooty," she chuckled. "You look like... like a huge swirl of liquorice! And you know the thing about liquorice? It's always the

LAST candy anypony chooses!"

"What... what are you talking about?" said Nightmare. Throughout Sugarcube Corner, a few of the ponies had started to giggle, and somewhere a pony laughed out loud.

Rarity stepped forward. She looked Nightmare up and down, and a supercilious smile appeared on her face.

"I can see what Pinkie Pie means – but I'm afraid things are much, MUCH worse than that, darling! Why on EARTH would you come to Pinkie's party wearing black?" She stifled a laugh. "My dear, black might be appropriate at a formal event, but at a casual party such as this it is MOST definitely a faux pas!" She shook her head in pity.

"And lookit them skinny legs on ya!" added Applejack, a grin breaking onto her face. "There ain't an ounce o' muscle on 'em. I reckon you ain't done an honest hour o' work in yer whole immortal existence, have ya?"

Dash started to chuckle. "Yeah, you do look pretty lame. But the way you talk is even lamer!" The Pegasus flew right up to Nightmare's face and said "'Eternal despair' this, 'endless horror' that. Don't you realise you're scaring nopony with all that gloomy stuff?"

And now everypony was looking at Fluttershy. She looked down left and right and bit her lip in concentration. "Oh... ah.... um.... You... you..." Her eyes suddenly flashed in inspiration and she leapt forward and shouted: "You're... a big meanie and... and... a gate-crasher... and... and... I'm very, VERY disappointed in you!"

There was widespread giggling throughout the crowd now and patches of outright laughter. Spike had both his claws held up against his mouth, but even then the laughter was escaping from him in the form of loud snorts from his nose. And at last he couldn't hold it in anymore and he started to guffaw. And the sight of the ridiculous little purple dragon doubled over triggered a tidal wave throughout the crowd... and soon everypony was laughing. Deep, full-bodied laughs that resonated throughout the room, high-pitched titters that echoed off the walls –and all of it directed towards Nightmare. The dark figure shied away from the crowd, its shadowy forefeet held up against its ears, and with every step back it began to lose

its imposing shape. And at last it stumbled and fell to its knees, the little form it had left steadily dissolving away like ink poured into water.

Pinkie was laughing so much that her face was red from a lack of breath. But she managed to say between fits of giggles "So you ARE just a big ghostie, after all! Nothing but a silly old shadow! And to think anypony was every scared of you!"

Nightmare was now little more than a black pool on the ground, and from it emanated a low voice that was more like a feeling in the air than a sound: "You may have this power here, Pinkie Pie – but it will make no difference in Rainbow Dash's dream. You'll be able to do nothing there but watch as she begs me to take her body! And all thanks to you and your pathetic, laughable love!" And then even that feeling was gone as the shadow passed away.

Pinkie turned to Twilight and all her friends. "Sorry everypony, but the party's over. Thank you all so much for coming! I had such a wonderfully awesome time here with you all." Her eyes became suddenly sad. "But this was never, ever real... and the real Dash needs my help. I'm sooooo sorry for causing so much trouble."

The dream Dash came up to her and hugged her close. "Don't sweat it, Pinkie Pie! I wouldn't change my time with you here for ANYTHING. Not even if I was offered membership with the Wonderbolts!"

"Really really?" asked Pinkie, her eyes wide in surprise.

Dash nodded. "Really really." Then she sighed. "I know I'm just a dream made up of all your feelings and memories and stuff about the real Rainbow Dash, but I do love you, Pinkie Pie." She looked up at Pinkie with tears in her rose-coloured eyes. "With all my heart – even if it is only a dream's heart. And if I know the real Dash, I bet she loves you just as much as me. But you've got to go and find her, and find out how she truly feels about you." She kissed Pinkie on the cheek. "But whatever she says, remember that I'LL always be waiting for you here – at the party that never ends." And then the dream of Dash turned and fled, tears spilling from her eyes, disappearing into the crowd of assembled ponies.

Twilight came up to the now crestfallen Pinkie. "I'm sorry Pinkie, but we're

running out of time. Do you have any idea where we'll find the real Dash?"

Pinkie managed a little smile. She was still looking into the part of the crowd where Dash had fled. "I know where to find her, Twilight." She tapped her chest with a hoof. "The answer's in here. It was all tangled up and twisted before, but I know where she is now."

The unicorn pony nodded. "Then let's go."

Rarity came forward to Twilight. She was dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. "I'm so TERRIBLY sorry for slapping you, darling. I'm afraid I was caught up in the emotion of the whole thing. Can you EVER forgive me?"

Twilight smiled. "Oh, what's a dream-slap between friends? Besides, it doesn't hurt anymore." She went to feel her cheek with a hoof, but as she did she noticed that her hoof and entire foreleg had become translucent and that she could see right through them at the ponies milling around nearby.

"Hey Twi, yer fading away!" said Applejack, shocked.

"Applejack, you are too!" cried Fluttershy. And she was right. The colour of everypony's coat was draining away, just as if night was fast approaching and the light of the sun no longer lent its rainbow of colours to the world. And everything was becoming misty and losing its form.

A sad smile slipped onto Twilight's face. "It's the dream – it's been broken, and so it's fading away," she said. "And I guess I was always part of it as well." Only Pinkie kept her full form and colour now, while all around her the party and its guests – her friends, the decorations, the ruined tables and the huge banner that read Welcome to Your Surprise Party Rainbow Dash! – everypony and everything was dwindling away into shadow.

Twilight moved to hug Pinkie one final time – but her forefeet passed right through her. And her own voice was barely audible now, little more than a whisper: "Go find Dash, Pinkie. But be careful not to forget who you are!"

"I won't!" replied Pinkie with a nod, and she turned to leave. But she looked back one final time on the party that she had wanted to go on forever, and

as it melted away she shouted: "No pony has to worry. I'll never, EVER forget that I'm Pinkie Pie, Ponyville's premiere party pony – and that's a Pinkie promise!" Her face set with sudden determination. "And now it's time for some payback – Pinkie Pie style!"

Twilight watched as the little pink pony hopped away into the gathering darkness and cried out "We'll be waiting for you, Pinkie Pie!" – and a heartbeat later she was gone.

"Darling, you're awake!" Rarity's surprised face filled Twilight's entire vision as she woke up. "Did it work?"

Applejack's voice came from somewhere nearby. "Did ya manage ta find Pinkie Pie?"

Twilight nodded. Her mouth was dry and her neck ached, but she seemed to be OK. "Pinkie went ahead to find Dash in her own dream," she replied. "Oh – and I met Nightmare."

Spike helped her to sit up. "What was he like, Twilight?"

"Well, he was a 'she' – and she loved the sound of her own voice," explained Twilight. She still felt groggy and she looked around herself blearily – but when she saw Zecora, relief washed over her. She couldn't still be dreaming if Zecora was here!

"Yer looked so strange, Twi'," said Applejack, bringing over a glass of water. "We we're concerned somethin' had gone wrong."

"It WAS a bit hairy in there for a while. How did I look?" asked Twilight.

"Ya looked... well, I dunno," replied Applejack. "Kinda blissful. Like you weren't never gonna wake up."

Twilight sighed. She didn't want to lie to her friends, but she knew there were some things she would never be able to tell them about what she had experienced. She took a sip of water and looked down at Pinkie and Dash lying on the floor next to her – but what she saw made her drop the glass.

"Their faces! What's wrong with their faces?" yelled Twilight.

"Oh darling! You noticed!" Rarity's eyes glittered in pleasure. "Well, Pinkie and Dash both looked so... so... DISHEVELLED and well, we had NOTHING else to do so Applejack and I decided to give them a makeover!"

"What d'ya think, Twi'?" asked Applejack. "Rarity let me do Pinkie's..."

Twilight looked at Pinkie Pie. The earth pony's face was caked with so much makeup that she looked like she was wearing clown paint. "Well, perhaps you went a BIT overboard with the foundation," she said with an uncertain smile.

"Maybe yer right," agreed Applejack. "But Pinkie was jus' a practice-run."

"Oh yes," added Rarity. "You did a MUCH better job with Twilight, Applejack dear!"

Twilight's eyes bugged out, and she raised a trembling forefoot to her face. A smear of foundation came off onto her hoof and she screamed.

"Oh darling!" tutted Rarity. "Such drama! You never let me do your makeup, so of COURSE I had to take the opportunity when it presented itself."

Spike was doubled over in laughter and even Zecora herself was chuckling. "I do admire you pony folk!" she said. "At times like this you still can joke!"

Twilight sighed. "Well, I guess reality IS better than the dream world in some respects – though I can't really think of any right now," She looked down at Pinkie and Dash. Even under the makeup, the look of pain and sorrow on Dash's face was obvious, while Pinkie's expression was one of calm determination.

"D'ya think Pinkie'll be able ta deal with that Nightmare feller?" asked Applejack.

Twilight smiled and nodded. "The thing Nightmare seemed to be most frightened of was laughter," she said. "And that means we just sent in our big guns!"

Chapter 9

Rainbow Dash stood at the end of the cloud-colonnade and looked over the edge, gazing down towards the surface of Equestria far below her. Tears fell steadily from her rose eyes and she watched as each tear spiralled down through the night air until it disappeared. It would be so easy to just fall forwards, to keep her wings furled tight against her sides, and to just spiral down to the earth herself until she disappeared as well!

It was then that she felt somepony approaching her along the colonnade, from the direction of Cloudsdale Flight School's hall where the Autumn Sky Ball was coming to an end. She didn't turn her head, but sobbed and rubbed the tears from her eyes.

"Just go away!" she whispered harshly at the unseen newcomer. "Can't you see I just want to be alone?"

"Oh, Miss Dash," It was a cultured voice, soft and resonant, and Dash immediately recognised it. "Thank goodness I've found you at last!"

"Lord Cozmar?" She turned now. And it was him! The unicorn pony lord from Canterlot who had been the guest of honour at the Ball. She stared at the darkly handsome stallion, with his charcoal-grey coat, his sable mane and his striking green eyes. But she tore her gaze away when she remembered how she looked – her eyes must be red raw by now, tears staining her cheeks. She felt so humiliated to be seen like this.

He came close and stood beside her. "I know how you must be feeling, Miss Dash. It was a terrible thing that happened – and so public!" He tutted. "Really, the foals of today have no sense of decorum, no conception of proper etiquette when it comes to matters of the heart!"

Dash scrunched up her eyes at the pain of the memory as it came flooding back. "Please, Lord Cozmar..."

"It is such a horrible thing to have one's innocent love thrown back in one's face," he continued. Dash wasn't looking at him, now, but was gazing at the

landscape lying in the darkness far below, and so she didn't see the toothy grin of perfect white teeth that opened across his face. "It is such a wound to the heart! And although it might heal over, it will always be there – a tiny little wound perhaps, but the slightest thing will break it open again."

"Please," sobbed Dash, hot tears bursting anew from her eyes. "Please leave me alone. I just want to be alone!"

"Why the rush, Miss Dash?" Cozmar asked. "You will have so much time to be alone! You'll be alone for the rest of your time here in Cloudsdale. You will push every pony that wants to get close to you away – and even when you leave here, nothing will change." He sighed. "It is so very sad."

Dash turned to him now. Her face was a mixture of despair and disbelief. "Why... why are you saying these things to me? What've I ever done to you?"

Cozmar chuckled. "I think this game has gone on for long enough. It might be all new to you, but for me it is becoming a little tiresome." He waved a hoof before her eyes and Dash gasped as the memories that had been taken from her blossomed back into her mind in a frantic instant. She gaped at Cozmar and scrambled away from him. The edges of his body had lost definition and a black mist was rising from his coat, and the gaze of his piercing green eyes seemed to burn into her.

"I know you!" cried Dash. "You're..."

"Nightmare. Yes," His teeth flashed white in a sharp smile – they were pointed now. "You always say that!" He moved closer and Dash, standing on her hind legs, took a step back towards the edge.

"Come any closer, Nightmare, and I'll jump!" she cried. "I'll let myself fall. You can't take my body if it's broken!"

Nightmare laughed so hard his face seemed to split open. "You always threaten to jump!" His eyes blistered in savage humour. "And do you know what? Sometimes you DO jump. Such loyalty! Such self-sacrificial bravery! And yet despite such courage, here we are again."

"What are you talking about?" Dash took another step backwards, closer to

the edge.

"Again and again and again!" Nightmare laughed. "This little scene has played itself out at least two dozen times now – and each time, the tragedy and despair compounds upon itself. It's only a matter of time until you break, Rainbow Dash. And while we indulge ourselves in this little masquerade, Ponyville is being further devastated –not that that seems to concern you very much!"

"Ponyville?" Dash's eyes grew wide in horror.

Nightmare waved a fore-hoof in the air, and up against the night sky an image burst into life in a flash of pale green fire. It was Ponyville! But the little village was scarcely recognisable through the maelstrom of wind and rain that was scouring it. And there was her squad, the Weather Patrol! But it wasn't just her squad. All the Pegasus ponies in Ponyville were there. They were in V-formation, flying straight up against the screaming winds, tunnelling through the ash-black clouds. Cloud Kicker was leading them, and beside her was... was that really Fluttershy? The Pegasus pony looked exhausted – all of them did, as if they would drop out of the sky at any moment! Dash knew exactly what they were doing: they were struggling to slow the storm system down, to keep it from reaching critical mass and developing into a final, destructive hurricane that would wipe the little village off the face of Equestria.

Dash turned to Nightmare, her face livid with anger. "Nightmare!" she screamed. "You sadistic monster!"

Nightmare chuckled, and with another sweep of his hoof the image dissipated into green mist. "There is only one avenue of escape for you AND for your beloved Ponyville and your friends, Rainbow Dash," he said. "And that is to submit to my will!" He leapt forward and gripped her around her forefoot, and where his hoof touched her coat a sudden, glacial coldness burned through to her bones and she gasped. It continued to burn her as she struggled, and she cried out in pain – but at last she pulled herself free.

"A lie! It's all just a lie!" she shouted at Nightmare in grief and rage. "If I give in to you, you might save Ponyville from the storm – but just so you can do something even more terrible to my friends!"

Nightmare shrugged. "Well, that may be true. But surely slavery is preferable to total annihilation?"

Dash shook her head, and when she spoke her voice was calm, devoid of any despair or anger. "That line obviously didn't work last time, Nightmare, and it mustn't have worked all the other times before that," She closed her eyes and breathed out. "You'll never make me betray my friends."

And with that she stepped backwards off the edge and vanished into the icy darkness below.

Nightmare scowled, and stepped forwards to the edge. He watched the tiny form of the Pegasus pony plummet down through kilometres of darkness until it finally disappeared.

He sighed and turned away. "Such a terrible waste. I guess that the song must continue then." He strode back along the colonnade towards the hall, and with each hoof-step everything behind him grew dark and faded away into blackness. "Next verse, same as the first!"

"So YOU'RE the little filly who pulled off that amazing stunt?!" The white-coated Pegasus filly's wide blue eyes glittered. "That is SOOOO cool!" She beamed at Dash who was in the middle of unpacking her saddlebags onto her own bed. "Hey, hey – you know what they're calling that trick you did?"

Dash shook her head. She was blushing. Everypony had heard of the trick that she had pulled off in Junior Speedsters last year, and had been eager to talk to her about it. It was a strange new experience for Dash to be the centre of attention, and now her roommate was doing it as well!

"They're calling it the Sonic Rainboom!" The white-coated filly jumped onto her bed and sprang off it, her long blue-pink pastel mane fluttering behind her. "Oh, I DO hope you'll teach me how to do it, Rainbow Dash!"

Dash nodded. "Uh, no problem! But... you haven't told me your name yet!"

The other Pegasus pony stopped her leaping and lay on her bed. Her long

mane flopped down onto her back and Dash suddenly realised how pretty it was. She'd noticed that a lot of the Pegasus ponies at Flight School cut their manes short to help reduce wind-resistance during high-speed manoeuvres, and Dash was thinking of doing the same thing. But looking at how beautiful this filly's long mane looked made her think twice.

"My name's Star Catcher," said the filly. She turned her blue eyes on Dash. "I'm so pleased to meet you, Rainbow Dash!"

"Likewise," replied Dash with a shy smile.

"Oh, I just know we're going to be the best of friends!" Star Catcher leapt off the bed and trotted over to her. "Hey, Rainbow Dash, show me your cutie mark!"

Dash's eyes widened. "Oh – OK," She brought her back half closer to Star Catcher, and as the white-coated filly looked it up and down, her tail swished against Dash's face, soft and warm.

"Just as I suspected!" said Star Catcher. "It's totally cool as well!"

Dash blushed. "I... I always thought that three lightning bolts would have been cooler," she said.

Star Catcher shrugged her shoulders. "Well maybe, but only about 20% cooler, max. Hey, check out my cutie mark!" She brought her own flank right next to Dash's face, and the rainbow-maned filly blushed as Star Catcher's coat rubbed against hers. She smelled of vanilla and powdered sugar. "So, what do you think?"

Dash looked at the cutie mark being shoved in her face. It was a pink love-heart surrounded with blue pastel cumulo-stratus clouds.

Dash swallowed. "It's..."

"It's cool, isn't it!" Star Catcher gushed. "The heart symbolises the passion I have for flying, while the clouds – well, they just symbolise clouds I guess..."

As Star Catcher continued talking about cutie marks, Dash unpacked the

rest of her belongings. She'd been worried she wouldn't make any friends at Flight School, but things looked like they were going to work out after all!

Suddenly, Dash heard the sound of light knocking – as if somepony was tapping on glass. And there was a voice as well... a familiar sounding voice, repeating her name. But it too sounded muffled, like it was coming from somewhere far away.

Dash turned to Star Catcher, who was now in the middle of unpacking her own saddlebags. "Hey Star Catcher, did you just say something?"

Star Catcher looked up from the cosmetic box she had just pulled out. Her bed was already covered in brushes and combs and piles of tack. "Uh uh," she shook her head.

But then there was the buzz of a bell and Star Catcher leapt up and grabbed Dash. "Hey, that's the mission bell! Our very first class!" she bubbled with enthusiasm. "Oh, I'm so excited!"

Dash smiled. "Uh, me too!" But she had no time to say anything else as the white-coated filly hustled her out of the room. And so she didn't see the hand mirror that had slipped out of one of Star Catcher's saddlebags hop across the bed and finally fall onto the floor. On its surface could be seen a blue-eyed earth pony with a shock of curly pink hair and a desperate look on her face, tapping on the mirror with a hoof just as if it were a window she was looking through.

"Dash! Dash! Come back!" she cried. "It's me, Pinkie Pie! Dash, come baaaacccckkk!"

"C'mon Dash! I know you've got a lot more left in you!" laughed Star Catcher as she edged ahead towards the mountaintop that they'd decided was going to be the finishing line for their race. Despite her delicacy, Star Catcher was fast! Her wings beat in a steady rhythm, piercing the air, and it was difficult for Dash to stay alongside her. She was used to sprints rather than long distance, but flight training demanded that she build up her endurance – and so here she was, training again with the white-coated Pegasus filly. Star Catcher's pastel mane flew behind her like a pennant,

and whenever it flashed in front of Dash's face, that gentle vanilla perfume surrounded her and she fell a little further back. A bank of cumulo-stratus loomed ahead. The finish wasn't far away now!

"Concentrate, Dash! Concentrate! You can't let this dainty little filly outgun you!" She dug deeper, and with an agonising burst of energy she pushed ahead. The bank of cumulo-stratus was streaking under them now, and Dash could see their shadows wavering across its white surface.... and suddenly she saw Star Catcher's shadow right next to hers. They were neck and neck again!

