

Caramel's Light

By Squeak



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Chapter 1

Caramel Apple was stuck working the apple cart for the day. He was on loan from his own farm to the Ponyville Apples. He had been told it was because his cousins' had a particularly heavy apple crop this season and needed sompony to keep shop while they worked. But he knew it was really because they didn't want him around the farm. He sighed, looking at his cutie mark. It was three horseshoes, it should have been four. But it marked his talent, losing things. Or perhaps being lost. He wasn't quite sure.

Maybe his talent was being useless.

He tried to be helpful around his farm, he really did. But everything he tried seemed to turn out for the worst. If he bucked some apples, they'd fall into the river. If he tried to plant some crops, nothing would grow on the land for days. He'd tried everything, but nothing seemed to work out. It was obvious his farm looked for any excuse to get rid of him. They'd given him a position as deliverypony for a while. He'd done his best, but they always made him take packages to the far reaches of the village, only to find that the patron hadn't ordered anything. If he actually managed to find the address in anycase. He'd return to find they had 'gotten the order wrong' and finished the day's work in his absence.

He sat his head down on the cart, feeling miserable. He hadn't received a single customer all morning. It seemed this was going to be another thing he failed at. The ponies here knew very well of his reputation and either rushed past a little faster than usual, or ignored him completely. He imagined returning to his cousin's farm in a few hours without a single bit earned. They'd be convinced he was useless too, they'd probably never want his help again. He'd already lost the grass seeds for the earlier Winter Wrap Up, not to mention the incident with Granny Smith's false teeth. This would be the last straw he was sure of it, another bunch of ponies on the long list of those that would be better off without him.

"Hello?" said a voice. "I haven't seen you around in a while. Where's Applejack?"

Caramel snapped out of his reverie to find a purple unicorn looking at him. "Oh...Um...are you talking to me?" he asked.

"Well, I don't think I'm talking to the apples." She put on a friendly smile. "Well, technically I am, the Apple family going back generations and all. But I mean, I'm not talking to a physical apple as in the small fruit."

Caramel just stared.

"Are you alright?"

"Um...Um..yeah...I'm fine." Caramel stuttered. "Applejack's back at the farm. It's Applebuck Season." He paused. "Would you like to wait for her to come back?"

Much to his amazement, she laughed. "Oh no, that's fine. You can sell me some apples right?"

"Me? Oh!....Yeah, I mean sure! If you want to buy some, just call me the applepony!" Caramel paused. "I mean, I am an Apple pony.. Like you said....you know...cause I'm an Apple...well..not the...fru- well...You know."

"Yes," the unicorn said charitably. "I know. Don't worry, Caramel."

Caramel froze. "You know my name?"

"Of course, you're Caramel. We've met twice before. When I first came to ponyville and during the Winter Wrap up. Remember? I'm Twilight."

"Oh." The memory surfaced in his brain. She was the one who'd found the grass seeds after he'd lost them. They'd somehow ended up on the roof of the bakery. "Yeah....well it's nice to meet you again Twilight." He tried the name on his tongue. It sounded nice.

"Likewise." Twilight examined the apples around the cart. He couldn't help but notice how nicely her mane was combed "Do you have any red Gala's? They make a good replacement for rubies apparently."

"Rubies?"

"For Spike."

Caramel looked even more lost.

“My friend, he’s a dragon, you’ve met him too.” she raised an eyebrow. “Not very good with faces are you?”

His face reddened slightly. “W-well not really. I’m pretty forgetful,” he admitted. “I’m not sure how I could forget your face though... I mean, it’s a pretty memorable face. Not that it’s ugly or anything! I mean ...um...it’s a very nice face, and your mane looks nice too. If you don’t mind my saying that is. You probably comb it a lot...Um...Not to say that you...Um....You know what? I’ll get those Galas.” He ducked behind the counter before Twilight could reply. Searching hastily through the various apples he had in stock. Caramel pushed aside a basket of red Delicious, looking past the fugis and dodging around the Granny Smiths before finding the bushel in question.

“Ah! Here we are,” he said, lifting it onto the counter top. “How many did you want?”

“Oh, just two, I’m meeting Spike for lunch.”

“Ah, well you’ve picked yourself a good apple. Nothing better than a Red Gala to fill you up!” Caramel attempted a smile. He shifted through the apples piled in the basket, trying to find the best two to give her. “So...um....It’s a nice day isn’t it?”

“Oh yes, Rainbow Dash did a fine job of clearing the clouds today. It’s so nice I might take my books outside later. I’m studying paleolithic runemancy today, and this weather is just perfect for reading.”

Caramel stopped himself from asking what most of that meant. “Yeah. Super reading weather for sure.” Caramel fumbled with the apples some more, trying to ignore his heart hammering away in his chest. She was being so nice. Why was she being so nice?

He found two apples and after a quick check to make sure they were the best in the bunch, gave them to her. “That’ll be two bits.”

Twilight frowned. “I thought it was four bits for two apples?”

Caramel floundered for a moment. "Oh...well it is! But you see um...you were so...well... I mean....well...You see you seem so...That I..." He paused. "...We're having a sale," he finished lamely.

"Oh, well that's lucky." She smiled. Caramel instantly decided she had the best smile in the universe.

Twilight turned to leave. Caramel's mind raced on how to get another word in.

"Um, wait!" he held up a hoof. "That...sale, I forgot, you get three apples with that. Not two."

Twilight paused. "I only need two, it's just me and Spike."

"Well....what if somepony else came with you to lunch? You know...for the extra apple?"

Twilight pondered this for a moment. "That's not a bad idea. There's somepony I'd love to have lunch with."

Caramel's heart soared.

"Fluttershy's probably taking a break from tending to her animals about now. She works so hard. She'd appreciate it if I invited her to lunch."

It fell back into his hooves with a lurching thud.

"Oh..."

"Could I have a Granny Smith instead of a Gala for the third apple?" asked Twilight. "She likes those best."

"Sure....no problem." Caramel mumbled. He fetched her the apple in question. Twilight floated it into her saddlebag and turned to leave.

"Thank you very much. I'm sure she'll enjoy it."

"You're welcome," Caramel replied, crestfallen.

"Have a wonderful day Caramel."

His ears perked up when she said his name again. He was still amazed she'd bothered to remember it. She knew him, and was still willing to talk to him, and buy apples no less! He felt thoroughly out of his depth.

It suddenly occurred to him that he hadn't replied.

"Oh! Yeah, thanks, you too-" But she was already walking down the road by the time he'd opened his mouth. "Twilight." Caramel said the name slowly. He felt afraid that if he said it too fast the words might get away. Caramel sighed, sitting his head on the counter and staring dreamily after her as she headed off towards the center of town. "Twilight..." he whispered again, to himself this time. He really liked that name. "Twilight..."

"What about her?"

Caramel jumped, whirling around to see his cousin Applejack.

"Oh, nothing!" he said quickly.

"The way you said it, it sure didn't sound like nothin'." The orange pony eyed him suspiciously.

Caramel quickly searched for something to change the subject. "I sold some apples!" He pointed to the bits lying on the counter.

"You did!?" Applejack quickly hid her shock. "How many?"

Caramel glanced at the bits, knowing he was three short. "Two." he lied. He would have to bring some apples from his own farm next time he came over. He didn't want to tell Applejack he'd gone around giving her apples away. Even if it was to a friend.

"Well, good for you Caramel!" She slapped him on the back in a way he was sure would leave a bruise. "You might be cut out for this yet."

"Thanks..." Caramel groaned.

"Now, why don't I help you pack up? If we hurry, I reckon we'll be back at the farm in time for dinner."

He brightened at this. Things were looking up.

“Sure, I’ll get the-” he was interrupted as he tripped headlong over the stopping blocks in front of the cart. “Ow...”

“Whoa there!” Applejack looked him over worriedly. “Are you alright sugarcube?”

Caramel got slowly to his hooves. “Yeah, I’m alright. I scuffed my leg a bit but...” he noticed she was staring. “What’s wrong?” He followed her gaze, she was looking past his head at something behind him. He turned around to find the Applecart speeding down the hill into the horizon.

“Horseapples.”

Chapter 2

Applejack had been awfully nice about the whole thing after they'd managed to stop the cart. Somehow it had managed to roll halfway across town before it finally slowed enough to be caught. He'd collected the apples that had fallen along the way, which took up the rest of the day, and returned them, slightly bruised, to the farm. Caramel felt terrible, for once he'd thought he'd managed not to screw something up for once, but everything had gone bad, as always. Somehow the fact that his cousin was being so kind about it made it worse. She'd even still let him come to dinner, though it was cold by the time they got there. Granny Smith gave him the evil eye whenever she thought he wasn't looking the whole time. The apples couldn't be sold in that condition, they'd have to be made into pies and other deserts to hide the blemishes, which meant extra work for all of them. Knowing this, he very much wanted to sink into a large hole and never come out. He hardly touched his food.

They sent him on his way with what he didn't eat wrapped up and put in his saddlebag. Even if Granny Smith was angry she was still an Apple, hospitality came first.

Applejack walked him home, there was an awkward silence as they progressed through the emptying streets of ponyville toward his own farm at the edge of Hoofdale.

"Aw, don't look so glum, sugar cube," said Applejack. "It wasn't your fault. Just a bit of bad luck is all."

He sighed. "Yeah, bad luck...my only luck."

"Now don't you go frettin' bout it. Your luck'll change. Just you wait and see." She patted him on the back. "Just don't give up, that's the Apple Motto."

He nodded, avoiding her eyes. They approached the edge of town where his farmland began.

“Really now, you cheer up, and give the family my regards ya hear?” Applejack turned to head back to her own farm. “You can make it on your own from here right?”

Caramel managed a small smile. “Yeah, I’ll see you later Applejack.” He began to walk into the trees that bordered the land, he glanced back once, to see the orange earth pony waving him on his way.

He felt a little better, perhaps she was right, maybe things would change for him soon. A pony could hope right? His steps were a little more lively as he came towards the house, a rather old two story red brick building. He could see that all the work had be finished while he was away, as usual. The apples were all stored away in the shed, and the apple trees closest to the house were bare.

Caramel knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” asked a voice.

“It’s me, I’m back.” He peered through the peephole.

“Oh, welcome back Caramel.” The door opened and Caramel stepped inside. His sister, Toffee Apple stood there looking him over. She was a rather stocky pony, her coat was a pale brown to offset her blond mane and tail. “No broken bones...that’s a good sign.” She smiled.

“Thanks.” Caramel rolled his eyes.

“So, how did it go? Don’t leave me hanging,” she said, leading him into the living room.

“I managed to sell a few apples if you’re wondering.” Caramel muttered.

“Oh that’s great Caramel!” She slammed her hoof into his back in the exact place that was still sore from his earlier encounter with Applejack.

“Thanks....” he groaned. “But I have to be honest....not everything went well..”

Toffee’s smile faded. “What happened?”

“Well, I may have knocked the applecart off its blocks.”

She sighed. "And?"

"And it might have rolled half way through town."

"And?"

"And most of the apples might have fallen off and got bruised..."

"Oh Mel..." Toffee put a hoof to her forehead.

Caramel hung his head. His earlier good mood evaporating. "I'm sorry. They really didn't mind all that much...they can still make pies out of the apples..."

Toffee looked at him for a moment. "Oh, it's not that bad I suppose...you've had worse days right? At least you managed to sell some Apples. I won't tell Grampa Jonagold if you won't."

Caramel looked up towards their Grandfather's room. He knew the old stallion would probably be asleep. If he got wind of another screw up, Caramel would never hear the end of it.

"Deal."

Toffee nodded. "Good. Come to think of it, how many apples did you sell?"

"Oh," Caramel's face flushed. "Well....I sold a couple..."

"How many is a couple?"

"You know.....a few..."

"And just how many is a few?"

Caramel twiddled his hooves. "Three..."

Toffee shook her head. "Well....that's not.....nothin'. Right?"

"True enough." Caramel turned towards the stairs. "I think I'll go up to my room." If Grampa asks, tell him I sold more than that. Please?"

Toffee nodded.

Caramel walked up the stairs to his room. Making sure to walk softly past Grampa Jonagold's door, he went inside and sat down on the bed. He felt quite a bit worse having talked to his sister. She did her best he supposed, but really Toffee could only do so much. Their Grandfather was getting on in years, and it was looking more and more like he certainly wasn't up to the task of taking over the farm. It was going to her, and he was well aware of that. Caramel didn't mind this fact. She worked hard, and enjoyed doing the odd jobs around the farm. He was more than happy for her, but he really hated feeling like a burden. It seemed as of late that everything seemed to be going downhill as far as he was concerned.

