

Mares in Manhattan

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Chapter 1

Manehattan is a city that is uniquely amorous and repulsive simultaneously. To those who visit, the town shines as a beacon of romanticism. To those ponies actually unfortunate enough to live there, the drudgery of big-city monotony wages a war against sanity that nary a colt can defend against. Individualism falls second to “the corporation,” and only the truly gifted are ever recognized for their talents. The ponies that fail to shine during their foalhood are forced to live out their days in a shallow malaise, scraping together a living and yet never really “living” a day at all. This account follows Penn, an earth pony who fits that description perfectly.

Penn was a grey colt who was unremarkable in any way. His brown mane was styled in the typical Manehattan fashion, and his quill and parchment cutie mark was nondescript. He never recalled being recognized in a crowd, not that he was around large groups of ponies often, but when he was, he blended in perfectly. He lived in a one-bedroom apartment located three city blocks from the newspaper where he had interned and then worked since discovering his ability to write during a school trip. The bits were decent, but Penn would never have passed up the chance to write for a publication like *The New Yoke Times*.

Penn got out of bed at 7:30, giving himself a few minutes to wake up, feed his pet snake Skinner, trot out of his front door and down three flights of stairs, and then spill out onto the sidewalk lining the street. The walk to the newspaper was easy and never required Penn to think or process the data that his half-asleep eyes and ears were collecting. Pushing through the revolving door that marked the entrance to his job, he boarded an elevator and rode up to the fifteenth floor of the building, stumbling through the mechanical doors as he reached his destination.

The office was near-silent at this hour. The only ponies present were dazed-looking journalists who had the misfortune of investigating a story the previous night and being stuck with an early-morning deadline. They were scribbling fiercely onto crumpled pieces of parchment, crossing through words and at times slamming their heads onto their desks in defeat. A couple had no mark on their flank, leading Penn to believe that they were interns writing test stories. He considered reassuring them that

nobody scrutinized those sort of articles too severely, but brushed the thought off, fearing he might break their concentration.

Penn turned his gaze to a plain oak door on the far wall of the room. The Managing Editor's door was open, and a yellow glow from inside clued the young journalist in on the fact that the editor was there. Penn trotted towards the office and knocked once on the door before peeking his head in. A blue mare sat behind a maple desk piled high with various sheets of paper, and a carved wooden plate displayed the name 'Prose.' The mare ran a hoof through her black mane and nodded in recognition of Penn's appearance.

"You're late, Penn," she stated sharply. The colt checked a clock on Prose's wall and read a time of 8:02. He was two minutes late. Prose was one of the most aggravatingly detail-oriented ponies Penn had ever met. She expected to have her journalists come in exactly on time, and a minute in either direction would earn the offending party a lecture on tardiness. Penn figured that it was this attention to detail that made Prose such a good editor, but her attitude didn't translate well outside of her profession.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Prose. I lost track of time wat-" Penn stopped as his boss held up a hoof to silence him.

"Save it. You can apologize properly by taking an assignment. I need you to do a write-up of a fashion show." Penn rolled his eyes, eliciting a glare from Prose in response. "You're really pushing it, Penn. I swear I'm this close to firing you!" she brought her front hooves an inch apart from each other. The colt recognized her bluff as the tactic she always used to frighten young staff writers into working harder than the task warranted. "A mare's debuting some dress designs from a podunk town called Ponyville. Apparently her work is above average, even by Manehattan standards." Penn raised an eyebrow at this fact.

"Sounds like a bit of an overstatement to me. Why can't you just send Silver or Dazzle to cover it? I'm not even a fashion writer," Penn pleaded his case, but his words seemed to have no impact on Prose's stoic expression.

"They're both in Canterlot to report on the royals' summer ensembles. Look, it's the only story you're going to get today, so you can take it or

leave it. I really could care less how you eat tonight,” Prose explained, contempt dripping off of her every word. Penn scratched the back of his mane before sighing loudly, finally chiseling away Prose’s stony expression and revealing a slight half-smile. The mare knew the answer before he even spoke.

“Gimme an address.”

After spending the rest of the morning tending to assorted odd-jobs that needed to be done in the office, Penn set out for the warehouse that would serve as the location for the show. He found the building easily. It wasn’t much of a sight in the bright midday sun. Outwardly it appeared to be nothing more than a run-down warehouse, but upon entering, the grey colt was shocked by the lavish decorations that adorned the interior. The flooring looked immaculate, and there was a very clean feeling about the entire room. Elegant lighting had been installed on the walls surrounding the expansive main area, and ponies were already conglomerating about the newly erected catwalk. It seemed like no expense had been spared in assuring that this “podunk” Ponyville fashionista’s show would be a success.

An abundance of mares and a surprisingly large number of colts were in attendance. Most wore some sort of formal attire, and Penn was mortified to find that he seemed to be the only pony dressed casually. How was he supposed to know what the dress code for this sort of thing was? He couldn’t recall ever having actually seen a fashion show, and he started to panic as his mind raced. After a few deep breaths, he began thinking logically.

Come on, Penn! You went to school for this sort of thing and you just need to remember your training. First, no one is going to notice you. You don’t stick out in a crowd, and a lack of a tie isn’t going to draw anypony’s attention. Next, just think about the basics of journalism. You’re writing for a bunch of fashion-conscious ponies, so you need to write about the dresses and that sort of thing. Wait, what makes a dress good or bad? Well, I guess the color is the most important part or something like that. I’ll know it when I see it. Finally, try to get an interview with the pony that the show is for. Ponies like interviews. Are interviews appropriate in fashion columns?

Penn had been aimlessly ambling around, thinking about the task at hand. When he started to focus on the room around him instead of his mind's images, he realized that the lights had dimmed, and everypony was now packed tightly to get a good view of the runway. He sprinted to join the throng, but found any opening lent an inopportune view of the stage. Penn settled on a space where he could see the very end of the catwalk clearly. As he understood, that was the most important part of the show. A magically amplified speaker shook Penn from his concentration, and he was now engrossed in a sultry male voice describing what was about to unfold.

"Fillies and Gentlecolts, a new age of fashion is upon us. Since ponies first wove saddles out of wild grasses, there has been the desire to be fashionable. The need to find a universally attractive wardrobe has never been greater. Today, the most appealing dresses ever to grace Manehattan have been assembled into the most life-changing fashion show of all time. Rarity presents, *Living Fabric*." A pounding bass rhythm started to play, sending a wave of 'oohs' over the audience. Penn had to stifle laughter. If he had been sure that Prose's earlier boast was an overstatement, this introduction was surely a joke. How could anypony take something as fickle as fashion so seriously? Regardless, he had to complete this assignment while remaining unbiased. Penn retrieved a scrap of parchment from his saddlebags and took a quill in his mouth, ready to put anything he saw into words.