"How did she catch up so fast?!" Dash looked across at her friend in awe, and Star Catcher poked her tongue out at her.

And then they reached the mountaintop and streaked above it. It was a tie! Star Catcher glided across Dash's path, slowing to a coast and landed with a flump on the grassy green meadow on the summit of the mountain... and Dash belly-flopped next to her, giggling.

"How in Equestria did you catch up so fast?" asked Dash, lying on her stomach and panting in between giggles.

Star Catcher blushed. "Like you always say, Dash – I just have 'a need for speed' I guess!"

Dash turned over and smiled at her. "That is some impressive flying! I haven't seen anything like it since I was in Junior Speedsters..."

Star Catcher arched her eyebrows in interest. "Oh really? What was their name?"

Dash's smile dropped away. "Her name was Gilda. She was a griffon."

"A griffon?" Star Catcher whistled through her teeth. "I heard they're some top-notch fliers!"

"Yeah," said Dash. She stood up. "Hey, why don't we do some aerobatic training now? Just to mix things up a little?"

Star Catcher hopped onto her hooves. "Great idea Dash! I'll go first. I've got

this sweet move I've been working on – but you have to promise not to steal it from me!"

Dash lay on her back. "Show me what you got, Star!"

As Star Catcher flew up into the sky and began her routine, pirouetting and spiralling, Dash sighed. She was graceful as well as fast! But then she heard a voice.

"Pssst! Dash! Rainbow Dash!"

Dash leapt up. "Who... who is that?"

"It's me Dash! It's Pinkie Pie!"

"Who-ie... What?" Dash shook her head.

"PINKIE Pie!" came the incessant voice again. So she HADN'T imagined it!

"Where are you?" Dash looked around her, but apart from herself and Star Catcher high up in the sky, nopony else was there.

"Down here!"

In the centre of the meadow was a pool, and in the soft autumn light it glistened yellow and gold. Dash stepped over to it, and when she looked into it she saw not only her own reflection, but that of a round-faced pink pony.

"Dash!" the pony laughed, a wide smile blossoming onto her face.

Dash yelped, turning around and expecting to see the pink pony standing behind her. But there was nopony there.

"What the..." She turned back to the pool – and there the pink pony was again, smiling up at her!

"Oh Dash! I finally found you!" cried the little pink pony in joy, clopping her hooves together.

"Who... who are you exactly?" asked Dash. She looked about herself again. But there really was nopony there at all!

"It's me, Dash! Your gal pal Pinkie Pie!" Pinkie's face grew concerned. "You... have you forgotten who I am?"

Dash frowned. Was... was this what those third years had meant when they were talking about "high altitude hallucinations"? "Yeah, that must be it!" she laughed. "Too little oxygen in the blood. Or too much nitrogen. Ha ha! Or at too much something, anyway..."

"Dash!" the little pink pony cried out again, waving her hoof to get her attention. "We don't have any time! You have to wake up!"

"I have to... what?" repeated Dash.

"Who are you talking to?" It was Star Catcher. She had finished her aerobatic display and had flown down to find Dash seemingly talking to her own reflection in the glittering little pool.

Dash almost leapt out of her coat. "Uh, nopony! Nopony at all!" she blustered. "Those... those were some pretty sweet moves, Star!" Dash clapped herself on the chest with a hoof. "But wait til you see what the Dash has got in store!"

Star Catcher clopped her hooves together. "Oh, I can't wait!"

"OK then... here I go!" She turned and as she trotted across the grass to get a run up for takeoff, she sneaked a look at the pool. Its surface was again blue and gold, and the strange little pink pony had disappeared. She sighed in relief.

"I should totally get a check up once we get back to Cloudsdale," she thought to herself as she unfurled her wings and glided off the mountain top and out into the crisp autumn air.

"I keep seeing this little pink earth pony," explained Dash. She was lying on her bed watching Star Catcher choose what she was going to wear for the

Autumn Sky ball. "It's totally weird, and I've got to admit it's starting to freak me out a bit."

Star Catcher murmured something from behind the wardrobe's open door. The chime of hanger after hanger being drawn along the rail rang out. But then the chiming suddenly stopped and the white-coated filly poked her head around the door and looked at Dash in surprise. "You're joking right, Dash? An earth pony? What in Equestria would an earth pony be doing in Cloudsdale?"

Dash sighed. "I know, right? But the strange thing is she looked so... familiar to me. I see that round face with its curly pink hair and I keep trying to remember – but it's just no use!" She banged a hoof on her forehead.

Star Catcher shrugged. "How strange! It might be one of those high altitude hallucinations we learnt about in that lecture on stratospheric flying."

Dash nodded. "That's what I thought as well at first, Star. After all, I HAVE been flying pretty high recently!" Dash had recently become famous around the school for her death-defyingly high flights into the upper reaches of the atmosphere. "But the thing is, I've started seeing her in Cloudsdale as well and we're nowhere near high enough here to get those hallucinations."

"So this... pink phantom pony only appears when you're alone?" asked Star Catcher.

Dash nodded.

The white-coated filly smiled. "Then there's an easy solution! You should stay at my side at absolutely all times."

Dash laughed. "But we spend like almost every minute together already, Star!"

Star Catcher trotted over to Dash and brought her face close to the rainbow-maned filly's. She was wearing a serious expression. "So tell me... does this scary pink pony come to you in your dreams as well?" Dash swallowed and blushed. She shook her head and Star Catcher immediately smiled. "I'm so glad! I would have been terribly jealous if she had been."

Dash frowned. "The strange thing is that I haven't been dreaming at all recently," she added.

Star Catcher laughed. "Well, I'VE been dreaming," she said with a wink. "Oh, and you've just given me the perfect idea for what I'm going to wear!" She returned to the wardrobe and after disappearing behind its open door for a couple of minutes she came out wearing a black satin dress-blanket with cashmere lining, and a matching halter with a gold buckles and tie-rings. "So how do I look, Dash?" she asked, striking an exaggerated pose and batting her eyelashes.

Dash breathed in. Star Catcher looked so gorgeous and she did it without any effort at all. "You look fine," said Dash.

Star Catcher pouted in theatrical annoyance, and then she laughed. "Oh Dash, you can do better than that! I took so long to choose this tack and you haven't even started to think about what you're going to wear. The Autumn Sky Ball is an important event, you know! It's like Cloudsdale's answer to the Great Galloping..."

"...Gala, yeah I know." Truth was Dash didn't really want to go. She had to get dressed up? What a waste of time! And there was no way that she would look as pretty as the other fillies. It just sounded like a total drag. "I haven't decided whether I'm going to go or not yet."

Star Catcher's mouth fell open. "You haven't decided if you're going yet? You have to go! There's going to be Canterlot royalty there! In fact, one of Princess Celestia's nephews is the guest of honour – a Lord Cozmar or something."

Dash shook her head. "That's exactly why I don't want to go. What do I have in common with all those aristocratic types?" She looked across at Star Catcher. The white-coated filly really DID look like royalty herself dressed in that tack!

Star Catcher was distraught. "You have to go, Dash! Who else am I going to dance with?"

Dash snorted. "Oh, come on, Star! You can have your pick of any of the colts in our year, or any other year – you know that!"

Star Catcher shook her head. "If you don't go, then I'm not going."

Dash sighed. "Fine! I'll go then. But I've got nothing to wear."

Star clopped her hooves together in joy. "Awesome! And don't worry about what you're going to wear –I've got a piece of tack all picked out for you!" She walked back over to wardrobe and brought out a cerulean blue satin dress-blanket lined with pashmina and a halter with silver buckles and tie rings.

"But... that's so...so totally gorgeous!" Dash protested. "I could never wear anything like that."

Star Catcher giggled as she put the tack back and closed the wardrobe. "Oh Dash! You know, you're so utterly adorable sometimes! There's just something so charming about a beautiful filly who doesn't know she's beautiful." She looked at the clock and screamed. "Oh Celestia! I forgot all about my appointment at the farrier's!" She went to leave, but then turned back to Dash. "Oh Dash, I'm so glad you decided to come to the ball! So glad!" And then she trotted out, closing the door behind her.

Dash sighed. Beautiful? She snorted. When was the last time somepony called her beautiful? Well, Gilda might have said it to her, once or twice, and in that sarcastic way that she had always used to tease her with.

Dash leapt up off the bed and pulled open the wardrobe door. She looked in the mirror that was set into it. Beautiful? She glared at her face, then turned it in profile, first left and then right. It was just the same old face she always saw. Star Catcher didn't realise how much she hated being teased like that! Dash shook her head, and her mane fell over her eyes. She angrily tossed it back – and when she looked again that little pink pony was standing right behind her in the mirror.

Dash yelped. "You again! I told you to leave me alone!"

Pinkie shook her head. "I just HAVE to keep trying to get you to remember, Dash! Like I keep trying to tell you..." She saw that Dash had grabbed the edge of the wardrobe door and was about to slam it and she winced in anticipation – but when the door didn't shut, Pinkie opened her eyes again.

Dash was staring at her.

"I always kind of suspected I was nuts," said Dash. "It would sure explain a lot of stuff I've done. Lay it on me, pink pony. What's your deal?"

Pinkie shook her head. "Oh Dash, you're not nuts – although nuts ARE delicious. Except those yucky brasil nuts," She stuck out her tongue. "But wait – I'm getting distracted again! Bad Pinkie!" She tapped herself on the head with a hoof. "You're not crazy, Dash – you're just dreaming a whole lot crazy stuff, because this big meanie pants evil pony is trying to..."

"A dream?" repeated Dash.

"Or a memory. Or a dream of a memory?" Pinkie tapped her forehead again. "Oh, I wish Twilight Sparkle was here to explain things!"

"Twilight who'll?" Dash narrowed her eyes. "You mean there're more ponies inside that mirror with you?" Weren't hallucinations meant to make at least a little sense?

Pinkie frowned. "Oh, you REALLY don't remember anything, do you Dash?" Her face was troubled. "You don't even remember the party, or our kiss, or..."

"Our kiss?" Dash laughed, but it wasn't a happy sound. "Unless I'm very much mistaken, you're a filly just like me, Twinkle Pie!"

"No, Dash, you big silly!" Pinkie tried to smile, but it sat on her face wrong. Oh, this wasn't going right at all! "My name is Pinkie Pie!"

"OK then – 'Pinkie Pie'," Dash replied, eyes narrowed. "And just for your information, 'Pinkie Pie', I don't do fillies – that's so totally gross!"

Pinkie's upper lip started to quiver. "Oh Dash!" she cried. "Please just wake up! Even if you hate me when you wake up and never, ever want to see me again, it won't be so bad because I'll know that you're alive," Tears fell from her eyes. "If I just know that you're OK somewhere, even somewhere far, far away from wherever I am, I'll be happy."

Dash looked at the pink pony in the mirror. She felt suddenly... criminal for

making her cry, even though she was just a hallucination. Maybe Pinkie was like her... conscience or something?

"Oh, don't cry Pinkie Pie," said Dash suddenly, and she reached backwards so that her reflection's hoof was touching the pink pony's face. And she gasped when she realised she could feel the warmth of a soft coat against her hoof. But just as quickly as she had felt it, the sensation disappeared.

"Wait! You ARE real, Pinkie Pie!" said Dash, her eyes wide.

Pinkie sniffed and nodded. "I'm real as real can be, Dash! I'm just stuck here, outside your dream. Nightmare is keeping me out with some kind of scary ju-ju I think..."

"Nightmare?" asked Dash.

"Oh, the spooky ghost-pony shadow meanie I mentioned before!" Pinkie explained.

"A ghost-meanie-shadow-pony... thing?" repeated Dash, furrowing her brow.

"Well, what I actually said was 'spooky ghost-pony meanie'... wait, 'shadow meanie'," Pinkie nodded up and down in excitement. "But yes, exactly! He's the one who's trapping you here... although he is sometimes a she...." Pinkie's shoulders slumped. "Oh, dreams are soooooo super-confusing sometimes, aren't they?!"

Dash chuckled. "Whatever you say, Pinkie Pie! But you look to me like the one who's trapped."

Pinkie tapped on the inside surface of the mirror. "Oh, I just KNOW I could bust out of here if all those memories that sneak Nightmare stole from you came back!" Her face grew resolute and she punched the air with a hoof. "And then we could go and teach that Black Snooty a lesson he'd never forget!"

"Black Snooty?" Dash shook her head. "Let me guess... another ghost-pony?"

Pinkie nodded. "Well, kind of. Black Snooty and Nightmare are just different names for the same ghost-pony."

"So let me get this straight. All of this," Dash waved a hoof around the room. "All of Cloudsdale and the Flight School and this room here, all of it is just a dream created by some spooooooky ghost pony, and he...or she... whichever it is... is keeping me trapped here?"

Pinkie nodded. "Exactly!" she cried. "Oh Dash, you're such a smarty smart pants!"

"And I guess YOU'VE come to save me, Pinkie Pie?" Dash snickered.

Pinkie laughed and clopped her hooves together. "Yes! Yes! Oooh, you always WERE good at guessing games!"

"But why would you want to risk your own life to save mine?" asked Dash.

The smile dropped from Pinkie's face and she blinked. "Because we're... friends, Rainbow Dash! Best friends!"

Dash cocked her head. "My best friend is a pink earth pony?" She chuckled. "What in Equestria could we have in common?"

Pinkie beamed. "Oh, barrels and barrels of things! We both love hot-sauce on muffins and vanilla lemon-drops and sarsaparilla and splashing around in the mud on rainy days and...and... ooh ooh! We both love jokes and pranks! In fact, were the biggest, most super hilarious pranksters in all of Ponyville, and..."

Dash suddenly interrupted Pinkie. "Well, if you really ARE as big a prankster as me, Pinkie Pie, it DOES explain your craaaaazy story!" She shook her head. "I can't believe I've been standing here and talking to a hallucination about ghost ponies," Dash lifted a hoof and started to close the wardrobe. "Goodbye, Pinkie Pie, and good luck with the whole Black Snooty Nightmare thing."

"Wait!!" cried Pinkie. "Oh Dash, don't leave me stuck in here!" Desperation tinged her voice. "We're running out of time! Oh, if you die I just couldn't..."

"Die? Isn't that a little... melodramatic for you, Pinkie Pie?" Dash rolled her eyes. "You've obviously been hanging around Rarity too much," She suddenly noticed the reflection of the clock on the wall behind the pink pony. "Oh no! Star Catcher'll be back any minute!" There was no way she was going to be caught talking to Pinkie again. That last time had been so embarrassing!

"But Dash, you're starting to remember!" Pinkie protested. "You just mentioned Rarity! Rarity!"

"Whoity?" Dash sighed. "Look, Pinkie. I'm not sure what I remember. I remember remembering something, but that's it." She turned and looked at the door. "I... I have to go now. My friend will be back soon and I have to get ready for the ball..."

"The ball?" Pinkie repeated. "No, Dash! We don't have time to go to a ball! We have to..."

But Dash had already stopped listening. She grabbed the tack that Star Catcher had picked out for her off the rail and closed the wardrobe door without another word.

Chapter 10

"I'm so glad that you decided to come to the ball with me, Dash!" said Star Catcher. Her mane was done up in a formal style, an abundance of curls fashioned into a crown at her poll, the rest falling down the other side in a waterfall of blue and pink. Her ears glittered with diamond earrings and the necklace at her throat sparkled. Dash had never seen a filly look more stunning. She blushed as she took the hoof Star Catcher offered her and they stepped together through the huge doors that led into the great hall of Cloudsdale Flight School.

The roof of the hall was open to the air and the weather had been expressly designed for the evening's celebration. A sliver of a moon shone down through layers of stratus clouds that lit up in its soft light like a veil of glowing yellow-silver. Gorgeous banks of cumulus surrounded them, and illuminated by the last rays of the setting sun their undersides were aglow, salmon pink and lemon yellow.

But Star Catcher had eyes for Dash alone. At her urging, the rainbow-maned Pegasus pony had finally leapt into the shower and then got dressed up – and although she DID look a bit uncomfortable in the tack, the novelty of seeing her friend dressed formally for once more than made up for it. The gorgeous dress-blanket and her unruly mane of rainbow hair! It made Star Catcher sigh. Dash's rose-coloured eyes glistened in the gentle candlelight that had sprung up around them from the candles on the dining tables, and when her friend caught her staring at her, Star Catcher blushed and dropped her gaze to the floor.

Every class from Cloudsdale Flight School was there – from the seniors to the first years of which Dash and Star Catcher were part. And all their teachers and trainers were there as well, including the Principal of the Flight School – the tall and imposing Pegasus pony mare who was the founder of the Wonderbolts, the fastest aerobatics team in all of Equestria. And alongside her was the guest of honour – Lord Cozmar. Up on the dais, the Principal bowed to the unicorn pony lord, and Cozmar with a flourish indicated that the band should start playing – and music immediately filled the hall.

Dash stood close to Star Catcher, drinking sarsaparilla and looking around at all the older and more experienced Pegasus ponies that crowded the hall, laughing and chatting and drinking. She felt so out of place! – but Star Catcher, with her finely-done up hair, her gorgeous jewellery and her formal tack look so much a part of it all that whenever Dash looked at her she felt even more of an outsider. She wished now she'd done something with her long mane – brushed it at least! And the tack she was wearing – although it was beautiful, seeing as how it was part of Star Catcher's wardrobe – felt hot and alien against her coat and she itched to be out of it.

"Oh Dash!" said Star Catcher, noticing how the rainbow-maned Pegasus pony was squirming in her dress-blanket. "Don't worry so much! Just relax a little bit. You look beautiful!" She flashed a winning smile at her and put a hoof on her shoulder. "You just need to smile at everypony and say hello!" Dash tried a smile and Star Catcher laughed at her uncomfortable attempt. "There you go! We'll make a little debutant of you yet!" And then she turned and greeted a few second years who were passing by, pushing their way through the crowd to get a closer view of the Lord of Canterlot.

"Oh Star!" muttered Dash. "Do we have to hang around here for long? Why don't we sneak out and do some flying?" She looked up at the evening sky in longing. "No pony'll be there! We'll have the whole sky to ourselves..." She shrugged at the dress-coat. It just wasn't sitting right! "I just feel... all wrong in this thing."

Star Catcher's face grew serious. "Oh Dash. You should have more confidence in yourself! I can't understand how a pony who's so talented... talented and beautiful can have so little self-confidence."

Dash snorted. "Beautiful? No way!" she said. "Talented? Maybe!" She smiled as she looked up at the rapidly darkening sky. "Anyway, I haven't got time for all that soppy stuff. This pony just wants to fly!"

Star Catcher turned her blue eyes towards her. "You don't mean you're not interested in... love and romance and... THAT kind of thing, does it?"

Dash nodded. "That's totally what I mean, Star."

"So there's no pony that you like?" asked Star Catcher. "No pony that you

have your eye on?"

Dash didn't answer straight away. She looked past Star Catcher towards a group of third years who were pairing off and flying into the air to begin the first dance. Then she turned back.

"I hate it when you tease me about this sort of thing, Star," muttered Dash. "You know how I feel about that. The only thing I've got my eye on is 'the prize!'"

Star Catcher knew exactly what Dash meant. She'd heard it so many times before, as they lay in bed late at night talking about the future. So she remained silent as Dash continued.

"I'm going to be a Wonderbolt one day!" Dash cried, throwing a hoof up into the air. "Just you wait and see, Star! I'll be streaking across those skies and everypony's eyes will be on me...."