He reached over and opened the draw of his nightstand, pulling out a bag of caramel chews, he dumped a few onto its surface, and poked at them with a hoof.

"Perhaps I have some really awesome talent I just haven't discovered yet?" he mused. "I'll probably stumble upon it any day now. Yeah...that's it." He thought about this for a moment. "Maybe I'm meant for something bigger. Maybe I should look into being part of the royal guard or something." Caramel thought about this. He'd probably look ridiculous in armor, and in anycase he wasn't a pegasus. "Then again...maybe I'm just a lost cause..." he popped a caramel chew into his mouth.

He sighed. "Why am I so delicious?"

Caramel's mind turned to the day's events. There wasn't much he wanted to relive, but one memory stuck out in particular. The unicorn who had purchased the apples from him. She'd remembered his name. She'd seen him screw up before, and still wanted to talk to him. She wasn't even a relative! She didn't have too.

But she did.

He briefly wondered if he'd see her again. Or if he wanted too. Why ruin a perfectly good memory? She'd probably want nothing to do with him if they ever got to know each other. But...she'd been so nice. She wouldn't really do that would she? The kind mare who had been the only good thing in his long day? He wondered if Applejack knew her. She probably did. If he asked, she might even take him to see her again. They could talk then. He'd like that. He had seen she liked books, perhaps if he bought one for her she'd be more inclined not to laugh in his face. But which one to buy?

Would giving her a gift on only the second-or maybe it was the third- time they met be awkward?

For the second time that day Caramel felt horribly out of his depth.

Chapter 3

Caramel descended the stairs into the kitchen the next morning. The smell of apple pancakes wafted up from the stove as Toffee cooked, humming a tune to herself. Grampa Jonagold sat at the table studying the day's edition of the Equestria Daily layed out on the table.

Caramel quietly sat down across from him, watching his sister prepare the food, and waiting for the daily errand to be issued. He knew full well that his grandfather would think of some useless task for him to do, as he had yesterday, and almost every day before that. He hoped it would at least be a good job this time around. Not like polishing the the apple buckets, or going all the way to Canterlot for a new pair of eyeglasses.

He looked at Grampa Jonagold out of the corner of his eye, the old stallion seemed engrossed in whatever article he was reading. His light green mane brushed out of his eyes and his dark red coat clean and ready to begin the day. Caramel quickly averted his gaze as the old pony looked up from his paper. Taking a new interest in the cup of lemonade next to his plate.

From behind his small glasses Grampa Jonagold inspected him.

"So.." he started, smacking his lips. "Yer sister here told me you managed to sell some apples yesterday for that farm over in ponyville?"

Carmel looked up. So he'd already asked Toffee about it, hopefully she'd covered well. "Um...Yes sir." he nodded quickly taking a sip of his lemonade.

"Good, good, I had to make sure. Couldn't believe it when she told me. You, our little Clumsy Caramel selling forty apples all on his own!"

Caramel choked. "What!?" He shot Toffee a look, but she was hiding her face behind a cabinet door.

"Now don't be modest boy, yer sister done told me all about it. I bet them Ponyville apples is singin' your praises. You should be proud!" His

Grandfather beamed. "Here I am trying to make you into a workhorse, when it's obvious what you are!"

"B-but Gramp-"

"A sales pony!" Grampa Jonagold continued, heedless of Caramel's protests. "That's why, today I've got a very special job for you. Follow me."

The old pony got shakily to his hooves. Caramel followed him out to the barn, at a total loss for what to say. He was in over his head now, what was Toffee thinking? He'd wanted to look good, but not *that* good! What did his Grandfather have in mind?

Grampa Jonagold came to a stop in front of the barn doors and turned smiling to Caramel. "I've got a surprise for you, boy. It's right in here." He opened the doors with a flourish. Inside something lay under a tarp. It was large and bulky whatever it was. Caramel walked forwards for a closer look. It came up to about his neck, and looked to be rather heavy. He couldn't begin to imagine what it might have been. But he had a feeling it wouldn't be good.

"Well go on." Grampa Jonagold urged. "Take a look at it!"

Caramel hesitantly grabbed the corner of the tarp and pulled. It slid away to reveal a wooden cart. Caramel stared at it in horror. He suddenly had an idea of what his errand for the day would be, and he didn't like where it was going.

"Surprise!" Grampa Jonagold clapped him in the back with a hoof. Caramel was quite certain the bruises in that particular area would never get a chance to heal. "After hearing how good you did with the Ponyville Apple's cart, I thought, 'Why not use some of that salespony charm for ourselves?' So I went out this morning before you woke up, and got this baby at a great price! Isn't that wonderful?"

Caramel just stared.

"Speechless my boy? I totally understand, it's overwhelming isn't it? We're going to make so much money! Good thing too, I still need that hip of mine looked at. Darn thing's creakier than a metal door at the bottom of the ocean."

“B-but...But Grampa! I can’t-”

“Wait to get out there and sell some apples?” Caramel found himself being pushed towards the cart. “That’s great! It’s already loaded up, you get this to the ponyville market and go get’em Caramel! I have faith in you boy. Good luck!”

Caramel found himself harnessed to the cart before he knew what was happening. He turned to protest again, but seeing his Grandfather’s smiling face, he found he couldn’t. *He works so hard, Caramel thought, I can’t disappoint him....*

“Thanks, Grampa...” Caramel said quietly. “I’ll go right now.”

This comment earned him another hoof to the back. “That’s the spirit! Now get out there and sell, sell, sell! Bring us home some bits!”

The cart was heavier than it looked. It was at this point more than any other Caramel regretted the fact that the Ponyville town square was at the top of a hill. It took him half an hour just to lug the cart up.

When he finally arrived, he sat on his haunches for a moment, gasping for breath. What had he gotten himself into? The ponies around here wouldn’t buy anything from him. He knew that from yesterday, and then he’d had Applejack’s cart. With his own cart he’d be lucky if anypony came within 20 feet.

Still, he was here. Nothing to do but set up. Caramel, unloaded some bushels of apples, placing them around the cart in a way he thought might look attractive to the unwary passerby. He found an umbrella wrapped in some cloth. He opened it, and layed it against them, maybe if he looked like he knew what he was doing somepony might buy something. Apples didn’t like being in the heat. Right?

As he turned to look at his work, his head collided with something hard.

“Ow!” yelled a voice. There was the sound of fluttering of pages as a book fell the ground.

Caramel's head was spinning. That voice was familiar, but he couldn't place it, he waited for his vision to stop swimming, and looked around. The purple unicorn from the previous day sat rubbing her head.

"Twilight!" he yelled, he was on his hooves immediately. "Oh my gosh! I'm so sorry! Are you hurt? It was my fault. Oh Celestia, I am so **so** sorry. I didn't mean it. Of course...you know, I'd never mean to hurt you." *No...wait..that sounds weird.* He thought. "Or anypony really!" he quickly interjected. "Do you need help?"

Twilight looked up. "Oh Caramel, hello. I'm fine really. Don't worry, it was more my fault than yours. I should really choose between reading and walking." She nodded to the book that had fallen to the ground in the collision. "I didn't see you."

Caramel raced over to pick up the book. The cover was filled with words he couldn't fathom the meaning of. He offered it to Twilight, who floated it into her saddlebag. "Oh no, I was setting up the cart. I should have been paying more attention. Really, it's my fault. You know me, Clumsy Caramel."

Why did you tell her that nickname? His brain screamed.

Twilight laughed. *Oh Celestia she had a great laugh....* "Fine, I guess we'll share the blame."

"Um..yeah." Caramel chuckled. "I guess so."

Twilight looked past him at the cart. "That's not the same setup you had yesterday is it?"

"Oh, uh, no. Grampa Jonagold bought us our own cart this morning. We could use the money."

"So it's new is it? Well you should have a grand opening sign." She gestured to the crowd. "To draw in customers. I'm sure Applejack could help you with it." Twilight smiled. "If she doesn't mind the competition that is."

Caramel stared at her for a moment. It was only the second time he'd seen her smile and he was quite sure he never wanted to stop seeing it. Wow she was pretty. Perhaps he should have brought that book he'd

thought of...but she was already reading a book. It suddenly dawned on him that she ran the library. Applejack had mentioned it once before. Would she need books? Maybe something else...

Caramel realized he'd spaced out for a moment.

*Oh no...*he thought. If he replied now, would it be awkward? Maybe if he acted like he hadn't heard her she'd repeat it, then he could reply...but that might make him seem uninterested in what she had to say....*Why was this so hard?*

He chose to reply. "Oh, me? I'm no competition."

Twilight looked briefly at his cart. "Well your apples look pretty good. I'd say you might give her a bit of a run for her money. How about I help?"

Caramel's heart was beating three times faster than it should have. "H-huh? Oh! That's not really necessary, I couldn't...I mean.."

"I'll be your first customer. Come on, we'll set the tone for the day." She smiled again.

He would have jumped into a volcano if she'd asked.

"Okay..." he said dreamily.

Twilight picked out two Golden Delicious apples, and set them on the counter. "How much is that?"

Caramel suddenly remembered he had neglected to ask what the prices were before he'd left the farm. He really didn't want to charge her, but if he returned home empty hoofed, his Grandfather would be disappointed. Caramel didn't want to see that.

"Four bits."

Twilight fished the money out of her saddled bag and set it on the counter. Grabbing the apples. "Thank you."

Caramel floundered for a moment. "O-oh no, thank you!"

"Good luck, Caramel" Twilight turned to leave.

Caramel thought for a moment. Twilight was so kind to him, she'd been his first customer two days in a row. Did that mean she liked him? He thought. It seemed like she liked him. But did she *like* him, or *like, like* him? Maybe she was just being charitable...he thought. Perhaps she saw that he was a screw up, and everything she said was out of pity....

He sighed, looking up as she walked away. That was probably it. There was no way in the wide world of Equestria she'd ever like him.

You don't know that. Said a little voice in his head.

Yes I do. Caramel thought back.

If she was doing this out of pity, would she have remembered your name? And bought apples from you twice?

Maybe.

Well there's only one way to find out.

Caramel's mouth was open before he knew what was happening.

"Twilight!" he called.

She turned. "Yes?"

Caramel's face turned bright red. Curse that voice, there was no turning back now.

"Um...are you..busy this afternoon?"

Twilight pondered for a moment. "Not really, why do you ask?"

Caramel's face got redder. "Um...well you see...I was wondering....If...you know...you had nothing to do....if you would.....you know.... kinda...." His voice petered out.

This time it was Twilight's turn to blush. "Oh! Oh you mean....if I'm not doing anything...you'd like to..."

Caramel resembled a tomato at this point. He nodded.

Twilight's face got just as red as Caramel's. "Oh....oh my.."

His heart sank. She was going to say no. He just knew it. "Well...if you don't want to... I understand...I'll jus-"

"I'd love to!" she blurted out. Twilight quickly covered her mouth with her hooves. Surprised at her outburst.

Caramel got that now familiar, 'out of his depth' feeling.

"So you...."

She nodded.

"With me..."

She nodded again.

His heart nearly burst in his chest.

"Um...how's four?"

A final nod. "Um.... S-see you then?"

"Um...yeah..." Caramel said. He didn't dare move in case he woke up.

"Good..." said Twilight.

"Good.." said Caramel.

Chapter 4

Caramel stood behind the applecart for several minutes. He was completely motionless as he was still convinced this was all a dream and that if he moved too much it would all pop like a giant soap bubble.

*She said yes....*He thought. *She said yes...*

"Mommy...is he alright?" said a small filly walking by. Her mother glanced Caramel out of the corner of her eye. She'd thought he was a statue until her daughter had pointed him out. She noticed he wasn't blinking.

"Don't stare honey." she said quickly, rushing the small pony past Caramel's cart.

"*She said yes...*" he whispered under his breath.

"*It talks!*" the child yelled as she was pushed into the crowd.

"**She** said yes..." He said it again. Still not quite sure it was true. "She said yes, she said yes, she said yes!!" Unable to keep still any longer Caramel jumped around the cart happily. "She said yes!"

"Well, landsakes Caramel, what's got you in such a state?" said a familiar voice.

Caramel missed a step, falling head over a tail onto the ground. He landed at the hooves of his cousin Applejack, who was staring at him oddly.

"Are you alright?"

"Ow." Caramel groaned. "Yeah, I'm alright...wait...I'm better than alright! She said yes!" He was on his feet again in seconds. "She said yes!"