The cacophony of cameras and excited whispers started all at once and Penn assumed the first model had walked out. He looked up and began to commit everything about the model's outfit to memory as she posed. She was an attractive mare, if a little thin. Her deep blue coat and lighter blue mane worked very well with the elegant lavender dress she was wearing. The dress had different layers of material, and Penn was taken aback as he realized that each individual layer was sewn together with unique flowers worked into it. The *Living Fabric* title was starting to make sense. He had a brief second to take a mental picture before the mare turned and strutted back to the opposite end of the runway. Penn quickly jotted down every pertinent fact he could recall about the recently departed model before looking up again to observe the next one.

This model was taller than the previous, and at least as thin. Her brown coat contrasted the colorful one that had preceded it, but her stunning red gown was at least as stylish as the lavender one. This one had long-stemmed reeds worked in to accent the flowing cloth, and left a far greater impression on the journalist. He quickly put all of his thoughts onto the parchment he was keeping notes on, realizing that it wouldn't be too hard to complete his assignment with everything he was seeing. He looked up expectantly as he finished scribbling, only to become conscious of the fact that there was nopony on the catwalk. The music was still pumping, but the whispers throughout the crowd began to grow louder as the seconds ticked on. Finally, somepony must have stepped out, as a chorus of cheers erupted throughout the audience. Penn craned his neck to catch a glimpse of the new model, but to no avail. He would have to wait for her pose at the end of the runway. Slowly, a pale yellow Pegasus crept into his view.

Penn tried to do a preliminary scan of the pony before examining her outfit, but never made it past her face. Her strong blue eyes opened up like cavernous pools, full of depth and vibrancy. He noticed her pink mane hanging loosely around her head, and wondered if she had styled it that way for the fashion show, or if it was the norm. Regardless, she was no Manehattan filly. She looked mildly uncomfortable, not exactly sure how to hold herself or how to place her hooves, but Penn found an undeniable attractiveness to this. She dripped with poise, even if the mare didn't recognize it for herself. She managed a shy smile, her cheeks blushing deeper than the powder she had applied. In a flash, she rotated on the spot and shot off of the runway, leaving every pair of eyes in the room yearning for more. Penn's mouth hung slightly open.

It was hardly a millisecond before he remembered the job he was sent there to do. What had that last mare been wearing? He hadn't even looked! What could he do, write about how beautiful the model was? That wouldn't work. Sure, she was an intensely attractive mare, but ponies didn't want to read about that. Grumbling, the colt decided to skip remarking on the last dress to focus on the rest of the show.

The remainder of the outfits were as glamorous as the first two had been. Penn was in awe of the plethora of ways that the designer had been able to incorporate natural materials into her designs. Internally, however, he was a little upset that the yellow Pegasus model had failed to make another

appearance. Every other mare had gone through multiple wardrobe changes, but apparently the one in question had been exempt from that. Regardless, Penn had taken copious notes, and all that was left was for him to snag an interview Rarity, the pony behind the dresses.

The journalist had no idea where to find her, though. He hadn't been given a description of any sort, and in reality, how was a designer going to stand out in a crowd of the most fashion-centered ponies in Manehattan?

"Gather round, everypony! Gather round! I, Rarity, am here!"

Ok, so that was pretty easy.

Penn turned to face another mob of fashionable ponies centered around a white Unicorn. The mare wore a light blue dress that had assorted wildflowers interwoven in its fabric. Her mane was a deep purple, and finely styled so that it fit in with the average Manehattanite's. She was laughing and gesturing at a colt that had apparently made some humorous remark. Penn quickly ascertained that getting to talk with Rarity was a near impossibility at this point, and that it was more logical for him to head back to the office and get started on his article. *An interview wouldn't have added much, anyway*, he supposed.

The writer unceremoniously exited the warehouse and headed left towards the towering news headquarters. Thoughts still infiltrated his head as he trotted lazily through the building's revolving door. *Who was that Pegasus?* That was the foremost question on his mind, and he would have given his right hoof to find out her name. As he stepped into an unoccupied elevator, he realized that he worked for the newspaper! He could easily contact Rarity at a later date and find out about the model. The Pegasus hadn't seemed like a local, so Penn guessed that the two mares might be traveling together. His spirits slightly lifted, the colt moved purposefully out of the elevator and towards his boss's door, knocking once before poking his head inside.

"Ms. Prose, do you have any contact information for that designer, Rarity?" Penn's boss looked up sternly from the paperwork she had been attending to. She glared at him and spoke quickly.

“Look, I don’t have time to take requests from you. Bring me the article first, and then you can ask questions.” She looked down immediately and returned to writing furiously on the parchment in front of her. Penn was sure that the blue mare was going to tear through the paper if she continued to scrawl so rapidly, but the avaricious glow in her eyes let him know that she wasn’t going to be talked too.

Penn only knew the basic rumors about Prose’s literary background. Supposedly, she discovered her cutie mark (an ambiguous red book) very early in life, and took up writing as a hobby. She had a lot of problems with publishers, and never saw a bit from her first few novels. Pouring her soul into works like that caused the mare to become internally disillusioned with the literary world, and she decided to take a job with *The New Yoke Times* until the “fascist publishing scum” was replaced by somepony with taste. Needless to say, she never left. Then again, all of this was a lot of speculation, and it could be fiction as likely as fact.

Penn left his boss alone and backed out of the doorway. He turned and tried to locate any journalists who might want to chat for a little bit. His article wouldn’t be needed for hours, and it wasn’t going to take more than half an hour to put together. Unfortunately, he couldn’t pick out a friendly face from the lot of them. He did recognize a bare-flanked intern from the morning who was napping in the same position Penn had left him in, but he didn’t even know the colt’s name. Dejected, Penn crept towards his desk near the far left wall of the room and laid out his day’s findings before him.

It didn’t take much to write a newspaper article, and it took even less to write one on fashion. Penn put his quill to a clean sheet of parchment and began to summarize what he had seen. He spent a little time highlighting a few of the dress’s designs in particular, but mostly tried to express a general view to avoid needing involved explanations. He added a line in about the beauty of the models, but quickly scratched it out, fearing that it would seem in bad taste. After finishing what Penn recognized as a few paragraphs worth of uninspired writing, he rolled up the parchment and took it in his mouth. He translated himself from his desk back to the Managing Editor’s door for the third time that day. He knocked twice before fully passing through the open doorway. Penn observed Prose working on some sort of crossword puzzle, obviously finished with her composition from earlier. She didn’t look up as he approached her desk.

“Ms. Prose, I finished the article you assigned,” Penn spoke, trying to catch his boss’s attention. She held out a hoof, still focused on her crossword puzzle, and the grey colt transferred his writing into her possession. She snapped the article away quickly and dragged it over her puzzle, now eyeing it with intense scrutiny.

