



# Fixing Up Miss Smartypants

By Arkensaw Pinkerton

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# Chapter 1

"Ah'm in a heap o'trouble, sis."

Big Macintosh had the decency to blush a little as he heaped the tatty old doll onto the kitchen table, although it wasn't noticeable under his crimson hair to anyone who didn't know him well. Applejack certainly did, though, and was willing to let her big brother explain the doll with the loose button eyes before asking questions.

"This belongs to Miz Sparkle. It's her doll from all the kerfuffle six weeks ago."

Applejack couldn't help but raise an eyebrow.

"Big Macintosh, y'all oughta know better than to hold onto somepony else's property for so long! There was a spell or some such on the old thing. Twilight knows she was wrong to cast it on her doll but she's been lookin' for it ever since. Ah was gonna visit her later today anyhow, if you want me to take it?"

Big Macintosh looked at his sister, and slowly shook his head, eyes pleading.

"So y'don't want me to take it over. You're gonna take it yourself? 'Cause if you are you better not be thinking Ah'm gonna catch you up for the work you'll be missin' on the south fields."

Big Macintosh shook his head again, faster, desperate not to have to spell it out.

"Big Macintosh, if Ah didn't know better Ah'd think you were wantin' to keep that old thing for yourself! Y'know it belongs to Twilight, right? 'Cause-"

"Of course Ah know who it belongs to, sis. S'why Ah took it in th' first place. So's Ah could be th' one to return it."

Applejack took a few seconds to stare at her brother before responding, in case she was wrong. The signs were there for anyone who knew the big stallion, though. He was looking everywhere except into his sister's eyes, and he was starting to rub his forelegs together like a colt who'd been caught in the pantry. Big Macintosh was nervous, and not just nervous; he was embarrassed about it.

Applejack decided to go with the good ol' Apple family standby and just confront the truth head on. Whether it was a bad case of powdery mildew across the entire western front, a broken beam in the barn or a pie that Granny'd plum forgotten to put sugar in, there wasn't much that was made better by waiting to talk about it.

"Big Macintosh, were you lookin' for an excuse to talk to Twilight?"

Big Macintosh finally returned her gaze. Before he answered, he stood up straight and took a deep breath, ready for and fully expecting an argument.

"Eeyup."

Applejack didn't blink. Big Macintosh realised, all of a sudden, that his tongue was far too large in his mouth. Applejack's response was measured; Big Macintosh knew there was a shouting match to be had, if he put a hoof wrong, but it wasn't absolutely certain yet.

"Less'n three months ago Ah remember you were this nervous, and it was because you were asking me if it was alright for you to go courtin' Fluttershy! Now you be honest with me, Big Macintosh, have you got yourself an answer from her yet? 'Cause Ah'm not about to let my big brother go messing my friends about, y'hear?"

Big Macintosh looked away for a second, hanging his head a little under Applejack's stare. He could feel his words stumble over his teeth like they always did when he was nervous or worried, even if his stammer was mostly under control these days.

"N-Now, don't be thinking that. Miz Fluttershy was awful nice t'me. But she w-weren't interested in me as a gentlecolt caller and she was kind enough not to pretend anythin' different."

Applejack started for a second, suddenly indignant. What was wrong with Big Macintosh that Fluttershy would just shut him down like that? She'd spoken to Fluttershy before about the sort of pony she'd be interested in, and Big Macintosh seemed to fit the bill just so; reliable, hard-working, honest and gentle with both Applebloom and the parade of critters Fluttershy always had wandering through her place. Applejack didn't exactly consider herself qualified to judge the desirability of any stallion, let alone her big brother, but she'd always figured Fluttershy'd be a good match for him.

Horsefeathers, Applejack thought, Fluttershy'd be lucky to have her brother as a gentlecolt caller! He'd been running the farm since Applejack could remember, sitting up until late in the night balancing books with his ridiculously tiny reading glasses perched at the end of his nose. He could do stuff with finances Applejack could barely understand, haggle with the suppliers and apple traders like nopony's business, and he'd even spent a week and a half reading those ridiculous romance novels Rarity had said Fluttershy was so fond of so he'd have something to talk about with her! Applejack resolved herself to have a conversation with Fluttershy as soon as possible before she let her chance with Big Macintosh slip away.

Not that she had anything against Twilight as a potential suitor for Big Macintosh, Applejack quickly reminded herself. She was a studious pony alright, reliable in her own way, and Big Macintosh could sure lose himself in a book the same way she kept seeing Twilight disappear into one, so they weren't necessarily a bad fit. It's just that Applejack had always assumed, she realised, that Fluttershy would be invited into the Apple family sooner rather than later. She was good with animals, and that'd be real useful for sure, but it was more than that.

Applejack had always appreciated her brother's taciturn nature, letting her speak her full mind before responding, even when she was a little filly and had been prattling on about nothing. She'd not realised at the time it was a terrible stammer of her brother's that had contributed so much to his quiet nature. She'd just liked that he let her finish her piece. Even now, the rest of her friends spoke too quickly for her liking. Fluttershy would let her finish saying everything she wanted to say before she'd say anything in response, and that response would always show she'd really taken the time to listen. With Fluttershy it was more her consideration for the speaker than anything else that prevented her from butting in, but in any case whenever

Applejack had spoken to Fluttershy it felt safe. It felt like she was speaking with family.

Big Macintosh saw Applejack set her face into a determined grin, and internally braced himself. That face meant he was about to hear a plan that he'd have no hope of changing. Worse than that, it usually meant that Applejack had decided - again - to go off and do something instead of waiting to find out everything that was going on.

"Well, don't go trying to open another door before we're certain this one is closed, y'hear? Ah'm gonna go and have a talk with Fluttershy this afternoon about our chickens anyhow, so Ah figure Ah can make sure y'all have got your apples in a row before you go talking to anypony else."

Big Macintosh felt his heart sink. Applejack bringing this all up with Fluttershy was the last thing he wanted. Fluttershy'd been honest enough with him about the hows and whys of why they wouldn't exactly work as a couple and he didn't exactly want Applejack dragging a rake through it, if only because he knew it'd make the nervous little pegasus feel even more awkward than usual. One look at his sister's face, however, told him it was a done deal. He sighed, and gently lifted the battered doll from the table.

"You do what y'think best, sis. Could you at least take Miz Smartypants here with you? Ah was gonna ask Miz Fluttershy if she could find the time to spruce her up some, re-attach the eye and whatnot."

Applejack sighed and roughly took the doll, jamming her into a saddlebag and making Big Macintosh wince.

"Whatever you say, big brother. But this is as a favour to Twilight and not for any other reason. Ah'll make sure Ah bring it back so's you can be the one to return it, but if I know Fluttershy, and Ah do, then y'all will be returning it as Twilight's friend's brother and nothin' more. Ah'm sure Fluttershy was just too nervous to say anything to you before!"

Applejack shot a wide grin at her brother for a second before turning and cantering out of the door, off in the direction of Fluttershy's cottage. Big Macintosh stared after her sadly for a couple of seconds before sighing and following her outside, looking for a moment in the direction of the town proper before heading off to the south fields. From the farmhouse, he could

just see the top of the library tree peaking above the rest of the buildings. With a quiet smile on his face, Big Macintosh walked off to the south fields, ready for a good, long, distracting day of work.

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As she pounded down the road towards the town, Applejack was starting to have misgivings about taking the doll with her to Fluttershy's place. She knew she was no good in a protracted lie and it was bound to slip out that Big Macintosh had been holding on to the thing. If she was going to convince Fluttershy that Big Macintosh was a viable suitor after all, then she couldn't be having anything on her that might cast misgivings on his affections; like hanging on to some other pony's prized personal possessions.

She slowed down her running as she looked back at the raggedy old doll in her saddlebags and thought about it. What she needed to do was drop it off with somepony else, somepony who could fix her up as good as Fluttershy would be able to do with her crazy knowledge of sewing- Rarity! She'd have to dance around the truth a little and say she just found it in the house, otherwise Rarity'd just let on to Fluttershy about it at one of their frou-frou spa sessions, but that wasn't really a lie. She had found out about it in the house, at any rate.

Applejack changed direction and headed into town towards Carousel Boutique, pulling the doll out of her saddlebags as she cantered up to the door and knocked on it loudly with her front hooves. It wasn't long before a slightly harassed-looking Rarity answered.

"Applejack! You're a sight for sore- isn't Applebloom with you?"

"Hmr?" Applejack mumbled around the doll. "Uh fort that she-"

"Dear, I absolutely cannot hear you around that- that thing you're carrying around. Do wipe your feet, come in and put it down, but if it was supposed to be an article of clothing I'm afraid it's beyond even my talent to rescue."

Applejack quickly stamped the dust off her hooves and walked into the boutique, depositing Miss Smartypants on a nearby table.

“Sorry about that, sugarcube. Ah was gonna say Ah thought your sister and Scootaloo were meeting Applebloom up at Sweet Apple Acres. That’s what Applebloom’s been flappin’ her jaw about in any case.”

Rarity’s eye twitched for a moment, and she spoke through gritted teeth.

“So Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo have been waiting here - playing in my boutique - when they could have been using all that energy to, say, walk over to your farm? Well, no time like the present.”

Rarity turned to her stairs and shouted up.

“Girls, stop whatever little projects you’re working on! Applebloom’s waiting for you at Sweet Apple Acres!”

Upstairs, the noise reached a crescendo moments before Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo pounded down the stairs. Rarity turned back to Applejack and looked at the slumped old doll on her table for a second, before raising a questioning eyebrow.

“Oh, this ol’ thing? It’s Twilight’s doll from that whole mess a few weeks back. Ah, uh, Ah found it up at the farm and Ah wondered if maybe you could try fixing it up some before Ah give it back. Ah’d be real appreciative, Rarity, Ah know it’s not the sort of thing you usually do.”

Rarity sighed and magically lifted the doll to a work table in the corner.

“I will give it my very best, Applejack, but I’m not sure how it’s going to turn out. Why didn’t you just give it back to Twilight straight away?”

Before Applejack could answer, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo started firing off their own questions, each jostling in front of the other for Applejack’s attention as they spoke.

“Why did you keep the doll for so long?”

“Yeah, why? Were you playing with it? It’s really old.”