Applejack raised an eyebrow. "Who said yes?"

"She did!" Caramel hopped happily. "She said yes. To *me*! Do you believe it?"

“Well I can’t rightly start if you don’t tell me the poor gal’s name!”

“Twilight!” Caramel yelled. “Twilight....” Caramel paused. “Oh no....Does she have a last name? Oh Celesita...Did she ever tell me? I’ve forgotten haven’t I? This is teri-”

“Woah, there Caramel. Did you say Twilight? As in Twilight Sparkle?”

“Sparkle! That’s it, thank you Applejack. I was panicking for a minute there.” His face split into a dreamy grin. “Twilight Sparkle....”

Applejack tsked. “Wow, he’s got it bad.” She waved a hoof in front of his face. “So, you got yourself a date. Well I’m plum proud of you, Caramel.”

Caramel’s face flushed. “Date? Is it a date? I mean we never really called it that...I mean she might think it’s weird if I start calling it a date. We’re just...” He paused again. “I have no idea what we’re doing...” he realized. “Oh horseapples I have no idea what we’re doing! I have to plan something! But what? Maybe a nice dinner.....no wait... is 4 o’clock to early for dinner? Is going for food moving to fast? Maybe we should just take a wa-”

He was cut off as Applejack shoved a hoof in his mouth. “Calm down, sugarcube. I know Twi as well as anypony here, and you want me to tell you somethin’?

Caramel nodded.

His cousin lifted a hoof to his ear and whispered, “She was talking about you yesterday.”

“She was!?” Caramel yelled.

Applejack shushed him.

“Sorry,” he said, lowering his voice. “She was? What did she say?”

“Well, don’t tell her I told you this. Normally I wouldn’t but honestly, and I mean nothin’ by it sugarcube, you need all the help you can get.”

Caramel was forced to agree.

“She was talking to Fluttershy yesterday, and I overheard as I was bringing my cart to the Apple celler. She was sayin’ she fancied some colt from the market. Blushin’ like a red delicious I reckon.”

Caramel froze. “A colt in the market?” his ears drooped. “So...she likes someone else?”

He was almost knocked off his feet as Applejack punched him in the side.

“No! She was talkin’ about you for peat sakes!” She sighed. “Look, what I’m tryin’ to say is, she likes you Caramel. Just be yourself and stop worryin’ so gosh darn much. Ya hear?”

“She...she was talking about me?” Caramel’s heart fluttered.

“You’re missin’ the point sugarcube.” Applejack patted him on the back. “You’re gonna be fine.” She paused. “Come to think of it, what’re you doin’ in the market today anyhow? Shouldn’t you be helpin’ on the farm over in Hoofdale?”

Caramel suddenly remembered what he was here for in the first place. “Oh no...”

“What is it?”

Caramel slumped, sitting on his haunches. “Remember how I sold those three apples yesterday?”

Applejack raised an eyebrow. “Ah thought you said it was two apples?”

“Oh...” He’d neglected to bring two apples to replace the one’s he’d given away. “Well you see there’s a funny story about that...”

“You gave them the Twilight didn’t you?”

Caramel nodded.

Applejack sighed. “Continue.”

“Well...” he looked at his hooves. “You know my sister Toffee sometimes exaggerates right?”

“Yeah...”

“Well she might have made it sound a little better than it was.”

Applejack eyed him suspiciously. “How much better we talkin’?”

He squirmed under her gaze. “It may have been a bit high...”

“Spit it out.”

“Forty apples...” Caramel murmured.

She stared for a moment. “Fourty apples!? She get kicked in the head or something!?”

“I don’t know!” Caramel cried. “I told her not to tell Grampa I didn’t sell many yesterday. I guess she thought she was looking out for me. Now he’s gone and bought this cart. He expects me to do it again today!” He looked up at his cousin. “I need your help Applejack. I can’t disappoint him again, I just can’t...We really need the money....Please?”

Applejack smiled. “Well, I wouldn’t be much of a cousin if I didn’t help you out a bit, now would I? But no more of this lyin’ business, you hear?”

Caramel brightened. “Deal!”

“Good, now, we’re gonna need a sign.” She turned walking towards her farm. “I’m gonna go get some wood. You stay here.”

“Alright Then....Wait!” he called after her. “what do I do in the mean time!?”

“What’dya think? You try to sell some Apples!” Applejack disappeared into the crowd.

Caramel stood there for a moment. *Well.....how do I do that?*” he thought.

Applejack always yelled out her sales and tried to entice customers over. He could do that couldn’t he?

“Hello sir!” he said to a passing stallion. “Would you like some delicious apples toda-”

“No.”

This was not going as he had planned. “B-but they’re really juicy and...”

The stallion just kept walking.

Caramel sighed. He tried again on a passing mare. “What about you ma'am? Would you li-”

“Just had lunch, sorry.” She hurried past.

“Oh...alright..... How about you two foals?” he asked, spying two fillies walking home from class. “A nice apple will keep those teeth nice and shiny! What do you say?”

They sized him up. “No thanks. We don’t buy apples from losers.”

Caramel was taken aback. “Well, that’s not very nice you-”

The fillies ran away giggling.

“Know...” he finished lamely. “How does she make this look so easy?”

He tried this for a while longer before giving up, if anything this got him less interest than when he’d simply been quiet. He stared at the passing ponies, hoping one would eventually stop, but none did. He tried not to look too eager, but when that didn’t work he tried looking pleadingly at everypony who passed. The results were the same.

“Oh come on!” he implored. “They’re good apples! See?” He took a bite out of one. “Delicious!”

This earned him a few odd stares, but no customers.

“You’ll get it eventually. But for now, stop makin’ a mule out of yourself and help me with this stuff.”

Caramel turned to find Applejack had returned with Big Mac in tow. He carried a large fencepost in his mouth, and a larger plank of wood on his back. He opened his mouth and it fell to the ground with a heavy thunk. Applejack had some paint, which she sat down next to it.

“Here we go, all the stuff we’ll be needin’ for a proper sign. How’s business goin’?”

Caramel looked out into the crowd. “Not so well. I haven’t made a single sale since you left....” he said, hanging his head.

“Well we’re gonna change that. All we need this here bit of wood and pain, and in two shakes’a my tail we’ll get you some customers. Right Mac?”

“Eyup.”

Caramel smiled. “Thank you guys for doing this, I really appreciate it. I’ll pay you back for the supplies...”

“Don’t you worry none, Sugarcube. We’re family remember? Apples help Apples, it’s our way.” She gestured to the paint sitting on the ground. “Now enough flappin’ our gums. We need to get to work if you’re going to get them sales before your date.”

Big Mac raised an eyebrow. “Date?”

Caramel blushed. “It’s...not a date really...it’s more of a....well....”

“Date.” Applejack finished. “With, Twilight.”

Big Mac eyed her for a moment. Then looked Caramel over. “....Really?”

His sister hoofed him sharply in the chest. “Yes, really! Now like I said let’s get started! You nail the sign together, Caramel and I’ll paint it.”

The large red stallion walked over to the plank of wood, he carefully placed it over the fence post. Applejack passed him a nail, which he positioned over the two. With a quick jab of his powerful hooves it was done.

“Thank you Big Mac. You can go back and help Granny with those pies now.”

“Eyup,” he said turning to leave. He looked back at Caramel over his shoulder. “Good luck on your date Caramel.”

His face flushed again. "But it's....I mean I told you it's more of a...."

Big Mac had already walked away.

"Will you stop doing your best impression of a strawberry and help me? I need to know what this sign ought to say." Applejack stood poised over the paint cans.

"I thought you had that part figure out?" Caramel asked, looking at the blank wood.

"It's your sign, not mine, I just know that you need one. It's your cart, if you want to sell apples, it's gotta be your message, somethin' important."

Caramel put a hoof to his chin in thought. He couldn't think of anything, he wasn't a salespony, how should he know what to put on a sign?

It's gotta be your message, something important, he thought. That's what Applejack said.

He had an idea.

"Can I hold that paintbrush?"

A short time later Caramel finished. He stepped back and examined his work.

"What do you think?"

Applejack stepped back to get a good look at the sign.

"Landsakes..."

Caramel's ears drooped. "You don't like it?"

Applejack's mouth hung open for a moment. "It's beautiful..."

Caramel pulled back in surprise. "Really? You think so?"

Applejack examined it closely. "Shoot, I'd say you have quite the talent there Caramel. If this don't get you some business, I don't know what'll do it!"

"A talent you say?" He looked at the sign. It was a strange feeling, nothing had gone wrong or exploded and it seemed like everything had gone according to plan. This was new. Caramel smiled. "Yeah..maybe so. I hope you're right."

"Excuse me," said a voice behind them. Caramel turned to find a rather plump unicorn mare in a rather opulent dress standing behind them.

"What'd I tell you?" Applejack clapped him on the back. He was quite sure he was going to have a bald patch on that area. "Already got a customer. Go get'em." She shoved him towards the curious mare.

Caramel stumbled for a moment before regaining his balance. "Um...yes ma'am, how may I help you?"

"Are you the the owner of this cart?" she asked.

"That's me. How may I help you? If you're looking for apples we've got every type you can think of, gala's red delicious braebu-"

"Nononono, you misunderstand me sir." She looked past him at the cart. "I would simply like to know where you got the sign. I have to say it's simply marvelous!"

"Oh!" Caramel said, surprised. "Well...I made that sign actually...just finished it. The paint's still wet."

The mare eyed him in shock. "*You?*"

Applejack stepped up eyeing her right back. "And just *what* do you mean by that may I ask?"

The mare backed up a bit. "Oh...well I mean nothing by it my good lady-"

Applejack's stare got a bit harder.

"It's just that the colt hardly seems the type." She looked Caramel up and down again.

Caramel sagged a bit.

“Have you got a point to this miss?” Applejack asked curtly.

The mare looked affronted. “Well!” she huffed. “If you must know, I own a mane styling boutique on the other side of town. I was wondering if the creator of that sign, could do something like that for me.” She turned to Caramel. “So I suppose that means you. Now matter how rude your...*assistant* is.”

“Assistant!?” Caramel leapt to hold Applejack back. Struggling against her brute strength.

“What my *cousin*, means to say is. I don’t make signs, sorry. I’m selling apples though, so if you want one of them I’d be happy to sell it to you.”

The mare signed. “Pity. You seem to be quite good, despite outward appearances.”

Caramel grunted as Applejack tried to push forwards again.

“But,” she continued. “I suppose it can’t be helped. Give me two of your best red galas.”

Caramel paused. “...What?”

“You said you’d sell me some apples, so I intend to buy some apples. If I can’t have a sign from you I can at least get that much I assume?”

“Y-yeah! Sure you can!” Caramel quickly pushed Applejack over to the side, and rushed to fetch her apples. He placed them in a small bag and passed them to her. “Here you go.”

“Thank you.” Her horn glowed as she floated the bag over. She inspected the apples closely, before taking a bite of one. “Hmmm...”

“How is it?...” asked Caramel.

The unicorn produced a handkerchief from her saddlebag and wiped her lips.

Applejack whispered something that made Caramel blush.

If the mare heard her she didn't acknowledge it. "This," she began, pausing for overly dramatic effect. "Is delicious."

Caramel spoke before Applejack could. "Thank you miss! I hope you'll spread the word! I could use the business."

"Well, I believe that can be arranged. Though your establishment is...." she looked over the cart. "...quaint, your product is good, and your sign is just darling. I shall recommend you highly." She leaned into Caramel's ear to whisper something. "Though I would fire that assistant, she is quite crass."

Caramel quickly shoved an Apple into Applejack's mouth. "Um...no I think I'll keep her, she does good work." He shot her a look.

"Very well then." She turned to leave. "Have a good day sir."

Caramel had never been referred to as 'sir' before. "...Sure, you too."

Applejack spit the apple out, stomping a hoof angrily. "What in tarnation you do that for? You should'a let me give that hoity-toity filly what for."

"Sorry Applejack. I didn't like her either, but we really need the money... who knows if we'll get another sale?"

Applejack softened. "It's alright I suppose sugarcube. Don't you worry, I'm sure you'll sell some more before the day is over."

Caramel smiled. "I hope so, I've still got thirty-eight more to go!" He looked at the mare disappearing into the crowd. "She said she'd tell her friends, who knows? Maybe it'll drum up some business."

"I'll take two gala's and a Granny Smith." said a rather pudgy green mare with a pearl necklace.