“This writing is atrocious! Did you even attempt to work on it, or did you think that this would be acceptable?” Penn didn’t know how to respond to Prose yet. She might be serious, but it was more likely that she was just being aggravating for aggravation’s sake. “My four-year-old nephew could piece together a story better than this!” Penn smiled at that statement. Those working under Prose were always compared to her ‘four-year-old nephew,’ who apparently hadn’t aged for five years. He was also apparently an accomplished writer, athlete, or whatever the situation might call for him to be. Prose referring to him in a critique usually meant that she couldn’t find anything actually wrong with your work, but she wanted to insult it somehow.

“I’m sure he could, Ms. Prose. Now, I still have a question. Do you think there’s any way I can contact that designer from today?” Penn asked, shyness creeping into his voice no matter how much he tried to hide it. His boss caught on to his tone.

“Oh, you have something you want to tell her do you?” a mischievous grin crossing her face as she talked. “Yeah, you can have her hotel’s address, but don’t do anything weird that’s going to get me fired. You should probably just write a letter.” She quickly scratched a sentence unto a scrap of parchment and handed it to the journalist. Penn was again at a loss for words, and thought it best to simply thank Prose and make an exit.

Returning to his desk, he glanced at the writing to find out where the designer was staying. She appeared to be sequestered in a hotel within ten blocks of the newspaper office, but Penn agreed with his boss that sending a letter would be more appropriate than showing up unannounced. What was he going to ask, though? Without too much consideration, Penn picked up a quill and began to write exactly what came to mind.

Dear Ms. Rarity,

I'd like to congratulate you on your first fashion show here in Manehattan. I was present today as a journalist, and I've seen that your designs are truly unique. In my opinion, however, one of your models stole the show. She was a yellow Pegasus with a pink mane, and I'm guessing that she wasn't a local. I don't mean to be invasive, but I would be very interested in talking to her, if that isn't too much to ask. If she's from a local modeling agency and you don't know her, that's alright too. If you would please write back with any information you may have, it would be greatly appreciated.

*Thank you,
Penn*

It didn't turn out quite the way the reporter had envisioned it, but he didn't foresee himself writing anything more eloquent at this point. He hurried to an elevator and then quickly exited the building upon reaching the ground floor. Almost at a full gallop, Penn sped to a mailbox and deposited his letter into it, hoping that the mailmare hadn't been around yet. Feeling as if he had accomplished his day's goals, Penn set off for home, sure that Prose wouldn't need him again until the morning.

Rarity opened the door to her exquisite hotel room and nearly collapsed onto the floor with exhaustion. Fluttershy squeezed by her and made her way to the leftmost of the two beds in the room. She daintily rolled onto the mattress, trying her best not to mess up her mane. She had taken off the dress from earlier and left it backstage at the fashion show. The colts Rarity hired to move all of her equipment would take it back wherever it needed to go. At this point, Rarity had moved from the now-closed doorway, and was taking off her makeup in front of the room's mirror.

"Did you see the way their faces lit up when that last dress came out? It was marvelous!" Rarity let out a happy squeal and continued. "I'm sure that some of the local shops will have offers for me in, oh, what's that Rainbow Dash always says? 'Ten seconds flat!'" Fluttershy smiled gently.

"Everypony really enjoyed the show. It'd be hard not to with a designer as great as you, Rarity," the shy mare explained, still trying to relax a little bit. Rarity turned, her face now only naturally gorgeous, and began to talk to Fluttershy.

"You were excellent too, dahling! The colts in the front row nearly fainted when you made your appearance," Rarity boasted. "If only you'd have gone out for another outfit," she added quickly.

"Oh, Rarity, you know I would have, but I hate modeling! You remember how long it took you to get me out here with you." Rarity thought back and recollected the days of pleading leading up to Fluttershy's defeated agreement. She knew that the Pegasus would have liked nothing more than to stay at home and receive a postcard from the big city, but Rarity just couldn't let an opportunity like this slip by. It was good for Fluttershy to see a little more of Equestria, whether she knew it or not.

"I understand, I was just having a little joke is all. Have you thought any more about what you want to do tomorrow?"

"Oh, well, I might want to visit Central Park, if that's alright," Fluttershy admitted while blushing. Rarity looked pensive.

"Hmmm, well I suppose we could see the park, but staring at trees all day does not a vacation make."

"I don't know, it would to me," Fluttershy responded weakly.

"Yes, well, we could maybe work it into the morning, but what about tomorrow afternoon? Wouldn't you like to take in some of the sights? Manehattan has such a diverse array of things to visit and enjoy! I'm sure you'd like to see some of those, wouldn't you?" Fluttershy opened her mouth to answer, but ended up jumping and landing with a small 'eep' at the sound of a knock on the door.

"Now who could that be?" Rarity wondered aloud, walking to the room's door and opening it with a tug. A pony in a concierge outfit greeted the mare.

"A message for you," he stated simply. Rarity took the letter from his hooves and replaced it with a bit. The concierge nodded and left as quickly as he had come, closing the door behind him.

"Who is it from?" Fluttershy asked quietly. Rarity had been rereading the return address for almost a minute.

"It's from *The New Yoke Times*! Oh, maybe they want to make me their pony of the year!" Fluttershy giggled as Rarity started to hop around.

"That's the wrong publication, Rarity." The white Unicorn stopped her excited bouncing and frowned.

"Regardless, they sent me a letter and I'm sure it's of the utmost importance." She carefully undid the seal on the parchment before unfolding it. The mare held it in her hooves for a while, her eyes gazing across the page before returning to the other side. Fluttershy anxiously awaited what the letter might say. A grin spread across the whole of the Unicorn's face, and Fluttershy grinned too. Rarity looked up and broke the silence.

"This is absolutely stunning news, dear! I don't think we'll have to worry about our plans for tomorrow. The letter's from a nice colt journalist." Fluttershy couldn't figure out what any of her friend's ambiguous statement had meant.

"What do you mean?" Rarity's grin became wider at the question, almost frighteningly so.

"Why, he wants to meet you, Fluttershy! He saw you at the fashion show today and he thought you looked smashing, as we all did, but he went a step further and actually tried to find out who you were. Isn't this fantastic?" Rarity giggled and stomped her front hooves giddily, the near opposite of Fluttershy.

The Pegasus' stomach had dropped. A colt wanted to meet her? She hadn't even met *him* yet! Rarity couldn't really expect her to get together with the journalist without knowing who he was, could she? A thousand thoughts raced through her head, and Fluttershy tried to express some of them.

"I can't, Rarity! It wouldn't be right to take away from our time in the city together, and I don't really want to meet another colt, I know plenty back in Ponyville." Rarity scoffed at Fluttershy's feeble plea.