“How come you want it all fixed up? Are you gonna give it to her as a present?”



"You can't give someone something that's already theirs as a present!"

"That's why she's having it all fixed!"

Applejack finally found a way into the conversation by pushing the two foals away from each other.

"Now, girls, there's no reason to argue over it. Sweetie Belle's right, Ah'm getting it fixed up for her as kind of a present. Now Applebloom is waitin' on you both, so-"

"Why are you getting her a present?"

Both girls chimed in at once, joined by Rarity who was looking up quizzically from an extremely critical examination of Miss Smartypants and starting to thread a needle. Applejack hated being the centre of attention when she couldn't just tell the truth, and she could feel a blush starting on her ears and working its way down across her face.

"Because- Because sometimes it's nice to get somepony a present when y'care about - when they're your friend, d'ye hear? Rarity, I gotta go. Girls, Applebloom's waiting for you both at the farm."

Applejack quickly backed out of the door and took a moment to clear her head. She hated lying, even doing anything that was close to lying, and she knew full well she was no good at it. As she looked out towards Fluttershy's cottage, she felt her belly rumbling. Deciding that that particular conversation was going to be tricky enough without an empty stomach distracting her, she headed into town with the intent of grabbing a quick sandwich before carrying on with her day.

Back at the boutique, Rarity and the girls stared at the door for a second. Suddenly, Rarity put everything together. Applejack was incredibly nervous about asking Rarity to repair the doll, so it must have meant a lot to her that it was in its best possible shape before handing it back to Twilight. And since Applejack didn't normally care at all about the little things, that must mean...

“Oooooooh!” Rarity squealed to herself. “Oh, I shall simply have to outdo myself! This has got to be absolutely perfect for Applejack.”

“Don’t you mean for Twilight? It’s her doll,” Sweetie Belle asked, breaking Rarity’s reverie.

She smiled at Sweetie Belle before carefully framing her answer; her little sister was, of course, still a stranger to complicated affairs of the heart. After all, it took a pony with true sophistication to understand this delicate a matter with such crystal clear intuition.

“Yes, Sweetie, for Twilight too. It’s just very important to Applejack to be able to hand over something nice as a gift.”

Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo stared at Rarity blankly.

“Why?” they asked in unison.

“That’s not important, dears. Now off you go, Applebloom’s waiting!” she said in that cheery tone of voice that Sweetie Belle knew meant they were now intruding on her big sister’s work.

“Okay, fine. Come on, Scootaloo!”

The two fillies walked out of the door and started out towards Sweet Apple Acres.

“What was that all about?” asked Scootaloo.

“I dunno. Let’s go ask Applebloom! I bet she knows why Applejack was so nervous!” Sweetie Belle said, breaking into a canter. Scootaloo quickly sped up to follow her, and they both started giggling as they began an impromptu race towards the farm.

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Big Macintosh enjoyed physical labour; the repetitive nature of a task never bored him. He usually found it freed up his mind, allowing him to almost unconsciously get on with the job at hand, and he hadn’t expected his work in the south fields replacing the old fence to be any different. But then, he

hadn't expected Applebloom to be following him around for the past hour, first making everything take twice as long by "helpin' make sure you use th'right nail each time!", then shouting instructions at him in case her cutie mark would appear for "organizin' a labor force!". For the past twenty minutes, though, she'd found a far more odious game to play, and Big Macintosh had resigned himself to one heck of a headache later.

"Is it... Fluttershy?" Applebloom asked excitedly, suddenly popping up in his left ear.

"Nnnope," Big Macintosh answered. He moved the beam into place, bit a nail and jammed it in where he'd need it. He grabbed the mallet in his teeth, took careful aim and-

"Is it Rainbow Dash? 'Cause that don't seem like it'd work out," Applebloom asked again, bouncing up in front of Big Macintosh so suddenly he dropped the mallet. He sighed and answered before picking it up again.

"Nnnope." Big Macintosh swung the mallet into the nail once, driving it firmly into the beam and the post both, before dropping the mallet and fetching another nail from the bag he'd brought with him.

"Is it Derpy Hooves?" Applebloom asked happily, jumping around behind Big Macintosh.

Big Macintosh dropped the nail, swung his head around and bit the bouncing Applebloom's big pink bow for a second, leaving her swinging from his mouth. Just as suddenly he let go, depositing her on her rump. He leaned down to speak to her face to face.

"Now whut have Ah told you about that nickname?" he said quietly. Applebloom cringed. There wasn't much that'd make her brother angry, but this was one of the few things that could do it consistently.

"Ah meant Ditzzy Doo! Ah did! Ah didn't mean to say- to use the mean name. 'm sorry," Applebloom blurted. Big Macintosh gave her a good, long look before grabbing another nail and putting it in place.

“Is it Ditzzy Doo, though? Y’see her at speech therapy all th’time,” Applebloom asked, running and fetching the mallet for her brother. Big Macintosh sighed. It was turning into an extremely long afternoon.

“Nnnnope.” Big Macintosh took the mallet and swung at the fence again, pinning the beam firmly in place with a single satisfying ‘thunk’. Even with the distractions, it’d only take him another half an hour to finish the job. Maybe, he thought, he could go into town early, visit the library before meeting up with Ditzzy for their group speech session. Even if he could barely get a word out, Twilight always seemed so pleased to see-

“Are y’ SURE it isn’t Fluttershy? ‘Cause Applejack said that she was practic’ly part of the family, so Ah thought that-”

Applebloom was prevented from finishing by the sounds of a small, mobile fight rolling over the hill, from the direction of the farm house. The dust up seemed to include equal parts Sweetie Belle, Scootaloo, a blue scooter and accusations of cheating until Big Macintosh walked calmly over and pushed them apart with his nose.

“You can’t use a scooter in a race! It’s supposed to be a RACE!” Sweetie Belle was shouting.

“Yes I can! You never said I couldn’t!” Scootaloo screamed back. Big Macintosh took a deep breath - it looked like getting these two on talking terms again was going to take up the rest of his afternoon. There goes the library, he thought. He was about to start the long, laborious process of mediating the argument when Applebloom interrupted him.

“Girls, knock it off! Ah’ve got a great plan for our crusadin’ today!” Applebloom proudly announced from atop Big Macintosh’s head. Before she’d even finished speaking, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo were side by side in front of Big Macintosh, looking up at Applebloom with excited eyes, their argument totally forgotten.

“Ooooh, what’s the plan?”

“Yeah, tell us tell us tell us!”

“Ah’ll tell y’all in a second,” Applebloom said, before bouncing to the ground and turning around to face Big Macintosh.

“But it’s a secret, Big Macintosh, so you’re gonna have to finish the fence without me. Ah’m sorry but it’s important!” Applebloom said with an extremely serious expression on her face. Very carefully, and without allowing any expression of confused relief to creep onto his face, Big Macintosh walked back to the fence and continued his work, pleased to sink back into pleasant thoughts of the filly at the library.

“So here’s mah plan for our crusadin’ today! Except y’gotta keep it real quiet otherwise Big Macintosh’ll hear,” Applebloom whispered, leaning her head in towards her almost awestruck friends. Suddenly, Sweetie Belle started, interrupting loudly.

“Oh! I just remembered! Applebloom, do you know why Applejack was so nervous this morning? She had that old doll of Twilight’s we fought over, and she wanted Rarity to fix it, except she kept on looking at her hooves and she wouldn’t answer any of our questions.”

Applebloom looked at Sweetie Belle dismissively. “Of course Ah know why! That’s where Ah got mah plan for today’s crusadin’! We’re gonna be matchmakers!”

“Matchmakers?” Scootaloo wrinkled up her nose in confusion. “You mean we gotta make matches? Like, fire matches?”

“We don’t even know what the bit that catches fire is made from,” admitted Sweetie Belle, rubbing her legs together in embarrassment. “Applebloom, I don’t think-”

“No, you’ve got it all wrong! Ah mean we’re gonna help other ponies find their one true love!” Applebloom explained excitedly.

“Oh!” Sweetie Belle exclaimed with a huge grin. “That’s so romantic! I bet that would give you a great cutie mark!”

Scootaloo’s expression was a lot less animated. She sat down in the field and fixed her fellow crusaders with a blunt look.

“That sounds so sappy! Who would even want a cutie mark for making ponies get all lovey-dovey with each other?” she said, looking thoroughly dejected at the idea of an afternoon wasted.

“Well...” Applebloom looked up for a second, thinking hard about what might get her friend excited about her great idea.

“Oh! Ah know! You can fix up Rainbow Dash with someone! That’s sure to work!”

Scootaloo perked up a little at that. Rainbow Dash was really pretty, after all, so it couldn’t be that hard getting her matched up with someone. And then she could tell Rainbow Dash that she helped fix her up, and Dash would be so happy that she’d teach her how to do the Super Speed Strut! And the Buccaneer Blaze! And even how to do a Sonic Rainboom! Yes!

“Okay, I’m in! So what do we have to do to matchmake?”

“Well, first we have to decide who we’re gonna match up with who, but we’ve got insider knowledge.” Applebloom smirked. “Applejack’s been hiding that ol’ doll in the barn for weeks now! I didn’t say anything cause Ah thought maybe she’d make me keep it or somethin’. But if today she’s gettin’ it fixed for Twilight, then it must mean she’s almost ready to ask her on a date!” Applebloom pronounced triumphantly.

“Well, if she’s gonna ask her out anyway then how do we do any matchmaking?” Sweetie Belle asked.

“That’s easy! We just go and make sure Twilight’s interested in Applejack!” Scootaloo blurted out. “R-right?”

“Exactly!” Applebloom grinned at both her friends. “But y’all have got to fix ponies up too. Sweetie Belle, can you think of anyone who you could fix up Rarity with?”

Sweetie Belle sat and thought for a moment, trying to work out if her sister had recently mentioned any pony more than often, or in a particularly dreamy way.

“Well, there is ONE pony she might want to get all snuggled up with,” Sweetie Belle said, almost thinking out loud. “She made her a costume for Nightmare Night and then she made herself a matching costume. But she couldn’t go out ‘cause Mom and Daddy were goin’ to Nightmare Karaoke and they needed someone to sit and watch the house, ‘cause Daddy said somepony might throw eggs at it. She was really grumpy about it too, and her costume didn’t really make much sense on its own for a unicorn and ponies kept asking her about it and she kept saying how it was the worst possible night!”