Caramel rushed to fill the order. "Sure thing one second please! I have to-"

A stallion in a monocle shoved his way forwards. "I'll take five golden Delicious and a jonagold."

“Well....please wait your-”

“I’ve been waiting. Where are my apples young colt!?” yelled an irate pony from somewhere in the crowd.

“Wait! One at a time! Don’t shove, please! I’m trying my best!” Caramel fought his way through the line of ponies, giving out apples faster than he ever thought he could move. He’d lost count, but he was pretty sure he was well past forty at this point.

“Well!” Applejack yelled from a hay bale at the edge of the crowd. “I’d say she told her friends!”

Caramel was jostled and bumped as he tried to find out who ordered what. “Yes, I think it’s safe to- Please miss, don’t shove!- say that.”

Applejack smiled. “Well, isn’t it nice to have customers?”

“Oh yes it’s- Ow! Don’t kick please!- just wonderful. I think I’ve gone over forty apples at this point.”

“Congratulations Caramel. Looks like your sign worked better than you expected. It’s a good thing you were so *nice* to that city-mare from earlier huh?”

Caramel dodged a stray knee. “You’re enjoying this aren’t you?”

“A fair bit, yes I am.”

“Well, at least Grampa won’t be disappointed. Wait’til he sees all these sales!” Caramel managed a smile between rushing through the crowd. “If this keeps up we’ll be able to do all those repairs. I can’t wait to see Toffee’s face.”

Applejack got her feet. “I really am happy for you Caramel. I bet your Grandpa’s gonna be right proud of you.”

“Thanks.”

“Will you two stop you insipid conversation and procure my produce? I have a meeting at six.” The stallion at the front of the line snapped.

Caramel froze. “What...?”

The stallion scoffed. "I see I'll have to dumb down my language. "*Can you get me my apples please?*"

"N-no...after that, what'd you say?"

"I said, I have got a meeting at six, young colt. Now if you pleas-"

A slow feeling of dread crept through the pit of Caramel's stomach. "What time is it...?"

With a sigh the stallion checked his watch. "It's half past five."

"Oh no..."

"Young colt?" he waved a hoof in front of Caramel's eyes. "Young colt? I still require my apples. Are you quite alright?"

"*I missed it....*" Caramel whispered. "*An hour and a half...*"

The crowd began to mummer.

"He looks awfully pale..."

"Is he quite alright?"

"I think he's in shock, has anyone got some smelling salts?"

"Oh, I do, just let me check my saddlebag. He'll have to pay be for them of cour-"

Applejack cut a path through the crowd. "Sweet highsteppin' horseshoes! Caramel, I'll take care of this. Go!"

Caramel stood despondently. "*I missed it...*"

"Go!" she shoved him roughly in the direction of the library.

Caramel stumbled for a moment before he found his footing.

"*Run!*"

He didn't need to be told twice. His hooves pounded the cobblestone road of the market as he sped outwards the old oak in the center of town.

Things had been going so well. He couldn't screw up now, not again, not with *her*, not this soon. They hadn't even started, the first person who'd been kind to him on his first day in the market and he'd let her down. He hoped she was still waiting.

Caramel skidded to a stop as he came to the tree, he looked around wildly, but she wasn't waiting outside. His heart sunk as he scanned the town square. She was nowhere to be seen.

Walking now, he came up to the door. He stared at the green wood for a long time.

Should I knock?

Would she be mad? Probably, who knows how long she'd waited outside for him, he was more than an hour and a half late at this point.

Caramel's head drooped. She'd probably want nothing to do with him now. He'd screwed it up, like everything else in his life. Another thing he'd failed at, another pony who'd probably relegate him to being useless, the first mare who'd ever taken any kind of interest in him.

He felt low, lower than he'd felt in a long time.

What was the point?

Caramel turned to leave.

"So, are you ready?" said a voice behind him.

Caramel's ears perked up. *It couldn't be.* Slowly he turned, to find Twilight standing in the doorway, smiling at him.

"Wha....but I'm....but I'm late....I kept you waiting....you still?"

She nodded.

"Really?"

She nodded.

Caramel paused. *"Why?"*

Twilight walked over to him, blushing slightly. "Well, several reasons. One, you seem sweet."

Caramel turned bright red. "...And two?"

"Two, your sister came by earlier, and told me you probably wouldn't show up on time."

Carmel stepped back. "Toffee!? She was here? But ho-"

"Apparently you talk in your sleep." Twilight shuffled her hooves. "You mentioned a few things."

Caramel's face was burning like a small sun at this point. "Whatever I said, I-I didn'-...I wasn't awake..."

Twilight smiled. "Oh don't worry, you didn't say anything too embarrassing." Her face rivaled his. "Apparently you're quite the gentlemen when you're asleep."

Caramel floundered, still confused. "B-but how did she know about the date? I haven't been home..."

"Big Mac came by your house, apparently he told Toffee."

"And she came...."

"Yes, said she was looking out for you...good thing too. I'm sure you didn't *mean* to be late."

"No! Not at all! I couldn't help it. I had so many customers, and I couldn't get away. I wanted to be on time, I really did but...."

"It's okay Caramel, I understand." She walked past him into the square. "So...you ready to go?"

"You really still want too?"

She nodded.

"Even though you know I'm a screw up?"

She shook her head. "You're not a screw up Caramel. All you need is a bit of help...I could give it if you want."

"S-sure!" Caramel rushed to her side. "I'd love that, I need all the help I can get!"

She laughed that fantastic laugh. "Well we'd better get started."

They walked through the square, past the buildings, and into the market. The sun had almost set, the stars crept in at the edges of the sky as they walked.

They came to Caramel's cart, Applejack was gone, along with all the apples he'd brought. Apparently he'd sold out.

"Wow." said Twilight. "Looks like you had a good day."

"Yeah, I did, my Grandfather is going to be really happy." he smiled.

"I see you got that sign."

Caramel froze. *The sign....*

"Oh! Um...I hope you don't mind...it's just that Applejack said I should paint something important and....well...."

"Oh..." Twilight blushed.

"I mean... um...it could be any two ponies... you know... love is importa-" Caramel paused. "Not that I'm... *you know...* Well... we've only just met... but I needed something and... well..."

"Yeah... I know." Twilight leaned into his shoulder.

Caramel did his best not to fall over from shock. He wasn't sure what to do for a moment. But then he just walked forwards, she followed, still leaning. They walked till they were at the edge of ponyville.

"You have no idea where we're going do you?" asked Twilight.

"Well... not as such but... You see... No," said Caramel.

===

Behind them, the sign sat in the ground next the cart, on it, in fresh paint, was a picture of an apple in the shape of a heart, a light brown colt and a purple filly on either side.

Two ponies, both bright red now, with no idea where they were going,
kept walking

Chapter 5

Caramel stumbled through the dark streets of Ponyville on his way home. He thought back to the night he'd had. Everything had gone so well. They'd walked and walked, unsure of the time or the place, with Twilight next to him Caramel could hardly have cared less. Her steady pace keeping up with his, her beautiful mane pressed against his side. It still smelled of old books, like the library in which she lived. He could have stayed there forever.

Still, eventually they had to admit to themselves that if they didn't go home soon they'd probably get irreparably lost. So they had called it a night. He'd walked her back home. Or at least he'd walked next to her, as he couldn't remember the way back the library. When they reached her door she'd stopped, turned, smiled that amazing smile and said she'd see him later.

Later couldn't come soon enough.

Caramel giggled to himself as he reached the edge of his family's property. This was the best day he'd had in a while. A very long while and now he was finally convinced it wasn't all a dream. This was real.

He hummed a tune to himself as he opened the door to the main house, dancing towards the kitchen swinging through the halls with reckless abandon.

"So, it went well I suppose?"

Caramel tripped over himself into onto the hard tiles. He looked up to find Toffee staring at him much the way a viper might when it's found a small mouse.

"Come on! I want details! You owe me for saving your flank again you know."

He leapt to his hooves. "Oh! Hello, Toffee!" he said shakily, a sudden redness creeping onto his face. "Um...."

“The first word you’re looking for is ‘Thank’,” she said smiling.

Caramel chuckled nervously. “Yeah...thank you Toffee, you really did save me back there.”

“You’re welcome, Mel, now, as payment for my good deed, you’re gonna fill me in on everything that happened.” she sat down at the table and stared at him expectantly.

He signed. *There’s no getting out of this is there?*

Caramel sat down across from her. “Well...it...went....well!” he said. He was still a bit surprised at this fact himself. It felt strange to say it out loud. “Thanks to you she was understanding. She wasn’t mad or anything! It was weird, but....so....well...nice! Nothing went wrong Toffee! Nothing at all....She likes me...she actually likes me..”

Toffee leaned over and hoofed him in the shoulder. “Well don’t look so shocked! You sound like you’re waiting on the sky to fall!”

“Ow!” he yelled. “Sorry! It’s just, this doesn’t happen often! And it wasn’t just the date either! You know the apple cart Grampa Jonagold bought this morning?”

“Yeah.”

He leaned in, as though he were sharing a secret. “I didn’t just sell a few apples, I sold *out*.”

Toffee pulled back in shock. “*You?!*”

“I know!” Caramel agreed. “Applejack has a hard time doing that, and she’s *the* best apple seller in that market!”

His sister eyed him suspiciously. “How did you manage that?”

“Hey! I’m just as surprised as you are. I’m not sure what it was exactly...” He paused, thinking back to that morning. “But I guess it was when Applejack said I should make a sign to attract customers. So I did...It worked! I got this fancy looking citypony to come up to the cart. She asked me to make a sign for her boutique! She told her friends about us, and we were mobbed before lunch.”

“Wait a minute. What did you tell her?”

Caramel paused. “Who?”

“The citypony who wanted a sign of course!”

“Oh....well I said I was busy, so I couldn’t do it.”

Toffee frowned. “Well, would you like to do it?”

“Well...I suppose I wouldn’t mind..why do you ask?”

She got up from the table, and walked towards the hallway. “Well, the way I see it is, you don’t think you’ve been very good at anything in your life do you?”

Caramel opened his mouth to speak, but paused. He really hadn’t.

“Exactly,” Toffee went on, not waiting for his reply. “But, if your sign was good enough for a pony like that to want you to work for her? Well, I’d say you’re pretty darn good at somethin’. If I were you I’d think about it.”

She left him sitting in the kitchen pondering what she had said. She was right. He’d done something today, and he hadn’t simply done it, he’d done it *well*. Could he do it again? Did he want to try?

He got that increasingly familiar feeling of being out of his depth. These were uncharted waters.

“Oh by the way!” Toffee called back. “I invited Twilight over for dinner tomorrow night. She’s cute. Can’t wait to talk to her some more!”

The uncharted waters suddenly turned into lakes of fire.

“Oh Celestia...”, whispered Caramel.

It was at some point during the night, or perhaps it was early morning, that Caramel noticed he was still sitting at the kitchen table. He’d been rubbing his hooves against the wood, and it appeared he’d left a small indent.

“Oh Celestia...”, he whispered again.

His brain had run away with him, at first it ran to escape routes. Could he pretend to be sick? No, Toffee knew him too well for that. She'd spot the fake right away. There'd be no way out there. He considered faking his own death, but he couldn't do that to Twilight, he'd only just met her. Caramel had very little relationship experience, but he figured that death was usually considered a deal breaker.

*She'd be here...*he realized. And there was no stopping it. She'd meet Toffee, for the second time actually. But he really wasn't worried about that. He gazed at the upper floors where Grampa Jonagold lay sleeping. He'd gone to bed early as usual. If he listened Caramel could hear his slight snoring. Caramel loved his Grandfather, despite any flaws he might have had. But that pony was about as subtle as a baseball bat at a tennis game. He wouldn't hold back anything. *He'd ask her all the questions that shouldn't be asked on the...what was it? Second date? Yes, her buying apples couldn't count as a date...She'd been a customer then...a wonderful..sweet..beautiful...custo-* Caramel stopped himself. He was getting off track. His mind turned back to the looming dinner. It would be a disaster he was sure of it.

Maybe if I hint to her that my family is insane..she won't want to come? He thought. I mean, it's got to be a bit weird for her right? Meeting them this soon. We've only known each other for a few days. If I can get her to back out...then she won't see that weird thing Grampa does with his corn...

He decided then. First thing in the morning he would go over to the library and try and gently convince her not to come. He couldn't outright ask, that'd be awkward. *Why is everything about this so complicated?*

Caramel sighed. And headed up to his room. Where he fell into fitful sleep.