Star Catcher nodded. She wasn't smiling. "I know you will, Dash."

Dash turned and grinned at her. "You really think I can do it, Star?"

Star Catcher nodded again. "I don't think you have any real limits, Dash," she said softly. "Especially after that Sonic Rainboom of yours. If the Wonderbolts ever see it, I'm sure they'd ask you to join – right there on the spot!"

Dash's eyes grew wide. "You really think so, Star?"

"I really, really do," she replied.

Dash sighed. "I dunno. I mean, I'm sure that there's a ton of ponies waiting to get into the Wonderbolts."

"None of them are like you, though, Dash," said Star. She moved closer. "You're You're one of a kind."

"I'm nothing special," replied Dash.

"Oh Dash. You can't really mean that, can you?" Star Catcher's voice was hurt. "You know, you're... you're really popular here at the school..."

"Me? Popular?" Dash laughed. "Now I know you're pranking me, Star!"

Star Catcher looked at Dash. The rainbow-maned filly felt her friend's eyes take in each part of her face – her rose eyes, her upturned muzzle, her long rainbow mane which hadn't been brushed and which hung on her neck in tangles, that little bruise on her cheek where she'd hit the tree branch during emergency landing training...

"Uh... have I got something on my face?" Dash asked, rubbing at it with her hoof.

Star Catcher shook her head. Her eyes glistened under shy, half-closed lids. "No. I just like looking at you sometimes. When I first saw you I felt like I'd met you somewhere before..."

Dash arched her eyebrows. "It's so totally weird," she said. "I... I felt the exact same thing!"

Star Catcher's eyes opened wide. "You did?"

Dash nodded.

"That must mean we were fated to be... to be together," said Star Catcher.

Dash laughed. "Fated? Oh, Star – that's so like you! You're such a total romantic." The sarsaparilla was going to her head now, and she felt suddenly sentimental. She moved forwards and, putting her neck over Star Catcher's in a pony-hug, she said "You know, Star – even though we're like totally different ponies, I'm soooo glad we're best buds!"

Star Catcher rubbed her coat against Dash's, but the rainbow-maned filly couldn't see the tears welling at the corners of her closed eyes.

"It would be so easy for somepony to fall in love with you, Dash," Star Catcher whispered. "There's just so much, so much life in you. I think that's why you're so fast – all that energy builds up and builds up in you and you have to let it explode out. I...I love... that about you..." She broke the hug and looked at Dash.

Dash suddenly saw what was in the white-coated filly's blue eyes and turned away.

"I... guess that's the way it works," she said.

Star Catcher had wiped the tears from her eyes and continued. "But there are other ways that that passion can come out as well, you know..."

Dash looked at the floor. "I wouldn't really know anything about all that."

"But why are you so down on romance, Dash?" Star Catcher waved a hoof at all the Pegasus ponies talking and drinking, and dancing in the air above them. "... Is there really nopony you could share your heart with? Don't you think you'd ever be lonely? Everypony needs somepony beside them!"

Dash snorted. "Not me! All that sissy stuff would just weight me down. That's just the sort of thing that will totally distract you from your dreams!" She thumped her chest with a hoof. "You have to look after number one – as soon as you add anypony else to that equation, you're going to end up totally off course!"

Star Catcher looked down into her sarsaparilla. "I see," she said, starting to turn away. But then she turned back to Dash and asked. "I'm... I'm going to get another drink. Do you want one?"

Dash finished her drink and replied "Totally!" The sarsaparilla was starting to go to her head! She gave the empty glass to a waiter and watched as Star Catcher walked away.

Star really was a gorgeous filly, Dash thought with a sigh. No wonder all the colts in their classes were vying for her attention! They didn't even notice her – although a few times one of them had approached Dash and she'd thought for a moment that they had been interested in her, but then it had turned out that they just wanted her to give a note to Star Catcher for them. But whenever she did, Star Catcher would just snort in annoyance and say "Why would I want to go out with a foal like him?" – and she said this about even the most handsome boys in their class. Dash shook her head. But she knew what those boys were feeling! Star Catcher was not only fast, but graceful as well, while Dash – well, she had to admit she wasn't the most graceful Pegasus filly in Equestria.

Thinking about these things made Dash feel like she was alone in the sea of happy Pegasus ponies, and her face slipped into a frown. She hoped Star Catcher would be back soon. But then her face fell even further when she noticed those three jocks who were in the same year as her and Star Catcher approaching. Touchdown, Hoops and Reps. Those three dunderheads! She'd had a number of run-ins with them before, and earned a couple of groundings as a result.

Hoops, the biggest of the three colts, was shoving Touchdown around good-naturedly as they approached. Reps turned to them and muttered "Cut that out you guys!" He turned to Dash. "Oh hey Rainbow Dash! I see you're standing here enjoying the amb-ee-ance!"

Dash rolled her eyes. "Oh, not YOU guys!"

"Oh hey, Rainbow Dash," said Hoops with a snide smile. "Nice to see ya! But...where's your girlfriend?" He looked about theatrically.

"Who are you talking about, dweeb?" replied Dash.

"That pretty little filly Star Catcher of course!" Reps chuckled, jumping in. "You and Star Catcher are a bit too chummy... IF you know what I mean!" He jabbed Hoops in the side with a hoof and his friend punched him on the shoulder with a smile.

"She's just my best bud," said Dash with a sneer. "Not like you and your two BOYFRIENDS."

Reps scowled. "Never had you figured for a filly-fooler, Dash. When we first heard about you and your Sonic Rainboom, you seemed pretty righteous! But now it's all around the school. What you and that... Star Catcher get up to at night. All that filly-foolin' stuff!"

"Filly-fooler?" Dash arched her eyebrows. "Isn't that a pretty big word for such a little colt like you, Reps?"

"I'll show you how little I am!" smirked Reps, pushing his chest against hers. "Or maybe one of my bros can. You should let one of us stallions show you how it's done! We'd cure you of filly-fooling NO problem..."

Dash chuckled. "I'd break any of you lightweights in under a minute! You muscle-heads always lack muscle in the one place which counts."

"Is there a problem, boys?" came a deep and authoritative voice from nearby. The Principal of Cloudsdale Flight School was making her way through the sea of Pegasus ponies and soon was standing right next to them.

"Uhh... no, Principal!" said Hoops, leaping back away from Dash, his eyes flashing left and right nervously. "We were just congratulating Rainbow Dash on coming first in the speed rankings this term... right boys?"

Reps and Touchdown both nodded their heads, ingratiating smiles stuck on their faces.

"Maybe you colts could cool down with some more drinks," the Principal laughed. And then she glared at them, and the three bullies slipped away into the crowd.

Dash tried to slink away as well, but the Principal had already placed her hoof on her shoulder, stopping her from escaping.

"And here she is!" said the Principal, turning to the tall dark stallion beside her. "Lord Cozmar, this is Rainbow Dash, the little first year who we have such high hopes for!"

Lord Cozmar!? Dash's eyes flicked from the smiling face of the Principal to that of Lord Cozmar. The unicorn pony lord was motioning for Dash to offer him her hoof. She hesitantly placed it trembling before him, and he brought it up to his lips in a kiss, a kiss that felt strangely cold against her coat. "Miss Rainbow Dash! So wonderful to meet you at last!"

Dash didn't know what to do. Should she curtsy? Bow? She wished Star Catcher was here to help her! "Uh, uh... pleased to meet you, your... your majesty," she managed at last.

Cozmar's green eyes sparkled in humour. "Did I just become a Princess suddenly? Oh, how Princess Celestia will be surprised!"

Dash blushed, but the Principal clapped her on the shoulder. "I've just been telling Lord Cozmar about all your recent accomplishments, Dash. Fifty thousand feet?" She whistled. "That is some frosty sub-orbital space-kissing I'D have found challenging when I was your age!"

Dash's eyes went wide. "Ah, oh ... thank you, Principal..."

Cozmar nodded. "That is indeed an amazing achievement! And that new technique all the young speedsters are trying to emulate – what is it called?" He cocked his head in thought. "Oh yes, the Sonic Rainboom! Remarkable, simply remarkable!"

Dash nodded. Her chest swelled with pride. Now they were talking about stuff she could relate to! "Oh yeah, the Rainboom! Me and Star Catcher have been trying to perfect it."

The Principal nodded. "Yes, the Rainboom. Simply astounding." She came close to Dash and whispered to her conspiratorially. "Dash – I've just been speaking with Lord Cozmar about a little idea I've had. I thought you might benefit from being given some greater challenges, so with your consent we'd like to invite you to join the Wonderbolts in some of their training sessions. You know, just to see what you've got!" She winked.

Dash's knees almost gave away beneath her. "Me? The... the Wonderbolts?" Her mouth fell open. "I... I'd love to!" She put her fore-hooves to her mouth in glee. "Oh, Star Catcher won't believe it! She was just saying earlier that..."

The Principal's eyes suddenly focussed on something behind Dash's shoulder. "Oh, and speak of the...!" She turned to the unicorn pony lord. "May I introduce to you another promising young flier of ours, Lord Cozmar? This gorgeous young filly is Star Catcher!"

Dash turned. Oh thank Celestia! It WAS her. Dash beamed at her, but the look the white-coated filly gave her back was unreadable.

Star Catcher didn't even bother to greet the Principal or Lord Cozmar as she approached, but straight away she put a hoof on Dash's shoulder and whispered in her ear. "Uh Dash, can I speak t'you for a moment?" Her words seemed strained, as if it was a struggle for her to get them out.

"Star! Are you OK?" asked Dash in concern. She turned and with her face close to Star Catcher's she at once noticed there was a strong smell of sarsaparilla on her breath. "Have you... how much have you been drinking, Star?"

"I hafta talk to you Dash!" Star said, louder this time, as she pulled at Dash's shoulder.

"Can't it wait?" Dash whispered harshly in reply. She nodded her head in the direction of the Principal and Cozmar. "I'm kinda in the middle of something important right now!"

"What... what's going on?" asked Star, as if she had just noticed the Principal and Lord Cozmar standing there.

"I've been invited to train with the Wonderbolts!" said Dash in delight. "Isn't that totally AWESOME?!"

"The Wonderbolts?" Star Catcher muttered. "They're... they're going to take you away from me, aren't they?!" Tears started in the corners of her eyes. "But I thought we'd always... always be together."

"What are you talking about?" asked Dash, annoyed. "I thought that you'd... you'd be HAPPY my dream was coming true..."

"But what about my dream!?" shouted Star Catcher suddenly. The Principal and Cozmar looked on in bemusement as the white-coated pony shook Dash by the shoulders.

"*Your* dream?" asked Dash in confusion. "What are you talking about, Star? You're..."

"*You're* my dream, Dash!" cried Star Catcher with a sob. "I love you!"

She threw her hooves around Dash's neck and falling forwards planted her mouth on the rainbow-maned pony's. Dash stumbled backwards in surprise and tried to pull away, but Star Catcher stuck to her. They struggled for a few heartbeats until at last Dash pushed the white-coated filly off her and she fell to the ground.

The Principal stood by, watching the scene with a look of total confusion on her face, but Cozmar merely smiled, a soft and secretive smile, as he took her hoof in his own.

"Perhaps, my dear lady Principal, we should leave the rest of this conversation for another time," he said. He turned to face Dash, who was staring dumbly at her friend crying on the floor. "You're obviously a little busy with your friend, Miss Dash, so if you'll excuse us..."

"No, wait!" cried Dash, turning to them and wiping off the saliva and sarsaparilla that still covered her mouth with a hoof – but Cozmar merely bowed and winked, and leading the bemused Principal away he disappeared into the crowd of gawking bystanders.

Dash turned to Star Catcher. Her face was red, livid with rage and humiliation. "You... love me?"

"Oh, I love you sooo much Dash," sobbed Star Catcher. Tears filled her blue eyes. She got back onto her hooves with difficulty and stepped towards Dash, but the rainbow-maned filly fell back, shaking her head.

"Love me?" she repeated. "But... "

"Don't you love me, Dash?" The look of desperation in Star Catcher's eyes horrified her.

Dash stood silently and looked at all the ponies around them. Some were whispering to each other, and some were just staring. But one or two were smiling at each other, and somewhere somepony laughed.

Dash turned viciously to Star Catcher. "Love you too?" She scowled at her. "How could I love somepony like you?"

Star Catcher's face was agonised. "You... you don't love me?"

Dash shook her head. "No, Star Catcher – I don't love you!" she replied, her hooves clenched and shaking with anger. "I... I hate you, you... you filly-fooler! You've made me look..."

One of the third years, a tawny-coated colt with a red mane, came up to them. He laid a hoof on Dash's shoulder. "Uh, Dash? Maybe you and your friend should..."

Dash pulled herself away and looked down at Star Catcher in disgust. "She's not my friend," she said.

At Dash's words, Star Catcher sobbed once and then burst into tears. "Dash... Oh Dash... Please! I..."

Dash turned away. "You've ruined everything, Star Catcher." But the white-coated filly never saw the tears that had burst out in her rose-coloured eyes. Dash leapt into the air and flew across the hall, dodging through the ranks of dancing ponies, until she landed on the other side of the hall and galloped down the corridor that led to the bathrooms.

The tears just wouldn't stop! Splashing hoof-full after hoof-full of cold water onto her face, Dash looked in the mirror at herself. She despised what she saw.

"You... you fool, Dash," she sobbed. She wiped the mixture of water and tears from her face, and when she looked again in the mirror she saw Pinkie Pie there. The little pink pony had tears in her own eyes.

"Oh, not you!" Dash moaned, fresh tears springing up.

Pinkie spoke, and her voice was full of warmth and pity. "Oh Dash... I never... I never knew what happened to you!"

"You... you saw what I did?" asked Dash.

"I was there, high up in the sky above you! – in the windows," Pinkie explained. "Anywhere there's a reflection I can peep in and see. But I can't do a vanilla-frosting thing! Oh, I just wish there was some way I could get out of here and..." Frustrated, she thumped both of her fore-hooves against the inner surface of the mirror and for a moment it seemed to bulge outwards, but then it bounced back into shape and sent Pinkie falling backwards onto her bottom. "Oh cupcakes!" she cried in frustration and pain.

Tears were still falling from Dash's eyes. "Oh Pinkie – she ruined everything! Why did she have to say that to me?"

"What did she say, Dash?" Pinkie was on her feet again and was rubbing her bottom.

"She... she said she loved me, Pinkie," said Dash.

Pinkie's face softened in pity. "But why was that such a scary thing, Dash?" Again she moved against the mirror, and again its surface gave a little – but nowhere near enough for her to throw her arms around Dash as she ached to. "I mean – couldn't you have just said 'I'm flattered, Pinkie, but... but I just don't feel the way you... the way you...'" Pinkie's eyes suddenly flooded with tears, and she rested her forehead against the mirror's surface in pain.

Dash turned her face away.

"Why didn't you say it?" asked Pinkie, louder this time. Her tears were running down the surface of the mirror, distorting her image.

Dash didn't reply, but grabbing hooves-full of water she splashed them angrily on her face. Her long mane was soaked now and hung in soggy strings across her cheeks and eyes.

"Dashy?" whispered Pinkie. "Why didn't you just...."

Dash exploded into white-hot rage. "SHUT UP PINKIE!" she screamed. "JUST SHUT UP!" She struck the mirror with both hooves, and Pinkie pulled away in shock. "YOU STUPID, STUPID LITTLE PONY! JUST... SHUT... UP!" Dash slumped over the sink. "Because I loved her, you fool! Because I LOVED her! I loved her so much that it hurt me and I was so scared and..." She sobbed and the sobs wracked her body so violently that it was as if all her energy were ebbing away. "I loved Star more than anything else in the world, you fool! You fool," she muttered. "You fool, Dash. You ruined everything. You ruined her life!" She thumped the sink with her hooves as the tears continued to spill from her eyes. "She never flew again after that! She left and she never said a word to me again – but she looked at me with those blue eyes, – those beautiful blue eyes! – and they looked just like she was staring at a monster." She closed her own

eyes in pain. "Like a monster!" She opened them again and stared at Pinkie. "Do you know how it feels for the one you love to look at you like you're a monster?"

Pinkie closed her eyes and nodded.

Dash's face trembled. "It doesn't matter, Pinkie Pie. None of it matters anymore."

"Oh Dash, that's not true! Everything always matters!" Pinkie's heart had broken, but she attempted a brave little smile. "YOU matter!" She pushed her hooves against the mirror. "In fact, you matter to me more than anything else in all of Equestria! Even more than hot-sauce and jokes and... hugs and laughter. I'd give all of them up stone-cold-pony if I just knew you were OK!"

Dash didn't look up. Her body was shivering in pain. At the sight of Dash's agony, Pinkie bit her lip to stop the tears from returning and started striking the mirror again, stronger this time. "If only... I could... get out... of this... vanillafrosting... mirror... I could try and FIX everything!"

"Stop it, Pinkie," said Dash, still staring down into the sink. "It's all over. And it's all because I was too much of a coward to say what I really felt...."

"Dash, you can't blame yourself forever!" said Pinkie. "You were just a little filly and..."

"But I still couldn't say it, Pinkie!" Dash replied bitterly. "No matter how many times this memory has been replayed by Nightmare, I've never once been able to tell her how I felt. I was just so scared of what everypony else would think." She sobbed. "And... when you When you said... and I couldn't... I... I really AM a screw up! I got you involved in all of this and now..."

"No, Dashy! It's my fault," Pinkie said. "I was such a silly, stupid little Pinkie! I was the one who believed all of Nightmare's lies.... The one who let him find you and..." She choked up. "Oh, I would've given anything, ANYTHING at all for you to be with... with me, forever."

Dash looked up at last. Her eyes were almost swollen shut with the force of

her crying and her face was barely recognisable. "You really... care about me... that much, Pinkie Pie?" She tried to stand up, but slipped on the mixture of water and tears that covered the sink. But she tried again, and gradually and painfully she pulled herself up until she was looking directly across at Pinkie in the mirror.

Pinkie nodded. "Absotively posilutely Dash! Why, ever since that day you swept me of my little hoofsy-woofsies in the Everfree Forest I haven't ever been able to feel really, truly Pinkie Pie-happy if you weren't there with me!" She blushed.

Dash leant forward, bringing her face closer to the mirror. "You risked everything to come and... save me from all of this? From... Nightmare?"

Pinkie nodded. "Of course!"

"But why?" Dash's eyes were questioning.

Pinkie looked down at the reflected sink in her mirror world. "You kind of know why, right Dash? Do you... do you remember what I said to you after my party?"

Dash said nothing, but she brought her fore-hooves up until they were touching the mirror. "I just wish I had the chance... to feel you one last time, Pinkie Pie," she whispered.

Pinkie wiped the tears from her eyes, but they refused to stop – so she just let them fall, and lifting her forelegs she placed her own hooves against the mirror. And as soon her hooves touched Dash's through the mirror, the surface flashed white and with a sound like the striking of a tuning fork it shattered – and Pinkie fell forward through the glittering veil of falling glass.

"Oh Dash!" she cried, throwing her forelegs around the Pegasus pony's neck as she fell on top of her. "You remember me! You REMEMBER me!"

"Oh Pinkie Pie! Of course I remember you! Of course I remember you!" Dash sobbed as the two of them rolled across the tiles, crying from joy and hugging each other until their muscles ached. "How could I ever forget that crazy Pinkie Pie face of yours?"