"Name two available colts that you know from our town, dear."

"Big Macintosh!" Fluttershy blurted out, before pausing for a moment, "and, let's see, ummm..."

"Exactly! You need to broaden your horizons a bit, Fluttershy. Big Mac is quite the stallion, but we both know we can never have him," Rarity sighed, before returning to the matter at hoof. "A mare your age needs to start looking at the future. You saw how I was conversing with those local colts after the show! You never know where your 'prince charming' might be."

"I'm still not sure, Rarity."

"Nonsense! You'll be absolutely fine, and I'll be close by, making sure everything goes well. Doesn't that make you feel a teensy bit better?"

"I suppose," Fluttershy lied. Rarity beamed and began to write on a piece of parchment. She filled up the front, and, deciding it was sufficient, signed her name at the bottom. She turned to look at her Pegasus friend.

"I'm going to have the concierge send this out as quickly as possible, and when I return, I'll fill you in on the plans." Rarity trotted to the door, opened it, and disappeared into the hallway adjacent to the room. Fluttershy sighed deeply.

What was she getting herself into?

Chapter 2

Penn got out of bed at 7:30, giving himself just enough time to wake up a little bit before feeding his pet snake, exiting his apartment, journeying down three flights of stairs, and joining the ponies going their own ways on the sidewalk. He walked dazedly through the revolving door denoting the entrance to his career, and boarded an elevator.

Stepping out at the correct floor, Penn tried to take in the office scene. The same blank-flanked intern was napping on his desk, causing Penn to worry a little bit. He must have been asleep for at least fifteen hours! Regardless, it really was none of his business, and waking up a stressed colt was the last thing that the journalist had planned. He instead crossed the room and walked into Prose's office, the door open wide. His boss sat behind her desk, more papers than ever competing for space on top of it. Her black mane hung loose over her neck, and she looked up to acknowledge Penn's entrance.

"You didn't knock," she informed him.

"I didn't think it was necessary," he replied quickly, formality forgotten. Prose glared at him before continuing.

"Well maybe I won't think it necessary to give you this," she smirked while producing a sealed piece of parchment. "Now the horseshoe's on the other hoof, am I right?" Penn wasn't amused.

"Withholding mail is a crime, you know, and I don't appreciate my boss antagonizing me like this," the grey journalist pronounced, indignation rumbling within his raspy early-morning voice.

"Oh, lighten up; I'm just trying to mess around with you! Here," the mare threw the letter to Penn, "I'm not going to prevent you from reading your mail. Honestly though, do give people your home address for personal letters." Penn hadn't paid attention to his boss's last statement. He had already broken the seal on the parchment and begun reading.

My Dear Mr. Penn,

I received your letter, and I think you'll be happy to know that I am in fact traveling with the model from the day previous. Her name is Fluttershy, and she is from Ponyville, as am I. She is a bit on the timid side, but when she heard about your letter, she was positively bouncing with joy. She'd like to meet you for coffee this afternoon. There was a café named 'The Daily Grind' only a block or so from our hotel, and she'll be there at 3:30. I encourage you to do the same.

*Sincerely,
Ms. Rarity*

'Bouncing with joy,' eh? Penn hadn't known that his letter would have that much of an effect on the mare in question. That being said, he was a journalist for one of the most successful publications in all of Equestria, and he supposed that the return address hadn't hurt his chances any. Smiling, he turned to leave the office, only then realizing that his boss was still talking.

"... And of course there's the matter of actually getting inside the whole scam, but I'll leave that to you. Are you up for it?" Penn had absolutely no idea what Prose was referring to.

"I'm afraid not, Ms. Prose. I'm actually going to take the day off." Prose opened her mouth to speak, but Penn continued. "No amount of threatening is going to keep me here, either. I have enough bits for a while, so missing one day isn't going to starve me. Now, I'm not trying to be rude, but I'm leaving. Have a wonderful day." He turned and left quickly, leaving his boss speechless, her mouth hanging open.

Prose was not a supporter of 'days off.' As far as she understood, she had never taken one in her life. She had a job to do, and who would step in for her when she was gone? No, it was easier to stay and work than to go home. Besides, what would she do with free time anyway? It's not like she had any friends outside of the office.

Penn spent the remainder of his morning getting ready for his afternoon meet-up. He weighed his wardrobe options, settling on a nice hat as opposed to a full outfit. He wasn't exactly sure what the dress code for this

sort of thing was. The two ponies weren't going on a date, per se, but he supposed it could be construed as one. Regardless, his black fedora would be acceptable, and keeping that in mind, he left for the coffee shop at 3:00.

The journalist had been there once before, stopping in for a house blend before continuing on to write some article. It wasn't the most spacious place, but Penn had to commend Rarity on her sense of style. The Daily Grind was usually a well-kept secret of Manehattan, and for her to spot it in passing was nothing short of a feat. Penn trotted along at a good pace, finding himself reading the café's sign at 3:25. It wouldn't hurt to be a minute early, so he pushed open the small front door and moved into the tiny shop.

The intoxicating aroma of ground coffee beans assailed his nostrils within a second of entering the establishment. It was divine, as far as Penn was concerned. He began to glance around at the few full tables, before quickly spotting the pony he had come for. Fluttershy sat near the back of the room, the newspaper she held nearly obscuring her face. She hadn't looked up at Penn, but then again she didn't know who was coming to meet her. The reporter mentally briefed himself before breathing in deeply and approaching the mare's table.

"Hello Ms. Fluttershy, I'm Penn," he said, sticking out a hoof in greeting. Fluttershy lowered her paper, revealing a pair of tinted pink sunglasses over her eyes. She blushed, but didn't say anything. Penn quickly pulled his hoof back and brushed it through his mane, trying to appear as if that had been his intention. The colt heard the Pegasus mumble something.

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that, what did you say?" Penn tried to put on a friendly, reassuring smile. Fluttershy was pushed as far back as she could be in her chair, her eyes unreadable.

"I...i...it's nice to meet you, Penn." Her words sounded strained and were extremely hard to hear. The journalist wasn't really sure what course of action to take, and eventually settled on joining the table with Fluttershy. She looked to have pressed herself further away from him, if that was even possible. Penn maintained a smile.

"I'm sorry for trying to put something together so quickly, it's just that, well, after that fashion show yesterday, I really wanted to meet you." Penn

noticed Fluttershy shivering slightly in her seat. "I'm sorry if this was unexpected. I honestly only wanted to congratulate you on a fantastic job. I think you really made the show yesterday." Fluttershy let out an extremely low-volume noise, and Penn thought it sounded like 'thank you.' He broadened his smile a little wider. This isn't anything like the "bouncing" model he had envisioned from the letter.