The next morning Caramel woke up before anypony else. He quietly crept out of bed, grabbing a saddlebag and walking gingerly across the old wooden floor. Years of practice had taught him which boards would creak, and which wouldn't. He silently made his way to the door, slipped out and headed for Ponyville. It was slightly cold that morning, the chill bit into his

coat. He shivered slightly, but kept walking. Caramel needed to hurry, he knew his Grandfather would expect a full report on yesterday's sales and want him out there selling again as soon as possible. He quickened his pace, breaking into a trot. *I really need to work out more*, he thought. He felt winded by the time he reached the edge of the property and entered the Ponyville proper. He was up very early, only a few ponies were walking the streets, opening shops and setting up carts. He didn't see Applejack, but vaguely wished she was there. She knew a lot more about this kind of thing than he did. *What would be the best way to bring this up?*, he wondered. *Should I start with a joke?* He searched his mind for any witty one-liners he might have lying around. Finding nothing that wasn't incredibly cheesy, he tried to think of something else.

I need a reason to visit don't I? I mean...if I just show up, wouldn't that be weird? He worried. *Maybe I'm over thinking this. I'll just go. What's the worst that could happen?*

He really didn't want to think about the answer to that.

As he passed a florist's stand that was setting up, suddenly an idea dawned on him. He thought back to last night. She'd been so wonderful, he really wanted to say thanks for that. *Flowers that's perfect!* He'd show Twilight he appreciated her understanding, and have a reason to visit.

He stopped and looked through the florist's stock, taking in all the bright colors and shapes of the various flowers in all manner of jugs and jars. Which one would be appropriate? Was there a particular color for this kind of thing?....Was there a *wrong* color for this kind of thing?

The vendor, a cream colored pony with a red mane and tail, walked over.

"May I help you?" she asked.

"Oh," Caramel stopped his perusing. "Good morning, I was just looking for some flowers for my..." He stopped short....Caramel suddenly realized he had no idea what to call Twilight. Would fillyfriend be too presumptuous? Would not calling her that be wrong? Was there some other word for this?

The vendor gave him a knowing look. "Ah, you're one of those," she said, smiling. "Here," She picked up a bundle of purple flowers. "These'll be perfect for her."

Caramel floundered for a moment. "Oh...well, thank you! I mean...these are lovely...for um...my...her....you know.."

"Yes," The vender nodded. "I know. That'll be five bits."

Caramel payed her, and continued on his way.

Okay, now, just open the door and give her the flowers. It's easy enough, just say something like 'These are thanks for last night.' He paused. No, that sounded....*wrong* maybe something else. *This is a token of my gratitude.'*Or was that too formal? Perhaps something more casual would work better, like *Hello Twi! These are for yo-*

His thoughts were interrupted as he walked into the library door. His head making a resounding thud against the solid wood.

"Ow..."

"Now who could that be." He heard a voice he recognized all too well from behind the door. The top portion swung away to reveal Twilight staring at him. He didn't have time to move, his nose was almost touching hers as she peeked out.

"Oh! Caramel!" she said quickly. They both backed up a few paces, blushing profusely.

"Um...yep! That's my name!" He chuckled. "I...er....thought I would...you know, stop by....I brought you these! As gratitude for my last night thanks." **Darnit.** He reached back into his saddlebags, to find there was nothing there. "Oh no...", he said under his breath. "Where are they!?" He looked around in a panic.

"Um...Caramel?" asked Twilight.

He stopped looking and stared back at her. "Oh...well, I brought you some flowers...you know....I....well...you were so understanding about me being late and all....I wanted to...well..I wanted to say thanks...but it looks like.....I may have misplaced them."

Twilight smiled. "I think so. You dropped something." She pointed behind him.

He looked to find the flowers sitting on the ground a few feet back. There was a gaping hole in the bottom of his saddlebag. "Oh." He tried to be as suave as possible in going back to pick them up, but he was pretty sure it wasn't working.

"Thank you." The flowers glowed a faint purple as Twilight grabbed them. "They're beautiful." Her face got a bit redder.

"You're welcome! You deserve them....I really wanted to thank you.."

The two stood there for a moment, twiddling their hooves, faces resembling strawberries.

Twilight broke the silence. "You know, Spike and I were just about to have breakfast...would you like to come in?"

Caramel's heart skipped a beat. "Yes!" He said a bit louder than he'd meant to.

Twilight's face broke out into a smile again. "Great!" She opened the bottom half of the door. "Come right in."

She turned, and Caramel followed her inside.

Chapter 6

Caramel stepped across the threshold into the library, the smell of old paper washed over him like a wave in a hurricane. It was like the smell of Twilight's mane, only multiplied by some number he couldn't begin to imagine. It wasn't an unpleasant smell by any means, just a strong one. It was accompanied by the smell of cooking food, and for some reason a smell not unlike burning plastic.

Though Caramel's brain only dimly registered any of this. His most prevalent thought was: *Oh Celestia she invited me in for breakfast.*

He walked behind her, trying to stare at anything that wasn't Twilight in hopes of not making her uncomfortable. But he thought that might make him look like he was up to something, so he stared directly at Twilight for a while.

No wait that's creepy....

He settled on focusing on a point just to the left of Twilight's head.

The library was extremely neat, all of the shelves were perfectly organized, the books seemingly ordered both alphabetically, and by size. Caramel didn't even know it was possible to do both. The few books that were lying about were stacked to perfection, not so much as a page out of place. He briefly wondered how often ponies came in to check out books, this place was so immaculate it looked new.

They reached the kitchen, the hard wood of the library floor being replaced by tile. It was just as neat as the library, with spices and ingredients lined up against the walls in neat little groups. Along with several other things that weren't spices, or indeed anything Caramel could begin to guess at. A small purple creature stood in front of the stove, stirring something.

"Spike," said Twilight. "We have an extra guest for breakfast. Would you mind making some more daisy pancakes please?"

Caramel remembered now. This was the small dragon Twilight had bought the apple for when they'd met. He briefly remembered seeing him around during the Winter Wrap Up. Mostly asleep. This was where the burning plastic smell had come from. It appeared to be how he normally smelled.

Spike turned around, he was wearing a 'Kiss the Cook' apron and a large chef's hat.

"Sure thing Twilight, we've got plenty to spa-" He paused when he saw Caramel. "Who is this?"

Twilight's face colored a little bit. "Oh, this is Caramel. You know, you've met him before. He's been around Ponyville for a while."

"Oh." Spike noticed Twilight's blushing. "Oooohhh." His face broke out in a teasing grin. "I see."

Twilight's face colored a bit more. "Just make the pancakes will you?" she sighed.

"Sure thing," he said, pouring a generous amount of mix into the pan. "One 'lovers' special' coming right up!"

Twilight was an unhealthy shade of red by this point. A mixture of annoyance and embarrassment. Caramel hung back in the doorway, trying not to let his own embarrassment show too much. *You're here for a reason.* He thought, *Just act cool.*

He took a deep breath and stepped forwards. "Um, Twilight, would you like to sit down?" he nudged a chair out from the table and sat down on the opposite end. He noticed that the table was set perfectly. In the middle there was a small bowl of fruit, four apples sat around the edges with a single pear in the middle. Caramel wondered if one of the apples was from him. In front of this sat a small pair of salt and pepper shakers shaped like ponies. Caramel recognized them as a pair of characters from a foals' book *The Secret Tree*, a small red colt in a baseball cap, and a little filly in a bow tie. He remembered the story from when he was a foal. He'd always thought it was odd that the filly wore a bowtie of all things, but he could still remember when his Grandmother would read it to him. There was still a copy in his house somewhere.

Twilight's voice interrupted his thoughts. He made a mental note to stop letting his

mind wander.

"Sorry about Spike, he might be annoying sometimes, but he's a good cook I promise."

Caramel waved it off. "Oh, no really he's fine. I know how that goes, I've got a sister myself. She's always saying doing stuff like that. You two have met right?"

Twilight's face broke out in a smile. It was just as wonderful as he remembered. "Yes, she told me you were going to be late yesterday. Among other things."

Caramel chuckled a bit louder than he'd intended to. "Ah yes...the dinner...at my house.... tonight?"

Twilight clicked her hooves together. "Yes! At eight o'clock sharp. I'm looking forward to it. I've read up on the subject. It's customary to bring something you've baked yourself correct? Normally some kind of side dish, so as not to upstage the host's main dish. Tell me, will this be formal or casual? And if formal will I need to RSVP?"

Caramel stared for a moment. "Uh...wel-"

"Oh! And does your sister like hay stew?" she began to fiddle with the salt shakers. "There was a recipe for that in a book of mine, it looked very good."

"Yes bu-"

"And you live with your Grandfather right?" she asked. "Is there anything he might have a hard time eating? I want to know ahead of time so I don't offend him by bringing anything he couldn't enjoy. I would like to get things off on the right hoof." Twilight rocked the shakers back and forth. "I mean, I know some ponies have a hard time with certain fruits, so I figured I'd ask."

"Twilig-"

“But then again, if I assume he can’t eat something would that be rude? What if he gets offended? I wouldn’t want to offend him. The book on being a proper dinner guest mentioned not to make assumptions, to let your host dictate what should be done and what shouldn’t be.”

“Tw-”

She fiddled a bit more. Rocking the small objects even faster. “I wonder if I should make two different things just in case. I could get Spike to help...anything to make sure I’m a good guest! I certainly don’t want to be a bad guest because that would be..” she paused “Well....bad! I need to make a good impression after all!”

The shakers fell over, spilling salt and pepper onto the table.

“Oh no! Let me clean that up, one second.”

Before she could get up Caramel reached across the table and placed his hooves on her’s.

“Twilight, calm down!” He suddenly realized what he was doing. Caramel quickly took his hooves away. “Um...I mean, calm down.” he said a bit more softly.

Twilight looked away for a moment. Brushing the salt and pepper around the table. “I’m sorry. It’s just...I’m a bit nervous I suppose.”

Tell me about it. He thought. Now’s the perfect time to convince her not to come! This is excellent!

Carmel opened his mouth to say something. But in that moment, she looked so small and a little scared. She really was worried about this dinner, she’d apparently been reading about how to act since she’d heard. Looked up recipes, thought about what his grandfather might enjoy and had really gone over what she should be doing. Twilight had been trying really hard to make a good impression for his family. Then he realized, it was all for him.

He sighed, he couldn’t try to convince her not to come after all that.

“Twilight?”

She looked up from the table.

“You’re going to be fine, great even. I’m sure they’ll love you, Toffee already likes you, and if my grandfather has any sense, he will too.”

Twilight brightened a little.

“You’re going to be great, okay?”

Twilight took a deep breath. “Okay.”

Caramel smiled. “Good, now, forget these books and recipes. It’s a dinner and we invited you. Come as you are, and we’ll try our best to be up to *your* standards. Not the other way around. Deal?”

Twilight returned his smile. “Deal.”

Spike chose then to come into the kitchen with the pancakes. He placed a steaming plate in front of the pair of them.

“I’ll leave you two alone for a while.” he said, waggling his eyebrows.

The pair of them turned beet red as he left.

Twilight was the first to take a bite. She went methodically through the pancake, starting at the front, and working her way down in a row until she got to the other end. Then repeating the process.

That’s adorable... Caramel thought as he watched her eat. She’s very neat. I wonder if she’s always like this? The library is so well kept, not to mention the kitchen. I’ll have to clean a bit when I get home...I always thought Toffee kept things neat, but now...

“Are you hungry?” asked Twilight, noticing he hadn’t eaten any of his pancakes.

“Oh! Yes, yes I’m very hungry. Just thinking I suppose.” Caramel took a bite of the pancake in front of him. It was good, very fluffy, he detected a hint of cinnamon somewhere.

“Wow...”

Twilight laughed. "Yes, for all his teasing, Spike actually does know how to cook. It's one of the reasons I keep him around." she said, shooting a look towards the kitchen door, which shut with a sharp click.

Since he didn't want to talk with his mouth full, Caramel nodded.

This is actually nice. He thought. Though he'd failed to convince her not to come, and in fact ended up *encouraging* her to do so, he felt good. Still, something bugged him, the same thing that had been bugging him for the last few days and would continue to bug him unless he got an answer.

"Um...Twilight, can I ask you something?"

She looked up from a particularly stubborn corner of pancake. "Oh, sure. What is it?"

"Well...it's just, I've been wondering something...for a little while."

"What's that?"

Caramel paused, trying to think of how to put it. "It's.....I just need to ask....well. Why me?"