They finally came to a stop with Pinkie lying on top of Dash. The little pink pony's smile was so wide that it threatened to split her face in half. But then Dash's wings, which had been cradling both of them as they had hugged, unfurled and fell slack to the floor. Pinkie's smile vanished as she looked down at the Pegasus pony. "Dashy, are... are you ok?"

Dash looked up at her with a sad smile. "I... I don't feel so hot, Pinkie," she whispered. "I... I feel so strange. Like... like something has just broken inside of me."

"Broken? What are you talking about, silly?" Pinkie looked down at her, and then she gasped. All the blood seemed to be draining from Dash's face.

"There's a pain... right inside my chest," said Dash, her eyes squinting in agony. Pinkie brought her cheek to Dash's chest – the Pegasus pony's coat felt deathly cold.

"It's Black Snooty," muttered Pinkie, sitting up. "I'd know the feeling of that meanie anywhere." Confusion flooded her face. "But... but I thought we broke the dream!"

"I think maybe you were a bit too late," whispered Dash. "When... when I saw you and all my memories came back, I remembered what... what happened to... what I did to you, Pinkie."

"Oh Dash!" said Pinkie. "Don't worry about that – I just overreacted like a big silly Pinkie Pie!"

Dash smiled and shook her head. "That was me, Pinkie. It was me who overreacted."

"But I know why, now!" Pinkie protested. "I understand why..."

"But when I saw you and I..." Dash closed her eyes. "... I remembered – part of me just... just broke."

"Broke?"

"I saw your face when I left that night, when I ran away... and, and I didn't want to feel anything anymore."

"Dash, are... did Nightmare...?"

Dash nodded. "I... I think he's already in here, Pinkie. I think he's already inside me."

Pinkie wiped her eyes. There was no time for crying anymore. "Dash, I'm going to get you out of here. Twilight will know what to do about that... that evil, mean stowaway!"

Dash shook her head. "Just get out of here, Pinkie." She leant forward and kissed her. "You gave me back my memories... my memories of you and all the totally awesome times we had together. You've done enough for me... more than I ever deserved."

Pinkie didn't reply. She walked around Dash and, slipping her head under the Pegasus pony's water-soaked body, she lifted her onto her back.

"What are you doing, Pinkie?" cried Dash. "I told you to get outa here!"

Pinkie shook her head. "I'm not letting you go, Dash. Ever again." Her round, open face was steeled in determination. "We have to end all of this now." She took a step towards the open door of the bathroom.

Dash lifted her head painfully. "Do you hear that, Pinkie?"

Pinkie shook her head. "I don't hear anything!" she replied.

"That's right – the music has totally stopped. He's out there... waiting for us. Nightmare."

Pinkie scowled. "Then let's give that big meanie what he wants – a final confrontation!"

She carried Dash with difficulty along the corridor back towards the ballroom – Dash may have been just a little pony, but she was all toned muscle and heavier than she looked. But at last Pinkie stepped out into the great vaulted hall – and her mouth dropped open at what she saw.

The hall was empty now. The Principal, the bullies, Star Catcher and all the

other guests had vanished, and Lord Cozmar alone stood in the centre of the room, a wide smile on his face. Around him, the candles on every table burned green, and flickered as if an invisible breeze were striving to extinguish them, while high above the moon glowered down through the open ceiling, glowing with same limpid green and staining everything with its light.

Cozmar chuckled, and he bowed as they approached. "I'd like to welcome you, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, to this place. Oh, please look around you!" He waved a hoof in an expansive gesture about him. "Draw in its ambience! After all, it's a venue very dear to both of you!"

All about them the hall was decaying. The walls peeled and crumbled, great cracks crackled across the floor at their hooves, while the windows high above bubbled and slid away into slag. It looked as if the whole hall was melting away in the centre of a cold, invisible furnace.

Pinkie glared at Cozmar. "What are you talking about, Black Snooty?"

"Don't you know where we are, Pinkie Pie?" laughed Cozmar. "I thought YOU of ALL ponies would recognise Dash's HEART!" He twirled around on his hooves to take in the whole scene at once. "Oh, how gorgeous it all is! It's such a scene of devastation! And I have YOU to thank for it, Pinkie Pie!"

Pinkie stepped back in horror. "Me?"

Dash slid off the little pink pony's back and struggled to her feet with difficulty. She wiped the strings of her mane from her face and stepped Cozmar. "You sure love to talk, Nightmare," her voice was weak, but inside it was the steel of determination. "But I'm totally sick of your long-winded speeches. Pinkie and I are leaving. Your nightmare doesn't have any power over us anymore."

"You still don't understand, do you?" replied Cozmar softly, shaking his head in pity. "I never created anything. I have just been a guest, here, deep within your heart."

"A... guest?" Dash clutched her chest. It felt as if an icicle had just been thrust into it.

"Oh, so you do understand now?" Cozmar's eyes were sad. "YOU are the one who trapped yourself here. YOU are the one who kept Pinkie out. I've just been sitting here, waiting, waiting for you to finally break yourself. And to think it was your memory of Pinkie Pie that did it in the end! Oh, the delicious irony of your would-be saviour destroying you!" Cozmar laughed, and as it echoed throughout the empty hall, the stars fell loose and began to fall from the sky.

"Dash! Don't listen to his lies!" shouted Pinkie.

"They're not lies, Pinkie," said Dash, closing her eyes. "It's all true. It IS all my fault."

"At last we understand how things are," Cozmar said simply. "Very good. But one last illusion remains to be thrown aside. You see, little ponies, Lord Cozmar and Lady Morava were only ever a small part of my essence." Cozmar raised his face to the sky where the stars continued to fall in streaks. "And although I've very much enjoyed this form, I think it is time for us to show all our cards face up on the table and for you to see me as I truly am!" And with a bow he vanished.

Around them what remained of the hall dissolved away, until Pinkie and Dash were left standing in a void of darkness. Above them, the last stars fell from the sky and flashed away into green mist until only the glaring moon and the white cut of the Milky Way remained above them. And as they watched, the stardust began to boil and shift, coalescing and thinning until it resembled a long, serrated knife blade – and the sliver of the moon shivered and grew larger, as if opening up into a universe of green light.

"Nightmare. Where... where has he gone?" asked Dash, struggling to lift her head and look around.

"He's... everywhere!" replied Pinkie, her mouth open.

The row of ghostly teeth curved up and split open, and the green moon blinked and crinkled in humour as the sky that was the face of Nightmare smiled down at them.

Pinkie stared up, her mouth wide open. "Woooooooooah!" she gasped. "You ARE a big ghostie after all!" She turned to Dash and helped her up onto her hind legs. "But it doesn't matter how big of a meanie-pants you are. We've beat you once, Black Snooty, and we can do it again. Right Dashy?"

Dash nodded. She slipped a foreleg into Pinkie's and the two of them stood defiant against the huge form of Nightmare. "You're just a ghost anyway, Nightmare," said Dash. "A bad dream. You're not real. You've NEVER been real!" She managed a chuckle.

And Pinkie looked across at Dash and she laughed as well. And it was a sparkling laugh, a rich laugh that flew up and rose into the dark heavens. But then the laughter stopped, trapped in the air above them, and falling back into a distorted echo it faded dead away as it was replaced with the vicious cutting laughter of Nightmare, laughter that shook the whole universe.

"I TOLD YOU THAT THAT OLD TRICK WOULD NOT WORK IN THIS PLACE!" His voice filled their ears painfully, echoing as if it was coming from every direction at once. The green eye was joined by a second now, and both stared balefully at the two tiny ponies. "LAUGHTER CANNOT EXIST IN A PLACE OF VOID AND DARKNESS! THAT OLD MAGIC HAS NO POWER HERE!"

Pinkie clapped her hooves to her mouth. Beside her, Dash slipped from her and slumped to the ground.

"It's just too much, Pinkie. The coldness. The pain." Dash winced with every word, and she looked up at Pinkie with eyes that begged her for forgiveness. "I'm so sorry Pinkie – We gave it our best shot... It's just that... I just can't fight anymore."

"Dash!" Pinkie cried, reaching down to her.

Nightmare suddenly shrieked in glee, and the sound of his pleasure scoured all of existence. "AND NOW IT ALL ENDS! ALL HAPPINESS, ALL LAUGHTER – ALL LONELINESS!" The gargantuan face reared back, impossibly far above them, and then it dissolved away into a maelstrom of darkness and screaming winds... and yet the two green orbs stared on. But

then they too faded away, until all that was left was the foaming plume of the Rainbow of Darkness, and with a scream of dark joy it poured itself at Rainbow Dash as she lay trembling in the centre of the black maelstrom.

But Pinkie leapt in its way. Her forefeet thrown wide, she received the spray of darkness full on, and it seeped into her like ink spreading across a piece of paper. It coursed through her body, and where the darkness spilled in, its spirit's cruel laughter followed.

"DO YOU THINK YOU'VE SAVED YOUR FRIEND?" Nightmare's laughter was all Pinkie could hear now, for her eyes had been blinded by the twofold night that covered them. "THAT THIS FINAL ACT OF LOVE WILL SHIELD HER FROM MY HATE? FOOLISH LITTLE PONY! YOU HAVE SACRIFICED YOURSELF FOR NOTHING! ONCE YOU ARE GONE, I WILL TAKE YOUR BODY AND USE IT TO DESTROY ALL THAT YOU HOLD DEAR!"

Pinkie cried out as the final dregs of shadow poured into her chest, and she collapsed beside Dash.

"Pinkie?" Dash got to her feet. Nightmare was gone, and all around her was incomprehensible darkness – but lying in front of her was Pinkie, unmoving. Dash lifted her up in her fore-hooves, and Pinkie coughed suddenly, and she turned her face painfully towards the Pegasus pony and smiled weakly.

"Pinkie!" cried Dash, hugging the little pink pony closer to herself. "You're.. you're OK!"

Pinkie shook her head. "I'm... kinda not OK, Dashy. But... Nightmare is gone. I'm..."

Dash's eyes glistened with tears. "Pinkie, what are you...?" she demanded.

"It's... OK Dashy," whispered Pinkie. Her voice sounded softer, weaker... as if it was drifting away. "This was the only way... we could defeat Black Snooty. It's OK." She raised a hoof and stroked Dash's cheek. "I'm glad you remembered me, Dashy. It made me soooo happy to see you again, and to feel your touch again... sooo happy," And then the hoof fell away from her cheek, and Pinkie's body went limp in Dash's arms.

"No," Dash whispered. She shook the slack body cradled in her fore-hooves. "Pinkie! Wake up!" But the little pink pony's blue eyes were open and staring, and they didn't react as Dash shook her again and again.

"No!" Dash shook her head, her mane flying wildly around her. "No! Nooo!" Dash burst into tears. "You silly... you silly, stupid, STUPID pony!" Her mane veiled Pinkie's body as her tears spilled down onto her friend's face. "Why? Why did you..."

But suddenly hooves were pulling Dash back. She yelped and turned in terror, but then she saw that the hooves belonged to Twilight Sparkle.

"Dash! Dash! You're awake!" The unicorn pony cried, shaking her. "You're back in the real world!" She pulled her off Pinkie and looked at her, concern scoring her face.

Dash glanced about her. She was in Twilight's library. An almost deafening shrieking of the wind outside was filling her ears now and it made it hard to hear anything. Rarity and Applejack were there near the couch, holding each other and looking on in horror. The little dragon Spike's eyes were moist with tears, and he shook his head in disbelief. And Zecora was there as well, an ineffable sadness her zebra face.

"What happened, Dash?" demanded Twilight. "Where's Pinkie? Why didn't she wake up as well? What happened in there?"

"Nightmare," gasped Dash. Tears poured from her eyes, and throwing herself onto Pinkie's body again she rubbed her face against the little pink pony's. Her coat felt cold, just as if Dash were laying her face against dead stone. "Nightmare... killed her!" she wailed.

Applejack, clutching a softly sobbing Rarity against her chest, turned to Zecora, angry tears in her eyes. "Can't ya do anything, Zecora?" she demanded. "Potions... or yer magical mumbo-jumbo... or...or.... anythin' at all?"

Zecora walked across the room and put her hoof on Dash's shoulder. The Pegasus pony turned to her with tear-stained eyes and nodded, and she moved aside to let the zebra in next to her. Zecora brought her face close

to Pinkie's and ran her hooves over her body, muttering in her native language. At last she closed her eyes and turned away.

"Is she going to... be OK, Zecora?" asked Twilight.

The zebra shook her head in despair. "Pinkie's life has ebbed away..." she replied. "...to bring her back there is no way."

Spike burst into tears and threw himself into Twilight's hooves, and she crushed him to her chest as her own violet eyes filled with tears.

"Twilight! Twiiiiiiilight!" he wept. "Can't you... can't you use magic or.... ask Celestia... or... or ... DO SOMETHING! ANYTHING!?"

Twilight shook her head. "I'm so sorry Spike. But magic..." she tried to squeeze back the tears but they continued to fall unhindered from her eyes. "Magic... it can do all sorts of wonderful things. With it you can... raise the sun... and the moon, and change winter to spring. But it can't..." The unicorn pony sobbed and she held the little purple dragon closer to her as her knees gave away and she slipped onto the ground. "... it can't bring life back to the dead."

Chapter 11

The next thing Pinkie saw was Twilight Sparkle's face, contorted in absolute horror, gaping at her.

"Pinkie Pie," Twilight whispered, her violet eyes wide and staring. "What... what have you done?"

"What are you talking about, Twilight?" asked Pinkie. She saw that she was in Sugarcube Corner and in front of her was a still-steaming batch of cupcakes fresh out of the oven. "I'm just making cupcakes!"

Twilight's sickened gaze switched from Pinkie to somewhere over her shoulder - and then her mouth slipped open in silent scream at what she saw. Pinkie turned in shock and saw something on one of the work benches – the sight was so inexplicable that it took her several heartbeats to realise it was a Pegasus pony, lying on its side.

"Rainbow... Dash?" Pinkie whispered. The Pegasus pony was lying on her side and her face wasn't visible, but her unique multi-coloured mane identified her without a doubt. But she wasn't moving! Her unfurled wings lay slack at her sides, and there was no sign of breathing. Pinkie gasped when her eyes at last focused on the terrible thing beside her – a carving knife, covered in something red! Was that...? It couldn't... it just couldn't be!

"Oh... Oh... Oh!" Pinkie lifted her fore-hooves to her mouth in shock... and then she noticed they were covered in red stuff as well!

Twilight had slumped to the ground. "Pinkie... how... how could you?" Tears were streaming down the unicorn pony's face. "Why did you... Rainbow Dash? You... chopped her to pieces!"

"But I was just..." Pinkie shook her head. This wasn't happening! "...I was just making cupcakes!" she sobbed. A nightmare. It must be! A terrible, horrible nightmare! Pinkie squeezed her eyes shut, but when she opened them Twilight was still there, crying and shaking in horror... and her hooves were still covered, covered in Dash's....!

"You made Dash... into cupcakes?" Twilight whispered. "Why Pinkie? Why?"

Pinkie's mouth opened, but what she was about to say she never found out for she suddenly heard a voice, a voice that came to her as if floating across time and space from somewhere far away, a voice she immediately recognised and loved more than any other in the world. It said seven simple words to her, and by the end of them all her memories came flooding back at once.

Pinkie's mouth no longer gaped open in horror but curled itself into a wide crescent smile. She laughed hugely. "Oh, Twilight, you silly billy! What are you talking about?" Pinkie lifted her hooves to her mouth and started to lick the red stuff off them.

Twilight's muzzle wrinkled in disgust. "Pinkie... what are you doing? Have you gone insane?"

"This isn't blood, Twilight!" Pinkie chuckled. "It's raspberry jam! And these are just normal sweet and tasty cupcakes!" She rolled out her tongue and gobbled one up. "Mmmm! Raspberry jam filling!"

There was a sudden explosion of boisterous, boyish laughter as Rainbow Dash leaped off the work bench. She was trying to wipe the raspberry jam that covered her stomach off but was only succeeding in smearing it everywhere, and soon she gave up and double over in laughter. "Aw man, I didn't think it would be this sticky!" she chuckled.

Pinkie had a hoof to her mouth to try and stop her own giggles from escaping, but to no avail. "Oh Twilight! You should have seen your face!" Pinkie giggled. "You thought I'd gone crazy and chopped Dash up and turned her into cupcakes!"

Twilight's gaze switched from Pinkie to Dash and then back to Pinkie again, and then her face suddenly twisted in a mixture of confusion and rage.

Dash trotted over to Pinkie and stood next to her. "Uh oh Pinkie!" She nudged the little pink pony in the side with an elbow. "Twilight looks pretty angry! I think we may just have taken this prank a little... too... far!"

Twilight was covering her face with her fore-hooves. At first she seemed to be crying – but then she lifted her hooves away and Dash and Pinkie saw that her violet eyes had been replaced with ones that glowed a sickly green.

Nightmare-Twilight screeched in rage and threw herself bodily at Pinkie, but Dash, wings unfurled to their full size and fluttering aggressively, jumped between them.

"Tricky tricky, Black Snooty!" chuckled Pinkie Pie from behind her friend. "But if you're going to scare me with a nightmare, at least create one that makes sense! Why in Equestria would I chop Dashie into cupcakes? I love her!"

"Yeah Nightmare!" scowled Dash, pawing the ground with her fore-hooves. "You'd best pack your bags and get outa here! There's not enough room for you and me in Pinkie's heart!"

Twilight dissolved back into the dark form of Nightmare, his strident voice echoing throughout the bakery. "THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING, PINKIE PIE! SOON YOU'LL SUCCUMB TO DESPAIR AND YOUR HEART WILL BE MINE FOR THE TAKING! AND THEN..."

"You know what this calls for?" laughed Pinkie. She hopped back over to the bench and grabbing a cupcake in each fore-hoof she threw them at Nightmare. "A FOOD FIGHT!" The cupcakes exploded on impact, vanilla frosting and raspberry jam coating the black shadow who stumbled back in confusion.

"Oh yeah! You're on, Pinkie!" yelled Dash. "Hundred points if you can hit him in his mean black muzzle!" She leapt behind another bench and with her wings swept all the desserts that had been resting there at the floundering Nightmare who was trying to scrape the jam and frosting from his eyes. A veritable squadron of cream cakes and éclairs sailed through the air and slammed forcefully into the shadow, and they splattered him with huge streams of cream and melting chocolate.

Nightmare roared in anger and frustration, the sound of his scream making Pinkie and Dash clutch their ears in pain. And then he melted away into a

tempest of darkness which coursed and seethed throughout Sugarcube Corner, reverting all that it touched into shadow: the benches, the walls, the ceiling - and then finally the dream of Dash still laughing at Pinkie's side, until it poured all over Pinkie herself. She cried out as total darkness fell over her eyes again and her memories dissolved and fled away.

"Hurry Pinkie Pie! Hurry!" Nurse Mercy was yelling as Pinkie and her galloped towards the infirmary tent in Ponyville Park. "I... I'm afraid there's been an... an accident," She turned to Pinkie, her face haggard and her voice almost breaking. "I'm afraid that... that Rainbow Dash-"

"What's... what's happened to Dashie?" Pinkie whispered. Her entire body felt chilled to its core, as if she'd fallen into the lake during the depths of winter. She had never in her life seen Mercy's professional demeanour so shaken. Something super terrible must have...

"It... it happened while she was flying through a violent electrical storm..." Mercy explained, her voice heavy with pain. "She... she was struck by lightning and... she fell from a very great height..."