Applebloom and Scootaloo didn’t look particularly impressed. Sweetie Belle looked at them quizzically, cocking her head to one side.

“Your sister says that all the time, Sweetie Belle. She said it last week when we tried Cutie Mark Crusader Chimney Sweeps, remember?” Applebloom said.

“I don’t need to remember,” muttered Scootaloo, kicking at one of her ears and depositing a small pile of soot on the ground.

Sweetie Belle stamped her foot, putting on her most determined expression. “I know she can be a bit dramatic, but she was really upset! She was so upset she got QUIET about it for a whole day!”

Applebloom and Scootaloo were stunned into silence. They’d managed to make Rarity pretty mad over the last few months - Cutie Mark Crusader Basement Builders and the Cutie Mark Crusader Fashion Designer Talent Agency sprang to mind - but they’d never managed to upset her so much she’d actually gone quiet.

“So there!” Sweetie Belle said, clearly quite pleased with herself. “We gotta get Rarity and Rainbow Dash together. That covers you too, Scootaloo!”

Scootaloo thought for a second. Rainbow Dash was really pretty, and Rarity was really pretty too, so she couldn’t see any problems with the idea.

“Alright!” she said. “We got a plan!”

“Okay, this’ll get us our cutie marks for sure!” said Applebloom. “And while we’re doin’ all that we should fix up Big Macintosh and Fluttershy too,

‘cause everypony knows that’s just a matter o’time and they’re just too nervous to speak to each other. Even Granny Smith said so.”

“Well, yeah, obviously.”

“Rarity’s even already made them a tuxedo and a big frilly dress that she keeps in the back of the cupboard.”

“Okay then - all together now!” Applebloom shouted, all discretion lost.

“CUTIE MARK CRUSADER MATCHMAKERS!” they yelled together, before Scootaloo grabbed her scooter and the three of them disappeared in the general direction of Ponyville proper.

At the fence, Big Macintosh looked up from his work for a second, the mental image of him presenting Twilight with a first edition of ‘Starswirl the Bearded’s Compiled Research’ slowly disappearing from his mind. Had somepony shouted something at him? A little unsure, he returned to finishing off the fence, but couldn’t quite shake the nagging feeling that something was about to go very, very wrong indeed.



# Chapter 2

Spike strained against the handle, slowly pulling his overstuffed red wagon through the streets of Ponyville. As a bolt of cloth rolled off the side and he had to run after it for the third time in as many minutes, he decided it was definitely a bad idea to have volunteered to collect all Rarity's stuff from the post office. At least, it was a bad idea to have tried to do it in one trip. He'd just not realised anypony could order so much at once! There were new fabrics, new magazines, an entire box of black opals from some country Spike couldn't even pronounce (he could practically smell them) and several jars of imported face mask stuff. At least one of which was now filled with plain old Ponyville mud after a particularly bad spill early on in Spike's journey had knocked the lid off, and he'd lost track of the contents. It's not like it really makes a difference, thought Spike. It's still mud, at least.

Finally, thought Spike, wheeling his wagon over the last rise and seeing Carousel Boutique down the road. Rarity was really pretty, and sweet to him too, but she wasn't worth this sort of effort. Well she probably wasn't, amended Spike, thinking about his gem-studded bow tie safe in his keepsakes box under the sink in the library. Well maybe she was a little bit worth it, if he considered how grateful she'd been when he'd helped her with the gem digging. As he pulled the wagon up to the door of the boutique and pushed it open, he thought about how radiant she'd looked when Hoity Toity had asked to feature her fashions. Okay, okay, Spike admitted to himself. She's completely worth it. She's so beautiful, and sophisticated, and refined.

None of these traits were in particular evidence at the moment, however. Spike opened the door and immediately ducked under a flying pair of scissors that stuck, quivering, in the door jam. He looked up to see Rarity wide-eyed and practically vibrating with rage, screaming at a tattered old doll.

"Why. Are. You. Being so DIFFICULT!" Rarity yelled, as the doll convulsed on the table and fired a loop of thread around Rarity's horn.

“Um, Rarity?” Spike offered, from behind his wagon. “I brought your stuff from the post office. What’s going on?”

“Oh, hello, Spike,” Rarity said, turning and attempting a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I’m attempting a bit of a restoration of Twilight’s old doll, and somepony has decided to enchant her with a spell that resists deliberate changes. I imagine that it was a youthful attempt to stave off the ravages of time, but that was clearly quite a miserable failure. As it is, whenever I deviate the tiniest amount from the basic design, the moment I try to change out old buttons for new or add a little glamour- well, see for yourself!”

Rarity levitated a sapphire from her gem chest and placed it in the lap of the recumbent Miss Smartypants. Spike cautiously walked over to the table, leaning up to see exactly what was going on. After a few seconds, he turned to Rarity.

“I don’t think it’s-” the jewel catapulted away from Miss Smartypants at terrific speed, careening off Spike’s skull with a high-pitched ‘Ping!’ and sending him sprawling to the floor. Spike’s vision blurred for a couple of seconds before resolving into the very pleasant form of a worried looking Rarity leaning over him.

“Oh, you poor dear! I had simply no idea that a larger gem would be repelled with so much extra force. You lie there and I’ll go and get you a cold compress,” Rarity said kindly before trotting off to her kitchen.

Spike had no intention of going anywhere, at least for a moment or two. While his pressing concern was the lump he was going to have later, he still had questions, though. Why did Rarity even have Miss Smartypants in the first place? Twilight had looked for her doll for two weeks after she’d lost it, and she’d asked all her friends if they knew where it was. Spike knew she’d felt terrible about it- she’d been too old for it for years, but as soon as she couldn’t find it she felt like she’d lost a piece of her childhood. Why would Rarity hide it from her?

Rarity re-entered the room with a bag of crushed ice tied with a daring green ribbon and levitated it over to Spike.

“There you are, you poor thing. And after you went to so much trouble fetching all my mail, too!” Rarity said, walking over to the wagon at the door and delightedly rifling through the contents.

“Oh, the new edition of ‘Shod’! They keep asking for an interview, but I simply can’t find the time until I’ve finished my new line. My opals! Oh, you are a marvellous assistant, you know, I don’t know what Twilight ever did to deserve you. And my new face masks from Manehattan! Spike, you must come and sniff this, it smells so healthy and earthy,” Rarity bubbled over the contents as she unpacked them neatly around the room.

“Uh, I think I caught a whiff of that one already,” Spike said, careful not to catch Rarity’s eye. “Rarity, why do you have Miss Smartypants in the first place? I know Twilight’s been looking all over for it.”

Rarity shuffled her hooves a little bit, looking at the ceiling for inspiration. It was, of course, absolutely imperative that Twilight not find out about Applejack’s feelings until Applejack was ready. But was it so terrible if she knew that somepony was interested in her? Rarity loved Twilight dearly, of course, but the poor mare was even more naive than Applejack when it came to romance. Perhaps, then, the right thing to do would be to clue Spike in that Miss Smartypants was being repaired as a romantic gesture, but not give away so much that Twilight would work out who it was? Oh yes, thought Rarity, that’s magnificent! I’ll give away just enough that Twilight knows I’m working on the doll for some shadowed suitor, but not so much that she’ll work out who it is!

Of course, thought Rarity as she wandered over to her drawing table, they’d need her assistance in planning everything for the inevitable wedding. It would be so perfect if they made it a double ceremony with Big Macintosh and Fluttershy! And the dresses would have to compliment each other just so while remaining absolutely, intrinsically tied to each pony’s personality...

“Um, Rarity? The doll?” Spike broke Rarity’s reverie halfway through a rough sketch for the perfect Apple family wedding gown.

“Oh! Yes, the doll. Well, Spike, I’m not sure I can tell you everything. You see, it’s something of a secret, as ‘twere,” Rarity danced around the issue,

keeping her back to Spike so he couldn't see the delighted grin playing across her features.

"It's a secret?" asked Spike, now genuinely confused. "You don't want Twilight to know you're working on it?"

"Well, it's probably best to keep my name out of it, Spike," Rarity said as she walked back to the doll. "You see, some pony who would rather remain anonymous found the doll recently, and they wanted to make a gift of returning it. You see, the pony that found the doll wanted to make sure Twilight was absolutely delighted with it when they returned it."

Rarity had a sudden flash of inspiration. Applejack may not know much about romance, but Rarity had been asked on dates by several very eligible mares and stallions, and they always seemed so nervous; why not do Applejack a favour and set the date up now, so that all Applejack had to do was show up clean and smart?

"They'll return it to Twilight Sparkle tonight. At the Maison de Lune, at 8pm. Make sure Twilight arrives in style, would you Spike? I'm sure she wouldn't want to disappoint her suitor," Rarity said as she turned to face Spike, her eyes sparkling with delight at her plan.

Spike looked at Rarity, seeing excited joy written across her face. The Maison de Lune was her favourite restaurant, he remembered. He looked at the doll on the table that had been frustrating Rarity so much, that she'd been working so hard on. And he felt his heart sink somewhere to the level of his tail as he came to a very understandable conclusion.

"Oh. Okay then. I'll tell Twilight. Eight o'clock and dress in style." he said, staring at his feet.

"Why, Spike, you seem disappointed!" Rarity said, looking at Spike and seeing his downcast expression. "Don't you think this is wonderful news for Twilight? After all this time with her nose stuck in a book she's finally going to learn about love! Oh, it's going to be the perfect first date, I just know it. That is, so long as Miss Crankypants over here decides to let me fix her properly."

Rarity turned back to the doll, threading a needle in midair. Spike looked at her as she did so, and made up his mind. He'd always tried to treat Rarity like a proper gentlecolt should, and now Twilight had the chance to go on a date with her and he was going to sulk about it like a hatchling? Huh, no way! Twilight Sparkle was the best pony he knew, the best big sister he could ever ask for, and she deserved to be dating somepony as good-looking and generous and hard-working as Rarity. So what if Spike had had a crush on Rarity? All that meant was he wanted her to be happy. Spike blinked rapidly a couple of times, cleared his throat, and put on his best smile.

"You're right, Rarity, I guess it is good news for Twilight. I'll make sure her best dress is pressed and ready! After all, we wouldn't want her *mystery date* to think she looked bad." he said with an exaggerated wink.