Twilight looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"I mean...why do you like me?" Caramel asked. "I can't figure it out. Since I first saw you in the market I thought 'Oh wow, look at her, she's lovely, smart, kind' all that stuff. There's tons to like about you. But me? I didn't think I had a shot in all of Equestria.... I'm not... big or strong... or all that brave. I'm not really good at anything, or handsome. But....you like me...I mean I hope you do... But I've been wracking my brains trying to figure out...why? I keep thinking it's just a fluke or a mistake, or I'm asleep. But you said yes to me in the market I'm here today, you're coming to dinner at my house, and so far...no one has woken me up."

There was silence in the kitchen for a while. Twilight stared at him.

Oh no... He thought. Oh no...I blew it...I freaked her out didn't I? I should have just kept my mouth shut. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

"Caramel..." she said at last.

He looked at her.

“You know why I like you?”

He shook his head.

“Well, because you’re not half as bad as you think you are.”

This took him by surprise. “Huh?”

She got up, and walked over to his chair. “Remember when you lost the grass seeds during the Winter Wrap Up?”

Caramel nodded.

“When that happened, I saw how disappointed you were in yourself. But you know what? You still helped, even though you messed up a lot, you still pushed the snow plows-”

“Into the lake.” Caramel interrupted.

“Beside the point. We fished it out...eventually, and you kept going. You’re sweet.” She pointed to the flowers he’d bought her, sitting on the windowsill. “Thoughtful, and you’ve got a good heart. I like that, and I like you. Besides...”

“Besides what?”

Twilight shuffled a bit in her seat. “Well....I never thought anypony would ask me...”

“Wait...You?” Caramel asked, shocked.

Twilight nodded. “It’s....It’s just I’m not exactly the outgoing type...I spend all my time in

here, reading books, and studying magic. I’ve been here for months, and no one’s ever asked.” she looked up. “Until you....”

Caramel paused. “Oh....” he looked at her for a moment, she let a small smile creep onto her face. “Well I’m glad I did.” He reached across the table and put a hoof over hers again. “I really am.”

She blushed, but didn’t pull away. “So am I.”

They finished their pancakes, and Caramel got to his hooves. "Thanks, Twilight." he said, walking back into the Library with a smile on his face. "That was really nice."

"Yes it was, you could...come back again tomorrow...if you want."

Caramel's smile grew even wider. "Yes!" The sound echoed around the empty library. "Oh...Um...I mean I'd like that."

Twilight laughed. "So would I...Oh, wait a minute." her horn glowed. "Before you go, you've got something on your face."

He froze as a napkin floated up to his face. She stepped in front of him, peering at a small amount of butter on his cheek. She was about a good hoof shorter than he was, so she had to look up. He couldn't help but blush again, she was very close.

"There, all clean," Twilight said, putting the napkin away. She suddenly seemed to notice where she was, she stiffened a bit. "So....I'll see you tonight." she said, backing up a bit.

"Um...yeah. See you then." he headed towards the door. Before he opened it, he thought of something. "Oh...and Twilight?"

"Yes?"

"You know how you asked if there was anything you shouldn't bring?"

She nodded.

"Don't bring corn."

Chapter 7

In Caramel's defence he almost made it halfway home before the panic set in again. This was going to happen. He'd practically made *sure* it would happen, and now there would be no stopping it.

He stopped dead in the middle of the road back to his farm, staring into space. A bird may have landed on his head, but he really didn't care. She was going to be in his house, with his family, for *hours*.

Take a deep breath he thought to himself. *You talked to her about this, it's all going to be fine.*

He thought back to breakfast, pancakes with Twilight. He could get used to that, it sounded nice, sitting there, talking in the morning, her sweet smile across the table, the smell of books filling the air. She'd invited him back, he'd get to do it all again tomorrow. *If* everything went well.

"And I'm going to make sure it does..." he promised himself.

He took up a gallop the rest of the way home. Leaving a startled bird in his wake.

The farm came into view shortly afterwards. Although it was still early, he could hear Toffee bustling around the kitchen already. Apparently everything had been put on hold for this 'Event'. He hoped that was a good thing. Her silhouette shifted about the kitchen picking spices, mixing bowls, getting the house ready for their visitor.

He walked up to the door and stepped inside, the smell of apples cooking a hundred different ways flooded into his nose with the force of a psychical blow. It was warm and comforting in some ways and frankly alarming in others.

Toffee peeked her head around the doorway, a bit of chocolate staining the side of her cheek. Her face lit up at the sight of her brother.

“Well if it isn’t our little Romeo!” she teased. “Out getting ready for your date?”

Caramel attempted not to blush. “I had some business to take care of...”

“Oh yes, ‘Business’, I’m sure.” she wagged her eyebrows, laughing at the expression this drew from Caramel. Then her face softened. “Oh don’t worry, Mel, I’m sure you’ll be fine. I won’t embarrass you I promise. Now tell me, does Twilight like apple brownies or apple celery stew?”

Caramel’s stomach churned. Sometimes Apples were a bit *too* efficient at using apples. “Um...why no-”

“Make both! You’re right, Mel!” she disappeared back into the kitchen in a vaguely Toffee shaped cloud of flour.

Caramel gulped.

“Oh, by the way, Grampa’s lookin’ for you.” Toffee’s voice echoed back.

He turned and walked down the hall towards the living room, where his Grandfather could normally be found sitting in a large easy chair.

What now? he wondered as he progressed.

The old pony was exactly where Caramel thought he would be, though his eyes were closed.

“Grampa?”

The old pony snored loudly.

Caramel rolled his eyes and shook Grampa Jonagold gently. “Grampa? You wanted to see me?”

“Huh!? Whazat?” he stuttered. He looked around wildly for a moment before his eyes focused on Caramel. “Oh! There you are, must’a nodded off waitin’ on ya. You weren’t in your room this morning.”

“Oh,” Caramel wondered for a moment if he ought to lie about his whereabouts earlier, but quickly decided against it; he wasn’t a liar. “I...well...went to see Twilight.”

“Ah!” A sly smile spread accross Grampa Jonagold’s wrinkled face. “Goin’ to see your girl eh? Toffee has told me about this filly, from what I hear she’s quite the catch.” he clicked his teeth together in a way that made Caramel horribly uncomfortable. “Very lucky my boy!”

“...Thanks?” said Caramel.

“You’re welcome Caramel. You know, I was quite the stallion in my day. I swear the fillies were lining up for your old grampa! I reckon you must’ve gotten some of the Apple magic. Good genes, that’s what it is!”

Caramel figured it was safer to just nod.

Grampa Jonagold laughed heartily. “Ah yes, I have such memories of them days.” He stared of into space for a moment.

Caramel used this time to think. He and his grandfather had never really hit it off. They’d spoken a lot more in the last few days than they ever had before. He let himself smile inwardly about this. Though he did hope if they eventually grew to talk more, it would be about less..... sensitive topics.

The old pony came back from wherever he had gone, smiling oddly. Then he seemed to realize where he was. “Oh! Sorry about that Caramel, got a bit lost for a second there. In anycase, the reason I wanted you is, that applectart ain’t gonna wheel itself to Ponyville!”

Wait...what?

His grandfather hefted himself from the old chair and pushed Caramel towards the door. “Go on now, the rest of us may get a break to prepare for your little date, but we still need bits Caramel! Get out there and sell, sell, sell! Don’t worry, we got things here. Besides while you’re out you might pick up a few more to bring home. Filly killer.” he clicked his teeth again. It didn’t make Caramel any less uncomfortable the second time around.

“But I want to help!” he protested.

“Nonsense! We need those sales boy! Like I said we’ve got it!” He shoved Caramel outside. “The cart is in the barn all stocked up for ya, just push it and you’re ready to go!”

“Bu-”

The door slammed.

Caramel sighed. It looked like he was going to have to leave it up to them and hope it would turn out for the best.

What’s the worst that could happen?

He thought for a moment.

You know, I really don’t want the answer to that...

Caramel pushed the heavy cart all the way back to ponyville, once again cursing his lack of stamina. He slumped to the ground, exhausted, and stared ruefully at the bushels of apples he had to unload.

Well, they’re not gonna display themselves.

As he set about moving the heavy baskets, Caramel spotted his sign lying on it’s side among the breaburns. He smiled a bit in spite of himself as he picked it up and stuck it into the soft ground in front of the cart. The paint still looked fresh. He eyed the purple mare painted onto the wood, smiling a bit more at the sight.

Perhaps things won’t be so bad.

He felt a bit more optimistic as he set about making an alluring display out of apples. He decided to organize them by color, darkest at the front and lightest at the back. He thought it looked rather nice. He knew he probably wouldn’t get any customers until the lunch rush, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t try.

Finishing his work he plopped down behind the cart and waited. The ponies of ponyville milled about as usual. He did notice that they didn’t give him as wide a berth as the last two days, that was a good sign. Maybe his reputation was changing.

Still this didn't get him any customers during the morning. Caramel sat there for hours, waiting for the sun to reach the midday point. He decided that if he sold enough apples during the lunch rush he'd pack up early and see if he could help with dinner preparations. He wanted it to be really special, he'd never brought anypony home before, it needed to be something to remember.

He thought about that for a moment.

*Okay, something **good** to remember.* He mentally corrected.

"So, how'd it go?"

Caramel jumped, tripping over a bushel of apples and falling head first onto the ground.

"Land sakes!" said Applejack, looking down at him worriedly, "I'm sorry, sugarcube, didn't mean to go sneakin' up on you. You alright?"

Caramel made a mental note to start paying more attention to his surroundings, his day dreaming was starting to become dangerous to his health.

"Yeah," he said as she helped him up. "I'm fine, about used to it by now really."

Applejack laughed. "Well, I just thought you might like somethin' to eat." She looked off to the left. " And....while I was at it figure out how that date'a yours went." she reached into her saddlebag and returned with a slice of apple pie.

The look in her eyes told him that the pie was more or less a bribe for information.

Oh well, I am hungry.

Caramel accepted the pie, but as he placed it on the cart top something occurred to him. "You haven't asked Twilight?"

"Tried, she got all red at the mention'a the word date, said she had to put Spike to bed and ran off." she paused. "It was 9 in the mornin'"

“Oh.” said Caramel, remembering his reaction to Toffee asking about it. Applejack's eyebrows arched, waiting for his reply. “Well....”

“Yes?”

“Well....things went wonderfully!” he said finally, a grin breaking out on his face. “We didn’t even have to do anything. No plan, no set up, just the two of us walking through ponyville ‘til we had to turn back. It was so....” he looked for a word.

“Wonderful?” Applejack supplied.

“Yes! I’d hardly believe it if I weren’t there.”

Applejack smiled. “Well shucks, I’m happy for the both’a you. I swear you two are cuter than a pair of peaches.” She playfully hoofed Caramel in the back. Right over the bruise that was just starting to heal.

Caramel winced, blushing at the complement. “Thanks...We’ve actually got something planned for tonight...I’m kinda worried honestly.”

“What is it?”

“Well, Toffee invited her over for dinner...tonight.”

“Oh!” she laughed. “Well shoot I thought it was somethin’ bad. You got nothin’ to worry about Caramel. Toffee’s got a good head on her shoulders. You won’t have too much to worry about.”

“It’s not Toffee I’m worried about...well... a little. It’s my grandfather.” Caramel admitted. “He’s...not the most socially....sensitive.”

Applejack’s was silent for a moment. “Your granpa’s my uncle Jonagold right?”

“That’s the one.”

Applejack thought for a moment. “The one who does that weird thing when he eats corn?”

Caramel nodded grimly.

“Ah...” Applejack looked uncomfortable for a moment. “Well I still say you’ll be fine sugarcube...just watch what you cook, alright?” She let a

smile slip back onto her face. “Really, I’m sure it’ll go wonderfully. With you two together, I can’t see it goin any other way. Now you enjoy that pie. I gotta get back to my own cart...I left Applebloom in charge...”

There was a crash from the opposite end of the market place. Applejack looked panicked and dashed off into the commotion.

Wonderfully. Thought Caramel. Wonderful.

How many times had he used that word? He thought back through his life, and found a distinct lack of it.

Until recently.

When he'd first met Twilight, it'd been wonderful and the second time he'd seen her in the marketplace, that'd been wonderful too. When he'd plucked up the courage to ask her on a date, when she'd said yes, their walk through the town, pancakes this morning...

Wonderful

Since he'd met her, suddenly he had a reason to use that word.

'It'll go wonderfully', Applejack had said.