They had arrived at the infirmary tent now, and Mercy, without delay, pushed the flap open and led Pinkie inside. The inside of the tent was in total darkness except for a single flickering fluorescent light that hung over a lone bed shrouded by a curtain in its centre.

Pinkie closed her eyes. This couldn't be happening! Her hooves refused to take her any closer and she stopped dead, but Mercy placed a hoof on her shoulder and forced her to continue. Behind the curtain somepony was stirring, moaning in dull agony.

"Oh Pinkie... I'm so, so sorry!" Mercy's voice was barely more than a whisper. "Dash... she's still alive, but... please. Please don't be shocked when you see her," Tears glistened at the corner of Mercy's eyes. "She needs you to be strong for her. She... doesn't look like the Dash you remember." Mercy's hoof trembled she moved forward to pull aside the curtain.

But then Pinkie heard the voice again – that voice she had heard before, a

voice she immediately recognised and loved more than any other in the world. And it said seven simple words to her, and by the end of them Pinkie was smiling in joy.

"Oh Nurse Mercy!" She put a fore-hoof up and stopped the nurse from moving the curtain aside. "I'm afraid you've made a silly mistake. Dash is fine! Look!" She nodded back towards the tent flap, where a rainbow-maned Pegasus pony was pushing her way inside.

"Hey Pinkie, hey Nurse Mercy!" Dash greeted them cheerfully. She was wearing her saddlebags at her sides and in her mouth was a tangle of strings connected to a big bunch of green and purple balloons that floated above her head. "How's the little patient?"

Nurse Mercy's mouth gaped open in shock and confusion. "What... how are you over there? I thought..." She turned back to the curtain, and further agonised moaning came from behind it.

"Oh Nurse Mercy, I think you must be just a little teeny bit confused!" laughed Pinkie. "It's Spike who's sick! The naughty little dwaggie ate too many baked bads and gave himself a tummy ache, so we're here to cheer him up!" She went to Dash's side and took a hoof-full of party poppers out of one of her saddlebags. "And what's better at cheering a pony up than a party?!" she cried.

"You got that right, Pinkie Pie!" laughed Dash, who passed the balloons to the still perplexed Mercy.

Suddenly the curtain was pulled aside from within and Spike appeared, his green face a mixture of anger and nausea. "Aw, could you guys keep it down?" he cried in annoyance. "I'm *trying* to sleep off a baked bad bender in here!"

Nurse Mercy stared at the little purple dragon for several heartbeats as if she had no idea who he was, but then, letting go of the balloons, she turned violently to face Pinkie. The nurse's eyes had turned a sickly green colour and her face was a mask of catastrophic rage.

Mercy hissed and lunged at the little pink pony – but Pinkie was ready for her. She pulled all the party poppers at once and with a loud bang a mass

of streamers and confetti exploded into the nurse's face and as it fell about her in a multicoloured shower she melted away into a swirl of darkness that rapidly resolved itself into the form of Nightmare.

"Close but no chocolate éclair, Black Snooty!" laughed Pinkie as she popped more streamers and confetti onto the confused shadow. Beside her, Dash was rolling on the floor of the tent in laughter. Spike just shook his head in disbelief and muttering threw the curtain closed with a resounding ring.

"You FOAL!" screamed Nightmare, pulling at the streamers and scratching at the confetti that covered his dark form. "YOU CANNOT ESCAPE! THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING OF YOUR SUFFERING!"

"I'm just getting started too, you big meanie!" growled Pinkie, falling onto all fours and pawing the ground with her fore-hooves. "Give me your best shot!"

Nightmare exploded into a whirlwind of shrieking darkness once more, and once again it spilled over everypony and everything, obliterating all it touched until it flew at Pinkie and enveloped her in shadow and she knew no more.

Pinkie found herself in Sugarcube Corner again. She was sitting in a chair in the centre of the bakery, but when she tried to get up she found she was tied to it with rope.

Nearby, Rainbow Dash was standing at a work bench with her back to her, singing to herself in a strange, monotone voice. "Chortle at the kooooky, snortle at the spooooky..."

"Dash!" Pinkie cried out. "Let me go Dash!" She struggled to move, but the rope held her tight. "What... what are you... going to do to me, Dash?" The little pink pony's teeth chattered in fear.

Dash had been busy working at someone unseen task, but when Pinkie spoke she stopped singing and turned to look at her. The Pegasus pony's eyes were impossibly wide, and her unfocused pupils darted this way and

that as she smiled hugely at Pinkie.

"Oh, hi Pinkie Pie!" said Dash. Then she turned back to her task, and there was the clinking of metal against metal. "Sorry, I'll deal with you in just a sec!" she said over her shoulder.

She'd moved aside now so Pinkie could clearly see that she was standing in front of an open cutlery draw and was sorting through it. "Maybe a spork?" Dash looked back at Pinkie and turned the spork about in front of her eyes with a wink, but then she shrugged and put it next to the other implements on the cutting board she had rejected.

"What.... what are you going to do to me, Dash?" whispered Pinkie, petrified. "Is this a... prank?"

"No pranks, Pinkie Pie!" Dash chuckled. "This is like TOTALLY serious." She resumed her browsing through the cutlery drawer. "An egg-beater? Now that's a little *too* crazy!" She tossed it aside and turned around to face Pinkie. "Ya see, Pinkie Pie, I have to find something I can use to let that demon out of you, or else *you're* the one who's going to do something crazy! These bad dreams I've been having! Terrible, terrible nightmares!" Dash clutched her fore-hooves to her head, her eyes squeezed shut in pain. "Celestia must be sending them to me – telling me to do her bidding!"

"Stop it, Dash!" sobbed Pinkie. "You're scaring me!"

"You? *I'm* scaring *you*?" Dash opened her eyes and they narrowed. "You're the one who's totally crazy, Pinkie Pie! I know what you're going to do... what that demon inside you is planning to do to me!" The Pegasus pony reared up on her hind legs and started to dance, her wings sweeping about her like a ball-gown as she sang:

*"Cupcakes! So sweeeet and taaaasty!
Cupcakes! Don't be so haaaasty!
Cupcakes!
Rainbow! Dash! Cupcaaaaakes!"*

"Cupcakes?" Pinkie struggled. How... how was this all happening? Since when did Dash sing and dance? Everything was so totally wrong!

The song finished, Dash had turned back to the work bench and lifted something Pinkie couldn't see from the cutlery draw. She turned it before her eyes, apparently examining it closely. "Ah yes! Perfect!" Dash whispered. "This'll be totally effective at letting that demon out of you, Pinkie Pie!"

Pinkie struggled desperately. The ropes had loosened a little, but still held fast all she accomplished was to cause the chair to rock back and forth. "Dash!" she cried. "Don't do this to me! Don't you... don't you *love* me?"

"Of course I do, Pinkie!" Dash sighed. "And that's why this has got to happen..." She had turned around and was advancing on Pinkie now, the implement she had chosen hidden behind her back. She sang softly to herself "Giggle at the ghostie, guffaw at the grossie..."

But suddenly Pinkie heard the voice again – that voice she had heard before, a voice she immediately recognised and loved more than any other in the world. And it said seven simple words to her, and by the end of them Pinkie had begun to struggle against the ropes again, but this time with a wide smile on her face.

"Oh Dash! No! No!" Pinkie yelped. "Don't come any closer with that horrible, terrible thing!" She squirmed and kicked her hooves. "You know how *ticklish* I am!"

"... ticklish?" Dash's expression shifted suddenly from one of insanity to one of confusion, but then she shrugged and smirked darkly. "Whatever, Pinkie Pie. You can be so random sometimes!" She slowly brought the thing she was holding from behind her back and raised it in front of her face.

It was a long, red feather.

"Oh please don't Dash! Oh, oh, oh!" Pinkie squealed louder and louder. "I'm beeeeeegging you! Keep that feather away for meeee!"

Dash's expression straightaway changed. Her eyes lost the stare of insanity that had held, and they now glittered in good-natured humour. The dark smirk had transformed into a playful grin. "Too late, Pinkie Pie!" she laughed, clearing the distance between them in a half-bound, half-glide. "You're going to get the tickling of a life time! So where do you want it...?"

She ran the feather across Pinkie's round tummy, and the little pink pony giggled and then gasped as Dash drew it lower. "Or maybe... your hooves?"

"No, not my hoofsies!" Pinkie struggles became panicked. "That's the most super tickly part of my *whole* body!"

Dash said nothing, but lifting one of Pinkie's hind hoofs she brought the feather closer... and closer... and closer....

But then she dropped the feather and scrambled backwards with a bitter cry of defeat. She scowled at Pinkie with malice, her rose eyes turning the ghostly green that Pinkie now knew so well.

Pinkie pouted. "Oh Black Snooty, you spoilsport! Couldn't you have waited just a few moments longer?"

Nightmare-Dash was livid with rage. "You intractable, incomprehensible, irritating pony! There's more, so much more, where that came from!"

Pinkie sighed and stifled a huge yawn. "Let's get it over with, then, Black Snooty! Every one of your nightmares is the same." Pinkie rolled her eyes and wrung her hooves in her best rendition of Rarity's theatrical expressions of horror. 'Oh no, Dash had a terrible accident!' 'Oh no, Twilight is evil!' 'Oh no, Pinkie, you went crazy!' 'Oh no, Applejack went crazy!'" Then she broke down into giggles. "Who's going to go crazy next – Spike?"

Nightmare screeched in frustration and, reverting to a cloud of darkness, he again surrounded Pinkie in a screaming shadow that stole her memory away.

Each time the nightmare grew more horrible as Nightmare despaired and tried to break Pinkie's spirit. But each time the little pink pony would hear the same words in her ears, coming as if from far away, spoken by a voice she recognised – and loved more than anything else in the world.

And the words Rainbow Dash said to her were these: "I love you Pinkie!"

Please wake up!"

And each time Nightmare's illusions were stripped away as Pinkie remembered that it was all a dream and she wrested control of her heart from him. And each time he despaired and reverted to his form of living shadow, stealing her memories away and drawing her into a new nightmare – but each time he grew smaller, his eyes paler, his voice weaker.

At last Pinkie found herself standing on the road that led to Ponyville from the Whitetail Woods. In the sky, the black storm was dissipating away, and what was left was a scene of utter destruction. Even from a distance the devastation was horrific. Pinkie could see Twilight's library, torn out by the roots, now little more than a splintered heap of broken wood. Sugarcube Corner, Carousel Boutique, Fluttershy's treehouse, the homestead at Sweet Apple Acres, and every other building and home in Ponyville – everything had been destroyed by the storm and lay in total ruin, angry flames sweeping over the little that was left. And everywhere, everywhere the bodies of ponies lay unmoving on the ground, and among them stumbled the surviving inhabitants of Ponyville, their cries of agonised pain filling the smoke-stained air.

Next to Pinkie Dash had fallen to her knees and was weeping. "Oh Pinkie!" the Pegasus pony sobbed. "We were too late... too late!" She slammed her fore-hooves on the ground. "I saved you, but... but we lost everything – and everypony we loved!" She looked up at Pinkie, her rose eyes awash with tears. "Everypony... they're all dead!"

Pinkie choked back her own tears. "Oh Dash, it's.... it's all too horrible to look at!" She covered her eyes with her hooves – and so Dash didn't see the huge smile that had broken onto her face behind them.

The little pink pony leaned down and hugged her friend, and as Dash hugged her back the Pegasus pony grew insubstantial, melting away into an inky darkness punctuated by two glowing green eyes and a white slash of a mouth that curved up into a smirking sneer. And then Nightmare enveloped Pinkie, from hoof to ear-tip, shrouding her in shadow... but almost immediately fell away from her, like water slipping off a leaf, and Pinkie stepped back and laughed – a bright laugh, full of happiness, that hung in the air like the ringing of a bell.

"It's all over, Black Snooty!" said Pinkie, a beaming smile on her face. "There's no reason for you to lie to me anymore. I remember everything now – you can't take it away from me again. I've won!" She cried out in joy. "Dash is alive and she LOVES me!"

"You foal!" Nightmare hissed and reared up before her – but he was smaller now, so much smaller that Pinkie was far taller than him now, and his voice had lost all of its resonant strength, although it still retained all of its malice.

Pinkie chuckled at the now almost-comical shadow attempting to threaten her. "You weren't even a very big ghostie, were you Black Snooty?" she said.

Nightmare stepped back... but then the tiny dagger smile reappeared and he snickered. "You... you think you've won? It is I who has won!" His green eyes flickered. "The storm is destroying the real Ponyville as we speak! Even if you do make your way back there, there will be nothing left except what you see before you now!" He waved a melting, shadowy hoof towards the burning village. "This might be an illusion, but what you will find will not be! Look upon my works, Pinkie Pie, and DESPAIR!"

Pinkie giggled. "Despair? Oh Black Snooty, you just made up a word that doesn't exist! Maybe you should be a funny ghostie rather than a scary one!"

Nightmare stumbled back. His green eyes now looked upon Pinkie with an emotion akin to terror. "What... what are you talking about?"

Pinkie looked at the little black shadow with pity in her big blue eyes. "Poor silly, silly little Nightmare... you're not scary anymore, and you're so teeny-tiny now you can't really be called a nightmare can you?" She took a step forward towards him. "But then, Nightmare isn't your real name, is it? And it never was. But you're not Black Snooty *either*, are you?"

"What... what do you mean?" Nightmare's eyes blinked. "I am Nightmare, the one who lurks at the end of your..."

Pinkie shook her head. "I know your real name now," she whispered. "You

said it when we fought you in Dash's heart!" She looked down into his pale green eyes that were still blinking nervously at her. "'Goodbye loneliness!' – that's what you said! And that's your true name – Loneliness."

"Loneliness?" repeated the shadow. "What are you...? I am Nightmare! I am what I..."

"Your name is Loneliness," repeated Pinkie. "You can't hide it anymore – it's written all over your heart!"

"My heart!" laughed the shadow – but it was a feeble, hissing laugh that dissolved away into the air as soon as it was born. "I have no heart!"

Pinkie was the one who laughed now. "Oh, what a silly thing to say! Everypony has a heart." She started to trot towards the shadow, who retreated from her approach with now undisguised fear.

"What... what are you doing?" cried the shadow. "Stay away from me! Stay away!" But Pinkie was too quick. She had already cleared the distance between them.

"I'm sorry," she whispered as she touched a hoof to the shadow's chest as it struggled in vain to escape from her. "I don't usually go where I'm not invited... but Pinkie Pie has to do some gate-crashing just this once! It's time you remembered everything!" And then Pinkie drew herself into the shadow and the two of them became one.

Pinkie found herself standing in almost utter darkness, and it took an age for her eyes to adapt. There was light in this place, but it came from a scattering of distant stars high above her. They glared down at her, white and fresh and angry, and as she moved forward gingerly she noticed that their light was periodically broken up by patches of darkness that she soon realised were leaves and branches. She was standing on a path in the middle of a forest – no, not a path, rather just a place where the forest had thinned naturally and the trees were not so bunched together.

Pinkie shivered. It was so cold here! And all was silent, except for the soft rustling of the trees around her as a gentle but icy breeze slithered through

them.

She trotted forwards along a zigzag path and soon she reached a pool of lighter darkness which she realised must be a glade. The frosty white light of the newborn stars overhead rimed the ground and tree trunks with a ghostly glow.

As soon as Pinkie had slipped into the open, she looked up at the sky. The heavens seemed impossibly full of stars – far, far more than she had ever seen in the night sky over Ponyville. As she gazed upwards, she noticed now that two of the stars were moving, gliding slowly across the sky – a larger star and a smaller one. As they moved they grew brighter and larger, and Pinkie saw now that the larger one was leading the smaller. They seemed to be falling from the sky – no, not falling, but floating down to where Pinkie was standing! She was gripped with a sudden overpowering fear, and she galloped out of the glade in panic and leaped into a bank of darkness that she hoped was undergrowth. The scratchiness of the branches and the smell of vegetation told her that she had been right.

She lay still and looked out. The glade was now wholly ablaze with white light. Against it, a tall black figure equine in shape was silhouetted, but when it stepped forward Pinkie realised it was not just a silhouette, but wholly made of darkness – and then she noticed a smaller figure of the same shape peeping from behind the larger one. It moved forward suddenly with the skittish movements of a foal, and it looked about itself with a mixture of curiosity and fear.

"Mama? Where are we?" The voice was so soft, a sibilant whisper resembling the rustling of the breeze through the trees, and Pinkie recognised it immediately from the many times she had heard it before.

"This world is... well, it doesn't matter where this is," the taller shadow that was the smaller one's mother replied. Its voice echoed as if it was coming from the depths of space between the stars, deep and cold and yet somehow kindly. And even in such an unearthly and alien voice, Pinkie could clearly recognise a terrible sorrow.

The mother shadow lowered the part of it that Pinkie guessed was its face to touch the same place on the little shadow's body in an invisible kiss. "I...I want you wait here for a while, little one," said the mother shadow.

"Just a short while." It lifted its face to the sky. "If... if they ever found you, they would take you away from me. You have to hide here. I won't be long, little one. I promise."

The little shadow rubbed its neck against its mother's. "But mama! I want to go with you!"

"You can't," the mother shadow replied, and the pain in its voice almost broke Pinkie's heart. "They'll find you if you do."

"But mama! I'm so scared!"

"Don't worry, little one," The mother shadow was walking away from the smaller one now. "I'll be back for you soon. You just have to wait a little while, a short little while..."

The mother shadow walked back towards the light, turning back just once to shake its head at the little shadow that had moved to follow it. And then the light swallowed it up, and becoming a shining sphere it rose slowly into the sky, leaving the little shadow alone in the centre of the glade. As the light receded and darkness fell once more, Pinkie saw the two glowing green eyes on the little shadow that had until then been invisible. They were lowered to the ground and glistened wetly, as if full of tears.

"Mama?" The plaintive voice drifted up into the air, hanging there unanswered, and Pinkie watched as the little shadow raised its face up to the heavens and cried one last time: "Maaamaa!"

Then suddenly she was back in the world of the burning Ponyville and Loneliness was staring at her, its green eyes blinking in confusion. But then it hissed and batted at her with its fore-hooves. It seemed so small now, and its green eyes were so disproportionately huge compared to the rest of its shadowy body that any fear Pinkie had once felt towards it was gone forever.

Tears poured from Pinkie eyes as she looked at the little shadow that shivered in front of her. "I... I understand now," she whispered. "Now I know why you're so lonely,"

"So lonely," Loneliness's voice was an echo of an echo now, and against

the sound of the burning homes and the cries of mourning from Ponyville it was almost impossible for Pinkie to make it out at all.

The little pink pony sniffed, dabbing at her eyes with a hoof. "Your mom left you here and she never came back, did she? You waited soooo long for her to come back, and she never did."

"Never did," echoed the little shadow with a blink of its green eyes.

"And you got sadder and sadder," continued Pinkie, "until all the sadness tangled up inside you went bad and turned into anger and ate you all up inside."

"Ate me all up inside," the little shadow agreed.

"Oh Loneliness – you poor, poor scared little ghostie!" sobbed Pinkie.

"Poor scared little ghostie." Loneliness's huge green eyes looked up at Pinkie, pleading.

Pinkie placed a hoof on top of the little shadow's head. "I'm sorry, Loneliness," she said. "I can't stay and play with you right now." Pinkie wiped the tears from her big blue eyes, and she knelt down so that she was looking right into Loneliness's green ones. "I have my town and friends to save from a terrible storm that a mean old ghostie created! But I promise that somepony will be here to find you soon."