Rarity blinked back some faint confusion and carried on. It was important Spike was on board, even if it seemed like- oh, of course! It made perfect sense Spike had been a little reluctant at first. He was only a small child, after all, and he'd be worried about Twilight's attention transferring entirely to her new beau.

"Absolutely, Spike dear. Incidentally, I'm fairly sure that the dress that would make the best impression is her Gala gown? The one I designed?"

"No problem, Rarity! I'll go and let Twilight know that you'll be-"

Rarity's coy smile suddenly fell.

"Oh, Spike, no no no! It would be awful if Twilight knew I was involved in all this! Why, it would ruin the whole surprise of the gift, the magic of that first romantic gesture! If it doesn't go well, she'll feel like a complete foal, believe me," Rarity said, her eyes flickering to a storecupboard for a moment. She sighed at it, momentarily downcast, before composing herself, clearing her throat and continuing.

"Spike, you must promise me that when you talk to Twilight Sparkle about this date that my name does not. Come. Up." Rarity leaned right into Spike, pushing her face up against his to punctuate the last few words. For a brief moment, Spike was reminded of the time he'd come face to face with a belligerent dragon.

“Okay, okay! Just the date! Mystery guest! No pony needs to hear any names!”

Rarity trotted back over to the work table, picked up the needle and started to reattach Miss Smartypants’ loose eye.

“Exactly, Spike. Now run along and let Twilight know! I’m sure she’ll want to spend the rest of the day preparing.”

Spike watched Rarity get absorbed in her work again as he pushed his wagon out through the door, and made a promise to himself. If Rarity wouldn’t be happy with him, but with Twilight Sparkle instead, then he was going to do everything in his power to make sure they had the best date possible. He strode into town with new purpose in his heart, thinking over exactly how to prepare Twilight for the date properly. She’d need to be dressed well, of course. And she’d want to read up about first dates to make sure she knew exactly what was going to happen. He’d have to check they’d not lent out any books on the subject... Spike picked up the pace. It was going to be a very busy afternoon.

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Ditzy Doo breached the surface for a moment, drew a great lungful of air, and plunged back into the lake. Powerful wingbeats against the water propelled her towards the bottom, before a complex turn and spread of her wings brought her to a dead stop inches above the sucking mud of the lake bed. Looking up, she could see the blurred light of the surface, dancing around the bubbles that left her feathers as the water crept into them, displacing the air. With a grin, she started sweeping her wings through the water, gathering more and more momentum as she headed towards the surface, until suddenly she broke free.

Tucking into a tight ball, she span forward twice before flaring her wings and beating them once, backflipping into a lazy glide towards a grey unicorn filly with a blonde mane who was bouncing around with excitement beside a landing platform. She forced both her eyes to focus for a moment as she glided in, getting a distance on the platform for a fraction of a second. It was all she needed. All four of Ditzy’s hooves landed at precisely the same time with a satisfying ‘Clack’.

“Mom that was so great! You were totally perfect! You’ll win a Marelympic gold for sure!” The little unicorn said, winding between Ditzzy’s legs.

“I-it wasn’t p-p-p-” Ditzzy said, feeling her stammer aggravated by her shortness of breath after that last dive. She stopped to take a quick breath before carrying on, shifting her weight to distract her voice like she’d been taught. “Wasn’t p-perfect. I sh-shorted the forward spins.”

Ditzzy saw her daughter’s face fall before deliberately grinning and leaning in towards her, winking with her good eye.

“It was still g-good, though, Dinky.” she whispered conspiratorially. “Thanks for watching me practice.” Dinky Doo looked at her mother with undisguised confusion.

“Mooom, you know I like watching you practice. It’s totally my favourite thing to do!” she said, running and fetching a towel sat next to two mailbags that were piled next to the platform. “It’s so cool that you’re doing the training again! Grandpa said he thought you’d never do it again because your physical responses looking after me take sorority, but I told him you’d find time.”

Ditzzy looked at her daughter for a second before thinking through the sentence. Dinky was clever- precocious, even- but had a habit of trying to re-use words she’d only ever heard once, and often got the pronunciation and context completely wrong.

“Did you mean ‘fiscal responsibilities take p-priority’?” She hazarded a guess.

“Yes! Exactly! But I told him you were going to be in the Marelympics again, just like before you had me.”

“It’s the Paramarelympics, remember? And we’ll see, k-kiddo. I’ve got a lot of work to do,” She smiled at her daughter as she towelled off- she’d never get all the water out of her feathers, so her afternoon’s flight would be a bit heavy and clunky, but they’d be dry enough for basic flight at least.

Both of them were suddenly interrupted by three young fillies coming charging over the nearest hillside, abandoning a bucket of apples as they broke into a run. Dinky recognised them as Applebloom, Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo, from one of the other classes at school.

“See? See, I told you Miss Ditzy went swimming before she delivered the mail! I told you!” Scootaloo shouted happily as they charged up to Ditzy and Dinky.

“Ah never said you didn’t know! Ah was askin’ why you knew in the first place.”

“I knew in the first place because of the pegasus swimming lessons. If you start drowning more than three times, then Miss Ditzy picks you for her special weekend class, and I nearly drowned five times on the first day!” Scootaloo proudly announced, sticking her chest out and her head high.

“Five times on the first day? I guess you can’t get a cutie mark for drowning, then, huh,” Sweetie Belle said before nodding at Applebloom, who took a large, dog-eared list from one of her saddlebags, marked ‘Things we know don’t work’. Dinky watched with interest as Applebloom scribbled ‘Drowning’ in between ‘Drooling’ and ‘Drum Catapulting’.

“What’s drum catapulting?” Dinky asked.

“Oh! It’s a way of getting a big bass drum across town really really fast. Applebloom invented it!” Sweetie Belle said.

“It’s a way of gettin’ unfairly grounded really really fast.” Applebloom muttered, putting the list back in her bag. “How was Ah supposed t’know Applejack was gonna set her stall up right in the target zone?”

“But Applejack always sets her stall up in the same place, doesn’t she?” Dinky said.

“Aw, you sound just like her,” Applebloom said to Dinky with a wounded expression, before turning her attention to Ditzy.

“Miss Ditzy, we were wonderin’ if maybe you could do us a favour! See, we’ve got these letters that have got to get to Rarity and Rainbow Dash,”



Applebloom explained, pulling two envelopes out of her saddlebags and presenting them proudly. One of them had "For Rarity" written on the front in slapdash print, the other "Miss Rainbow Dash" in elaborate cursive. On both envelopes, an abundance of hearts were printed around the edges.

"We'd take them ourselves, except we can't take them to Rainbow Dash's place because she can fly so she lives in a cloud house and I've not got the hang of my wings yet," Scootaloo leaned in to explain.

"And I said I'd give the other one to my sister but the pony who wrote it doesn't want her to know that they wrote it, and if I give it to Rarity myself then she'll make me tell," Sweetie Belle explained, reddening slightly. Scootaloo almost groaned; this was such a tiny lie, and Sweetie Belle was still terrible at it! It wasn't even really a lie at all, Scootaloo figured, since she'd written the letter to Rarity herself and she sure didn't want her finding out about it.

Ditzy looked at the letters and the fillies in front of her with her good eye. She raised an eyebrow for a second, thinking it over. From the way Applebloom and Sweetie Belle were starting to blush, and Scootaloo's obvious exasperation, she wouldn't be surprised if the two more embarrassed fillies had started to reach the age where anonymous love letters seemed like a great way to communicate with a new and unexpected crush.

"Okay, g-girls, I'll t-take them." Ditzy said, to a resounding chorus of cheers. She made a mental note to herself to explain the source of the letters to Rarity and Rainbow Dash before handing them over- they'd want to handle the situation themselves, and that'd be much easier for them if they knew who'd authored the letters.

She lifted the letters in her mouth, depositing them in one of the mailbags by the platform before shifting the bags over her shoulders, getting used to the weight and the heft of them. They were heavy today- best to keep as much height as possible, Ditzy figured. She didn't want to cause any accidents, after all. She had her mail route to run, and then time to get home and wash up before speech therapy. At the thought of that last appointment, she could almost feel her tongue freeze up, and grimaced in frustration. Couldn't she even think about him without falling over her words

now? While she continued her flight preparations, the fillies behind her started talking with her daughter about their ongoing crusade.

“Hey, Dinky, you don’t have a cutie mark! I thought you had a bubble wand.” Sweetie Belle said.

“Ah thought it was dolphins. Didn’t you used t’have dolphins?” Applebloom asked.

“Well- Well I was just-” Dinky shrank back, embarrassed.

“No way, it was a pillow, I remember! What happened to it? Did you lose it? Can you lose a cutie mark?” Scootaloo asked with mounting panic.

“No- I just- I-” Dinky closed her eyes, blushing furiously. “I drew them on! I thought maybe it would help me get one!”

The Cutie Mark Crusaders stared at Dinky for a second before all starting to talk at the same time.

“That’s such a good idea! I can’t believe we didn’t think of that!”

“They looked really good, too! You know, I bet if you got the right one then it’d help everything along. Rarity always says it’s easier to work from a good pattern.”

“Well, that’s just th’sort of spirit we’re looking for in the Cutie Mark Crusaders!” Applebloom ran over to Ditzzy, who was starting to prepare her takeoff.

“Miss Ditzzy! Miss Ditzzy! Can Dinky play with us this afternoon? We’re gonna try and get our cutie marks and with Dinky helpin’ we’ll be done before dinner for sure!”

“Oh! Mom that would be totally great! Please please please?” Dinky ran over to her mother as well, bouncing up and down as she pleaded.

“Sure you c-can, Dinky. Just m-make sure you tell Sparkle wh-where you’re going, okay?” Ditzzy said. She was pleased Dinky seemed to be making new friends; while Sparkle was a great help and the ‘big sister’ program

had really started to get the shy little unicorn out of her shell, it was good that she was making friends about her own age.

“Okay mom! We’ll go into town and tell Sparkle and then we’ll go get our cutie marks! Bye mom!” Dinky and Applebloom ran off towards the other two fillies, and Ditzzy saw them have a brief discussion before Applebloom pointed out the great bucket of apples she’d left at the top of the hill. As Ditzzy took off, veering slightly to the left, she saw the four fillies start dragging the bucket towards the town. Shaking her head, the mailmare adjusted her bags once more and started to gain a little height, aiming for the library at the centre of town and almost staying on track.