“It’ll go wonderfully.” he whispered under his breath. He remembered the promise earlier that morning. He smiled and took a bite out of the pie sitting on the cart.

It really will.

The sun was almost in the middle of the sky when Caramel saw the first of the lunch customers arriving. It was the same unicorn mare from yesterday. Today she was done up in a dress layered with multi-colored feathers. The general impression landed somewhere between a peacock and a fireworks display.

She marched up to Caramel’s cart, nose upturned. Caramel briefly wondered if her neck was simply built that way.

“Hello, Apple Pony,” she said stiffly. “I require two granny smiths for lunch. Make sure they are as green as possible, no blemishes.”

“Coming right up.” Caramel grabbed the apples in question, making sure they were unbruised.

“Have you reconsidered?”

“Reconsidered?”

The unicorn gestured to the sign stuck in the ground next to the cart. “Reconsidered my offer to make a sign for my boutique.” She looked Caramel in the eye. “Though your apples are good I really must say your talent is wasted here.”

Caramel was unsure how to respond “W-well I wouldn’t say wasted...”

The mare raised an eyebrow. “Do you enjoy working here?”

Caramel thought for a moment. “Well...I wouldn’t say ‘enjoy’ but it’s not ba-”

“That’s what I thought. Now, young stallion, my offer still stands, and will stand. Whether or not you will take it is yet to be seen. I hope you will make the right decision.” She placed some bits on the cart turned curtly and walked into town.

Caramel stood dumbfounded for a moment.

What just happened?

Caramel didn’t have long to ponder this. The lunch rush hit like a wave in a hurricane, stuffy ponies of all types bombarding him with orders for every kind of apple he had in stock, their impatient jabs ringing in his ears.

Maybe she’s right...he thought passing a pair of gallas to a stallion in a top hat. This job isn’t what I enjoy... he tossed a fugi to mare yelling at the top of her extremely fancy lungs. Is it? I mean...Do I enjoy painting? I never did it until the sign....

An old couple with a parakeet on their shoulder asked if he sold slices. He explained that he didn't have a knife. The bird tried to nip his ear as he moved to the next customer. *But....It worked didn't it? I did it **well**, could I do it again?* Caramel announced he was out of braeburns to a few disappointed groans. *I mean...I don't particularly enjoy this job....but it makes money right? It's stable...that's what's important.*

"This isn't a jonagold you lummox!" screamed a prissy mare in a large hat. "I asked for a jonagold!" she tossed the apple back over the cart. Caramel barely managed to duck out of the way.

"Sorry! I'm sorry, I'll get you that apple right away!" He turned to a quickly emptying bucket of jonagold apples.

But would I be happy with this...

"You'd better, and get it right you hick!"

If I tried something else...I might fail....

"Apple Pony! Apple Pony! I've been waiting for ten minutes! Get over here this instant!"

I've failed before....

"Apple Pony!"

A lot....

"Apple Pony!"

Who's to say it won't happen again?

"Have you got corn in your ears? Or is your brain not working?"

But....I didn't fail this time...

"Apple Pony!"

I succeeded....My sign is what brought these ponies here.

"I have never been kept waiting this long! If I do not get my apples this minute I shall be personally insulted!"

These rude...

"Apple Pony!"

Belligerent...

"Hello!"

Ponies....

"I shall have service, and I shall have it n-" The screaming pony was silenced by granny smith apple shoved in his mouth.

"We're closed." said Caramel shortly.

Murmuring broke out among the crowd.

"We're closed." he repeated.

"B-but what is the meaning of this? We're *hungry*"

"And I'm closed." Caramel started packing up.

"You can't do this!"

Caramel put on a plastic smile. "You know what I can't do?"

The ponies looked apprehensive.

"I cannot....put up with....*this*." he gestured to the crowd. "Any of this!" he felt a pit of rage bubbling in his stomach. "You pompous, stuck up bunch of....of....I don't know what!"

The crowd took a step back.

"I'm tired!" Caramel continued. "I'm tired of the insults, of the yelling, of this! I'm tired of being told what to do. I'm tired of trying to impress everyone, and *failing* again and again! Tired of being looked over!! I'm tired of it! *All* of it!"

Caramel stood their, hyperventilating. The ponies stared at him for a movement, unsure what to do.

"We....are...closed." he said again.

With some resentful whisperers they dispersed.

Caramel slumped to the ground, whatever was propelling him through his outburst had been spent.

What now? he asked himself.

I've chased off my main customers....

He sighed.

No going back now....

He got up and began loading the apples back on to the cart.

I'll take her up on that offer.

He'd managed to sell a good amount of apples before his impromptu closing. Grampa Jonagold would be very happy about that.

But I'll have to tell him. Caramel thought.

His grandfather had always been a traditionalist, every pony in the apple family had an apple job. Painting signs didn't fit into that. He wouldn't like it.

Caramel made his way back home.

I'll cross that bridge when I get there. Caramel decided. *For now...I just want to get through dinner.*

Chapter 8

Caramel took his time walking home. He wanted to get there in time to help with dinner, but he didn't relish the idea of telling his grandfather what he'd done. The sooner he got there the sooner he'd have to. Of course it would have to happen eventually, but stalling was one of the few things Caramel considered among his talents.

Eventually though he did come to the edge of his family's land. He took a deep breath, filled with the smell of Toffee's cooking.

The most he can do is yell at me. He thought. Plus after dinner he'll be full. Who isn't happy when they're full?

The heat from the kitchen flowed over Caramel as he approached the door. He sat the mostly empty cart by the stairs and headed inside. The walls had been decorated with various apple themed things, apple streamers hung from the ceiling, apple mats had been layed strategically around the house and, of course, fresh apples sat on every windowsill. Toffee had gone all out.

At the moment, she was in the dining room, placing a smoking bowl of apple cobbler on the overstocked table.

"You're home early!" She remarked with a happy little jump. "Sold extra hard to be here early for your little Juliet?"

Caramel's face colored. He opened his mouth to reply only to have a spoonful of something shoved in.

"Tell me, more apples?" asked Toffee, looking up at him expectantly.

"Mhmmphh mphm?" asked Caramel.

"You're right!" she spun around and danced back into the kitchen. "Everything's better with more apples."

Caramel swallowed whatever it was she'd forced on him. It tasted of apples-*of course, what else would it taste of?...*But...there was hint of garlic.

He made a mental note to find out which dish that was and accidentally spill it.

He found Grampa Jonagold balanced on a ladder in the sitting room, putting up large apples themed stickers. Very briefly he considered telling him then, and got as far as opening his mouth when his grandfather turned around.

His face lit up and Caramel quickly closed his mouth.

"There you are m'boy!" he bellowed, jumping off the ladder with more energy than Caramel had seen in quite a long time. "Just finishing up the preparations for your little date! How were the sales today?"

"Oh, well they were alr-"

"What am I saying, of course they were great! With our little ace in the hole how could they not be? I am so proud of you." He grabbed Caramel in a hug, patting him roughly on the back.

Caramel winced. "Um...thanks Grampa, that means a lot."

It really does....He thought morosely. I wonder how long it will last.

"Now!" Grampa Jonagold released him. "Let's get you right and proper for your little filly eh?"

Suddenly Caramel found himself being led by the hoof up the stairs to his grandfather's room. He'd hardly ever been inside disregarding the one time he'd had to help rebuild the roof after an unfortunate kite accident. It smelled of distilled cider and old hay.

Caramel tried not to trip as his grandfather came to a stop in front of an old wardrobe.

"Now, I'm about to give you something that has been in our branch of the Apple family

for generations. Passed from Apple stallion to Apple stallion as a tradition. I think it's about time it fell to you." He opened the wardrobe with a flourish. "Congratulations."

Caramel's mouth dropped open.

“Speechless eh?” Grampa Jonagold grinned “Thought you’d be, this beauty has seen me through more than one date, and now it’s yours.”

“Well....thanks Grampa, b-but it’s...it’s...”

“Too fancy for you? Don’t worry, I thought the same when I was your age. You get used to it, whip this thing out and BAM! The fillies will be falling all over’ya.”

“Well...no that’s not exactly what I was thinking....”

Grampa Jonagold arched an eyebrow. “Pre-date jitters? Perfectly understandable.” He patted Caramel on the back again. There was a cracking sound. “I know exactly how you feel, felt the same way when I met your grandmother.” His eyes got that faraway look. “Put this old thing up after that. Didn’t need it any more.”

It was quite for a moment.

Caramel sighed, he couldn’t turn down such a gift. Not with its history. “Well...suppose I’d better change.”

His Grandfather’s face lit up again. “I suppose you’d better!” He turned towards the door. “You’re going to look great!” He walked out into the hall, leaving Caramel alone.

Caramel let out another sigh. *Maybe she won’t laugh too much...It’s not **that** bad...* he took a hold of the hanger and prepared to get dressed. *But did it have to be blue?*

Toffee set yet another dish on the table, wiping a bit of sweat from her brow. She’d changed out of her cooking apron, and into a modest dress. Normally she wouldn’t be caught dead in such an outfit, but her Grandfather had insisted.

It is something to her credit that she managed to hold back the laughter that threatened to come bursting out when Caramel descended the stairs.

“Well...” she said between suppressed snickers. “You look....‘nice’, Mel.”

Caramel shot her a look. "It was grampa's idea."

Caramel stood dressed in an antique blue suit. Its large buttons hung haphazardly underneath a comically large collar that refused to stay down. A pink flower that had seen better days hung cheerily above the pocket, which held a green handkerchief. Darker blue streaks ran down either side, ending in a pair of tails.

Toffee finally abandoned any pretense of seriousness, and fell into a fit of laughter banging her hoof against the floor.

"Thanks for the support," Caramel huffed, walking past her into the kitchen.

She rolled over and got to her feet. "What are you doing?" she asked, drying her eyes.

Caramel stood there for a moment. "Well...I'm helping. What do you need?"

"Oh no you're not!"

"Huh? Why no-"

Toffee appeared behind him and began shoving him towards the door. "This is your date, you're not getting all dirty in the kitchen before Twilight shows up. Now get! Go on! Shoo!"

"B-but I want to help!"

"You can help by staying clean and in one piece until dinner starts. Good luck!" She turned and headed back into the kitchen.

Caramel was left in the living room unsure what to do with himself. Twilight wasn't set to arrive for another half hour. He realized he missed her. It'd only been this morning when they'd shared breakfast, but it felt like days. He wondered for a moment if she missed him as well.

He needed something to take his mind off it. Toffee was taking care of the final dinner preparations, his grandfather had taken care of the

decorations and he was already dressed, as much as he didn't like what he was dressed *in*.

There's nothing for me to do.... He thought morosely. Of course he was grateful his family had worked so hard to make this night special. Still, he couldn't help but feel a bit unnecessary. He wracked his brains for something, anything he'd forgotten, something that might be necessary for tonight.

Dinner.....decorations.....dress....What else? What else do ponies have on.... his thought process stalled for a moment. He gulped. **Dates.**

He looked around the room, perhaps something would come to him. His eyes fell on the old bookshelf in the corner, landing on one book in particular. It was missing most of its spine and the pages were horribly dogeared, but it gave him an idea.

Gifts. The word surfaced in his brain. *They get each other gifts! It's been long enough hasn't it?* He wondered, he didn't want to rush things.

Caramel walked over to the shelf and picked up the dusty old book. It wasn't particularly thick, and its cover had been marred by one to many spilled glasses of juice and many more uses as a coaster, but he could still make out the faded words of the title:

The Secret Tree.

He hadn't read it since he was a small colt, but he still remembered the story from his days with his grandmother as she read aloud and he pointed at the pictures. He had a bit of time, and as a small smile appeared on his face he opened the book and began to read.

A filly, who always wore a blue bowtie, lived on a hill by a town by the forest. She did not have many friends, but that suited her just fine. Every day she would walk down into town to visit a little library, which is the best kind of library because it only has room for the best books. There was always a kind pony behind the counter who was the epitome of librarianiness, from his big glasses to his soft voice, would always tell her what a smart little filly she was and say how nice her blue bowtie looked. Then he'd bring a ladder to retrieve the largest book from the tallest shelf at

the back of the library. It was a book of fairy stories that the little filly loved. At the start of every day she'd check it out, go to her secret reading spot and spend hours pouring over the fantastic tales inside. Then at the end of every day she'd return it. It was only polite for little fillies to be punctual after all.