The little ghost's eyes blinked in panic.

Pinkie shook her head and smiled. "I know your mom never came back, but I bet she really tried to. Something must have happened for her to break her promise. I know she loved you very much." Pinkie's lip quivered. "But I won't break this one 'cause it's a Pinkie promise!" She stood up and crossed herself, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye!"

And then she galloped away towards the burning village of Ponyville, leaving the little black shadow staring after her with its round, green eyes. She stopped once to turn and wave, and when she turned back towards Ponyville the little village was no longer burning. The flickering flames had

turned to a rising wave of streamers and balloons, fireworks exploded in the sky overhead, and the sound of crying and lamentation had been replaced by cheering and laughter. It was as if all the villagers were holding a celebration party, a party that sounded like it had been going on forever and one which gave no sign that it would ever come to an end.

Chapter 12

"Wake up, Pinkie Pie!" Dash sobbed. Her head lay on the little earth pony's unmoving chest, tears streaming from her eyes and soaking her pink coat. "I love you. I love you!"

Outside the black storm raged unabated, the shrieking winds whipping around the Library, the great tree creaking and groaning as if it would splinter apart at any moment, the rain pouring against the windows as if they were trapped in the course of a surging torrent. But none of the ponies inside could hear any of it: all they could hear was the soft sobbing of their friend, and her desperate, unanswered prayers. They all watched, heartbroken, in silence except for the soft weeping of Spike, whose face was still buried in Twilight's chest, unable to look at either Dash or Pinkie.

"Wake up, you stupid, stupid little pony!" Dash yelled suddenly. She lifted Pinkie's body up, and as the pink pony lay slack in her forelegs Dash shook her and shouted "Wake up! WAKE UP!"

Twilight, her eyes half-closing in pain, gently passed the softly sobbing Spike to Zecora, who nodded to her and took the little dragon in her own forelegs, holding him tightly to her. The unicorn pony took a deep breath and stepped forward to put a hoof on Dash's shoulder. "Dash, I... I think, maybe we should..."

Dash batted Twilight's hoof away and turned on the unicorn pony, her face a mask of rage. "Stay away! No pony but me is going to touch Pinkie, OK Twilight? No pony!" As Twilight backed away from her, Dash placed Pinkie back down on the floor and lay her face once more on her friend's chest. "Oh Pinkie..." she whispered. "Please... please just wake up!" She kissed her pink coat. "I... I love you OK? You know that now, right? So please....please just wake up!"

Rarity, frail and limp in Applejack's forelegs, looked up at her and whispered "Oh Applejack, it's... oh, it's just too TERRIBLE!"

The earth pony opened her mouth to reply, but before she could get a word

out Gummy brushed past her legs and scuttled towards Pinkie, squeaking.

Dash looked up at the little alligator, and a look of terrible loss crossed her face. "Gummy," she whispered, "You loved her too, didn't you?" Tears dropped from her eyes as she watched Pinkie's pet start to nuzzle and lick his mistress's ear and cheek. "But... she's gone, Gummy. You can't bring her back... She's gone... away. Forever." Dash fell back onto her rump, staring at the wall across from her with unseeing eyes. "Oh Gummy, PINKIE'S GONE!" And she cried out in agony and buried her face in her hooves.

Suddenly there was a murmur from the floor. At first Dash didn't hear it, for all she could hear was her own deep sobbing. But when she heard Rarity gasp, she took her hooves from her face and looked.

Pinkie, yawning hugely, was sitting up on the floor, and was holding an excited Gummy in her lap. The little pink pony was staring at her pet with eyes still half-hooded in sleep. "Gummy?" muttered Pinkie, wiping the sleep from her eyes with a hoof. "Oh, I just had the strangest dream EVER!"

But then she was knocked onto her back by a hurtling blue and rainbow mass of hooves and fluttering wings as Dash threw herself at her, crying "Pinkie Pie! You're alive! YOU'RE ALIVE!" She squeezed her head against Pinkie's chest, rubbing her face against her pink coat, leaving it sopping wet with the tears that were spilling from her eyes.

"Well, of course I'm alive, Dashie!" replied Pinkie, wrapping the sobbing Pegasus pony in her forelegs. "I would never go away and leave you all on your lonesome!"

At the sight of Pinkie and Dash together again at last, everypony broke down. Twilight had fallen onto her knees, her violet eyes awash in tears, and Spike was beside her, chortling in joy, a brilliant smile threatening to break his little scaly purple face in two. Applejack had at last started to cry, while in her forelegs Rarity was staring blankly at the pair, her eyes red-raw, shaking her head. And even the corners of the usual stoic Zecora's eyes were glistening with tears, and she closed her eyes, nodding softly to herself.

Dash at last broke their embrace, and she pushed herself away to look at

Pinkie, her eyes wide with disbelief. "But Pinkie... what happened to Nightmare?" she whispered. "I saw you... I saw Nightmare kill you!"

"Nightmare? That poor little ghostie?" Pinkie chuckled. "Why, he didn't kill me! He just got tricked by a sneaky little Pinkie Pie prank!"

"What are you talking about, Pinkie?" asked Twilight. "How could you trick that... that terrible thing?"

"Oh, it was easy-peasy bottom-squeezy, Twilight!" Pinkie turned to Dash. "There was no way we could beat him while we were stuck in your heart, remember Dashie?" Pinkie mimicked the spirit's low, whispering voice, and it was such a good imitation that Dash involuntarily shivered. "'Laughter cannot exist where there is pain and emptiness!' – and so I tricked him into entering MY heart!"

"But what difference did that make?" protested Dash. "Couldn't he just trap you with those scary illusions of his just like he did to me?"

"Oh Dash, you can be such a silly pony sometimes!" Pinkie put her cheek against the rainbow-maned filly's. "Didn't I tell you my secret long ago?" She started to bounce around, giggling. "There's a party inside me, a party that's never, ever going to end! And there was no way that big meanie was going to be able to do anything to me as long as that party was going on!"

Applejack shook her head. "Nah jus' wait one cotton-pickin' minute, Pinkie!" she said. "Ah'm suppostah believe that there's an endless party happenin' inside o' you, and that *that's* what put paid to that Nightmare feller?"

"Uh huh!" nodded Pinkie, beaming. She bounced over to Dash and looked at her sideways with a sly smile. "And you know what keeps that party going forever and ever and ever, Dashie?"

The Pegasus pony shook her head.

"IT'S YOU!" cried Pinkie, hurling herself at Dash in total, ecstatic abandon. The Pegasus pony yelped and caught her in her forelegs, struggling to hold her up as the little pink pony peppered her face with kisses and giggled.

"Pinkie!!" Dash gasped. "I've been unconscious for days! I don't think I can

hold you for too long..." And with that her forelegs went limp with exhaustion and she dropped Pinkie, who fell onto her bottom on the floor.

Spike was gently stroking Gummy's spines as he watched the craziness that was unfolding. "But Pinkie, what did you do to Nightmare? Did you..." He gulped. "...you know?" He drew his free claw across his neck and made a "skkkrrrt" noise in his throat.

Pinkie laughed. "Oh no! He's not dead. And his name wasn't Nightmare, either!"

"Don't tell me he really *was* called Black Snooty?" asked Dash with a frown.

Pinkie shook her head. "His real name was Loneliness," she explained. "Do you remember when he leapt at you while we were fighting him inside your heart?"

Dash shuddered. "How could I forget?"

"Well, when he leapt at you he said "Goodbye Loneliness!" And that was his name – Loneliness."

"So Nightmare," began Twilight. "I mean Loneliness... is still alive? And he's inside you?"

"Oh Twilight!" sighed Pinkie. "You can't kill a thing like loneliness. And he's always going to be there, inside me, inside you, inside everypony! But the only way to make sure he never gets you is to always surround yourself with friends...!"

Spike looked quizzical for a moment, and then he said "So I guess friendship really *is* magic!"

Applejack looked at the little purple dragon with disgust. "And jus' what is *thatsupposta* mean?"

Pinkie chuckled. "Oh, Applejack – Spike is absolutely right!" She hopped over to the little dragon and patted him on the head. "Oh, I'm so glad you aren't sick anymore, Spikey! Don't you dare ever eat so many baked bads

again, do you hear?"

"Huh?" muttered Spike. But then he shrugged with a smile. "It's good to have you back, Pinkie Pie, even if I *still* don't understand a single thing you say."

Twilight and the others all nodded and murmured in agreement.

Applejack had taken her hat off and was scratching her head with a hoof. "So this Nightmare... I mean, this Loneliness feller – you jus' up and zapped 'im with your Pinkie Pie powers?" She whistled. "Woeee! I woulda loved ta've seen *that* battle!"

"Oh, but I didn't do it on my own!" replied Pinkie. She looked at Dash, whose rose eyes hadn't moved from Pinkie for a single moment since they had been reunited. "Loneliness tried to trick me into thinking all these terrible things were real, but each time I heard Dashie's voice, calling to me... saying that she..." Pinkie glanced hesitantly at the Pegasus filly, but Dash just smiled and nodded.

"It's no secret anymore, Pinkie," she said, lowering her shy eyes and blushing a deep red. "Everypony here heard what I was saying, that... that I love you."

Pinkie's mouth gaped open. "So... it's true, Dash?" she whispered. "It's really, truly true?"

Dash nodded, and then a sudden sobbed escaped her throat. "It's really, truly, absotively, posilutely true, Pinkie!" she cried. She threw her forelegs around the little pink pony's neck and kissed her hard on the lips. "I love you!"

"You love me, Dashie?" Tears began to pour in a steady stream from both of Pinkie's big blue eyes. "Really?" She blinked and opened her mouth wide. "More than... vanilla lemon drops?"

"About a zillion times more than vanilla lemon drops!" replied Dash, wiping her friend's tears away with a hoof.

"More than... pranking?"

"Easily a *million* times more than pranking!" Dash smiled.

"More than your gorgeous, fluffy blue wings?" Pinkie asked, eyes wide.

"More than my wings, more than flying, more than the Wonderbolts... more than anything!" laughed Dash.

Pinkie's eyes grew even wider still. "More than...?" she began.

"Pinkie Pie!" Dash cried in frustration. "I said I loved you, OK!" Her mouth was frowning, but her eyes were glistening with emotion as she looked at the filly in her embrace. She saw the others watching and she blushed red, but then she looked back into Pinkie's blue eyes. "I love you more than anything else in the world, Pinkie Pie," she whispered.

Rarity looked up at Applejack and for the first time since Pinkie had stirred she spoke. "Did... did Rainbow just say that she loved Pinkie more than the Wonderbolts?" asked the unicorn pony in disbelief.

Applejack looked down at her and nodded, and straight away Rarity exploded into tears. "So this IS just a beautiful dream after all!" she sobbed.

"But Zecora," Spike turned to the zebra had been watching the proceedings in silence the whole time, an enigmatic smile on her face. "Didn't you say that Pinkie Pie was dead?" He was rubbing the drying tears from his eyes, looking slightly embarrassed.

Twilight smiled, and looked towards Zecora. "I think Pinkie really did die, Spike – but she just found her way back."

Zecora nodded. "Pinkie Pie died, that much is true – but to come back from the dead? That's something new!"

"But Twilight!" protested Spike. "Can you do that? Can you live twice?"

Applejack looked up from reassuring the still crying Rarity and snorted. "Of course not!"

Twilight sighed indulgently. "Then again, this *is* Pinkie Pie we're talking

about. She can appear in mirrors, be in two places at once, predict the future with that twitchy tail of hers. In fact, I don't know if there's anything she *can't* do!"

"Oh, there're lots of things I can't do, Twilight!" Pinkie laughed.

"Like what, Pinkie Pie?" asked Spike.

"Well..." Pinkie cocked her head. "For one thing, I can't do long division. Ooh, and I can't *ever* seem to temper chocolate properly!"

"Tha' IS real difficult," agreed Applejack.

"And I can't ever eat just *one* hay fry!" added Pinkie.

"*No pony* can do that, Pinkie Pie!" laughed Twilight.

Pinkie suddenly grabbed Dash around the waist. "But most of all, I can't ever, never, *ever* let this filly here go!"

"Aw, Pinkie!" Dash nudged the little pink pony in the ribs, blushing. "You're gonna start making me bawl in a minute!"

There was a sudden flash of lightning that lit up the storm-gloomy inside of the library as bright as day, and it was followed by an ear-splitting bellow of thunder which made the windows judder, and everypony was dragged back into the reality of the storm that was still raging outside.

"But... but why hasn't the storm disappeared?" asked Applejack. "With Loneliness gone, ain't everythin' supposed to just go back ta normal?"

"Ontological inertia, my dear Applejack!" replied Pinkie, tapping her forehead with a hoof.

"Say what?" Applejack shook her head. "With all that jabberin' about 'Loneliness' this an' ontowhagical' that, at least we know we got tha right Pinkie Pie back!"

Twilight was looking out of the window. With each flash of lightning, the

devastation that had already occurred to Ponyville was briefly illuminated, and her heart sank. Trees had been uprooted, houses were bent and shaken, and the ground had been reduced to a muddy swamp. Then she turned back to the others. "Pinkie just means that magic doesn't necessarily disappear when the one who created it does, Applejack," she explained.

Dash nodded. "Which means we've got no other choice but to stop this storm ourselves..." She took a deep breath. "Somehow."

Pinkie's face fell. "Loneliness said that the storm would destroy Ponyville if he didn't stop it himself!" She gasped. "Oh, Dashie! I saw... I saw what he said would happen if the storm wasn't stopped!"

Dash's face grew steely. "No way the Dash is going to let something like *that* happen on her watch! I'm the one who started all this – but I think I know how to end it."

The front door of the library was already juddering at its hinges from the wind, and when Dash turned the latch the wind tore it forward out of her hooves and the inside of the library became one with the maelstrom of rain and wind outside.

"Dash!" Pinkie shouted over the noise of the storm, grabbing her before she could leave. "I'm coming with you!"

Dash shook her head. "No way Pinkie Pie! It's too dangerous!"

"That's why I'm coming!" replied Pinkie, unshakeable resolve on her round, pink face. "If something happens, I want to be with you when it does. When I said I'm never going to leave your side, it was a Pinkie promise, remember!" She drew a hoof across her chest. "Cross my heart and hope to fly..."

"Yeah, stick a muffin in your eye. I know, I know!"

"Cupcake!"

"Whatever!"

The two fillies looked towards their friends, who were shielding their eyes from the onslaught of the wind and rain pouring into the Library. Dash looked up at the ceiling, and then she said: "Pinkie and I are just going out for a bit, guys. If we don't make it back..."

"What kinda crazy talk are yer saying, Rainbow?" Applejack yelled over the screaming of the wind. "We ain't gonna let you two go alone... we already lost both of you! Ah... ah just couldn't bear to have it happen again. My ticker just couldn't take it!"

"You have to, AJ," cried Dash. She was patting herself all over with her hooves, looking for something, but then Twilight handed her her flight goggles. "We've got to fly, and Pinkie's going to be heavy enough!"

"Hey!"

"I'm just sayin, Pinkie Pie!" laughed Dash. "All those cupcakes don't just vanish into thin air when you eat them, you know! They have to go somewhere!"

Pinkie nodded. "And I know where *that* place is!" she sighed, glancing back at her round bottom.

"Do take care, darlings!" cried Rarity from the doorway. She was still dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. "Oh, I must look simply DREADFUL!"

Beside her, Applejack smiled "Ya look as be-youtiful as always, Rarity," and then she waved to Pinkie and Dash. "Good luck, y'all!" said Applejack. "You give those nightmare-clouds a good kickin' from me!"

"Be careful!" shouted Twilight. "Remember, we're in the Northern Hemisphere, so the storm will be spinning in an *anti-clockwise* direction!"

Dash frowned. "Clockwise. Got it!"

"I said ANTI-clockwise!" Twilight shouted back.

Spike popped his little purple head out from behind Twilight's legs. "What are you going to do, Dash? What's the plan?"

Dash shrugged. "I'll come up with something!" She looked at Pinkie. "I hope."

Gummy was there beside the little dragon, squeaking and leaping up at Pinkie.

The little pony dabbed a tear from her eye. "Now Gummy, if mommy doesn't come back, she wants you to be kind to your big brother, OK?"

Gummy squeaked again, and stopped jumping. But it was hard to tell with his blank pink eyes still swivelling madly whether he had understood what Pinkie had just said.

Spike looked down at the little alligator, and sighed. "'Big brother'? Oh brother!" But an affection smile had slipped onto his face.

Zecora was the last to say goodbye. "Good luck to you, oh pony folk, a zebra's blessing I do invoke." Then she came forward and whispered to Dash: "There's only one way to avert this doom, and that is..."

Dash chuckled. "I'm WAY aheada ya, Zecora!" She grinned at the zebra. "But thanks anyway."

Pinkie came up to Dash. "What is it, what is it Dashie?" she asked. "Ooh, ooh! I know! It rhymes with 'doom', right? Is it... is it perfume?"

Dash shook her head. She turned and waved to their friends, who had now retreated into the Library and were sheltering together from the onslaught of the wind and rain.

"Ooh! Ooh! Is it a nom de plume?" cried Pinkie. Her voice was so boisterous that it could be heard without a problem against the howling winds of the dark storm.

Dash shook her head. "Oh Pinkie. Even at a time like this?" But she smiled indulgently as they both vanished into the maelstrom of wind, rain and darkness – it was as if all the elements had merged together into one destructive state and had taken over every part of the universe. The storm was far, far worse than either of them expected.

"Pinkie," Dash grabbed the little pink pony and shouted at her, a serious look on her face. "You do know this is probably a one way trip, right?"

"Of course I know Dashie!" Pinkie shouted back. "I could see it in those super-beautiful rose eyes of yours! That's why I'm here with you."

Dash nodded. "Then let's go put an end to all of this." She put on her flying goggles, and when she looked back she saw Pinkie was wearing a pair as well.

"Where in Equestria did you get those, Pinkie Pie?"

"Oh Dash," Pinkie laughed gaily. "Don't you know yet that I'm always *Pinkie-prepared* for anything!?"

They stood with their backs against the onslaught of the wind, digging their hooves into the mixture of mud and water that the path had turned into. It was all they could do to stop themselves from being swept up and carried away to destruction.

"Are we really going to try and fly... in this?" asked Pinkie. "Won't we be smashed flatter than a pancake or mashed into a waffle or turned into cookie batter...?"

Dash's ears went back. "Thanks for the mental image, Pinkie!"

"I wish I hadn't given me that mental image either," Pinkie shouted apologetically. "The thought of all those snacks is making me hungry!"

Dash laughed. "Well, you always said you crossed your heart and hoped to fly, Pinkie!" She brought her back up to Pinkie and looked over her shoulder at her. "And that's exactly what we're gonna do right *now*!"

Without any more prompting, Pinkie leapt up onto Dash's back. She brought her mouth close to the Pegasus pony's ear and asked "But aren't I too heavy for you, Dashie?"

Dash shook her head. "Truth is, Pinkie, when you left Ponyville I couldn't even unfurl my wings!" She closed her eyes at the painful memory, but then

she suddenly smiled. "But now you're back I just can't seem to keep them furred for some reason. They're *a/ways* popping up on me! I guess you're the one who keeps me flying. Now hold on!"

And with that Dash galloped with the wind, and as it pushed them along the swampy street Pinkie pumped a hoof into the air and shouted in excitement as the Pegasus pony unfurled her wings to their full length. The screaming winds lifted them up almost straight away, even with Pinkie's weight, and within a heartbeat they were flying straight at Sugarcube Corner.