"I heard you're from Ponyville. Is this your first time in the big city?" The mare nodded almost imperceptibly in response. He tried to think of something that would force her to speak.

"This must all be very exciting for you then," he commented. Fluttershy gave another slight nod. Obviously she wasn't going to talk about herself.

"Have you seen Central Park yet? It's quite a sight this time of the year," to which the mare nodded again in agreement. Penn sighed without trying to hide it, his smile faltering.

His feelings were conflicting. He had been very excited to get to meet Fluttershy, but this conversation wasn't going anywhere. She was a beautiful mare, but who was she on the inside, behind this wall she had built up? The journalist sighed, finding the answer abundantly clear. It wouldn't do either pony any good to keep this up. He decided to speak his mind.

"Would you be more comfortable if I left?" Fluttershy nodded stronger than before. Penn stood up fully.

"Well, it's been nice meeting you, Fluttershy. I hope you have a nice stay in the city." Penn turned and made his way to the front door, the barista shooting him a dirty look for not buying anything. The colt had a hoof on the door and was about to push it open, chalking the afternoon up as a learning experience.

"Waiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!" a sing-song voice called from behind. Penn put his hoof down and turned, almost jumping upon realizing that he was eye-to-eye with a white Unicorn. He quickly recognized her as the designer from the day previous. Where she had appeared from, however, he had no idea.

"I know that this hasn't exactly gone swimmingly, but perhaps you'd like to try another meeting again, sometime?" Rarity batted her eyes, cocking her head slightly. Penn sighed, no longer trying to maintain a façade of happiness.

"I really don't think that would be best. I'm not mad, I just don't want to put Ms. Fluttershy through anything she has no desire to be a part of," Penn explained, noticing the form of the Pegasus huddled behind Rarity.

"But surely you're not going to leave after just one introduction?" Rarity's voice was hurried, seemingly pleading with the colt to stay. Penn tried to think of a way to make an exit.

"You know, I've actually got a snake at home that's going to be agitated if I don't get back and feed him soon. Wouldn't want him to try to swallow the couch again, you know?" Penn turned and made to push the door open.

"Wait." The voice called out to him softly. He revolved on the spot again, this time seeing Fluttershy fully emerged from behind her friend. The colt was sure that he must have had a surprised look on his face, and Rarity's wasn't any bit less amazed.

"Did you say that you have a snake at your home?" Fluttershy had finally started to speak with some conviction in her voice, even if that only left her volume a little louder than whisper. "I've never heard of ponies keeping snakes as pets before."

"Well, yeah. I've had him for quite a while now. He's just a little corn snake, but he eats his fill. So anyway, I should probably get back to him."

"I'd like to see him."

"What?" Penn asked.

"If that's alright with you, of course." Fluttershy crossed her front hooves nervously.

"I, I don't think that will be a problem. Skinner loves meeting new ponies!" Penn's smile returned, this time sincere. He glanced at Rarity, who was sporting a similar expression.

“Look, if you’re not going to buy anything, then get out, ok? You’re blocking my door!” The owner of the café had come out from behind the counter to confront the three ponies congregating around his entrance. His bushy moustache bounced with each step that he took.

“I’m sorry, sir, we were just on our way,” Penn hastily said, ushering the two mares out of the shop before exiting himself.

“Oh my, he’s big, isn’t he?” Fluttershy remarked as Skinner attempted to slither around her hooves. She giggled a bit as the snake brushed against her. “He’s playful too! Oh, Rarity, you should come over and see this.” Fluttershy turned to face her friend, who was hiding behind Penn’s sofa and attempting to avert her gaze from the serpent.

“That’s quite alright. I’m sure he’s simply adorable,” she remarked, her voice quavering. Penn smirked as he took in the sight. Here he was in his crummy apartment with what seemed to be two of the most attractive mares in Manehattan. He recalled having a dream that had a similar premise, without the same two girls, of course.

“Do a lot of ponies in Manehattan have pet snakes?” Fluttershy asked while holding Skinner in her hooves. The snake was lying limp, exceedingly docile even by Penn’s standards.

“I’m not sure,” the journalist replied, thinking about the inquiry. “I suppose that enough ponies must, because they sell these breeds in shops.” Fluttershy’s eyes grew wide. She placed the snake on the floor.

“You don’t mean that they keep them in captivity just to sell them?” Penn was taken aback by the mortified tone of her words.

“Well, of course they do. How else are pet stores going to make money?” Fluttershy nearly fainted at the words ‘pet stores.’

“They catch animals just to sell them here!? That’s awful!” Fluttershy was speaking louder than ever, though that was just regular volume for most ponies. Penn took it to mean that the mare was finally becoming comfortable around him. “Did you buy Skinner from a store?” Fluttershy

asked breathlessly, her eyes revealing a passion Penn hadn't noticed in her yet.

"I actually got him from an animal shelter a few blocks away from here. They found him in an office building, which naturally caused quite a stir." Penn bent down and picked up his pet from the floor. "I don't want to think what might have happened to the little guy if I hadn't rescued him from that place." Penn nuzzled Skinner, a rare display of affection from the colt. The snake responded by playfully biting Penn's nose. "Skinner, what are you doing?" Fluttershy giggled as Penn attempted to chastise the snake.

"I'm not your food, little guy!" The colt shook a hoof at his pet. "Now give me a kiss to make up." Skinner rolled his eyes (quite a challenge for a snake) and reluctantly stuck out his long tongue to brush Penn's cheek. Fluttershy was practically squealing with giddiness.

"You two are so cute together! Rarity, you really should see this," the Pegasus commented.

"I'll take your word for it, dear," she answered, still behind the couch. Penn could see her purple tail swishing back and forth in annoyance over the top of it. Fluttershy didn't seem to mind, fully engrossed in playing with her new animal friend.

"He really is beautiful," she commented as she stroked the snake's scales with a hoof. Skinner was flexing happily at all of the attention. "And I'm glad you didn't buy him either," she added.

"I've never been a proponent of buying animals. I've always thought it was cruel to spend money on a creature that can be provided for as opposed to trying to support one who can't. Besides, you don't find a personality like Skinner's in stores." Penn beamed at his own words, feeling as elated as he could remember feeling for a long time.

"I think he's tired," Fluttershy announced as she brought the snake over to his bed. She laid him down on it and quietly turned back to the other two ponies. Rarity had arisen from her hiding place, eyes still slightly wider than normal.

“See Fluttershy, Penn wasn’t a bad guy after all! You just had to spend some time getting to know him,” Rarity said, tossing her mane back with a hoof nonchalantly. Fluttershy blushed at having been called out.

“You were right, Rarity,” the Pegasus conceded. She glanced at the floor, and then at the wall next to her. Her eyes lit up as she examined the clock. “Oh dear, it’s late, isn’t it?” Rarity turned to face the clock as well.