But, early one morning the filly in the blue bowtie came down into town to the little library as she always did. The kind pony behind the counter told her what a smart filly she was and how nice her blue bowtie looked. But then he frowned and told her that somepony had already come in to check out the largest book from the tallest shelf at the back of the library. He, being the epitome of librarianiness, could not turn down a pony who wanted to check out a book, as much as he wanted to keep it for her.

The filly in the blue bowtie was very upset, not being able to read her favorite book. But her mother had taught her well and she thanked the kind pony behind the counter and left without checking out anything at all.

On the walk home she lamented the loss of her book. It seemed she would simply have to wait until tomorrow to check it out, and continue her reading. Oh how cruel was fate!? She'd just gotten to the bit about the wizards, but there was nothing to be done. So, saddened, but hungry, the filly decided to get something to eat.

After buying a lunch of roasted hayseeds and a cupcake, she decided to go to her secret reading spot. While she still didn't have anything to read, a secret reading spot should make just as good of a secret eating spot shouldn't it?

Carrying her bag of food, the little filly in the blue bowtie went back up the hill, past her house and into the forest. She knew the path by heart. She went past the mossy boulder, being extra careful to be quiet, so as not to wake the sleeping dragon, under the roots of the oldest oak, three times for luck, jumped over the small creek, being careful not to touch the water for there's never a small creek without some kind of nefarious beast, then through the hanging leaves of the weeping willow and into the glen.

In that glen, surrounded by flowers, was her secret reading spot. It was an old tree. Though she'd read books about plants she'd never been quite sure its breed, but its trunk was full of holes and nooks just perfect for a filly to crawl into, and its leaves were just dense enough to shade her

from the sun while letting in enough light to read by. They were polite that way.

She sighed, it is hard to be sad in such a place, but without her favorite book the whole thing felt a bit wrong. Like putting lettuce in a peanut butter sandwich.

Still, she was here and she had food, so she found a comfy nook and set about eating. As she chewed, there was an odd sound, like a bird only slightly lower pitched. She ignored it and kept eating, but then it happened again, slightly louder. It sounded like it was coming from directly above her. She ignored it for a bit longer before her curiosity got the best of her.

So, bracing her hooves against the bottom of the nook she peeked into another hole in the trunk a little ways up.

A colt in a clover baseball cap lay with his back turned to her gnawing on the tip of his hoof with worry. In front of him, there was a large book.

The filly in blue bowtie gasped, it was her book! The one from the library, it must have been him who checked it out!

She hopped up and tapped him on the back. The colt in the clover baseball cap yelped and almost fell from the tree, his cap wiggling on his head because it was a size too big.

"Who are you!?" he asked, angry at being disturbed.

"Well, I might ask you the same question!" said the filly in the blue bowtie. "Along with what you're doing with my book!"

"Your book? I checked this out from the library. It's nopony's book."

This caught her off-guard.

"Well....that's right. But I'd **meant** to check it out, as I do every morning, that counts for something," she said testily. "And what are you doing here? This is my secret reading spot. I've got rights you know."

"Well I'd say it's just as much my reading spot as yours." said the colt in the clover baseball cap. "And besides I got here first. It's terribly impolite to interrupt someone when they're reading." He frowned.

“Well, what do you think you’ve done!?” she asked. “I’ve been reading that book for a while. I’d just gotten to the story about the wizards.”

The colt in clover baseball cap blinked. “Well so did I. Just now in fact. Did you read the part about the dragon?”

The filly nodded. “Yes, it was so exciting! Now you see my predicament. I would very much like to finish it.”

“Well,” the colt began, looking her over. “We’re in the same place. We could just read it together.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “I don’t know. I’ve never met you, or seen you around town. For all I know you could be a stranger. My mother told me to avoid those.”

“Well,” The colt put a hoof to his chin. “Mine did too. So if she warned you about strangers, and me about strangers then neither of us can be one. Because then they wouldn’t have had to warn us about them.”

The filly in the blue bowtie had to admit this made sense.

“Well that still doesn’t explain why I haven’t seen you before.”

The colt in the clover baseball cap explained that his family had moved here only a week ago. He came from the little town on the other side of the forest. He’d hated it there because it didn’t have a little library. Which meant it was no place that anypony ought to live. His house was in the town by the bakers, and he didn’t have many friends, which suited him just fine.

He’d seen the tree on the ride and decided it looked like a rather nice place to read. So he’d looked for the perfect book to do so. Finding her book he’d come here to enjoy it.

The filly in the blue bowtie listened to his story, nodding at the appropriate points, and not at all interrupting until it was finished.

“Well,” she said considering. “If you really want to read it that much...and you promise you’re not a stranger, then I suppose there would be no harm in reading it together.

So they did.

They finished the story about the wizards much faster than she thought they would. The sound she'd heard earlier was the colt biting his hoof during the suspenseful bits.

Since they had a lot of time until sundown they decided to read the next story too, for it was a very large book. And by the time the day was over they'd read *The Mare and the Man in the Moore*, *The Colt Who Loved the Moon* and they even managed to finish *The Brave Knight of Midnight*. But alas, the sun must set on even the best of days, and the two had to say goodbye. The colt in the clover baseball cap let her take the book back to the library, and promised he would not check it out again if they could do the same tomorrow.

She agreed, and they walked back. She showed him all her tricks to avoid the creatures of the forest that he'd never noticed, and they went their separate ways.

The next day, the Filly in the blue bowtie walked down into town to visit the little library, the kind pony behind the counter told her what a smart little filly she was and said how nice her blue bowtie looked. Then fetched the ladder to retrieve the largest book from the tallest shelf at the back of the library.

The colt in the clover baseball cap met her at the entrance to the forest with a smile on his face, and together they went in. Past the mossy boulder, being extra careful to be quiet, so they would not wake the sleeping dragon, under the roots of the oldest oak, six times for luck, helped each other over the small creek, being careful not to touch the water for there's never a small creek without some kind of nefarious beast, then through the hanging leaves of the weeping willow and into the glen. Where they sat and they read every day, just the filly in the blue bowtie, the colt in the clover ball cap and the book of fairy stories.

And that suited them just fine.

Caramel closed the book, his smile growing a bit wider, he knew exactly what to get Twilight now.

He raced off to the storeroom to find some supplies.

He found everything he needed in the pantry hidden beneath the winter tree covers and

several apples far past their prime. There were several cans of paint and paint brushes available. He'd been surprised at the amount of colors available. But then he thought back to all the little accidents around the house, every scratch needed to be painted over didn't it?

Well at least some good came out of them. He mused, closing the pantry door.

He examined himself, he'd managed not to get any paint on his suit, though in his opinion it might have made it look better, and turned to admire his work. They didn't have any paper, or canvas, as far as Grampa Jonagold was concerned if it didn't sell apples there wasn't much of a reason for it to be on an apple farm. Though there was plenty of spare wood sitting around for much the same reason as the paint. The trouble had been finding a piece of the right size that wasn't scratched, pitted, scorched or otherwise damaged. Eventually he found a small block that seemed perfect for the task.

So, spending as much time as he dared before Twilight arrived, he painted her gift. This

was only the second time he'd tried his hoof at painting and the result now sat drying on his nightstand.

He couldn't help but smile.

She'll love it.

Feeling a great bit better about the looming dinner, Caramel checked the clock hanging

on the wall. He'd finished with very little time to spare. Twilight would be arriving in less than ten minutes.

He shook the stiffness from his limbs, he'd been standing in the same place for far too

long. Racing over to the mirror he checked his hair, done in it's usual way. He silently thanked Celestia that his grandfather didn't know anything about hair styling. The suit was bad enough as it was. Still, it had been a nice gesture.

Caramel exhaled slowly, looking his reflection in the eye.

"You're gonna be fine," he said to himself. "You're gonna be fine...."
He stared into his

own eyes for a bit. "Won't you?"

His reflection offered no answer as the doorbell rang.

Caramel's heart leapt into his throat.

Here we go....

He stepped out of his room, trotting down the steps two at a time. He had to get there

before Toffee or, Celestia forbid, his grandfather did.

Surveying the living room as he hopped past the final stair, he saw Toffee coming down

the hall. He put on a bit of extra speed and made it to the door first, but not by much.

He tried to stop his heart from beating so fast as he readied himself. He wanted badly to

rip open the door, but that wouldn't be gentlemanly.

What would her books say about this? He wondered for a moment, taking a breath. *Just*

open the door. Everything will be fine. Taking another breath, he slowly opened the door, and gasped.

She looked lovely.

Twilight was wearing a modest red dress with yellow sleeves, there was a matching sash tied around her neck, it all beautifully complemented her natural purple color. She didn't appear to be wearing any makeup, but her face looked lovely nonetheless as she smiled, lighting up as she saw him. She was blushing slightly.

Caramel caught himself staring.

"O-oh Twilight! Welcome!" he said a bit louder than he'd intended. "You look...beautiful."

She turned her head bashfully. "Thank you...a friend of mine heard about dinner. She

absolutely insisted." Twilight looked him over. "You look very handsome yourself."

This caught Caramel off guard, he'd almost forgotten the horrid blue suit he'd been

wearing for most of the night.

"Oh, me!? No, no, you're being too generous. This is my Grandfather's old suit....it's

nothing special."

"Oh, it's your grandfathers!" she said examining it a bit more closely. "That explains the

stripes," she said running a hoof along the side. "Very early pre-modern ponyvillian. It's really well taken care of if it's that old. It must mean a lot to him."

Caramel felt a flash of guilt for thinking so badly of it all night.

"Yeah... I suppose it does."

He looked at her for a moment and realized her hoof was still pressed against his chest.

She'd leaned in a bit close to look at the details of the fabric.

Twilight seemed to realize this at about the same time and looked up to find his eyes

looking into hers.

“Um...ah....” Caramel fumbled for something to say. “You have lovely eyes.” He’d never

seen them this close, from a normal distance they were pretty, but here from so near, they were astonishing.

“Thank...you...” she softly. “Yours too.”

“Ahem.” Toffee cleared her throat.

Caramel almost fell into Twilight before regaining his balance. “Ah! Yes...Um...how silly of

me! Would you like to come inside?” he said, stepping back into the house, blushing furiously.

“Oh, oh yes! Thank you.” Twilight stepped inside, her face matching her dress.

“Sure, wouldn’t be much of a dinner if we spent the whole night on the doorstep.” Caramel laughed nervously at his own joke. “Let’s sit down.”

He led Twilight into the dining room with Toffee bringing up the rear. As they walked he

tried to find his grandfather, who was nowhere to be seen. Twilight sat across from him at the table. There were four place settings, two on the right for Toffee and Twilight, and two on the left for Caramel and his Grampa Jonagold, wherever he was.

Toffee noticed his absence and nodded to Caramel.

“I’ll be one sec, hun.” she excused herself to look for their missing grandfather, leaving

Caramel and Twilight alone.

“So much food!” she said, looking over the table, bowls of food practically spilling off the

sides. “You didn’t have to do all this!”

“Oh, that’s Toffee” said Caramel, grinning despite his nervousness. “Give her any excuse

to cook and she’s all over it. Though, she might have gotten a bit carried away this time.” he looked around, then pointed a hoof to a vaguely red dish sitting on the left corner and mouthed, “Don’t eat that one.”

Twilight laughed that laugh he loved so much, he couldn’t help but join in.

“What’s so funny?” asked Toffee returning with Grampa Jonagold tow.

“Um...Nothing! Nothing at all! Isn’t that right Twilight?” he asked.

“Oh no, nothing that I can see.”

Toffee looked at them for a moment. “If you say so. I found this one out cold upstairs,”

she said cocking her head towards her Grandfather.

“I need my sleep!” he protested. “Gotta have my wits about me. Stay sharp and all that.”

He looked around the room until his eyes fell on Twilight. “Ah! There she is! Nice to finally meet you!” He walked over and took her hoof, shaking it enthusiastically. “Twilight right? Toffee didn’t tell me you were a unicorn. Could come in plum useful whe-”

Toffee shooed him into his seat before he could finish. Caramel had no idea what he was

going to say, but had the feeling he wouldn’t have liked it.

His grandfather sat down with a huff. “What’ch do that for?”

“The food, it’s getting cold.” Toffee said reproachfully. “I didn’t cook all of this so you could

talk over it all day.”

“Fine,” Grampa Jonagold grumbled.

“Um... It’s nice to meet you too Mr.Jonagold,” said Twilight, her hoof still moving a little.

“Ooooooh, *Mister* Jonagold,” he puffed out his chest a bit. “I like this one.”

“I bet you do,” said Toffee. “Now come on eveypony, dig in!”

Caramel leaned over looking at the food, and hoped the night would go well.