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“That’s ‘Love In The Time Of Colic’ for Lyra, ‘Apples Are Not The Only Fruit’ for Granny Smith, and... wait, that can’t be right,” Twilight talked to herself as she packed her saddlebags for town. She wrinkled her nose at the bad information and checked her packing list against her book requests list to find that Spike had gotten those last two mixed up. She shook her head, remembering how absent-minded her number one assistant had been that morning; at the prospect of any interaction with Rarity he tended to be more than a little distracted. After attaching the correct notes to the books, Twilight was about to levitate her saddlebags onto her back when she heard hoofbeats and a voice on her balcony.

“Hey! Twilight! Are you around? I need to talk to you about something,” Rainbow Dash’s voice rang out through the library.

“I’m down here, Rainbow!” Twilight shouted back. “I was just getting ready to do some deliveries. We could walk together if you like?”

“Nah, it’s okay. If you’re busy, I mean. I can just talk to you about it later or something.”

Not for the first time since coming to Ponyville, Twilight silently thanked Celestia she’d built an extra hour into her routine in case of an unexpected occurrence. Rainbow Dash clearly wanted to talk about something a little uncomfortable, since she’d made the trip over and then immediately tried to brush it off. Twilight walked up the stairs to see Rainbow hovering over her balcony, ready to leave.

"I've always got time for a friend who needs to talk. What was it you wanted to discuss?" Twilight asked with a bright smile. Rainbow landed on the balcony again, not making eye contact with Twilight for a second. When she did, she seemed to think for a second before saying anything.

"I don't actually need to talk to you. Well, I do, but not for me. I've just- I've got this friend, okay? And I've given her my advice on something, and that totally covered everything because I knew exactly what to do, but I thought maybe I should get your advice -for her- too, because... because maybe you read about it in a book. Or something."

Twilight untangled the sentence in her mind for a second.

"Well, why not just tell me who your friend is? Then I could just talk to her directly," Twilight asked.

"No, that won't work. Because, er, she's too shy to talk to you face to face," Rainbow explained with a tired smile.

"Is it Fluttershy? Because she knows she can always just come round and-"

"It's not Fluttershy! It doesn't matter who it is! Will you just go and get whatever book it is that says how to ask somepony on a date so you can tell me what to do?" Rainbow almost shouted, exasperation written plainly across her face. "I mean, tell her what to do. My friend. I already know how to ask a pony on a date."

"Oh, you need dating books! I've got loads of those!" Twilight exclaimed happily. "I can get just the right one for your friend and you can take it to her, if you tell me a couple of things. Is she interested in a mare or a stallion?"

"She's thinking of asking a- wait, no, if I tell you you might work out who it is. She definitely doesn't want that."

"Rainbow, it's not really statistically significant information. I mean, if you take the accepted averages of twenty percent of the population having a specific interest in mares, twenty in stallions, and sixty in both, then..." Twilight started to hit her stride, levitating a handy scrap of paper over to

demonstrate the math. Rainbow Dash could feel her focus slip, imagining for a second giving her Wonderbolts acceptance speech to an adoring crowd. Applejack and Pinkie Pie would be cheering as hard as they could, Fluttershy would be doing her best to keep up, Twilight would be stamping her hooves as hard as possible, and Rarity...

She snapped back to reality, blushing, as an oblivious Twilight finished up her explanation.

"...so even if I knew an existing sexual prediction of every mare your friend could be then this new information would, at best, eliminate twenty-five percent of the possible candidates, so there's no good statistical reason not to tell me and it'll really improve the accuracy of the books I'm able to give you!" Twilight finished with a flourish of her quill on the paper and a satisfied smile. Rainbow Dash snapped up the page, scanning it intently.

"Well, the math checks out," Rainbow said, "so I guess it's okay to tell you she's interested in a mare."

Twilight raised an eyebrow at that. Mathematics was not traditionally one of Rainbow's strong suits. She was about to mention it before Rainbow Dash carried on; a dam of information seemed to have burst somewhere within her.

"It's not so much that she doesn't know how to ask a mare out, though. I mean, I've asked mares out before," Rainbow flushed scarlet before continuing, her words falling over each other as she blurted it all out. "So has she! I mean, I have, and my friend has, and that's not the problem, okay? It's that she's never asked out somepony who's so different to her before. I mean, they have totally different priorities! She's got no time for fun, at least not proper fun, and she'd be totally lost without her stupid weekly spa visits, and she spends way too long on her mane even if it does look all- all soft-"

Rainbow Dash trailed off, staring at her hooves. Twilight took a moment before speaking very softly indeed.

"Dash, are you interested in somepony?"

“Yes,” Rainbow Dash muttered under her breath.

“And is that somepony Rarity?” Twilight asked in the same quiet voice, suppressing a smile.

“Yes! No! I don’t know!” Rainbow sat down in a slump on the balcony. “I just- I can’t stop thinking about her. I don’t know how to look her in the eye. I can’t get her on her own and I don’t know what I’d say even if I did! Ever since the Best Young Fliers competition I’ve been trying to get a way to talk to her properly, or do another Sonic Rainboom, and I can’t do either. I’ve never had trouble asking asking a pony out before. Or with a trick. So I thought maybe you’d know some way to help me out, like a spell or something.”

“Rainbow, I don’t think this needs a spell. Everything I’ve read tells me they’re nothing but trouble when it comes to romance. And have you actually tried just going round to the boutique and asking her out? No plans, no get-out clauses?” Twilight nodded towards her library.

“I have read a lot of books about this. The more nervous you are about asking a question, the more invested you are emotionally in the outcome. In this case, your nerves are really just a signal that you should bite the bit and go for it.”

Rainbow sat up, smiling at her friend. Twilight was right! Since when had she been afraid of anything? She was Rainbow Dash, for crying out loud! No more excuses, no more stupid plans, no more anything except getting out there, and doing it!

“Okay!” She squeaked, her voice pitifully small. She took a deep breath and stood, facing Twilight and getting ready to shout.

“Okay! You’re right! I’ll go over to her boutique and knock on her door and ask her out.” Her volume slid away as she got to the end of the sentence.

“Tomorrow,” she said, twitching her ears down apologetically.

“No excuses, Rainbow-” Twilight was interrupted by an enormously loud crash at the front door, extending into the library. She and Rainbow exchanged worried glances before running down the stairs to see letters

strewn about the library and the local mailmare holding her head in her hooves and cursing quietly.

“Oh my goodness! Ditzzy, are you alright? What happened?” Twilight asked, running down to check on Ditzzy Doo.

“The d-d-. The d-” Ditzzy stammered at Twilight, taking a moment to get her voice under control. “D-door was c-closer than I th-thought. N-nothing broken.”

Ditzzy smiled apologetically, getting to her hooves and starting to sweep up the mail that had spilled out of the top of her bags. Rainbow and Twilight pitched in too, grabbing pieces of mail from between books, under tables and in one case from behind Ditzzy’s own ear.

“Oh, hey, this one’s for me!” Rainbow said, extracting an envelope from between the floorboards.

“Look, it’s all formal. ‘Miss Rainbow Dash’, heh. It’s got hearts all over it.” She took the envelope in her teeth,

“W-wait!” Ditzzy shouted, reaching out a hoof to stop Rainbow Dash opening it, and getting the distance right on the second attempt. “I was g-given that b-b-by Sweetie Belle. I th-think she’s got a b-bit of a crush.”

“Huh. Sweetie Belle, really? I mean, I know Scootaloo has kind of a hero worship thing going on, but I didn’t- huh. What am I supposed to do about something like this?” Rainbow said, putting the unopened letter on a nearby table and glaring at it accusingly.

“I remember doing something like that when I was about her age,” Twilight said, smiling at the other two ponies. “It was just after I’d started magic school properly, and Celestia had made me her own personal protégé there. She just seemed so regal, and kind, and she was at least kind enough never to mention the letter I sent her. I don’t think you need to do anything, Rainbow, except maybe go talk to Rarity? I think she’d want to know, and she won’t let on to Sweetie Belle.”

Ditzzy nodded, grateful that Twilight had articulated what she wanted to suggest so clearly, before suddenly starting- she must have been in here for five minutes! That meant she was going to be late finishing her round,

which meant she'd be late for speech therapy, and that was definitely not something she needed to be more stressful than it already was. Waving to Twilight and Rainbow, she set off out of the open doorway.

"Bye Ditzzy!" Twilight shouted after her, before turning back to Rainbow. "Now, you go! You've got a good reason to talk to Rarity now, so no more excuses." Twilight shoved the letter in her friend's mouth, muffling any further argument as she shoved the feebly protesting pegasus out of the door.

Twilight shut the door firmly, looking over the mess of her library. They'd managed to get all the letters together, she was fairly sure, but her books had still been badly scattered by the crash. Sighing, she resigned herself and Spike to yet another weekend of organisation and levitated her saddlebags onto her back. As she made her final preparations for leaving, she didn't notice that one of the letters had wedged itself inside "Common maladies of the *Malus* genus" at the top of her bag, little hearts on the edge of the envelope just visible whenever she moved.



# Chapter 3

“So that’s ‘A Mare’s Guide To Marriage’ back safe and sound,” Spike said, dropping the weighty tome into his wagon and giving the mint green unicorn in front of him a quiet wink.

“Just make sure you don’t let on anything to Bon-Bon. I’ve been planning this proposal for weeks now. I’m sure she thinks I’ve developed some secret obsession,” Lyra whispered back, blushing slightly.

“I won’t let on anything to anypony! Let me know when she’s said yes, okay?” Spike said with a wave as he wheeled his wagon away from Lyra and Bon-Bon’s little house. Lyra nodded enthusiastically before going back inside and shutting her door.

Spike eyed his wagon critically. It was getting a little full, and he’d only just hit the halfway point on the list of books he wanted to collect. He’d gone to the library after dropping off all Rarity’s mail, and as he’d expected Twilight was out on her weekly delivery for those ponies who couldn’t find the time to get to the library during opening hours. That was a lot of ponies, thought Spike. Probably because Twilight tended to view opening hours as a mild suggestion rather than strict rules. Still, the book delivery service was a way of getting around the irritation caused in the town by the number of times the library was closed for one of Twilight’s experiments. Or because she was reading upstairs and had forgotten to unlock the door. Or because she was out and about on what Spike was assured were ‘important examinations of the magic of friendship’, although he was starting to get suspicious about how those tended to coincide with her turn to do the washing up.