“I suppose that it is nearly nightfall. Mr. Penn, we’ve had a fabulous time visiting with you today. Receiving your letter nearly a day ago has truly set the course for a memorable afternoon. If it’s not imposing, would you mind possibly giving us an insider’s tour of Manehattan tomorrow? If you’ve got other plans, that’s quite alright.” Rarity smiled brightly at the colt. He didn’t take more than a second to think.

“I’d be happy to, ladies. I know my way around the city like the back of my hoof!” Penn demonstrated by holding a forehoof out and examining it. Fluttershy giggled again.

“I’ll bring Fluttershy over with me tomorrow around noon, does that sound acceptable?” the stylish Unicorn inquired.

“It sounds perfect to me,” Penn exclaimed.

“Then with that, I bid you good evening, Mr. Penn,” Rarity spoke, turning and exiting through Penn’s apartment door. Fluttershy smiled a little at the colt.

“Good night, Penn.” Farewells over with, she trotted off after her travel partner to catch up. Penn closed and bolted the door behind them.

Rarity insisted on calling a taxi carriage to pick the two of them up. Fluttershy had admitted on the night of their arrival that the city didn’t feel all too safe after the sun went down. The ride back to their hotel took very little time, and within half an hour the two mares were lounging on their respective beds, recalling the day’s events.

“What did you think of Penn, dahling?” Rarity asked Fluttershy after a minute of silence. The question caught the Pegasus off guard, but she responded nonetheless.

“He seemed like a nice pony,” she replied simply. Rarity knew there was more that she had to say, though.

“Yes, yes, we both thought he was nice, but what *e*/se did you think about him?” Rarity turned onto her side to face Fluttershy after asking the question.

“Oh, well, he likes animals. I think that’s neat. And, um, he’s not a bad looking colt either, I suppose,” Fluttershy rushed out the last few words, turning her head away.

“I’m soooo glad you mentioned that, dear. I couldn’t help but notice that he did have a rather toned flank. It must be all of that walking he does as a reporter,” Rarity guessed, her eyes staring off at something in the distance before continuing. “He’s probably not much by Manehattan standards, but I believe it likely that he would be very handsome to most of our Ponyville friends.”

“I guess,” Fluttershy said. Talking about other ponies was never something she liked to do, fearing that others would be talking about her as she did so.

“I have an idea for tomorrow,” Rarity began, “and you can say no to it if you want.” Fluttershy nodded for her to go on. “I think the two of you should explore the city together, without me.” Fluttershy nervously started making excuses.

“Oh, I couldn’t, Rarity! What would you do tomorrow?” The unicorn smiled slyly.

“I’ve been meaning to get together with a few of the local boutiques to discuss selling my designs in the city. We *are* leaving in two days, and I need to attend to the business that brought us here in the first place. If you wanted to tag along it would be a dreadfully boring day,” she explained.

"No it wouldn't! I'd love to see some of the stores in Manehattan! I don't need to go and trot around with some colt I just met today," she said, her blue eyes darting nervously around. Rarity had her right where she wanted her.

"But Fluttershy," she began, "you yourself stated that he was a nice colt! You two even bonded over that slimy reptile this afternoon! I think it would be beneficial for you to try this." Rarity put out her lower lip, pouting. Fluttershy was unaffected by her expression. "Pleeeeeeease?"

"I just can't do it," the Pegasus sighed, face downcast. Rarity tried a new tactic.

"Why not? What is the worst thing that could possibly come of all of this?"

"I don't know," the yellow mare answered. "I just don't want to! Can't you please let me come with you?" It was now her turn to pout.

"Fluttershy," Rarity began, her expression becoming serious, "I want you to do this for me. I know that you don't think it's the best plan, but sometimes you have to trust me. Begging you to model out here wasn't exactly proper, and I do apologize, but I am asking you now, as your best friend, please do this. You'll never get another chance to if you don't." Rarity turned onto her back and faced the ceiling. Silence overtook the room. It felt hot and thick in the air, only shattered by a feeble response, barely audible to anyone who wasn't listening for it.

"Fine."

Prose was agitated. Not because she had missed a deadline or anything of the sort, but because Penn hadn't returned this morning. The grey colt already had his fun taking a vacation the day previous. That had aggravated his boss enough. Now he was skipping a second day, with no word sent in about what he was doing. Prose was nearly fuming. She told herself that she would have felt the same way if it had been another reporter, that she wasn't regarding this particular colt differently than any other, but grew more agitated as she realized that this wasn't the case. Plenty of reporters took time off without sending in a letter. That never bothered Prose before.

She slammed her head onto her desk in defeat. Was she actually attached to one of her underlings? It couldn't be possible. Penn was an average writer with an average body and was average in every other facet of his life. Reluctantly, she opened a drawer in her desk and removed her voluminous manuscript from it, attempting to distract herself. Setting the papers on her desk, she tried to find where she had left off.

The story was a romance novel about two ponies that met by chance in a museum. They got together and basically built up their relationship as the novel progressed. Currently, the two were on a date taking place in a small boat. The colt was having a hard time using the oars with his clumsy hooves, making the mare even more exasperated as time went on. It was good writing. Prose knew it. The plot was questionable, but the writing was fantastic.

She examined the two characters. She had already figured out that she was personifying the female lead as herself, and she started to wonder about the colt in her book. Sure, he too was an average pony, never recognized as anything special, but that alone didn't make him Penn, did it? There are plenty of grey colts with brown manes in Equestria, right? Journalism was a popular career choice, and all of the other small idiosyncrasies were just coincidences. Who was she kidding?

Prose brushed all of the papers off of her workspace with one swipe of her hoof. The writings fell to the floor and spread out in an immitigable pile. The story hadn't been that good. She could write something better; something that didn't make her think about Penn every time she put her quill to paper. All she needed was inspiration.

Chapter 3

For what seemed like the first time in an eternity, Penn slept in. It wasn't much, the journalist just getting one more hour's worth of sleep, but arising at 8:30 felt refreshing in an indescribable way. He rolled out of bed and examined his bedroom. When was the last time he actually paid attention to what his quarters looked like? Everything was stark, the walls bare save a painting of a forest.

Penn moved into his kitchen/living room and tried to take in everything. Usually he was too bleary-eyed to observe any details of his home in the morning, and at the end of a work day he was too tired to care. Knowing that he had no duties that day besides escorting two mares around the city gave him a sense of freedom that he desired to have more often. His gaze eventually fell on Skinner, who was curled up in a tight coil.

"I owe everything thing to you, my friend." Penn addressed the snake. The serpent opened an eye to see what was going on, but didn't look like he had understood any part of the last sentence. "Who would have guessed that Fluttershy was an animal-lover?" She probably tended to animals in her profession back in Ponyville. He would have to ask her when they met up later.