"Dashie, we're going to crash!" screamed Pinkie. But Dash just chuckled, and with a quick lift of the leading edge of her wings they cleared the bakery easily, and were soon flying straight up into the sky.

There was a sudden crashing from behind them as all the windows of Sugarcube Corner smashed out at once, and a string of muffins and cupcakes came flying out.

"Oh no! The baked goods!" cried Pinkie in alarm.

"They're gone now, Pinkie!" Dash shouted back at her. "Let them go!"

And then Dash lifted her head, and they streaked up into broiling pitch blackness.

Fluttershy's voice was almost impossible to hear against the keening winds, and Cloudkicker felt it rather than heard it in her ear. They were flying right next to each other, and the blonde-maned Pegasus pony had one foreleg around Fluttershy's shoulders, helping her to stay aloft as they struggled to keep the steadily rising power of the hurricane in check. Over the past few hours they had lost a few of their number, who had succumbed to exhaustion and gone spinning off into the roiling darkness behind them. Cloudkicker prayed to Celestia that they were OK.

"I'm ... I'm so sorry, Cloudkicker, I... I just can't go on!" wailed Fluttershy. "My wings, they're... they're..."

Cloudkicker nodded. "Me too, Fluttershy." She closed her eyes – she could

barely feel them in the chilling cold of the rain that swirled at them like frozen needles. "But I just want to thank you... for being here with me. We .. we did our best.... I just want to tell you that... that I lov..."

But suddenly a flash of colour appeared before them in the grey and black limbo of the storm... a sudden shining point of brilliant colour that streaked up before them from below, leaving an after image of all the colours of the rainbow against their eyes.

"Is that...?" gasped Fluttershy, gaping in disbelief.

"It can't be!" cried Cloudkicker.

"It is! It is!" screamed Fluttershy. She cried out over the shrieking winds. "Rainbow Dash!! Rainbow Dash!!"

"And... is that... Pinkie Pie?!?!!" Cloudkicker eyes grew impossibly wide.

Even over the shrieking winds, Pinkie's voice could be heard.

"Wooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhoooooooooooooooooooo!" she screamed.

"I've never seen her go that fast!" laughed Fluttershy. "Never!"

Cloudkicker shook her head. "Surely Dash's not going to try and..." A sudden realisation gripped her. She turned and screamed over the squalling storm at the rest of the Pegasus ponies flying in V formation behind her. "Just a few more minutes, everypony!! Let's give it all we've got!! We've got to give Dash and Pinkie just a little longer!!"

A look of determination steeled Fluttershy's face, and she turned and nodded once at Cloudkicker, who turned away from the fierce gaze of her cyan eyes and blushed.

On the other side of Cloudkicker, Derpy Hooves had redoubled her efforts. Her wings beat powerfully against the onslaught of wind and rain, and her wall-eyed gaze was focused on the endless banks of clouds that loomed before them, crackling with electricity.

Cloudkicker shook her head. "Who knew a mailmare had such stamina! I

wonder what it is that keeps her flying?"

"Muffins!" shouted Derpy as she strove to push back into the endless waves of buffeting winds.

"Oh Derpy, is that all you ever think of?" chuckled Cloudkicker, and then she turned and with a brief glance at Fluttershy she readjusted her flying goggles and beat her wings harder and harder until her muscles creaked and ached.

And so Cloudkicker didn't see that Derpy's eyes had gone straight for a moment, and that tears had trickled out at the edge of the mailmare's goggles. For before her eyes had appeared the image of a tiny blue, blonde-maned unicorn foal prancing about, a letter in her mouth, giggling "Lookit me momma! Lookit me, momma! I'm delivering the mail!"

Derpy closed her eyes and pumped her wings even harder still. "My muffin," she whispered.

"That awful storm is never going to go away is it?" shivered Lyra. She was lying on the couch in the living room of her little house, her head on Bon-Bon's lap. They'd retreated there when the storm had first arrived and now they were trapped there together, the tray of cookies Lyra had baked long since finished and now containing only a scattering of crumbs and left over chocolate chips.

Bon-Bon looked out the window. The town had been plunged into utter darkness, and even when it was illuminated by a flash of angry lightning, the swirling wind and rain made it impossible to make out the little houses that were nearby.

"Don't worry Lyra," said Bon-Bon, still staring out the window. She lay a hoof gently on the trembling unicorn pony's head. "You're safe here with me." She began to stroke her mane, and Lyra, sighing, looked up at Bon-Bon with glistening eyes.

Bon-Bon sighed as well, but it was a sigh of resignation. The storm was

only going to get stronger – nothing could stop it now.

So this is it, she thought. *The end of Ponyville.*

She looked down at Lyra's face, now calm and blissful, lying on her lap and a tiny, secret smile appeared on her own face.

I guess it could be worse, she thought.

"Make sure all the casualties are kept dry!" Mercy ordered the squad of nurses and assistants helping her tend to the growing number of ponies injured by the storm.

She went to the flap of the tent which had been tied shut to keep out the wind and parted it just enough to glance out. Everything was so dark! The ground and the sky were indistinct, and Mercy couldn't easily tell where one started and the other finished. It truly did look like the end of the world.

Please, Princess Celestia, she prayed in desperation. *Please let us see the sun just one more time!*

Big McIntosh was still at Caramel's side. He had regained consciousness a short while earlier and was looking up at the red-coated stallion.

"Thank you for staying with me, McIntosh," said Caramel. "But... are Applejack and the others *really* ok?"

Big McIntosh nodded. "Now don' you worry 'bout them none, Caramel. AJ'll take good care o' them," He smiled at the thought of his bossy little sister. "She is the loyalest of friends and the most dependable of ponies, after all." He looked down at Caramel. "Just keep yer strength up an' get yerself better, y'hear?"

Caramel looked at the faces of the nurses' and their assistants as they bustled back and forth inside the tent, tending to the wounded. They were trying to be strong, but beneath their professional expressions lurked a growing desperation and panic. Outside, the wind shrieked even louder, and the flap to the tent tore open and started to whip around, rain spilling

into the tent as ponies struggled to tie it up again.

Caramel looked up at McIntosh, his blue eyes despairing. "Is there any point though, Mac?" he whispered. "I mean, things look really, really bad."

McIntosh shrugged. "We're always in th' middle of one crisis or other," he chuckled. "But we seem ta stumble outa it one way or another." He brushed the smaller stallion's bedraggled fringe away from his eyes with a hoof. "So don' sweat it none."

Caramel nodded. "I...I guess you're right, Mac."

McIntosh looked at the walls of the tent billowing in and out at as each new squall of wind and sheet of rain fell upon it.

Though Ah wonder if we can get outa this one, he thought. Then he looked back down at Caramel. *Ah sure hope we can.*

Chapter 13

Pinkie and Dash streaked higher, ever higher into the sky. Layer after layer of black, boiling cloud had slipped past them, and then they had escaped the storm and were out among the normal white clouds, the cumulus and cumulo-stratus that floated above Equestria like great white fairy castles. But even those clouds were gone as well now, far below them, and they flew through the clear frosty-blue silent expanse at the top of the world.

Pinkie leaned against Dash and shouted in her ear to be heard over the air coursing past them. "But Dashie? Where are we going? Isn't the storm right back down there?"

Dash shouted back: "We've got to get as high as possible, Pinkie. That way gravity can give us the extra boost we'll need to trigger the sonic rainboom."

Pinkie gulped. "A s-s-s-s-sonic rainboom?" she stuttered. "Straight into the centre of the storm? Are you crazy!?!?"

"You're really asking ME if I'M crazy, Pinkie?" Dash laughed. "That hurricane was born from the rainbow of darkness, so the only thing that can stop it is rainbow magic." She took a deep breath in. "But we have to trigger it at just the right moment, or else we'll rainboom straight into the ground or miss the storm entirely if we pull up too soon. We've only got one shot at this, Pinkie. We've got to make it count. Everypony is relying on us."

Pinkie didn't reply, but looked back over her shoulder at the rapidly dwindling landscape below them. They were so high now that everything had shrunk to tiny proportions, and Pinkie could make neither ear nor tail of what she was looking at. Ahead of them, stars had started to appear, first one, then another, and then more burst into existence until soon the sky glistened with them as if night had fallen.

Dash started to slow her flight, and soon she came to a halt entirely. Extending her wings out to their full extent, she flapped them slowly, but there was no real need up here, in the silent expanse at the top of the

world.

"Dashie, why aren't we falling?" asked Pinkie. They seemed to be floating up here in space, the sky above them almost as black as the night sky and studded with glowing stars, while below them the land, impossibly wide, stretched away to a gently curving horizon.

"We're up too high for gravity to affect us," explained Dash.

"Gravity?" asked Pinkie.

"Oh, you know – that thing that keeps us from flying off the face of the world while it spins around." Twilight had explained it to her, but Dash was sure she was messing up the explanation. "It keeps the moon from flying away from the earth."

Pinkie's eyes went wide with understanding and she nodded. "Oh, so 'gravity' is just another word for 'love'!"

Dash frowned. "Love? Uh, no Pinkie..." but then she gave up trying to explain. Once Pinkie had made her mind up about something, there was as much use trying to straighten it out as there was trying to straighten out one of her crazy pink curls!

"Where's the storm? I can't see it!" cried Pinkie. She'd taken her flight goggles off and was stretching her neck this way and that. "Has it... has it disappeared?"

"No, it's still there Pinkie," said Dash, slipping her own flight goggles off and pointing down. "See that little black smudge, between the big blue smudge and the big brown one?"

"Oh yeah!" Pinkie could see it now. "It looks so teeny-tiny! But what's that big blue smudge?" She pointed to their right.

"The sea," said Dash. "I always wanted to see that one day – well, I guess today's the day, then!"

"And what's that big brown patch?" asked Pinkie, pointing to the left.

"The Swayback Mountains – I think," replied Dash. She was panting. The air up here was so thin!

"I never realised that Equestria was so big!" whispered Pinkie in amazement. "Or so beautiful!"

"Neither did I," said Rainbow Dash. "This is at least twice as high up as I've ever flown, I think."

"I thought that was impossible?" said Pinkie, her eyes wide.

Dash looked behind her at the little pink pony clinging to her back and she grinned. "You know, Pinkie Pie, with you with me I don't think *anything's* impossible anymore!"

Pinkie had turned her attention the sky above them. "Look up at Princess Luna's moon!" she said, raising a hoof. "It's almost like you can touch it from here!"

"Yeah, that's sure something," Dash panted. She took great deep breaths. "Hey Pinkie, get off for a short while. I just want to catch my breath a bit – all that dreaming has made me out of condition!" She took hold of one of the earth pony's hooves in her own, and slipped from under her.

Pinkie cried out in surprise. "But Dashie! I'll fall!"

"You always said you hoped to fly, Pinkie!" laughed Dash, and she took hold of Pinkie's other hoof so that the two of them, hoof in hoof, were spiralling slowly together in a gravity-less dance. "Well, up here you can!"

"But I'll faaaaaaaaall!" yelped Pinkie. And then she looked down at the earth far below. It wasn't coming any closer!

"Trust me!" said Dash. "Up here you could float forever if you wanted to!"

"Forever?" asked Pinkie.

"Forever," Dash nodded.

As they floated high above the surface of Equestria, between heaven and

earth, Pinkie looked and into Dash's deep rose eyes. She blushed.

"Dashie," said Pinkie shyly. "I... I always wondered what it was that you loved about me..."

Dash frowned. "Aw jeeze, Pinkie!" she said, turning away. "You know how I feel about all that..." But the Pegasus pony's voice dropped suddenly away when she remembered another time she had said those words. She sighed and looked into the little pink pony's deep blue eyes. "It's all kinda stuff, Pinkie. I've thought about it a lot, you know."

Pinkie nodded. "It's just that I totally understand why you loved Star Catcher," she said. Then she lowered her gaze again. "But... I'm nowhere near as beautiful as she was, and I'm not graceful or sophisticated.... and I don't have that super-cute figure she had!" Pinkie looked back over her body at her bottom. Floating high above Equestria it looked even bigger than it usually did. "I mean, look at it! That thing is *humungous*!"

Dash chuckled. "Aw, it's nowhere near *that* big, Pinkie," she said. "And it's just part of the whole package!" The Pegasus pony looked suddenly thoughtful. "But you've got *life* in you, Pinkie. So much *life*!" Dash's eyes grew wide. "I... I look at you and it's like... a massive pink explosion of life! An explosion of love and light and goodness and... you make everything better," Tears welled up in her eyes. "Just one smile from you makes everything better. The sun shines brighter, rainy days don't seem so sad – even vanilla lemon drops taste sweeter! Being with you, I... I don't feel afraid anymore. I don't feel alone anymore."

Pinkie's eyes were glistening with tears now as well. She nodded. "I feel the same way about you, Dashie. Everything gets soooooo *confusing* inside me sometimes, like all the ribbons and the balloons at the party have got tangled up," She gazed into Dash's eyes and her blush deepened. "But...but when I look at you, when I see those super-gorgeous eyes of yours, I... I can untangle everything, even if just for a little while." She looked away and across the great expanse of sky that surrounded them. "It's like... that party inside me had always been missing a special guest, somepony for me to throw the party for. And then you came along and..." She smiled. "Well, I just know the party won't *ever* end as long as I'm with you, Dashie. I think it'll just keep going and going and going *forever*!"

At "forever" Dash looked suddenly serious.

"Pinkie," she whispered. "You know this might not work, right? We might not..."

Pinkie shook her head, and droplets of happy tears floated away from them, sparkling in the starlight. "What are you talking about, Dashie? Of course it'll work. If *you* can't do it, nopony can!"

"Oh Pinkie Pie!" whispered Dash. "You..." but she didn't finish the sentence.

Pinkie let go of one of Dash's hooves and kicked her hind legs as if she was swimming until she was beside the Pegasus pony. She clambered onto her back again, then leaned over and kissed Dash on the cheek.

The Pegasus pony blushed, raising a hoof to her face. "What was that for?"

"Just a kiss for luck!" said Pinkie with a shy giggle.

"No need for luck," said Dash with a grin. "I've got Ponyville's premiere party pony beside me." She slipped her flight goggles back on and adjusted them until they were sitting just right. "Let's go."

In the beginning the flight back down towards the earth was almost leisurely, with little of that strange magic called gravity pulling them down. But soon Dash's speed dramatically increased as the earth took hold of them, and within heartbeats their speed doubled, then tripled, and it gave no indication of slackening off.

Behind them, Pinkie saw that the stars had now disappeared and the sky had changed to a rapidly deepening blue, while in front of them, the tiny, toy-land appearance of the earth as it flew up towards them had quickly shifted into a haze of white as they punched down through layer after layer of first stratus, then stratocumulus, then cumulus clouds, until finally they were hurtling towards the great black eye of the nightmare storm itself. It revolved slowly, staring up at them balefully, and cataracts of lightning scored across it with furious white-yellow flashes.

They were flying blindingly fast now. Pinkie clung to Dash's back for dear life as the air speared past them with a roar. But they weren't going nearly fast enough yet.

"Auuuuuuugh!" Dash groaned, her forelegs spearing out in front of her and pressing against the invisible barrier that separated the universe from the scintillating source of all rainbow magic. Sparks of colour began to leap out from the tips of Dash's hooves as she pressed forward faster, faster, even faster! – but they remained sparks, and although the barrier seemed to bend ever so slightly, it steadfastly refused to break. The storm covered their entire world now, and individual banks of cloud could be made out. It screamed up at them, and Dash cried out in frustration.

"I'm just not... going... fast... enough!" Tears slipped from the corners of her eyes and flew past Pinkie's face, shattering into mist at the speed they were going. "I'm sorry Pinkie... we're not going to make it.... this time! It's... just... not... possible!"

Pinkie pushed her face against Rainbow Dash's mane, smelled the mixture of sweetness and perspiration that she loved so much, and whispered in her ear. "Nothing's impossible for you, Dashie." She reached down and, drawing her forelegs along Dash's, she placed her hooves on the Pegasus pony's – and as soon as they touched, the shower of sparks dramatically increased, spraying out now in thick streams, and the barrier started to bend backwards.

"Pinkie!" cried Dash. "It's working! We're doing it!" Her voice was stretched back by the bending barrier, the sound sucked immediately backwards by the bending of space so that it seemed to echo from somewhere far behind them. The sparks were so thick now, a stream of red and yellow, green and orange, indigo, violet and blue and now pink as well, that the two ponies could barely see through them.

And then Dash and Pinkie both cried out as the air seemed to be sucked away from them, and in an instant the universe collapsed backwards and they plunged into a world of pure boundless white light.

And then they broke through the barrier. Bending, it slipped back into infinity behind them and snapped, and what had been streams of multicoloured sparks coalesced into radiant bars of pure, blinding colour

that radiated out in a starburst that painted the universe with all the colours of the rainbow.

Suddenly they could see again. The earth leapt up before them, and Pinkie shouted "Pull up Dash!" as she desperately lifted her friend's hooves up. With a great cry of effort the Pegasus pony straightened out her death-dive and they were right in the middle of the storm, which by now had developed titanic strength.

They were flying impossibly fast now, rainbow light pouring from them in a steady stream of brilliance, and Dash banked sharply to the right, plunging into a circular course that took them directly against the full brunt of the storm. Pinkie had expected to feel torrents of rain and wind against her face, but it was like the time she'd rode in Twilight's hot air balloon – there had been no feeling of wind blowing past them as they'd flown through the sky. And that's how it felt now – with rainbow energy coursing before and behind them, the wind instantaneously dissipated away, the clouds dissolved and the rain was scattered into a superfine mist by the wake of the sonic rainboom, and as Pinkie looked back at the multi-coloured contrail, she saw the darkness receding away and blue sky appearing everywhere and she cried out in joy.

"Dash! It's working!" Pinkie yelled. "It's working!"

"That's great, Pinkie!" Dash yelled back at her. "But we've still got a few problems of our own!"

The Pegasus pony was struggling to keep her course straight. The agonising speed, the blinding light, the dizzying circular course were all taking their toll. But at last the final banks of grey-black clouds scattered and boiled away in their wake and Dash let out an explosive lungful of air. Another quick bank to the left, and they were flying straight towards the lake not far from Fluttershy's treehouse.

"Hold on Pinkie Pie!" Dash yelled. "This is going to be one vanilla-frosting of a landing!"

And an instant later they were swallowed up by water, and everywhere was a confusion and chaos of bubbles and flailing hooves. At last, Pinkie struggled to the surface... and immediately afterwards Dash's face

appeared as well, her goggles knocked askew by the impact and her mane sopping wet.

"We did it! We did it!" yelled Pinkie, throwing her forelegs in the air. Before them, as they bobbed in the water, they could see the buildings and trees of Ponyville – sopping and stretched and bent, but intact.

"Look Dash! Sugarcube Corner! The Library! Fluttershy's treehouse! Mr Breezy's Fan Emporium!" Pinkie laughed, swimming over to the Pegasus pony. "We did it! We saved them! We saved them all!"

But Dash was busy looking upwards, and then she burst out laughing and pumped a fore-hoof into the air, slipping back under the surface of the water for her trouble. She spluttered as she bobbed back to the surface, and then, grabbing Pinkie, she pointed up in the air and yelled ecstatically. "Pinkie! Look! The rainbow! The RAINBOW! Ha ha ha ha ha!"