He’d used the time to go through the list of books out of the library from the romance section, and since most of them were due back in anyway he figured he’d go and collect them before finding Twilight to tell her about her date. The first thing she was likely to ask him to do in any case was to fetch reading material, so it’d be best if he actually had some to hand. There were a lot more romance books out than he’d expected though, and some ponies had been pretty embarrassed about revealing their reading material

to Spike in any case. Colgate had only admitted she'd got "Stallions are from Ares, Mares are from Eros" after Spike had showed her the list. Doc Whooves hadn't stopped trying to explain exactly why it was important research that had led him to take out the entire series of "Doctor, Darling" paperbacks. Cherrilee wouldn't even look him in the eye when returning something called "The Art Of The Bridle", although in fairness that one was illustrated.

All in all, though, Spike felt he was running out of time. The next name on his list was Fluttershy, and she lived quite a way out of town. She had the majority of the remaining books, and actually almost half the 'erotica' section. Fluttershy was one of those few ponies who used Twilight's 'automated checkout' system at the library, which was Twilight's name for 'just let Spike know you took the book out and don't bother me while I'm reading'. Actually, Fluttershy had taken out almost all her books through Spike instead of through Twilight. Spike frowned a little. Did Fluttershy want to keep Twilight in the dark about her taste in books? This would be a lot easier to work out, Spike thought, if I knew what 'erotica' was. I'll have to check the dictionary when I get back to the library. In any case, it's a good job I'm the one getting them back- if Fluttershy was keeping her reading list quiet, it'd only make her flustered if somepony else found out about it.

If I make that one last stop at Fluttershy's now, figured Spike, then I'll have pretty much everything back. Then I can find Twilight, tell her about her date tonight and she'll have a ton of books to leaf through. His decision made, he turned around the fountain, only to see his big sister on the other side of the town centre, wearing mostly-empty saddlebags and being followed by a belligerent-looking Rainbow Dash. As he walked over to meet them, he heard a snippet of their conversation.

"All I'm saying is you might need somepony to fly one of your books somewhere while you're on your route." Rainbow was saying, although she wasn't actually looking Twilight in the eyes while she spoke.

"Uh huh." Twilight's voice had the same peculiarly flat tone it did when Spike tried to tell her something while she was reading, and Spike got the feeling that she hadn't been listening to her pegasus companion for some time now.

"You can't fly. Not even with all your magic! But I can, and I refuse to let a

friend be stuck in trouble because I was off on a personal errand.”

“Uh huh.”

“I’m the Element of Loyalty, Twilight.” Rainbow suddenly flipped in front of Twilight, blocking her path and rearing. “*Loyalty*. I couldn’t leave you in the lurch like that!”

“Sure thing, Rainbow. I bet it’s nothing to do with- oh, hey Spike!” Twilight’s eyes lit up as she spotted Spike walking over with the wagon.

“Twilight, I’ve got news for you!” Spike shouted as he got closer. This was too good an opportunity to miss. He could tell Twilight about her ‘mystery date’ and then get Fluttershy’s books later. Pleased with himself, he put on his best dramatic voice, swelled his chest and spoke.

“Twilight Sparkle, while I was running errands earlier I was talking to another pony in town. A pony who shall remain nameless. A *mystery pony*. And they wanted me to tell you that they would be-”

“Are you collecting books?” Twilight cut across him, sounding peeved. “Spike, Tuesday is book collecting day! This isn’t Tuesday! This is Thursday, which is book delivery day!” Twilight indicated her saddlebags with a flick of her horn.

“Well, yeah, but this *mystery pony*-”

“What if you’ve picked up one of the books that I just gave out? You could have really irritated somepony! What if they wrote me a letter of complaint?” Twilight carried on, her voice getting higher and higher pitched as Rainbow Dash stifled a giggle behind her hooves.

“But- but the mystery pony-”

“What if they wrote Celestia a letter of complaint? She’ll decide I can’t be trusted with the library! She’ll-”

Spike took a deep breath and shouted across Twilight’s rant.

“You’ve been asked on a blind date!”

Twilight's jaw hung open, mid-rebuke. Even Rainbow was stunned into silence long enough for Spike to get out a hastily spoken sentence.

"You've been asked out on a date tonight at the Maison de Lune at eight o'clock, and you have to wear something nice, and it's a mystery pony who asked you and I can't tell you who it is because I promised I wouldn't."

"But- but the books-" Twilight stammered out.

"These are almost all the books that had been taken out of the Romance section. I thought you might want to have a read before deciding what to do. But you should wear your Gala dress, because the mystery pony likes it a lot," Spike said, frowning a little to emphasise that last point.

"I've never been on a date before," Twilight said quietly, looking at the ground. "I didn't think- Spike, are you sure I'll like them?"

She looked up at Spike with nervous eyes under heavy lids, and Spike almost couldn't bear it. She really was a bit naive when it came to romance after all.

"You'll love them," he said with a big, brave smile. Twilight lifted her head a little higher and exchanged a quick, pleased glance with Rainbow Dash, who was grinning widely at her.

Suddenly, a large red apple bounced off the back of Twilight's head at fairly high speed before ricocheting into the fountain.

"Ow! What was that?" Twilight said, wincing at the impact. She levitated the bruised apple out of the fountain, pulling it over to where Spike and Rainbow looked at it in confusion.

"I dunno. That's pretty weird. Maybe somepony threw it at you," Rainbow said, her eyes lighting up. "Maybe somepony's throwing apples at a whole bunch of ponies! They've got to be stopped! Twilight, I gotta go after them!"

"You don't have to do anything except go speak to- to a certain pony," Twilight said, flickering her gaze to Spike momentarily. "You have to stop making excuses! Like me, for example. I've never been on a date before,

and this is a blind date at a fancy restaurant and I'm going to go even though I'm nervous. And you're going to go and talk to the pony you've been avoiding. Okay?"

Rainbow pouted, looking sulkily at the fountain. "Fine. If you can do yours then there's no way I can't do mine. I can find the Apple Bandit of Ponyville tomorrow."

Twilight and Spike exchanged exasperated glances for a moment before Spike jumped into the lull in conversation.

"I've got almost all the books back from the Romance section, but Fluttershy still has a lot of the rest. Twilight, you can take these back to the library and I'll go over to Fluttershy's, get the other books and meet you back there, okay?"

"I'm not sure, Spike," said Twilight, looking at the sun. "It's nearly four already and I'll need at least an hour to dry from a bath and sort my mane, plus a half hour in the bath, and a half hour to dress, and if I need one of the books from Fluttershy's then I'll only have about an hour and a half to read it if you go at your normal speed."

Twilight grabbed the wagon handle in one hoof, and levitated her saddlebags over to Spike.

"Wait, I don't think-" Spike tried to explain that he'd rather be the one to get Fluttershy's books back, but Twilight cut him off mid-sentence.

"You finish these deliveries- there are only two or three left- and I'll teleport over to Fluttershy's cottage, get the books on the list and then meet you back at the library when you've finished. See you later!" she smiled for a second, and then she and the wagon both disappeared in a flash of white light.

"I never quite get used to that," Spike muttered to Rainbow. "I do get used to her leaving me a job, though."

Spike picked the saddlebags up off the floor and turned round, only to be confronted by Rainbow grinning madly at him.

“So Spike, you promised not to tell Twilight who her mystery date was, right?”

“Yeah,” said Spike, nervously. This was not going to end well. He could feel it.

“But I bet you didn’t promise not to tell anypony else who the date was, did you?” Rainbow’s grin grew even wider.

“Well, not exactly, but I’m sure-”

“Tell me who it is! This is too juicy, Spike! Somepony’s got a crush on little miss smartypants? I gotta know who!” Rainbow said, smiling and stamping one hoof on the ground.

“I don’t think-”

“Is it Applejack?” Rainbow started flying, lifting off the ground and pushing her face towards Spike.

“I’m just not sure I should-”

“Is it Fluttershy?” Rainbow said, leaning right in towards Spike.

“Fluttershy?” Spike asked, genuinely bamboozled for a second, all his nervousness forgotten. “I thought Fluttershy and Big Macintosh were dating.”

“Fluttershy and Big Mac? Hah!” Rainbow snickered, doing a quick loop-the-loop in amusement. “Fluttershy’s not interested in stallions. Didn’t you know that?”

“Well, obviously not!” Spike said in indignation. “I just figured because she spent so much time up at the farm that she was trying to get close to him, or something.”

“‘Or something’ is right,” Rainbow laughed under her breath. “But we’re getting off topic. Is it Colgate? Or Caramel?”

“No.” Spike said, turning to haul the saddlebags onto one shoulder and

trying to ignore the pegasus hovering over the other

“Daisy? Rose? Fancy Pants?”

“No!” Spike shouted, his frustration rising.

“It’s not Lyra, is it?” Rainbow mused, starting to run out of ideas.

“Of course it’s not Lyra! Lyra’s proposing to Bon-Bon!” Spike clapped his claws over his mouth and span to face an astonished Rainbow Dash.

“Lyra’s gonna prop-” Rainbow was cut short by Spike’s claws over her mouth.

“You can’t tell anypony! I promised Lyra, okay? I’ll even tell you who Twilight’s meeting on her date, but you can’t tell anypony about Lyra and Bon Bon and you can’t interfere in Twilight’s date tonight! Promise!” Spike blurted out, desperation on his face. Rainbow pushed his claws away from her mouth with a triumphant smile.

“You got it. I promise. So tell me already!”

Spike leaned towards Rainbow, looking around for anypony who might be listening in, before whispering.

“Twilight’s mystery date is Rarity.”

Spike pulled back, a little confused. He’d expected some reaction- it was excellent gossip, after all, and after telling somepony it might be a relief to finally talk about it- but Rainbow just stayed quiet, her eyes focussed in the middle distance, as she slowly landed on the ground.