The morning passed blissfully slowly. Penn discovered a bag of coffee that he had bought a week ago from a peddler at some event he had been reporting on. He brewed it in a severely underused coffee maker and enjoyed taking time to drink it. The journalist later tried to find something to eat for breakfast, but instead found he was lacking when it came to early-morning types of food. He settled on leftover pasta from a few nights ago.

After eating, the colt moved on to tidying up his apartment. Penn was actually embarrassed by the amount of dust that had accumulated since the last time he had cleaned. Hopefully Rarity and Fluttershy had been too preoccupied to notice yesterday. It didn't take the colt long to wipe down all of the dusty surfaces in his small living room, and he made a mental note to never let his home get that bad again.

Housework finished, he relaxed on his couch and examined the last two days in his mind. How did he actually feel about Fluttershy? The answer wasn't immediately clear to him. He liked her, he supposed. He was definitely excited about meeting her again, even if she was with that designer, Rarity. Penn had nothing against the stylish unicorn, in fact he found her quite attractive physically. He just couldn't imagine himself ever actually having a romantic attraction to a mare with her sort of demeanor. That factor was probably why he had such a hard time finding a marefriend in Manehattan. Penn sat lost in thought for quite a while.

The hotel room was dark when Fluttershy finally opened her eyes. The curtains were still drawn, preventing any light from spilling in through the window. As the Pegasus turned onto her side, she realized that Rarity wasn't in her bed. 'She must have already left to meet up with some stores,' Fluttershy discerned. The yellow mare threw off the sheets covering her and sat up on her mattress. She stretched out her wings and began to flex them both in unison, working out kinks she had developed while sleeping. She ran her hooves through her mane, finding that it had actually kept its shape fairly well.

It was her last day in the city, and she felt great about it. All in all, the trip had turned out to be enjoyable, despite the stress she had felt about modeling. It had been nice to see a place so different from Ponyville, if a little strange. Manehattan wasn't something that Fluttershy was going to forget anytime soon.

And then there was Penn. The journalist puzzled Fluttershy in a most peculiar way. She knew so little about him, and yet she was looking forward to getting to understand him further. She had never wanted to make acquaintances with strangers before, so why was this colt so different? The Pegasus let out a sigh, not wanting to think too hard after just waking up. Instead, she lightly stepped off of her bed and onto the floor, stretching her legs out one at a time.

She walked around the room and eventually examined the suitcase she had brought with her lying in a corner. She didn't have anything packed. The mare started to gather all of her belongings that she had scattered around the room over the course of the past few days. She put away

anything that she wouldn't need until returning home, and arranged everything else neatly on the table within the room.

The task at hoof completed, Fluttershy returned to her bed and sat down. The clock on the nightstand separating her and Rarity's beds read 10:30. She sighed, realizing that she didn't have anything to do until her appointment with Penn later. Knowing that going out and walking around alone wasn't an option, she grabbed a fashion magazine that Rarity had left on her sheets and began to flip through the pages idly. She would show up to Penn's early, she decided, though not too early; 11:30 sounded about right.

Prose tapped a hoof anxiously on the edge of her desk, eyeing a mounted clock intently. She was now sure that Penn would be coming in late, as opposed to skipping another day. As the hour hand reached eleven, she sighed and stopped watching the ticking of the second hand. The journalist had come into her office at 8 o'clock every other morning without fail. Why did she miss that so much after one day without it? She gritted her teeth and tried to beat back her emotions.

It didn't work. Thoughts raced through her head. Maybe he had been in an accident the day previous, or had been abducted. Prose couldn't recall him ever actually talking about family, so what if nopony was searching for him? She frowned and concentrated harder on pushing everything about Penn from her consciousness. It was a losing battle, as each minute brought a new concern to the surface. This wasn't how a mare should feel about just a regular pony. Prose sighed as she made the final connections in her mind; she was falling in love with Penn. The fuel had always been there, his absence was just the spark that lit it ablaze.

She pulled out her desk drawer and withdrew a thoroughly worn and dated copy of *Fifty ways to Seduce a Stallion*. The book had served Prose well ever since she had purchased it as a filly. She flipped through the paperback until she arrived on a page that had been folded over multiple times.

#32: *Timing*

It is well known among the mares of our generation that colts do not always respond well to a slow build-up of romance. A mare that takes too much time trying to express her feelings will likely be turned down. It is important to remember that surprise and spontaneity are great ways to catch a colt off guard and maintain his interest. By keeping them guessing about what's happening, you now have the upper hand for the moment. Get close to them, and don't hide how you feel internally.

If you think that the time is right, kiss him. If he has feelings for you, he will try to kiss you back. Even if he is not sure of his emotions, there is only a small chance that you will be met by resistance. As a final note, keep in mind that you should be undeterred in your efforts. Colts are complex, and sometimes do not display how they are feeling with their actions. You are on a mission, and failure is not an option.

Prose put the book back in its drawer. The mare turned around and opened the top drawer in her filing cabinet, running her eyes over each file's label until she found the one that read 'Employee Records.' She took it in her hoof and opened it on her desk, brushing assorted other papers away to make room. She checked each paper within the folder until she came across one with a grey colt's picture on it. Recognition of the face sent an odd sensation through Prose's stomach which she tried to ignore. She scanned the document until she found an address.

"It looks like I'm taking a day off after all."

Penn jumped a little as his eyes fluttered open. He must have been napping, judging by the fact that his neck hurt as he looked around. He glanced at his mounted clock and realized that it was half an hour before noon. He had been out cold for quite a while. He put his head back down on his couch's armrest, willing to get a little more rest if he could.

knock knock

Penn's eyes darted open again. That knocking must have woken him up to begin with. He clumsily rolled off of his sofa and ended up landing on his back with a thud. Finally managing to get his hooves under himself, the journalist trotted quickly to the door to answer it. He undid the lock and pulled the door open. Fluttershy stood there, looking at him through her

deep blue eyes. She had decided against wearing her sunglasses again, and Penn was thankful for that. A colt could really get lost in those eyes.

“Good morning, Penn,” the pink-maned Pegasus greeted, the corner of her mouth turned up in a smile.

“Good morning to you as well, Ms. Fluttershy.” Penn beamed, gesturing for the mare to come in before realizing an incongruity. “If it’s not personal or anything, where’s Ms. Rarity?”

“Oh,” Fluttershy said softly, suddenly appearing nervous. “She had to do some business today. I’m sorry if you were expecting her.” Penn was internally jumping for joy. He’d have the whole day with Fluttershy!

“No, it’s not like that. I’m glad you’re here,” he reassured. He turned and pushed his door shut. Penn decided against locking it, seeing as they’d be going out to explore the city in a little while. As he walked back in to his living room, he saw that his visitor was standing around awkwardly. “You can have a seat if you like, Ms. Fluttershy.” She smiled at him as she sat on his couch.