"The rainbow?" Pinkie looked up. And she didn't realise what she was looking at straight away. Before them, born of the Sonic Rainboom and the last, shimmering remnants of the great storm, glowed the largest rainbow Pinkie had ever seen. It arched across the sky from horizon to horizon, from the Whitetail Woods to Dragon Mountain. It wasn't a triple rainbow, and not even a double one – but it was the most amazing rainbow that had ever appeared over the town of Ponyville, or indeed anywhere in all of Equestria.

"One, two, three, four..." Pinkie counted quickly on her hoofs. "Eight?" She turned to Dash. "Dashie, does a rainbow usually have EIGHT colours?"

The Pegasus pony shook her head. But there they were: eight colours! For along with the red, the orange and yellow and green, the blue and indigo and directly underneath the violet ran a vibrant strip of pure, glowing pink that stretched across the whole sky.

"BEST. RAINBOW. EVER!" yelled Dash, and leaping at Pinkie she threw her forelegs around the little pony's neck and kissed her so hard that they both fell back beneath the water.

Although it was a struggle to get out of the lake, after lots of laughing and horsing around they managed to do it – but Dash was so exhausted at the end of it that Pinkie had to lift her up on her back and carry her.

"Are you sure this is OK, Pinkie?" asked Dash, as she lay her head against the earth pony's waterlogged pink mane.

"Of course it is, Dashie," Pinkie replied, looking back at her. "You carried me RIGHT up to the strat- strater –sky! so the least *Pinkie Pie* can do is carry you the short way back to Ponyville!"

Sunlight lit their way, that glistening sunlight that only appears after rain and which seeps across the landscape and makes everything glitter.

"Do you think everypony is alright?" asked Dash in Pinkie's ear. Her eyes were closed, and she was half-asleep from exhaustion.

She heard Pinkie chuckle. "See for yourself, Dashie!"

And when Dash opened her eyes and lifted her head, she saw a huge crowd of ponies waiting for them on the road that led to Ponyville. Everypony had come to meet them!

Applejack was the first to spot Pinkie and Dash, and tearing her hat from her head she waved to them with it. Even from a distance they could see the huge smile that had broken onto her face. And soon, with Twilight Sparkle at the lead, all the rest of their friends galloped up to meet them.

"How did you know where we were?" Pinkie asked, as they were swamped on all sides by hugging, kissing and nuzzling ponies.

Twilight rolled her eyes. "Oh Pinkie!" she said, pointing up into the sky. "We followed your rainbow of course!"

Pinkie clopped her hooves together in delight. "Did you notice the new colour!?"

Applejack chuckled. "It's pretty hard ta miss, Pinkie."

Rarity was nuzzling Dash's wings with her muzzle. Somehow, in the time

between the dissolving away of the storm and the journey to the lake, her hair had been restored to its elegantly-coiffured state. "Oh my dear," she said, tutting, "We have to get you to the Boutique at once, Rainbow! These feathers need to blow dried IMMEDIATELY or else they'll get all FRIZZY!"

Dash chuckled, moving away from her fastidious ministrations and stood next to Pinkie. "I promise I'll come round and see you tomorrow, Rarity!"

"What about my hair?" asked Pinkie, curling it around a hoof. "It's all scooshy and squishy as well. Should I come to the Boutique too?"

Rarity's eyes opened wide in shock, and then she laughed gaily. "Oh Pinkie, frizzy or curly or... or whatever that is..." She brought a hoof to her chin in thought. "Poofy perhaps? Anyway, however your hair looks, on you it will always look PERFECT."

"But where's Fluttershy?" asked Dash, looking around at the steadily increasing crowd of ponies who had come to congratulate them. "And the rest of my Squad? We saw them on the way up but..."

The crowd parted and Cloudkicker, cradling a bruised and battered Fluttershy in her forelegs and wings, stumbled forwards.

There were tears in her eyes. "Oh Dash," she sobbed. "Fluttershy... she was magnificent! She held on until the very last moment..." She lowered the injured Pegasus pony to the ground, and Dash and the others immediately surrounded her.

"Fluttershy, are you OK!?" cried Dash. She brushed the pink mane from her face, and Fluttershy stirred and looked at Dash through bleary, squinting eyes.

"Is... is that you, Rainbow Dash?" she asked, her usually soft voice now even less than a whisper.

Dash nodded. "It's me and Pinkie – and everypony!"

"Is... is the storm gone?"

"It's gone," replied Dash with a sigh of relief. "Thanks to you, Fluttershy. We

couldn't have done it without you!"

Fluttershy raised her exhausted face up, a gorgeous beaming smile suddenly flashing across it.

"yay" she whispered.

Dash saw other members of her squad in the crowd – many of them nursing injured wings or legs, and poor Derpy was there, Nurse Mercy wrapping a bandage around her head.

"Derpy, are you ok?" cried Dash, galloping up to her.

"Muffins!" said Derpy, nodding her head.

"Oh, do be careful Ditzzy!" Nurse Mercy complained as she struggled to tie the bandage. "You're just lucky that you crash landed near my infirmary tent!"

"You crash landed?" asked Dash.

"On her head," nodded Nurse Mercy.

"Phew!" gasped Pinkie. "She'll be ok then!"

Suddenly, a little unicorn filly came galloping up, covered in mud, and threw her forelegs around Derpy's feet.

"Mama! Mama!" squealed Dinky. "You're ok! You're ok!"

Derpy, tears in her eyes, lowered her muzzle and kissed the dirty little filly on the top of her head.

"Muffin!" she sobbed. And the sight of the valiant mail mare and her daughter melted every heart that beheld it.

Nearby, Twilight was talking to Dash.

"Zecora said that the Sonic Rainboom would be the only thing that could work!" Twilight was gushing. "So you flew clockwise, right? Just like I

suggested?"

Dash was rubbing the back of her head with a hoof. "Ah, yeah Twilight," she muttered sheepishly. "Just like you said. Clockwise."

Twilight clopped her feet together. "So you saw what it looked like on the other side of the light barrier!" She put a hoof on Dash's shoulder. "You have to tell me everything about it! You *actually* looked straight into the primal light of creation, the source of Princess Celestia's power! I need to know *everything*...!"

Dash slipped from under the unicorn pony's hoof. "I'd love to help you, Twilight. But maybe tomorrow?" She looked at Pinkie, who was hugging a crying Spike. "Right now I think me and Pinkie need a bath!"

Pinkie looked up in mid-hug. "But Dashie," she protested. "We just flew through the BIGGEST rainstorm in Ponyville history, and then we dash-crash-landed into a lake! I mean, don't you think we...?" But then Pinkie noticed the look on Dash's face, and her eyes went wide and she blushed crimson. "Ooooh!" she said.

"Uh, so what should I do with Gummy?" asked Spike. The little alligator was hopping up and down at his feet in an attempt to leap up into his arms.

Twilight smiled as she looked at the Pinkie and Dash staring into each other's eyes, and she put a hoof on Spike's shoulder. "I think that maybe we can look after Gummy for just a teensy little while longer," she said.

Spike looked down at the little alligator, who stared back up at him with his crazy pink eyes and squeaked.

"Aw no. You can't just turn those eyes on me to make up for all those gummings you gave me earlier..." muttered Spike, annoyed.

Gummy squeaked again.

"Well, maybe you can. Just a little," sighed the little purple dragon.

"We'll see ya'll later!" said Applejack. "Ah've got to go check out the farm to see if the apple trees are ok." She looked across to where Big Mac and

Caramel were talking to each other, their faces close together, and she shook her head.

"Oh brother!" she muttered, and then she smiled tolerantly. "Ah guess *Ah'll* hafta be the one to keep the Apple family line goin' after all!" She looked about at all the happy but dishevelled ponies close to her. "Nah who's a likely can-dee-date for the future Mr. Apple?" Her gaze went from Snails to Pokey Pierce to Mr Breezy, and by the end of it she shook her head in despair. "Aww ponyfeathers!"

"AND just what do you THINK you're doing, Apple-Jack?!" Rarity had come up behind her, a furious look on her face. Applejack looked at the unicorn pony's flashing, imperious eyes and she smiled soppily.

"Ah, nuthin' Rarity," she said. And then she offered the unicorn pony the crook of a foreleg and said "Shall we?"

Rarity sniffed. "We most CERTAINLY shall!" And the two walked off, hoof in hoof, along the path that led to Sweet Apple Acres.

And soon everypony began to leave, until only Dash and Pinkie were left, holding hooves and gazing into each other's eyes.

"Hey Pinkie?" said the rainbow-maned Pegasus pony at last.

"Yes, Dashie?" asked the little pink earth pony.

"Let's go home."

"I think the rainbow looks so nice with the extra colour," said Celestia from the battlements of Caterlot. She looked down at the smaller purple-coated alicorn pony at her side. "Don't you agree, little sister?"

Luna nodded. But then she sighed. "It was so hard to watch them struggling, Celestia," she whispered. "What if Twilight hadn't been able to save Pinkie Pie? And what if *she* hadn't been able to save Rainbow Dash? And what if...?"

Celestia laughed. "So many 'What if's!'" She smiled indulgently at the Princess of the Moon. "I know you wanted to go and save them yourself, Luna – you are the Queen of Dreams, after all – but sometimes it is only through a trial that true love has a chance to blossom fully. Look at the poppies that grow up here on the mountainside," Celestia indicated with a nod of her head a patch of the blood-red flowers growing beneath the battlements. "If you give them too rich a soil, they never grow. But throw the seeds upon a rocky wasteland, and they will thrive. Sometimes love is the same."

Luna looked at the poppies. Sometimes her sister's wisdom frightened her.

"So what did we learn from everything that happened today, little sister?" asked Celestia at last.

Luna looked up at her, her eyes doleful. "Do I really have to say it?"

Celestia nodded.

"That I should always trust my big sister," said Luna, an incongruous hangdog expression on her divinely beautiful face.

And then Celestia laughed, and she slipped her white neck across her little sister's smaller, purple-coated one in a hug. "And that I love you, Luna, and I would never let anything happen to the one you love more than anypony else... more even than you love me."

Luna's green eyes went wide in shock. "You... you know?" she whispered.

"Well, of course!" laughed Celestia. "I am the Princess of all of Equestria after all!" She smiled softly. "And I approve of the match. But it may take longer than you think to capture *that* little pony's heart." And then she drew Luna to her and kissed her. "I wish you the best of luck, little sister."

"Poor Spike," said Dash. "I think he's going to have his claws full with Gummy!"

"Oh, Gummy is a sweetheart!" replied Pinkie. The huge porcelain bath at Sugarcube Corner was filling with hot water, and the little pink pony leaned over to add bubble bath to it.

Dash shook her head as she watched Pinkie put too much of the mix in again and there was a sudden explosion of pink foam and bubbles. She laughed.

"Hey Pinkie," said Dash suddenly. "I've never asked you, but why do you like pink so much?"

Pinkie turned away from the bath. She was wearing a handlebar moustache made of pink foam, but she quickly blew on it and it turned back into a flotilla of bubbles that floated off across the bathroom. "Pink, Dashie?" She beamed at the Pegasus pony. "You really have to ask? Bubblegum, cotton candy, strawberry milk – what's not to like?" She turned off the faucet and dipped a hoof in the water. "Ooooo! Toasty!" She turned back to Dash. "Well, hop in!"

Dash clambered into the big tub and eased herself into the bubbly water and immediately leaped out. "Hot-hot-hot-hot!" she yelped.

"Well, of course it's hot!" giggled Pinkie. "A bath has to be hot, otherwise it's not a bath – it's just a swim!"

Dash soon got used to the heat, and she felt herself relaxing. She lay back and closed her eyes, but straight away opened them again when she realised that Pinkie had made no move to join her and was looking down at the bathroom tiles, a sad look on her face.

"What's the matter, Pinkie?" asked Dash.

"Oh, nothing!" she said, rubbing a hoof against the tiles absentmindedly. "It's just..." She looked up at Dash and the Pegasus pony could see tears starting in her big blue eyes.

Dash's heart broke. "Oh, Pinkie..." she whispered. "Are you remembering the last time we... we were here?"

Pinkie nodded.

Dash sighed. "C'mere, Twinkie Pie!" she said, beckoning with a hoof.

"What?"

Dash grew mock-angry. "I said, 'Get that little pink rump of yours over here now!!'"

Pinkie trotted up to the edge of the bath. "Yes Dashie?" she asked, but that's all she managed to say before Dash threw her pink-bubble-covered forelegs around her neck and brought their lips together, hard.

And as they kissed, Pinkie grew limp in Dash's embrace, bubblegum scented foam covering the two of them – and for a long time neither pony let go of the other.

Finally, Dash broke the kiss. Pinkie's mouth lay open in an O, and her eyes remained closed.

"Pinkie, are you... alright?" Dash asked, concerned.

And then Pinkie exploded in every direction at once. She flew into the air, rocketed off the walls, bounced across the tiled floor, ricocheted off the ceiling, until at last she cannonballed into the bath and bubbles, pink water and laughter erupted everywhere.

Chuckling, Dash searched through the mountain of foam and water with her forelegs, but Pinkie was nowhere to be found.

"Uh, Pinkie? Where have you..."

And then suddenly Pinkie exploded out of the water and threw herself onto the Pegasus pony crying:

"I LOVE YOU RAINBOW DASH!"

Dash hugged her back, gazing into those blue eyes that had stolen her heart away. "I love you too, Pinkie Pie," she said, tears in her own rose-coloured eyes. And together the two ponies slipped under the screen of pink, bubblegum-scented bubbles and they didn't reappear for a very, very

long time.

Dash and Pinkie lay next to each other on the little pink pony's huge four-poster bed. Pinkie was staring up at the ceiling, while Dash was nervously twiddling her fore-hooves together.

"Hey Pinkie?" Dash said at last, scooting across the bed and drawing the earth pony down into the darkness under the covers with her.

"Yes Dashie?" Neither pony could see the other, and only their voices could be heard.

"Uhh, I have a confession to make."

"A confession?"

"Yeah. Promise you won't laugh?"

"Oh Dashie, I would never laugh at you! I mean, unless you were telling a really funny joke, like that one about the oatmeal that..."

"Aww, c'mon Pinkie. This is kinda serious."

"Oh, I won't laugh, Dashie. Cross my heart and..."

"OK, Pinkie – I believe you. You don't have to say the rest of the rhyme."

"Aww, ok."

"You see, Pinkie. Uh, the thing is....is that I'm...."

"You're...."

"I'm a... a..."

"A what?"

"A virgin!"

"A virgin? You mean you've never..."

"Nope. Never. I've never done it before."

"But I thought..."

"Yeah, everypony thinks that."

"But what about with... with Gilda?"

"Gilda?" Dash laughed. "Oh, we never did anything except wrestle each other and kiss."

"Oh."

"Oh? Are you... disappointed, Pinkie?"

"Oh Dash! Of course not! And being a virgin is nothing to be ashamed of!"

Pinkie suddenly threw the covers off as jaunty music started to play unbidden from somewhere above them, and bouncing up and down on the bed she began to sing:

*Oh Dashie dear, no need to fear!
We all pony-paddled before we learned to swim!
Just take my hoof, I'll draw you near...*

"Uh, Pinkie?" Dash looked up at the prancing pony with a grin. "Maybe – just this once? – we can skip the song and do things my way?"

Pinkie stopped dead in mid-pirouette and looked at Dash with wide-open eyes. "Your way, Dashie? Which way is that?"

But Dash had already thrown herself headlong at Pinkie, screaming "Geronimo!!!!"

Dash woke up to find Pinkie asleep beside her. The little pink pony was flat

on her back snoring loudly, her round tummy rising and falling with each snore.

Dash looked at her and sighed. She leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, and Pinkie squirmed a little and smiled.

Lying back, the Pegasus pony put her forelegs behind her head, and as she stared at the ceiling she smiled as well.

"So *that's* what sex is like!" she whispered to herself, and then she threw her forelegs up in the air and cried: "SO. TOTALLY. AWESOME!!!"

*Hey, you don't have a clue
This party never ended - not for me and you
I know you're just pretending*

*You're hiding from yourself
Yes you are, yes you are
Like golden rays of sun in the cloud*

*I will make you see
Haven't you got, haven't you got it yet?
Just lay down for a while next to me*

*Didn't mean to make you panic
I didn't mean to put you off
Baby, it's the way that you've got me*

*I listen to my heart and it takes you high
And you ask me how, can I show you how?
I need your love right now, now, now
(Royksopp)*

Epilogue

On the road that led to Ponyville, a little black-coated foal was crying. He was so deep in his misery that he didn't notice the little pink filly bouncing along the road until she was right next to him.

"What's your name, little guy?" asked the filly, her round, open face frowning in concern.

"Don't know!" sniffed the little foal. His green eyes were red from crying. "I can't remember!"

"Well mine's Twinkie Pie!" The little pink filly took a hoof-full of her mane and handed it across to the crying colt. "Here! Dry those eyes of yours!"

He looked at the curly pink blob in his hoof. "Is it really ok?"

Twinkie nodded her head rapidly, and the colt rubbed his face on the mane. He would have realised that it smelled liked popcorn and candy if he'd known what those things were, but as he dried his tears his heart seemed lighter. He didn't feel so frightened anymore.

He looked up at the filly and a tiny smile tried to struggle onto his face. "Thank... thank you," he said. The words seemed so strange in his mouth, almost as if it was the first time he'd ever said them.

But Twinkie didn't seem to think they were strange. She hopped up and down, a beaming smile exploding onto her face. "Yippee!! You're all better! Now let's get going!" She started to trot towards the village – but then she noticed the foal wasn't following her. She turned and saw him still standing in the middle of the path.

"What's wrong?" asked Twinkie, concern filling her face as she trotted back.

"I'm scared," the foal said. Tears threatened to burst out again in his eyes.

"Oh, there's no need to be scared!" said Twinkie. "You know, whenever I feel scared, I just go and eat a muffin and it makes me feel soooooo much better!"

"Muffin? What's muffin?" asked the little colt.

Twinkie's mouth gaped open in horror. "You don't know what a muffin is?" she cried. "This is serious!" She took his little hoof in her own and started to lead him along the path towards the village.

"Where are we going?" asked the foal. He hadn't started crying again after all, and he looked up at the filly with his green eyes wide with curiosity.

"We're going to Ponyville, of course!" she replied. "All my friends are having a party there and I want you to meet them!"

"Friends?" asked the foal. "I... I don't think I have any friends..."

Twinkie stopped and looked at him seriously. "Oh, what a silly, silly thing to say!" She kissed him on the cheek. "I'M your friend! And I'm sure all my friends will be yours as well, just as soon as you meet them!"

The little colt felt the wet spot on his cheek with a hoof. And then a big smile burst out onto his face – but it was painful, as if he'd never used those muscles before in his life.

"Now we just have to think of a name for you," said Twinkie Pie as they neared the village called Ponyville. "Tell me if you like any of these ones!" She cocked her head, thinking. "How about Midnight Glitter?"

The foal shook his head.

"How about Starry Night?"

The foal thought for a second, then shook his head again.

"Hmmm...." Twinkie scratched her head. "Oo! Oo! I know!" And then she brought her mouth close to his perky little ear and whispered into it.

And a huge smile burst onto the colt's face and he nodded. "It's perfect!" he said. And then he nuzzled Twinkie's shoulder and said "Oh, thank you, Twinkie Pie!"

And Twinkie replied "No, thank *you*... " And then she said his name. But by now they were too far away for anypony else to hear it. Still, I'm sure it was a most fitting and most beautiful name, seeing it was given in love by the purest of all pure hearts.

--The End--