“Rainbow? Rainbow Dash? Hello?” Spike waved a claw in front of her face, and suddenly the pegasus seemed to snap awake, with a brittle smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Spike, hey! Yeah, that’s quite a scoop. Good for Twilight. Look, I gotta get going, okay? I think I’m late for a nap. And I have, er, a letter to deal with.” she said, pulling a little envelope trimmed with hearts from under her wing.

“Didn’t Twilight say you had somepony to talk to?” Spike asked, genuinely confused.

“Huh? Oh, that. No, not really. Not any more, anyway. Catch you later, Spike.” Rainbow Dash beat her wings once or twice and soared away with uncharacteristic slowness, as Spike looked on confused.

As he pulled Twilight’s saddlebags over his shoulder, he didn’t notice four young fillies dragging a big bucket of apples behind them leave from the other side of the fountain, pulling towards Fluttershy’s cottage on the edge of town.

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Big Macintosh lumbered slowly into the centre of Ponyville, his near-empty saddlebags loose across his broad back. The fence across the southern fields had been completed in enough time for him to go into the library for a few minutes. Maybe he’d look up one of the farming almanacs in the reading corner. The one that faced the fire, where Miz Sparkle liked to sit while she was cross-referencing.

He pondered, as he made his way around the fountain, what had drawn him to the bookish unicorn in the first place. She enjoyed reading, and it’d be nice to discuss the books he read with somepony else, sure enough. He did have to admit that Applejack was justified in her surprise, though. He enjoyed working with his hooves, and the hard work of the farm was in his bones. Twilight Sparkle worked hard too, but all her muscles were in her mind. He’d seen her hunt down a magical rule she needed the same way he’d track an errant sheep, finding traces of the author in book after book until she’d pinned down the scroll it was scribbled in the margins of. That was impressive, but it wasn’t the sort of work that would help out at Sweet Apple Acres, he knew. What if she got bored at the farm? What if she resented his time there, or got upset or frustrated that she wasn’t as strong as he or Applejack?

Not that she wasn’t perfectly athletic, Big Mac corrected himself. She did well in the running of the leaves and she wasn’t weak or slight. She could probably adapt to farm life pretty well if she didn’t mind putting on a few pounds of solid muscle in the process. She could also lift a heck of a lot with her magic, certainly more than Big Macintosh could lift himself. That’s



the sort of talent that could come in useful, he thought to himself. If she didn't mind getting a little practical with her research, maybe they could finally get the stream diverted due east, irrigate out some of the higher land so it'd be usable all year round. They could move into his Ma and Pa's' old room, after they'd been seeing each other long enough. Granny Smith had been bugging him to do it for years- head of the household and all- but it hadn't felt right to him, to take that big room on his own.

Big Macintosh shook his head a little to clear it of daydreams, and smiled ruefully at himself. He could try convincing himself Twilight was the right choice for the farm all he liked, but the fact of the matter was his heart had fixed on her about two months ago and it wasn't planning to point in any other direction. He'd thought he'd fallen for Fluttershy in the past- she was kind to him, and he found it easy to speak to her, and he'd been upset sure enough when she'd turned him down. But that hadn't felt anything like what he now felt for the little lavender unicorn who ran the library.

It was when he'd spotted her looking through him this all started, Mac thought to himself. He'd been in the library looking for something to read to relax after a hard day, and after a brief and pleasant conversation Twilight had set him up with a copy of 'One Flew Over The Griffin's Nest' and he'd sat down to read. He could see her working in front of the fire and occasionally he'd happen to glance over at her, hard at work on a series of magical problems. Back then, she was just another of his little sister's friends, somepony he'd see around occasionally but nopony special.

Then he'd looked up to see her staring right at him. She was deep in thought, with a serious expression and the tiniest wrinkle between her eyebrows that showed how hard she was concentrating. She seemed to be examining him minutely, looking into his eyes for something, and suddenly- to his great surprise- Big Macintosh felt a blush starting around his neck and rising through his cheeks.

"M-Miz S-Sparkle?" He'd stuttered out, suddenly breaking her concentration. Her gaze snapped onto his, looking at him properly for the first time, and suddenly she'd started talking, flushing with embarrassment and burbling her words as she suddenly stood up.

"Oh! I wasn't- I wasn't staring at you! I know I was looking directly in your direction but my attention was directed elsewhere. I mean, was thinking

about a magical spell that switches the colours of things, so I was looking around the room at different colours, and you've got green eyes and Stormlord the Bald's first law states that it's always more difficult to change a pony magically than to change an inanimate object, so I was thinking about what I'd have to do differently if I wanted to change the colour of your eyes but I don't actually really want to do it."

Twilight sighed and lowered her ears, looking away from Big Macintosh as she saw his perplexed expression and starting again.

"I meant to say i didn't mean to stare. And that you have green eyes but you probably know that already," Twilight said, looking back up with an apologetic expression. She had violet eyes, Big Macintosh realised, and for a moment he couldn't believe he had ever found them possible to overlook.

"Eeyup," he said. He couldn't find any other words.

Ever since then, he'd been as smitten with her as a cat with cream, he thought to himself. He started to lose himself in daydreams again until he was interrupted by a yell from almost underneath him.

"Whoa there, Big Mac! You nearly stepped on me!" Spike said with irritation as he walked further out in front of the stallion. He hefted Twilight's saddlebags on his shoulder onto the street before pulling out a fairly large textbook and a paperback novel.

"I've been looking for you everywhere! You're my last delivery for the day, if you'll take something with you for Granny Smith. She's got 'Love In The Time Of Colic' here, and you've got 'Common maladies of the *Malus* genus', which is almost as heavy as I am so be careful with that. You good to go with those?" Spike said, scratching off names on a little list.

"Eeyup." Big Macintosh grabbed the paperback first and tossed it into a saddlebag.

"Okay, I'm done for the day! I'm back off to the library. See you later, Big Mac!" Spike waved a quick goodbye and started off at a brisk walk as Big Macintosh slowly maneuvered the larger book into his other saddlebag, carefully working around the lump of his glasses case. In his caution, he dislodged a scrap of paper from the textbook, sending it drifting to the

ground in front of him.

He didn't need his glasses to see the name 'Rarity' printed clearly on the front of the envelope. Or the little hearts around the edge.

Calm down, Big Macintosh thought to himself. Yes, it's probably a love letter to Rarity. Yes, it was in Twilight's saddlebags. But that don't mean Twilight wrote it. It could have been, er, it could have been- come on fella use your darn brain for once in your lifetime-

"Spike!" Big Macintosh exclaimed to himself, picking up the letter in his teeth and galloping after the young dragon. As he rounded the second corner towards the library, he only saw a brief, terrified flash of green and purple before he tripped over Spike and the two of them landed in a heap. Spike pried himself out from underneath Big Macintosh, his eyes unfocussed.

"Did I give you the wrong book?" Spike slurred, wobbling to his feet.

"Nnnope," Big Mac said firmly, controlling his words and moving the letter to directly in front of Spike's face.

"Did you write this to Miz R-Rarity?" He asked around the letter, his face unreadable. Spike rasied an eyebrow and snatched the letter out of the stallion's mouth.

"Nope! This hoofwriting is awful, it looks more like Twilight's than mine. Where did you find it?" Spike said, looking carefully at the letter. Big Mac could feel his stomach sinking with every word.

"In th' textbook," Big Mac mumbled.

"Well, it's not mine. It could be Twilight's, I guess. They are her saddlebags. But I don't know why she'd write a letter to Rarity when she sees her so often. And what's with all these little hearts on the edge?" Spike looked up at Big Mac quizzically, before examining the envelope again. Big Mac could almost see the wheels turning in Spike's head as his eyes lit up.

"Wait, you don't think this is a love letter, do you? Oh, wow! Big Mac, this is perfect!"

Big Mac raised an eyebrow at Spike's enthusiasm. Wasn't the little dragon head over heels for Rarity? Spike saw his confusion and leaned in close before whispering the rest.

"Look, don't tell anypony, but Twilight's got a mystery date tonight with Rarity! This letter means that Twilight must like her back, so now I know it'll definitely go well." Spike leaned back expectantly, waiting for Big Mac to react to his news. Big Mac took a deep breath, swallowed, and looked Spike directly in the eye.

"Eeyup."

Spike's excited expression faded, as he picked up Twilight's dusty saddlebags, muttering something about ponies not knowing good gossip if it bit them. Big Mac could see from his expression that Spike had wanted a better reaction, but Big Mac didn't have it in him to fake the enthusiasm the dragon wanted.

Rarity? Really? Big Mac thought to himself. She's about as far away from me as you can get and still be a pony. She's all powders and perfumes, fashion and gems. If that's the sort of pony Twilight likes then she would never have been interested in me. Big Mac cleared his head and took the letter out of Spike's claws, putting it safely in his saddlebags again.

"Ah'll deliver it. Ah'll bet you're gonna be busy makin' sure Miz Sparkle's ready for her date," Big Mac said tonelessly. Still, it had the effect he'd wanted, since Spike gave a grateful thumbs up and sped off towards the library.

Big Mac turned and headed for Carousel Boutique, keeping his mind carefully blank of ideas like losing the letter in a sudden blizzard, or accidentally delivering it to a convenient fire. He was a grown stallion, darn it, and he wasn't gonna let himself get riled over some pony he liked preferring somepony other than him. It wasn't like he and Twilight had been seeing each other and Rarity had up and stolen his date with strategic dressmaking. She and Twilight were two ponies who liked each other and deserved a clear run at it. As he reached the boutique, Big Mac just wished he'd had the courage to ask Twilight out back when he might have had a chance.

No use crying over unbuckled apples, he told himself as he got to the door and retrieved the letter. He decided he'd rather not actually deliver it face to face and see Rarity's reaction right in front of him, so he slid it under the door and knocked three times before turning around and walking back to town to meet Ditzy Doo before their speech therapy lesson. Even that didn't work as he'd hoped, since he wasn't a hundred yards away before he and every other pony within half a mile heard a great squeal of excitement from Carousel Boutique. Eyes downcast, he made his way slowly back to the fountain.

"Wh-what's g-got you looking so d-down?" Big Mac looked up to see Ditzy waiting for him at the fountain, looking at him with her good eye. He supposed he must have been quite a sight, moping his way down the street towards her. He shifted his collar and stood up straight before replying.