“You can just call me Fluttershy if you want, Penn,” she explained, still smiling softly. The journalist nodded in response, now doing the part of standing around himself. Fluttershy spoke up. “You can sit down too, I don’t bite, I promise,” she said, blushing slightly as the colt joined her on the small couch. They were close, nearly flank to flank.

“So,” Penn began, “do you have anywhere in particular you want to visit today?” Fluttershy looked pensive for a moment, before eventually replying in her quiet manner.

“I’m afraid that I don’t really know the city that well. Wherever we go will be fine,” she said.

“I hope you’re up for a little bit of walking, because I know a few places you are going to love,” Penn said, smiling as widely as ever. He was mentally drawing the route that they would take.

“How long have you lived in Manehattan?” Fluttershy asked while playing with her front hooves.

“Ever since I was a foal, actually. I’m not much of a traveler, you see. Have you lived in Ponyville all of your life?” the reporter questioned, genuinely interested in the mare’s response.

“No, I was born in Cloudsdale. The story about how I came to live in Ponyville is kind of long, truthfully,” the shy mare commented. Penn wanted to know more.

“I’m all ears, Fluttershy.” He smiled as the Pegasus started to retell the story of falling from Cloudsdale. With a little convincing after a few tentative pauses, the apprehension she had displayed the day previous was replaced by a much more confident sounding voice. Penn was grateful that the mare was finally starting to open up to him a little bit. After speaking for a couple of minutes, Fluttershy began to wrap up her tale.

“And the ground just seemed so inviting,” she explained, her white teeth visible as she smiled, her blue eyes seeing an image that was nothing more than a memory. “I’ve lived in Ponyville ever since.” Penn nodded, amazed at the length of time the Pegasus had spoken for. Fluttershy chuckled a little at her recollection, causing a strand of her mane to fall down over right eye.

“Hold still for a moment,” Penn instructed. Fluttershy gave him a curious glance that quickly changed to a very surprised expression as the colt brushed the rogue hair back with a hoof nonchalantly. She blushed more deeply than before as the journalist smiled. “You really do have beautiful eyes, you know.”

“I, um, uh,” the mare began, eyeing different objects around the room. “May I use your restroom, Penn?” she finally asked. Penn pointed to a door adjacent to the couch with his hoof, now wondering what she seemed so nervous about.

“It’s right in there, Fluttershy.” The mare nodded and got up from her seat. She lightly stepped towards the door. Penn noticed that her wings were shaking at her sides, apparently being strained. The Pegasus pony took the last careful steps towards the bathroom before trotting inside and closing the door behind her. Penn swore that he heard a slight **pomf** from inside, and suddenly became painfully aware of what had just happened. His

cheeks turned exceedingly red as he facehoofed, more embarrassed than he wanted to admit. Was she really that, with no better way to put it, *sensitive*? The journalist didn't want to think about how Fluttershy was feeling, the Pegasus only just having become comfortable around him. He decided to pretend it never happened, though he knew that any progress they might have made during their earlier conversation had been erased.

KNOCK KNOCK

Penn's head shot up as his front door swung inward and made contact with the interior wall with a loud bang. A familiar blue mare stepped through the entryway, panting. A look of relief crossed her face for a fraction of a second before it was replaced by a glare.

"Any particular reason you're not at work today?" Prose questioned angrily, stepping towards the colt. Penn was dumbstruck. His boss's face softened a little as the journalist remained silent. "Penn, say something," she said, her usual tone replaced with one that the colt couldn't quite define; desire, maybe? Prose shook her head, dropped her fake aura of superiority, and joined him on the couch. She leaned in close to his ear and whispered something.

"I missed you."

"Oh," he answered. Penn felt his cheeks burning intensely as he turned to face his boss. Prose was smiling slyly and had her eyes half-lidded. *What the hay is going on?* Penn asked himself. Why was his boss at his apartment? Was Prose coming on to him? That was impossible! The mare had verbally degraded him for years! The blue pony opened her mouth to speak again.

"Don't tell me you don't feel it too, Penn. You know what's between us." A second later Prose had her lips on Penn's. The colt's eyes grew wide as he started to comprehend what was happening. Conflicting emotions played through him as he weighed his options. The idea of his boss being so romantically inclined towards him was hard to grasp. This was going against every speech that the Equine Resource Department had given about relationships in the workplace. This shouldn't be happening.

That being said, Prose's lips were warm and comforting, and he felt real passion coming from her. Trying not to over think the moment, Penn relented and laid back, leading Prose to straddle his torso and move in closer. Her chest rose and fell in a soft rhythm, and her hooves were graceful as she ran them over his face. How had he missed the emotions he was feeling now? Some well of appreciation or even attraction to Prose had opened up within him. He started kissing back in earnest, becoming fully immersed in the event. He was too preoccupied to listen for small sounds in his apartment, like a bathroom door being quietly pushed open.

"Penn, I thought I hea- Eep!" a small voice from behind Penn called. The colt sat straight up, nearly injuring his very startled boss. She rolled onto the floor next to the couch. He spun his head around and caught a fleeting glimpse of Fluttershy turning before the Pegasus shot out of his apartment. Penn was furious with himself for forgetting about the mare that should have mattered to him. He tried to step off of his sofa, but Prose wrapped her foreleg around his hoof.

"Where are you going?" she asked, trying to remain as seductive as possible. The mare's surprise at the turn of events was clearly evident, however. Penn looked at her and only grew more internally aggravated. Any romantic feelings he had for Prose even a minute ago had been replaced by concern for Fluttershy. He shook his leg free and galloped out of the room and into the apartment hallway. The Pegasus he was hoping to find had already disappeared by the time Penn made it there. He punched his hoof as hard as he could into the wall. The journalist tried to convince himself that the pain that was shooting up his arm was what was causing him to tear up. He turned back into his home and made his way back to the living room. Prose was lying on her side on the sofa, attempting to model an inviting pose. Penn spoke without considering his words.

"Get out of here, now," he commanded, his voice monotone and void of personality. His boss's expression fell, but the colt wasn't looking at her. "You scared off a mare that I like a thousand times more than you, and I think you need to leave." Prose's lip quivered at this revelation. She tried to voice one final thought.

"I, Penn, I was just trying to-" the mare stopped as Penn held up a hoof. He pointed to the exit without saying another word, not at all caring about the irony of ordering his boss around. Prose got to her hooves and slowly

walked out of the apartment. Penn unceremoniously slammed it shut behind her and locked the deadbolt, immune to the sound of near-silent sobs from the hallway. He returned to his sofa and put his head in his hooves, attempting to block out his memories of the morning. Somewhere nearby a police carriage sounded its siren.