"Well, Miz Ditzy, Ah just got some news Ah didn't care to hear. Ah suppose Ah was sulking about it a little," He said with a little smile.

"Oh. D-do you want to t-talk about it?" Big Mac could see the concern in Ditzy's eyes. The blonde pegasus had been a good friend to him ever since they'd met at speech therapy. Not that the therapy actually seemed to help her much, he thought. Her stammer was still as bad during the lessons as it was when they'd first started, but she said she found the information helpful as soon as she got away from the stress of the lessons.

"Naw, Ah'm just being foalish," Big Mac replied, setting into a slow walk. Ditzy fell in beside him, matching his pace. "We've just got time for a muffin each from Sugarcube Corner before we go see Doc Whooves. What d'ya think?"

Ditzy nodded enthusiastically at that, and the two friends set off to their appointment.

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"Okay now, sir, if you'd just stretch your wing out a tiny bit more for me that'd be just wonderful."

On Fluttershy's table, a bright blue cardinal stretched its left wing out to its

fullest extent, enabling Fluttershy to carefully unwrap the tiny bandages around its base. She looked at the uncovered wing critically, checking to see if the bandages had restricted feather growth or hidden any unexpected infections. Satisfied that the wing had healed properly, she allowed herself a big smile before continuing.

“Well everything looks just perfect. I’m sure if you just take it slowly and avoid any sudden exertion you’ll be absolutely as good as new within-”

BAM BAM BAM

A loud, insistent knocking startled the cardinal and Fluttershy both, sending the bird flying out of the window as fast as he could move and Fluttershy cowering under her table before she realised it was just a knock. It took a few seconds and a raised eyebrow from Angel Bunny before she remembered she was supposed to actually say something in response to a knock on the door, even if it was a really loud knock.

“Who is it please?” Fluttershy asked in what she was sure was a confident and commanding tone.

“Fluttershy? Are you in? I need to talk to you!”

Fluttershy sighed with relief at hearing Twilight’s voice, even if her friend did sound a little stressed. Extracting herself from under the table, she walked over to the door and opened it to let Twilight in. As soon as she did, she could see relief on the unicorn’s face- whatever she needed to discuss was clearly important.

“Hi there Twilight! Please come in, I’ll get you a cup of tea.” Fluttershy gestured as Twilight dragged in Spike’s wagon, heaped high with books. Fluttershy couldn’t help but notice the titles on some of them- what on earth was Twilight doing with a book like ‘The Art of the Bridle’?

“No time for tea I’m afraid. I just needed to get back the romance books you borrowed. I’ve got research to do!” Twilight pronounced happily. She pulled up a list from the wagon and scanned over it, reading a few of the titles out loud before she realised what she was saying.

“So let’s start with ‘The Mare Erotic’ and the ‘Filly Friends’ series, and then

‘Housemares at Play: fifteen tales of forbidden...’ Twilight trailed off, embarrassed. Fluttershy couldn’t say anything; she’d frozen in place.

“How about I just give you the list and you find the books yourself and I have a cup of this delicious tea?” Twilight said quickly, sliding the list over to Fluttershy and sitting at the table. She busied herself pouring out a cup of tea and quickly hiding her face behind it. Fluttershy picked up the paper from the table and looked over it, almost fainting when she saw all her ‘entertainment’ listed out in front of her.

Quickly sweeping the list off the table Fluttershy set about retrieving the books from her bedroom. By her third trip, Twilight seemed to have recovered from her shock enough to ask a question.

“Fluttershy? I’m- I’m a little suprised at your choice of reading material. Not that I disapprove or anything! I really don’t, I mean I’ve got a well-read copy of- not that you need to know about my reading habits, sorry. What I meant to ask is- this all seems marephilic. I thought you and Big Macintosh had an understanding. Was I wrong?”

Fluttershy felt her stomach fall. Ever since she’d turned Big Macintosh down a few months ago, she’d found it simpler to just not explain the situation to anypony. They all assumed that Big Mac and she had been carrying on in secret, and since they were both fairly private and shy nopony had really pressed her on it. Even Rarity had had the good grace not to press too hard during their spa sessions, and though Fluttershy had never actually lied she’d carefully let Rarity come to the wrong conclusion. The pegasus sighed at herself a little, sat down at the table and looked up at Twilight from under her mane. She’d promised herself she wouldn’t lie about this if somepony asked her directly.

“Yes. I mean, I don’t have an understanding with Big Macintosh. He’s a nice pony and I like him a lot but I’m not attracted to stallions,” Fluttershy said quietly. She wasn’t sure what reaction she expected from Twilight, but an exasperated sigh certainly wasn’t it.

“So you turned him down a few months ago. He’s just been walking around and not dating anypony, even though he could just go and ask out anypony he liked.” Twilight folded her forelegs, looking thoroughly peeved. “I really thought you and he were dating!”

"I asked him not to tell anypony that I'd turned him down," Fluttershy said, biting her lip. "I was- I didn't want Applejack to get mad at me. Or say I shouldn't go to the farm so much." Twilight raised an eyebrow.

"Why would Applejack do that? I mean, if Big Macintosh was alright with everything."

"It's not that I think she would want to see less of me or think I was hurting Big Macintosh's feelings or anything. I just think Applejack's really focussed on a specific picture of the future. I think she saw that Big Macintosh liked me, and that she and I get on well and I'm good with the animals and I can even help a little with the weather. She's planned a whole life for us all in her heart. I don't want to have to tell her it can't be that way," Fluttershy said, feeling tears prick at the corners of her eyes. Twilight listened silently, her tea forgotten.

"I don't want Big Macintosh. I want Applejack."

Fluttershy didn't feel any better for saying it out loud. She'd hoped she would, but it wasn't a relief to get it off her chest. It was just a confirmation that it was true, that she'd been pining over a farm pony who'd never think of her as more than a friend. Not while it might hurt Big Macintosh to think otherwise. Fluttershy wiped her eyes with a hoof and set back to her bedroom to get more books.

Suddenly, Twilight was in front of her. Fluttershy caught a glimpse of the tears in her friend's eyes before she was pulled up into an enormous hug, Twilight squeezing her hard enough to trap one of her wings in the process.

"Oh, Fluttershy!" Twilight almost sobbed into the pegasus' shoulder. "I didn't- I had no idea that you were- I promise I won't tell her, okay? More importantly, I promise you we'll get Applejack to come around. The way she is around you- the care she takes- I'm sure she feels something for you. I just know it. We just need to get her to know it."

Fluttershy extracted her wing from Twilight's embrace, pulling her forward into a more comfortable hug.

"You really think that we could-" Fluttershy was interrupted by a flat, cold



voice from the door.

“Not that Ah want to interrupt, but Ah need to have a word with Fluttershy,” Applejack said.

Fluttershy and Twilight froze for a second before Twilight disentangled herself. While Fluttershy mostly kept her composure and just quietly returned to her hooves, Twilight couldn’t seem to stop herself talking.

“Applejack! What are you doing here? Not that you shouldn’t be here, of course, I mean who doesn’t like to call on Fluttershy? Not that I’m calling on Fluttershy! I’m just here about the books!”

Applejack eyed Twilight suspiciously before taking a look at the wagon and turning pale. Snorting from her nostrils, she started towards Twilight, getting louder with each step.

“This is what you were here for? Well, don’t it all start makin’ sense now! You’ve been coming round here with your little smut wagon for a few months now, Ah reckon. You’ve been seducin’ Big Macintosh with your fancy books at the library, and now you’re peddlin’ your bawdy nonsense to Fluttershy! Well, the amount of time she’s spent up at the farm she’s practically part of the family, d’ye hear?. Ah look after the Apple family! Me! You got no right to take her away from me!”

Applejack had pressed Twilight right back against the wall of the little cottage. Fluttershy could see Twilight silently pleading with her to help, but Fluttershy just couldn’t find her voice.

“I think you’ve got the wrong idea Applejack, I wasn’t-” Twilight stammered out.

“You weren’t what? Staying? Well you’re right there, missy. Here, you take your cart of fornication and you teleport back to that book barn you call a home!” Applejack said, grabbing the handle and forcing the wagon at Twilight.

“Applejack- I didn’t-”

“Listen, sugarcube, Ah’m gonna make this real simple for you. Either you

get home right now or Ah buck you there.” Applejack turned to make good on her threat, and with a squeak of protest- and an apologetic, panicked glance at Fluttershy- Twilight disappeared in a flash of white light.

Fluttershy took a longing look at the open door for a second before meeting Applejack’s furious gaze. Applejack didn’t speak straight away, and when she did her voice had the same awful, even flatness as when she’d arrived.

“Ah could understand if you didn’t want Big Macintosh for personal reasons, Fluttershy. Ah really could. But you have been lying to me. Don’t come to the farm again.”

By the time Fluttershy found her voice, Applejack had left, her powerful strides taking her out of the cottage and over the hill. Fluttershy sat down by the table and stared at her cooling, unwanted tea, taking deep breaths to calm herself. After a few minutes, there was a tentative knock on the door. Fluttershy wandered over listlessly and nudged it open, to see four young fillies and a pail of apples.

“Hey there Fluttershy! Did we miss Twilight Sparkle?” Applebloom said, beaming and panting with exertion.

“Yes, you missed her. Can I help?” Fluttershy asked tonelessly.

“I don’t think so. We’ve got to throw apples at her!” Dinky cheerfully exclaimed.

“Not *at* her, *to* her. Ah thought we covered that at the fountain,” Applebloom complained.

“I say it’s too hard to keep up with her just to throw them near! We’ve gotta make every shot count,” Scootaloo interjected.

“Scootaloo’s right,” Sweetie Belle agreed. “We’ve gotta make sure she can’t think of anything but apples!”

“Well, maybe. Perhaps if we hit her hard enough with them we only need two or three good throws. Fluttershy, where’d Twilight get herself off to?”

Applebloom realised after asking the question that she had maybe

misjudged Fluttershy's mood. Across the pegasus' face there was an expression she'd only seen once or twice before, and each time it had meant that she and her friends were in a whole heap of trouble. Fluttershy's glare had an intensity that was difficult to ignore.

"I think," Fluttershy said quietly, "that you girls had better come in and tell me everything."

The four young fillies filed silently into the house, their heads held low. Fluttershy followed them in and closed the door.